

IT'S ALL ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS:
EXPLORING IF A PURSUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS HAS INFILTRATED OUR LIVES

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ABSTRACT

Everyone wants to be righteous. We compare ourselves to others, seek justification for the things we do, desire a sense of belonging within our group, or flat out declare ourselves to be right. The problem is that while we want to have a “righteous” identity, by nature we pursue that identity in all the wrong ways. This thesis aims to reveal how a misguided pursuit of righteousness could be motivating our decisions and actions. I will offer a few observations regarding how we pursue forms of active righteousness within the framework of Luther’s two kinds of righteousness, which properly teaches a person’s relationship to God and others.

INTRODUCTION

“It’s all about righteousness.” I had not considered it until that moment. While discussing a recent challenge his member was facing, a pastor said this Christian man was learning about righteousness. He was a very wealthy, reputable, and successful businessman. But in the last year, he had made a business deal that failed. He was forced to sell one of his two homes in order to recover financially. His pastor believed this man was learning about where real righteousness is found. It does not come from success or money. It must be found elsewhere.

However, that pastor’s phrase, “It’s all about righteousness,” was not confined to one particular Christian in one particular circumstance. Over fourteen years of ministry, he had seen his fair share of situations just like this one and witnessed how his members learned they were not pursuing true righteousness. He challenged me to see the same thing. At the time, I pondered it and could not disagree. The more seriously I considered it since then, the more I wondered if it was true.

My considerations simply came from observations. I could see how people acted certain ways or said certain things, whether personally or publicly, and how it caused issues or problems for them and others. I watched politics unfold from Washington down to the commoner. I listened to what was said during and after major American events. I was intrigued about why church members acted the way they did during meetings or why certain members had particularly poor church attendance depending on the time of year and the weather. I asked myself why a college-aged girl decided it was necessary for her to be “rebaptized.” If a pursuit

of righteousness—being “right”—is behind our behavior and decision-making, could that be why we often deal with strife, division, broken friendships, and more? If so, then all it would take is correcting our understanding of how a person *truly* becomes righteous to hopefully solve the problems we face in our lives.

What if it is righteousness that is behind a person’s comparison of himself to another person? What if righteousness is the reason someone seeks recognition for the good things he does? Is righteousness the reason division exists between major groups, such as political parties, who both declare that they are right? Does a pursuit of righteousness prompt someone to live and act a certain way in hopes of popularity and happiness? Could a pursuit of righteousness be the reason for the tension and strife we see in society and face in our own lives? It could mean something. It could mean nothing.

I was by no means convinced initially that righteousness was the answer. However, after research, study, and observations, my thinking has shifted. Pursuits of righteousness have infiltrated our lives so much that they could be the root cause of problems and troubles in human lives. *Human beings often seek an identity through forms of active righteousness.*

I intend to defend that claim in the following way. First we need to define what righteousness is. Then, we will view Scripture’s overview of righteousness. That will provide the basis for considering Martin Luther’s framework of the “two kinds of righteousness,” along with a modern-day assessment of our righteousness pursuits from Jonathan Haidt.¹ Within that

1. Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist at New York University’s Stern School of Business and taught for sixteen years at the University of Virginia. He has co-founded a variety of organizations that seek to apply moral and social psychology to help people live, work, and understand each other despite moral differences. He has authored five books and over one hundred academic articles. His most popular book is *The Anxious Generation*, which studies how social media has led to the decline of teen mental health and political dysfunction. *The Righteous Mind*, published in 2012, will serve as a major contributor to this thesis.

framework, we can observe some types of “righteousness pursuits” from different angles: comparative, compensatory, personal, and group.² As we distinguish those categories, it will be necessary to put observations to the test to learn if righteousness is the solution. Is everything ultimately “all about righteousness?”

2. Thanks to Jonathan Haidt for his category of group righteousness in his book, *The Righteous Mind*. Comparative, compensatory, and personal righteousness are categories I created personally while researching this thesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is necessary to examine first the books and articles that contribute to a discussion about righteousness.³ We will explore the work of four authors: Martin Luther with his *Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness*⁴ and his introduction to Galatians,⁵ Jonathan Haidt with his book, *The Righteous Mind*,⁶ as well as Robert Kolb and Joel Biermann. Each of them either supports the work of the others or has something unique to offer concerning righteousness.

The most natural place to begin is with Martin Luther. It is his framework of the “two kinds of righteousness” that sets the stage for the entire topic. There is some question as to whether his sermon, *On Threefold Righteousness*, or his *Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness* was produced first. Both sermons amply discuss the topic of righteousness.

Luther’s sermon on threefold righteousness distinguishes righteousness as civil, alien, and active.⁷ Luther speaks of these kinds of righteousness in opposition to three kinds of sins. Civil righteousness opposes manifest sin. It falls underneath the umbrella of secular

3. In-depth looks at Martin Luther’s *Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness* and Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind* can be found starting on p. 16 and 23, respectively.

4. *LW* 31:293–306.

5. *LW* 26:4–12.

6. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: How Good People are Divided Between Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

7. Martin Luther, “On Threefold Righteousness,” *Project Wittenberg*, <https://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/3formsrt.html>.

governments. In this righteousness, man is able to “avoid the punishments of the law” and “receive temporal promises of the law.” Promoting civil righteousness benefits society as it encourages good, moral behavior. Alien, or passive, righteousness opposes original sin.⁸ Man is completely unable to cure himself of sin by any strength of his own. However, through alien righteousness, given through Christ’s obedience by God, human beings are declared righteous (Rom 5:18–19). Luther calls the product of passive righteousness actual or active righteousness.⁹ This opposes “actual sins.” Although the greatest good works of human beings remain tainted with sin (Is 64:6), God views a believer’s good works as righteous because of Christ (Eph 2:10). This active righteousness will only flow from passive righteousness as the forgiven believer seeks to live in God’s footsteps.

Joel Biermann finds the paradigm of the three kinds of righteousness useful. While the dichotomy of passive and active righteousness encompasses the aspects of the Christian life, Biermann appreciates how the three kinds of righteousness make the case for Lutheran ethics. His book, *A Case for Character*, argues for how the doctrine of justification can form a societally ethical and at the same time Christian character.¹⁰ Because the three kinds of righteousness include a worldly focus in how believers and unbelievers practice “civil righteousness,”¹¹

8. Luther calls this righteous “alien” because it is not from within a person. It comes from the outside, from God. He also calls it “passive” because a human being does not contribute to this righteousness. Only God is active and responsible for bestowing the rewards of Christ’s death and resurrection upon us.

9. Luther calls this righteousness “active” because a believer carries out this righteousness in service and love toward his/her neighbor(s).

10. Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 105–64.

11. Civil righteousness is simply defined as the good actions human beings do which benefit society.

Biermann uses that framework to explore how righteousness before the world does far more for our neighbor than we might realize.¹² Whether it is a product of passive righteousness or not, civil righteousness benefits believers and unbelievers as it contributes to promoting a moral society.

In his *Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness*, Luther sharpens the distinction into two categories, passive and active righteousness. Passive righteousness is “alien” since it does not originate from within man.¹³ Luther points to Christ and the righteousness he imputes to believers because of his death and resurrection. Justification before God can only be received passively—it can never be earned. On the other hand, active righteousness consists of love toward another’s neighbor. Active righteousness is the product of passive righteousness.

Without Luther’s exposition of this righteousness distinction, any in-depth study of righteousness would be very difficult. It is fitting for Luther to call this distinction “our theology.”¹⁴ Justification before God in our Savior is central to salvation and to a believer’s life of love and service. Luther’s two kinds of righteousness properly places the reality gifted to us through Christ within our lives on earth.

This framework allowed Luther to lean into Christian living without casting Christ to the background. Robert Kolb, in his articles, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness,”¹⁵ “God

12. Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 126.

13. *LW* 31:297.

14. *LW* 26:7.

15. Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on his Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 449–66.

and His Human Creatures in Luther's Sermons on Genesis,"¹⁶ and his book, *Face to Face: Martin Luther's View of Reality*,¹⁷ explores how Luther defined what it means to be a human being in a two kinds of righteousness format. Kolb states that Luther could legitimately recognize what it means to be human "in God's sight" having "received the unconditional love of God," as well as in being "creatures of God" in "exercising responsibility for other human creatures as God designed it."¹⁸ Being human as God designed involves both passive and active righteousness. Thus, Luther did not see them acting against each other. Rather, he viewed them as complementary, functioning in different ways, but all centered on the same foundation.¹⁹ A believer's identity as righteous before God rests in Christ, which then motivates a life of service toward other human beings. Kolb provides an excellent summary of this point: "Christ raises the sinner to new life—to a new identity and a way of practicing that identity."²⁰ Our justified and righteous identity from God produces a daily life of love and service.

Luther's two kinds of righteousness highlights the distinction between passive and active righteousness. However, the question of this thesis is whether human beings pursue righteousness as if the distinction did not exist at all. Here, Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* proved to be the capstone piece in hopes of answering that question. His angle is unique

16. Robert Kolb, "God and his Human Creatures in Luther's Sermons on Genesis: The Reformer's Early Use of His Distinction of Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Concordia Journal* (April 2007): 166–84.

17. Robert Kolb, *Face to Face: Martin Luther's View of Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2024).

18. Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness," 450.

19. Charles Arand and Joel Biermann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Concordia Journal* (April 2007): 118–20.

20. Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness," 462.

compared to Luther, Kolb, and Biermann—but invaluable. Surprisingly, my research did not start with Luther’s *Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness* but rather with Haidt.²¹

In his book, *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt explores why people think and act upon different moral philosophies. His concern is why there are different intuitions between right and wrong and particularly why groups—political and religious—are at odds with each other. His assessment is that an “obsession with righteousness is the normal human condition.”²² This sounds similar to how Luther describes how human beings have an inclination towards sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions.²³ An obsession with righteousness naturally leads to an inclination towards sin, since sinful human beings believe incorrect things about where a real righteous identity is found.

Haidt first observes how “intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second.”²⁴ Every person makes automatic and unconscious reasonings before learning more about a topic or a person. As a psychologist, Haidt compares how human beings will have different reactions to the words, “sunshine,” “happiness,” “cancer,” and “flood.” The reactions and emotions a person has will affect their perception of them prior to stopping and actually thinking about them.²⁵ These same intuitive reactions also occur in our interactions with others. Gut reactions prompt a person’s reasoning to assure himself that he is righteous.

21. See Appendix 1 for a backstory to discovering his book.

22. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, xix.

23. Luther, “On Threefold Righteousness.”

24. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 62.

25. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 67.

Second, Haidt sees how “there’s more to morality than harm and fairness.”²⁶ Haidt notices how the righteous mind leans into what he coins “six different taste receptors.”²⁷ Different moral philosophies and ideologies will place more importance on each of these “taste receptors,” which are virtues. The values of a group will determine their moral foundation, which explains why morality is more than basic virtuous qualities. While this portion of his book does not relate as much to righteousness as parts one and three, it is a necessary step to the final, and most important, piece of his argument.

Haidt recognizes how “morality binds and blinds.” Since human beings are “naturally groupish,” Haidt states that a multitude of righteous minds will group together to promote the group’s interests against the interests of another group.²⁸ While one group is “bound” together, they are simultaneously “blinded” to the fact that there are morally good people in other groups. For Haidt, when a righteous mind is guided by intuitions, confirmed by reason, and shielded by the approval of the group, it will take hold of that which it believes to be the truth.²⁹

Joel Biermann senses how this “righteous” motivation could easily distort the gospel. The two kinds of righteousness require two different understandings.³⁰ Passive righteousness and active righteousness must be kept distinct and not used outside of their purposes. However, in practice, Biermann, like Luther, observes how one can easily be “affirmed” as the other is

26. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 109.

27. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 368.

28. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 221.

29. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 218–366.

30. Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 119.

“rejected.”³¹ In a world where people try harder to “look right than be right,” Haidt and Biermann would agree that an active, performative righteousness is a very intense motivation.³² The pressure to look and act righteous leads people to seek righteousness in tangible, earthly forms rather than through God’s declaration of righteousness in Christ. It is with such a misunderstanding of the distinction between the passive and the active that life can shift to pursuing an active form of righteousness as if it will provide the identity that passive righteousness provides.

Does *The Righteous Mind* really have much to offer to a righteousness discussion? Perhaps it does not seem that way initially. Considering that Haidt writes with only a societal goal in mind and his book is absent of anything strictly theological, it may seem like he does not belong. Haidt does not personally relate his material in any way to Luther’s two kinds of righteousness. The connection between the two is implicit. Where Luther leaves us with a distinction of two types of righteousness, Haidt takes over the active righteousness aspect as he assesses what makes everyone want to be righteous. *The Righteous Mind* proved extremely valuable in showing how every individual has a tendency for righteousness and how that affects a pursuit for righteousness in daily life.

Would Luther and Haidt agree in their assessments of what it means to be righteous? Possibly. Taking each author at face value, it seems like the two are not speaking about the same topic. They cannot necessarily be compared thought for thought but certainly complemented each other as they discussed what it means to be righteous. Overall, the foundation for any

31. Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 116.

32. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

righteousness discussion should rest on Luther's two kinds of righteousness framework. From there, Haidt and others can take over to further explore righteousness from their own lenses and angles.

The majority of resources contributed to a discussion about righteousness. Kolb provided the best analysis and explanations of what Luther wrote and taught concerning righteousness. Biermann's work contextualizes active righteousness in view of passive righteousness as he connects virtues and ethics to a Christian's life before others. In doing so, he is able to avoid deescalating the importance of civil righteousness. Haidt's description of righteousness contributes a perspective that incorporates how culture and society are affected.

If anything lacked in research and development, I was hoping to find more sources that might have connected a pursuit of righteousness to psychology. Haidt scratches that itch briefly in *The Righteous Mind*.³³ I do not believe that this thesis lacks any foundation without such research. If there was more evidence of a psychological component, it could strengthen the argument.

Now that the stage is set, righteousness can be defined clearly with a close look at this question: could a pursuit of righteousness be the reason for the tension and strife we see in society and face in our own lives?

33. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 3–84.

DEFINING RIGHTEOUSNESS

Kolb defines righteousness as being “the human person God envisioned when he created us.”³⁴ Charles Arand and Joel Biermann follow a similar vein by saying that righteousness has to do with “meeting God’s design specifications” and “fulfilling the purpose for which he created us.”³⁵ David Green, Haidt, Emma Green, David Brooks, and even on rare occasion Luther, identify morality as the prime feature behind righteousness or righteous tendencies.

Certainly, righteousness is meant for human beings. It is a characteristic that human beings cannot be without. But with many different vantage points and definitions, what is the best way to explain what righteousness is? For the purposes of this thesis, we will define righteousness according to God’s design from Scripture. *Righteousness is complete dependence on God for eternity and love toward neighbor and creation during earthly life.*

However, this definition does more than simply cater to a wide range of authors. Righteousness includes morality and being a morally good human being for society. However, a definition that only covers morality is insufficient. The definition above—dependence on God and love towards neighbor—has definite, scriptural support, which will be evident in a close look at how Scripture addresses the topic of righteousness.

34. Robert Kolb, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 26.

35. Arand and Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 118.

Scripture's Definition of Righteousness

Righteousness for human beings has been present since creation. God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them “good.” His whole creation was completely perfect, including the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. They bore God’s righteous, sinless likeness, and sought all that was good and right as God did. They themselves were righteous. They lived in complete dependence on God and they lived in love for each other as they cared for God’s creation (Gen 1–2).

Once Adam and Eve fell into sin and lost the image of God, they no longer stood in a right relationship with him. Seeking to become like God, they ate the fruit from the tree and quickly realized that “the desirable thing” Satan offered them replaced their righteousness with corruption.³⁶ They became opponents of God: their spiritual condition was no longer righteous but sinful. Rather than being united with God, they were reoriented to live apart from God—as Luther said, it was a “flight from God.”³⁷ But God had a plan for creation. He would restore righteousness and bring salvation to humanity through the woman’s offspring (Gen 3:15). His promise came to fulfillment in Christ.

Jesus lived without sinning so his death would pay for all sins of all time. Christ declared, “It is finished” (John 19:30), and the temple curtain was torn in two, showing how the once separated relationship God had with sinful human beings had been restored through Christ (Luke 23:45; Heb 10:15–19). His resurrection demonstrates the Father’s approval of his saving work

36. Carl Lawrenz and John Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 139.

37. Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 72.

(Acts 13:32–37). Everyone who believes in Jesus as Savior receives Christ’s merits through faith. His righteousness becomes a person’s own righteousness through faith (Gen 15:6; Isa 61:10; Rom 3:22).

Scripture declares how a righteous standing before God is only received passively through Christ. Paul exerts much energy to preach this gospel message in his epistles. In the letter to the Galatians, he emphasizes how anyone who tries to find righteousness in the “works of the law” (Gal 2:16) is looking in a place where God did not intend it to be. A righteous status before God can and will only be found through Christ (Rom 3:22). No human actions can earn God’s favor and gift human beings eternal blessings.³⁸

Paul places active righteousness into its proper role as he directed the Romans to live in God’s grace. (Rom 6:11–23). Rather than satisfying personal desires, God’s design is for believers to be “instruments of righteousness” as they serve him. Believers become like a slave as the righteousness of Christ creates obedience to God. However, this response can only follow God’s gracious action toward humanity. For a believer, active righteousness demonstrates a change within a person’s heart, as Michael Middendorf refers to it, a “before and after.” The righteousness that has been passively received from Christ is responded to in a way that reflects a believer’s new heart—namely, through active righteousness.³⁹ Christians are doing nothing more in their lives of sanctification than reflecting their righteous identity in Christ in everyday life.

38. Andrew Das, *Galatians*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 246.

39. Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 501–3.

This means that Scripture does not remove the law on account of Christ. The law itself is not evil. It does not contribute anything to justification.⁴⁰ The NT epistles express how faith is the root of a Christian's righteous status, while good works are the fruits of that root. Those good works are part of the Christian's life of sanctification. As Das says, "love proceeds from faith, and not the reverse."⁴¹ We understand what Scripture is teaching as we distinguish between passive and active righteousness in doctrine and practice.

Whether or not the two kinds of righteousness and the distinction between justification and sanctification are identical, the similarities between the two demonstrate how Luther developed his framework. The passive righteousness humans receive from Christ is a gracious declaration from God. The active righteousness believers perform is living out a Christian life—it does not save. At a minimum, the two distinctions are similar in how they demonstrate a proper relationship with God and with each other.

40. *LW* 26:139.

41. Das, *Galatians*, 530.

LUTHER'S TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Luther observed multiple types of righteousness: political, promoted by kings, princes, lawyers, and those involved in the civil realm; ceremonial, used narrowly to define human traditions; and the Ten Commandments, which required a righteous life according to the law. However, political, ceremonial, or any other forms of righteousness lack in significance compared to the greatest kind of righteousness.⁴² The righteousness of faith surpasses any other form of righteousness.⁴³

This did not mean that Luther discounted all other forms of righteousness. Being a human being involves not one but two major types of righteousness—both of which are important, although for different reasons. There is the righteousness of faith before God (*coram Deo*) and the righteousness of works before the world (*coram mundo*).⁴⁴ He viewed them as encompassing a person's relationship to God and other human beings.⁴⁵ Arand and Biermann see how Luther believed that there is a twofold dimension to being a human being. For Luther, the best way to

42. Luther remarked on this important distinction in his introduction to his Galatians lectures. He states, "For they [other forms of righteousness] are contrary to this righteousness [alien] both because they proceed from the laws of emperors, the traditions of the pope, and the commandments of God, and because they consist in our works and can be achieved by us with purely natural endowments" (*LW* 26:4). In that concluding sentence, Luther is highlighting what is brought up in his sermon, *On Threefold Righteousness*, which brings civil/civic righteousness into the picture, which will be discussed in the following pages.

43. *LW* 26:4.

44. Arand and Biermann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness," 118.

45. "We must be righteous before God and man. Without one or the other, we find our humanity diminished." Arand and Biermann, "Why Two Kinds of Righteousness," 120.

describe this was with the framework of the two kinds of righteousness. Both must be present, but both must “function in fundamentally different ways.”⁴⁶ God’s design for human beings requires two kinds of righteousness, each serving a distinct purpose.

Passive and Active Righteousness

The first kind of righteousness is “alien,” granted from outside a person—it is not present within an individual human being. This righteousness is Christ’s, which brings justification through faith.⁴⁷ It is not a righteousness that we can gain from personal actions, hard work, or any individual effort (Eph 2:8–9). For this reason, the righteousness of faith is more than “alien;” it is also rightly called “passive.”⁴⁸ All that belonged to Christ becomes ours by God’s grace (Rom 3:22). “He [Christ] himself becomes ours ... so mine is Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.”⁴⁹

Luther strove to ensure that passive righteousness and justification remained at the center of all doctrine. When the law replaces the gospel, suddenly the message of forgiveness is lost as a human being’s actions are mixed with grace.⁵⁰ That same message is the core tenet of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. A relationship with God through the law places a burden upon a person

46. Arand and Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 118.

47. *LW* 31:297.

48. Luther states this in his sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: “For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, ‘passive’ *LW* 26:5.

49. *LW* 31:297–98.

50. *LW* 26:7.

who then believes he must obey the law to be saved.⁵¹ True freedom and real righteousness before God is found in Christ, not in the law that imposes burdens upon human beings (Gal 5:1–4). Luther encouraged his listeners to find comfort in passive righteousness through faith as he wrote, “For this righteousness means to do nothing, hear nothing, and to know nothing about the law or about works but to know and believe only this: Christ.”^{52,53} Human beings are to look for a righteous status before God in no other place than Jesus, who gives his righteousness to sinners.

The second kind of righteousness is “proper.” It accompanies alien righteousness. It consists of “love toward one’s neighbor” and “meekness and fear toward God.”⁵⁴ Since its focus is on the activity of day-to-day life, it is rightly called “active” righteousness. Active righteousness does not work with the passive to complete salvation (Rom 3:20). The righteousness of faith received from Christ fully accomplished that apart from a human being’s good works.⁵⁵ While active righteousness properly activities of both believers and unbelievers, it is distinctive for a Christian. For a believer, active righteousness is a life of sanctification. A believer who knows Christ’s love for him then is inclined to show that same love out of love for his Savior.⁵⁶ Joel Biermann summarizes this well:

51. *LW* 26:7.

52. *LW* 26:8.

53. “Hogan’s Heroes” fans may see Luther encouraging a “Sgt. Schultz” approach to the law.

54. *LW* 31:299.

55. Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 142.

56. Luther noted how the doctrine of vocation incorporates itself in active righteousness. Knowing a passively received righteousness from Christ, a believer lives with many opportunities to perform good works—a preacher through administering Word and Sacrament; a father within his household; a ruler as he performs the duties of his government office; a servant who tends to his master’s charge. Believers “know that God wants this and that this obedience pleases him.” *LW* 26:11–12.

Made right in the heavenly kingdom, *coram Deo*, the justified Christian is returned to another kingdom, the kingdom of the left-hand world, the world of the created realm, *coram mundo*, and is busy there with the varied and demanding affairs of this present life. Such obedient work, Luther asserts, is God-pleasing as it conforms to God's will and desire for the creature.⁵⁷

Passive righteousness remains the sole identity for believers in their relationship with God.

Raised to new life in Christ, they are given a new identity and a “new way of practicing that identity.”⁵⁸ That means God is responsible even for a human being's role in active righteousness.⁵⁹

Both passive and active righteousness are a daily part of the Christian life. Believers need both kinds of righteousness to be “completely and genuinely human.”⁶⁰ To be a human being as God created requires a human being to be a totally passive, child of God and totally active, responsible neighbor to other people (Gen 1–2). Luther did not establish this framework to elevate passive righteousness and discourage the active. He made clear his opposition to failing to perform active righteousness—doing so displays a flawed relationship with God.⁶¹ Passive righteousness remains “inseparable” from active righteousness as a person expresses his or her identity.⁶² That means a Christian's status as righteous before God (*coram Deo*) remains central not only to passive righteousness, but also active.

57. Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 142.

58. Kolb, “Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 462.

59. Robert Kolb writes: “God is ultimately responsible for the creation of both human trust, the human side of passive righteousness, and human performance, the human side of active righteousness.” Kolb, *Stories of God*, 88.

60. Arand and Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 120.

61. Kolb, “God and His Human Creatures,” 182.

62. Kolb, “Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 171.

It is noteworthy how two things are simultaneously true when it comes to righteousness. For as free as believers are in Christ, there remains an adherence to God's law of love and service.⁶³ Two kinds of righteousness simultaneously exist. When the two kinds of righteousness are properly taught and clearly distinguished, the whole counsel of God in justification and sanctification is proclaimed without compromising the message of the gospel.⁶⁴

The Crux of the Matter

Even though the two kinds of righteousness framework excellently presents what it means to be human before God and before others, Luther recognized a potential flaw. Just like any kind of theory or principle, it can be perfect on paper or but people can struggle in practice. There is nothing wrong with Luther's framework of the two kinds of righteousness. All it does is reflect Scripture. Luther recognized that human beings will not always distinguish the two kinds of righteousness as they should.

Luther believed that we can speak of passive and active righteousness easily, but in experience and practice its distinction is difficult.⁶⁵ The sinful human heart, in good times and in bad, will combine the two kinds of righteousness. After all, passive righteousness is "alien" to a human being, who believes that righteousness actually comes from within himself rather than

63. Compare Luther's axiom in *The Freedom of a Christian*: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to no one; a Christian is a dutiful servant of all, subject to all" LW 31:344.

64. Jordan Cooper, *Hands of Faith: A Historical and Theological Study of the Two Kinds of Righteousness in Lutheran Thought* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 10.

65. LW 26:10.

outside himself. For as much as Luther wanted it to be avoided, he recognized how human reasoning “simply rests in the active [righteousness].”⁶⁶

He was not alone in this assessment. Speaking on the simple distinction between law and gospel, the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, attests to a major infiltration of relying on inward righteousness. Galatian Christians who had learned about total, complete, and free salvation through faith in Christ had abandoned him to pursue righteousness through God’s laws and commands in the OT (Gal 5:1–6). The wonderful proclamation of the gospel was lost because the Galatians did not believe that righteousness came through faith alone. They desired approval before God as righteous apart from the place God intends righteousness to be found.⁶⁷

Here is the crux of the matter: human beings have a tendency to base their righteous identity on personal actions. The things Paul would consider “garbage,” like an impressive resume and background (Phil 3:4–10), remain more enticing to human being’s righteous inclinations. Active righteousness is the focus instead of passive righteousness (Gal 5:1–7; Ecc 7:29). Ultimately, it is a kind of active righteousness that has nothing to do with God and passive righteousness. It is founded upon a person’s own actions and can only be called “active” in that it is witnessed by the world and that a person is actually doing something.

So what happens when *active* righteousness takes the role of *passive* righteousness? True active righteousness of a life of love and service to others is the product of a God-given identity through Christ (Eph 2:10; Gal 5:6). It can only stand as righteousness that is pleasing to God in relationship to the greater righteousness—the alien and passive, which gives us identity and

66. LW 26:5.

67. LW 26:213.

purpose in Christ. But what if we pursue forms of active righteousness believing *they* will give us our identity?

It makes sense that in practice, between passive righteousness and active righteousness, that one will be affirmed and the other rejected.⁶⁸ Although both maintain their proper role and purpose, and one is superior to the other in the matter of eternity, one becomes more important to sinful human beings in day-to-day living. Which one is it? I believe it is an easy answer. Human beings will lean toward active righteousness before passive righteousness and pursue it in their everyday life. To say it thematically, life becomes “*all about righteousness*.”

But do not simply take my word for it. Jonathan Haidt also recognizes a pattern of “all about righteousness” pursuits as he analyzes American society. Between his assessment and Luther’s distinction of the two kinds of righteousness, I found it easy to notice a trend toward active righteousness.

68. Biermann, *A Case for Character*, 116.

JONATHAN HAIDT AND THE RIGHTEOUS MIND

Haidt believes that human beings are obsessed with righteousness. This obsession is not a skill that's acquired but comes naturally to every person.⁶⁹ Although that “natural human condition” has allowed us to be glued together into tight-knit groups, he finds that a righteous mind will ensure perpetual strife and problems.⁷⁰

From an atheist's worldview, Haidt is simply seeking better progress and life for society. He does not have the theological goals that Luther had when addressing righteousness. But his line of thought in *The Righteous Mind* is about active righteousness pursuits. This is evidenced in the three core tenets of his assessment, as summarized and explained in the next part.

Justified as Righteous by Intuition and Reason

Justification is everything for Haidt—but not justification in the theological sense. He observes how human beings have a unique skill of finding a way to defend their actions and furthering the agendas they have.⁷¹ His first tenet, “Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second,” demonstrates how to understand this human behavior.

69. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, xix.

70. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, xx.

71. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, xx.

Every person creates a logical reasoning, automatically and sometimes unconsciously, before learning more about a particular topic or person. As a psychologist, Haidt compares how human beings will have different reactions to the words, “sunshine,” “happiness,” “cancer,” and “flood.” The first reactions and emotions a person has will affect their perception of them prior to stopping and actually thinking about them. “Sunshine” and “happiness” create positive thoughts, while “cancer” and “flood” create negative ones just from the words themselves. Intuition prompts and shapes our thinking.⁷²

Haidt explains this phenomenon with an illustration about “the rider and the elephant.”⁷³ A small human being on top of a mammoth animal cannot control it. When the elephant leans or turns a particular direction, the rider goes with him since the larger and stronger animal is actually in control. The rider is not the master but the servant of the elephant. Likewise, Haidt sees how reason (the rider) is the servant of intuitions (the elephant). The righteous mind’s intuitions are constantly reacting to everything. Those initial reactions guide a person’s reasoning, not vice versa. Within the first moments of seeing, hearing, or meeting another person, “the elephant has already leaned toward or away and that lean influences what you think and do next.”⁷⁴ Once a person reacts, he/she will rationalize how to support his/her reaction and defend it. Oftentimes, it is a pure fabrication. Haidt identifies these reactions as desires for righteousness. All that matters to a person is ensuring he can prove himself to be right.

72. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 67.

73. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 1.

74. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 69.

Haidt shared a personal example of this happening.⁷⁵ His wife asked him not to leave his dirty dishes in the same place on the counter where she prepares their baby's food. Immediately, he gave excuses why it should be fine he did that. "The baby woke up at the same time I finished eating. I had to take the dog for a walk and needed to rush off to work." Hours later, he wrote this first tenet down and realized he had done the very thing he was writing against. His intuition leaned, then his reasoning justified his actions. That is only one example from countless that could fit that paradigm. Consider also what happens when a child pushes another child on the playground. The response to, "Why did you do that," is, "He was being mean to me." It is justification for a gut reaction.

A righteousness-wired mind demonstrates itself in interactions with others. Those displays of righteousness can be quite strong—positively or negatively. It can be to defend against accusations and criticism or to layer on proof for logical reasoning.⁷⁶ More often than not, Haidt recognizes how this occurs when a person learns how another person identifies himself/herself.⁷⁷ That could be something simple like a Chicago Bears fan, or something more serious like Catholic, Baptist, Republican, Democrat, gay, lesbian, and more. In fact, it's likely that every person would have a particular reaction simply reading the list. A Packers fan thinks certain things about a Bears fan, and Bears fans certain things about the Packers fans. A Lutheran reacts to the misleading teachings and beliefs of a Catholic or a Baptist. With whatever side of the political aisle a person is on, he will have certain feelings about his opponent. Lifestyle

75. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 61–3.

76. Consider Adam and Eve's behavior in this way when God confronted them over their sin in Gen 3. Both defended themselves by blaming someone else for their actions.

77. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 68.

choices garner reactions whether they are objectively wrong or not. The first reaction human beings have will determine how they treat the situation or the individual, and more importantly, will lead to a desire to ensure every reaction is *proved to be right*.⁷⁸

Of course, sinful lifestyles, improper behaviors, and false scriptural beliefs are not being approved in this argument. The point is that every human has a righteous hardwiring that will cause him to justify his own behavior. Righteousness is believed to be dependent on that reasoning. It could lead a pursuit of righteousness so far that it encourages a “winner-take-all” or an “end justifies the means mentality”—meaning, all that matters is being right.⁷⁹

Let us consider this with a hypothetical situation. A Christian meets a man who shares that he is living the homosexual lifestyle. He notices the disgusted look on the Christian’s face and challenges the Christian about his reaction. Emphatically, the Christian shares with him that his reaction was warranted since this man’s homosexual lifestyle is against God’s will and he will go to hell if he continues living this way. Meeting up with friends at church the next Sunday, the Christian talks with his friends about his interaction and expresses that he “told this man what he needed to hear.” His friends agree and he feels validated.

Yes, that homosexual’s lifestyle is sinful and against God’s will. But where might an intuitive, reasoned righteousness be in a scenario like this? The Christian’s defense for his reaction was nothing more than, “You are wrong; I am right.” Even though the message concerning God’s will for man and woman in marriage is warranted and true, the purpose behind

78. Haidt uses the words “right” and “righteous” interchangeably. I used “righteous” more often, but the two terms, for this thesis, can be understood in the same way. A desire to be right is essentially a desire to be righteous.

79. Kristin Garrett, “Navigating the Double-Edge Sword in Politics,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 51:3 (2022), 341.

sharing anything with this man had nothing to do with the gospel. It was about demonstrating *rightness*—first to him, then to peers. It was not about sharing the gospel. It was all about righteousness.

Admittedly, that might be a crass example to try to prove a point. However, I do not think that we can deny that we pay attention to, care about, and invest in such things, like the topic of sexual identity, because being righteous is all that matters.⁸⁰ If our goals in such interactions, expressed or not, are only that we can prove ourselves righteous, it is evidence that we care more about righteousness than we realize. Haidt expands on how human beings look to prove themselves right in his second tenet.

Righteousness Goes Deeper Than Values or Virtues

Haidt recognizes how human beings do more than try to individually prove themselves righteous. He observes how every person looks for righteous identity through values and virtues as he states, “There’s more to morality than harm and fairness.”⁸¹ In saying this, he desires his reader to see how the righteous mind does not simply choose virtues to exalt about others. Rather, an individual uses a virtue or value to prove himself righteous, personally and publicly.

Haidt senses this to be like a tongue’s taste buds.⁸² People enjoy foods that are sweet, salty, savory, fruity, etc., and have preferences for foods within those particular descriptions. For

80. Kristin Garrett also supports this position in her article, “Navigating the Double-Edged Sword in Politics,” 343.

81. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 109.

82. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 143.

example, a person who enjoys sweeter snacks and drinks will tend to purchase Coke products and high-sugar candy more than the “salty” person who would rather have Pringles or pretzels. The righteous mind has its own taste buds: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. For Haidt, people with particular political, moral, or societal leanings tend to be attracted to their particular “taste buds” more often than people who do not share the same beliefs.⁸³ A person who served in the military or works within a tight-knit community typically has strong feelings about loyalty. Another who believes that we should “tax the rich” may associate with care and fairness in hopes that there is equality on the annual April 15 deadline.

A quick look around society demonstrates how people are attracted to their righteous taste buds. Bumper stickers reveal plenty about a person’s beliefs and values, especially the close to elections. Clothing or apparel that reads, “Let’s Go Brandon,” or, “Love is Love,” highlight personal political preferences or views about what society should think about a topic. Social media posts for July 4th, Pride Month, Black History, Christmas, Easter, and more reflect virtues and ideals people appreciate and consider important.

Do those behaviors and preferences simply stop at the values and virtues themselves? Haidt says no. It is not about a virtue being right, but about individual people being right.⁸⁴ It is reasonable, then, that political parties, media outlets, or cultural catchphrases lean into certain virtues. It is feeding righteous taste buds what they prefer. The more a particular virtue is proven to be right, then people who adhere to that virtue are proven to be righteous. Adhering to a particular virtue provides a person with a righteous identity—so he thinks. How can this be

83. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 149.

84. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 220.

anything but a pursuit of active righteousness? By means of what is done, said, and lived, human beings gravitate toward attractive virtues, invest in them, and then use a virtue to promote themselves as righteous.

However, this extends beyond an individual person. Human beings use virtues to prove their righteousness to other people. It is a simple logic. A particular virtue is declared to be right, whether by a large or small group of people. A person believes that virtue to be right and declares himself righteous because he values it. To prove his righteousness, he demonstrates how “right” he is through his behavior, speech, and social media posts.⁸⁵ This is a classic example of virtue signaling.⁸⁶ The approval a person has before others defines their position in a small group or in society.

All of this is to show that righteousness pursuits are more than a surface-level problem. A human being’s tendency for active, performative righteousness seeks to create an *identity* before others. Human beings naturally do not depend on God for an identity but base righteousness on outward actions.

Confirmation of Righteousness Solidifies Righteous Behavior

85. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 220.

86. Virtue signaling is defined as the act of expressing opinions or actions that demonstrate one’s moral values, often to gain social approval, rather than to effect real change (as defined by Merriam Webster, accessed February 2026). In the case of the examples on p. 24, wearing the “Let’s Go Brandon” or “Love is Love” clothing is a case of signaling to others in whatever political group you are in that, “I’m one of the guys.” It *signals* you are on the “good team” as you express a virtue in order to gain approval from others.

It does not help that virtue signaling accomplishes what human beings hope it will. When a person demonstrates his rightness concerning a particular topic or issue, they are proven righteous as they receive validation and approval from those around them. In other words, people receive the “righteousness” they hope to achieve through such behavior. The virtue signaling we discussed with Haidt’s second tenet demonstrates why human beings care about righteousness and pursue it. As we examine his third tenet, which might be the most important part of *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt shows how a group mentality legitimizes and solidifies righteousness pursuits.

He writes, “Morality binds and blinds.” A collection of righteous minds group together to promote the interests of that group. Each individual within a group can confirm the self-assessment each person has—meaning, they declare each other to be righteous. In doing so, a group becomes closely knit while simultaneously closing themselves off to the opinions and beliefs of others. Haidt concedes that groups in and of themselves are not bad as they promote good things for society. However, he senses that by virtue of being a part of a group, it is natural to then exclude or even ridicule others.⁸⁷ A group of people are easily bound together as they fight against opposing groups and are blinded to the fact that their opponents are good people.⁸⁸

Walk into a high school or a workplace and this is easily seen. In a high school, there will be the athletes, popular kids, nerds, brainiacs, geeks, quiet kids, and more.⁸⁹ Intermingling between those different groups is rare to see, with bullying typically happening at the expense of

87. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 359.

88. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 366.

89. A clean adaption of the categories made by the secretary, Grace, in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. Ironically, she also declares Ferris “a righteous dude.”

the nerds and geeks by the athletes and popular kids. The nerds and the geeks despise them for it. Workplaces have the gossipers, career chasers, nine-to-five-ers, Human Resources, and criminals, to name a few. The steady and faithful workers are critical of managers and the company. Gossipers start rifts and drama in the workplace. No one wants to be friends with Human Resources. Those who might have spent time in prison bond over the foods they shared at their various prisons. Wherever it may be, there is both a sense of community and a sense of separation.

Most naturally, Haidt sees group mentality carried out when something is declared “sacred.” That can be through religion, politics, friendships, or anything that brings people together.⁹⁰ Tangible forms of righteousness are extremely attractive and their attractiveness is exemplified by many individuals in a group. Politics may be the most obvious place to see group righteousness in action. Consider simply what a presidential debate or campaign consists of. The Republican candidate reveals all the ways the Democratic candidate will destroy civil order, allow illegals to cross the border, and not support local police, while he/she will do the opposite. The Democratic candidate boasts how he/she will create jobs for all, tax those who have more money so the commoner has more for savings and retirement, while the Republican will not keep things fair.⁹¹ As politicians lean into the virtues their supporters care about, it *confirms* what one person believes to be right as it also *confirms* that the opposite is not. For the common American, it creates and solidifies an *identity* tied to a political party. Righteousness has binded and blinded.

90. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 299.

91. Note, also, how this plays off the virtues we discussed in Haidt’s second tenet. Politicians lean into particular virtues that their supporters are invested in. Righteousness in virtues and group righteousness are not distantly separated. In fact, it is not a small leap between the two.

The church is not exempt from group righteousness. Of course, certain political mindsets could appear and cause issues between members of a congregation, but that is not the focus here. A collection of members or staff could unite against the pastor or a teacher in the school. A major congregational decision creates differing opinions and in fighting. When a called worker is suspended, family members and friends band together against circuit or district leaders to defend the accused and ridicule the accusers.⁹² One side believes they are right, convinces each other they are right, and then stand in defiance against the rest. Again, righteousness binds and blinds.

There is certainly something to Haidt's consideration of group righteousness beyond politics. In September 2025, Republican advocate Charlie Kirk was shot on a college campus in Utah and a gunman in Michigan drove his vehicle into a Mormon church, then shot and killed four people before setting the building on fire. Both were two horrific, senseless, and violent crimes. However, I sensed a different reaction, not only from those around me but also in myself. Kirk's assassination drew an emotional reaction while the shooting at the Mormon church did not. Could it be because I have more association, even as a bi-partisan voter, with Republicans and Charlie Kirk than I do with the Mormon church, especially since I believe they teach serious false doctrine? There is something to that. I had an association with one group and, to use Haidt's language, "demonized" another.⁹³

This may not be the best example to use for being "binded and blinded." The Mormon church teaches salvation apart from Jesus—that is an objective fact.⁹⁴ There will always be a

92. These examples are not hypothetical. I have witnessed each situation multiple times.

93. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 312.

94. Actually, it is a righteousness problem since they teach a form of work-righteousness where people can attain the afterlife by their own powers.

reason to speak against the teachings of the Mormon church as long as they continue as a church body. However, which one did I care about more? That reveals categorizing a group as right and weaponizing another as wrong even though both groups had horrible things happen to them. By virtue of my group associations, the way that I reacted to the two events demonstrates that groups will naturally distinguish between good and bad, righteous and unrighteous, whether for legitimate reasons or not.⁹⁵

Active Righteousness Means More to Humans

Isn't God's absence striking? When it comes to human beings' pursuits for a righteous identity, they are not dependent on God, as he designed our relationship with him to be. It is independent of God and very dependent on oneself and others. Simply put, this is because the sinful human heart is all about righteousness. Inwardly, it will fight to push God aside and pursue the fleshly desires it wants (Rom 7:17–21). Outwardly, it seeks an identity independent from God through worldly means. Within society, among friends, and also in the church, it is evident how both an individual sinful nature and a collection of sinful natures are obsessed with righteousness. In a way, it turns a person into his own god as he must create and form an identity by which he will declare himself righteous.⁹⁶

95. A quick summary here of Haidt's three tenets: 1) an obsession with righteousness convinces you that you are righteous; 2) humans grasp and promote the "most righteous" virtues so they can be declared righteous; 3) righteousness is easily believed when others agree with your self-assessment.

96. Is misunderstanding of righteousness really a First Commandment issue? Ultimately, one could argue that is what it boils down to. A person who puts his trust in himself and his actions turns himself into his own god. Luther presents this in his section of the Large Catechism's on the First Commandment.

The core problem with every human being, sin, turns human life into a pursuit of righteousness. The human life becomes all about righteousness in various forms for unbelievers and believers. Since passive righteousness is alien—it is naturally absent from the human heart—can it be all that surprising that it is forgotten or cast aside for a supposedly “better” righteousness? Not at all. Every human being has a gigantic hole in their life as they are born in a broken relationship with God (Isa 59:2). God fits that hole perfectly as he provides the answer to righteousness in Jesus. However, sinners will always seek substitutes that prove to be inadequate because active righteousness can be more easily grasped by a sinfully corrupt heart.⁹⁷

97. Kolb, *Face to Face*, 70.

TYPES OF PURSUITS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Consider what this especially does to true active righteousness. When righteousness before others becomes the foundation for a person's identity, it creates a selfish motivation that replaces God's design for human beings to serve one another in love. This destroys the two kinds of righteousness all together. When the purposes of passive and active righteousness are switched, or they are blended into one, salvation and good works are affected. Human beings do not follow the paradigm in which God created us to be. The relationship with God is broken and it creates broken relationships with others.⁹⁸ After all, righteousness is intended to give us "a sense of who we are."⁹⁹ We are to be dependent on God for everything and live in service toward our neighbors. Apart from God's design, human beings cannot find true righteousness (John 15:5; Rom 3:22).

There are four specific ways human beings pursue an active kind of righteousness apart from God: comparative, compensatory, personal, and group.¹⁰⁰ While there could be more than these four categories, each of them encompasses most of what people experience in their personal lives and in the church. Let us examine each category as we see it in both the world and

98. Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness," 461.

99. Kolb, *Face to Face*, 184.

100. Again, thanks to Jonathan Haidt for his distinction of group righteousness. The other categories I developed myself. Each category will receive its foundation and then be expanded and defended as my observations from direct interactions or overviews of society are linked with these "righteousness categories." In order to maintain anonymity, names or locations may not be included. If a particular situation seems rather vague, that is why. I assure you that any example that I bring up is real and not hypothetical.

the church. If we can identify clear righteousness pursuits, then we can better develop our understanding about how life is “all about righteousness” and direct ourselves and others to a true, righteous identity from God and a selfless service of others.

Comparative

Everybody asks honest questions about their vocations and lives. “Am I a good parent ... a person of character ... honest and fair?” Kolb notes how questions like these determine whether or not we are regarded as righteous before the world. The problem is that human beings base righteousness upon their self-assessments or assessments from others.¹⁰¹ Active righteousness morphs from service to neighbors and the world into comparing one human being against another. We evaluate ourselves on a standard set by ourselves or others and judge ourselves comparing our actions to those around us.¹⁰² This comparative righteousness can appear in two ways.

First, we consider our righteousness as better than another person’s. Human beings feel that certain things, actions, and people are noble and worthy, while others are labeled as irreverent and shameful.¹⁰³ For example, the person who donates his life savings to build an orphanage is honorable, while the person who keeps his wealth for personal gain is selfish. A woman spends hours volunteering while her sister spends the day on the couch watching college

101. Kolb, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 74–86.

102. Kolb, *Face to Face*, 163.

103. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 174.

football. As a handcuffed suspect is placed in the police car, bystanders remark, “I’m glad I didn’t do what he did.” Certain behaviors are worthy, others dishonorable. The more we are seen as worthy by those around us, the better we are for society and especially for our own reputation.¹⁰⁴

However, this translates into comparing how good we are with how bad others are.¹⁰⁵ Luther remarks how this turns us into nothing more than Pharisees.¹⁰⁶ We believe our actions to be superior and we glory in them. We expose the faults of others while ignoring our own faults.¹⁰⁷ It is like the Christian man I met who said in a council meeting, “In this congregation, six families (including his) contribute 70% of the general offerings for the year, while the majority of families here contribute nothing.” There was a “betterness” to what he was doing compared with other Christians that he worshipped with every Sunday.¹⁰⁸

Second, comparative righteousness is conversely displayed as we view our life as worse than someone else’s. This is not a comparison based on moral behaviors. It focuses on comparing possessions, abilities, and the like. Social media and personal friendships are the most

104. Garrett, “Navigating the Double-Edge Sword,” 349.

105. John Braun, “Christian Freedom: The Struggle to Remain Free,” An Essay Presented at the WLS Symposium, (2001) *File*, 4.
<http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/706/BraunFreedom.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

106. In his Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness, Luther writes: “He [the tax collector] was not like the Pharisee who said, “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men” [Luke 18:11]. For that man was delighted that others were wretched...this is the type of robbery that man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God’s nor does he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God.” *LW* 31:301.

107. Haidt includes Jesus’ comment about the speck of wood versus the plank of wood in the eye as he makes this point on p. 64.

108. Luther: “The carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor’s shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than his neighbor’s.” *LW* 31:304.

influential example of this. A quick look at Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube displays how another person has the mansion, the newest sports car, the swimming pool and hot tub, brand new kitchen, eighty-inch flatscreen TV, and more. An invitation over for dinner quickly becomes the host showing the guest all the amenities of his home. Suddenly, a person learns how his life is “insufficient” compared to everyone else’s. In order to be viewed as good and righteous before others, a human being can believe that he needs to have all the possessions and qualities as others in order to look good. Appearances equate to righteousness.

Mark Leary, a researcher on self-consciousness, finds this kind of thought process to naturally create this comparative behavior. People care so much about other’s approval that attitudes and behaviors change depending on whether or not approval is being sought from peers. It makes sense, then, why conversations and social media posts include something about getting the new phone or vehicle, why a person boasts about the number of letters after his name,¹⁰⁹ or parents compete to see whose son or daughter has won more awards. Human beings are steered by their own barometer of how they stand compared to others.¹¹⁰ It’s about being like or better than someone else. Simply put, it is all about righteousness.

Compensatory

109. An example of this could be doctors who have initialed titles after their names. For example, “Joe Early, M.D., F.A.C.S.,” states that Joe is a medical doctor who has also received a notable certification for performing surgery. Having letters behind one’s name is not wrong; however, times when a degree or certain level of education is used for personal benefit could be an example of comparative righteousness.

110. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 90–91.

With compensatory righteousness, we must make a distinction. Luther believed there is a very valuable kind of compensation we receive as human beings underneath this umbrella of righteousness. We must distinguish “civil righteousness” from demanding a reward for personal actions.

Civil

Luther included civil or civic righteousness in his sermon “On Threefold Righteousness.” This form of righteousness is opposed to “manifest evil.” Because of the depravity of man, sin permeates society. Secular governments create laws in order to control human beings’ depraved state and to promote peace and benefits to those who obey.¹¹¹ In short, the government uses the law to promote righteousness for the good of society.

Civil righteousness accomplishes the purpose for which it is established. Citizens want to avoid punishment and receive the “promises” of the law—namely, a peaceful life.¹¹² This could be as simple as a driver decelerating upon seeing a state trooper parked in the median or to something greater like keeping neighbors from physically harming each other during a disagreement. Civil righteousness has great value in and of itself, for believers and unbelievers alike. Generally speaking, it rewards those who live upright lives.¹¹³ It compensates people according to their actions.

111. Luther, “On Threefold Righteousness.”

112. Luther, “On Threefold Righteousness.”

113. Paul Harris, “Civil Righteousness vs. Civil Religion,” *Logia* 15:3 (2006), 26.

Deserving a Reward

Whether or not there is a connection to civil righteousness, all human beings believe that they deserve compensation for their actions on a personal level—hence, the category of compensatory righteousness. Behind it lies the belief that people should “get what they deserve and not get things they don’t deserve.”¹¹⁴ Every person believes he must shape his own image, secure his ideal future, and determine his self-worth by actions.¹¹⁵ Notable actions and good effort should reap benefits for an individual because they deserve it.

For example, consider the disagreement between a husband and wife. Each one is frustrated with the other for their spouse’s lack of participation in the marriage and home life. The wife tells her husband, “I cook all your meals, clean up after the kids, do the dishes, fold the laundry, walk the dogs, and you don’t care about me enough to even thank me.” He responds, “I work fifty hours a week to pay the bills and it sounds like you don’t think that’s enough.” Both believe they should be recognized for what they do. Consider what both Ernest Becker and Kolb write regarding a desire for recognition in the following quotation:

The tragedy of human destiny is such that every person must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he counts more than anything or anyone else. This is not to say that human being will not make sacrifices for others, engage in acts of generosity, or even lay down their lives for their country or cause. But a person has to believe that what he is doing is truly heroic, timeless, and supremely meaningful.¹¹⁶

114. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 212.

115. Kolb, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 80.

116. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 2. As referenced in Kolb, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 80.

Human beings will desire recognition for everything they do. Really, compensatory righteousness is nothing more than a work-righteousness mindset. Everything done with this mindset is for the glory of self. The issue is that this kind of righteousness counts for absolutely nothing.¹¹⁷ Even if a person or group of people performs a noble and beneficial thing for their neighbor, but their motivation was to get a personal reward, it is not the kind of active righteousness that is pleasing to God. In the end, it's more about the self than it is about the neighbor.

In the realm of compensatory righteousness lies a very prevalent feature most Americans witness: the “victim card.” People portray themselves as victims to gain sympathy and special treatment from others. By labeling a person as a racist, sexist, homophobe, fascist, or more, the so-called victim can control other's treatment of himself and even be rewarded from outsiders for his strength or courage.¹¹⁸ It seems like righteousness more than anything else. A person receives benefits based on their actions—and actions they intentionally did to achieve that result.

We can also consider a more individual aspect to compensatory righteousness. Similar to the husband and wife that want recognition for what they do, every person can feel this same desire for approval in every aspect of life. Often, it comes from a sense of jealousy more than anything.¹¹⁹ An employee who does every job her supervisor asks is denied the promotion as it is

117. Paul Harris notes how contrary this is to American ears: “What about all the fine, good, and noble things done by America and Americans? When a disaster strikes anywhere in the world, who is the first to help? Which country sends her soldiers around the globe in an effort to wipe out oppression?... Yet all such glorious works when not done in Christ are not done to him, and are, therefore, sin. And when men trumpet them as anything else, the apex of sin has been reached: works-righteousness.” Harris, “Civil Righteousness vs Civil Religion,” 27.

118. Conor Friedersdorf, “Readers Lament the Rise of Victimhood Culture,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/readers-lament-the-rise-of-victimhood-culture/405784/>.

119. Kolb, *Face to Face*, 49.

given to another employee who does half the work in double the time. A man who wants to serve on a committee or board is envious that he constantly gets overlooked. A student who always has the answers but never gets called on is frustrated that the brainiac in the room gives the correct response before he/she has the opportunity to do it personally. A desire for recognition on any level is at its core a desire for righteousness. That desire drives people to want even more than they have. Their righteous identity depends on what they can achieve.

Personal

Personal righteousness may be the most blatant kind of righteousness pursuit. It is the easiest to recognize but possibly the hardest to manage. Sinful human beings declare themselves right in everything they do or say, whether it is good or sinful. The Formula of Concord is right to call the sinful nature an “stubborn donkey,” since it is defiant and self-serving.¹²⁰ It wants nothing to do with God’s righteousness or instruction as it only pursues what it finds appealing, kicking and screaming against any opposition to it.¹²¹

Arand and Biermann blame Darwinism for fueling the sinful nature’s desires as it encourages a person to mold and shape his own identity as he sees best.¹²² Christians are not exempt from this. Every human being hopes to learn his identity and place among other humans in the world. Scripture and Luther place that identity within the two kinds of righteousness—

120. FC SD VI:24. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 591.

121. Braun, “Christian Freedom,” 3.

122. Arand and Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 121.

specifically in passive righteousness rather than active righteousness (Gal 2:20–21). However, the human heart stands defiant against the identity God provides, believing that it already possesses its own righteousness.¹²³

Personal righteousness is especially apparent when a person is confronted with an error. Consider the couple living together before marriage, the person living the homosexual lifestyle, or even a man who holds a grudge against his colleague. When they are confronted with their error, occasionally the conversation will be smooth; typically, a person becomes defensive. People search for reasons to defend their actions and justify their behavior as the right thing.¹²⁴ Once they have convinced themselves they are right, their belief will control them.¹²⁵ In their minds, they are justified by their actions. They will condemn anyone who opposes them, being highly offended by a critic's behavior and speech. Personal righteousness says that only one person can be right; the other must be wrong.

Personal righteousness can be seen in American society. All Americans have the freedom to say whatever they want, do whatever they want, and become the person they want to be. In other words, each American can shape his/her own identity. Because of that, it is considered a gross injustice to tell another person that his identity is wrong. Personal righteousness creates harsh interactions between human beings who battle for their own identity. Is it surprising that people who were treated, in their opinion, unfairly, want to humiliate those who humiliated

123. Kolb, *Face to Face*, 175.

124. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 89.

125. Sam Harris (quoted by Haidt): "Belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004).

them?¹²⁶ Why do political decisions polarize Washington and individual relationships? Why will Americans fight to defend their “rightness” as if they are fighting to the death?¹²⁷ Human beings invest themselves into reacting to what happened to them.¹²⁸ Attempting to establish a personal, righteous identity is the result of an “all about righteousness” mindset.

Group

Arguably, group righteousness has infiltrated our lives, society, and the church more than the others. These pursuits combine one individual’s righteousness with others to create a plethora of active righteousness pursuits. People within a group are not only searching for personal righteousness but also approval from others within the group.¹²⁹

Haidt uses Emile Durkheim’s observations to explain how this group mentality occurs. Durkheim notices how the simple act of congregating is powerful. Individuals who gather together create a closeness that provides community and an emotional bond.¹³⁰ We see how this happens through worship, political rallies, sporting events, and more. Haidt compares this phenomenon to a beehive. Like bees forming a colony, as more people bond together, it creates

126. David Brooks, “How America Got Mean,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>.

127. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 240.

128. Ta Hashei Coates, “The False Nobility of Victimhood,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2008/08/the-false-nobility-of-victimhood/5638/>.

129. Haidt would agree with this assessment. His third tenet, “Morality binds and blinds,” essentially takes this position.

130. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 262.

trust and cooperation. It speaks against selfishness so that the entire group is benefited. And like bees, “hiving” effects competition against other groups, or to use Haidt’s language, hives.¹³¹

When a colony of honeybees are met with a wasp in their colony, they surround the wasp, cover it up, and buzz together to create so much heat that the wasp burns to death. It is not difficult to witness human groups acting the same way. A Michigan Wolverines fan walks the Ohio State campus and is ridiculed, has beer poured on him, and hears obscene, foul language. A street preacher has the police called on him since he is standing in the middle of a queer pride event. A member of one political party that walks into a group of the opposing side faces intense scrutiny. When a group is infiltrated, the whole group reacts accordingly.

How is this righteousness? The group influences the behavior, words, and actions of individuals within the group. Human beings are subject to the group influence and want to make sure they fit in.¹³² It is about a person’s appearance to others in the group, whatever that group is: Republican, Democrat, evangelical, progressive, person of color, LGBTQ+, southerner, patriot, and more.¹³³ Approval—righteousness—depends on appearances.

Let us use this observation within a few contexts. A person’s status among others often depends on their location on the American political spectrum. A person does not necessarily have to be good morally. The only requirement is that he identifies as a Republican, Democrat, or socialist.¹³⁴ A leader could be doing business secretly, using his/her power to gain wealth, have

131. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 281.

132. Emile Durkheim: “When I act under the influence of a social entity, I am simply a part of a whole, whose actions I follow, and whose influence I am subject to.” Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 261.

133. Thanks to David Green for these examples.

134. Green, “How America Got Mean.”

a child with a criminal record and personal life, or be divorced three times and lambast enemies publicly, but as long as that person is connected to the *correct* party, the *whole group*, from leaders to commoners, will defend that individual.¹³⁵ Anyone from within the group who speaks against him/her will become an outcast.

What about group righteousness within the church? Political mindsets can certainly cause divisions and strife in a congregation. People argue or even leave a church over American politics. It's not uncommon for a newcomer to a WELS congregation to ask if a Democrat or liberal is welcome at [fill in church name here].¹³⁶ A pastor who addresses a political topic in a sermon or Bible study can scan the room to learn who lies on a particular side of the political scene.¹³⁷ Political judgments can shape a Christian's own sense of right and wrong that's counter to Scripture as he/she identifies more with a group's mindset than with the Word of God.¹³⁸ With approval before the group as the motivation, a Christian might even defend positions that are objectively wrong. It is clear what righteousness matters more.

However, we can distinguish group righteousness within the church from American politics. Groups within a congregation can develop their own need for approval. For example,

135. Using examples from the previous and current U.S. president was intentional.

136. A question I answered myself for a prospect as he started our Foundations course. It took this prospect only a few Sundays to sense the love for Trump and hatred for the Left.

137. In a sermon on the Good Samaritan, I decided to touch the politics button pretty strongly. This congregation was comprised of a good mix of Republican [more specifically, Trump] and Democrat supporters. Talking about how we set up our own boundaries and definitions of, "Who is my neighbor," I brought up how our opinion of a person changes once we learned who they voted for. Or we might even say to someone, "That is who you voted for? You clearly hate this country." It was easy to see the twitches, head turns, ruffled feathers, and overall reactions from the chancel to that—or the congregational president who started looking around, excited to see how members reacted to it.

138. Garrett, "Navigating the Double-Edged Sword," 339.

there is a major congregational decision looming. Two major opinions exist. One group of men within the congregation meet to discuss their shared opinion on the matter. When the congregational meeting to make the decision begins, one man introduces an argument about why the decision-making process is faulty. Each man from that inner circle continues the debate, mentioning how he is merely saying what one particular opinion is. The entire meeting collapsed. Completely blinded to what anyone else in the room hoped to discuss that day, they push their own agenda, validating their opinions in the context of what everyone on one side of the argument is saying. Their group being *right* matters more than anything else.

The need for group righteousness apart from church could also affect a person's involvement with church. Could a person's neighborhood, friends, or family influence the desire for righteousness? Everyone in a member's neighborhood, a wealthy part of town, owns a second residence, a cabin, or a lake house, as does the member family. However, when the weather is nice, everyone in the neighborhood goes to the cabin or lake house for the weekend; anyone from the neighborhood who does not do that receives strange looks and probing questions. Might it make sense why that family's church attendance is very poor when it is 80 degrees and sunny? A family has friends who all have their kids in traveling sports leagues. The weekends include many tournaments that start on Friday afternoon and finish Sunday evening. Might it be reasonable that the family might be absent many weekends because they will be pressured or be outcasts for attending worship rather than the championship?¹³⁹ What righteousness matters more?

139. I have heard of and experienced this situation happening with WELS organized teams and clubs, too. Attending Sunday morning worship was not as important as attending the championship game, which started at 8:00am.

Group righteousness is intertwined with individual self-esteem as much as it is with public approval. A person will feel better about himself and his identity when it is supported by others. Identity is connected to the group, and the best way to confirm that identity is to be involved within the group more. Naturally, the group is favored and anything outside of the group becomes a negative influence.¹⁴⁰ This seriously affects the individual Christian who lives in a world that does not find righteousness in Christ. A truly righteous identity is dependent on God. But if righteousness, and particularly identity, is dependent on a person's actions with others rather than in Christ, righteousness will be pursued in a place where it will neither create an identity that lasts nor counts for anything.

140. Garrett, "Navigating the Double-Edged Sword," 345.

CONCLUSION

Is it “all about righteousness”? Is every person simply after some form of active righteousness, causing strife and tension for themselves and others? It is difficult to argue against, whether or not active righteousness actually fits as the answer in every circumstance. If, in fact, pursuits of an identity through active righteousness are the reason behind our words and actions, it certainly provides an understanding and explanation behind the motivations and behaviors we witness in others and ourselves. Even if you are not completely convinced that righteousness is the key, testing it as the answer to the issues and pursuits we have in our lives, at a minimum is useful to starting the conversation. The overall usefulness of demonstrating that righteousness can take many forms—comparative, compensatory, personal, and group—widens our understanding of exactly how much righteousness can take over our hearts, minds, and lives.

Luther’s framework of the two kinds of righteousness sets the proper, scriptural teaching of our relationship with God. It can change our orientation in respect to how we approach God and each other. Righteousness established through Christ and based in Christ fuels our righteousness before the world. Justification produces a life of sanctification, not vice versa.

Consider the value both a pastor and members of a congregation can have in this regard. A pastor who is frustrated with how his members are behaving and acting can ask himself, “Do they need some redirection about whom real righteousness is founded upon?” If so, then he can also identify for a member how Christ stands as the clear solution to the problem. A pastor also has the joy of being able to preach and instruct his members on how to properly live as a genuine

human—with dependence on God being first, and love toward each other flowing from that as second.

We can also find this distinction helpful to re-orient ourselves individually with righteousness. When Christians cling to the promises of God through Christ, it naturally produces the kind of life every believer desires to have. Pursuing that active righteousness apart from Jesus actually does not provide the kind of righteousness we desire. With our righteousness grounded in Christ, political stances, friendships, careers, and interactions can carry a different tone since our conduct is not centered around ourselves but around others.

Imagine a scenario where human beings were “all about righteousness” in a completely different sense. Rather than being self-centered in righteous pursuits, believers are ever more grounded in their complete righteousness given through Christ. Acquiring the kind of outward righteousness human beings desire actually comes from returning daily to our justification through faith in Christ. It is from our identity and status in Christ that true active righteousness blossoms. Could we be “all about righteousness” in that way? In other words, “all about Christ.” It is my prayer that the righteousness pursuit we seek is the best kind possible: chasing after Christ. He is our righteousness.

APPENDIX 1. THE DECISION BEHIND *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND*

With Luther being the staple author concerning the topic of righteousness, why did I decide not to start with him but rather with Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*?

It all started with Austin. Over vicar year in Asheville, North Carolina, I met a young man named Austin Holder. He visited a couple of times from September to November before attending Living Savior on a regular basis. After answering our invitation to learn more, we had many discussions about the Bible with him over the next few months. He had a religious background but considered himself an atheist turned agnostic turned "searcher." He had dealt with many serious life problems over the previous year and knew that there had to be something more that could give him the answers he was looking for.

I had the privilege of leading him through our Foundations course. It was a pure joy to witness the Holy Spirit work on his heart as we studied God's Word together. In July 2025, he was confirmed and joined Living Savior.

Near the end of my time in Asheville, we met at a Waffle House near Living Savior for a fun activity for our "20-30-somethings" group. While discussing the transition between vicars, our pastor's transition to his new call in Colorado, and what life would look like for me back at school, he inquired about any major "master's level" project. When I told him about the senior-year thesis and my interest in an "all about righteousness" question, *Austin* directed me to Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Righteous Mind*. Making the connection between my brief

description of Luther's two kinds of righteousness and Haidt's book, which he had read, he led me to a source I am confident I would not have found on my own.

It did not take long into reading *The Righteous Mind* to see how Haidt might answer my research question. Being able to compare him to Luther's framework thoroughly grounded the remainder of the research, thesis development, and the writing process.

I found this to be the case, too, because an "all about righteousness" question deals more with active righteousness than with passive. After all, it is when the active replaces the passive that problems arise. With Haidt's atheist (might I say "outsider") perspective on American society, the active and passive righteousness misconception could be touched upon in a way that perhaps a Lutheran theological writer could not do. Since sinful human beings live in a sin-infested world, might it also be true that it is easy to fall into a worldly kind of righteousness?

I am by no means in support of choosing Haidt over Luther and Scripture when looking to learn more about righteousness. However, I believe one cannot ignore Haidt's perspective, as viewed from a Lutheran lens when it comes to addressing if our pursuits of righteousness are more often than not found through Christ.

All of this happened because of an "All-Star Special" at a Waffle House in South Asheville.

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