

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for the *Journal of Theological Studies* (old series) can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jts-os\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jts-os_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article]

## THE 'RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD' IN ST. PAUL.

IN last July's issue of this JOURNAL Dr. Sanday raised the question of the relation of the teaching of the Epistles to that of the Gospels, and asked in particular what there was in the earlier Epistles of St. Paul to answer to that Kingdom, of God or of Heaven, of which the Gospels are always speaking. Dr. Sanday's article, whilst it was one to be much enjoyed by the thoughtful Christian student, did not profess to make more than a partial comparison in respect of doctrine of the two sections of the New Testament. He omits, for example, to discriminate between the Synoptic Gospels and St. John's. It is evident that throughout his paper he has only the former in view. In the Johannine writings there is less mention of the Kingdom than in St. Paul's Epistles. In John iii there are the remarkable sayings, 'Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God,' 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God'; and then there is no further mention of the Kingdom in this Gospel, till Jesus, answering Pilate's question, 'Art thou the King of the Jews?' speaks of 'My Kingdom.' It is a more obvious and a no less interesting inquiry than that which Dr. Sanday has proposed with regard to St. Paul, what doctrinal form the Kingdom of God or of Heaven has assumed in the Fourth Gospel and in 1 John. But both Dr. Sanday's question and his own answer to it must have been found by many of his readers suggestive and awakening.

Dr. Sanday's answer is, that when St. Paul speaks of the Righteousness of God he is meaning substantially what our Lord meant when He spoke of the Kingdom of God or of Heaven; and that, whilst he thoroughly accepted our Lord's phrase, he was led by his familiarity with the Old Testament

to express the true idea of the Messianic Kingdom by that word, the Righteousness of God. Dr. Sanday explains that what both the Lord Jesus and St. Paul had in view, in using their respective phrases, was the whole action of God in the world, the sum of all the currents of influence which descend from above and affect human life. He holds that Righteousness, as used in the Old Testament and by St. Paul, not only is not identical with Justice but is to be carefully distinguished from it. In the concluding words of the Paper, 'The central and cardinal point of the Christian dispensation is the same, whether we call it the "Righteousness of God" or "the Kingdom of Heaven." In either case it is the goodness and love of God, actively intervening to guide, redeem, sustain, and bless His people.' This account of the Righteousness of God, identifying it with 'lovingkindness and pity' (p. 487), must seem to many readers a questionable one. To St. Paul a righteous or just man was a different kind of person from a good man: as is shewn by his very human observation, 'Scarcely for a righteous man will one die, for per-adventure for the good man some one would even dare to die' (Rom. v 7). I should like, if I may be permitted, to interpret Righteousness in harmony with this distinction.

Dr. Sanday says that the case of Righteousness 'is an instance that illustrates in a striking way how much we are at the mercy of language. We remember,' he continues, 'that the Latin and Romance-speaking peoples have but a single word for "justice" and for "righteousness." The almost inevitable consequence is to lose sight of the larger meaning in the smaller. We are somewhat better off than that. We have the two words, and we can keep clear the two senses. We are not in so much danger of limiting our idea of righteousness to that of equal dealing between man and man. But even we must find it hard to rise to the full height of the conception as it was present to the mind of St. Paul' (pp. 486-7). It might almost be supposed that Dr. Sanday did *not* at the moment remember that what he says of Latin and its derivatives is equally true of German, of Greek, and of Hebrew. I am ignorant of Hebrew, and I do not know what difference of words in the original may be represented in the passage quoted by Dr. Sanday, 'I put on righteousness, and it clothed me: my justice was as a robe and a diadem'

(Job xxix 14). But it is commonly stated that there is but one word in the Hebrew for 'righteous' and 'just.' Instead, therefore, of suggesting Dr. Sanday's moral, that we should be careful to distinguish between righteousness and justice, the phraseology of St. Paul and the Old Testament would rather warn us against thus distinguishing, and would bid us try to see what the one word *δικαιοσύνη* means.

The difficulty of defining justice, as we commonly use the word, is well known to those who have studied the popular or other definitions of it. We are apt to find that a definition of justice either carries us no further,—like Dr. Sanday's 'equal dealing between man and man' (p. 487), in which 'equal' would probably be explained as meaning 'just,'—or is demonstrably inadequate or misleading. The key to the solution of the problem seems to me to be the idea of order or harmony. Etymologically, *righteous* is derived from *right*, which means what is ruled or straight; *just* appears to be well-joined. Similarly, *equal* is even or level. The Hebrew word I have to pass by. *Δίκη*, primarily manner or usage, seems traceable to pointing or directing. How rights grow out of usage,—how the fact that a thing has been is assumed without hesitation to give it a claim to go on being,—sometimes comes as a surprise on those who are in contact with old-fashioned ways of life.

If then we take Order as the root idea of Justice or Righteousness, we name God just or righteous in the sense that He is the Creator or Fountain, the Sustainer, the Vindicator, of the Universal Order. And it was in that character that Israel regarded his God Jehovah. The regularity of nature was an inferior part of the Universal Order, and was contemplated by the Hebrew prophets and poets as an illustration or symbol of the higher part of that Order. Jehovah had bound His chosen people to Himself in a special relation; He was their God, and they were His people. He could not but be true to this relation, and the people were called upon to be on their part true to it also. As a righteous God, or a God of order, Jehovah gave His people statutes and ordinances; they were to be orderly, to aim at righteousness, in keeping those statutes and ordinances. But did not devout Israelites associate loving-kindness and pity with the righteousness of their God? Undoubtedly, because the

relations which He established, with His own fulfilment of them, were so gracious and beneficent. The righteousness of God easily blended itself with His goodness in the contemplations and thanksgivings of Israelites, inasmuch as the same action might be regarded under the two forms of righteousness and goodness. In respect of His having created and fulfilling relations and demanding fulfilment of them, as a God of order, Jehovah was righteous; in respect of His kindness and compassion, as a God who loved His people and made them happy, Jehovah was gracious.

Dr. Sanday suggests that St. Paul, whilst he sufficiently shews that he accepted Christ's idea and name of the Kingdom of Heaven or of God, was led by his Jewish training to present to his converts the same idea under another name; and that the 'innermost, distinctive, and characteristic meaning' of both the Messianic 'Kingdom' and the 'Righteousness of God' was 'the sum of all those influences and forces that specially betoken the presence or manifestation of God in the world' (p. 484). I should be disposed to accept more simply the Gospel statement that the Divine Kingdom *came* in the coming of the Son of God. The coming of the Kingdom was an event in the history of the world. Jesus, taking up the announcement of His fore-runner, spoke of the Kingdom more than of Himself, seeking to transform the popular notions of the Messianic Kingdom into true spiritual apprehensions; His envoys found it more natural to speak of the King. That, I take it, is the chief reason why the name of the Kingdom occurs less frequently in the Acts and Epistles than in the Gospels. To this day the Kingdom, whilst it is important that the name should be significant to us, is best understood through the King. It is quite possible, however, that St. Paul spoke more frequently of the Kingdom in his oral teaching than he did in his letters: his work at Rome consisted in 'proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts xxviii 30, 31). In his Epistles he was not making an announcement, he was rather illustrating by theological instructions the Gospel which he had delivered.

What a marvel these utterances of St. Paul are, for the freshness of interest and of speculation which they have continued up to the present moment to excite! We are agreed to see in them evidences of distinct growth and development in the writer's own

convictions. He sets forth with enthusiasm what is exercising his own thoughts and filling him with rapture at the time, even more than what he knows to be wanted by those to whom he writes. The best 'introduction' to each letter is an endeavour to put oneself at the point of view from which the Apostle at that stage of his life was seeing things. It is the Epistle to the Romans with which we are chiefly concerned when we are asking what St. Paul held about Righteousness: and assuredly it is by getting hold of this belief of his, that we have the best hope of understanding the Epistle.

Every Jew, as I have said, thought of the righteous Jehovah as having bound His people to Himself in a special relation, as having given them statutes and ordinances, and as expecting the people to keep His commandments in return for His favours. The Pharisee of the New Testament age, whose conceptions were carnal and external, held that an Israelite's duty was to keep the law with exactness, and that through such observance he would be right with his God. In that belief Saul of Tarsus had been trained. But he never found rest in it. His experience, though it had an intensity peculiar to himself, was that which all men whose spiritual nature has been stirred and awakened have passed through, when they have tried to make themselves righteous and arrive at peace with God by a flawless observance of His commands. I need not dwell on that experience. What concerns us is the change produced in Saul's consciousness through his conversion. It is probable that the internal revelation which issued in his conversion began at the martyrdom of Stephen. The Jehovah whom he had worshipped as the God of commandments gave place, gradually perhaps but at last completely, to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It was through knowing God as He was to be seen in Jesus Christ that St. Paul's apprehension of the Divine Righteousness underwent a change.

For he did not cease to think of God as righteous; that is, as a God of order, who established relations and fulfilled them Himself and claimed the fulfilment of them by men. But, if Jesus Christ was His Son, what was God, and how was He related to men, and what did He want of them? These were questions which St. Paul continually asked. And he saw that the Father of Jesus Christ was not an indulgent Being who did

not care whether such creatures as men sinned against Him or not, any more than an inexorable Being who insisted on every commandment of His being obeyed and could not help inflicting an infinite punishment for every act of disobedience, but a Being who of His own free grace reconciled men through forgiveness to Himself, and whose will was that they should know Him and love Him and be in intelligent spiritual sympathy with Him. St. Paul, when Christ had shone as Divine Light upon him, saw God only and always in that light, and set himself to find out what God and men and the world were as studied in Christ. No doubt he learned with eager reverence what those who had been companions of Jesus could tell him about his new Lord: but he probably never knew as much as it is open to us to learn from the Gospels, about the history and the teaching and the character of Jesus. To him it was all in all that Jesus was the Son of God, who had died and risen again: at one moment he considered what this implied concerning God, at another moment what it implied concerning men. And he saw, with a conviction that could not be shaken, God making men in Christ His loved and reconciled children, welcoming them into dependence on Himself, into intimacy with Himself; and he saw men called in Christ to be, through the quickening Spirit of sonship, what God thus made them. What was there for him, or for any man, to do, when he saw the righteousness of God in this light? Not to try by what efforts of conformity to commandments he might lift himself up to blamelessness and security before God,—that aim might be put aside once for all: but to throw himself upon the grace assured to him, to accept with wondering joy and thankfulness the reconciliation and the privileges offered to him, and to open his heart to all the affections of a spiritual sonship. And this was to be righteous by faith. The sinner who was thus justified did not make himself righteous; his faith was not a laborious or instantaneous 'work' on which his righteousness was based: he simply submitted to God's righteousness, to God's blessed ordering of the relations between himself and men, and yielded himself with trust and joy to be what God's righteousness made him, and to do what God's righteousness would have him do.

When St. Paul, some years after the date of the Epistle to the Romans, was writing from Rome to the Church of Asia Minor,

he had before his mind the grand and absorbing image of the Universal Spiritual Order constituted in Christ. In Christ, risen and exalted, and bringing the Church into being by the power of the Holy Spirit, he saw the eternal purpose of God making Christ the Head of a whole harmonious creation. That consummation would be the fulfilment of the righteousness of God. Not the less was the individual man claimed as one of God's reconciled children, who had nothing to do, if he would put himself right with God, but to accept God's grace and consent to be what God made him ; but individuals found themselves to be also members of a Body of which Christ was the Head, and in the perfection of which God's righteousness was fulfilled. We may say in familiar words that St. Paul bade every man to whom Christ was preached reckon himself a child of God, a member of Christ, and a subject of the heavenly kingdom. A man had but so to count himself, and he was what God counted him ; and he was righteous in God's sight, because he was conforming himself to the relations towards God and towards his fellow men which the righteous God, the God of the heavenly order, appointed for him.

Is this reckoning on God's part to be called a 'fiction' ? In other words, if God justifies sinners as St. Paul teaches that He does, is His dealing with them such as to render confidence in His truth and equity impossible to us ? The theory, which has been supposed to be St. Paul's, that when a man has passed through an experience that is called 'believing' God is able to impute the merits of Christ to him and to regard him as a very different person from what he is, does indeed offend our sense of justice to a degree which in these days the light which has been given to us forbids us to tolerate. It is surely time that theological writers ceased to designate this theory as *forensic*. What would our *Forum* think of it ? Some of St. Paul's interpreters, continuing to take for granted that that is what he held, are sorry for him, and try to excuse him on the ground of his Judaical training. But that theory is a perversion of the Pauline doctrine. The modern way of representing St. Paul's view would be to say that he describes the Divine ideal ; that he saw in Christ what would be to the Divine mind ideal human perfection. But then St. Paul thinks of the spiritual order which he contemplates, not as imaginary, but as real. Could it, we may ask, be real to him,



can it be real to us, when Christians, even good believers, are so far as they are from being holy and blameless before God as His children, and when the actual world is so far from being a harmony of all things in Christ? It might be answered that St. Paul was looking up to God as above time, and contemplated the Divine idea as eternal. That was one reason for his regarding the ideal as real. But I think that the Apostle, rather than appeal to anything that could be called metaphysics, would have found demonstration of reality in our experience. Reality is not easy to define. What—St. Paul might have asked—is more real to us than what we build upon, and what commends itself to us as the more stable the more we take it for granted and live and act upon it? And he would assuredly have bidden all Christians at every moment assume themselves to be what God in His eternal purpose makes them; and not Christians only, in the sense of converted believers. That is a hard saying, 'God justifies the ungodly'; but St. Paul would have encouraged the ungodliest of men at any moment to take to himself God's forgiveness, and to reckon himself one of God's reconciled and righteous children, and to try whether God's idea of him was not really beneath him so substantially that he could at once build upon it. God deals with the human race as well as with individuals, and He justifies an ungodly world as well as an ungodly man. The human race, in the Divine idea, is a sound body of which Christ is the Head. And St. Paul's social prescription for the Church or for mankind would be that all the members of the Divine Body should assume the Divine idea to be real underneath the Society, and should seek at every moment with simple confidence to conform social action to it.

'In that He subjected all things unto Him, He left nothing that is not subject to Him. But now we see not yet all things subjected to Him.' If these are not St. Paul's words, they express his view. He was as little as any one under illusions as to the goodness of individuals, believers or others, or of the world. His view was that of St. John, 'Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin . . . If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.' The true son of God in each is sinless; God demands nothing of a man but that he should be His true son. But there is no living man who is nothing but a son of God; the law of sin remains in his

members. Against this law of sin he fights most hopefully when he repeats to himself, 'God has begotten me, He is my Father in Jesus Christ.' Marcus Aurelius bade a man imagine the emerald to be always saying, 'Whatever any one does or says, I must be emerald, and keep my colour.' 'To the spirit elect there is no choice.' That is the proper consciousness of one whom God justifies. But whilst he regarded the ideal of the spiritual order as real, St. Paul was well aware of actual imperfection. And he derived encouragement from what he saw of the Divine energy working towards the fulfilment in life and history of the Divine idea. The energy bore witness to the idea, whilst the idea explained the energy. Writing to the Ephesians, St. Paul rings the changes upon *δύναμις, ἐνέργεια, κράτος, λόγος*, in bearing joyful witness to that force of God which wrought in the raising and exaltation of Christ, and in the struggles of single Christians, and in the growth and increase of the Church, and of which the manifest aim was to accomplish the eternal purpose revealed in Christ. The Divine Order, the Divine Energy: to behold the one, and to be conscious of the other, is granted to men—so St. Paul teaches—in Christ. What he desires for his fellow men is that they should rejoice in the Righteousness of the Living God, and conform themselves to it, and so be more effectually invigorated and carried onward and mastered by the victorious forces of the Kingdom of Heaven.

J. LLEWELYN DAVIES.