

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

It is the unique character of the Christian faith that it makes the righteousness of God available for the children of men. This aspect of the Gospel filled the mind of the Apostle Paul when he wrote his Epistle to the Romans. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," he declared as he proceeded to state his theme, "for it is the power of God unto salvation. . . . For therein is revealed a righteousness of God" (i. 16, 17). The Gospel in itself is exceedingly simple, being the offer of the grace of God to the faith of man. But the righteousness of God which makes the Gospel possible is one of the most complex and difficult themes in all the Bible. Paul alone among the apostles attempts to define it, and the letter he sent to the Roman Christians containing his explanation of it is the profoundest and most closely reasoned of all the apostolic writings.

I

Paul's mind was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, and from them he would gather his first ideas of the righteousness of God. In the Old Testament righteousness is primarily that quality of the divine character which is reflected in the Law of the Lord. It is more than a subjective attribute; in its full sense it is the objective activity of God in the moral order of the world. The history of Israel was the particular field in which the righteousness of God was displayed. The Psalmists frequently sing of God's righteousness as having been manifested in the redemption and deliverance of His people. "Jehovah hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly showed in the sight of the nations" (Ps. xcvi. 2). They also regard it as a gift which He bestowed. The priests in the sanctuary are represented as being "clothed with righteousness" (Ps. cxxxii. 9); and the worshipper who approaches the Lord aright in His holy place receives "righteousness from the God of his salvation" (Ps. xxiv. 5).

When we pass into the Prophets we find the righteousness of God associated with the Messianic redemption which still lay in the future. The theme is especially prominent in the Book of Isaiah, where God's righteousness is often identified with His

salvation. "I bring near my righteousness, it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry." "My righteousness is near, my salvation is gone forth." "My salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished." "My salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed." (Isa. xlv. 13 ; li. 5, 6 ; lvi. 1). It is evident that the glorious redemption which the greatest of the prophets saw filling the whole horizon for Israel was to be in some special way a revelation of the righteousness of God. The Old Testament closes with the promise of a new day when "the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in its beams" (Mal. iv. 2).

In the teaching of Jesus righteousness is represented as something which belongs to God alone. His message was, "Seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness" (Matt. vi. 33). Our Lord is silent about any righteousness attainable by human effort. When He told His disciples that except their righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees they should in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. v. 20), He meant that the righteousness of the kingdom was beyond the reach of the most punctilious observers of the law. It was not to be attained in that way. His exposition of the law in the Sermon on the Mount describes a righteousness of an essentially different kind. It is indeed the fulfilment of the law, but it is not produced by the law. It is the reflection of His own character for He Himself was the incarnate righteousness of God.

On the last night of His life, when He was preparing His disciples for His departure from the world, He promised to send them the Holy Spirit, who would come and convince the world "in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment". And then He went on to explain: "of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and ye behold me no more" (John xvi. 8, 10). Whatever may be the full significance of these words of our Lord, this at any rate is implied, that the righteousness which He was accomplishing in His own earthly life could only be revealed to the world as a completed achievement through the work of the Holy Spirit after His own work on earth was done and He had gone back to God. That is, righteousness could not be offered to the world until the Gospel was ready to be proclaimed. This brings us at once to the righteousness of God which Paul saw revealed in the Gospel of Christ and which he undertook to explain in his letter to the Romans.

II

Having stated his theme, the apostle approaches his discussion of it by pointing out the complete moral failure of the whole human race. Gentile and Jew alike have hopelessly sinned and are exposed to the wrath of God. There is no righteousness to be found among men. Even the law only makes this fact all the more evident. Then he goes on: "But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested", and he proceeds to define this righteousness in a passage that bears the marks of tremendous concentration (iii. 21-26). As phrase follows phrase, we feel the whole force of Paul's massive mind being brought to bear upon an attempt to put into one comprehensive statement what he conceives to be involved in the righteousness of God as revealed in the Gospel. The heart of the whole Epistle lies in these verses.

In order to understand the import of the passage and follow the argument which the apostle is carrying through it, we should approach it, not by thinking first of its doctrinal implications, but rather by keeping our eyes on two objective facts, the incarnation and the cross.

The incarnation was the means by which the righteousness of God was "manifested", or made apparent to the world. Over against the utter failure of all human righteousness, God Himself wrought out a righteousness. Jesus exhibited the righteousness of God by doing the will of God throughout His earthly life. He completely fulfilled the law. Before His incarnation He was the Holy One of God, or the Divine Holiness. But this holiness could not be called righteousness until it had become obedient under human conditions. It was perhaps this idea, or something like it, that was in the mind of our Lord when He met John's hesitation to baptize Him with the statement, "Suffer it now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt. iii. 15). In that rite, Jesus yielded Himself, as the Son of Man, to do the will of God and accomplish the Messianic work by depending entirely as a man upon the Holy Spirit of God.

The character of Jesus, then, is the visible manifestation of the righteousness of God. In the sinless perfection and moral grandeur of the life He lived among men may now be seen what righteousness really is, and what God meant the human race to

become. In the light of that life it is clear that all men without distinction "have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God".

But the final purpose of this manifestation of the righteousness of God did not appear till the cross was reached. Jesus God extended not only to the carrying out of its precepts but also to the bearing of its penalty. By suffering death as the voluntary end of His own life of righteousness, Jesus Christ accepted for Himself the inevitable end of man's moral failure. He had achieved a perfect righteousness: He received the wages of sin. But this very fact, which would seem at first sight to sink the divine righteousness in utter collapse, is its highest and sublimest manifestation.

In the death of Christ a mysterious and awful transaction was being accomplished. This transaction had a two-fold aspect: it was related both to man on the one side and to God on the other. It took place, as it were, on the border of the unseen world, at the meeting-place of man and God. This is brought out in the words, "whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood". On the cross Jesus Christ was set forth before the eyes of men in propitiatory power as the object of faith. There He was made historically manifest for all men to behold as the one sacrifice for the sin of the world. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself" (John xii. 32).

But the cross of Christ looked out also on the Godward side. God set Him forth for Himself (*προέθετο*). In the preceding part of the Epistle, Paul has already spoken of the wrath of God. God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (i. 18). It is the final divine attitude towards all human sin and guilt (ii. 5). On the cross Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, was set forth in the sight of God as the representative of sinful man. And there, in that supreme hour, the righteousness of God met the wrath of God and, "in his blood", became "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus".

This act of propitiation, Paul goes on to say in effect, explains and vindicates God's moral government in the history of the race. The cross casts a revealing light both over the past and over the future. In the Old Testament days God's righteousness was obscured by His forbearance in passing over sin. The righteousness of God, which would have been manifested in the adequate punishment of "the sins done aforetime",

was now revealed in what happened on the cross. The cross had also a forward look over all subsequent time. The righteousness of God, which might have been manifested in the adequate punishment of sin "at this present season", is revealed in His justifying the sinner who believes on Jesus and accepting him as righteous.

Thus, through the incarnation and the cross, by the life and the death of Jesus Christ, righteousness has become a manifest reality. It has been accomplished "apart from the law", by another method altogether. And yet a method which was quite in keeping with the law and the old system, for it was "witnessed by the law and the prophets". The law had foreshadowed it and the prophets had foretold it. It was "a righteousness of God", for He alone was its author; in Christ, God Himself was manifest in the flesh. It was an objective achievement, accomplished in the midst of human history but without any help whatever on the part of man. Everything moves in a realm entirely outside the sphere of subjective human experience. Man is nothing, God is all. But now that it has been accomplished, man may share it. The Gospel may now be proclaimed to the world. The sinner may be justified "freely", i.e. by way of a gift (*δωρεάν*). Righteousness has now become the gift of God, ready for God to give "by His grace" and for man to receive "through faith in Jesus Christ".

Paul has used the word "faith" several times in the course of the passage we are considering; and, in the verses immediately following, he points out that faith and not works is the principle by which men, both Jews and Gentiles, are justified and share the righteousness of God. Later on in the epistle he speaks of this righteousness as "the righteousness which is of faith" (ix. 20; x. 6). But nowhere does he make any attempt to define faith. Faith is really an elemental thing and cannot be defined. It can be recognized and understood, however, for it is the fundamental feature of man's original relation to God. It is the right disposition of the creature to the Creator. It involves the whole man, mind, heart and will. It is the attitude of the soul that turns from self to God, abandoning self-trust and self-effort and relying entirely upon Him. Faith, then, is not an arbitrary condition laid upon man, but the only attitude which makes it possible for God to meet man with His grace and communicate His righteousness to him.

In the next chapter Paul discusses the function of faith in this connection by citing the case of Abraham. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness" (iv. 3). This cannot mean that God accepted faith from Abraham instead of righteousness, or counted righteousness to him as the reward of his faith. This interpretation makes faith simply another kind of works and is entirely inconsistent with Paul's whole argument. What is meant is that Abraham's faith put him in the right attitude towards God and made it possible for God to regard him as a righteous man. As Paul goes on to explain, Abraham's faith was that disposition on the part of the patriarch which acknowledged his own hopeless inability and looked to God's supernatural power and grace alone. It is the same disposition on the part of the sinner which enables God to justify him with the gift of His own righteousness. It is those who have no trust in themselves that they are righteous, but trust themselves entirely to God because of what He has done in Christ, who receive the righteousness of God. It is they that hunger and thirst after righteousness that are filled.

III

But how is that righteousness which has been objectively manifested in Christ Jesus and is reckoned by God to them that believe, to become a subjective experience in the lives of His people? This question is answered in what is perhaps the profoundest passage in the epistle, the first ten verses of the sixth chapter. Here Paul takes us to the inner secret of the Gospel and describes the spiritual activity which operates at the heart of the Christian system, and which is, in very deed and truth, "the power of God unto salvation".

The ground of this spiritual activity is to be found in the representative character of Jesus Christ as the second Man. This relation of our Lord to the human race has been explained by the apostle in the preceding chapter. The human race was created at the beginning a solidarity. The first Adam was a corporate personality; in him all humanity was included. As its representative head, he was put under a probation which was to determine the character and destiny of the whole race. Through Adam, "sin entered the world, and death through sin". His disobedience to the will of God, his "one trespass",

was of such a character as to give the permanent bias of self-will to human nature and bring all men under the doom of death. But God has provided another representative Head in Jesus Christ. As a corporate personality, He too was put under probation. His obedience to the will of God, His "one act of righteousness", was of such a character as to perfect human nature and establish it anew, free from self-will and sin. And now, in Christ Jesus, God is creating a new humanity. In the old humanity, under the first creation, sin rules and the end is death. In the new humanity, under the new creation, grace makes righteousness rule and the end is eternal life.

At this point in the argument the sixth chapter opens, and Paul goes on to explain how the righteousness of God secured by our new representative Head is applied to our lives and how the new humanity can no longer live in sin. We now pass into an entirely new realm, the realm of transcendent truth. What the apostle is describing here, is that supernatural spiritual union with Christ which is the inner life of the new humanity and the mysterious power of the new creation. In order to see what this is and get the mind of the inspired writer as he proceeds with his argument, we must clearly understand the significance of two key phrases, "baptized into Christ Jesus" and "the likeness of his death".

To baptize into Christ Jesus is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is that supernatural act which is performed every time a soul turns to God in faith and is born of the Spirit. The believer is then united with Christ and becomes a member of the new humanity. This supernatural activity had its beginning at Pentecost. It was not possible until Jesus had finished His earthly work and had been glorified. Just before His ascension He had promised His disciples that they should be "baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence" (Acts i. 5). The baptism which took place on the day of Pentecost is repeated in the case of every new believer. "For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. xii. 13). Thus does the transcendent activity of God respond to the faith of man and carry on the new creation. This unique and distinctive operation of the Holy Spirit in building up the body of Christ is known in the New Testament as "baptism". "There is one body, and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. iv. 4, 5).

This is what the apostle has in mind as he goes on with his argument. When we were baptized into Christ Jesus we became identified with Him in such a way that His death became a critical event in our history, carrying with it all the consequences that followed in His case. When He died we died in Him ; our old man was crucified with Him. When His dead body was laid in the tomb our old human nature was buried with Him. We were also raised with Him when He came back from the dead. With Him we have now passed into a new realm where sin no longer reigns and where there is newness of life.

But what was this death of His in which we died, and what is meant by "the likeness of his death" ? It was something different from any other death, for it was "his" alone. The death of Jesus was unique in that it could not have happened but by an act of His own will. Death had no claim on Him ; He gave Himself to death. He was not compelled to die ; He consented to die. His death was peculiarly "the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. ix. 26). We become united with Him in the likeness of His death when, in dependence upon Him, we consent to die to ourselves and our self-life, when we allow self-will and self-interest to be crucified as He did. What Paul means is that attitude of life which our Lord demanded of His disciples when He said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. xvi. 24).

But the apostle does not stop there. He declares that if we share the cross with Christ in this way we shall share His resurrection also. If we are with Him in His way of dying, we shall be with Him in His way of living. We shall be united with Him "in the likeness of his resurrection". As Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God through the Holy Spirit, so we too shall be quickened by the same supernatural power, by the same Spirit. We shall live a new kind of life, in the power of the risen Saviour and no longer in bondage to sin.

Paul then gathers up the practical significance of the transcendent truth he has been describing in the statement, "Even so reckon ye also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus" (vi. 11). The word "reckon" is the same as that used so often in the fourth chapter of God's reckoning righteousness to Abraham. Just as God treated Abraham as righteous when he believed on Him, so we are to treat ourselves as dead and alive again when we believe in Jesus Christ, our old

nature dead to sin, our new nature alive to God. When this attitude is maintained, the power of the new creation carries on its spiritual activity within us and our members become instruments of righteousness in the hands of God.

Paul goes on through the chapter with his discussion of this point, expanding and illustrating the truth that our deliverance from sin is realized, not by our own effort to overcome it, but by "reckoning" on the fact of our union with Christ. In the next chapter he shows, from his own former experience as a follower of the law, how utterly it fails to deliver a man from sin and make him righteous. Then, in the eighth chapter, he returns to the transcendent side of the truth and carries it out to its triumphant issues. There is no condemnation to them that have been baptized into Christ Jesus as members of the new humanity. What the old law failed to do is accomplished in them by another power, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus". They fulfil the requirements of the law by following another way of life; they "walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit". They no longer attempt to obey the law as an outward standard in the servile power of the old nature; but, in the glad freedom of the children of God, they respond to the inward principle of the new nature, the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian life, then, is not self-culture. It is not the result of developing and perfecting our own life. It is something immeasurably higher and nobler. It is the inexhaustible energy of the living Spirit of Christ reproducing His own life within us. The Christian man escapes from evil habits and evil passions, not by the force of his own moral struggles, but by the power of the grace of God. He attains to righteousness of life, not by his own laborious conformity to an ethical standard, but by continually appropriating the spirit and power of the life of Christ.

Paul takes up the case of the Jews, who had the purest ethical code in the world, and through three chapters (chs. ix.-xi.) he discusses their failure. They failed, he points out, notwithstanding all their zeal, because they used that code as a means of self-culture, "being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own" (x. 3). They would not yield to God in faith and subject themselves to His righteousness. They followed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and refused the righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount.

The twelfth chapter begins with the apostle appealing to his readers "by the mercies of God", by all he has been telling them of the grace of God in the gift of His righteousness, "to present their bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God." This is just putting in another form the practical injunction of vi. 11. To present one's body a living sacrifice to God is the same as reckoning oneself dead to sin and alive to God. The writer has come back here to the transcendent fact of our mystical union with Christ and is now about to follow it out to its practical issues. He goes on from this point with the most complete and elaborate treatment of Christian conduct to be found in all his epistles (xii. 1-xv. 13). Though given in the form of precepts and exhortations, it is not a code of ethics or a system of morals. It is a description, rather, of the way the Christian should react to the various conditions of life in which he finds himself. It all springs from the initial act of self-dedication to God.

Practical Christianity, therefore, is rooted in evangelical faith. Christian behaviour is a revelation of the righteousness of God. It is but the continuous manifestation in human life of the activity of the unseen spirit of the risen Christ. It is the spontaneous response of the new man to successive sets of circumstances. The Christian man takes his place with other men in the midst of society, but he holds in his heart a transcendent secret. The springs of his life are in a higher world, but his feet are on the solid earth. He shares with other men the duties and tasks of common life, but how different the quality of his life from theirs! The conduct which Paul describes in this section of the epistle is essentially different from ordinary human righteousness. There is a different atmosphere about it. It is marked by the entire absence of self-will, self-interest and self-love. Its point of view is always a tender and sympathetic interest in others, and it is pervaded by genuine love. Righteousness of this kind is not the product of natural ethics. Its secret is beyond the reach of psychological analysis. It is found by those alone who follow Christ in the way of His cross. Their lives become fragrant with His spirit and His righteousness. They are not conformed to the standards of this world; they are being transformed by an inward renewal. Having died in Christ to self-will, they are living in "the good and acceptable and perfect will of God".

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