

CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the sixteenth century the church faced much corruption in things that were being taught and things that were being done. One issue that brought everything to a head and changed the world drastically was the issue of how people were made right with God. Many in the church at that time were saying that through proper good works men could earn their way into God's favor. This degenerated all the way down to buying forgiveness of sins from the Pope. These were called "indulgences." Men like Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and others came along and addressed those problems. They had specific issues that needed addressing, and they addressed them with the Scriptures. One of their teachings that stood out among many others was the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone. In their day they had to answer questions of the place of indulgences and good works meriting favor with God so as to earn one's way into the promises of God.

Do we face the same issues? To some degree, yes. Man in sin is inherently self-reliant and wants to find a way to boast before God. A merit system provides that; no matter what form it takes. While we still face this to one degree or another and in one form or another, the issues of our day have changed quite a bit. To assume that people understand what sin is or even that we are talking about the same thing when we say "God" in our culture assumes way too much. Many people today don't have a real sense of guilt and debt that they are trying to pay off. Quite frankly, they are apathetic toward these issues. This doesn't mean that the biblical teaching of justification is now irrelevant. This rich, biblical doctrine answers the issues that we face today as much as it answered the issues faced by the church in the sixteenth century and before. Just as our fathers in the faith expounded the doctrine with a particular emphasis on the need of the hour, so we need to take up their mantle and do the same.

If we as the twenty-first century church had to nail up our Theses today to which justification was the answer, what would that look like? What are our issues that Christ being our righteousness or justification answers today? (Just as a side note: Luther's Theses did not address justification directly. They mainly dealt with the corrupt practices of the sale of indulgences and the necessity of genuine repentance.) I believe that Paul's context in his correspondence with the Corinthians and elsewhere speaks to many of the issues of our day. In sum, when Paul speaks about Christ being our righteousness he is saying that *God reveals his righteousness in Christ and joins us to him so that we might be put right with him, with one another, and the rest of the world around us.*

In 1Corinthians 1.30 Paul proclaims clearly that Christ Jesus has become for us "righteousness." In order to understand why Paul would say that here in this passage, we need to understand what is going on in the overall context. The Corinthians have adopted the world's ways of thinking about things. This is the world that is opposed to God who sees the cross as foolishness and a stumblingblock (1Cor 1.23). They are wanting to fit into the world. They are wanting to be wise like the world. Well, in submitting themselves to the way of the world outside of Christ, they were getting the same results: divisions and factions just like the world. The wisdom of the cross corrects this kind of thinking by instructing us that God does not operate through what the world thinks of as strength and wisdom. The world thinks asserting oneself and insisting upon one's rights and own way is the way to go. God reveals in the cross that this is the opposite of the way that he thinks and works. God reveals himself in Christ and his greatest victory through giving up his own rights and becoming what the world would consider weak. In doing so he accomplished the greatest victory.

In the paragraph that includes Paul's statement concerning Christ being our righteousness, Paul speaks about this community that is formed by the cross in every way: the church (1Cor 1.26ff.). He tells the Corinthians to look at themselves. God has not chosen many wise according to the world's way of thinking. Neither has he chosen many powerful. Instead, God has chosen the weak, the ignoble, the off-scourings of the earth. Then, in a rather vivid picture, Paul says that God has chosen the things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are. Paul's reference here is Genesis 1 and God creating the world out of nothing (Heb 11.3). In the world-opposed-to-God, this is a very non-flattering position. Paul just called these Corinthian Christians "nothings." They were, and remain in the world's eyes, nobodies. There is nothing that they have or can offer to God that would make him accept them. It could be no other way. If they did have something that would somehow merit God accepting them, then they would have a reason to boast. And Scripture is clear that no flesh will boast before God. The Corinthians are nobodies. In reality, everybody is a nobody who needs to be re-created by the word of God. Then they will realize that they have nothing of which to boast except for what God has done for them by his grace alone.

How does God do this? How does he re-create us as individuals living in community as we are intended to live? Paul gives the answer to this in v. 30: "and from [God] you are in Christ, who has been made our wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." All of these words are bursting with meaning within this present context, but I want to focus upon just one: righteousness. Christ has been made our righteousness. Christ as our righteousness is one aspect of the answer to our problem.

But if Christ as our righteousness is the answer, what is the question? Again, this goes back to the situation with which Paul is dealing in this present context: factions in the church (1Cor 1.10). These factions reveal the problem in the world's wisdom and, consequently, the world's way of doing things.

What is going on in Corinth and the world around them reflects and is the result of what has gone on since the time of Adam. When God created man in his image, he created him to live with integrity, a wholeness, in relationship within himself, with God, with others, and with the world around him. The Scriptures describe this as *peace*.

Peace is not merely this cessation of conflict. Peace is, as I said, this wholeness. Peace is things being the way they ought to be in every respect. Sin destroys peace. Man in himself and his relationships with God, others, and the world around him is all out of sorts. Things aren't *right*. Things aren't the way they are supposed to be. Paul says elsewhere that sin entered the world and death through sin, and death passed upon all men because all sinned (Rom 5.12). Death reflects itself in the individual seeking to be his own God. From one perspective, man seeking to be his own God is to seek to create his own system of what is right. Man seeks to order and govern himself in a way determined by his own mind. This is the wisdom of the world of which Paul speaks. Seeking to create his own righteousness—his own way of determining and doing what is right—man does not submit to God's righteousness. He is in rebellion against God.

What happens when man, the image of God, acts this way? He dies. He loses this wholeness in relationship with God, within himself, with others, and the creation around him. This is reflected immediately after Adam sinned and he wanted to hide from God and throw his wife under the bus. Man is at enmity with the rest of creation. He will have to fight the creation to make it fruitful because it will try to yield thorns and thistles to him. Everything is out of sorts. Things aren't *right*.

As sin matures in the world, we see how this death sentence is passed upon those who rebel against God at the Tower of Babel. They unite in their rebellion against God. God comes down to see what they are doing and then passes sentence upon them, ensuring that relationships in rebellion against him will not survive. He will defeat all alliances in rebellion against him b/c this is not the way the world ought to be. Since he created the world and created man in his image, he has the authority and knows what is best in determining that. There is a certain way that things ought to be, and that is the way they will be one way or another. Man doesn't like this and wants to rebel against it. At this point, man is bad, God is mad, and that is sad.

Using Paul's allusion, this sin has de-created us. We are nothings. In what I think would be Paul's understanding, we have gone back to pre-creation, pre-Genesis 1.1 in some sense where God has to call what is out of what is not.

So, how does Christ being our righteousness answer these problems of death and this lack of wholeness with God, within ourselves, with others, and the world around us? Well, the first question that must be answered is, What is *righteousness*? Simply put, righteousness is *things being the way they ought to be*. When we say "the way they *ought* to be," we are saying that there is a standard. There is a rock-solid, immutable, standard by which everything is measured so that it can be said, "This is right and this is wrong." Conformity to that standard is righteousness. Rebellion or lack of conformity to that standard is unrighteousness. God's righteousness creates and maintains the proper divisions between right and wrong, that which is healthful and that which is hurtful. It is righteous for God to punish sin because it violates the standard. In this he maintains the proper divisions between right and wrong. God created us, determining everything about us; how we relate to him, to one another, and the world around us. This is not up for debate. Violating this is putting you in direct rebellion against the one who determines right and wrong.

Furthermore, true life can only be found for us in proper union and communion with God (i.e., in proper relationship with him). There is no such thing as true life outside of this. There is no way God *can* allow sin to be unpunished by death. Outside of proper relationship with him there can be no life. There is no other option. Life and sin are incompatible. To be outside of proper relationship with God *is* death because there is no life outside of the life of God. It is not as if God gives us life to possess on our own apart from him, as if he is handing out this thing called "life" like jelly-beans. In him we live and move and have our being (Ac 17.28). To rebel against this life is to receive the just penalty: the wrath and curse of God. When we say that God is righteous, it means that God does the right thing, no matter what form that takes.

God doing the right thing doesn't only take the form of punishment. God's righteousness also means that he *puts things right*. God's righteousness is not a static law-code. God's righteousness is active. He always *does* the right thing, and he is always putting things right. So, we can't think of God's justice or righteousness in negative terms only. God's righteousness, for instance, does not just speak of his unmitigated hatred and wrath toward sin. It involves that. But it is more than that. *God's righteousness is his commitment to doing what is right and putting things the way they ought to be*; i.e., the way that he intended them to be. The Scriptures teach us that God's righteousness is restorative, healing, or saving.

There are a number of passages that speak of God's righteousness in this way. In Psalm 98, for example, the Psalmist parallels God's righteousness and his salvation. "YHWH has made known his *salvation*; he has revealed his *righteousness* in the sight of the nations." (Ps 98.2; cf. also 71.15) The prophet Isaiah does this frequently throughout his prophecy. He proclaims the words of YHWH and writes, "I bring near my *righteousness*; it is not far off, and my *salvation*

will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.” (Isa 46.13; cf. also 51.5, 6, 8; 56.1; 59.16; 61.10; 62.1) God is committed to putting things right. Saving or restoring his people to a right relationship with himself, with one another, and with the world around them is the right thing to do. Overcoming this death with life is the righteous thing to do. If God didn’t do this, he wouldn’t be righteous.

But God is righteous, and he reveals his saving righteousness in Christ. To speak about Christ as God’s righteousness or righteousness from God is to speak about God acting the way he is supposed to act in saving his people in Christ. Putting it negatively, it would have been wrong for God *not* to save his people. This is not to say that anything outside of God forced him or compelled him. There is no constraining force outside of God that makes him do anything. But there is a compelling force within God, we might say, that does constrain him: his own will, purpose, and love. It would be wrong of God not to abide by his own will. And his will is to restore proper relationships with and within creation.

God created us and the rest of this world for a purpose. In that purpose he made both implicit and explicit promises both before and after the fall. God created the world in order for his creation to be in communion with him. It would be unrighteous for God not to make his creation what he intended it to be. He would violate his own righteous purpose. That could never be! Now, in Christ we see the fulfillment of all that God promises. In him we see God’s faithfulness to his word. As Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians, we see God in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2Cor 5.18-21).

How does God do this in Christ? How is Christ the righteousness of God? When we hear of Christ being the righteousness of God, we might tend to think, “That means Christ was without sin.” That is true. But again, it is much more than this. Christ being the revelation of God’s righteousness means that Christ is the revelation of God’s commitment to do the right thing; namely, save his people in fulfillment of his promises. Jesus Christ embodies this righteousness that brings salvation.

God’s commitment to his people is revealed in the fact that God the Son became flesh (Jn 1.14), entering into our situation. The depth of his participation with us doesn’t stop at his taking on flesh. Though he himself was without sin, he took upon himself the likeness of sinful flesh becoming sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (Rom 8.3; 2Cor 5.21). Yes, it is *righteous* for God to punish sin. It is righteous for us to receive the penalty for our sin. The penalty for sin that we rightly deserved, the wrath and curse of God, God assumes to himself, taking our liabilities upon himself, *so that he might do the right thing to save us as he promised*. In his death, Christ reveals God’s righteousness in dealing with the penalty of sin. He reveals his righteous indignation toward sin. But he also reveals righteousness in that he fulfills his promise to us to save us from our sin and bring us into his promised salvation; that is, full reconciliation with him so that we have peace with God. As Paul says to the Romans, in this act of Christ’s death, God reveals his righteousness being both just (i.e., righteous) and the justifier (i.e., the-one-who-makes-righteous) all those who believe in Christ (Rom 3.26).

God’s righteousness revealed in Christ doesn’t end in the cross. Christ reveals God’s righteousness in his resurrection. It is in resurrection that God fulfills his promise to overcome the death produced by sin. The cross can never be left by itself. The cross without the resurrection is only the death of another well-intentioned, but crazy, wanna-be messiah. The resurrection reveals the fact that God has truly accomplished what he said he would do. In Christ Jesus the righteousness of God is revealed: God’s immutable commitment to doing what is right.

God reveals his righteousness in Christ. But as is said by Paul, this righteousness is for us (1Cor 1.30). Christ becomes our righteousness. Many times when we speak about this, we speak in terms of being justified. Justification is being declared righteous by God. This is how we come to have this righteousness. Justification, righteousness, and vindication are all in the same word family. In fact, in the Scriptures they are really all the same word. One thing that Paul makes clear to us is that this righteousness is not a “thing” given to us. God is not doling out righteousness like candy. Righteousness is a *Person*. Paul says that from God we are in Christ who has been made our righteousness. He doesn't *give* us righteousness. He *is* our righteousness. The gift of righteousness is the gift of Christ himself. Only as we are united to Christ, only as we are one with him, do we have this righteousness. As we are united to him, we are united to him in his death. Being united to him in his death, the penalty of sin which we rightly deserve is fully satisfied. We are crucified with Christ (Gal 2.20). We have been buried with Christ in baptism unto death (Rom 6.4). Because the penalty of sin has been exhausted in Christ, those united to him do not suffer the penalty for sin. They can't. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8.1). When we stand before the judgment bar of the Father, Christ stands in the dock in our place. The wrath and curse owed to us has already been assumed and exhausted in Christ in his cross. So, in union with him we are declared “not guilty.” Being justified—put right—by the blood of Christ, we are saved from the wrath of God (Rom 5.9).

But this is not the end. Justification or righteousness is more than just the forgiveness of sins so that we are declared “not guilty.” Christ being our righteousness means that things are put right. Things are put in the way they ought to be. What this means ultimately is life. It means the peace of reconciliation with God (Rom 5.1) and with everyone and everything that is in union with Christ, which just so happens to be everything in heaven and upon earth (cf. e.g., Col 1.20; Eph 1.10). With the problem of sin having been dealt with, the problem of death is also dealt with. You see, sin produces death. But if the penalty of sin is exhausted, that means sin has lost all of its hold over us. Sin's power losing its hold on us means that resurrection is sure. This is what happens with Jesus' resurrection. When it happens with Jesus, it happens with all those who are in union with Jesus.

In the act of justification, God declares that we are forgiven. When he declares that we are forgiven, the prison of the grave can no longer hold us because it has lost all of its rights to do so. God gives us the promised life. This life means being in right relationship with him, within ourselves, with others, and with the world around us.

So, how do we lay hold of these promises in Christ? We lay hold of Christ and all that is in him by faith (cf. e.g., Rom 3.25-26). Only those who are loyal to Christ receive these blessings of being in Christ. Faith receives and rests upon Christ and all that is promised in him, tenaciously grasping whatever God places in the hand. While this faith is our faith, it itself is a gift from God. Paul says in Rom 10.17 that faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the word of God (i.e., in the preaching of the gospel). This word is not a hollow set of sounds and syllables. The word of God is that creative power of God seen in Gen 1. The word of God is the power that creates. When the word of God comes to us, he creates faith in us. Even our faith is the work and gift of God so that we have no reason to boast (Eph 2.8-9). In answer to the question that Paul would ask the Corinthians in 1Corinthians 4, “What do you have that you have not received?” The answer is, “Absolutely nothing.” Everything from start to finish is the grace of God.

This faith takes us to where Christ is found. Where does God promise to give himself to you in Christ? He promises to meet you in the Word, baptism, the Supper and all of this within

the context of *body of Christ*, the church. This is the place he promises to meet you and give himself to you. This is the place where you lay hold of Christ. Justification has as much to do with your relationship with the church as it does anything else. Remember, righteousness has to do with putting things the way they ought to be. This includes taking a divided humanity and putting them back together. The Scriptures, and especially Paul's letters are filled with talk about how the church is God's new humanity, this one family that he always intended to have. The church, though not complete, is the way things ought to be. When the individual is restored, declared righteous, he is put in a new set of relationships. Paul is clear in 1 Corinthians 1.30 that Christ is *our* righteousness. Yes, he is my righteousness as an individual. But in declaring me righteous he has put me in proper relationships with others, not just God.

Again, this is what Paul is dealing with in Corinth. These people are all divided up. Christ as our righteousness is the answer to the problem. In Christ, we are restored to proper relationships with one another. This is never more vividly illustrated than in what could be the first written defense of justification by faith in Galatians 2. Paul has gone up to Antioch where Cephas (Peter) has been eating with Gentiles (presumably including the Lord's Supper). Well, when certain Jews came from Jerusalem, Peter would no longer eat with the Gentiles but tried to maintain the old divisions and separated himself from them. This was no small thing. In his actions, Peter was saying that God's people were still divided *even after Christ came*. Paul gets in Peter's face about this, telling him and the others that they are not walking in line with the truth of the gospel. They are, in fact, denying Christ by refusing to eat with those people God has accepted and with whom he has made them one. Paul says that we can't do this because we are justified by faith! Those divisions are healed and God has put us in relationship with one another. Justification by faith is as much about with whom we eat as it is whether or not we cross all of our theological "t's" and dot all of theological "i's." In fact, it has more to do with whom we are in relationship and how we relate than our theological acumen. Being justified by faith means that you are put in relationship with the church, the body of Christ. This is the place where God's righteousness in us and for us is lived out.

Having considered these things, how does the doctrine of justification or Christ being our righteousness speak to our present situations in the twenty-first century? If justification in Christ is still the answer, what are the questions?

1. Justification speaks to the need of individual restoration.

We live in a very broken world, but a world that thinks it has all the answers in its wisdom. People continue to try the world's answers and they continue to find that they don't work. They are left broken, hurting, unfulfilled, and used. They try to fill these voids and heal these wounds with more of the same, only to find themselves in deeper and deeper forms of death. God's promise of justification in Christ tells the individual that he is worth saving because God values his life. God's promise of righteousness in Christ tells the individual that he can make him whole if he will trust him.

2. Justification answers the problem of loneliness.

Our culture, especially our urban culture, is one in which we are surrounded by people all the time. But we tend to be the loneliest people in the world. To a great degree we have lost a sense of cohesiveness and community. We have lost what it means to have real relationships with

actual people. There is some stab at trying to restore this through patriotism, politics, and even philanthropic organization. But nothing can quite do it. It all turns out to be the Tower of Babel.

Each individual has his own story that is different from everyone else's. They may happen to overlap at points, but no one can tell me how I should live my life because my story is my own, which means I determine for myself what is right for me. I have no common story, no common life, no controlling narrative, that connects me with you. We don't have common authorities and, therefore, we don't have a common righteousness. What is right for me may not be right for you even in the ultimate sense. Consequently, we can't really live at peace with one another. We are just individual atomistic beings bouncing off of one another trying to survive another day, seeing which one can get to the top of the food chain.

The doctrine of justification says, "God has put us back together with one another and with himself. There is a place where we have a common bond and a common authority and a common life. You don't have to be alone." No, the church isn't perfect. She hasn't arrived. But she is a family with a common story, a common righteousness. When we fail we have a God who is faithful and *righteous* to forgive us (1Jn 1.9), and we can continue living together, connected to one another in this common life.

As the world tries to create parodies of community, they are only going about trying to justify themselves, creating their own righteousness instead of submitting to the righteousness of God. God's righteousness puts you in right relationships and causes you to live the way he intended.

3. Justification promotes healthy catholicity.

The problem of divisions is not just out there in the world. It is among us as the church as well. Yes, the church is God's plan. Yes, people find answers here. No, we have not arrived. We are, as Paul says to the Philippians, working out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2.12). One thing that the doctrine of justification by faith *should* teach us and lead us to do is to acknowledge one another at the Table while we work out our differences over time. If we don't do this and create improper divisions, according to Paul we are denying the truth of the gospel. Justification has more to do with whom we eat than it does with whether or not we can properly articulate the doctrine of justification by faith alone to all the self-appointed, ivory tower theology wonks.

Eating with the right people doesn't mean that we need to go out and find the assembly nearest to us or flee to some so-called "ancient church." Those things aren't the answers and may even promote the problem. We acknowledge our differences. We admit that there are some things that are keeping us from worshiping in the same places together all the time. But we can do so while recognizing one another as Christians, welcoming one another to the Lord's Table.

Jews and Gentiles had a ton of issues to work through. There were vast differences in the way they did things. But they were to accept one another at the Table and work these things out over time. Healthy catholicity means that we can hold firmly to what we believe, for example, about infant baptism, recognizing that we couldn't live within a local church that doesn't acknowledge that. But we can still recognize those who disagree with us as family in Christ and eat with them at the Table. Justification by faith means that we eat with the rest of the family of God, which means acknowledging them to be family even while we recognize our differences.

4. Justification speaks to the need of continuing forgiveness of one another.

Paul says to the Ephesians that we are to be forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us (Eph 4.32). This is working out your justification. You are put right with God and others. Therefore, you need to work that out in practice. Justification means that there is a new way of living in relationship with one another, and that way involves pursuing peace, reconciliation with one another. The only way that can happen is through a willingness to forgive one another just as God for Christ's sake has forgiven us, creating peace.

Justification is not an old, dry, dusty doctrine that we pull off the shelf once-a-year around Reformation Day to remind us of our history. I'm thankful for our history. But this doctrine is not just for the sixteenth century. God's righteousness in Christ for us is as fresh and new and speaks to the need of the hour just as much today as it did nearly 500 or even 5,000 years ago.