

Imputed and Imparted Righteousness—Design versus Imposed Law

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | April 4, 2024



The way we understand the Bible and its themes, such as imputed and imparted righteousness, is determined by the law lens through which we view them. If we believe that God’s law functions no differently than human law—imposed rules requiring imposed punishments—then we interpret Scripture legally and penally, which is a fantasy because God’s universe is not built upon imposed law and, therefore, it is not how reality actually functions. (If you are wondering, if God’s kingdom is not built on imposed law then why did God use so much law in Old Testament times? see our blog [The Death Penalty In Old Testament Times](#)).

But if we worship God as Creator and understand that His laws are the [design laws](#) upon which all reality exists and operates—both the physical laws (gravity, physics, etc.) and the moral laws—then we interpret Scripture objectively and truthfully, in the way that reality actually functions.

When we understand that God’s laws are [design laws](#), we know that breaking them is directly damaging to the one who breaks them and results in suffering and death *unless* the Creator of reality fixes the problem, restoring the one damaged (the sinner) back into harmony with God and His designs for life. This is why the Bible teaches that the law must be written upon our hearts and minds (Hebrews 8:10) and that those who sow to the carnal nature “from that nature [that is, not externally by God] will reap

destruction” (Galatians 6:8 NIV84). For an exact explanation as to why Christ had to die for our salvation and how we experience it, please see our blogs [Salvation and the Cleansing of our Spirit—Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

But if we substitute man’s law in place of God’s law, denying that His laws are design laws, we believe the lie that God’s law functions no differently than the kinds of laws sinners make up—rules that do not govern reality but which, instead, require a ruling authority to use external power to inflict punishment upon the wrongdoer—then we draw a completely different conclusion about the sin problem and the plan of salvation, including what the terms imputed righteousness and imparted righteousness mean.

All treatment starts with a proper diagnosis. If the diagnosis is wrong, then the treatment is wrong. Imputed and imparted righteousness are words, technical terms, that are intended to communicate some aspect of God’s treatment for the sin problem.

The Legalization of Righteousness

If we believe that sin causes a legal problem (because we believe God’s law functions like human law), then we will ascribe legal meanings to these terms, such things as adjusting our legal standing in legal books in heaven—or giving us some kind of legal credit that somehow improves our righteousness credit score from an “unrighteous” legal status to a “righteous” legal status.

The following are typical descriptions given by those who view Scripture through the lens of human law:

- “Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, and when you put your trust in him, he takes his righteousness and **credits it to your account**. You gain access to righteousness not because of anything you have done but because Christ **applied it to your account**. This **imputed** righteousness puts you in right standing before the Father **as if** you had done the right thing all along” (emphasis mine).[\[1\]](#)
- [Imputed righteousness] is “**charging to an account**, used in the Bible with **legal reference** to sin and salvation being recorded by God. ... When Scripture speaks of the imputation of good or evil, **it does not suggest that any change of moral character is involved**. Scripture does affirm that, from God’s perspective, righteousness or sin is **charged to an individual’s account** (emphasis mine).[\[2\]](#)

Notice that in both of these statements, the sin problem is defined in legal terms—seeing it through a human-law lens, made-up rules requiring legal oversight, legal accounting, inflicted punishment as penalties, awarding credits, canceling debts, and changing records.

This entire legal theological construct is false because it is all based on the lie that God’s law functions like human law. It is a fiction, a fantasy, because it is not based in what happens in reality.

What is the reality?

God did not get changed when Adam sinned, nor did His law get changed. Instead, the actual condition of Adam changed. Adam did not get into *legal* trouble with God; he experienced *lethal* trouble. He was changed from a being who lived and operated upon God’s living law of love to a being who was infected with fear and selfishness. Instead of Adam *remaining* in a state of loving unity with his never-changing Creator, living in harmony with His never-changing design laws, he entered a state of being “dead in trespass and sin,” a terminal sin condition that, without remedy from the Creator, would result in death.

The Infection of Death Spreads

And since God gave Adam and Eve the ability to create beings in their image, once they infected themselves with sin, when they reproduced they would give birth only to children infected with their terminal sin condition. Thus, as Scripture teaches, we are born in sin, conceived in iniquity (Psalm 51:5).

We are not born legally guilty (fantasy); we are born terminal (reality)—born dead in trespass and sin.

Consider an HIV-infected man and woman getting together and having a baby who is born HIV-infected—what did the baby do wrong? Nothing! The baby has no guilt for their condition. But the baby still has a condition that without remedy will cause symptoms and death. That is the situation of every human since Adam sinned!

We are born with a terminal sin condition; we are not born legally guilty. Therefore, the solution to the sin problem is not a legal one—it is an actual one. It is the actual removal of the sin condition from our hearts and minds, replacing it with a condition that is *right*, a condition that is *right* with God, a heart that *rightly* harmonizes with God's design laws for life—in other words, with a *righteous* condition. The real solution for us as individual sinners is that we must be reborn, recreated, renewed, cleansed, washed, purified, have our hearts circumcised by the Spirit, have the heart of stone removed and a tender heart instilled, have the mind of Christ, all of which is symbolically taught through various biblical metaphors and object lessons, including the wearing of the robe of Christ's righteousness—we *become* righteous (2 Corinthians 5:21). Reality requires that we be actually made righteous, not that record books be adjusted to *declare* we are righteous while we remain unrighteous.

In the legal model, righteousness does not mean that we are made righteous; it means God legally declares us righteous based on Jesus being righteous, and God adjusts our records in heaven to legally account us as being considered, reckoned, or credited as righteous even though we are unrighteous in reality. It is a big fraud, a con game, a shell game, a farce!

The functional impact of this false theology is to trick good-hearted people into believing things are well and good with God while they remain unrighteous in their heart and slowly dying of their sin condition.

This legal fiction is like telling someone with leukemia, for which there is a real cure that will put the cancer into remission, that what they need is to claim their healthy brother as their legal substitute so when the doctor comes in to examine them, the doctor will instead examine their healthy brother and write into the sick person's medical record the perfect health of their cancer-free brother. Then the doctor will declare that they are cancer-free while they continue to die of the leukemia.

Another way to describe this fraud would be that your child is dying of cancer and your doctor tells you there is nothing he can do, but you hear of a doctor whose every patient leaves his office with a clean bill of health. So you take your child to this doctor, bringing with you the thick medical record documenting all the disease, pathology, symptoms, and sickness. The doctor takes the record, opens it, begins removing all the documentation of the sickness and disease, and then stuffs the record with clean white sheets of paper. He then hands the *cleansed record* back to you and says, "You can go home now; no more record of disease."

Paul warned Timothy about this powerless and fraudulent Christianity:

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—**having a form of godliness but denying its power**. Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:1-5 NIV84, emphasis mine).

It is a sad fact that epidemiological data confirms that there is no difference between Christian homes and non-Christian homes in the rate of drug abuse, alcohol addiction, pornography use, spouse abuse, and child molestation.^[3] These struggling Christians have a form of godliness, a religiosity, but they have no power to live victoriously. Why? Because they believe the penal/legal fraud based on the lie that God's law functions like human law—that imputed righteousness is God accounting someone to be righteous when, in fact, they remain unrighteous.

True Godliness and Power

The truth is that righteousness is being right with God in heart, mind, attitude, spirit, and character. Genuine righteousness is actual; it is not legal fiction. As Paul wrote, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV84, emphasis mine).

The substitutionary sinless life and sacrificial death of Jesus was to fix the actual problem Adam's sin caused in humans so that we might *become* the righteousness of God—not so that we will be declared righteous while remaining unrighteous.

So what then is imputed and imparted righteousness? And what role does each play in us actually becoming righteous people?

Imputed Righteousness

Becoming human, Jesus took up humanity damaged by Adam, lived a sinless life, destroyed the sin infection at the cross (see our blog [How Jesus Our Substitute Cleanses Our Spirit](#)) and, thereby, restored the species human to rightness with God. But Jesus' perfect righteousness doesn't make us righteous as individuals unless we partake of that righteousness. And what obstructs us from partaking of it? Believing the lies about God that keep us from trusting Him. Thus, the imputed righteousness helps us overcome the distrusting spirit of fear so that we open our heart in trust to receive the imparted righteousness that actually transforms us.

As Paul wrote, the carnal mind has enmity toward God (Romans 8:7)—our natural state, the one we inherited from Adam, distrusts God, is hostile toward God, doesn't align with or harmonize with God. We believe the lie that God is punishing, severe, and unforgiving and requires something be done to Him to appease His wrath, assuage His anger, propitiate His fury. Thus, in fear of what He will do to us, we do not open our hearts to God, we do not have a change in fear functioning toward God, but we remain afraid, desperately claiming legal protection provided by Jesus from this punishing God.

Thus, the first step in God fixing the sin problem in any individual is to win that person from fear and distrust to love and trust. This is done by **imputing** righteousness—God treating the sinner with the righteousness of Christ, treating the sinner with mercy, grace, kindness, love, understanding,

compassion, acceptance, seeing them as a soul suffering from sin-sickness that they did not choose and from which He can heal if they let Him. In other words, God does not impute sin to them and treat them as sin deserves (e.g., letting them die of their sin condition), but imputes to them, or treats them, with the love, mercy, grace, and goodness that belong to His Son Jesus, rather than abandoning them as Jesus was abandoned on the cross when He became sin for us.

It is this kind, compassionate, gracious, righteousness imputed to us that wins us to trust. And as Paul wrote, “God’s kindness leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4 NET).

God, imputing to us the righteousness of His Son and treating us with kindness, love, mercy, grace, sees through the corridors of time to what we will be if we trust Him—we will *become* the righteousness of God. And it is this kindness of God that leads us to repentance, and repentance is the conversion experience; it is when the distrusting heart that is at enmity with God chooses to trust God. In other words, conversion, repentance, is when the heart is set right with God, set from distrust to trust.

This is what happened to Abraham—he had faith, trusted God, and it was only *after* his heart had changed from distrust/enmity to trust that God recognized, accounted, or marked that Abraham was righteous, set right, justified. Why? Because Abraham’s heart *was set right* with God again! Abraham’s actual state of heart was changed! Being justified, made right with God, is actual, real, and occurs in the heart and mind of the sinner. There is nothing penal or legal going on, for the problem is not penal or legal; it is an actual state of being that is out of harmony with God and His design for life. The heavenly records are like medical records; the reason Abraham’s heavenly record changed was because Abraham’s heart was set right with God. And what caused Abraham’s heart to be set right? God’s imputed righteousness, which won Abraham to trust.

Imparted Righteousness

Once the imputed righteousness wins a person to trust and their heart is opened to God, then they receive the **imparted** righteousness that fills the heart with the righteousness of Christ. We receive new desires, pure motives, new insights, inspiration, direction, and daily strength to succeed, which all come from the perfect life (spirit) of Jesus being infused into us by the indwelling Holy Spirit. We become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4); it is no longer our old sinful, carnal selves living but Christ living in us (Galatians 2:20). Jesus is the vine and we are the branches that live by daily receiving the infusion of His life (righteous loving spirit) imparted to us via the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 15:4-6).

We see this demonstrated powerfully in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:4-11). When she was dragged before Christ, He did not impute her sin to her (He did not treat her as guilty nor abandon her to her fate) but, instead, He treated her with His imputed righteousness, the righteousness of what she could be if she would only trust Him. And His imputed righteousness—His grace, forgiveness, kindness, not counting her sin against her—won her to trust, and she opened her heart to receive a new heart and right spirit, the imparted righteousness of Jesus.

Summary

When we experience the imputed righteousness of Christ—the love, affection, mercy, kindness, grace, patience, forgiveness, and longing to heal us—we open the heart and are reborn as we trust our Savior. The new heart and right spiritual attitude and desires within us are Christ’s that we receive through

trust; the power to resist the old habits, fear, selfishness, lusts, the carnal desires is from God through the indwelling Holy Spirit—but the *choice* is ours! When tempted, we, by faith, can choose to say yes to Jesus, yes to the desires of the imparted righteousness, the new motives of love and trust, and say no to the fear and selfishness. And when we choose to say yes to the spirit of Christ, we *then* receive the divine power to succeed—but we don't get the power until we make the choice. And it is this cooperative relationship of faith/trust in Jesus that develops a character like Christ's within us.

There is nothing penal/legal going on in God's remedying of the sin-problem in our hearts; imputed and imparted righteousness are actual, reality-based events occurring within the heart and mind of the individual—just as Jesus said: "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21).

[1] <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-imputed-righteousness.html>

[2] Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). In Tyndale Bible dictionary (pp. 630-631). Tyndale House Publishers.

[3] R. D. Drumm et al., "Intimate partner violence in a conservative Christian denomination: Prevalence and types, *Social Work & Christianity* 33, no. 3 (2006): 233-51;

1. Tjaden and N. Thonnes, *Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women Research Report: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 2000);
2. L. Coker et al., "Frequency and correlates of intimate partner violence by type: Physical, sexual, and psychological battering," *American Journal of Public Health* 90, no. 4 (2000): 553-59;
3. Schaefer, R. Caetano, and C. L. Clark, "Rates of intimate partner violence in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 88, no. 11 (1998): 1702-4.

[3] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007," *Surveillance Summaries* 58, no. SS-4 (June 6, 2008).

[3] [Drug and Alcohol Dependence 74, no. 3](#) (June 11, 2004), 223-34.

[3] "Christian Views on Alcohol," Barna, December 22, 2013, <https://www.barna.com/research/christian-views-on-alcohol/>.

[3] Dein, S., Religion and Mental Health: A Critical Appraisal of the Literature. WCPRR June 2014: 42-46.

<https://www.wcpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2014.02.42-46.pdf> Park, J., et al., The Relationship Between Religion and Mental Disorders in a Korean Population. *Psychiatry Investig.* 2012 Mar; 9(1): 29-35. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3285738/>

[3] "New Research Explores the Changing Shape of Temptation," Barna, January 25, 2013, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-explores-the-changing-shape-of-temptation/>.

[3] Pornography Addiction Survey (conducted by Barna Group), Proven Men, 2014, available at www.provenmen.org/2014pornsurvey/pornography-use-and-addiction.

[3] Boz Tchividjian, "Startling Statistics: Child Sexual Abuse and What the Church Can Begin Doing about It," Religion News Service, January 9, 2014, <http://boz.religionnews.com/2014/01/09/startling-statistics/>.