

Righteousness by Faith

by Timothy R. Jennings, M.D.

In the aftermath of a recent Bible study class on justification by faith, also known as imputed righteousness, or righteousness by faith some had questions which deserve further exploration. The question which was raised by several is “how do I know when I am saved” or “how do I know when I am justified”? The concern seemed to center on the realization that all imperfections have not been overcome, then how can I have security?

The answer offered by the traditional penal substitution model is: “the legal application of Christ’s merits to our accounts in heaven so that when the Father looks at us He sees only the perfection of Christ.” This idea has multiple permutations such as, “I am covered by the blood so the Father only sees the perfect sacrifice of His Son not my sinfulness” or “The robe of Christ’s righteousness covers my sinfulness so when the Father looks at me He doesn’t see me He sees Jesus in my place” or “when we accept Jesus as our Savior we are legally accounted to be righteous as Christ’s righteousness is applied to our account.”

This type of thinking is promoted as a way for sinners to feel “secure” in their salvation while knowing they are still not “perfected.” A few attendees to class were uncomfortable with the idea of imputed righteousness being related to actual change of heart of the believer and instead wanted to make such a concept restricted to something called “imparted” righteousness. Here are a few of the statements we read in class which caused discomfort:

Abundant grace has been provided that the believing soul **may be kept free from sin**; for all heaven, with its limitless resources, has been placed at our command. We are to draw from the well of salvation. . . . In ourselves we are sinners; but in Christ we are righteous. **Having made us righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ, God pronounces us just, and treats us as just.** He looks upon us as His dear children. Christ works against the power of sin, and where sin abounded, grace much more abounds. {God’s Amazing Grace 181.4}

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). Beholding Christ means studying His life as given in His Word. We are to dig for truth as for hidden treasure. We are to fix our eyes upon Christ. When we take Him as our personal Saviour, this gives us boldness to approach the throne of grace. **By beholding we become changed, morally assimilated to the One who is perfect in character. By receiving His imputed righteousness, through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we become like Him.** The image of Christ is

cherished, and it captivates the whole being. {God’s Amazing Grace 96.4}

We aim too low. The mark is much higher. Our minds need expansion, that we may comprehend the significance of the provision of God. **We are to reflect the highest attributes of the character of God. . . . The law of God is the exalted standard to which we are to attain through the imputed righteousness of Christ.** {OHC 364.2}

He would have us comprehend something of His love in giving His Son to die that He might **counteract evil, remove the defiling stains of sin from the workmanship of God, and reinstate the lost, elevating and ennobling the soul to its original purity through Christ’s imputed righteousness.** TMK 206

Now maybe it is just me, but these statements of being “made” righteous, about us “becoming changed” and “assimilated” into Christ’s perfect character, about what we are to “attain” and “elevating and ennobling the soul to its original purity” all “through Christ’s imputed righteousness,” sound to me like something more than a legal pronouncement. It sounds like something actually transpiring in the sinner. It doesn’t sound like some heavenly accounting mechanism or divine declaration. Do you hear it the same way? In fact the Strong’s lexicon gives interpretation and definition to the Greek word translated as imputed righteousness in Romans 4:22-24:

λογίζομαι [logizomai /log•id•zom•ahee/] v. This word deals with reality. If I “logizomai” or reckon that my bank book has \$25 in it, it has \$25 in it. Otherwise I am deceiving myself. This word refers to facts not suppositions.

If this righteousness, which is imputed, is a reality, can one have imputed righteousness without a change in the believer? What do you think? Does God “count” someone righteous without making them righteous?

The Bible metaphor for sin is leprosy – when did the High Priest declare, or account, or reckon someone clean, before or after they were made clean? Christ cleansed the lepers and then told them to go to the priest to be “declared” clean. When was Abraham “accounted” righteous, before or after he trusted God? Is trust in God a change in the heart attitude of the believer toward God? How might this change be related to righteousness?

Those who prefer to see this as a legal process, a process in which Christ’s righteousness covers us prefer statements like this:

It is the righteousness of Christ that makes the penitent sinner acceptable to God and works his justification. However sinful has been his life, if he believes in Jesus as his personal Saviour, he **stands before God in the spotless robes of Christ's imputed righteousness.** {FW 106.1}

But they fail to allow the same author to define what "it means" to be clothed in the robe of Christ's righteousness:

This robe, woven in the loom of heaven, has in it not one thread of human devising. **Christ in His humanity wrought out a perfect character, and this character He offers to impart to us.** "All our righteousness are as filthy rags." Isa. 64:6. Everything that we of ourselves can do is defiled by sin. But the Son of God "was manifested to take away our sins; and in Him is no sin." Sin is defined to be "the transgression of the law." 1 John 3:5, 4. But Christ was obedient to every requirement of the law. He said of Himself, "I delight to do Thy will, O My God; yea, Thy law is within My heart." Ps. 40:8. When on earth, He said to His disciples, "I have kept My Father's commandments." John 15:10. By His perfect obedience He has made it possible for every human being to obey God's commandments. **When we submit ourselves to Christ, the heart is united with His heart, the will is merged in His will, the mind becomes one with His mind, the thoughts are brought into captivity to Him; we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with the garment of His righteousness.** Then as the Lord looks upon us He sees, not the fig-leaf garment, not the nakedness and deformity of sin, but His own robe of righteousness, which is perfect obedience to the law of Jehovah. {COL 311.4}

Why does the Father see Christ when we are covered by His robe of righteousness? Is it because "it is no longer I that live but Christ lives in me?" Is it because we have been changed, by the indwelling Spirit to be like Christ in heart?

But this is what frightened a few in class as they examined themselves and realize they are still imperfect. "How can I, a sinner, be right, when I am still imperfect?" What is it that makes us right with God, something we do, or, by receiving a new heart and right spirit as a gift achieved by Christ and delivered to the believer by the indwelling Spirit?

Where the confusion comes from is when a person has experienced a new heart, right spirit, been won back to trust in God, surrendered self fully into Christ's hands, yet still has old habits, conditioned responses, reflexive reactions which are part of the old selfish way of living. Sometimes people get confused and doubt the blessing of Christ righteousness infused into their hearts.

Why then do some get confused or insecure? Could it be failure to recognize the difference between heart surrender and the

rewiring of the brain? The person who surrenders self in trust, and is therefore now renewed in heart and right again with God (righteous), does not instantly receive new brain wiring. There are still old habit patterns, neural circuits, conditioned responses, all of which need removing.

Therefore, a righteous man may still make mistakes, as Abraham did after he was recognized as righteous. But here is the critical point: When a righteous man has an old habit, a conditioned response, a weak moment and deviates behaviorally from God's law, that righteous man is grieved in his heart, he is disgusted with himself, he is repulsed with his weakness and the remnants of sinfulness still at work in his life and longs to be delivered. He prays as Paul did, "**what a wretched man am I who will deliver me from this body of death**" (Romans 7:24). This righteous man runs to God humbly seeking grace and deliverance and healing.

The unrighteous man, the man who has not surrendered self to Christ, the man (or woman) who has not been won to trust in God, does not have a renewed heart and when he behaviorally sins is not grieved for his sin, is not disgusted with self and instead blames others, makes excuses, avoids repentance, and seeks in multiple ways to justify his behavior.

Therefore, we have assurance of salvation when we surrender to Christ and experience a new heart and right spirit that longs to live like Christ and is grieved whenever we fall short, pressing forward in grace until the day of complete transformation!

One final caveat, the human species (race) was set right with God (justified) in the person of Jesus Christ. His perfect life and victory destroyed the devil, the devil's work, death and all the lies told about God (Heb 2:14, 1John 3:8, 2Tim 1:10, Col 1:18-20), restoring humankind, in His person, back to God's original design. Thus, "**once he was made perfect he became the source of salvation for all who obey him**" (Heb 5:8). Therefore, the human species justification was achieved by Christ and only by Christ. Individuals are set right when each individual is restored to trust in God, through the work of Jesus Christ and in that trust experience the indwelling Spirit who then reproduces Christlikeness in the believer:

The Lord Jesus loves His people, and when they put their trust in Him, depending wholly upon Him, He strengthens them. **He will live through them, giving them the inspiration of His sanctifying Spirit, imparting to the soul a vital transfusion of Himself. He acts through their faculties** and causes them to choose His will and to act out His character. With the apostle Paul they then may say, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but **Christ liveth in me:** and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). . . . {TMK 78.4}