

# THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM



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

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# The Biblical Call for Justice

## The Biblical Call for Justice The Fulfillment of the Kingdom of God

The word “justice” can evoke all kinds of meanings for the evangelical church today. In some sense, we have lost a Biblical understanding of the term and have replaced it with a variety of cultural understandings. For many the word is often negatively associated with social or religious liberals and is tied to the idea of “social justice” in a way that undermines a genuine focus on the gospel. If the term “justice” is used in a positive way among evangelicals, the dominant sense of the word has simply come to mean “divine retribution” or “punishment for sins.” A common statement from the lips of many well-intentioned Christians sounds something like this: “We really want mercy and grace from God- not justice. If we received justice we would be greatly disappointed.” The popular television series “Law and Order” and justice as the punishment of criminals, or Dostoyevsky’s classic “Crime and Punishment” are the categories that come to mind for many with the term “justice.” Consequently, whenever the word “justice” occurs in a biblical text, it is assumed it must have some reference to divine judgment of evil. The perception is fed by a logic something like this: God’s “justice” requires the punishment of sin; God would not be truly “holy” or “just” if he failed to deal with the guilt of sin; the gift of God was to send his Son to take the punishment for sin upon himself, in our place; the good news is, “Christ became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The underlying conclusion: whenever the word “justice” appears in the Bible, it must be addressing these ultimate issues of God’s commitment to punish sin and the wonderful answer for us is the message of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

It needs to be plainly stated that the theology surrounding and tied to this second use of the term “justice” is absolutely true and nothing about the Christian life or the work of the kingdom can ever be separated from the Person of Christ and his atonement. However, the fundamental problem is that all this great theology is not actually tied to the term “justice” in most of Scripture. When God urges us as his people to “seek justice” (Isaiah 1:17), he is not telling us to go into the world and make sure people know they are going to be punished for evil (although confronting people with the reality of sin and the need for repentance is central to Gospel proclamation). When Amos calls us to “let justice roll down as waters” (Amos 5:24), he is not calling for punishment to flow. While there are many biblical passages that declare God will punish sin, the most common Hebrew term to express this action of God’s judgment against the rebellious is not the Hebrew word for “justice”, which is “mishpat,” but the word “paqad,” which we translate “punish”. The word for “justice” in most instances is not predominately linked to or used in connection with this action of punishing sinners.

What is the predominate, Scriptural use of the term “justice”? The verb form of “justice” / “mishpat” is the Hebrew word “shafat”, and means “to judge” or “to rule.” To reaffirm, God’s role as Judge clearly does include the idea of punishing or pronouncing sentence against someone. But it also has the positive meaning of ruling or judging “on behalf of someone”, in a positive sense of “governing for, or establishing righteousness” for them. It is this second meaning of “justice-mishpat” that is the focus of most Old Testament passages describing the “justice of God”, i.e. describing God’s commitment to establish righteousness on behalf of his people; his promise to take up their cause for good. It is also this more proactive, positive use of justice that the Old Testament highlights as the character of God’s people who are called to be a people of “justice” in the world; a people who work for the establishment of what is good and right for those in need. It is also carried over into the New Testament in Romans 3 (and elsewhere) when Paul describes God’s action of “justifying” sinners (Rom 3:23-26). God not only forgives sins through the substitutionary work of Christ, he also “establishes righteousness in his people” as a gift; that is, he “justifies” us.

A brief look at the relevant Scriptures reveal this positive use of the word “justice”/ “mishpat” has been translated as “justice” and “just” some one hundred fifty-one (151) times in the New International Version of the Old Testament (not including the negative forms of “injustice” or “unjust”). There are scattered uses of the term “justice” / “mishpat” in special circumstances - four (4) times in reference to God’s discipline of his children (Jeremiah 10:24, 30:11, 46:28), one (1) time in 2 Chronicles 12:6, thirteen (13) times in the book of Job, twenty-four (24) times used as a legal term, either concerning court procedures or bribery (Ex 23:2, Lev

# The Biblical Call for Justice

19:15)- but the vast majority of the time, in one hundred eight (108) references, the Scriptures describe God's "justice" as "governing for righteousness" and not "judgment against evil."

As a matter of record, in seventy-seven (77) of those one hundred eight (108) occurrences in the Old Testament, the term "mishpat" / "justice" is directly linked to "zedek" / "righteousness". It is so closely linked that some Old Testament scholars have understood the two terms as a Hebrew parallelism, in particular a synthetic or constructive parallelism. The words do not express identical thoughts, but they have a progressive correspondence. Righteousness describes the moral goodness of God's character that he intends for men to reflect as created in his image. Justice reflects the implementation of that righteousness / goodness on behalf of someone who needs help in receiving this righteousness in their life.

The first occurrence of this parallelism is in I Kings 10:9, when the Queen of Sheba acknowledges the greatness of Solomon's reign and declares, "Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice (mishpat) and righteousness (zedek)." Earlier, Solomon had asked God for the gift of wisdom and the Lord responded by blessing him because in asking for wisdom, he was really asking for "discernment in administering justice (mishpat)" (1 Kings 3:11). The illustration the author of Kings chooses to demonstrate Solomon's wisdom is his exercise of justice on behalf of a prostitute; not as punishment, but as bringing what is good and right into her life by restoring her baby to her (1 Kings 3:16ff).

This parallelism of "justice and righteousness" is used repeatedly throughout the Psalms to describe the rule of God, who is *The King*, from whom Solomon derived his position. Notice how closely the words justice and righteousness are linked:

Ps 9:8 "He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice."

Ps 33:5 "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love." Cf Psalm 11:7; 36:6; 37:6; 45:6-7; 72:1; 72:2; 89:14; 97:2; 99:4; 103:6; 106:3; 112:5-6.

Even a passage that might, at first glance, appear to be a call for God's justice as vengeance against the wicked is, in context, a cry for God to counteract that evil by taking up the cause of righteousness for his people.

"Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. Let the assembled peoples gather around you. Rule over them from on high; let the LORD judge the peoples. Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High." Psalm 7:6-8

The focus of God's "mishpat" / "justice" is towards his people, not directed at the enemy. While David cries out for God to be aroused in anger against his enemies, the focus of God's decree of "justice" is on behalf of his own people, "Rule over [your assembled peoples] from on high.... Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness...." David's plea is not about self-righteousness before God, but a call for God to work both on his behalf and on behalf of the people of God, because David is committed to the same issues of justice and righteousness as God is.

The word "justice" used in these contexts carries with it the idea of "the active implementation of righteousness." To "maintain justice" is to "constantly do what is right" (Psalm 106:3). The pursuit of justice is a commitment to ensure people are being treated with God's goodness, as they ought to be; of making sure God's goodness and righteousness are brought into their lives. This provides a significant, practical definition for the church and the people of God in understanding what it means to be a part of and to pursue "the kingdom of God": the church is the gathering of God's people from among all the nations of the earth who will actively pursue doing the good (justice and righteousness) we were originally created for (Gen 1:3, 9, 12, 18, 21, then Gen 1:26,27, Mt 5:16; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:10; 1 Peter 2:12).

# The Biblical Call for Justice

The remaining references to “mishpat”-justice throughout the Old Testament more specifically tie God’s justice to an active care for the powerless and disenfranchised- the poor, the widow, the fatherless and the immigrant. Righteousness and justice concerns for the poor and needy are in fact, at the center of God’s character. This is part of the glory of the God we serve. He is not a God who is uncaring or marginally interested in the plight of the oppressed. Unlike the false “gods” of the nations who justify oppression (Psalm 82:1-4), it is the very character and nature of the one, true God that in his goodness, love and justice he pays special attention to all the oppressed of the earth (Psalm 72:11-14, 103:6, cf John 10:34-38). The clear link between the terms mishpat /justice and “zedek” / righteousness and the oppressed is emphasized in the following Psalms:

“He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.” Psalm 9:8, 9

“Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.” Psalm 72:1, 2

“The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.” Psalm 103:6

“I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. Surely the righteous will praise your name and the upright will live before you.” Psalm 140:12, 13

The Prophets call the people of God away from idolatry and back to the true worship of God and make a moral connection between idolatry and this issue of justice for the poor and oppressed. Idolatry and oppression are two sins that are like flip sides of the same coin. Through idolatry they changed the very nature of the God they wanted to worship, and then in practice moved from justice and righteousness to oppression. As the Prophets urged the people of God to practice the justice he created them for, they described Israel’s failure to take responsibility for the poor as part of the core reason they were being exiled.

“...wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice; encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. ‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’” Isaiah 1:16-18

“See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her-- but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.” Isaiah 1:21-24

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.” Isaiah 58:-8; cf Jer 21:12; 22:13-16; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 2:6, 7; 5:7-12; Zechariah 7:9,10; Malachi 3:5

The promise of the Messiah and the glory of God’s kingdom rule and reign through him in Isaiah 9 and 11 is centered on these issues of justice / righteousness, and is tied specifically to the poor and needy (a summary phrase for the widow, orphan, immigrant and poor).

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will

# The Biblical Call for Justice

be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this." Isaiah 9:6,7

"The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked." Isaiah 11:2-4

These words become so closely linked in the Old Testament that the prophet Micah can give the people of God a summary of the kind of obedience God is looking for among his people and not even mention the word "zedek" / "righteousness", but simply say, "He has showed you what is good.... To act justly (mishpat) and to love mercy...." (Micah 6:8). When Amos makes his well-known cry, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:24), it is set in the earlier context of his prophetic complaint for their failure to do these things: "You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts." Amos 5:12

It is this same embracive use of the term "justice" / "mishpat" to represent the broader scope of justice / righteousness that is used by Isaiah in chapter 42 to define the nature of Christ's ministry as "the servant" of the Lord.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope." Isaiah 42:1-4

When Jesus started his official ministry, it is no accident his inaugural address in the Nazareth synagogue began with a quote of Isaiah 58 and 61,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19

As Jesus fulfilled his ministry, he went about preaching forgiveness and "doing justice" - bringing the goodness of God's love into people's lives by working justice / righteousness on their behalf: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, eating lunch with a tax collector and drinking water with an outcast Samaritan woman, and in each event, telling the good news of the free forgiveness of sins.

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us he previously wrote in his Gospel what Jesus "*began* to do and to teach," (Acts 1:1). The story of the church is a continuation of that ministry of Christ as "his body" in the world, continuing to bring the good news of the kingdom of God both by preaching repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name (Acts 2:14ff) and by doing Spirit-led deeds of justice / righteousness:

"Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off-- for all whom the Lord our God will call.... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." Acts 2:38-39, 44-45

# The Biblical Call for Justice

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Acts 4:31-35

A biblical understanding of these terms “justice” / “mishpat” and “righteousness” / “zedek” is at the heart of knowing what it means to “seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness.” Pursuing kingdom righteousness means making the priority of our lives the pursuit of God’s righteousness and justice in every area of life, with a particular emphasis on giving ourselves for the care of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. A preaching of the Gospel that leaves out this commitment to deeds of justice and righteousness has always had a detrimental effect on the overall health of the church and misses the richness of God’s love in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. The great command and promise of our Savior and King for going out to the nations is to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**, and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

It might be argued by some that these ought to be seen as acts of mercy and compassion, not justice, because none of these people were deserving of these acts of kindness. Of course any act of goodness that comes from God to us is a gracious gift because it is always contrary to what we deserve. In a world which is filled with the injustice sin creates, and where everyone is both a victim and a perpetrator of injustice, part of the great news of God’s kingdom is that he has come to graciously bring into people’s lives the kind of righteousness / justice they should have been experiencing and extending all along.

This understanding of justice does have implications for the evangelical church as we talk about “mercy ministries” or “acts of mercy”. The term we translate “mercy” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word “hesed” and carries the idea of covenantal “goodness and kindness.” Mercy in this context (as in Micah 6:8- to love mercy) is not primarily the idea of giving someone what they don’t deserve. That is grace, and grace truly marks the nature of God and his people in everything we do. But mercy – “hesed” – has the sense of following through on a covenantal commitment to fulfill God’s goodness and kindness to one another, especially in times of severe need. The Lord “requires of us” to act justly and love mercy (Amos 6:8).

Culturally defined, the idea of mercy too often has a paternalistic sense of one person giving another person help, even though the recipient doesn’t deserve it; a sense of “option” for the one giving mercy, and a sense of ingratiating for the one receiving it. Pagan religions call their people to such acts of “charity”. In Hinduism if someone is suffering or poor, it is because of failure in their past lives. In Islam, poverty, ill health, or desperate circumstances are because of someone’s failure in their present life. Even Christianity can have this misperception- compare John 9 and the disciples’ questions about the man born blind; “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” The assumption too often is that poverty and difficult circumstances stem from sin. Jesus’ answer is startling to our basic misconceptions; “Neither sinned. But this happened that God might be glorified”, i.e. that God would Sovereignly use the devastation of the fall to show his kindness in this man’s life. In Hinduism and Islam, the “righteous” do acts of charity for the poor and needy, but the real focus and end result is to build or add to a record of righteousness for the person doing the charity. For the true God of the Covenant and his people, there is a much different perspective. The poor and marginalized are, according to God, mostly in their condition because they are oppressed, and as such are in need of someone to work justice-righteousness on their behalf. While the book of Proverbs does address the issue of the poor who are lazy and unwise, it only talks about the poor negatively four (4) times out of the forty (40) times it mentions them (Prov 10:4; 20:13; 21:17; 23:21). The other thirty-six times Proverbs speaks of the poor in the same way the rest of Scripture does- as the oppressed of the earth who need justice (mishpat) exercised on their behalf (Prov 13:23; 19:17; 22:9; cf Isa 3:14, 15; 10:2). The acts of kindness and charity are to flow out of a people who have graciously received righteousness themselves as a gift, and their charity is free to be

# The Biblical Call for Justice

defined by the need of the person they are helping. That is why the “good Samaritan” in Luke 10 does more than simply give the beaten victim a bandage for his wounds. In addition, he follows through and makes sure all his basic needs are provided for.

When we come to the New Testament, although the language changes from Hebrew to Greek, the moral nature and purposes of God for his people do not change. The use of the phrase “justice and righteousness” is wrapped up in one term in the Greek New Testament – “dikaiousune” which is simply translated “righteousness”, but could just as faithfully be translated with the word “justice.” Spanish and French translations of the New Testament Scriptures generally use the word justice, “justicia” (Sp) and “justice” (Fr), instead of righteousness.

When Jesus was baptized by an astonished John the Baptist, he told John, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). Jesus submitted to this, even though he was already God, as the second Adam, because he knew it would require the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out the “mishpat” / “justice” (Old Testament summary word) – “dikaiousune” / “righteousness” (New Testament summary word) God had promised in Isaiah 9, 11 and 42.

As Jesus announces the righteousness of the kingdom of God in the Sermon the Mount, he ties it into the justice / righteousness the Law required all along:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matt 5:17-19

He then goes on to exhort us, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:20. There has been a long standing misunderstanding in much of the evangelical church that has presumed the Pharisees actually maintained outward obedience to the Law, but failed in the attitudes of their hearts. This misunderstanding has suggested that the righteousness Christ speaks of goes deeply into heart attitudes, while the righteousness of the Pharisees consisted merely of external conformity to the Law. A proof text example for this would be Matthew 5:27-28, where Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The conclusion includes reasoning something like this: “Keeping the Law is not enough. Anyone can care for the poor and oppressed. Many people don’t commit adultery. Even lots of ‘benevolent’ non-Christians do that. What God is interested in is the heart motivation and attitudes behind all that behavior. Let’s not talk about obedience to the Law; let’s talk about heart attitudes and heart issues- the real, spiritual issues of sin.” An example of this standard theology is reflected in one recent author’s response to a proposed question about the revolution of God’s kingdom:

“If ‘lawlessness’ is anti-revolutionary, then does the revolution of God’s kingdom involve ‘keeping the law’, despite Paul’s apparently contrary teaching about Christ as the end of the Law? The answer is yes and no: the righteousness of the revolution of God is not the righteousness of the Old Testament law, but the higher righteousness of Jesus, who fulfilled and surpassed the old legal standards and whose Spirit inspires his followers.”

The same author hints at a common understanding of the Pharisees as “external law keepers” when he later describes the Pharisees in his commentary about Jesus’ story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:

“They prided themselves on their scrupulous adherence to the law of God, and indeed they went

# The Biblical Call for Justice

beyond the letter of the Old Testament law in their personal lives. Although the Pharisees often get a bad press in the New Testament, this should not obscure the fact that they were an outstandingly religious group.” (Wenham, p.117, 118)

However, a closer look at the righteousness of the Pharisees reveals something more sinister. It is true the Pharisees did “externalize” the law, and did not deal with issues of the heart. But to conclude that they kept the Law outwardly is a huge misconception. The full extent and pernicious character of their sin was to reduce and pervert the obedience the Law actually called for, so that while they claimed to be pursuing righteousness as spiritual leaders of God’s people, they were actually perverting and falling far short of the justice-righteousness the Law required. They are guilty of both failures – the sinful thoughts of the heart, and the failure to observably, externally obey the commands. These sins go together. Some of Jesus’ more pointed rebukes of the Pharisees bring this to light:

“[Jesus] replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’ And he said to them: ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”  
Mark 7:6-13

“As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.” Mark 12:38-40

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” Matt 23:23-24

When Jesus says our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, he is not saying our righteousness is “of the heart”, while the righteousness of the Pharisees was “an external obedience to the Law.” He is saying our obedience must reflect the whole reality of the Law- both a heart attitude and an actual outward obedience to the justice / righteousness the Law requires. We must do more than tithe our “spices”, we must live out justice!

The climactic explanation of the good news of God’s grace for us in Christ is that we receive the power for this righteousness as a gift from Christ, including the gift of the Spirit to empower and lead us. Christ died for us, that we might become “the righteousness (justice-mishpat; righteousness-zedek) of God in him (2 Cor 5:21). As Paul goes on to tell us in Romans 8, now, through the law of the Spirit of life at work in us, we are free to fully meet the righteous requirements of the Law. We can be confident as we pursue this righteousness that God will direct our steps both because he has prepared “good works” for us to do in advance (Eph 2:10) and because he has gifted the church with a variety of pastors, teachers, apostles and prophets to equip us for “works of service” (Eph 4:12).

What kind of conclusions can we draw from this understanding of justice? Here are at least two practical applications for the church.

First, our call to do “justice” in this world; that is, to seek to bring God’s righteousness and goodness to



# The Biblical Call for Justice

practical expression in all people's lives, both to the world in general and in the church (Mt 5:14-16,38-48; Luke 6:27-36; Acts 2,4; Gal 6:10; 1 Peter 2:12; 1 John 3:16-20), is not an option for Christians or for the church. It is a fundamental, covenantal obligation, responsibility and great joy (1 John 5:1-5). Even "mercy" (*hesed*) is not an "option" for Christians to ponder over. It is a covenantal commitment God has called us to (Micah 6:8) and is part of the glorious expression that Peter describes as our "participation in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:3-9).

Second, this understanding of righteousness and justice gives practical expression to the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is his place of rule for the purposes of bringing his justice to expression (Isa 42:1-5), carried out by the presence of Christ (Col 1:13), through the Spirit, working in the hearts of his people (Luke 17:21). Too much of the church does not know or act like they exist for the purpose of proclaiming the "good news of the kingdom" - that through the death and resurrection of Christ we have been forgiven and brought into a relationship with God where our entire lives are now redirected from self-centered living to pursuing the establishment of God's kingdom - his goodness, love, righteousness and justice- in the lives of others: our spouses and children (Eph 5), our workplace (Eph 6), our respective nations and communities (1 Pet 2:12-18), the church (Acts 4:32-35), and especially in the lives of the marginalized- the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant (James 1:27).

When Jesus announces, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20), he is not saying only poor people can be saved. He is saying the very nature and purpose of God's kingdom rule is focused on those most in need, those most oppressed and those most marginalized. The kingdom has come with them in view. The amazing nature of God's love is that he can save anyone, including the wealthy or powerful oppressor (cf Zacchaeus, Luke 19 and Saul of Tarsus, Acts 9). When we come into relationship with God, his purpose now is for us to seek first the righteousness (*mishpat-justice /zedek-righteousness*) of his kingdom, with the glorious promise that all our needs will be taken care of (Mt 6:33). So Zacchaeus gives away half his wealth to the poor and Paul is willing to have his whole life poured out as a sacrificial offering to bring God's love to the Gentiles he once feared and despised.

When we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Mt 6:10) we are asking God to establish his justice on earth, through us as his people. Simply from a perspective of biblical integrity and the overall unity of Scripture, it is inconceivable that when Paul promises us that God has "prepared good works" for us to do in advance, they would not include justice on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. This is what Jesus was anointed by the Spirit for (Luke 4:18), and it is the same expression of the Spirit that is manifest in the church in the book of Acts (Acts 2, 4). The atonement and the centrality of the work of Christ on the cross and the resulting gift of the Spirit enable and empower us to "yield our bodies as instruments of righteousness (*mishpat-justice, zedek-righteousness*)" Romans 6:11-14.

When Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:14ff that he has given each of gifts and "talents" (resources) to be invested wisely, and that he will hold us accountable for the use of those resources, he also leaves no doubt what he intends us to use those resources for in the immediately following narrative of Matthew 25:31ff,

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'" Mt 25:34-36

Finally, what is so amazing about God's call for biblical, covenantal justice, is that God intends to work these things in us through a relationship of grace, purchased for us by Christ on the Cross (Romans 5:1, 2). There will be by a constant application of the blood of Christ over our sins and failures (1 John 1:8,9), and there will be an empowering of the Holy Spirit to work in us the very righteous requirements the Law calls for (Romans 8:1-4).

# The Biblical Call for Justice

He has shown us, O Church, what is good, and what the Lord requires of us: to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. And he has gloriously equipped us “with everything good for doing his will” (Hebrews 13:21).

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, “Justice”

“The Old Testament and the Poor” Harvey Conn, Westminster Media

“Parables of Jesus” David Wenham IVP p. 61

# The Biblical Call for Justice

# NOTES

# NOTES

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

## 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 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, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 Christ<sup>9</sup> 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,<sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.<sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> 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

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

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? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about-- but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” <sup>4</sup> Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> 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 is 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 justification. <sup>17</sup> 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



# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

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 outcast 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. <sup>19</sup> “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. <sup>3</sup> He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. <sup>4</sup> When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” <sup>9</sup> For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, <sup>10</sup> 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.” <sup>11</sup> So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.” Luke 5:1-11

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

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,<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> 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

"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,<sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions-- it is by grace you have been saved.<sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God --<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

age,<sup>13</sup> while we wait for the blessed hope-- the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,<sup>14</sup> 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 to 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 with Christ. But Luke tells us that Jesus also said, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat."<sup>32</sup> 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.

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 Gift of Righteousness through Christ

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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> 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

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. <sup>3</sup> Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. <sup>4</sup> You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup> But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. <sup>6</sup> 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.

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

“You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup> 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? <sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? <sup>4</sup> Have you suffered so much for nothing -- if it really was for nothing? <sup>5</sup> 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? <sup>12</sup> Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? <sup>13</sup> 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 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.

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

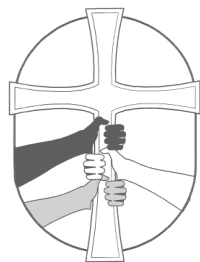
# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ

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. <sup>10</sup> 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, <sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. <sup>13</sup> For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Col 1:9-14

# The Gift of Righteousness through Christ



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