

Righteousness Saves

To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. 2 Pt 1:1

Introduction

If you asked the average Christian how they were saved, they would likely answer, 'By faith'; and in one sense they would be right. Justification is by faith and this faith is a gift from God to the elect. However, that faith does not save anyone; it is the means that God chose to be the instrument of triggering the mercy of God but it is not the foundation of that mercy. Faith is not the ground of salvation but the means of receiving grace.¹

Christians are often less clear on how they are actually saved than they ought to be. Now some may be more careful and say that they were saved by Christ's death on the cross. Again there is a measure of truth in this; the atonement of Christ paid the penalty for our sins; his blood washed them away, and God was satisfied (atoned) by Christ's sacrifice. But that did not save us; that did not give us eternal life, blessing and an inheritance with God. The atonement merely brought us to a place of neutrality; void of sin but still human and weak.

Salvation is not simply forgiveness of sins. Salvation is the gaining of eternal life so that we are adopted into God's family; we are totally changed in our nature so that we are a new creation united to Christ. In this new life we are brought into the blessing and inheritance of Christ and promised a new life where heaven is in a restored earth and we live forevermore, partaking in God's glory. Salvation is being changed from being human into being like God. So what causes this?

The answer, of course, is that it is Christ; but more accurately it is the righteousness of Christ which saves. We are actually saved and brought into new life as a result of the righteousness of Christ which is shared with us in justification and adoption. The action by which this is done is the baptism of the Holy Spirit.² The sacrifice of Christ pays for our sins committed in this life and cleans our slate; but it is the imputation (transfer) of Christ's actual righteousness to us which makes us a different type of people. The Holy Spirit joins us to Christ in the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13) so that our life is now part of Christ's life; we share resurrection life. But our standing with God is now not us in our old sinful life (that is now considered dead by God as part of our sharing in the cross); our standing is in the value of Christ's righteousness.

What is this righteousness?

This righteousness is not the virtue that Christ has as the Second Person of the Trinity; that righteousness is infinite and we are incapable of sustaining it; that is Christ's personal righteousness that he has as God. No, the righteousness which Christ shares with us is the righteousness he gained as a man on earth perfectly fulfilling the law of God on our behalf. It is coming into the good of all that was promised to the righteous man in the OT.

¹ The claim of Arminians that it is human faith which decides to accept Christ is utterly unbiblical. Human works, human attempts to justify, have no spiritual power at all.

² Of course this is nothing at all to do with the false notion of Charismatics about the baptism in the Spirit.

How is it possible to share this with many?

The reason that this righteousness can be shared with more than one person is because the person of Christ is infinite as well as human. The value of Christ is infinite so that his death can be shared with an infinite number of people, wiping away their sin by atonement, and his righteousness can be shared with an infinite number of people. This is why the Messiah had to be both God and man in order to accomplish redemption.

Christ's active and passive obedience

This is why the work of Christ in redemption is considered to be both active and passive. The passive obedience of Christ is his laying down his life on the cross to deal with sin. Christ was passive when men took his life away. His active obedience is his continual work throughout his entire life to obey the law of God; thus gaining a fully righteous and perfect life.

Implications of this

Errors

The 'faith' of Christ – salvation (justification) is not the receipt of Christ's righteousness produced by perfectly fulfilling God's law as a man.

There are those who teach that it is not the active obedience of Christ which saves us but rather the faith of Christ. This is a serious error based upon a mistranslation.³ It is a pedantic argument based upon twisting the Greek of one sentence, and ignoring numerous verses of Scripture, which demand that righteousness saves not faith.⁴ Salvation is by an actual righteous life, not an act of faith.

This is a very odd and mystical error. Scripture never tells us that Christ had faith because he saw God and was God.⁵ Faith is only required in those who cannot see God; it is the assurance of things invisible. Jesus did not need to use faith he always did what his Father was doing and said what his Father was saying. Though he laid his glory aside Jesus did not cease to be God in the flesh.

This error is also associated with the claim that the righteousness of the believer is not that which Christ gained as a man by perfect obedience to the Law, but the actual righteousness of God. This is not even the righteousness that Christ has personally as the Second Person of the Trinity before the incarnation, but the righteousness of God which Christ shared. This infinite and divine righteousness, they say, is given to man by Christ's faith. If you have no prior agenda or tradition to follow, you can easily see how preposterous this claim is. How could any man contain an infinite divine righteousness; such a claim has a very low view of the attributes of God.

This error is usually found in Hyper-Calvinists, such as some modern Strict Baptists.

³ Rm 3:22 is wrongly translated as is 'faith of Christ' as per the Authorised Version (KJV). This position fails to see the importance of the scriptures which speak primarily about the significance of Jesus' obedience in salvation not his faith. For instance Rm 5:19: 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous'. See my discussion of this error in, 'The imputed righteousness of God'.

⁴ For instance: Prov 10:2, 11:4, 6, 8, 19, 30.

⁵ Verses in the AV which state the subjective, 'faith of Christ', are to be translated objectively as 'faith in Christ', as in the NKJV. This shows how blind allegiance to a certain Bible version can lead to theological error.

Pelagianism – man produces his own righteousness.

A more obvious error is the Pelagian system which teaches that man is not totally depraved and can live a righteous life by following God's law in his own strength. Every person has an innate, natural ability to do good; man has no natural sinful disposition and is not spiritually damaged by the fall of Adam. The inspiration for good works is the example of Christ, which ordinary men can copy and do well. For the Pelagian, righteousness lies in the power of the human will; thus redemption is not necessary.

The essential error of Pelagianism is a failure to see that man is dead in sins; he is not merely sick with sin, weakened by sin and lost in sin but he is also spiritually dead because of sin and is following the prince of wickedness. There are other serious errors but this is the foundation of Pelagianism.

Semi-Pelagianism – man co-operates with God's grace to initiate being given righteousness.

While the term 'Pelagianism' proper belongs to the description of the teaching of Pelagius, the term is also loosely used to describe doctrinal systems that seriously corrupt the doctrine of grace. Semi-Pelagianism refers to those theological systems which are founded on Pelagianism's chief feature – denial of total depravity. These systems generally acknowledge the need of some sort of grace flowing from the cross (unlike Pelagianism) but still aver that the chief focus of salvation is the will of man and that man has the spiritual power to choose salvation. This means that the starting point of salvation, in such systems, is the righteousness of men instead of the sovereign mercy of God.

Chief Semi-Pelagian systems are Romanism, Arminianism and Methodism (a type of Arminianism). All heavily focus upon the action of man initiating salvation, usually on the basis of some sort of prevenient grace given to all (and in the case of Romanism, upon the mediation of the church). Converts are those who use this grace from their own choice of will. Such systems often talk of an 'infused righteousness' whereby God's grace is infused with man's nature in some way, elevating man's natural abilities.⁶

On the contrary, God's truth states that man is dead in sins and receives grace and mercy from God's sovereign good pleasure to the elect alone. In conversion these people die with Christ and receive an entirely new nature, which is Christ himself. Righteousness is thus established entirely by God on the basis of Christ and has nothing to do with man.

All such systems centre upon self-righteousness rather than Christ's righteousness.

Summary

Anything that detracts from the actual righteousness gained by Christ as a man to secure our eternal life, resulting in a declaration of righteousness and inclusion in God's family, is heresy. It is Christ's righteousness that saves.

The righteous are the ones who are saved

First we need to absolutely establish the teaching of Scripture, that it is righteousness which saves us from death.

Righteousness delivers from death. Prov 10:2

⁶ Infused righteousness: This is Roman Catholic dogma which describes the basis of Roman justification. Justification arises when the righteousness merited by Christ is not only imputed but also infused into the believer and becomes the wellspring for meritorious good works. The righteousness infused becomes the believer's own and justification results from this being acted out. Thus justification is part faith and part works.

Righteousness delivers from death. Prov 11:4

The righteousness of the upright will deliver them. Prov 11:6

The righteous is delivered from trouble. Prov 11:8

Righteousness *leadsto* life. Prov 11:19

The posterity of the righteous will be delivered. Prov 11:21

The fruit of the righteous *is a* tree of life. Prov 11:30

My mouth shall tell of your righteousness *and* your salvation all the day. I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD; I will make mention of your righteousness, of yours only. Ps 71:15-16

Surely in the LORD I have righteousness and strength. In the LORD all the descendants of Israel shall be justified, and shall glory. Isa 45:24-25

I bring my righteousness near, it shall not be far off; my salvation shall not linger. And I will place salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory. Isa 46:13

He shall see the labour of his soul, *and* be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous Servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities. Isa 53:11

In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell safely; Now this *is* His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Jer 23:6

Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy. Dan 9:24

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.' Rm 1:16-17

Eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour, and immortality. Rm 2:7

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference. Rm 3:21-22

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works. Rm 4:5-6

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Rm 5:19

Grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Rm 5:21

Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith. Rm 9:30

For they [natural Israel] being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. Rm 10:3

For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. Rm 10:10

But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God -- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption -- that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.' 1 Cor 1:30-31

For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Cor 5:21

Faith without works is dead. Jm 2:20

That I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith. Phil 3:8-9

What we learn from these verses

- Righteousness is essential for salvation.
- This righteousness is not mystical or ethereal, it is a righteous human life.
- The quality of this righteous life is that of God; it is perfect rectitude in human terms, being a declaration of God's righteousness.
- This righteousness is that of Christ himself. We are the righteousness of God 'in Him'.
- This righteousness is the perfect life lived by Christ as a man in perfect obedience to the law. He actually became our righteousness through 'the labour of his soul'.
- This righteousness is not from the law or from human works. It is gained by the instrumentality of faith, a faith given by God to the elect.
- This righteousness is the result of the grace of God; its origin point is God's sovereign grace given only to the elect. It results in eternal life.
- The revelation of this righteousness, and the means to obtain it, is preached in the message of the Gospel.
- Thus righteousness delivers from death and leads to life.

Further fruit of the righteous

We have established that salvation requires righteousness and that the Christian is a person who has responded to the Gospel with faith and this faith has triggered justification, adoption and unification with Christ. However, righteousness does not stop there; blessings are attached to the righteous according to the continual declarations of the word of God.

The reason is that the righteous man is Christ. No man has ever been completely righteous; not Moses, not David and no other great man; all have had feet of clay because they have an old nature. The picture of the righteous man seen throughout the Old Testament is a picture of Christ, the only man who ever perfectly fulfilled God's law in thought, words and deeds. As a result, he obtains all the promises granted to the righteous man. The inheritance of God given to the righteous man is found only in Christ.

However, all the elect are placed in Christ by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13) and are now a part of his body on earth. Thus all Christians can claim the promises of God as listed in the Bible because they qualify in Christ: 'giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light' (Col 1:12).

Here are just a few of the blessings of the righteous man.

The righteous are the delight of the Lord

The blameless in their ways are His [the Lord's] delight. Prov 11:20

The greatest blessing given to the righteous man is that God delights in him. This is a reversal for those who have been justified by faith since the natural position of man is that

God hates him for his sin. Sinners are alienated from God. We too in the days of our flesh (before justification) were also enemies of God by nature (Eph 2:3; Col 1:21); but God in his mercy changed us, by grace in Christ, and now we are part of God's family.

The corollary of justification is adoption; that is, being legally raised to the status of a son and heir in Christ, in God's family. It is for this reason that righteous people are loved by God – he sees his Son in them.

As God delights in Christ, so he also delights in the body of Christ on earth – the elect.

The righteous are guided

The righteousness of the blameless will direct his way aright. Prov 11:5

Those who are righteous in Christ are guided, just as Christ was in the days of his flesh. People are not guided just because they are righteous, that is they are not guided as a result of their own strength, but they are guided by God because they are righteous in Christ. If you are righteous you will be guided.

Now this does not mean that every step of the believer is correct, that he never loses his way. The problem is that the believer has two natures, and one that continually drags him down. Thus the Christian has to fight to overcome the old nature. However, if he fails and one day walks in the old nature, then his steps will not be guided by God and he will be led into sin by the enemy.

The Christian is always dependent upon Christ; he can never presume to obtain the promises just because he is a Christian. It is the meek who inherit; that is those who know that they are weak and trust in God for strength. Those who are dependent upon the Spirit of Christ are the ones who will know victory and be guided into further righteousness.

In general, God has provided a lamp to guide the feet of the saints, and that lamp is the light of his word. As Christ is the light, so God's word (the written truth of Christ) is a guide for all the eventualities of life. Christ uses the word of God, applied by the power of the Spirit, to guide the saints in ordinary matters. This behoves believers to study God's word and be familiar with its teaching in order to know how to walk right.

The righteous are blessed

Blessings are on the head of the righteous. Prov 10:6

Only the righteous are blessed by God; there is no grace or mercy for the reprobate. God makes everything work together for good for those who love him so that even our calamities are means of blessing and rewards.

The memory of the righteous is blessed. Prov 10:7

The reputation of the righteous leads to praise or blessing; people remember the righteous man with praise and bless God for him. In contradistinction, the remembrance of the wicked will perish ('the name of the wicked will rot'; Prov 10:7b).

The righteous bear fruit

The mouth of the righteous is a well of life. Prov 10:11

The labour of the righteous leads to life. Prov 10:16

Repeatedly we are told that the righteous man bears good fruit (Ps 1:1-3); indeed that is one test of who is truly righteous. All that the righteous man does in Christ leads to a positive blessing and a reward by God. Thus his mouth pours forth righteous and edifying

speech which brings life to others. The work he does also leads to life; it blesses other people and does good. Thus his spoken word and his hard work both bear good fruit. The actions of a righteous man lead to life.

The righteous are rewarded

He who sows righteousness will have a sure reward. Prov 11:18

The righteous will be recompensed on the earth. Prov 11:31

Only a righteous man can sow righteousness and those who are righteous in Christ are promised a reward.

Now some Hyper-Calvinist Baptists deny that believers have any rewards other than salvation. But salvation is not a reward at all but a gift of grace to the non-deserving. Yet Scripture, in a great many places, talks about rewards given to believers for their merit in faithful service to God subsequent to justification. God is not obliged to give us rewards but he chooses to out of his mere good pleasure. Those who are rewarded are rewarded for their acts of righteousness in Christ. These are the works of God done in Christ that we were predestined to perform: 'For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them' (Eph 2:10). God rewards us for these good works, 'And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ' (Matt 10:42; Mk 9:41; Col 3:23-24; see also 1 Cor 3:8, 14, 4:5, 9:17. Note that these rewards can be lost but salvation can never be lost: Col 2:18; 2 Jn 1:8.)

Note also that their recompense is on the earth. The hope of the Gospel, eternal life, has nothing to do with sitting on clouds playing harps. The hope is for a restored earth, a restoration of all things back to the quality of the Garden of Eden where righteousness dwells. Believers will have a home on a renewed earth where heaven and earth become one in Christ and God dwells amongst men.

Conclusion

Now we can see why it was necessary for the Messiah to be born as an infant, be raised to adulthood on the earth, and then live a life of perfect ministry unto the Lord. Only in this way could the Lord Jesus attain to a perfect life in the flesh and become the river of life and the fount of righteousness to his people; the firstborn of many brethren.

It is righteousness that saves us; it is righteousness that gives us life. Christ is our righteousness and our life.

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