

Righteousness by Faith in Jesus

Galatians 2:15-21

We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.

If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a law-breaker.

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

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

Luke 7:36-8:3

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet,

but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven— for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Preach

There is a plague that afflicts the world that is far more deadly than AIDS or Malaria or Yellow Fever. It is a plague that afflicts developed and under developed nations alike. It afflicts unbelievers and it afflicts Christians. It afflicts you and me. This deadly plague is Self-Righteousness.

Our two readings address this plague – Jesus addresses it through demonstration and story whilst Paul addresses it through reasoned arguments. It is such a serious plague within the Christian church that much of Paul's writing confronts the deceit of self-righteousness. Nearly all of the letter to the Romans and this letter to the Galatians are primarily concerned with this issue.

Let's start by observing the plague in our two readings, taking first the gospel:

First of all, we notice that Jesus accepted the invitation to dinner from Simon the Pharisee. This tells us that Simon and his friends must have been sympathetic to Jesus' ministry and His claims to be the Messiah. Jesus would have nothing to do with those who opposed and rejected Him. Simon is not trying to catch Jesus out or trick Him. He is not yet a disciple, but he is genuinely seeking to know the truth; he is not hard hearted. He has seen the countless healings and heard His teaching and he is impressed. But he does not want to be led astray by yet another false Messiah.

But almost immediately, Simon is disappointed. He sees that Jesus accepts the devotion of a notorious sinner and thinks that Jesus must be a fake. If he were truly a prophet he would know what kind of person she was.

So why did Simon come to this conclusion, rather than inviting Jesus to explain himself? Simon was an unwitting victim of this plague of self-righteousness. He never even thought to question the “obvious” fact that only worthy people can come to God. David said it plainly:

“Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps 24:3-4)

To Simon and his friends the test of whether Jesus was truly godly was in his rejection of those who were unworthy. It seemed to them such a self-evident truth that they did not even think to question it.

At this point it is all too easy for us also to miss the point. We could easily conclude that Jesus enables sinners to come freely to God. But that is not quite what Jesus says. Jesus’ story is not just about sinners, but crucially it is about forgiven sinners. It is forgiven sinners who can freely approach God – and forgiveness has to be received.

Simon’s plague of self-righteousness blinded him to his own need for forgiveness and left him feeling that his own goodness – his self-righteousness - was the basis of God’s acceptance of him. He was not wrong to think that only worthy people can approach God, he was wrong to think that his own righteousness was sufficient.

Our Gospel reading shows us that receiving forgiveness from Jesus is the only basis for coming to God; it can never be on the basis of our performance. The point is that when we are forgiven for our sins we are made righteous.

Before we look at the reading from Galatians, let us pause a moment longer to look at these two people trying to relate to Jesus; Simon the “worthy” man who devoted his life to seeking God, and this wretched ex-prostitute.

Many of us are far more likely to feel affinity with Simon than with the woman but it was the woman who was righteous in God’s sight. The point is not that we should grovel in the dirt bemoaning our sins, but that we should recognise very clearly that even our best efforts at being godly are not the basis of our relationship with God. God’s freely given forgiveness is the sole basis of our relationship with Him. Simon thought that his godliness obtained access to God, but the woman knew that it was all God’s grace in forgiveness.

We turn now to our reading from Galatians. In the previous verses Paul reported a conflict he had with Peter over the issue of self-righteousness. Even the great apostle Peter suffered from this plague of self-righteousness. He himself knew that our righteousness is a gift of God and not something earned by our behaviour, but he had been unwilling to confront self-righteousness in other leaders.

Paul would have none of it and writing as a Jewish believer he says, “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”

Again, it is easy to miss the point here. Many, reading passages such as this, say, “Yes! We are saved by faith in Jesus, not by good works.” It was the recognition of this great truth coming to Martin Luther that led to the reformation and the birth of the protestant church. The Roman Catholics have since come to the same conclusion and also teach that salvation is by faith alone, and not by good works.

But that is not actually Paul’s point in this passage. The people involved in the situation Paul is writing about were already believers. Paul’s argument is not about how we get saved, but how we continue to relate to God. As Christians, our daily righteousness is also by faith in Jesus and not by our works. This is explicit in Gal 3:3 “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by means of the flesh?”

Paul is not saying that godliness doesn’t matter, but he is most definitely saying that our godliness does not count in terms of our acceptance to God. Self-righteousness has no place in our relationship with God.

We haven’t actually defined self-righteousness, and it is time we did so. Self-righteousness is not to do with whether we *consider* ourselves to be righteous or not, but about the *basis* of our righteousness. A self-righteous person looks to their own performance in making a judgement about their righteousness. A non-self-righteous person looks only to Christ in making a judgement about their righteousness.

To check you have understood this, let us consider a person who says “Oh! I’m such a terrible sinner. God could never accept me.” Is such a person self-righteous? The answer is “Yes!” They are looking at their own performance. If they were to compare themselves with a child molesting murderer instead of you, they might think themselves quite righteous!

I said “Self-righteousness has no place in our relationship with God.” And yet it is a plague amongst Christians. Which of us has not thought “Because I have neglected to do X Y or Z God will probably not answer my prayer today”? How often do we pray, read our bible or go to church out of a sense of duty to keep God on our side? How often do we feel alienated from God for a period of “penance” because we have been deliberately disobedient to God? If you do not suffer from such temptations then praise God. May you never be afflicted with this plague. But sadly, many good faithful committed Christians do regularly suffer from this – and I include myself.

Whenever we think that God’s attitude towards us is affected by our own performance we are suffering from self-righteousness.

Paul shows us how to consider ourselves:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

As Christians we see ourselves as crucified with Christ and also raised from the dead with Him. Having died, it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me – and He is 100% righteous. God’s attitude towards me is always and only determined by the risen Christ who dwells in me. God does not take into consideration my performance. He considers only the performance of Jesus.

Will God hear and answer your prayer despite your bad attitudes and selfish behaviour? If you live by faith in the Son of God instead of faith in your performance then Yes! He will. He looks at Jesus’ performance, not yours.

Does God love you with a passion today, even though you have not given much thought to Him for the last week? Yes! He does.

Many people think their relationship with God works like a car-park ticket; it is valid for some period then it expires and needs renewing, and if you forget to renew it you will face a penalty.

Some people think their ticket lasts a month and gets renewed by going to church. As long as they get to church at least once a month they feel safe with God, but beyond that they feel God might begin to get angry with them and things might start going wrong.

Others think their ticket only lasts a week, and is renewed by taking communion or confessing their sins at church. If they miss a week they start to feel insecure and that God might discipline them.

Others think their ticket only lasts a day. They need to read their bible and pray every day to keep God's blessing on their life.

For others, their ticket is renewed by confessing their sin. Whenever they realise they have fallen short of God's standards they believe they need to confess their sin in order to restore their relationship with God.

Some feel that they have so offended God by something they have done that they simply can't come to God with a clear conscience any more. They can never renew their ticket. Perhaps you fear God's displeasure because you have divorced, or had an abortion, or stolen, or lied or lusted after someone or something. You have committed some great sin or a whole lot of so called small sins, and you feel alienated from God. You need some way of atoning for your sin, but nothing is sufficient or effective.

This kind of thinking is so wrong. Righteousness does not come through our actions, whether that be going to church, reading our bibles, praying or confessing our sins. Righteousness is a free gift of God and it resides in Jesus Christ who dwells within each of us who confess their need for Him and put their trust in Him. Righteousness is ours by faith, not works. If you have put your faith in Jesus as your saviour, then your righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus. You are forever righteous before God, and that is the end of it. Jesus' righteousness doesn't expire and never needs renewing. It is a done deal in which we should find rest for our souls.

This great truth is central to the Gospel and yet is so poorly appreciated. Many Christian's find the idea that their righteousness is entirely and only in Jesus so difficult to believe and accept that they argue against it. Paul faced great hostility from believing Jews in Jerusalem because of this.

If this wonderful truth does not thrill you, then maybe you haven't understood it. If you suffer from self-condemnation for your failings, then you haven't understood it. If your failings cause you to feel a barrier between you and God – even for a moment, then you have not understood this.

The power of this truth is not to set us free to sin with impunity, but to allow the love and goodness of God to draw us back whenever we go astray. The devil wants us to believe that sin still has the power to alienate us from God,

but the truth is that the power of sin has been broken by Jesus. Yes, sin is harmful and foolish, but it has no power to separate me from God.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ”

“A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”

“Do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through our actions then Christ died for nothing!”