

The Righteousness of Faith

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Published by NTChurchSource.com

"What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.' Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 9:30-10:4).

"For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.' But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith.' Yet the law is not of faith, but 'the man who does them shall live by them.' Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:10-14).

"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1-4).

What is "the righteousness of faith"? Does God require real righteousness? If so, what is the righteousness that God requires? Is this righteousness possible or is it only an ideal which we aim at and never attain to? Is it possible for us today to make Israel's mistake--seeking to attain righteousness by keeping the law--or did that only apply to them?

Are the Ten Commandments still in effect today? Are we made righteous before God by keeping them? Some say that the ceremonial and civil parts of the law have passed away, but that the Ten Commandments are still in effect; thus, along with the other nine commandments, we must keep the Sabbath. Is this true?

We want to look again at these questions, that the way of God may be made plain. The scriptures are very clear in these matters, but if we allow the natural reasoning of men to confuse us, we may find ourselves struggling to attain to the righteousness of God by our own efforts. The Galatians fell into that trap, and Paul told them that they had fallen from grace and had been severed from Christ. What could be more serious than that? These are critical issues, and we must not miss the way. Let us come before God with open minds and hearts, and He will not fail to show us the way to Himself.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

I believe that a critical question at the beginning is this: What is our goal? In other words, is our goal God Himself, or do we seek fulfillment in something else? This is not a question to be passed over lightly. We may say that our goal is God, but it is very easy to drop to a lower place and pursue other interests. The majority of mankind finds fulfillment in the things of this world--this is easy to see. But the much more deceptive danger is to find fulfillment by trying to serve God in our own way and with our own resources.

If our goal is serving God, our natural minds are quite capable of creating standards of righteousness that satisfy the conscience. We may feel virtuous for the things that we do or don't do, believing that we are pleasing God and that our service is of value to Him. Some of the outward acts may seem good (feeding the poor, doing kind things for our neighbors, preaching the gospel, and so on) but at the same time, the motive of the heart may be wrong. We may feel "righteous" and others may praise us and speak of what "good people" we are. But what does God think? Is this the righteousness that God requires?

If we search the scriptures with open hearts and minds, I believe we must come to one conclusion: there is only one goal that should motivate and direct us, and that is to enter into and continue in a love relationship with God. God's purpose is that we be joined together with Him, to be one spirit with Him, and to be available for Him to live His life through us. Our fulfillment is simply to be found in this right relationship with God.

This truth is to be found throughout the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. One passage where this is clearly stated is chapters 14-17 of the gospel of John. Jesus was about to depart this world, and in this discourse to the disciples just before going to Calvary, He imparted as much of the purpose of God as He was able to at that time. There is nothing in this passage about doing great works for God out of our own resources, but rather of abiding in Christ and His life, that He might bring forth fruit through us to the glory of God. The goal Christ holds before us is union with God. Love is the expression of this union, and in this expression God is glorified and we are fulfilled.

These thoughts are not new to most of us, but agreeing with the truth does not necessarily mean that the truth captivates and directs us. I strongly encourage us to stop and wait before God and let the truth sink into our souls. Is my goal God Himself? Do I know this place of union and communion with God? Am I satisfied with God, or am I finding satisfaction in something else (even in serving God)? The goal determines all, and if we are wrong at the foundation, we will be wrong everywhere. Are we willing to let God search our hearts and reveal exactly where we are? The stakes are eternal.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT GOD REQUIRES

If the goal is God Himself, then what is the righteousness required to enter into this fellowship with God? If we simply stop and consider that question, it will be very obvious that nothing we do can make us righteous enough to enter into union with Almighty God. His righteousness so far surpasses our righteousness that ours is "filthy rags." It cannot begin to be compared with His holiness. We are entirely unworthy to draw near to Him.

Can we all agree that God does not change? He is the great "I Am," eternal in His attributes. From eternity past to eternity future, the nature and character of God is the same. Thus there is no "God of the Old Testament" and "God of the New Testament." He is the same God in both. We may not understand all of His dealings with men over the history of time, but if God changes, we have no God and our faith

is in vain. *"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"* (Hebrews 11:6). God is everything He says He is, and this statement is all-inclusive. Whatever we may or may not understand, let us be sure of this foundation. Only then can we respond in faith, diligently come before Him who changes not, and be sure that we will not be disappointed.

To be able to enter into fellowship with God, we must be brought up to "His level," so to speak. That takes a miracle, and only God can produce that miracle in us. The resources lie in God alone. Only in His mercy and mighty power of grace can a divine work be done in us that will allow us to enter into union and fellowship with Him. Yet this is what Calvary is all about! God knew what it would take to make this fellowship possible, and Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

So what does man need? Man needs a new nature, a nature like God's. How has God chosen to do this? Listen to the words of Peter: *"Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust"* (2 Peter 1:1-4).

Peter says that by the great and precious promises of God, we have become partakers of the divine nature, and thus are made righteous by the work of God. What are these promises? Are they not: 1) the promise of the Savior, and 2) the promise of the Holy Spirit? Both of these are God Himself. Jesus paid the price for sin and opened the door so that the Holy Spirit may come within us. In the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God brings His very presence within these temples of clay and now His life (righteousness) flows from the inside out. It is no longer trying to be righteous by doing things. It is living *in* His life and righteousness.

HOW DO WE ENTER INTO GOD'S PLAN?

So if the work is all of God and what He can do, what is our part (if any)? Do we just wait for God to do what He must do, and in the meantime go about our daily lives? I think we know that is not the attitude God is looking for. In John 6, Jesus used the feeding of the five thousand to point the people to the true bread. He said they must labor for the food which endures to everlasting life. "What shall we do?" the people asked. *"Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent'"* (John 6:29). Brothers and sisters, this is the door into the riches of God's grace. But even though we know it so well, so often we turn to something else and thus do not experience the miracle power of God's grace. Our place is to believe God. Our place is to come diligently before the throne of grace and ask God to do what only He can do. *"Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16).

This is the crux of the matter. Do we really believe we need God, or are we sufficient in ourselves? I am not speaking about mental assent, but a heart-felt need: being fully convinced that apart from Him I am nothing and can do nothing. It is a heart matter, not a head matter. It is realizing that my efforts to please God mean nothing. It is only what God can do in me that counts. If I really sense my need, it leaves me prostrate before God, coming to Him and knowing that my only hope lies in the mercy and grace of God. This is the attitude of heart that opens the door into the riches of His grace.

When we come to God with this attitude, we will find He is there to meet us. He does not fail. Usually the last thing a man will do is come in humility, acknowledging his desperate need of God. But if the root of sin is pride, then the root of righteousness is humility. Humility lays aside all pretense, all excuses, all self-sufficiency, and comes as a pauper before God. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled"* (Matthew 5:3-6).

How does God do the work? We do not know. Can we understand the depth of our hearts? Do we reason with God and tell Him what to do? Jesus said that unless we become as little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of God. A child does not reason. He comes to his father with utmost confidence that his father will meet his request. He never considers that his father might not have the resources to accomplish what he asks. He just comes in simplicity. This is what God is looking for in each one of us. This attitude puts us in a place where God can do His work. He comes within, and in so doing brings His righteousness--so that we may now enter into fellowship with God.

DOES A CHRISTIAN KEEP THE LAW?

In the beginning we asked questions about the law. It seems that many today are going back to the Old Testament and saying we need to keep the law to be righteous before God. Their argument is something like this: If God has done away with the law, are we allowed to murder? Are we allowed to steal? Can we now covet our neighbor's wife? If we cannot do those things, on what basis do we not remember the Sabbath, since it is included in the same law? They agree that God has done away with the ceremonial aspects of the law that point to Christ ("the law of Moses"), but they consider that the Ten Commandments are the "law of God" and it has not been done away with; therefore we must keep the Sabbath.

On the surface the argument sounds good. There is a great deal in the Old Testament about the Sabbath, and the judgment for not keeping it was severe. However, I believe the answer to the question is not in a myriad of scriptures but in a revelation of what God has done in Christ and who we are in Him. If we do not clearly see the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, we will not be able to answer the question correctly.

Let me ask this simple question. Does a man or woman who has partaken of the divine nature of God through the promises (Jesus and the Holy Spirit) need the law to tell him not to murder or steal? If so, why? Did Christ have to be told not to murder or steal? The whole basis of the New Covenant is that God has done a miracle work in our hearts, and the law of God is now written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Christ now dwells in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. It is *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."* Consider these scriptures:

"Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:1-3).

"For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah-- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. For this is

the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.' In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:7-13).

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height-- to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:14-19).

I believe the basic question is this: have we truly partaken of His divine nature? If we have, that nature does not need a law written in stone to tell us what is right and wrong. We know what the will of God is, and faith walks in that divine knowledge. If we have not partaken of His nature, we do need a law to instruct us, but then we are outside of the grace of God and living only in the righteousness that was possible under the law. But God does not accept that righteousness, because He has made a new and living way available to us in Christ. The Old has been rejected and the New has come. We are now responsible to live in the New.

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Does the law still have any value? Here is what Paul said: *"But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust" (1 Timothy 1:8-11).*

The law is for the unrighteous man. The law condemns the sinner, and shows him that he is far from God. It has use in judging the man or woman who enters into sin. But it has no value to the Christian. We are now under a higher law, the law of life in Christ Jesus. *"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:2-4).*

Notice that Paul says the "righteous requirements of the law" are fulfilled in those who walk according to the Spirit. Most men would agree that applies to murdering and stealing and so on. But how does that apply to the Sabbath? Consider this: that natural men (separate from God) do not know when to rest. Greed consumes them, and they know no limit within themselves in following after the things of this world. They must be given legal limits to know when to stop. So God gave them a legal limit (just as in every other area) to keep them from destroying themselves. The law did not stop a man from lusting in his heart after a woman, but it did stop (or judge) the outward act of adultery or fornication. It could not stop the heart from hating, but it could stop (or judge) the outward act of murder.

But now by the Spirit we do not rest on just one day. Our rest is continuous as we abide in Christ. We cease from our labors, and know the working of God in and through us. There is no more value to God if we physically rest on Saturday rather than Tuesday. But in Christ (in union with Him) we are not just physically resting on a certain day, but resting in our heart in all things. We are not just reading the Bible and singing songs and reminding each other to "know the Lord," but we are living in His rest, having ceased from our labors, and He is working in us both to will and to do His good pleasure in all things at all times. This is much greater than the Old Testament Sabbath.

"Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: 'So I swore in My wrath, "They shall not enter My rest,"' although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the seventh day from all His works'; and again in this place: 'They shall not enter My rest.' Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again He designates a certain day, saying in David, 'Today,' after such a long time, as it has been said: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day" (Hebrews 4:1-8).

Everything in the New Covenant is greater than the Old. The demands are greater, the provision is greater, and the promises are greater. Those in the Old could not enter into the presence of God. They had to stand outside the curtain. God demanded righteousness, because He does not change, but they could not meet the demands. Paul says that the ministry of the Old Covenant (and law) was a ministry of condemnation and death (see 2 Cor. 3). The law brought men to see their own inability to meet the righteous demands of God. The law was a "schoolmaster" to bring Israel to the time of faith (Christ). Paul says that now "faith has come" so we are no longer under the law written in stone, but under a higher law, the law of life in Christ Jesus.

Does that mean that now we can "get away with something"? Far from that. As has already been stated, every requirement under the law of faith is higher than the Old Covenant (including the Sabbath). Those who say they are now enjoying God and pleasing God more because they are keeping the Sabbath are deceived. They have not entered into the *rest of God*, spoken of in Hebrews 4, and they will be rejected on the final day just as Israel was. How can resting on a certain day of the week possibly add to what Christ has done in those who have partaken of His divine nature and are walking in His life?

In the religious world, the Muslim keeps Friday as a holy day, the Jew keeps Saturday, and the Christian keeps Sunday. Who is right? My answer is that none of them is right. Sunday is not the Christian Sabbath. Christ did not die just to shift a day in the week--He died that we might have life! Is a Christian living in a Muslim country sinning because he rests on Friday and works on Saturday? By whose calendar will we decide? How low can our thinking go?

"Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:21-24).

THE EXPRESSION OF LIFE

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). Take these traits that Paul says are the fruit of the indwelling of God and compare them with the Ten Commandments. Can you match them up? They are in a completely different realm. They are so far beyond the things mentioned in the Ten Commandments that they cannot even be compared.

Christ came to give us life. This much should be clear. What is the fruit (evidence) of this life? Is it not the righteousness of God flowing from the heart? If Christ has given us life and He dwells within, is that not the answer to our question? If the very presence of God is dwelling in a man's heart, what more can we (or God) ask for? Can there be any lack?

Someone might argue that since God commanded the Sabbath in the Old Covenant, if a person is moving in faith before God, he will then keep the Sabbath as God commanded. That argument may sound good, but I come back again to this: what was the purpose of the Sabbath in the Old Covenant? Was it not that man had to be given rules to obey because he did not have life? The Sabbath was made for men who did not know God. Now that faith has come (Christ has come, *life* has come) the need for the rule of the Sabbath day has ceased. Now Christ has become our Sabbath rest, and as we abide in Him we will experience a far greater rest than keeping the Sabbath ever brought.

Will this work out in time set aside for communion with God? Of course it will, but not just on one day of the week. It will work out in time set aside for God every day, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the night, sometimes in the middle of the night, and sometimes all day. It will be according to the leading of the Spirit. We are under His control, and the fruit of that rest will not be just in outward things that could be observed or judged under the Old Covenant. Life will flow from an inward rest that the Old Testament Sabbath could not even begin to bring (or judge).

The whole focus in the New Covenant is living the life of God. That is what we are called to do, and that is why Christ went to Calvary. He paid the price for sin that He might give life to whomsoever He will. Have we partaken of life? If not, we are still in our sin, and keeping the law will not bring us out of our sin. If we have partaken of life, then we have been brought out of death and sin into a right standing with God, and nothing more can be added to that. Let us not go back into bondage again. If we do, Christ will profit us nothing. If we live by the law, we will die by the law, and we will stand before God on our own merits. And if we have broken even one point in the law, we are lawbreakers and will be pronounced guilty before God and cast from His presence forever (see James 2:8-13).

Brothers and sisters, I trust these few words are enough to point us to Christ. He is God's answer. Everything we need is found in Christ. Let us not be robbed of the simplicity of this salvation. It is not complicated, but it is a straight and narrow way. There is only one name given under heaven by which we can be saved, and there is only one way we can enter into that one name: by faith working through love. Let the Lord show us the way of life, and let us not listen to other voices.