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Chapter 12: Righteousness and Redemption in the Epistles of Paul¹

Bryan W. Ball

It would be stating the obvious to say that this brief study of Paul's use of the word 'righteousness' as it relates to redemption is not intended to be exhaustive. That would require an in-depth study and a full-length book, akin, for example, to Leon Morris's New Testament study *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* which, since its first publication in 1955, has not been surpassed, perhaps not even equalled. The first word which Morris examined was one of the words in the title above, 'redemption', an investigation which took up more than 50 pages in the book – more than four times the length of this entire chapter.² That should not deter us, however, for it will still be possible to establish the substance of what Paul means by these words, to see how they relate to each other and to other crucial words which Paul uses in conjunction with them. Perhaps more importantly, it will enable us to discern the assurance and hope they contain, making them as relevant today as they were to Paul's original first-century readers.

The essence of Paul's teaching is that there is a righteousness which is redemptive, which lies at the very heart of God's purposes for mankind. Paul's meaning, however, cannot be grasped only from the English words 'righteous' and 'righteousness' as they are commonly understood today. Morris sounds a warning here. "Many have fallen into serious error", he says, "by taking it for granted that everyone knows what 'righteous' and 'righteousness' mean".³ But as Morris points out, the biblical words do not have exactly the same meaning as their English translations. Paul uses the Greek word *dikaioisune* and its derivatives more than seventy times in ten of his thirteen epistles, eleven if we include Hebrews. These Greek words are always translated 'righteous' or 'righteousness' in English. We tend to think mainly of the English meanings of these words - goodness or moral excellence, even holiness - when in fact they inherently mean 'rightness' or 'justice'. They contain a forensic, or legal, meaning. According to standard

1 Adapted and expanded from a paper presented at conferences in the UK and Australia in the 1980s. Previously unpublished.

2 Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale, 3rd edn., 1965), ch.1, 12-64.

3 *Ibid.*, 269.

dictionaries and lexicons, *dikaiosune* and all its five derivatives have this strong legal connotation.⁴ Paul can only be adequately understood, in Romans in particular, if we remember the meaning of the original Greek words, as Paul himself would have understood and used them. That in mind, it may be said that Paul's teaching concerning redemptive righteousness can be summarised in seven propositions.

Redemptive Righteousness is Rooted in God.

It is, in fact, God's own righteousness.⁵ It begins with him, proceeds from him and leads to him. It is the first thing that Paul lays down in his exposition of righteousness in Romans, beginning in chapter 1, where in verse 16 he says that the gospel he is about to explain reveals the righteousness of God.⁶ The first six references to righteousness in Romans all affirm that the righteousness which Paul speaks about and is so anxious to explain is the righteousness of God himself.⁷ Everything that he later says as his argument develops must be seen in the light of this seminal truth. Luther understood it well, "God does not want to save us by our own but by an extraneous righteousness, one that does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves, which does not arise on earth but comes from heaven".⁸ For righteousness to be redemptive it must be other than human. Paul knew as well anyone Isaiah's all-inclusive assertion, "All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (Isa 64:6).

God's righteousness has a twofold character. Firstly, it has a legal dimension. Scripture as a whole reveals that God is just and fair, that the demands of both divine law and divine grace are fully met through the gospel. This is the essence of Paul's argument in Romans 3, climaxing in vs. 21-26, especially vs. 25 & 26, where, speaking of Christ's death on the cross as an atoning act by which sins may be forgiven, Paul says "God offered him . . . in order to demonstrate that he righteous". God thus "shows that he himself is righteous [i.e., fair, just] and that he puts right everyone who believes in

4 E.g., Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 66.

5 Souter says of *dikaiosune theou*, "righteousness of which God is the source or author", *ibid.*

6 Biblical references are from the *New King James Version* unless otherwise indicated. Gordon Rupp's classic study of Luther's life and thought was, significantly, entitled *The Righteousness of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953).

7 Rom. 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26.

8 The exact wording of this quotation depends on the translation of the original text; cf. Rupp, *Righteousness*, 161, quoting Weimarer Ausgabe *Werke* 56.158.10, and James Atkinson, *The Great Light: Luther and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 30.

Jesus”.⁹ It all flows from the righteousness, the fairness, of a just God. As Luther discovered, God is just or righteous, not because he condemns or punishes sinners but because he saves them. He provides a way of escape from the consequences of sin and broken law. This is the justice, the ‘rightness’ of God who cannot overlook the inevitable penalty of sin, but who enables the demands of the law to be fully met. And he does so because he himself is righteous – fair, and just.

In his commentary on Romans, Lenski claims it was the “happiest day in Luther’s life when he discovered that ‘God’s righteousness’ as used in Romans means God’s verdict of righteousness upon the believer”.¹⁰ He then adds, “This joy is ours today. *Dikaiosune theou* [the righteousness of God] is the status of righteousness into which faith and the believer are placed by the judicial verdict of God”.¹¹ Lenski then concludes:

It is fatal to eliminate the forensic idea from *dikaiosune*. This cannot be done linguistically, save by changing the sense; it cannot be done doctrinally, save by rejecting the central doctrine of all Scripture.¹²

The *dikaiosune* of God is the justness of a just God dealing fairly with both broken law and lawbreakers by handing down a verdict of acquittal because the requirements of the broken law have been fully and acceptably met.

The second defining characteristic of God’s righteousness is that it is moral. The righteousness of God is what God himself is, not only just and fair, but also good, holy and perfect. The righteousness of God is all that God is. It necessarily encompasses his holiness, his goodness, his sinlessness. Thus divine righteousness is the very antithesis of sin. Paul states it in II Corinthians 5:21, “For he made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”. The righteous God, having revealed his righteousness at the cross, now requires that liberated sinners become “slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:18), living a life approved by God, that is a righteous and morally upright life.¹³ Paul then goes on to show, in chapter 8, how this can happen through the inner working of the Holy Spirit, i.e., through God himself, by another act of righteous fairness in making possible that which is humanly impossible.

God’s righteousness is therefore both justice and holiness. It is like a

⁹ Rom. 3:25, 26, *Good News Bible*.

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961), 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³ J. J. Von Allmen, *Vocabulary of the Bible* (London: Lutterworth, 1964), 375. Morris states “the righteous man is the one who is accepted before God, the one who conforms to His way”, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 269.

two-sided coin, with both legal and moral significance, and because both are conjoined, it can never be one without the other. The righteousness of God himself is the righteousness which redeems and in order to accomplish such redemption it is freely extended to sinful human beings as both justice and holiness, the justice and holiness of very God himself.

God's Redemptive Righteousness is a Response to Sin.

In Romans 3:5(AV) Paul declares that human unrighteousness “commends”, i.e., recommends, the righteousness of God. The *New International Version* says that our unrighteousness “brings out God’s righteousness more clearly”. It is on account of human unrighteousness that the righteousness of God is declared and becomes available. The human condition is the dark backdrop against which the righteousness of God shines so brightly. Lenski translates the Greek here as “our unrighteousness places God’s righteousness into proper light” with the comment “darkness indeed makes light stand out as what it really is, namely light, as the blacker the darkness, the more the light is made to appear as light”.¹⁴ So divine righteousness is God’s own response to the human condition into which all are born. We note here just one of the many important consequences of this truth.

If the righteousness of God is to be efficacious, dealing effectively with the sin problem in human nature and experience, there must be on the part of the sinner recognition of sin and an understanding of what sin is and what its consequences are. Indeed, God’s saving righteousness can only be effective when sin is known, understood, recognised, confessed and, ultimately, forsaken.

This is true not only at the beginning of the Christian life when one becomes convinced of having a sinful nature and a past life of sinful acts and thoughts requiring forgiveness, but also at all times in the future as the Christian life progresses. A fundamental presupposition in Paul’s teaching concerning righteousness is that at all stages of human experience men and women are essentially sinful and thus in need of the righteousness which saves. As Lesslie Newbigin so aptly puts it, “to be human is to be sinful”.¹⁵ Since we remain human throughout life, we remain sinful to the end and in need of God’s redemptive righteousness. God’s own righteousness is a continuing divine response to our fallen and sinful nature.

This Righteousness is Revealed in Jesus.

Paul goes on to say that Christ, both in his incarnate life and atoning death, was the visible revelation of God’s righteousness. This righteous-

14 Lenski, *Romans*, 218.

15 Lesslie Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation* (London: SCM, 1956), 15.

ness must be explained as well as proclaimed. It must be seen as well as heard, demonstrated as well as argued. And it must be revealed before it can be received. Ellen White wrote, "The righteousness of God is embodied in Christ. We receive righteousness by receiving Him".¹⁶ The question, however, is how? How is the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus? Again the answer is twofold.

Firstly, as Paul states in Romans 3:24-25, Christ's redeeming death on the cross revealed the righteousness of God. Calvary was the definitive manifestation of God's own righteousness. There God revealed his justice. Through the propitiatory act of the cross, human beings are reclaimed from sin and death. Christ's shed blood, his substitutionary sacrificial death deals with human sin, guilt and condemnation. So the cross reveals the justice of God by meeting the demands or requirements of the broken law, and this revelation of righteousness at the cross is foundational. It is a demonstration of the fundamental justice of God as well as the love of God, in dealing with a problem which demanded a solution.

Secondly, Romans 5:10 and 19 sets forth the equally basic truth that the life of Jesus also revealed God's righteousness. Christ was obedient not only "unto death" but throughout his life on earth. He revealed the righteousness, the holiness, the very character of God, in his person and in the way he lived. His obedience in its totality is a revelation of God's righteousness and therefore the source of the righteousness that believers can claim as their own.

The twentieth-century New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce, explains the significance of Christ's obedient life in the scheme of redemption:

The obedience of Christ to which His people owe their justification and hope of eternal life is not to be confined to His death. . . . it was a perfectly righteous life that He offered up in death on His people's behalf. The righteous life in itself would not have met their need had He not carried His obedience to the point of death, 'even the death of the cross', but neither would His death have met their need had the life which He thus offered up not been a perfect life.¹⁷

Edward Heppenstall explores at some length the sinlessness of the Christ who revealed the righteousness of God. He points to the miraculous nature of Christ's incarnation and birth, his divinity united with humanity, his own witness to himself as well as the witness of the New Testament writers, and "his mission to provide a perfect righteousness for unrighteous" men and women, stating that sinlessness is "a life without sin in any respect".¹⁸ Re-

16 Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1956), 18.

17 F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (London: IVP, 1985), 120-21.

18 Edward Heppenstall, *The Man Who is God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977), 130.

ferring to the Greek word *anamartesia* [perhaps a misprint for *anamartetos*, “without sin” ?] Heppenstall states, “In Christ there was not the slightest expression of a perverted will at any point. . . . He was born of the Holy Spirit in complete oneness with the Father”.¹⁹ In Paul’s words, he “knew no sin”, II Cor.5:21. Indeed, how could he know sin, if born in complete oneness with the Father? This holy being, the only such being ever to have existed on earth, was the living embodiment of divine righteousness – in life and then in death.

The righteousness of God, in both its judicial and moral dimensions, is revealed in the life and death of Jesus. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Christ was the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, made c.600 BC, that a “righteous Branch” would arise in the future from David’s line and would be known as “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS”(Jer. 23:5,6).

God’s Righteousness Revealed in Christ is Received by Faith

We now turn from theology to experience, from understanding to practice. At the heart of Paul’s message of redemption is the crucial truth that God’s righteousness, revealed and available in Christ, is received by faith. The righteousness which is available in Christ is for all, Jew and Gentile alike, for all have sinned and all may by faith receive the righteousness of God by receiving Christ (Rom. 3:21-24). This is the good news for humanity. Faith is the hand that reaches out to accept the proffered gift.

Two things in particular should be noted about the faith which enables sinful men and women of all ages and from every culture and background to receive God’s saving righteousness. Firstly, it is a continuing faith. Here we return to that text which is central to the epistle to the Romans, Romans 1:17, which states that the gospel reveals God’s righteousness “from faith to faith”. This is truly one of the crucial texts of the New Testament. The *NIV* reads “by faith from first to last”. The *New Living Translation* puts it “from start to finish by faith”. J. B. Phillips translates the original as “a process begun and continued” by faith.²⁰

It is necessary to understand what Paul means here. When he says, “the just shall live by faith” does he speak of the present or the future life? When will those who are justified live? Does Paul refer to eternal life in the future or of daily life in the present? It is a critical question. The following chapters of Romans make it clear that Paul is concerned primarily with the life of the justified sinner in the present. God’s saving righteousness is effective from the moment of first belief to the end of the believer’s life. It is a process begun and continued by faith. The justified person lives by faith from the

19 *Ibid.*, 131.

20 J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*, Rom. 1:17.

moment of justification until he or she ceases to live. God's righteousness as revealed in Jesus and as received by faith is an ongoing process "from start to finish".

The second thing we need continually to remember relates to the nature of faith itself. The faith which Paul speaks of is much more than cognitive assent, important though that is. Saving faith goes beyond knowledge. There is something submissive, dependent, trusting, about true faith. It transcends knowledge, evidence, argument and understanding, although of course it does not dispense with any of these. Saving faith is more than what has been termed 'cerebral religion'. It is a trusting faith which receives the righteousness of God as revealed in Jesus by faith at the beginning and receives it continually by faith from the first moment of belief onwards. This is righteousness by faith in theory and in practice. It is authentic Protestantism now as much as it was in the sixteenth century. It is God's way of righting human sinfulness and Satanic distortion. Righteousness is available from Christ "by faith from first to last".

This Saving Righteousness is Realised in Justification.

Two words have traditionally been understood among Protestant Christians as summarising the essence of the plan of salvation – justification and sanctification. As we shall be reminded shortly the complete gospel as set out by Paul in Romans includes both. But first it is necessary to consider justification as it stands alone.

Through the process of justification God is revealed as being just and the believing sinner is *declared* just, or righteous. God is demonstrated to *be* just since through Christ's righteousness, his death on the cross and his sinless life, he frees from guilt and condemnation those who are by nature unrighteous but who believe. The believing sinner is thus *regarded* as righteous on account of Christ's righteousness which he or she has received by faith. In justification God's righteousness, revealed and accessible in Christ, is imputed or credited to the believer. This is the reality of the term "righteousness by faith".

Justification, then, concerns the sinner's standing before God. Nothing visible actually happens at this point in the believer's life through God's gracious act of justification. When a sinner exercises faith in God through Jesus Christ he or she is accepted as righteous by God even though he or she may not actually be righteous, or sinless, in reality. God declares that person righteous on account of faith in Jesus. This transaction is called 'imputed righteousness' (Rom. 4:6). "To impute" means "to regard as" or "to ascribe to". In justification God regards the believing sinner as righteous, even though up to that point he or she has been unrighteous and is still

in actual fact unrighteous. That declaration of God brings the sinner into a new standing or relationship. Whereas previously that person was sinful and guilty, now he or she is sinless, forgiven and guiltless, even though not actually sinless. Luther's oft-quoted words are still pertinent, *simul iustus et peccator*, "at the same time righteous and a sinner". According to James Atkinson, another version reads "Always a sinner, always penitent, always justified".²¹

So we can agree with Leon Morris, "Justification is in essence a matter of right status or standing in the sight of God".²² It is "the name given in the Bible to the changed status, not the changed nature".²³ And it happens as a result of God's own righteousness and on account of the righteousness of Christ imputed to the one who puts his or her trust in Jesus. In justification the believer is accounted righteous. "Christ . . . offers to take our sins and give us his righteousness. . . for his sake you are accounted righteous".²⁴ Morris further explains that the righteousness of God "is a righteousness which takes men [generically speaking] in their sins, alienated from the mind of God, subject to the wrath of God, and justifies them".²⁵ This is the very heart of the gospel. But there is more, and it, too, is crucial.

Redemptive Righteousness is Recognisable in the Christian Life.

We must now consider what has frequently been referred to as "imparted righteousness". God's righteousness, imputed through justification, also becomes part of the believer's new life and can be seen as such in an authentic Christian lifestyle. Once again this truth is set forth in Romans as well as in many of Paul's other epistles.

Through the years since the Reformation there has been an ongoing debate concerning Romans. Some affirm that Paul's main purpose in this epistle is to expound the doctrine of justification by faith. Romans has often been preached essentially from this standpoint. However, there is a strong case for a broader interpretation. Paul's exposition of justification by faith takes up the first five chapters of the epistle. Beginning with chapter six another emphasis appears, which runs on through chapters seven and eight and reappears in chapters twelve through fourteen. This emphasis is on the

21 Atkinson, *Great Light*, 33. Rupp quotes a further variation, *semper peccator, semper iustus*, "always a sinner, always just", citing Henri Strohl *L' Evolution Religieuse de Luther* (Strasbourg, 1922), 4.

22 Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 290.

23 *Ibid*, 291.

24 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1908), 62.

25 Morris, *Apostolic Preaching*, 278.

life of the person who has been justified. In these chapters Paul talks repeatedly about personal lifestyle, victory over sin, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, relationships with God, with one's fellow-believers and with unbelievers. This new life which follows justification is evidence that justification is real for it has been accompanied by a change of life and lifestyle.

The inescapable truth of all this is that Paul's gospel is a gospel of both justification and sanctification. The later chapters of Romans are just as much a part of Paul's gospel as are the earlier chapters. This is confirmed when we examine some of Paul's other epistles. In I Cor. 15:34 Paul's call is "awake to righteousness and do not sin". In Philippians 1:11 he admonishes Christians to be "filled with the fruits of righteousness". He urges Timothy to pursue righteousness, linking it with godliness, love and gentleness (I Tim.6:11). It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the conclusion that Paul's gospel is one in which the righteousness of God, initially imputed to the one who believes, is then imparted to that same believer, and is clearly evident in his or her life.

How, then, does this happen? In Romans 8 it is abundantly clear that it happens as a result of God's presence and activity in the believer through the Holy Spirit. Because it is the work of the indwelling Spirit, we can say that even when righteousness is imparted it is still the righteousness of God. It comes as the result of the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. This is what has been known through the Christian ages as sanctification. This too is part of the gospel, the good news that God not only imputes righteousness to us when we first believe, but that he also imparts it to us as we continue to believe, and that he helps us to live in harmony with his will.

It is worth noting, before we pass to the final section of this brief study, that Luther understood perfectly the necessity of sanctification as an integral element in the divine plan. The total separation of justification and sanctification as discrete processes in the outworking of the plan of salvation is an error, as is the imputation to Luther of a totally forensic justification which on its own account is the sum and substance of the gospel. Speaking of the growth in the Christian life that follows justification, Luther wrote, "It is no use for a tree to be living, to blossom, unless fruit comes from the blossom".²⁶ Rupp says that Luther recognised "a progress in the Christian life which is never complete in this life, but is consummated in the resurrection".²⁷ And Karl Holl, commenting on Luther's understanding of salvation as including "making righteous" as well as "accounting righteous", writes "As the great artist sees the finished statue in the rough marble, so God sees already in the sinner, whom he justifies, the righteous man that he will make of him".²⁸

26 Luther, *Werke*, 56.441.14.

27 Rupp, *Righteousness*, 182.

28 Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tubingen, 1948), 125, cited in Rupp,

God's Redemptive Righteousness is Reaffirmed by Hope.

There is one final, crowning truth concerning God's redemptive righteousness. In Galatians 5:5 Paul says we "eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith". Barclay translates this text "by the Spirit and by faith we eagerly expect the hope of being right with God".²⁹ The *NIV* reads, "by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope", with the comment "a reference to God's final verdict of 'not guilty', assured presently to the believer by faith and by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit".³⁰ Paul himself further states that believers are sealed by the Spirit "for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30) and those who now have the firstfruits of the Spirit, eagerly wait for "the redemption of our body" (Rom. 8:23). There is clearly in Paul's mind a strong sense of anticipation that the future will bring finality to the redemptive purposes of God. Perhaps it is all a reflection of what Jesus himself said when he admonished those who would see the signs of his second coming to look up and lift up their heads "because your redemption draws near" (Luke 21:28). Righteousness and redemption are constantly re-affirmed in the believer's life by hope. The final chapter in the story of redemption is yet to be written.

In Hebrews it is stated that Noah and other great worthies of the past became heirs of "the righteousness which is according to faith", but that all died not having received the promise. Elsewhere we are reminded of the new earth "in which righteousness dwells" (II Pet. 3:13). There is clearly a strong eschatological dimension to the truth of God's saving righteousness. Its full consummation is not realised through any of the categories traditionally used. It is not totally contained even by the words "justification" and "sanctification", for it is not fully attainable in this life. Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states that the righteousness which Paul speaks of is "the object of hope", "a hope that looks forward confidently to the final sentence".³¹ Possibly this explains why Paul sometimes uses the words "justify" and "justification" in a future tense, and notably in relationship to judgment and the last days.

Perhaps the clearest statement of this end-time dimension of saving righteousness is Paul's statement to Timothy, "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day"(II Tim.4:8). There have been many attempts to

Righteousness, 182.

29 William Barclay, *Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: St Andrews, 1983), 43.

30 *NIV Study Bible* (Zondervan, 1985), 1786.

31 G. W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans and Exeter, UK, Paternoster, 1985), 174.

define precisely what Paul means by a “crown of righteousness”. It is clear that he cannot be talking of a literal crown. It is equally clear that there is here a future dimension in the human experience of righteousness which is as important as the present. After an extended discussion of this text Lenski summarises his understanding. It refers, he says, to a victory wreath, “which the Lord (the righteous Judge), will duly give . . . in or at that day”. Then:

Throughout the Scriptures there runs this double idea: 1) that the righteous are pronounced righteous by a judicial verdict; 2) that the Judge himself must and will be declared righteous for his absolutely righteous verdicts upon both the righteous and the unrighteous . . . On that day, when all things are absolutely revealed, his righteousness which is evidenced in all his judgments will appear convincingly as well as the righteousness of all true believers . . . when all who have loved the Lord’s epiphany will be judged and duly given the victors wreath.³²

Perhaps even that is inadequate to describe all that Paul means. And perhaps we can only say categorically that the events of the last day will set the seal on God’s righteousness, the source and the substance of the plan of salvation which will come to a final consummation in God’s own time. What is beyond doubt is that Paul’s explanation of the gospel in terms of righteousness and redemption is ground enough for assurance in the present and hope for the future. Therefore we must allow that future to beckon us on, in faith and in hope and with assurance, knowing that the crown, the eternal reward of the righteous in Christ, awaits all who have been redeemed by God’s redemptive righteousness, received continually by faith.

32 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of . . . Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1964), 864-65.

