

Justification and Righteousness: what are they?

"God is rescuing us from the shipwreck of the world, not so that we can sit back and put our feet up in his company, but so that we can be part of his plan to remake the world. We are in orbit around God and his purposes, not the other way around." – Tom Wright

Our earlier sessions on the Gospel and Atonement encouraged us to avoid a narrow, individualistic worldview and to see the huge scope of God's unchanging plan in Scripture, involving his covenant with Israel. This session continues along these lines, as we consider 'justification' and 'righteousness' – two widely misunderstood words.

A change of perspective

Many common views on righteousness and justice are shaped not by biblical truth but by the concerns of the 16th century reformers, e.g. Luther and Calvin, who were addressing quite different problems to us, and in fact to New Testament writers like Paul. Over a few decades, scholars have rediscovered aspects of Jewish thinking which shed light on what Paul really meant in letters like Romans and Galatians on subjects like law, covenant and 'righteousness'. This updated thinking has been called the 'New Perspective on Paul', and has been strongly opposed by some evangelical theologians.



What is the traditional view?

A 'works contract'

In the minds of most evangelicals, the way salvation operates is that God requires good works. We have failed to deliver and so can never pay this 'debt'. Jesus did succeed in gaining 'credit' with God by his own works and, through the cross, paid off our debts and made available his own 'credit' status to us. Our 'debit' column is cancelled and our 'credit' column is filled by Jesus transferring the benefits of his good works to us. Therefore, God can receive us on the basis of the works of Christ. This is sometimes called the 'works contract', where salvation is by effort, albeit Christ's rather than our own.



According to this scheme, God's (or Christ's) 'righteousness', seen as moral uprightness, is *imputed*

(transferred) to us, like a substance that can be passed on. Old Testament Jewish attempts to keep the Law are seen as hopeless legalism, a failed attempt to bring salvation which was replaced by a better plan – ‘justification by faith’.

The Reformers’ misunderstanding



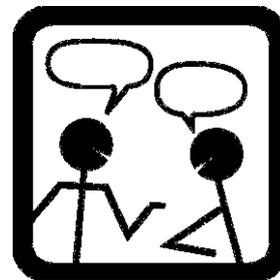
Many of these concepts arose as the Reformers struggled against the rampant corruption and legalism of the 16th century Roman Catholic church. Luther equated the legalism he saw with Jewish Law-keeping in books like Galatians. This has coloured much theology to this day.

In fact (as Calvin himself knew), Jews did not try to achieve ‘salvation’ by works, rather they knew they were chosen as a people by God’s pure grace alone. The Law was given not to *achieve* this status but to live it out well. Law-keeping was a sign that they were *already* God’s people. The real problem was that they began to rely on the outward sign, having let go of their faith and trust in God. In Galatians, Paul is opposing not legalism but people who said Gentiles (and Jews) must obey the Jewish Law¹ in order to show they belong to God’s people. Paul is saying that faith is both what got them in and what marks them out. There is no need to be marked out through special laws. Galatians is about Jew/Gentile unity as God’s people through faith only.

A language problem

Some of the confusion arises because English has two different word groups:

- Just / justice / justify / justification
- Righteous / righteousness



These mean slightly different things to some people (e.g. righteousness = personal morality, justice = treating others fairly). However, Greek and Hebrew each have only *one* root word, so ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ are the *same word* in the Bible, despite the confusing ways they tend to be translated – often betraying the theological bias of the translators!

Discussion time...

1. What are possible unintended (and unwelcome) consequences of a ‘works contract’ view of salvation? (Think of the implications for our view of God, and of ourselves within his plan.)
2. If we no longer accept ‘imputed righteousness’ (transfer of God’s or Christ’s righteousness to us), what dangers might that hold?

¹ Especially the laws around Sabbath, food and circumcision which marked out and separated Jews from non-Jews. Hence, Peter not eating with Gentiles (Gal 2:12).

Part 2: A wider perspective

Employing a more truly biblical approach and better hermeneutics, the 'new perspective' dramatically widens our understanding of God's plan.

Justification and righteousness according to Paul

Justification is the act of declaring someone righteous, which in turn means *not* that they are morally upright in their character but that they are legally declared to be 'in the right'. Righteousness is a *status*, not a virtue. Paul always has this law-court scenario in view, where God the Judge declares what is right and what is not. Note that the Judge in any court never passes to the defendant his own personal 'righteousness', which is a completely independent thing.



Two plans or one?

Paul does speak of God's own righteousness (Rom 3:21). But, in the mind of a Jew like Paul, God's righteousness is always his *faithfulness to his covenant*, in particular his covenant with Abraham – his promise to bless the whole world through the people that came from Abraham. That is why Romans and Galatians keep referring to Abraham, not just as an example of someone with faith but because it was always God's plan to rescue the world and form a huge covenant family through Abraham's descendents (Israel). This was not replaced by a 'better' plan, but rather found fulfilment and was re-launched in the person of Christ and now continues through the church, as we saw in our previous two sessions.

In several places (e.g. Rom 3:22, Gal 2:16, Php 3:9) where most Bible translations refer to 'faith in Christ'², it is now believed that the correct translation is the 'faithfulness of Christ', i.e. his faithful obedience unto death on behalf of and in place of unfaithful Israel, to fulfil and renew the covenant, re-establish them as God's people and open up blessing and salvation to the whole world – God being faithful to his covenant.

Being declared righteous by God means being vindicated as part of the covenant people. Justification therefore is God's statement that we are part of his family. Justification should not be confused with salvation as a whole. It comes afterwards – the affirmation that we are indeed 'saved', covenant people, as marked out by our faith in Christ.

Final judgement and the place of 'works'



Paul, the great champion of justification by faith alone, has some seemingly embarrassing things to say about judgement according to 'works' (e.g. Rom 2:6-11, see also Rev 20:12-13 and Mat 16:27). He has no problem with

² It says, literally, 'the faith of Christ' in the Greek. 'Pistis' can mean faith or faithfulness.

this, or with telling believers to work hard, because he knows the Holy Spirit empowers them. Our 'works' are both from us *and* inspired by God: So Paul talks about himself '*striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me*' (Col 1.29); '*I worked harder than all of them, yet it was not I but God's grace that was with me*' (1 Cor 15.10). In other words, those who are already declared righteous by God are then Spirit-empowered for and marked out by their changed lives and good deeds. They do not earn salvation, but their status as God's children is confirmed by the deeds that result. The eventual judgement of 'Well done, you are my child' is on the basis that the person's life of faith demonstrates it to be so. But this judgement is known in advance and announced in the present! Our present justification – being declared 'in the right' – is an absolute assurance of that final judgement outcome!

So, what is 'imputed' to us then?

Some may be disappointed that God's own righteousness is not imputed to us. However, we have something much better! When Jesus died and rose again, his resurrection was his 'vindication'. He was declared to have been in the right all along, despite the condemnation of various human courts. Those who have placed their trust in Christ are now counted as being 'in him' and having died and been raised with him (Rom 6:3-5, Eph 2:6, Col 2:12-13). Christ's death and resurrection are 'imputed' to us, and so we also share in his vindication, i.e. his justification! In taking Israel's place and representing all of God's people, he made us, in himself, part of the covenant people, i.e. 'righteous'.



Final thoughts

2 Cor 5:21 says: '*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might **become the righteousness of God.***' God's righteousness is his faithfulness to his covenant – his absolute commitment to reach out to all people with saving love. This verse is saying that by dealing with our sin, God enables us to embody his covenant faithfulness in our lives.

The covenant love that springs from God's relational nature as Trinity is to be expressed in and through his people as they become the means by which God fulfils the great promise to Abraham and draws people everywhere into his single family, marked out as righteous through faith.

"Justification is not just about 'how I get my sins forgiven'. It is about how God creates, in the Messiah Jesus and in the power of his spirit, a single family, celebrating their once-for-all forgiveness and their assured 'no condemnation' in Christ, through whom his purposes can now be extended into the wider world." – Tom Wright