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The Righteousness of God, Part 1

Romans 3:21-26, But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ¹

In Chuck Colson's *The Body*, the account of Maximilian Kolbe is told. (Charles Colson, 1994) Kolbe was a Polish priest who was sent to Auschwitz in 1941 on account of his work for the Lord. While there, a prisoner from his housing unit was believed to have escaped (he was later found drowned in the latrine). As a punishment and a lesson to the rest of the prisoners, ten men from Barracks 14 were sentenced to the "starvation bunker" which provided a death worse than the firing line, hanging, or even the gas chamber.

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Romans 3:21–26). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

As the ten prisoners were chosen at random, one man broke into tears pleading for mercy since he had a wife and young children. The German's ignored his plea. It was then that the unthinkable took place! Pastor Kolbe stepped forward and asked to go in his place. After some discussion, the German officer granted Kolbe's request and the death sentence that had been placed on the young prisoner was given to Maximilian instead.

Now as incredible and as moving as is this story, it is but a pale reflection of what our passage tells us that God has done for us! To the guilty, speechless, and condemned of Romans 3: 19-20, which is all of mankind, we read one of the most important phrases in the Bible:

Romans 3:21, "BUT NOW apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested..."

Against the dark back-drop of man's condemnation shines a ray of hope; God has intervened and provided deliverance. Notice the phrase, "the righteousness of God." Previously, we saw that "righteousness" is a term used in the Bible in reference to a covenant relationship; a relationship founded upon promise. In essence, the designation of "righteous" denotes that the obligations of a relationship have been fulfilled. When applied to God (as in "the righteousness of God") the word conveys the idea not only that God is just; His actions are in perfect agreement with His nature, but that He has perfectly fulfilled the obligations or standards of the relationship. What relationship? The relationship and so the obligations of the Covenant of Works!

That is what the incarnation of Christ was all about. Christ came to fulfill the covenant of works (Galatians 4:4-5). In fact that brings us to another facet of "the righteousness of God" that we considered last time. It is transferrable. That is, in relation to the stipulations of the covenant, God's perfect legal standing can be given to others. And so, just as Pastor Kolbe's "right standing" could be given to the condemned prisoner. So also God's righteousness can be imparted to us!

From this perspective the phrase, "the righteousness of God," can be taken as (1) "the righteousness that comes from God" or (2) the legal standing of God. This is what Paul is referencing when he says that "the righteousness of God has been manifested." "Manifested" literally means open to sight, made visible, or even imparted. And thus we see the beauty and magnificence of this passage. The same God who has gone on record in chapters 1-3 saying that all men are sinners and therefore deserving of death, is the same God who has salvifically IMPARTED His own righteousness to the legal standing of His children!

And that brings us to the question of the hour: How has He done this? How does this impartation work?

Romans 3 gives us a three-fold answer to this question. Notice firstly: It is apart from the law.

Righteous Apart From Law

Romans 3:21, "but now apart from the Law."

The sense here is, "apart from law-keeping!" Notice that this section is in contrast with Romans 3:20 where Paul uses the parallel expression, "the works of the Law." See the law has been given for various reasons, two of which are identified in verse 20 as:

- Shutting every mouth.
- Holding all accountable to God.

Now notice that of the various reasons God gave the Law, nowhere do we read that it was for the salvation of His people? In fact, we read here just the opposite. Salvation is "apart from the Law." That is, without law keeping!

You say, "But I thought that salvation is only possible because Christ kept the law and then applied His righteous account to our account?" Beautiful! That is exactly what happened. Yet the question remains:

- How does one receive the righteousness of Christ- His right standing?
- How does Christ's account get credited to our own?
- If the covenant of works could only be fulfilled by perfect obedience, is this same standard required for us in order to receive the application of God's righteousness to our account?
- Yet how is it determined as to whom will receive the gift of this right-standing?
- Is it like Linus' Pumpkin Patch and so given only to the most sincere individuals?
Does God grant His right-standing only to those who are worthy? Who by law-keeping distinguish themselves?

Paul's emphatic answer here is, "No! Receiving the righteousness of Christ is 'apart from law keeping!'" Whether you follow the Mosaic Law or whether you follow the law written on the heart (cf. Romans 2:15), it is quite irrelevant. Salvation is granted according to the good pleasure of God NOT the worthiness of the recipient!

Ephesians 1:4b-6, "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

We receive the forgiveness of sin NOT because of anything we have done, BUT because it pleases God. Accordingly, in and throughout God's word salvation is granted to ones who are not worthy! And why is that? Paul gives the answer in Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

As man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, so it is God's! Thus, God has chosen the weak and worthless of this world that the praise and glory might rest with Him alone! So it was in our justification. And so it is in our sanctification. Paul comments to the Corinthian's:

2 Corinthians 12:7, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me- to keep me from exalting myself!"

Truly the theme of our lives as children of God is the glory of God, the grace of God, the praise of God! When Paul set out to explain the basis upon which the Righteousness of God is imparted to the sinner,

he quickly asserts that it is apart from law-keeping. And so, while law-keeping is requisite in order for any or all of us to stand before God innocent of violating the Covenant of Works. Hence we see the need for the Virgin Birth, the perfect life, and the vicarious death of Christ. He alone earned salvation! Nevertheless, the basis upon which "the righteousness of God" is granted to the individual excludes any thought of merit on the part of the individual.

Well then, how can a sinner like you and me receive the application of the right-standing of Christ to our account? Notice that it is through faith.

Through Faith

Romans 3:21a, 22a, "But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested... even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ..."

With this, Paul asserts the avenue by which "the right-standing of God" is imparted to the sinner. What is the avenue? Notice it is "through" faith and NOT "by" or "on account of" it! I have mentioned this in the past, but because it is so important it bears repeating:

- The "righteousness that comes from God" is NOT received *BECAUSE* of faith (as if our faith merited God's blessing), BUT *THROUGH* faith!
- In other words, "faith" is the path through which a man receives God's right standing, NOT the basis! You are saved not because you believe, but "through faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:22).

This is the first time in this epistle that faith is specifically linked to Jesus Christ. From this we learn that God's righteousness is imparted NOT on account of the quantity or the quality of the faith that we have. Our confidence in God. Our recognition of the truth of the gospel. BUT "through a faith" whose object and substance is Jesus Christ!²

Truly if we would receive the righteousness of God it will only be because Christ has imparted it "through faith." You say, "What's the big deal?... through... because... what difference does it make?" Listen, faith is not the secret password to heaven. God didn't look down the corridors of time to see who would exercise this option and so grant the right-standing of Christ, that would make faith meritorious! You are not saved because you believe! Rather faith is the route upon which all God's people travel when once they've been regenerated! First comes the selection on the part of God, and then comes the faith.

Acts 13:48, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they *began* rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed."

John 15:16a, "You did not choose Me [which is a faith activity], but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit..."

God's choice preceded our own. And thus Paul writes Romans 3:21-22.

Romans 3:21a, 22a, "But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested...

² Compare Acts 16:30-31; 2:21; John 8:24.

[that is] *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe."

The path upon which those who receive the "righteousness that comes from God" is the path of reliance; whose focus, trust, and so faith is NOT in anything they have done, BUT in Christ alone! See, it is one thing to affirm the truth of this passage. And yet it is quite another to submit your life to it, and so to act upon it!

It is only those who depend or rely upon Christ's righteousness as their fulfillment of the Covenant of Works that actually are saved. In fact, a great picture of this is the well-known analogy of the tight rope walker.

The Tight Rope Walker

At Niagara Falls a man strung a tight-rope across the river and was doing all kinds of zany tricks, proving his skill and balance. A crowd soon formed. The tight-rope walker then approached the crowd with a wheel-barrow. When he came to the crowd, he asked a person, "Do you believe I could carry you to the other side of the river in this wheel-barrow?"

The person said, "Yes. I believe you could do that!"

To which the Tight-rope walker replied, "Then get in!"

This is a great picture of the faith that is being spoken about here. The only one who will

- See God.
- Be received, accepted, and approved by God.
- Receive the imparted righteousness of God.
- Is the one "who believes" and so depends, relies, or "gets in"!

Now lest you think that this is new to Paul, notice the phrase in Romans 3:21 which until now I have skipped over.

Witnessed by the Old Testament

Romans 3:21, "but now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

This is an expression which denotes the whole Old Testament.³ See the Jews divided the Bible into two parts: (1) the Law which included the five books of Moses, and (2) the Prophets which included all the other books. And so by this phrase Paul is saying that the entirety of the Old Testament points to the same truth that is presented here, that a right standing with God only comes through faith! And this we see throughout the sacrificial system.

The Sacrificial System

It clearly taught that if a sinner is to stand before God acceptably, they needed to be perfect! Yet we

³ Compare also Matthew 5:17; 22:40; Luke 24:27.

know that all have sinned and so are not perfect. Accordingly God allowed the sinner to offer a spotless lamb in their place and so stand before God on the basis of the righteousness of another! That is a major emphasis of the Old Testament!⁴

And yet it is not just seen in the sacrificial system, it is positively and directly addressed in such passages as Genesis 15:6. Speaking of Abraham:

Genesis 15:6, "Then he believed in the Lord; and [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Abraham received the right-standing of Christ via faith. And thus Paul wrote this commentary concerning Abraham.

Romans 4:13, 15-16: "For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law [keeping], but through the righteousness [which comes through] faith... for the Law [law keeping] brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace..."

David mused:

Psalms 32:1, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!"

Whether it be on account of the sacrificial system or direct revelation from God, David understood that the only way a man could stand innocent before God was through the righteousness of Another, specifically the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Habakkuk understood it as well.

Habakkuk 2:4, "...but the righteous will live by his faith."

Isaiah declared;

Isaiah 53:6, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

We have gazed upon the most wonderful news in the world! Just as Pastor Kolbe's "right standing" was given to the young prisoner, so also God's righteousness can be imparted to us!

And how does this work? It is NOT on account of anything we have done, BUT on account of God's choice through faith. If we would receive the right-standing of Christ, the Lamb of God, (John 1:29) we must rely upon His sacrifice. It is as Paul put it in Romans 1.

Romans 1:17, "He who is righteous by faith shall live."

Now as with any portion of God's word, this passage must mean more to us than just a theological statement that describes the basis of our salvation. In fact, as God's word is described as spiritual food

⁴ Other prominent examples are Genesis 22 and the ram caught in the thicket, Exodus 12 and Passover, and the emphasis on sacrifice in the Old Testament (the Old Testament records 31 verses about creation and 7 chapters [a total of 243 verses] on the issue of substitution. What is the emphasis of the Old Testament?).

for our souls (1 Peter 2:1-3), it is imperative that we feast upon the truth of our text this morning.

And to aid us in doing this, I want to begin by asking a very important question that naturally flows from this text: Are you living in grace by faith? Now the way we go about answering this question is by carefully looking at our life. See, our living is a barometer of our faith! James said:

James 2:14, "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"

James' point is simple. If we depend upon Christ for salvation, this will have an impact on how we live. Faith will translate to a predictable way of living. Christ taught:

Matthew 12:33a, "...the tree is known by its fruit."

Paul spoke of the sham-Christian:

Titus 1:16a, "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him..."

John wrote this:

1 John 2:3, "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments..."

Thus, a comparison of our lives in relation to the Bible's description of what kingdom living is all about will reveal the general health of our faith! Accordingly, what does "Kingdom Living" look like in the Scriptures? What is a life of faith characterized by? It will be characterized by:

- An intimate relationship with God, John 17:3.
- The fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 6:8; cf. 5:22-23.
- Lack of worry concerning food and material things, Matthew 6:25; Luke 12:15.
- A life of self-denial, Matthew 10:38-39; 16:24-25.
- A life of conflict, Galatians 5:17; 2 Timothy 3:12.
- Obedience to God's word, John 3:36.
- Contentment, John 4:14.
- Peace with God, Romans 5:1; 8:6.
- Freedom from the bondage of sin, Romans 6:5-9.
- Holy living, Romans 6:22.
- Hopeful living, 2 Corinthians. 4:12, 16; Colossians 3:3-4; Titus 3:7.
- Love of the brethren, 1 John 3:14.

Now, as you evaluate your life in relation to the fruit of faith, you will find that you fall into one of three categories: Either...

- Your life is characterized by kingdom living, or...
- Your life is NOT characterized by kingdom living, BUT it should (you trust in Christ), or...
- Your life is NOT characterized by kingdom living, AND it can't (you have not trusted in Christ).

Category One

If you fall into the first category, your life is characterized by kingdom living. Rejoice in the Lord! But, guard your heart (Proverbs 4:23)! The seed of unbelief remains in each and every one of us.

Category Two

If you fall into the second category, your life is NOT characterized by kingdom living, BUT it should for you trust in Christ. Realize that the bent of your life is not one of dependence or reliance upon Christ or His grace. Consider what Paul wrote of the fallen world view:

Galatians 2:18, "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor."

This text is rather illuminating. It tells us at least two things. There are two completely different worldviews by which to live: The Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Satan//grace vs. works (2 Corinthians 1:12).

For a Christian to "rebuild what was once destroyed" implies:

- A present worldview — that which is granted in Christ- and...
- A past worldview — that which we had as fallen beings that grace destroyed, but we in our flesh seek to rebuild.

As Christians, rather than allowing our minds to be renewed/refashioned by the word of God such that we think according to the kingdom of God (Romans 12:1-2), it is possible to take the fallen worldview destroyed by Christ and seek to rebuild it. When we do this we buy into:

- Either our default programming whereby we believe that we can earn God's favor.
- Or the lie of Satan that life is about...
 - Pleasure.
 - Being first.
 - Getting all that you can get.
 - Fulfillment and so satisfaction.

Now being so moved, "having rebuilt what has been destroyed in Christ" the inclination will be to stand before God and one another on the basis of our righteous living, and so reap the consequences in the form of...

- Fear, 1 John 4:18.
- Broken relationships, Galatians 5:15.
- Immoral living, James 4:2b-4a.
- Compromise, Galatians 5:7.
- Fleshly living, 1 Corinthians 3:2-3; Colossians 2:18-19.

If this is a description of you, don't lament your state or despair! Diagnose the problem. Grace has a specific instruction which always results in kingdom living (Titus 2:11-14). If you lack that fruit, then you

are not living by grace in reliance upon Christ no matter how much you may profess otherwise.

So what should we do if we find ourselves living here? Repent of your selfish independence. Turn from the self-exalting attitude that seeks to preserve your dignity, respect, and rights! Go to God and confess your weakness and rebellion. Submit your whole being to Christ- your heart, mind, body, and will this is what faith is all about!

Get in the word daily and allow it to renew your mind, Romans 12:1-2. And through it all be encouraged...

- The picture of the Christian in the Bible is that they are in process!
- In other words, God is not through with you yet (Philippians 1:6)!

Category Three

Finally, there may be some here who fall into the third category, your life is NOT characterized by kingdom living, AND it can't. Realize that the reason it can't is because you have yet to receive the imparted righteousness of God. Your FAITH in Christ is either historical (e.g. Abraham Lincoln) or temporal (e.g. you rely upon God for a specific answer to a prayer) both of which lead to hell, Matthew 7:13ff.

You've watched as a spectator; perhaps you have even been thrilled by what you've seen, and yet you have yet to, "GET IN." I plead with you:

- If you stand before God on the basis of your own righteousness you will die!
- The only way you will live is if you receive the righteousness of God through faith!

In light of this, go to Christ and confess your sin. Turn from your independence and self-dependence. Rely upon the saving work of Christ by which your sins can be forgiven and through which God's righteousness is imparted! And you will receive new life!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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