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LESSON 30

FOUR ASPECTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

A vital difference between God and man which the Scriptures emphasize is that God is righteous (1 John 1:5) while the fundamental charge against man as recorded in Romans 3:10 is that "there is none righteous, no, not one." So, also, one of the glories of divine grace is the fact that a perfect righteousness, likened to a spotless wedding garment, has been provided and is freely bestowed upon all who believe (Rom. 3:22).

The Scriptures distinguish four aspects of righteousness:

I. GOD IS RIGHTEOUS (Rom. 3:25, 26)

This attribute of God is unchanging and unchangeable. He is infinitely righteous in His own Being and infinitely righteous in all His ways.

1. He is Righteous in His Being.

It is impossible for Him to deviate from His righteousness by so much as the "shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17). He cannot look on sin with the least degree of allowance. Therefore, since all men are sinners both by nature and by practice, the divine judgment has come upon all men unto condemnation. The acceptance of this truth is vital to any right understanding of the Gospel of divine grace.

2. He is Righteous in His Ways.

It must also be recognized that God is incapable of slighting sin, or merely forgiving sin in leniency. The triumph of the Gospel is not in the belittling of sin on the part of God; it is rather in the fact that all those judgments which infinite righteousness must of necessity impose upon the sinner have been borne in substitution by God's provided Lamb, and that this is a plan of God's own devising which according to His own standards of righteousness is sufficient for all who believe. By this plan God can satisfy His love in

saving the sinner without infringing upon His own unchangeable righteousness; and the sinner, utterly hopeless in himself, can pass out from all condemnation (John 3:18; 5:24; Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 11:32).

It is not unusual for men to conceive of God as a righteous Being; but they often fail to recognize the fact that, when He undertakes to save the sinful, the righteousness of God is not and cannot be diminished.

II. THE SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS OF MAN (Rom. 10:3)

In complete accord with the revelation that God is supremely righteous, there is the corresponding revelation that, in the sight of God, the righteousness of man is as "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). Though the sinful estate of man is constantly declared throughout the Scriptures, there is no description more complete and final than is found in Romans 3:9-18, and it should be noted that this, as all other estimates of sin which are recorded in the Bible, is a description of sin as God sees it. Men have erected legitimate standards for the family, for society, and for the state; but these are no part of the basis upon which man must stand and by which he must be judged before God. In their relation to God, men are not wise when thus comparing themselves with themselves (2 Cor. 10:12); for not merely those who are condemned by society are lost, but those who are condemned by the unalterable righteousness of God (Rom. 3:23). There is therefore no hope for any individual outside the provisions of God's grace; for none can enter Heaven's glory who are not as acceptable to God as Christ. For this need God has made abundant provision.

III. THE IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD (Rom. 3:22)

The Bible doctrine of Imputation transcends all other themes concerning the Christian, and because it has no comparisons in things of this world, it is not easily comprehended.

1. The Fact of Imputation.

As Adam's sin is imputed to the human race to the end that all are constituted sinners by nature (Rom. 5:12-21), and as the sin of man was imputed to Christ to the end that He became a sin-offering for the whole world (2 Cor. 5:14, 21; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 2:2), so, also, the righteousness of God is imputed to all who believe to the end that they may stand before God in all the perfection of Christ. By this divine provision those who are saved are said to have been "made" the righteousness of God (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor.

5:21). Since it is the righteousness of God and not of man and since it is said to be apart from all self works or deeds of law observance (Rom. 3:21), obviously this imputed righteousness is not something wrought out by man. Being the righteousness of God, it is not increased by the goodness of the one to whom it is imputed, nor is it decreased by his badness.

2. The Results of Imputation.

In like manner, this righteousness, though it is termed "the righteousness of God" is in no way to be confused with the fact that God is Himself righteous. It is rather a quality which is imputed to the believer from God on the basis of the fact that the believer is, through the baptism with the Spirit, in Christ. Through that vital union to Christ by the Spirit, the believer becomes related to Christ as a member in His body (1 Cor. 12:13), and as a branch in the True Vine (John 15:1, 5). Because of the reality of this union, God sees the believer as a living part of His own Son. He therefore loves him as He loves His Son (John 17:23), He accepts him as He accepts His own Son (Eph. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5), and He accounts him to be what His own Son is -- the righteousness of God (Rom. 3:22; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Christ is the righteousness of God, therefore those who are saved are made the righteousness of God by being in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). They are complete in Him (Col. 2:10), and perfected forever (Heb. 10:10, 14).

3. Biblical Illustrations of Imputation.

Garments of skin which necessitated the shedding of blood were divinely provided for Adam and Eve. A righteous standing was imputed to Abraham because he believed God (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:9-22; Jas. 2:23), and as the priests of old were clothed with righteousness (Psa. 132:9), so the believer is robed in the wedding garment of the righteousness of God and in that garment he will appear in glory (Rev. 19:8). The attitude of the Apostle Paul toward Philemon is an illustration both of imputed merit and imputed demerit. Speaking of the slave Onesimus, the Apostle said: "If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself" (the imputation of merit), "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account" (the imputation of demerit -- Philemon 1:17, 18. Note, also, Job 29:14; Isa. 11:5; 59:17; 61:10).

4. Imputation Affects the Standing and not the State.

There is, then, a righteousness from God, apart from all human works which is unto and upon all who believe (Rom. 3:22). It is the eternal standing of all who are saved. In their daily life, or state, they are far from perfect, and in this aspect of their relation to God they are to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

5. Imputed Righteousness the Ground of Justification.

According to the New Testament usage, the words righteousness and justify are from the same root. God declares the one justified forever whom He sees in Christ. It is an equitable decree since the justified one is clothed in the righteousness of God. Justification is not a fiction, or a state of feeling; it is rather an immutable reckoning in the mind of God. Like imputed righteousness, justification is by faith (Rom. 5:1), through grace (Titus 3:4-7), and made possible through the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 3:24; 4:25). It is abiding and unchangeable since it rests only on the merit of the eternal Son of God.

Justification is more than forgiveness, since forgiveness is the cancellation of sin; while justification is the imputing of righteousness. Forgiveness is negative -- the removal of condemnation; while justification is positive -- the bestowing of the merit and standing of Christ. James, writing of a justification by works (Jas. 2:14-26), has in view the believer's standing before men; Paul writing of justification by faith (Rom. 5:1), has in view the believer's standing before God. Abraham was justified before men in that he proved his faith by his works (Jas. 2:21); likewise he was justified by faith before God on the ground of imputed righteousness (Jas. 2:23).

IV. RIGHTEOUSNESS IMPARTED BY THE SPIRIT (Rom. 8:4)

When filled with the Spirit, the child of God will produce the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22, 23), and will manifest the gifts for service which are by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7). These results are distinctly said to be due to the immediate working of the Spirit in and through the believer. Reference is made, therefore, to a manner of life which is in no way produced by the believer; it is rather a manner of life which is produced through him by the Spirit. To those who "walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit," the righteousness of the law, which in this case means no less than the realization of the whole will of God for the believer, is fulfilled in them. It could never be fulfilled by them. When thus inwrought by the Spirit, it is none other than a life which is the imparted righteousness of God.

QUESTIONS

1. What testimony do the Scriptures give relative to the righteousness of God, of man, and of the believer?
2. Name the four aspects of righteousness as found in the Scriptures.
3. How can God be righteous and at the same time forgive and justify sinners?
4. What estimation does the Bible make of man's righteousness?
5. Name three forms of imputation.
6. By whom is imputed righteousness said to be "made"?
7. On what reasonable basis can the righteousness of God be imputed?
8. Restate the Biblical illustrations of imputation.
9. Distinguish the believer's standing from his state.
10. On what basis does God justify a sinner?
11. How may justification be eternal?
12. What are the contrasts between forgiveness and justification?
13. Distinguish between justification by works and justification by faith.
14.
 - a. How may righteousness be imparted?
 - b. Who among believers experience imparted righteousness?