

How Righteousness Is Obtained

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“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness; that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believes in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay; but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also; seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:21-31).

After reading the above, read thoughtfully the preceding verses of the chapter, in order that the connection may be kept. Remember that the main point already made in the chapter is that all men—both Jews and Gentiles—have sinned in the sight of God; all are amenable to the law of God, and all are condemned by it; and therefore it is impossible for any to be justified by it. It cannot declare righteous those who have broken it, and its requirements are so pure and lofty that no fallen man has strength to fulfill them. Therefore no man can obtain any righteousness by the law; and yet without holiness—perfect conformity to the law—no man can see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14). But some will see the Lord (see Rev. 22:3, 4), therefore they must get holiness in some other way than by the law. How this can be is the problem, since the law is the complete and perfect expression of the righteousness of God. The scripture at the head of this article solves the problem. Let us note it carefully.

“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested.” Ah! That gives hope. But, hold! Are we not in danger of being led astray? Dare we trust in a righteousness that is obtained apart from the law? Well, since we can't get anything from the law itself, we shall have to get it apart from the law if we have any at all. But don't be alarmed, for remember that this righteousness which we are to get without or apart from the law, is “the righteousness of God.” Why, that's just what the law is! Exactly; there can be no real righteousness that is not the righteousness of God, and all that righteousness is set forth in his law. Where and how we are to get it we shall see presently; but note first that it is “witnessed by the law and the prophets.” It is such righteousness, as the law will give its sanction to. Now where is it to be obtained?

“Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe” (Rom. 3:22). And so we have the strongest evidence that we shall not be put to shame before the law, if we can only obtain this righteousness. For we know that Christ, as part of the Godhead, is equal with the Father. He is the Word, and is God. As the Word, the manifestation of Him whom no man hath seen, he spoke the law with his own voice. He spoke it “as one having authority” (Mk. 1:22), “for in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9). Therefore if we get the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ, it is evident that we shall have the righteousness, which the law requires, because we get it from the Fountainhead. Our righteousness comes from the same source that the righteousness of the law does.

How do we get it? —By faith. How else could we get it? Since it is impossible for any to get righteousness by the deeds of the law, it is evident that it must come by faith, as a gift. And this is in keeping with the statement that “the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Someone says that it doesn’t seem possible that we could get righteousness in this way. But think a moment; “sin” and “righteousness” simply denote our relation to God. Now if there is a way by which he can, consistently with his justice, count us righteous, he has a right to. Who shall say that he may not do what he will with his own?

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). In giving his only begotten Son for the world, it was the same as though he gave himself; he did give himself. And since the Just died for the unjust (1 Pet. 3:18), God can be just and count as righteous the one who will have faith in Jesus.

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay; but by the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27). The term “law” as used in this verse has no reference to a code, or to any set rules laid down. It must be considered rather as having the sense of “principle.” We are justified, not on the principle of works, but on the principle of faith. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). No other conclusion can be arrived at from what has gone before. By the deeds of the law there can no flesh be justified, for all have sinned, and those who obtain righteousness obtain it freely as a gift, through the graciousness of God. This excludes boasting. No one can boast of what he has done, for he has done nothing of which a good man would boast. Only good deeds are worthy to be boasted of; but the goodness that we have is given us by the Lord, and so we cannot boast of that. As Paul says elsewhere: “For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). There is no chance for boasting except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are a few expressions in the portion already passed over that must have more attention. One is, “To declare his righteousness for the remission of sin that are past.” This must not be taken as indicating that the grace of God exhausts itself in pardoning sin, and that for our future life we must stand-alone. No; if that were true, boasting would not be excluded. We are as dependent on Christ for the continued manifestation of his

righteousness in us as for the first exhibition of it. He says: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me, . . . for without me ye can do nothing" (Jn. 15:4, 5). But God's grace does not remit any sins except those that are past. Sins that are not past have no existence. To remit or pardon them before they are committed would simply be to grant indulgence or license to sin; only the Pope has presumed to do that, and in so doing he has set himself above God.

Note also that the righteousness by faith of Jesus Christ is "unto all and upon all them that believe." On the word rendered "unto," Prof. James R. Boise has this excellent note: "Not simply *unto*, in the sense to, towards, up to, as the word is commonly understood; but *into* (in the strict and usual sense of *eis*), entering into the heart, into the inner being of *all those who have faith*." This is exactly in accordance with God's promise in the covenant: "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts" (Jer. 31:33). The righteousness that comes by faith is not superficial; it is actual; it is made a part of the individual.

And let no one lose sight of the grand fact that not for a moment can anybody escape from the law. The law is ever present. The gospel does not absolve from obligation to it; on the contrary, the gospel emphasizes our obligation, in that it exists for the sole purpose of bringing us into a state of perfect obedience to the law. The man who imagines that faith leads away from the law, does not know what faith is, or what it is for. Faith can be exercised only toward Christ, who is its author and finisher. He alone has been set forth as the object of faith. But he has been set forth only "that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21). Says Paul again: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). The antinomian is not the man who has genuine faith in Christ. He cannot be, for if he has Christ, he must have the law; for Christ is the embodiment of the law.

And now for a very brief summary of the verses that we have commented upon. First, all are guilty, condemned by the law, so that they cannot get from it the righteousness which it requires. They try again and again, but in vain; they cannot turn aside its just condemnation. But now Christ appears on the scene. He is the one whence the law derives all its righteousness, and he promises to give it freely to all who will *accept* it. This he can do, because grace, as well as truth, comes by him. The sinner accepts Christ, tremblingly, yet knowing that it is his only hope. Christ covers him with the robe of righteousness (Isa. 61:10) and puts his righteousness into his heart. He takes away the filthy garment, and clothes him with change of raiment, saying, "Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee" (Zech. 3:3-5). And now the law, which before condemned him, witnesses to his righteousness. It engages to go into court and defend anyone upon whom is found that righteousness, for it is its own righteousness. And so the man who was almost in despair because he could not get righteousness of the law, and who turned from it, finds it in its perfection in Christ.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knows us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that has this hope in him purifies himself, even as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:1-3). This hope and purification work reciprocally. The hope that when Christ comes we shall see him as he is, and be like him, must necessarily tend to purity of life. A man cannot possess that hope without becoming purer. And purity of life makes more certain the hope; for the promise is that the pure in heart shall see God. What makes this hope the more real is that the possessor has a partial fulfillment of it even in this life. Only those will see God, as he is who have made his acquaintance here. By faith they see him now, as Moses, who “endured as seeing him who is invisible.” Acquaintance and association with God and the angels must be begun in this life it is to be continued in eternity.