



BETHEL  
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## The Righteousness of God

### An Introduction

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—<sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Iliad*, the great Trojan warrior Hector was preparing to fight Achilles and the invading Greeks. As he was about to leave, Hector wanted to hold his young son, Astyanax, in his arms and bid him farewell for what would be the last time. But Hector's armor frightened the boy. Rather than going to his father, Astyanax clung to his nurse. So Hector, laughing out loud, removed his bronze helmet and took up his son in his arms. Now rather than crying, the boy discovered the father of his love.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Ro 3:21–26). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Romans 3:21-26 is somewhat like taking off of the seemingly cold helmet of God's judgment and there finding the warm and loving arms of God! The same God who has gone on record in chapters 1-3 saying that all men are sinners and therefore are deserving of death is the same God who:

- "So loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16).
- "Has manifested His righteousness" to us savingly (Romans 3:21).

Now as I was studying for this sermon, I must confess that I was at somewhat of a quandary. For while the text we are approaching is magnificent and rich, it nevertheless was written with an assumed knowledge on the part of Paul regarding his readers. And for those lacking this general background, this section, though intended to clarify and edify the reader, will probably raise a certain amount of question and uncertainty.

Many of us are like Martin Luther. Luther misunderstood "the righteousness of God" and this phrase evoked dread on his part rather than gratitude and joy. So, I want to introduce the concept of the "righteousness of God" and the biblical concept of "righteousness" so that we can properly understand the book of Romans. I want to do this with the hope that we will lay a foundation upon which to build a thorough understanding of "the righteousness of God."

### Righteousness is a Relational Term

The term "righteousness is a relational term.

When David finally was delivered from Saul (v. 1), this is what the new king wrote:

- 2 Samuel 22:21-23, "The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness;  
according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.
- 22 For I have kept the ways of the LORD  
and have not wickedly departed from my God.
- 23 For all his rules were before me,  
and from his statutes I did not turn aside.<sup>2</sup>

This passage references the "righteousness" of David, a righteousness which he possessed in himself and would serve as the basis for blessing.

To what is David referring? Let's consider this term in some detail.

The word for righteousness in the Bible (*dikaioisune*) literally means, "to act in accordance with right." It comes from *dikaiois* which means "in accordance with right." Now, most of us associate this term with the concept of moral perfection and so immediately assume a soteriological context. And that is appropriate, but that is only part of it. See, "righteousness" is not a self-defining term. It requires a context.

- A prisoner could be considered as righteous if he upheld the prison rules.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (2 Sa 22:21–23). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

- Though Job had many struggles and problems with God, nevertheless he was considered as righteous before God (Job. 1:8).

So when the Bible speaks of “righteousness” what is it talking about? To answer this we begin by observing that in Scripture “righteousness” is a term that can only be understood in the context of a relationship. In both the Old Testament and New Testament it is used to convey the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, either with God or with man. Righteousness is justice within the context of a covenant relationship; i.e. a relationship founded upon promise. Outside of this relationship, righteousness has very little meaning. Thus, when a person fulfills the obligation of their relationship with God, they are said to be righteous or to possess righteousness.

Once again, we read of David, “The Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness [by and large David had kept covenant as an up and coming king; accordingly God rewarded him]... For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not acted wickedly against my God.” (2 Samuel 22:21-23).

It should be noted that there are different levels to a relationship with God and so different designations when it comes to “righteousness.” Here the righteousness in mind is not what we tend to think when it comes to this word. Again it is not salvific. Rather, David here is talking about the righteousness which he himself possessed as an anointed man chosen by God to serve as king.

So again, righteousness is justice/fidelity within the context of a covenant relationship. When Christ went to fulfill the obligation of the law at His baptism, He told John, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15) That is, it was required in order to fulfill the ceremonial law which required the baptism of a priest upon his ordination (Lightfoot)! Ezekiel in essence explained why Judah was in exile. They had forsaken the national covenant. “When the son has practiced justice and righteousness, and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live.” (Ezekiel 18:19b) God’s people did not uphold the national covenant; they were unrighteous. As a result, they were sent into exile.

Christ, using the example of the scribes and Pharisees who scrupulously fulfilled the law, said, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

This was a tall order for the scribes and Pharisees were righteous individuals! You say, “So they were saved?” No. But against the backdrop of external conformity to their religious laws and standards, they were Green Berets!

That is why when Christ made this statement, most hearts would have sunk. *You mean to tell me that for a person to be saved, their righteousness has to surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees? Impossible!*

From these passages we conclude that righteousness is a term used in the context of a covenantal relationship. It conveys the idea that the required duties have been and are being fulfilled.

## **The Righteousness of God**

Now as Romans 3:21 shows, “righteousness” can also be used in reference to God, “the righteousness of God.” And when it does, it carries at least a two-fold significance in the Bible. First it denotes that God’s

actions are in perfect agreement with his nature, the word could literally be translated as, “in accordance with right.” Since there is no external law to which God can be in agreement, God Himself is the standard. When the Bible speaks of “the righteousness of God” it conveys the truth that God is just; again His actions are in perfect agreement with His nature. So when we read that God “judges the nations in righteousness” (Acts 17:31), that means that God’s judgments do not violate His character (unlike man’s). And so, God cannot be bribed (Deuteronomy 10:17) nor is His judgment partial (Romans 2:11).

Secondly, it denotes that God keeps covenant. He is faithful and true to His commitments/word. Daniel, in his great confession for the sins of his people, prayed, “Righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to us open shame... Indeed all Israel has transgressed Thy law and turned aside, not obeying Thy voice; so the curse has been poured out on us...” (Daniel 9:7, 11)

In other words, we are the covenant breakers; God has and continues to keep covenant!

Deuteronomy 7:9, “Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant...”

God’s righteousness is seen in that HE has not violated any agreement that He has made with man throughout redemptive history. He keeps covenant! In fact even in the face of open rebellion on the part of man, God remains true to His word; He is righteous.

2 Timothy 2:13, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.”

So the first point one must see when discussing “righteousness” and/or “the righteousness of God” is that righteousness is a term which finds its significance in the context of a covenant relationship- a relationship founded upon promise! As it relates to God, it therefore implies that:

- God is Just- true to Himself.
- He keeps covenant/His word.

## Righteousness is Necessary

This brings us to a second point, righteousness is necessary in a relationship with God. When man was created, he entered into a covenantal relationship with God, Genesis 2:15-17; Hosea 6:7. This was and is the ultimate relationship when it comes to God. All other callings and duties (David’s calling to be king) flow from it. Now as we would expect this relationship was accompanied by certain requirements, notice the text.

Genesis 2:16-17, “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.’”

The relationship into which God originally entered with mankind had various and sundry stipulations the most important of which was that mankind was to obey God perfectly. In this context therefore, “righteousness” translated to sinless perfection. Now in the event that mankind violated this covenant; that is, they proved themselves to be unrighteous what would be the consequence? The text says that

the consequence would be death!

Genesis 2:17b, "...in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die."

And so, from the very beginning we see that righteousness was and is necessary in a relationship with God; that is, being true to the obligation of the relationship! Now we know that Adam violated the original relationship such that he and his wife became unrighteous and so died spiritually, morally, emotionally, and eventually physically. What impact did this have on the rest of mankind? In Adam, all died!

Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned."

This is an incredible passage that indicates to us that Adam was not acting alone when he rebelled against God in the garden. Rather, he stood before God as the representative of mankind, our Federal Head such that what he did was credited to the world.

And what did he do? He proved unfaithful so that today each and every one of us stands before God as covenant breakers, as unrighteous! That was the problem that Isaiah brought to the people of God.

Isaiah 64:6a, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our RIGHTEOUS DEEDS are like a filthy garment..."

When it comes to the most fundamental relationship we have in life, our relationship with God; no one stands before God as having fulfilled the covenant! And so, though we might stand "righteous" before God in the context of a religious system of ritual and sacrifice.

Isaiah 64 does reference a righteousness that the people of God possessed on account of their zealously for ceremony, that righteousness is "filthy rags" when it comes to the relationship which God entered into with mankind in Adam. And so speaking of this relationship, Paul said, "in Adam all die." (1 Corinthians 15:22a)

You say, "Why couldn't Adam right the wrong? If he violated the relationship he had with God, why couldn't he just say sorry?" Because again the only way he could right the wrong was through his death. And that continues to be the case today.

Romans 6:23a, "For the wages of sin is death..."

From this perspective, mankind is doomed. In Adam we lost our original righteousness and it can never be paid for on our part outside of our own death. From this we conclude that "righteousness" is a term in the Bible that is understood only in the context of a covenantal relationship, a relationship based on promise. In the beginning God deigned to enter into a relationship with mankind in Adam. The covenant stipulation was perfect obedience. Yet mankind in Adam violated this covenant and so stands condemned before God- and so indeed.

Romans 3:10b, "...there is none righteous, not even one."

## Righteousness is Transferable

Now lest we be disheartened, notice a third element when it comes to “righteousness.” Righteousness is transferable. Paul later will teach, “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:17) Again Paul said:

Romans 4:5, “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.”

Against the bleak and dark backdrop of Adam’s failure, we see a great and glorious message. It is amazing! In creating this world God wove into it the principle that **RIGHTEOUSNESS IS TRANSFERABLE!** That is what the sacrificial system was all about. It pictured the exchange of (1) righteousness for unrighteousness, of (2) life for death.

Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.”

By offering up a “righteous” animal in the place of the unrighteous, the individual could stand before God ceremonially cleansed! You say, “How could this be?” It only could be because righteousness is transferable! So we read this:

Hebrews 9:13, “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh.”

What a glorious truth! It is possible to be guilty of violating the terms of a relationship with God, and yet not suffer the consequences. You say, wait a minute! How is it that an animal could be “righteous” before God? They didn’t enter into a relationship with the Lord in Adam. So how can they be viewed as righteous?

The truth be known, they can’t! They only can picture and so teach the principle, which is why we read this:

Hebrews 10:4, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

So an animal really cannot exchange its righteousness with a man for it doesn’t have covenantal righteousness! It only is ceremonially clean or unclean. Well then, what can serve as a fitting substitution? If righteousness is transferable, whose righteousness can the unrighteous have? The Righteousness of God! Again listen to Paul:

Romans 5:17, “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.”

Indeed! Righteousness is transferable! But it is NOT the righteousness of an animal for they don’t have any. RATHER it is the righteousness of the spotless Lamb of God (Hebrews 9:11-14)! Following the rebellion of Adam, God deigned to become a man, to be born under the covenant of works, fulfill it, and

then give His life in exchange for the transgressor. When John first saw Christ in His public ministry he said this:

John 1:29b, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Christ said this:

Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Thus the only way a man can stand before God as having fulfilled the covenant of works is if he has credited to him the righteousness of Christ!

Romans 4:5, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

Every man approaches God on the basis of something.

- Their good intentions.
- Their acts of devotion.
- Their morally upright life.

This text tells us that the only acceptable basis upon which to approach God is Christ. We are called to rely upon His life and death as the basis for our acceptance. After detailing quite extensively his own righteousness and so the basis upon which many a Jew approached God, Paul said this:

Philippians 3:7-9, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith."

One of the descriptions of the child of God in Scripture is that they are ones who have abandoned their attempt to fulfill the requirements of the relationship they have with God (it's already been violated by Adam), and instead are living by the "righteousness of God" that is given by grace through faith.

And so as we approach Romans 3:21-26, recognize that what Paul says in this passage assumes a general understanding of the BROKEN relationship every person has with God.

Romans 3:10, "There is none righteous, not even one."

Every person is a covenant breaker, and thus unrighteous! The CONSEQUENTIAL CONDEMNATION every person has as their due.

Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through

sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

## The TRANSFERABLE Character of “The Righteousness of God”

Romans 5:1, “Therefore having been justified by faith [declared righteous], we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...”

And so to the child of God, “The Righteousness of God” is much more than just a cold, theological term (think of Martin Luther prior to his salvation). Rather it is the loving arms of a God who, “...so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...” (John 3:16).

How do we respond to these rich truths? First we must seek God's righteousness.

Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

The terms for “hunger and thirst” are strong words in the Bible. They indicate an all-consuming desire or passion. They are the words used to refer to the hunger and thirst of someone who is famished! And thus, the strongest and deepest impulses in the natural realm are used to represent the depth of desire that the “called of God” have for righteousness! In fact, these words are a present participle signifying a continuous longing. Those who come to Christ come hungering and thirsting for righteousness and it never ends!

This should be our demeanor! We must stop at nothing less than having, possessing, and so enjoying the righteousness of God! Our longing must be as the deer pants for the water-brooks (Psalm 42:1)! John Darby wrote this:

To be hungry is not enough; I must be really starving to know what is in God's heart toward me. When the prodigal son was hungry, he went to feed on the husks, but when he was starving, he turned to his father. (MacArthur, 1985, pp. 181-182)

Truly, Christ must be our only want, our only hope, our sure foundation! Now if there are any here who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, the Bible describes how you can:

- The one who is blessed- “approved of God” is the one who is exhausted of seeking to establish their own righteousness.
- Longing for the righteousness that is freely offered in the gospel, the “Righteousness of God.”

If you would enjoy a relationship with God, it will only be as you cast aside your vain attempts at trying to please God, and take as your own, “The righteousness of God” granted in Christ.

Secondly, one must rejoice on account of God's righteousness.

Isaiah 61:10, "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”



Did you know that every child of God has been “wrapped in the robe of the righteousness of God”? It is true. Everyone in Christ has been clothed by Him!

Galatians 3:27, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Now unite this with the truth that every person that has lived or will live is born as a violator of the covenant that God established with Adam. In other words, they are born as unrighteous beings and so violators of the stipulations of the covenant and the result is that you have a group of people who deserve the wrath and condemnation of God and nothing in life but turmoil, grief and pain. And yet you have received life, immortality and hope!

Against the backdrop of this wonderful truth, is there anything in the world that should cause you to be...

- Bitter and downcast?
- Hopeless?
- In despair?
- Over-burdened?

Indeed, our response to these truths this morning should be as Isaiah.

Isaiah 61:10, “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness...”

If you are one who is without joy, there are three possible reasons as to why. First, you haven’t been wrapped in God’s righteousness. If this is the case, go back to the teaching of Matthew 5:6 and so lay aside your self-righteous efforts at pleasing God, and receive God’s forgiveness in Christ.

Secondly, you are living in sin. David’s sin with Bathsheba robbed him of the “joy of his salvation” (Psalm 51:12). Accordingly repent of your sin; turn to God, or the state of your soul will continue to deteriorate.

Third, you failed to realize the significance of these truths; that is, you don’t understand grace! If this is the case and I guess that this is probably the case for most of us when we lack the joy of the Lord, let us purpose to become serious students in the school of grace. There is no more important topic you could seek to master.

Finally, commit your whole being to living in righteousness. This is where Paul is going to bring this discussion.

Romans 6:19, “I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.”

Can you imagine a family defaulting on their house payment, being threatened with foreclosure, having

a close friend or relative come forward and offering not only to pay the debt, but to assume all house payments? Can you imagine this benefactor saying, "Please, live in the house rent free. The only thing I ask is that you keep the house maintained and repaired. I'll pay whatever costs you might face in the process"?

Can you imagine this family responding in the weeks and months to come by trashing the house and feeling resentment toward the close friend or family member because they asked you to help fix the house? It is unthinkable!

Family of God, how can we enjoy the right-standing granted in Christ, but then neglect or ignore the covenant? When we were created/born we were placed in a relationship with God. Now Christ paid the price for our failure that we might continue in the relationship. Ought we now to look lightly upon the relationship because our debt has been paid? It is unthinkable!

Accordingly understand that for the child of God, the law of God no longer is our condemnation, burden, or accuser. Rather, it has become our guide and so our joy as we endeavor to flesh out the covenant relationship we enjoy with God on account of Christ.

Psalm 119:45, "And I will walk at liberty, for I seek Thy precepts."

Provided we are not seeking to fulfill our covenant obligations in order to gain our salvation or secure God's blessing, the law of God is the means to great freedom/liberty in the life of the child of God. God has given us His word to take the guess-work out of our walks. We need only look here to discern what healthy living looks like as covenant children (cf. also Psalm 19:11-13). In fact, that is the place Paul eventually is going to lead us in his discussion of the gospel. After spending eleven chapters discussing the doctrine of salvation, Paul exhorted the Romans:

Romans 12:1, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship." (in fact, we see this pattern in almost everyone of his epistles).

Truly, God is the author both of life and salvation. He created this world to work in a certain way- and that way is the way of..

- Righteousness (gained in Christ).
- Fellowship (the enjoying of Christ).
- Service (the honoring of Christ).

That which was lost at the fall, but regained in Christ, Colossians 3:9-10; Ephesians 4:24.

We have looked at the very important background to Biblical righteousness and have seen three things: Biblical righteousness:

- Is a Relational Term.
- Is Necessary in a Relationship with God.
- Is Transferrable.

## **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> 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**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 6, 2010. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.