

RIGHTEOUSNESS

There are many connections and similarities between “justification” and “righteousness,” including the fact that sometimes the same Greek or Hebrew word is translated into English as “justification” and sometimes as “righteousness.” Therefore an astute and knowledgeable Pastor would not choose to preach on justification one Sunday and then on righteousness the very next Sunday. What would be left to say?

Of course, he could point out that justification is more of a legal term and righteousness more of a relational term. Justification is vindication or exoneration. Righteousness is a “right relationship with God.” In many congregations, people are unable to track such small and subtle differences. Happily this is not a normal congregation.

Besides, one of my biggest hopes for these sermons is that you will all come to realize more and more that the New Testament Christians, especially Paul, broke past all their former definitions and came to understand that salvation and justification and righteousness were not mere “add-ons” to former concepts. *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away; behold, all things are become new.”* (II Corinthians 5:17) When will the churches everywhere start hearing that? We cannot just talk about how the Cross and Resurrection make us okay with God, as if somehow we were sinners before but now we have been cleaned up. The entire relationship between us and God has been made NEW. Justification by faith is not the same thing as justification under the Law. And the Law will *never* recognize our new righteousness as valid. In the New Covenant, forgiveness, grace, and love have all transcended into a higher reality. If we keep dragging our old concepts and meanings along with us, it will only draw us back into all our old beliefs. I am “saved” because God wants to save me. Jesus goes to the Cross because He thinks we are valuable. No matter how improbable or how little evidence there may be to support such an opinion from our perspective, that is still what happened. That is what He did. Put aside all former definitions, and claim the grace and the love. If we hang on to the old wineskins, we will lose the new wine.

RIGHTEOUSNESS. Being right with God? If we just want to think about it or theorize about it, the very notion becomes increasingly ludicrous. Who do we think we are?! The Numinous, Omnipotent One with power and wisdom enough to call the worlds into being: I am going to be “right” with God – have a relationship worthy of this God’s truth and purpose? What happened to humility, respect, worship, awe? The Hindu prays: “O Thou before whom all words recoil.” Meaning, none of our thought-forms and none of our words can approach the truth of the Omniscient One. Our tiny, finite minds cannot deal with such mystery – with true reality. None of our concepts are adequate; none of our words are grand enough to approach the throne. That remains true, even though in Christianity, Jesus assures us that God calls off the rules and instructs the servants to let the children come through.

In Christianity, when it comes to being right with God, the first and highest precept we know is the decision to trust God’s love. However beautiful and however profound, people who make that sound simple have no idea what they are talking about. For creatures of this earth to believe in a God we cannot see or to trust in a love we have barely experienced – how can that be? We will come back to that in a minute.

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Most of us do not know much about righteousness. What we know about is *self*-righteousness. We know about self-righteousness in others, and we know about self-righteousness in ourselves. Though we often speak of self-righteous people with scathing denunciation and scorn, we *all* start out trying to figure out the right way to live by our own best light, according to what we have been taught and what we have experienced so far. Not everybody agrees about what is the best and right way to live, but we have to start somewhere. And pretty much we go with what seems to work for us, and more and more we abandon what does not seem to work for us. What works for a child growing up in the slums of Los Angeles does not always work well for a child growing up in the Port Streets of Newport Beach. A few principles may cross over, but even so, being *self*-righteous means most of us live according to the truth we have learned, and that means according to the truth we have learned to trust so far.

If having temper tantrums gets me what I want, why would I give them up? If looking coy and cute and sexy gets me what I want, why would I give that up? If being hard-working, responsible, and knowledgeable gets me what I want, why wouldn't I keep doing that more and more? I am simply reminding us that all of us are self-righteous until something goes wrong – until something stops working the way we thought it was supposed to work.

In his letter to the Philippians (3:09), Paul claims that he no longer has a righteousness of his own. He is no longer *self*-righteous. How strange is that? Moreover, this is Paul's last letter, so it is not coming from naiveté or lack of experience. We have watched Paul over the years, so to speak, so even though he now trusts Jesus for any righteousness that may be operating in his behalf, it has not always been this way. Clearly Paul used to be very self-righteous and says so. He was a total "Law man" and proud of it. He was convinced that persecuting and even killing Christians would bring him honor and acclaim from both fellow Jews and from God. Is that not revealing? Do we know any Christians who think it would be a righteous thing to kill some Muslims? And obviously there are some Muslims who think it is a righteous thing to kill some Christians. But pondering such things only takes us down the rabbit hole.

One thing I do know is that it is *impossible* to be focused on our own righteousness – on doing good and being good – without becoming more and more judgmental toward those who are not trying as hard as we are to be good. This is not a new truth. It is the Elder Brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Nevertheless, lots of us seem to be vague about the problem of goodness. If you are conscientious about recycling and you discover a friend who just throws everything in the trash willy-nilly, what is your reaction? If you think of yourself as a good and conscientious driver and somebody comes whizzing by and cuts in right in front of you, what is your reaction? If you are hard-working and conscientious, what is your reaction if somebody breaks into your house and steals things? The more we try to make this a better world, the more we resent those who are not trying very hard to help with this effort. Besides, it makes no sense; isn't it obvious that all of us would be better off if we would just follow a few simple rules? Come to think of it, what's so wrong with the death penalty for those who break the rules, considering all the mayhem going on here because some people will not cooperate? And don't they have better counselors in the next realm than we have here?

The Pharisees and Martha and the Elder Brother and the guys who complained because they had worked all day but only got paid the same wage as those who came in at the last hour – the New Testament is full of stories and teachings that blast the self-righteous. Therefore none of us want to admit our self-righteousness. But does that mean it all went away?

If you believe the Ten Commandments set before us the best and most righteous way to live, who are the enemies? Who keeps making it so hard here in this world? Obviously those who break the Ten Commandments. And if you try really hard to obey the Ten Commandments, how can you appreciate or respect those who break them? I am simply saying that it is easy to become self-righteous and judgmental and unloving, even though that may not have been what we intended when we set out to live the best way we possibly could.

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Well, it's foolish to share personal experience because inevitably some people will think that you are trying to suggest that you are some kind of good example. That is far from the truth, in my case. Nobody here is more appreciative of grace and mercy than I am. If I were any kind of good example, such things would not be so important to me. Nevertheless, if theory does not match experience, then it's too vague to be very useful.

Because of my parents, the church I grew up in, and my early interest in the Bible, I got an early start as a "Law man." That is, before I had even framed such things in codes or statements of conviction, I was trying to live by rules that I thought all good people should live by. That is what I had been taught, and I believed it. Telling lies was bad. Eating sugar was bad, in my house. Getting good grades at school was good. Trying to help people less fortunate than you were was good.

To put more flesh on the bones: Jumping into a fight on the side of new kids at school that other kids were picking on was good. Being friends with Freddy Henry and Henry Aldrich, despite my parents' disapproval, was good. That was a little confusing at first. My parents had taught me to befriend the outcast – the unpopular – and now they disapproved? They were afraid that Freddy and Henry might lead me astray. Every parent knows that evil is stronger than goodness. So I forgave my parents for this lapse and went on with my friendships.

Working at the House of Neighborly Service during my college days, in the Mexican district below the tracks in Redlands, was a good thing. All the other college kids soon quit, for fear of the gangs and the violence. But I moved into a tiny room and lived on the premises for two years. Many adventures; many narrow escapes. Most of you have had them too.

Trying to take care of Gordon Rafferty and Chauncey Pease, both serious alcoholics, was an attempt to be good. That was long before I imagined that drinking would ever be a problem for me. Needless to say, I did not drink, did not smoke, did not screw, and “did not go with the girls who do,” as we used to say.

I sorted clothes for the American Friends Service Committee and was a volunteer at the Metropolitan State Hospital for the Mentally Challenged (not how we phrased it back then) in Norwalk. Some of you, I suspect, would have been proud of me, if you had known me back then in my former life.

Back in Boston, about two-thirds of the way through seminary, at a summer program in Clinical Pastoral training that was supervised by a Lutheran Chaplain, we were in a closing chapel service a few days before the end of the program. Lutherans served wine at communion. I did not drink, so I passed it by. I did not think much of it at the time, but later that night, at my prayers, the Spirit asked me: “Why did you refuse my communion?” A dumb question, I thought, even for the Spirit. “You know I don’t drink,” I said. The response: “Are your rules more important than my communion meal?”

We had a bit of an argument, but it did not cross my mind that I had done anything wrong, so I got stubborn. Then, after a few exchanges, the Spirit blinked out: withdrew – entirely. I was stunned. I could barely breathe. I had no comprehension of how much support and sustenance the Spirit was providing for me all the time – every day, every moment of every day.

I went through the motions of being alive for several days, but everything was bleak beyond description. There was no meaning; no purpose; no joy or light or reason for living. I kept expecting it to lift. I did not understand; I thought there was some mistake. Finally, in desperation, I went back to where the dialogue had stopped. “Please,” I said, “I cannot endure this. I will do anything you ask. I will smoke, I will drink, anything you want. But please, don’t leave me alone any longer.”

Just as suddenly as it had blinked out, I was flooded with light. More than I had ever known before. Everything was so beautiful, and the people I knew – especially Mariana – were all more beautiful and more meaningful than I had ever realized before. I was filled with a love far beyond anything I had ever imagined. Then it came clear to me that all my rules had been in the way. I was so busy trying to be good that I had not seen LIFE for what it really was. I had never truly loved people, not in the light that was now being shown to me. People had been objects for my charity. They were imperfect and they had problems, and I should try to help them. But they were not wonderful and beautiful and precious in their own right.

People are not important because I am trying to be good. People are not important because I am trying to help them. People are important because they come that way – because God creates them that way. And sadly, many of them do not know how important they are any better than I had known it. They have not really run into Jesus yet. They have only heard of Him from afar. But they are the only thing that is going to outlast this planet. I cannot make them important – they already are. And I cannot fix them; that takes years of pilgrimage. In most of the ways I used to believe in, I cannot even *help* them. Trinkets and dusting things off do not do much real good in the long run. A good doctor, a good lawyer, or a good auto mechanic can be really helpful at times, but these are not my gifts.

On the other hand, I have been learning how Jesus strips away the illusions and reintroduces us to the love and the caring and the destiny that God has for us. In strange and deeper ways than our world knows, that truth stands and it transforms us – if we are not too afraid of real transitions.

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A righteousness of my own? God helps those who help themselves? Total rubbish, coming from a former life that was mostly make-believe and that ended in complete betrayal.

People do not do bad things – if they know they are loved by the real God. People do not worship false values or stay unproductive or try to save the world all by themselves – if they believe in and trust the real God.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

This place, our nation, our world – I think they are all in real trouble, mixed of course with incredible possibilities. But I don't know if we will survive long enough to realize our possibilities. That is all information way beyond my pay scale. But the joy of God's presence, the realities of being faithful, the promise of a better realm to come, the amazing drama of knowing some of God's other children – those are all more important than all the fear and satanic hits that try to make us dismal and discouraged.

I cannot comprehend thousands or millions, only hundreds. But that is all the meaning and promise I can handle anyway. That is all the gratitude I can contain without serious consequences. So I thank God with great sincerity. And I am incredibly grateful to Jesus for making God's true nature and purpose so much clearer to us, so much more real for us. But that awareness is the only righteousness I want. All the other kinds of righteousness are highly toxic and exceedingly poisonous to my system.

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.”
(II Corinthians 5:19) That's the only righteousness I care about.