

From Faith to Faith

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“For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17).

This expression has been the subject of much learned discussion by theologians, and very few of them are agreed as to its meaning. The fact that learned men are disagreed in regard to it, need not frighten us from it with the thought that it cannot be understood, for we read that things hidden from the wise and prudent are revealed unto babes. If we are but simple enough to accept the obvious Scripture meaning, as explained by the Scriptures, we need not be in darkness.

One of the greatest causes of the failure of many people to understand the book of Romans, and indeed any other portion of Scripture, is a failure to hold to first principles and Bible definitions. Men attempt to define some terms according to their theological training, and find it hard work to make them fit. Then if they at one time accept the Bible definition of a term, they do not adhere to it, but give it some other meaning the next time they meet with it. This can lead to nothing else but confusion.

The cause of the difficulty in understanding this text is a failure to cling to the Bible definition of the term, “the righteousness of God.” We have already seen that it is an expression indicating God’s character, and that his character is set forth in the Ten Commandments. They sum up the whole duty of man, which is to be like God. The law, having been transgressed, cannot, as a matter of course, be perfectly represented in any person’s life, and so the gospel was devised, that man might in Christ find the perfect righteousness of the law. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, because it makes manifest the righteousness of God. Not only is the law—the righteousness of God—preached, and its majesty upheld, by the gospel, but by the gospel the fruits of righteousness are made to appear in the life of the believer.

Some would make “righteousness of God” in this text synonymous with “justification.” That is all right, if they do not limit the application of the text to the moment of justification from past transgression. It is the application of the law in Christ to the life of the transgressor that justifies him. Through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, God by his grace counts the past life of the sinner who believes as though it had been in every respect, in accord with his law. This is justification. It is the revelation, or manifestation, through the gospel, of the righteousness of God. But the text says that this is revealed “from faith to faith;” and this can mean nothing else but a progressive work of righteousness. The verse teaches that the righteousness of God is revealed from one degree of faith to a higher degree of faith, and consequently that righteousness must ever be on the increase. This is shown by the quotation which the apostle makes to prove his statement. It must be that the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, he argues, because it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

The force of this is found in the fact that the Christian life, which is the result of faith, is progressive. The Christian life is a continual growth. Peter says: "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:17, 18). The only way to keep from falling from that which we have, is to grow. David says of the righteous man that "he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water" (Ps. 1:3). This means continual growth.

We read of the path of the just, that it "shall be as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Prov. 4:18). But "the just shall live by faith;" therefore it must be that their faith increases.

Again, Paul says to the Corinthians: "Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for your food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness" (2 Cor. 9:10).

To the Thessalonians he wrote: "And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another and toward all men" (1 Thess. 3:12). And again he said: "But we beseech you, brethren that ye increase more and more" (1 Thess. 4:16). But faith works by love; that is, love is the outgrowth of true faith; therefore increasing love must be the result of increasing faith.

To the Hebrews, the apostle wrote: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection" (Heb. 6:1). And in the epistle to the Philippians Paul said: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14). Here is set forth a continual reaching out for some higher attainment. The calling of God in Christ Jesus, is a calling to holy or righteous living, for we read: "But like as he which called you is holy, be ye yourselves also holy in all manner of living; because it is written, Ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:15, 16, Revised Version).

This righteousness to which we are called, and for higher attainments in which we must constantly press, is obtained only by faith, as Paul expresses his desire to be found in Christ, not having his own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. (Phil. 3:9). Therefore, since righteousness comes only by faith, and it must increase, it follows that faith must also increase. So it was not a vain prayer which the disciples uttered, when they said, "Lord, increase our faith" (Luke 17:50).

That faith is susceptible of growth, is plainly declared by the Scriptures. Paul had hope that when the faith of the Corinthian brethren was increased, he should be helped by them to preach the gospel in the regions beyond them. (2 Cor. 10:15, 16). To the Thessalonians he wrote that he prayed exceedingly night and day, that he might see

them, and might perfect that which was lacking in their faith. (1 Thess. 3:10). And still later he wrote: "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the [agape] of every one of you all toward each other abounds" (2 Thess. 1:3).

This last text contains the whole of the argument that we have made. Their faith grew, and as a consequence their [agape] abounded. [Agape] is the fulfilling of the law. It is the manifestation of the righteousness of God, and is a result of true faith, for faith works by love, and the only righteousness which will be accepted when the Lord comes is that which is by the faith of Christ, "the righteousness which is of God by faith." Such being the teaching of Scripture, there is no reason why we should not understand Rom. 1:17 just as it reads: The righteousness of God is revealed, or manifested, from faith to faith.

One or two notable instances recorded in Scripture will illustrate this. The apostle records that "by faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace" (Heb. 11:31). This case has been a cause of stumbling to some who have not given careful thought to it. It is well known that Rahab lied to the men sent by the king of Jericho to seize the spies (see Joshua 2:2-6), and they imagine that in saving her God placed a premium on lying, and that it is right sometimes to lie. Neither is true. Rahab was saved, not because of her lie, but because of her faith. She, in common with all the people of Jericho, had heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Red Sea, and how he had led the Israelites; but she alone, of all the inhabitants of Jericho, believed that the hand of the Lord was in the matter, and that he had given the land of Canaan to the Israelites. She had simple faith, but was totally ignorant of God's law. In the code of heathen morality, lying was accounted a virtue, and she knew nothing better. But her faith made it possible for her to be saved, and brought her into a place where she could learn righteousness. As a natural consequence her faith in God would increase when she learned more of him. In her case we have a clear instance of the revelation of the righteousness of God from faith to faith.

The same thing is true of Cornelius. He feared God with all his house, and gave much alms, and "prayed to God always." As a consequence, an angel was sent to him, directing him to send for Peter, who should tell him what he ought to do.

The sum of the whole thing is that it is faith that brings God near to us. If we first believe that he is, he will reveal himself to us more fully. If we rejoice in that light and walk in it, our faith will be increased, and that will bring more light. As with Rahab, so with all. God does not grant us a blessing because we are righteous, but in order that we may become righteous. When our faith brings us to Christ, it is that we may learn of him. To our faith we add virtue and knowledge. But as faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, it follows that the more we really know—accept—of the word of God, the greater will be our faith. And so, increasing daily in faith, the just go on from strength to strength, until the dawning of the perfect day ushers them into the immediate presence of God.