
RM 1:17 : THE RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT GOD GIVES

No. EE6

Nothing in the Bible is unimportant. However, some scriptural truths are of such fundamental importance that, if they do not form the core of your convictions, the question would arise as to whether you could call yourself a Christian at all.

Consequently, it is truly disconcerting when I meet good and loyal church-goers throughout the country, only to realise that a great many of them do not understand the first thing about many of these truths.

Therefore I want to yet again discuss a gospel truth that not only lies at the heart of our holy faith, but is also the inexhaustible source of comfort to anyone who takes refuge in Jesus Christ for life and death. We have often pondered this, and for most of you I will not be saying anything new - but I shudder to think that I might one day, when I stand accountable before God, be rebuked for my failure to impress this upon you sufficiently.

I'm talking about justification through faith alone. It is this truth of which Luther said that it determines whether the church stands or falls. And indeed, there is scarcely a more reliable litmus test to assess the authenticity, or not, of a congregation.

Moreover: I cannot think of a truth that has a more drastic and practical effect on a person's life. Therefore, be sure to understand it, embrace it in faith, think about it again and again, and live according to it.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

☐ Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest and

professor at the University of Wittenberg. Amongst other things he had to lecture on the epistle to the Romans. But he struggled to grasp the true meaning of the apostle's writing. He did, however, know that the theme of the entire book was found in Rom 1:16-17, and that, as such, it was the key to understanding the whole. He read the two verses over and over again, and every time he stumbled over the expression in v.17: "the righteousness of God". Throughout the Middle Ages the Catholic Church taught that these words here in Rom 1 describe a character trait of the Lord - that His wrath burns against the sins of men.

If there was one issue that burned in Luther's soul, it was Job's question: *how can a mortal be righteous before God?* (Job 4:17; 9:2). He writes in his autobiography that he consequently came to detest the expression here in Rom 1:17, and he became increasingly angry with God. For Luther struggled with an intense sense of sin for many years, powerless to live a holy life. The last thing he needed to hear, especially from this book that claimed to carry the secret to eternal salvation, was that he was faced with a God to whom sinners were completely intolerable.

One day - probably in the autumn of 1514 - this priest-professor was reading over and over these verses again. And there in the tower of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, it suddenly hit him like a bolt of lightning: *in Greek this expression can also indicate that God is the source of righteousness - that He gives righteousness.*¹

Instantly the message of the book of Romans became clear to Luther. He later wrote: "Then I felt born again like a new man, and I entered God's Paradise through open doors."

And so the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century began. Nothing would ever be the same again. Europe's windows were thrown open and the truth of grace flooded in like sunlight, dispelling the darkness of the Middle Ages. In the following years this true

gospel would lead to the salvation of many thousands.

WHAT DID LUTHER SEE?

In order to understand what Luther saw, we have to go back to some fundamental Biblical truths.

☐ Adam acted as head of all humanity when he fell into sin. He represented each of us. The effect of his sin on all humanity is called *original sin* or *inherited sin*. This has two components: *guilt* and *corruption*. (Rm 3:9-20; 5:12-19).

- All Adam's descendants are considered by God to be "co-responsible" for the fall. They are equally guilty in God's sight, and equally punishable - even before committing a single sin. It can be compared to, as an example, Hitler causing millions, even small babies, to die during the war - simply because they were part of the German nation.

To put it technically: *Adam's guilt is imputed (debited) to all people. This is a forensic or legal problem. It is an objective truth; it happens outside of us - in God's books, as it were.*

Of course, this culpability increases as one personally sins day after day.

- Secondly, this has to do with man's corruption, his moral pollution. Every descendant of Adam is born with a morally distorted nature. He therefore has an inborn inclination to go against the Law and the will of God. This makes him a *rebel* before his Creator. Moreover, he is incapable of living up to God's will and standards. This makes him a *failure* before the Lord.

Here we have an irrefutable fact of life. It is true universally, and through all ages. Even in babies it is unmistakable: *Mine! No! Give! I Won't!* (Ps 58:3).

The corruption due to Adam's sin is therefore imparted to all his descendants - all people. This is a moral problem - therefore subjective, inside us.

☐ Christ came as "second man", as "last Adam" (1Cor 15:45, 47) - and as Head of God's new

1. A subjective, and not an objective genitive as the church of previous centuries had believed.

humanity - to eradicate the effects of the Fall for His people (Rm 5:12-21). When a sinner places his faith and trust sincerely and earnestly in Christ, he is, by way of speaking, taken out of Adam and planted into Christ. Just as Adam's sin was charged, or *debited*, to him, just so Christ's righteousness is now counted, or *credited* to him.²

□ To understand how Christ addresses the problem of our lost righteousness before God, we have to discuss the nature of sin first (our own sin and our sin in Adam).

All sin falls into one of two categories: that which one *does* (sins of commission), and that which one *doesn't* do (sins of omission). We violate God's commandments, *and* we fail to measure up to His standards. My trespasses are one thing, but what about all the things that the Lord commands, that I don't do? I don't hate Him anymore - and it's wonderful - but what if I do not love Him with my whole heart, mind and strength?

- Most of us are well aware of the fact that Christ paid for all sins that His people have done, do, and will do. The punishment that He suffered, He bore as Substitute - in my place. My guilt was imputed or debited to Him - it was charged to His account. And when He paid it, it brought an end to all my debt!

But how many of us realise that this acquittal alone is not enough?

If we were only acquitted, we would have been were Adam was prior to the Fall - yes, without guilt, but that would not have been enough. No! The Lord still had to earn eternal life for us! Through positive obedience he had to gain access to the Tree of Life.

It is not enough simply *not* to violate God's commandments, we must keep them! There is not only a punishment to be averted; there is also a reward to be earned! If you would inherit eternal life,

2. The word, "impute" or "count" or "reckon" in Greek (found 11 times in Rom 4), indicates an inscription in an accounting book. It can therefore be translated with either debit or credit, depending on the point being made.

you have to obey God perfectly. *And this is man's greatest problem!* Nobody can achieve it.

□ This insurmountable dilemma of the sinner is also addressed by Christ. He obeyed God perfectly - from the moment of His birth, up to His final breath. Not one single sinful thought, desire or motive! Even in the tiniest detail He did everything - exactly everything - that His Father commanded Him.³

This obedience is imputed to each one who truly believes in Christ! The Lord's perfect obedience is credited to his or her account! This is the good news of the gospel: *Place your faith and trust in the Substitute and His merits, and you are credited with His flawless righteousness!*

Exactly this is what Rm 1:17 talks about. This is the righteousness that God gives. This is the essence of justification through faith alone. This is what Luther saw.

WHAT DOES THIS BOIL DOWN TO?

□ When someone else has paid your debts, what do you owe? *Nothing!*

And when you have something to do, but a substitute does it in your place - do you still have to do it as well? Of course not!

Do you realise what this means? *In God's books, by way of speaking, you who are in Christ have the status of someone who has never sinned - because all your debt has been paid. Moreover, in God's books you have the status of someone who has kept the law perfectly - because Christ's righteousness has been credited to your account.*

□ Note that I say "in God's books". Remember, this is a judicial affair. Paul constantly uses legal and accounting language. Therefore this is an objective matter. It is not subjective. It occurs *outside* of you (in God's books), not *in* you. It is not an experience; it is

3. When the Father restored the Lord Jesus from death, it was His statement that the Son had obeyed Him perfectly - that He had committed no sin, and thus did not deserve death.

something that you have to accept in faith - because God's gospel promises it.

To turn our eyes from ourselves, and fix our gaze on Christ and His merits, is one of the first and most important lessons that a Christian must learn. It is the essence of faith (do you remember the bronze snake in Num 21:5-9 and Jh 3:14-15?).

Countless Christians are milling about on one place due to their constant introspection. Being forever inward-looking is being self-centred. And it is a sin - amongst other things the sin of doubt. You do not believe God's promises! As if He is a liar!

□ That which the first Adam should have done, but couldn't, the Last Adam achieved. He obeyed His Father absolutely to the end. And those of us who are united with Him through true faith, receive exactly the same reward as our Head.

Hence there is hardly a more blessed or more meaningful promise in the Bible as the one found in Rev 22:2: *the tree of life!* The angels who were to guard the Garden of Eden so that none of Adam's descendants could enter it, have become a guard of honour to welcome each one who has sought refuge in Christ and continue to abide in Him.

□ The famous American church leader and theologian, Gresham Machen, understood the message of this sermon. On January 1, 1937 his dying words were: *"I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."*

Nico van der Walt

- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.
- Subscriptions, changes of address, cancellations and correspondence: E: duplessismh@telkomsa.net; P.O. Box 35289, Menlopark, 0102, South Africa. Tel. 012-804 0316; 083 5544 941.
- www.reformed.org.za www.antipas.org.za www.sola5.org
- Weekly a sermon like this is sent world-wide and free of charge in Afrikaans or English by e-mail to 2000 people who have requested it.
- No copyright. Please duplicate or forward electronically.
- Past E-sermons can be found on the first two websites above.
- We gladly send an introduction to the sermons to those E-addresses you might wish to send us. However, we only put those people on our mailing list who request so personally.