

the
Good News of
The Kingdom



The Biblical Call for Justice
The Gift of Righteousness Through Christ
Reconciliation

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The Gift of Righteousness

The Gift of Righteousness through Christ:

God's means for bringing the Justice
of the Kingdom of God in this world

When Jesus came to announce the salvation of God he used the phrase “the good news (gospel) of the kingdom and constantly referred to his coming as the presence of the “kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven” ” (Mt 4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 19; 6:33; 7:21; 8:11; Mk 1:15; 4:11; 9:1, 47; 12:34; Lk 4:43, 7:28; 8:1, 10; 12:32). Jesus talked about the nature of kingdom righteousness, demonstrated it by his actions (Mt 13; 18:1-9; 20:1-16; 21:28-22:14; 25:1-46; Lk 13:18-20; 14:15-24) and called his disciples to “seek first the kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33; 25:31ff.) When Paul talked about God's salvation he frequently referred to it simply as “the gospel” (Rom 1:15,16; 1 Cor 1:17; 2 Cor 2:12), and he talked about “preaching Christ” (1 Cor 2:2; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 3:1,14; Eph 3:8). The righteousness Paul talks about is “the righteousness of Christ” (Rom 3:21ff; 2 Cor 5:21; Titus 3:4-7) and he urges us to receive and even pursue this gift of righteousness through faith alone (Rom 3:21ff; Gal 3:1ff; Phil 3:7ff.)

Are Jesus and Paul talking about the same thing? While everyone who acknowledges the Bible as the Word of God would assume there must be a consistency in the message between Jesus and Paul, there is still a practical disconnect in the thinking of many evangelical believers. Traditionally, those who are critical skeptics of Christianity and the Bible will highlight this perceived difference as proof that there is not really a consistent message in Scripture. But even among evangelical and reformed believers there is often a practical separation between the message of Jesus and the message of Paul. As a result, some emphasize the demands for the righteousness of the kingdom in a way that tries to motivate God's people out of a simple moral obligation to do good, and they leave out Paul's emphasis on grace and righteousness as a gift through faith in Christ. Others emphasize the righteousness of Christ as a gift that almost completely neglects the justice-kingdom focus of that righteousness. This can give believers the impression they are completely in good standing with God regardless of how they live their lives and there is no serious responsibility to pursue justice. When believers do pursue righteousness, they may also feel free to individually define what that righteousness looks like.

So how are the messages of Jesus and Paul the same and why do they talk about the nature of the “gospel” in what may appear to be different ways? The simple answer is one of emphasis and timing. There is a pattern to God's revelation which flows all the way from Genesis through Revelation and it works something like this. God tells us he is going to do something, carries it out, and then later explains the full implications of what he did and why he did it. He speaks-acts, and then explains or interprets. The pattern is set in Genesis 1 and 2 where God speaks-acts the world and the universe into existence (“And God said, ‘let there be light’, and there was light” Gen 1:3) and then explains to Adam and Eve that he has created them to live in his image, as vice-regents, who will carry out his goodness in the world by filling it with their offspring and subduing the earth for his glory (Gen 1:27ff, 2:15ff). In the Exodus narrative, God told Moses he was going to deliver his people Israel from Egypt (Ex 3:7ff.), acted through Moses as the deliverer (Ex 6:1ff), and then had the people of Israel sit at Sinai for a whole year while he explained his purposes and their new role as the nation-kingdom of God, through the “prophet” Moses (cf Deut 34:10). The same pattern can be seen on a larger scale with God's plan of redemption for the world after Adam's disastrous fall into sin. God “speaks-acts” the beginning of his redemption through Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, explains it through the Prophets, and then fulfills it all in Christ.

When we come to the ministry of Jesus, God does a tremendous amount of speaking and acting, which waits for the fuller explanation to come through the teaching ministry of the Apostles and the other New Testament writers. For example, Jesus says to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven” (Mt

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9:2). Later, as he hangs on the Cross he utters the words, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). We already had some idea of the connection between the two events from Isaiah 53, but the absolute clarity of how Jesus could forgive the paralytic his sins and the connection to his pronouncement on the Cross, comes in Romans 3:23-26 when Paul explains,

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (ESV)

Even though the paralytic could hardly have had Paul's fully developed view of justification, nonetheless, what Paul explains in detail in Romans 3 is precisely what God was doing in his life. Paul even says in Romans 4 that Abraham and David had a fundamental sense of this teaching, namely, that God freely justifies the wicked by faith as a gift (Rom 4:1-8). However, you and I might not see this connection with Abraham and David quite so clearly ourselves by reading the Old Testament narrative without Paul's Spirit-inspired revelation.

This same dynamic applies to Jesus' announcement of the “good news of the kingdom” and Paul's proclamation of “the Gospel of Christ.” Jesus calls for kingdom righteousness (Mt 5-7, Luke 6,11) and Paul states in Philippians 3:7-9,

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-“ (ESV).

Jesus calls us to kingdom righteousness. Paul more fully explains this righteousness comes only as a gift in Christ. Paul is explaining the details of the message Jesus preached, even if we can't clearly see it in the Gospel narrative ourselves. What we can be sure of is that Jesus never intended to give people the idea, nor did he ever teach men could attain the righteousness of the kingdom by relying on human effort and religious zeal. What he did say was that men were to look in faith to him as the means of fulfilling this kingdom righteousness he was calling them to:

“Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God? Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’” (ESV) Jn 6:29, cf Jn 1:12

On the other hand, Paul never talked about “yielding our bodies to righteousness” (Rom 6) or “the righteousness that comes by faith” (Phil 3:9) with anything less in view than the justice-righteousness of the kingdom Jesus calls us to live out. “Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness (the justice/mercy righteousness of the kingdom), for you will be filled” (Mt 5:3) is the promise of “righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom 3:22). In fact, the kingdom justice/righteousness Jesus speaks about is given almost a verbatim expression by Paul in Romans 12.

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Luke 6:27-31

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it de-

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depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Romans 12:24-31

When we fully grasp the "good news of the kingdom" Jesus announces and the preaching of Paul which focuses on "the promise of the righteousness of Christ as a gift through faith" are the same thing, and we put the promises of the kingdom of God in a context of grace and the very righteousness of the kingdom we long for as a gift through Christ, the power of the Gospel explodes. This is why Paul loudly and boldly proclaims in Romans 1 that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the very power of God for salvation. And why is it so powerful? Paul says, "[Because] in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" Romans 1:17. Those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness, will be filled" (Mt 5:6) and the filling will come through faith in Christ and the gift of the Spirit: "But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope." Gal 5:5

Traditionally, the Catholic Church has talked about this justification-righteousness of Romans 1 and 3 as an "infused" righteousness, meaning, God deposits righteousness in us as a gift through the sacraments and then it is up to us to make use of it and live it out. We are told the righteousness diminishes as we engage in sinful desires, and is enhanced as we do good works. According to the Catholic Church teaching, entrance into heaven or the level of purgatory we must endure is determined by how well we implement this deposit of righteousness and how much sinfulness needs to be purged.

Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the other Protestant reformers rejected this view and boldly proclaimed the righteousness of God in Romans 1 and 3 is not an "infused righteousness", but a legally "imputed" record of righteousness, credited to us one time as an eternal gift. The righteousness is not our own, but the righteousness of Christ which we possess by faith. It is his record of righteousness that becomes our record, as a gift. At the Cross there was a great exchange, where Jesus took on our sin and we were made righteous in him.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor 5:21

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about-- but not before God. ³ What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Rom 4:1-5

The problem is many Protestant preachers have taken this wonderful truth of "righteousness as a gift" and have seen it, and preached it, as a "forensic" righteousness only. The word "forensic" is a legal term that refers to factual evidence which can be used in a trial. Our standing before God as "righteous" is a matter of "theological forensics." God has legally declared us righteous, not because of anything we have done, but because God himself, as the ultimate Judge, passed judgment on Christ in our place, poured out his wrath on him, and credited to us the gift of his righteousness (Rom 3:21-26). But the righteousness of Christ is more than simply a legal standing. It is that. But it is also an active force within us which is meant to break out into kingdom justice and mercy- into life itself! The righteousness of Christ should have real life practical expression in Christian's lives. Paul talks about the spiritual death we inherited from our first representative, Adam, and contrasts it with the promise of righteousness and life we already have and will inherit through the Second Adam, Christ.

"And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justifica-

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tion. ¹⁷ If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ." Rom 5:16,17 (ESV)

Adam's sin and our consequent condemnation was also based on a legal, forensic relationship. But being declared "guilty in Adam" was clearly, not simply a legal condition. His sin and guilt, imputed to us, has worked itself out in all the horrible, destructive, sinful actions of men. The good news is the righteousness of Christ is even greater than the sinfulness of Adam. If Adam's "imputation" created the destructiveness of sin, then Christ's "imputation" of righteousness will create the restoration of life. Destroying something is a relatively easy thing to do. But to take something that has been destroyed and rebuild and restore it is a far greater work, and far more glorious. And the promise of God, despite the destructiveness of sin and death, is that the righteousness of Christ which has been credited to us will produce nothing less than life. What life? The life of the kingdom of God Jesus came to announce. The life that is eternal. Paul is more fully explaining to us the proclamation of Jesus that the good news of the kingdom has arrived.

"Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled." Mt 5:6

"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Rom 5:19 (ESV)

The very record of obedience and righteousness Jesus produced and in turn, has been imputed to us, is kingdom righteousness. He acted justly, loved mercy and walked humbly (Micah 6:8) with his God in a way no human being before or since has ever done. His righteousness that is "credited" to us is the righteousness of "preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, releasing the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18,19). He loved his enemies, gave to anyone as they had need, fed the hungry, touched the out-cast and repeatedly cared for the widow. His kingdom righteousness also included inviting the rich tax collectors to become followers (Matthew and Zacchias) and healing the servants of Roman soldiers. This is the record of righteousness he has given us, and it is the practical expression of his righteousness through us which he has promised to fulfill through the power of the Spirit daily in every believer's life.

The Gift of Righteousness in the Context of Grace

Paul further highlights grace as an important dimension to the preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom. The best, straightforward definition of grace is simply this: undeserved favor. As Jesus went about preaching and teaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, he not only offered the righteousness of the kingdom as a gift, he also offered it in a context of abounding grace. He bestowed God's favor and righteousness freely, without holding men's sins or failures against them. And, he maintained that grace-atmosphere and relationship with his disciples after he called them to follow him. Perhaps there is no better example of this pattern than his relationship with the twelve apostles, personified in Peter. A few examples should be sufficient to prove the point.

Matthew tells us,

"As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him." Mt 4:18-20

But Luke tells us the fuller version of the story,

"One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, ² he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to

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Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." ⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." ⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him." Luke 5:1-11

Peter's skepticism about Jesus' understanding the hard work of skilled fisherman is evident for all to see. His response to the surprising catch, that Jesus should go away from him because he was such a sinful man, is of course true, but the rest of the story of Peter's life tells us he did not truly know the depth of his sin until the very night Jesus was put on trial. And yet, in a context of abounding grace, Jesus calls Peter to follow him and become a fisher of men.

A characteristic of Peter's faith is that he is both very bold to say and do things the other apostles are only thinking about, and also very quick to demonstrate fear, arrogance and lack of genuine understanding. Peter steps out of a boat on another occasion and walks on water to Jesus, but then quickly shifts his focus from Christ to the waves and starts to sink, crying out for Jesus to save him (Mt 14:22ff.) Peter speaks up boldly when Jesus asks the question, "Who do you say I am?" and immediately announces, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), but then immediately has the arrogance to rebuke Jesus when he talks about his death on the Cross and says, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Mt 16:22). On the mountain when Jesus is transfigured before the eyes of his disciples and they are given the extreme privilege of seeing Jesus talk with Moses and Elijah, Peter hastily blurts out, "It is good for us to be here. I will put up three shelters" (Mt 17:4), obviously planning on staying for an extended period. He is interrupted by no One less than God the Father, who affirms His Son and then tells Peter (and the other two) to listen to Jesus (Mt 17:5).

Easily the greatest demonstration of the sinfulness and weakness of Peter's faith is the night he betrayed Jesus by denying him three times. He starts with that bold, pride-mixed faith, and responds to the very direct statement of Jesus that all the disciples would leave him, with the counter-assertion, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Mt 26:33). If that isn't arrogant enough to contradict Jesus once, when Jesus replies directly to Peter and says "I tell you the truth. You will deny me three times before this night is over" (Mt 26:34), Peter answers right back and declares to the Son of God Himself, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." One of the more interesting overlooked verses in Scripture comes in the next statement, "And all the other disciples said the same" (Mt 26:35).

When the Apostle Paul more fully explains the good news of the kingdom Jesus preached, he tells us repeatedly that this salvation comes to us in a context of grace and ties that grace into the freedom to pursue kingdom righteousness.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Rom 5:1, 2

"The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Rom 5:20, 21

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"I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" Gal 2:21

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Eph 2:4-10

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹² It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope-- the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." Titus 2:11-14

What does that grace look like on a practical level? All we have to do is look back at the life of Peter to see it in action (or, for that matter, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, David, etc.). Peter did take his eyes off Jesus in the storm, but when he cried out, Jesus saved him. Peter did rebuke Jesus about the single most important event and purpose of his ministry when he told Jesus he should never go the Cross. But that did not undo the promise of Jesus to build the church on the "rock" of Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ. Peter did speak too quickly and selfishly on the mountain, but again, God the Father Himself hushed Peter and redirected his focus to what Christ would tell him. And after Peter and the others fell down in fright, Jesus gently said, "Don't be afraid" (Mt. 17:8). And yes, Peter boldly contradicted the direct statement of Jesus that Peter would deny him, and he went on to prove himself a liar by not being willing to die to with Christ. But Luke tells us that Jesus also said, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. ³² But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" Luke 22:31, 32.

There may be a temptation to think that this period of "grace" in Peter's life was really only for this short time when he was a "beginner" Apostle. That somehow, after Pentecost and the anointing of the Spirit, Peter finally understood and experienced the love of God enough that God could begin to treat him with more and more of a demand for obedience in a way that required less and less grace. But Peter's post-Pentecost experience reveals a different story. Filled with the Spirit, used by God as an instrument to convert thousands, a leader of leaders in the development of the church, it still took an act of grace for God to teach Peter about the true nature of reconciliation and the purpose of God to save the nations through faith in Christ as a gift. Peter is at the house of Simon the Tanner when God sends him a roof-top vision, not once, but three times, to teach him the basic lesson that he should call no man (even non-Jews) unclean (Acts 10:28). And years later (possibly 15 years later), Peter still has not taken the lesson fully to heart and refuses to eat a fellowship meal with other Christians, simply because they are Gentiles and he is afraid of the opposition (Gal 2:11ff).

The overall point in the story of Peter's life, and ours, is that God not only freely forgives our sins and commits Himself to produce the righteousness of Christ in and through us as a gift, but he does this in a complete context of grace. This has several, crucial implications for how the people of God are to be loved and shepherded in their understanding of the Gospel and in our pursuit of the kingdom. Here are at least two of the most important.

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First, is the freedom the people of God are meant to have in dealing with our own sins. The New Testament writers talk about the reality of sin in the life of the believer and how to deal with it through God's grace in terms that are, at times, startling. Paul tells us there is a war in the life of the believer between the principle of sin (the flesh) and the Spirit:

“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” Gal 5:16-18

What is so stunning about this passage is that Paul readily admits there are times when the sinful nature rises up and knocks us down. We find ourselves doing sinful things we did not even want to do. This is the reality for every believer, in every culture and in every time period. Sin is something that we must contend with inside of us. John tells us in his first epistle, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). James tells us that the power of temptation is from our “own evil desire” (James 1:14) and that the destructive fighting we engage in comes from “desires that battle within you” (James 4:1).

The good news of the Gospel for believers is this: “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). In the Galatians passage, Paul seems to sweep away the concern about sin in the heart of the believer even more quickly than he brings it up: “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law” (Gal 5:19). If we were not under a relationship with God based on grace, but in a relationship based on Law- meaning our ability to keep the Law by our own efforts- then our sins would only leave us in a state of condemnation. Thankfully, we are not under Law, but under grace, being led by the Spirit, and therefore free to simply confess our sin, receive more grace and pursue righteousness through faith as a gift. Paul states it this way in Romans 6:12-14,

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

When we call the people of God to seek first the kingdom and to pursue God's justice in this world, we should be calling them to focus their faith on Christ to receive this righteousness as a gift, and giving them the freedom to acknowledge that they will struggle with sin, and even falter and fall, but that the ultimate victory is in God's grace abounding so that righteousness will triumph in us. Some are afraid to preach this kind of Gospel. They believe this will produce a loose view towards sin, and that the best way to produce righteousness and keep people from sinning is to lay a healthy sense of obligation on their shoulders and to simply warn them against sin, without acknowledging the reality of the struggle. Paul tells us clearly that it is impossible to produce righteousness by any other means but grace alone. “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Gal 2:21). In fact, it is just the opposite. More self-righteous efforts only produce more sin. More grace, more free forgiveness, more honesty in dealing with sin, produces more righteousness.

“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.” Rom 3:31
“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” Rom 8:3, 4

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Paul tells us that if we shift from a relationship of grace and righteousness as a gift through Christ to a relationship based on our self-generated efforts at keeping the law, the work of Jesus will actually be of no practical value to us.

“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴ You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

God’s ultimate purpose is to produce the righteousness of Christ in us- the righteousness of the kingdom. The way God will defeat our sin and bring that righteousness to expression is through a constant application of the blood of Christ over us, and the free, gracious blessing of the Spirit. Which brings us to the second, vital implication of the Gospel of grace- the promise of the Spirit as a gift.

I once preached at a conference in Uganda in 1994 to a group of several hundred single adults. African conferences are often several day affairs, with lots of worship and multiple speakers. The preacher who spoke just before me titled his sermon, “A Conspiracy to Bring Down the Holy Spirit.” His basic message was a call for the believers to be so holy, so righteous, so obedient, so zealous for God, so consciously turning away from sin to holiness, that God would be compelled to send his Spirit on the church and change Uganda forever.

The opening text for my message came from Galatians 3.

“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴ Have you suffered so much for nothing-- if it really was for nothing? ⁵ Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” Gal 3:1-5

Every group of believers, regardless of denominational background or theological history, acknowledges that Christians need the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to live out the kingdom of God. The very heart of the promise of the ministry of Christ is that he would “take away our sins” (John 1:29) and that he would anoint us with the Spirit (John 1:33). If the death and resurrection is the central, climactic focus of the work of Christ on our behalf, the promise and out pouring of the Spirit on his redeemed people is the central, defining goal of his salvation for us (ACTS 1, 2). The question is, why will, or why should God give us his Spirit? How can we be certain he will give us his Spirit?

Paul’s answer brings the clarity of understanding that God intends for us to embrace: the Father will give us the Spirit freely as a gift, not because of our personal record of holiness or because of our zeal to work justice on this earth, but because of our faith in Christ and as our only hope for righteousness. We receive the Spirit as a gift, every bit as much as we receive our basic salvation as a gift. Jesus said it this way:

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Luke 11:11-13

Was Jesus intending to tell us that when he said the Spirit would be given as “gift,” his real intention

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was to lead us to ask for the Spirit based on his finished work on the Cross? The answer is yes, even though the clarity of explanation does not come until Paul's Spirit-inspired Word in Galatians 3.

An Old Testament example of this truth is found in Psalm 51 and the repentance prayer of David, traditionally and universally recognized as his prayer of repentance after committing adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah (2 Sam 12:9). David's prayer is not based on a repentance that offers penance or even a promise to do better next time. Instead his repentance is simply a "no-excuse" acknowledgement that he is fully responsible for and utterly evil in what he did (Ps 51:3-6). He then asks for a free, complete forgiveness and cleansing that would make his red-blood sins, whiter than snow (Ps 51:7). What is stunning and amazing is that David does not slither away in self-loathing, but then goes right on to ask for the presence of the Holy Spirit to be with him in his life and ministry, and even to bless him and the people of Israel whom he represents.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. ¹⁴ Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. ¹⁸ In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem." Psalm 51:11-17.

As God's revelation/explanation of how his salvation is at work in the world unfolds in all its richness in the ministry of Christ and is explained through the writings of the Apostles, we now understand clearly how David could both be forgiven (Rom 3:23ff.) and ask for the blessing of the Spirit as an undeserved gift (Gal 3:1-5).

The implications for us as we preach and teach the righteousness of the kingdom and the need for the power of the Holy Spirit to work out that righteousness in our lives and communities, is glorious. We can (Luke 11:11ff.) and must pray for the boldness of the Spirit (Acts 4:29-31) to do the good works the Lord has prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:10), and our confidence that God will grant us the Spirit's power is rooted in the work of Christ on the Cross alone (Gal 3:1-5).

Essentially, the only thing that can block our growth as churches and our participation in the righteousness of the kingdom advancing in this world is if we refuse to continually repent by confessing our sins and freely receive the blessing of the Spirit. The lack of money, the presence of worldly opposition, even the very gates of hell cannot prevail against us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God and the fulfillment of his kingdom righteousness. If we become useless servants, it will be because we have not dealt honestly with sin, God's grace, his righteousness and the promise of Spirit for us as a gift. But if we embrace these things, Paul's prayer for the Colossian church will be fulfilled in us:

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Col 1:9-14

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