

Working Righteousness

Book of Isaiah

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If you will, take your Bibles and look with me in Isaiah 64 and I want to come back to a verse that we touched on last time that I believe is far more vital to us than just touching on it and so come back to it and prayerfully be able to speak with you today on what it is to work righteousness. Working righteousness. Here we read in verse 4, I'll begin there,

4 For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. 5 Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved.

Now, before the fall, before Adam and Eve fell in the garden, they were placed in that garden to work righteousness. You say, "Well, what was their work?" That was simply to follow the Lord's command to enjoy and partake in the tree of life and not partake of the tree of knowledge and good and evil. This was the commandment that he had given them.

And I would have you keep your hand here but go back to Genesis 2. What I want to do is lay some groundwork for our understanding of what this portion means when it says, "to meet him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness." You know as well as I do that people will take this word and interpret it anyway that they want to. They read it and understand it according to their mindset and I would tell you that given a million years reading this particular word of God as it is written here with a natural mind, we could never, ever understand what true righteousness is. It's not like math or science or any other subject that you take and read and come away with some understanding. Such is the mystery of the truth; such is the glory of God that if this were given us as an assignment to read through this and come at it with our own understanding, we would all come away with the wrong understanding. We would read that phrase "worketh righteousness" and assume, "Well, this is something that God intends us to do."

But let's begin back here in the garden, in the fall in Genesis 2:16, because when you hear the word "righteousness" you're thinking of a rule; you're thinking of a standard; you're thinking of something that you're measured against. Well, here it is in verse 16, "The

LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." Here it is before the fall, "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed." So up to the point of their disobedience and their fall, there was a righteousness to which they were held accountable.

Now we read in chapter 3 of Genesis, "Now the serpent," being Satan himself, "was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden." She repeated to this point exactly what the Lord had said to Adam in verse 16, "of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat." "But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." He was setting himself up as a god, therefore the plural, and what he was saying is, "Now you'll have more than one god to govern you." So herein was the temptation because verse 6, "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise," and I'd have to say that's exactly what causes men today to continue to pursue in a fallen state their gods, little g-o-d-s, for self-satisfaction or whatever it is. "She took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat."

Now, the fall has occurred from the end of chapter 2, now to chapter 3 and verse 6. A fall has taken place. Once righteousness, here's the point, once righteousness has been broken, can it ever be fixed? Remember the little nursery rhyme? "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty back together again." There is a lot of truth in that, in that before the fall, that righteousness that God set forth and established as a means of freedom and life to Adam and Eve and, I would say, in their innocence at that point, he created them in an innocent state of being. So long as they obeyed, there was freedom, but once they disobeyed, all of that went away. There was no undoing from that point forward.

Now, here's how I connected with what we're reading in Isaiah 64:5. Keep your finger right here in Genesis because we're going to read on, but when men read Isaiah 64:5, natural men think, "Well, we just have to pick up where Adam and Eve left off. If we could just from this point forward work righteousness, then God will be favorable unto us." That is as much Satan's lie as it was when he approached Adam and Eve and told them, "If you'll just eat of this fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, that you'll be as gods. You'll be alright. You shall not surely die." This is the part where I would say 99.999% of people in Christendom today think that somehow even though they say it's Christ and it's by his work, in their minds they still believe, "I still have something that I've got to do in order to add to it."

But what I want to show you here in Genesis 3 is that that method was already tried. Do you see what happened in verse 7? "The eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." So what did they do? "They sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." That's what they did thinking to fix what had been broken and that's what men in their natural lost state still do today without the revelation of Christ. You see, this is before God himself came to them and revealed unto them the remedy. You see, this wasn't a surprise to God but he established the first and caused it to fail in order that the last, or the second, might be revealed, and that is the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, that righteousness which he alone would approve.

But they put on fig leaves, just like men do in religion today, put on fig leaves: prayer, witness, testify more, try more, repent more, believe more. All of these things, I will tell you, are of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It's continuing to partake of the wrong tree, rather than looking to Christ alone.

So we know the rest of the story. When the Lord, it says in verse 8, "They heard the voice of the LORD." That's what it's going to take for us to be able to see the true righteousness of God and how it is he can be just and justified. "They heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God," notice, "amongst the trees of the garden." There again, they put on fig leaves, that was number 1, and then they ran back into the part of the garden where God said you could eat freely. They were, in essence, trying to reset what had been broken and act as if nothing was. But God is a holy God.

So in verse 9, "And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?" This was not because God needed information, but it's just like you ask your children questions; you've already seen what's what and now you're asking them questions to draw it out of them and they squiggle and lie and hide and talk and you can just tell by body language nothing is going right.

"And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." When there was no law broken, there was nothing to fear but now that the law had been broken, the very presence of God was sufficient to cause that fear.

Verse 11, "And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?" Then the blame game starts. "Well, it was the woman. Well, it was the serpent," all of this. But the Lord held Adam accountable because that commandment had been given to him and he was right there when Eve partook because we read that. Once she ate, it says, "she gave also unto her husband with her and he did eat." So by one man sin entered into the world; that full accountability lay upon him.

But here's the part in verse 15 where I want you to see that the Lord was showing that this fix to man's fallen state was not going to be man's to fix but another's, because in verse 15, we read, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed," speaking to the serpent. There is going to be a division between Satan's deceitfulness which he continues to deceive many today in making them think that somehow their works and what they do brings them acceptance before a holy God. There's that enmity between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed, but it says, "it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." There was to be a reckoning, a day of reckoning in which the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent.

Well, you fast forward several thousand years, that took place at Calvary. That's where the death blow was rendered upon Satan and bruised his head, the serpent. You know, where's the venom? It's in the head of the serpent and so in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, righteousness was earned and established and upon completion of his death, God the Father imputed, put to the account of the seed of the woman, of Christ's seed, that righteousness which was necessary. It says, "thou shalt bruise his heel." That's all Satan could do with our Lord is bruise his heel, but he rendered the death blow to Satan against any sin or accusation that could be brought against his people.

As if then to show how this would take place, we move forward here to verse 20 of Genesis 3, it says, "And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living." Verse 21, "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them." Which presupposes that he took off the fig leaves and he clothed them in the coats of skins of these innocent victims. There is a picture of the work that the Lord Jesus Christ would accomplish several thousands of years later and whereby righteousness would then be established.

So the point is clear right from the beginning. When we come to Isaiah and it says, "thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness," it's not saying, "Well, God will be favorable to you if you just work out a righteousness that is acceptable to him." That's impossible. Since the fall, there could be no fixing of what was broken by man. I hope that's clear to you. The lie is that if man just tries hard enough and determines to live righteously, then he can, but such a thought goes against all that God declares in his word.

We just saw it here in the story of Adam and Eve, but you can move forward even to Genesis 4. Do you see how all this foundation is laid? Some people say, "Well, you've got to go all the way to the New Testament to see the Gospel." No, the Gospel was

declared and set forth by God himself right from the garden, right from the fall. And it's obvious that Adam and Eve taught their children the difference because when we read here in Genesis 4:1, "Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD," some think that she was actually thinking that that was that one already who would bruise the head of the serpent. Such was her anticipation, "I've got me a man from the LORD, this God-man, this Redeemer man that was revealed." But she was to die and so was Adam, even though they lived long lives without seeing the fulfillment of this in time. It was to be thousands of years later.

But we read in verse 2, "And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him."

Now, moving back up: how did they learn to bring an offering unto the Lord? Well, it's what the Lord required. It's what God would have taught Adam and Eve there in Genesis 3:21 and not only any offering but to bring a blood offering. Such was the direction of Abel. He came "with the firstling of his flock and the fat thereof," and that's why it says, "and the LORD had respect unto Abel." That little word "and" can also be translated in verse 5 "even to his offering." It wasn't that Abel was anymore righteous than Cain, otherwise if it was, then he wouldn't have needed to bring an offering. Both were bringing an offering because of their need before a holy God, but it says the Lord had respect unto Abel because Abel came in the way that God had appointed that he should come.

And what I'm telling you is here in Isaiah 64:5 where it says, "thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness," that's what that means. It doesn't mean to come and work out a righteousness acceptable to God, but it's coming in the way that God has declared that sinners should come and judging him rightly and ordaining that way to come and never coming in any other way. You see, that's what it is to work righteousness, put simply. And that same holds true for us sitting here. When you read that, don't think in terms of, "I've got to clean up my life," like one shoe polisher was saying in airport that I went through recently. He said, "You can't get to heaven with a dirty sole so come and get it polished." He was kidding but that was his religion. That's the idea that, "I've got to do something for this soul and clean it up in order to get to heaven." Perish the thought and perish with that thought unless the Lord teaches you otherwise. No, to work righteousness is to come exactly in the way that God himself has ordained that sinners should come and that is through the blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want you to see that coming back to Genesis 4. It's all right here but the Lord has to give us eyes to see because notice what the Lord said to Cain in verse 7, he said, "If thou doest well." That's just another way of saying, "If you work righteousness, Cain, shalt thou not be accepted? If you come in the way that I have ordained, would you not be accepted?" The point is you're not accepted and the fact that you come in another way is proof positive that you're not accepted and I will say the same thing to you: if you attempt to come to God in any other way than through that one righteousness that God has approved, that Christ established and earned and he imputed upon completion of his death, if you come in any other way and you die in that state, there is proof positive you never were accepted because Ephesians 1 declares that we're accepted in the Beloved. That's all.

And that's what he says there in Genesis 4:7, "And if thou doest not well." God wasn't sending him off to works religion. He wasn't sending him off to clean up his life. Doing well simply meant, "Go grab an animal sacrifice that sheds blood and bring that." He said, "If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well," in other words you persist in this way of working righteousness. You see, everybody has a way of working righteousness, just like everybody has a way of faith, or everybody has a way of hope. You see, everybody has a hope. Everybody I talk to, no one anticipates ending up in hell. Last time I checked, they all had some sort of hope, but the question is: is it a good hope? Is it the true hope? Is it the hope that as the hymn writer wrote, "is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness"?

And I dare not trust the sweetest frame. I don't even hope in any supposed graces that are within me for feeling as if that is working righteousness. It's not because it says here, "If thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door." Those left to their own reprobate minds continue to try to work out a righteousness but that's not working righteousness because there is only one righteousness. I will tell you that working righteousness is exactly how Abel came. He was brought to God through a blood sacrifice and to such a point was that persuasion that God gave him that not even Cain's opposition caused him to budge from it. He preferred to die. It's like Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty or give me death." One who has been taught of the Lord says, "Give me Christ or I die, or I perish." Dear friends, I believe that's what it means over here to work righteousness.

Look with me in Hebrews 11. It's confirmed over here, Hebrews 11. There aren't different degrees of righteousness. You're either righteous or you're not. You either come in the way that God has declared to be the right way, that's what righteousness means. Through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, or you don't come at all. You have not come. And here in Hebrews 11, notice in verse 4, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh."

There is the whole sum of the message right there. First of all, by faith. Where does faith come? It comes by hearing, hearing by the word of God. It takes the revelation of God. The difference between Abel and Cain was the revelation of the Spirit of God to his heart

and that relates back to Isaiah 64 where it says, "For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him." And Paul used that very verse over in 1 Corinthians 2:9. Outside of the Spirit revealing this to a heart, a man will continue on in his way of righteousness; he will continue to labor in that supposed field of righteousness only to find out in the end that it was no righteousness at all. Paul said that, "Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit."

The Lord never leaves alone any for whom Christ has paid the debt and so in Hebrews 11:4 it says, "by faith," even that faith is not something that is drummed up in us. It's given. Faith is the gift of God and, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, and by it he obtained witness," God's witness, "that he was one of those righteous," for whom Christ would die, made righteous by the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, "God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh."

So as you fast forward through history, this has always been the way in which the Lord's people have been identified so this is the very first point that I believe in coming here to Isaiah 64:5 that needs to be underscored and that is to work righteousness means, again, righteousness, to approach God in the right way as he has ordained and that is approaching unto him through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. I believe that has to be the primary meaning, especially as we read other portions of Scripture. It's not by our works of righteousness. Bob just read that for us in Titus 3, not by works of righteousness which we have done.

You say, "Why doesn't the Scripture make it clearer?" It's as plain as day. It's like they said of Christ, "If thou be the Christ, tell us so." The reason why men don't believe it is because they are yet in their sin. It's like a bad investment. If you've ever had somebody tell you, "Man, I invested in this property. I invested in this stock fund years ago and that thing has completely bottomed out but I still have a hard time letting go of it." It's time to get rid of it. It has done you no good. Such is the state of man, though, he will continue to cling to because of all of his past and every bit of energy he's put into it. He'll to his death grit his teeth and say, "I still find it hard to believe that God won't at least look with favor upon me for all this that I have done and what not." I'll tell you what, the Scriptures say that those that stand before the Lord one day and speak in those terms, he'll say, "Depart from me," what? Not you workers of righteousness but, "you workers of iniquity. I never knew you." I never knew you. Those are some pretty straightforward words.

Look with me for confirmation here and then I want to come back to this portion with one other thought but look with me in Romans 5. Notice in verse 6, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died," not for the righteous but, "for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die," that's by men's terms. "If he's good enough, I'll lay down my life for him." "Yet peradventure for a good man some would

even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Now here it is, "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." So how is it that sinners are reconciled? How is it that they are made right? That's the word righteous, declared righteous? Well, it's by one way in verse 9, by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the fulfillment of what God established back there in the garden with Adam and Eve. Not the fig leaves of our own righteousness but that which is of God through Christ.

Look also with me in 1 John 2. This is underscoring this point. To work righteousness means to do rightly in approaching unto God in that way that he has ordained sinners to come and that is through the righteousness of Christ alone. If you go all the way to Revelation and them come back, you'll see 1 John 2. Look how it's put here in verse 29. It says here, "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one," you see, there is the word, "that doeth righteousness is born of him." Alright? When you read these words, you've got to read them in their context. It does not mean that everyone that tries to work out their own righteousness is born of him. That would be contradiction. That's what men do and women do when the Spirit has not taught them of Christ. They are attempting to work out their own righteousness and I can tell you that any person left in that state that continues to do that is not born of him. That's the clear indication right there.

But it says, "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him." You know that he is righteous. Who is righteous? Well, Christ. Christ who is the very righteousness of God in his nature and in his work that he came to accomplish for sinners. Paul said, "By one man's obedience, many are made righteous." By one man's obedience. So it's to know that he is righteous; that Christ is that righteousness and that he came and worked it out and upon completion of his death, God imputed that righteousness to his people.

Who are his people? Well, it says, "ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him." That doeth righteousness. What righteousness? Well, that is submitted to that one righteousness alone, that Christ worked out. That's our testimony and if I can render that testimony, you see, this is where the devil's lie comes in again because just back like before the fall, God said, "The tree of life suffices. That's all you need. You can enjoy everything in this garden. Just partake of that tree of life." The same is true with regard to our salvation: the work of Christ alone suffices.

You say, "How do you do that?" Well, you submit to it. You bow to it. You live under it. You enjoy the freedom that it brings. That's what it is to do righteousness. It's to rest. It's the opposite of the way men think. Men say, "Get more active. Be about doing works of the flesh." No! Doing his righteousness. Doing rightly according to how God has worked out that righteousness is to rest in what Christ has worked out. I'll show you that here in a second. But that's what it is to do righteousness, it's not bringing our own works but it's living under and resting in the righteousness of God that Christ has worked out and established. That's what the grace of God teaches us to do.

Look over here in Romans 10. I know I'm skirting around a little bit but I want you to see that. There is only one righteousness that we do. We do come to Christ alone as our righteousness. We do bow to that one righteousness of God alone in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you feel more comfortable putting the word "do" in there, then this is what the righteous do. They do come to Christ. They do rest in Christ. They do look to Christ alone as all of their salvation, but even that, I'd have to say in my doing and coming, it's all by his grace. That's what it is to work righteousness.

That's what Paul declares here in Romans 10, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God," notice, "but not according to knowledge." It's not zeal to God that's working righteousness. There is a whole generation that has a supposed zeal for God that are lost because Paul says, "My desire is that they might be saved." So don't call them saved. It's not according to knowledge.

"For they," notice, "being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness." There's the distinction. To work God's righteousness is to come to Christ by the drawing of his Spirit in grace. Any other righteousness is just going about to establish your own righteousness. You can be busy about doing that and be lost because it says here right there, "have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For," what? "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." That gives us a description of one who does righteousness. Christ is the end of the law for every one that believeth. Don't call yourself a believer and still be about trying to add some work of righteousness of your own to his and call it a cooperation. It's not. Salvation is not of cooperation, salvation is wholly the work of God in Christ through the Lord Jesus Christ.

So therein we see that to work that righteousness is to do rightly. Approach God in the way that he has ordained. Secondly, only those do righteousness to whom God has already revealed the true righteousness that Christ earned and God imputed on their behalf. If you come back here to Isaiah 64 and we'll pick up with this next time in verse 6. You see, lest anybody think that verse 5 means working out my own righteousness, well, read verse 6, "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses," pile them all up as best you think that that is working righteousness, he calls it "filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." That's not working righteousness. What is working righteousness? Well, to sum it up: all those who do work righteousness according to the Spirit of God, they submit to that obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ that he worked out on their behalf. That's what it is.

You notice, and there's a lot here in verse 5 when it says, "thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness," notice the connection between the doing of righteousness, the working of righteousness and the rejoicing. Whose righteousness do we rejoice in? It's the righteousness of God. And when it says there, "whom the Lord meetest," verse 5, "Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness," actually in the original, it's in the sense of has met and continues to meet, has welcomed. The word "meet" there

means "to welcome." "Thou welcomest him. You welcome them and you continue to welcome." It's speaking of God welcoming those that rejoice and work righteousness; those that come in the manner that Abel came; those that come in the manner that Abraham came; those that come in the manner that Paul was brought to come in time. Renouncing everything else is dung and coming to the Lord Jesus Christ alone in a way of grace and mercy. The promise that is there that he receives sinners. He receives sinners.

It's proof in verse 5 of Isaiah 64 that it's talking about sinners, "behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned." God has every right to condemn us with the rest of the world in those is continuance. Do you see what it's saying there? I never stopped being a sinner so if it was a matter of me working this righteousness to God's satisfaction, I could never do it, but he welcomes those who come in that righteousness that Christ would come and establish and earn and work out on their behalf. That's why it says at the end there of verse 5, "and we shall be saved." Based on that righteousness. Based on coming in that way, because that's the way that God has ordained.

Well, there's a lot more to that and much more profound and deep than what I could ever imagine to be able to explain, but I pray that the Lord will take it and seal it to our hearts and I know this, if you'll just be pleased to reveal Christ in me and draw me as he did Abel, I know that all will be well and so will it be with you.