

“The Righteousness Which Is in the Law”

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A FRIEND sends us the following question, which we are glad to have the privilege of answering:—

“What does the apostle mean by being blameless concerning the righteousness of the law, as we read in Phil. 3:6? Is not the righteousness which is in the law the righteousness of God?”

The further question implied is, “Was not Paul therefore perfect before he came to Christ?” Let us see if this is what he meant to convey. To do this we will first recall to our minds a few principles concerning the law.

1. The law of God is righteousness. (Ps. 119:172). It is the expression of God’s righteousness. (Isa. 51:6, 7). It is the expression of his will. (Rom. 2:17, 18). Being the standard of righteousness, anything that is unlike it is sin. (1 John 5:17). And since it is a transcript of God’s character, the perfect expression of his most perfect righteousness, it follows that nothing more can be required of a man than perfect obedience to it. (Eccl. 12:13, 14). “It shall be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us,” said Moses. (Deut. 6:25). This is self-evident. If we should do the righteousness of God, we should make that righteousness our own. And since nothing more than obedience to the law, or conformity to God’s righteousness, can be required of any man, we can readily see that “the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom. 2:13).

2. But “there is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). “They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one” (Verse 12). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Verse 23). Consequently, all are guilty before God. (Verse 19). Now a good law cannot justify a wicked man. To justify means to make righteous, or to show that one is already righteous. But a righteous law cannot do this for a wicked man; for if it should say that he had done no wickedness, it would bear false witness, and thus show that it was not good itself; and it cannot take away his sin, so as to make him righteous. Therefore since “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12), and since all men have broken the law, it is very evident, as Paul says, that “no one is justified by the law in the sight of God” (Gal. 3:11; Rom. 3:20).

3. Further; not only has there been no man since the fall who has not broken the law, but there has not been a fallen being who in his natural condition could by any possibility keep the law. Whoever reflects that the law is the complete expression of God's perfect righteousness,—that it is a statement of His way—, will readily admit this statement; for what fallen man is so presumptuous as to claim that he can of himself do any act that is as good as though God himself had done it? But not to multiply words, we need only quote the positive declaration of Inspiration: "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7, 8).

4. Yet there will be some who will be saved, because, like Enoch, they will have the testimony that they please God. Now how will they do this? How can they stand justified before God? Here is the problem to be solved: The law of God is the standard of righteousness; it is God's righteousness. Whatever does not conform to that standard is sin, and is displeasing to God. None can be counted just except those whose lives conform to it. But there is no one whose life has perfectly conformed to it, and there is no man who can perfectly keep it. And yet there will be some righteous, even as thousands have been. How?

5. The answer comes in the words of Paul. "But now the righteousness of God apart from 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" (Rom. 3:21, 22). A seeming paradox, yet exceedingly simple when we consider that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and that therefore the law, which is the righteousness of God, is the righteousness of Christ. The law came from the Son as well as from the Father, for they are one. But grace, as well as truth, came by Jesus Christ. (John 1:17). By his divine, creative power all things are given to us that pertain to life and godliness. **He can and will, in response to our faith in his sacrifice, impart his own righteousness to us.** For Paul continues: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed" (Rom. 3:24, 25).

Let us talk familiarly about this for a moment. The law came from Christ as well as from the Father. It is his righteousness. Now the law has only condemnation for us, because we have broken it; but Christ is full of grace, and came into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. Herein is the wonderful, inexplainable love of Christ, that while the righteousness that is in the law is in him, yet while the law condemns sin, he, the originator of righteousness, will justify. So when the law cannot give us righteousness, we turn to Christ and

get it; and this righteousness is such that the law will witness to its genuineness. It cannot be other than the genuine article, for we get it at the same place that the law gets its righteousness. **This is righteousness put upon us and created in us.**

1. This is the righteousness which Paul said that he wanted to have when Christ should appear. His anxiety and labor was, **"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 the faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Phil. 3:8, 9).** Now we have all the points necessary to an understanding of the sixth verse. Note particularly.

2. *That the apostle says that the righteousness which is from the law, is his own righteousness.* But Isaiah declares "all our righteousnesses are filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6); and that which Paul calls "my own righteousness" must be the same, for it is that which he did not dare be found having when Christ comes.

Now it was "touching the righteousness which is from the law," or Paul's "own righteousness," that he was blameless. In other words, Paul was blameless from a human standpoint. So far as the natural man could discern, Paul was perfect. With this agree his statements elsewhere concerning himself. He said before Agrippa: "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee" (Acts 26:4, 5). And again: "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1). When he, a Pharisee, thought, like his brethren, that he could establish his own righteousness by the deeds of the law, he was scrupulous in the performance of duty as far as he understood it. He did no violence to his conscience. So far as any man could see, he kept the law perfectly. As Calvin says: "He was therefore in men's judgment holy, and spotless from all legal blame. A rare praise, and almost singular; yet let us see how much he esteemed it." He counted it loss. Why?—Because God sees not as man sees; man looks upon the outward appearance, but God looks upon the heart. Note further that this righteousness which is in the law, touching which Paul said that he was blameless, is one of the things concerning which he says, "Though I might also have confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:4). Ah! The righteousness which is in the law, touching which he was blameless, was simply that righteousness to which the flesh may attain. But by Paul himself it is said that "they that are in the flesh cannot please God;" "because the carnal (fleshly) mind is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." So then, actually, in its spiritual depth, Paul did not, before he knew Christ, keep the law at all. **He was blameless in the eyes of the natural men, by whom spiritual things are not discerned;** but compared with the true righteousness of Christ, his righteousness was a dead loss—a minus quantity.

So we find that while the law is the exponent of perfect righteousness, it has none at all to impart to sinners. The only righteousness that there is in it for an un-renewed man is an empty shell of dead works. Yet when the individual loses confidence in the flesh and its feeble attempts at righteousness, and comes to Christ, who is the source of righteousness, as He is the source of the law, that law will bear witness that the righteousness which is through the faith of Christ, is the genuine righteousness of God.