

MAN'S RIGHTEOUSNESS AND GOD'S SALVATION

Gerald Bray

Romans 3:9–31

Having exploded the argument of those who would try to increase God's revelation of his righteousness by their own unrighteousness, Paul now moves on to the next stage, and discusses the meaning of righteousness in a purely human context. He demonstrates that in God's eyes nobody can claim to be following him as he should. He backs this up not by logical

argument alone, but by quoting extensively from the Old Testament—more extensively in fact than anywhere else in this Epistle.

Paul's starting point is, as always, with the Jews. Granted that there are advantages in being a Jew, how should one react? Is Judaism a source of pride or security for the one who has been born or received

into it? Not at all! At the end of the day, everyone has sinned, and none of us can claim any special place in front of God. Evil has invaded the hearts of Jew and Greek alike, and Paul does not hesitate to back up this point from Scripture. Verses 10–18 are a string of different quotations put together here to back up Paul's point. If we separate them out we find the following

- 10–12: Psalm 14:1–3 (53:1–3)
- 13: Psalm 5:9 (140:3)
- 14: Psalm 10:7
- 15–17: Isaiah 59:7–8
- 18: Psalm 36:1

With one exception, the quotations all come from the Psalms. One reason for this is probably that the Psalter, as the hymn book of ancient Israel, would have been relatively well known to the Jews. It is not unusual for preachers today to back up points they want to make by referring to well-known hymns, because they know that such quotations will lodge themselves more easily in people's minds. It is entirely possible that Paul was quoting from memory himself, and selecting verses which would lend particular weight to his point. If so, we have a clear demonstration here of how well Paul knew the Scriptures, for he was able not only to quote freely from different passages, but also to put the quotes together in a way which supported and developed his case. Let us look at each of these verses in turn to see how Paul uses them.

At the end of the day, everyone has sinned, and none of us can claim any special place in front of God.

The first point that Paul wants to make is that there is nobody who can claim to be righteous. The Jews thought it was possible to achieve this by keeping the law, but the law itself warned them against making such a facile assumption. Only God is righteous, and the gap between him and us is unbridgeable on our side. Then he adds that nobody understands, and nobody is concerned to look for God or to do his will. Here both the psalmist and Paul, quoting him, follow a logical development of ideas. Righteousness, both spiritual and moral, is the natural precondition for understanding. This is often not realised by intellectual people, or by those who want to present the Gospel in academic dress. You can never argue a person into faith; Christian theology and apologetics exist in order to make sense of the world for the believer, but they do not in themselves create that belief. This is an awareness which has characterised the world's leading Christian thinkers from the beginning to our own way. If you compare the writings of Paul with those of Augustine (354–430), Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109), John Calvin (1509–1564) or Karl Barth (1886–1968), to name only a few, you will find many differences, but one thing they have in common is this—the righteousness which comes to a believer by

faith inevitably precedes understanding, because it is that very faith which makes understanding possible.

Furthermore, it is when we understand, that we shall be moved to seek God. John Wesley (1703–1791) found this out the hard way. For many years he tried to satisfy God by living a particularly holy life, and even by going out to Georgia as a missionary to the natives. He was full of zeal, but it was a zeal uninformed by knowledge. When, on 24 May 1738, that knowledge suddenly came to him, his heart and life were transformed. From then on he worked tirelessly for a spiritual revolution in England, and by the time of his death he could testify that in spite of many obstacles it was well underway. The Bible promises us that if we seek God with all our heart we shall find him, and he will never let us down. But if we are to do that properly, we need to start with the right kind of preparation!

Instead of following God, everyone has turned away and done his own thing, as we would say nowadays. For most people, God is boring, there is no money in him, and anyone with a little imagination can easily find something better to do. Particularly in times of peace and affluence, like the present, there is a dullness which comes over people and causes them to forget to whom they owe their life. Forgetting God, they forget others as well, and in the midst of their apparent prosperity and security, the basic rotteness of humanity resurfaces, to give the lie to the feeling of peace without God which takes hold of people. What may not be immediately apparent in what they do becomes clear in what they say. Paul chooses a particularly stinging passage to remind us of what harm we can do with our mouths, and how easily they betray our true spiritual condition. Naturally, not all criticism is wrong—if everything unpleasant were to be banned, Paul would never have penned this letter. It is not a case of hiding unwelcome truths under a false kind of pleasantness, but rather of speaking the truth in love, which is one of the hardest things any Christian can ever be called on to do.

The first thing we are told here is that the sinner's throat is like an open grave, ready to swallow up whatever crosses its pathway. Sinners lie with their tongues, and under their lips they conceal a snake-like poison. Their mouths virtually quake with cursing and bitterness. All these things come from inside, and defile our relationships in the world. It is particularly important for a society which values freedom of speech, to keep a watch on these things. Would those who struggled for liberty back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries feel that their cause had triumphed if they could see the scandal and pornography which makes up the daily diet of millions today? They believed that a free press would raise the moral tone of society by educating the masses in the truth and by exposing evil and corruption. Instead, what we find is that newspapers fall over each other in the rush to print filth, evil and corruption are glorified, and truth is but a minor consideration. In fact, organs of public opinion now can sometimes even print lies, knowing that the victims will find it too costly and self-defeating to seek redress.

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especially when we hear that the worst excesses are preferable to any reimposition of censorship. We may agree that state control of information is a bad thing, people, or by those who want to present the Gospel in academic dress. You can never argue a person into faith; Christian theology and apologetics exist in order to make sense of the world for the believer, but they do not in themselves create that belief. This is an awareness which has characterised the world's leading Christian thinkers from the beginning to our own way. If you compare the writings of Paul with those of Augustine (354–430), Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109), John Calvin (1509–1564) or Karl Barth (1886–1968), to name only a few, you will find many differences, but one thing they have in common is this—the righteousness which comes to a believer by faith inevitably precedes understanding, because it is that very faith which makes understanding possible.

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This awful reality ought to make us tremble, especially when we hear that the worst excesses are preferable to any reimposition of censorship. We may agree that state control of information is a bad thing, but a little self-restraint is essential if civilisation as a whole is not to suffer the most serious consequences. Lies and malice, cursing and bitterness, have no place in a Christian society, and each one of us needs to struggle against these things. They are a particular danger for the young and the hot-headed, whose enormous energy is easily dissipated in such activities. For hot tempers can easily lead to rash and harmful behaviour, as we see from the next few verses. People of this type wreak havoc and destruction along their path, possibly without even being aware of it. They are so determined to carve their way through what they see as an impenetrable jungle of traditions and vested interests that it may never occur to them what effect they are having. The way of peace is something they have never heard of, since for them, the only way to get what they want is to fight for it!

How much Church history, both large and small, can be written in terms of people who have schemed and struggled their way into power at the price of any sense of proportion? How often have peace and reconciliation gone out the window because fanatical spirits have insisted on having everything their own way, regardless of the consequences? How true it is that people like that, convinced of the rightness of their own cause, have lost sight of the fear of God! If they thought for one minute that God might examine their lives and actions in the light of his standards, they would be covered with a sense of shame and disgrace. But the boldness with which they act, and

the confidence they have of their own success in evil, demonstrate, if any demonstration were needed, that they have lost any sense of impending judgement from on high.

The crunch comes when Paul sums up his conclusions from the long string of quotes which he has so skilfully put together. For what the law says, is valid for those who are subject to it. In other words, it is the believing community, not the unbelieving one, which is the victim of this kind of behaviour. It is among those who pay lip service to the truth that the lies are most often to be found. Is it not tragic to hear people say that sometimes they find more kindness and consideration from unbelievers than from those who profess to follow Christ? Is it not too often the case that one has only to open the doors of a Christian organisation to discover the worst kind of backbiting and political intrigue? In such situations, everyone is naturally tempted to plead innocent, but in a corrupt environment everyone is tainted, if only by keeping quiet and doing nothing at all to help improve the situation.

It is this universal guilt which the law reinforces when it speaks. Its purpose is to make everyone else shut up and turn back again to God. The law itself bears witness to the fact that nobody will ever be made righteous by doing the works of the law. What the law gives us is knowledge of the extent to which we have sinned and need the grace of God for forgiveness. It is when we recognise that—and only when we recognise that—that the true function and purpose of the law will be revealed to us.

At this point, Paul breaks off his denunciation of man's false sense of righteousness to inform us of the good news which has come to us in and through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For quite apart from the law, the righteousness of God has appeared on earth. It is true that the law and the prophets bear witness to it, but the reality of it has come by another route. God's righteousness is revealed to us by faith in Jesus Christ, which is effective for everyone who believes in him. For in the light of Christ's coming, whatever barriers or distinctions may have existed before have been broken down. There is no longer any real difference left, because in actual fact everybody has sinned and nobody has been able to live up to the measure of the glory of God. In this situation, the only way out is something no human being could ever have imagined, let alone achieved. Instead of turning away from us, God recognised our inability to pay the price for our sins, and freely undertook to pay it himself. What we could not do, he did for us, by the sacrifice of the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Here we have reached the very heart of the Gospel message, and it is not at all surprising that a great many people have found it difficult to cope with. They might claim that blood sacrifice is immoral, that it represents a primitive conception of God, or even that it tries to turn a human tragedy into a divinely-willed act. People who think like this may be very sincere in their intentions, but they have missed the most fundamental truth about God to be found in the whole Bible. This is that God, who could so easily have revealed his righteous character and his faithfulness to the Covenant promises by punishing those

who had failed to live up to its demands, chose instead to take that punishment on himself, by becoming a man and paying the price, in Covenant terms, for the sins for which we cannot atone on our own.

These verses provide us with an excellent example of how Paul relies on a theological structure which he does not state explicitly, but which we can read in other parts of the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John. Paul says that God has taken the initiative in our salvation. He also says that the agent of our salvation is Jesus Christ, whom God gave as a sacrifice. But what relationship is there between Jesus Christ and God? Why is there nothing strange or immoral about singling out this one person for death? Paul takes the Covenant context of our salvation for granted but he does not explain its underlying theological principles. The only answer to this is that Paul assumes that his hearers will already know exactly who Jesus Christ is. Their problem is not that they do not understand that he is God in human flesh, but that they do not understand what he has done and why. We must hang on to the belief that Jesus is God, because otherwise these verses do not make sense.

Let us look at the logic of this a little more closely, beginning with verse 24. We have been justified freely by God's grace, through the redemption which we have in Christ Jesus. If we look at this verse analytically, we see that there is a parallel between the two main parts of it as follows: *freely* corresponds to *redemption*, since the first word literally means 'as a gift' and the second word refers to a money payment, or ransom. We are thus entitled to conclude that what we have received for nothing has been made available to us because the price for it has been paid by someone else. Who that someone else is is revealed in the second part of the parallel, where *the grace of God* stands over against *in Christ Jesus*. It might be possible to argue from this that although Jesus is the agent of God's grace he is not necessarily God himself, though that possibility is removed, to all intents and purposes, by what we find in verse 25.

In this verse, Paul states quite clearly that God has appointed or offered him as a sacrifice though faith in his blood, i.e. a sacrifice which is valid for us if we believe that his blood is able to save us from our sins. But why on earth should we believe a thing like that? Paul has just spent two and a half chapters telling us that the law is unable to save us, reminding us that nobody is good enough for God, and warning us against thinking that any human being can claim a special status in God's eyes. Yet now, without any transition or explanation, he is telling us simply to believe in Jesus Christ as if that were the obvious solution to the problem. How can we accept this on the assumption that Jesus is a man like any other, a Jew with a special mission perhaps, but basically nobody very special?

An interpretation of this kind simply does not make sense. If the blood of Jesus is to be accepted by us as more valid in God's sight than our blood, and if it is to be acceptable to God at all, Jesus must be something more than just a man. Somehow he must be able to do something which none of us can do, and

be assured of God's approval. We need to remember that Paul does not say that Jesus was accepted by God *after* the sacrifice was made, but *before*, since God gave him to be the sacrifice in the first place. In other words, it was not anything which Jesus did which entitled him to be the Saviour of mankind; it was who Jesus was. As always, Paul puts BEING before DOING, although in this case the being is implicit rather than explicit. Once we realise this it becomes clear that Jesus must be God, since otherwise he could never have put himself forward, or been accepted, as a sacrifice.

The concept of sacrifice used in this verse also calls for comment, as it has been the subject of much debate. The context is one of the Covenant, and we know that in Judaism there were very strict rules about the sacrifice made in atonement for the sins of the people. The lamb chosen to be killed and offered to God had to be without any spot or blemish, to indicate its purity and perfection, in contrast to the sins of the people. An imperfect lamb would have made an imperfect sacrifice. Jesus was acceptable to God as the final lamb, and the one who would put an end to the old system of sacrifices, and whose blood would remain valid as an atonement for all time. How could this be possible unless he too was perfect? And how could he be perfect unless he too was God? Once more the answer that he was indeed God in human flesh imposes itself, if we are to make sense of this passage.

At one time the significance of the word used to mean *sacrifice* in this verse was hotly debated between liberal and conservative theologians. The liberals could not accept the concept of God's anger, so they tried to interpret the word as meaning 'expiation', that is to say, an offering made by Jesus to the Father on behalf of the world, but one made out of love, not out of a need to satisfy the Father's righteous anger. To this, the conservatives replied that the word must be understood in the sense of 'propitiation', which was understood to involve satisfaction of God's anger as well as an offering made in love. As you can see, the argument was not really about the meaning of the word *sacrifice*, since both expiation and propitiation have frequently been used to describe it, but about whether God can be said to be angry with sin and to demand satisfaction for it. As we have already seen, this belief is necessary if we are to do justice to the character of God as this is revealed in the Covenant. The liberal theory must therefore be regarded more as an attempt to mitigate the consequences of taking this verse at face value than as a serious contribution to our understanding of the meaning of the text itself.

Next, Paul proceeds to demonstrate what the effect of Christ's sacrifice is, and here again we see that only if we confess that Jesus is God can we really understand what the result of his sacrifice was. First, God used it to show his righteousness by forgiving the sins of those who had lived in the past. In other words, Jesus not only superseded the sacrificial lamb, he invalidated it as well. Those who had put their trust in the lamb were really pledging themselves to an image of what was to come in the future. The lamb and the temple sacrifices were thus revealed as a

temporary expedient, preparing the people for the coming of Christ by showing them in advance what Christ would do. Then, God used Christ's sacrifice also to show his righteousness right now, by showing that he is righteous in himself and that he makes others righteous when they put their faith in Christ.

How is it possible for the sacrifice of Jesus to show that God is himself righteous? Surely this would not have been necessary, given that nobody doubted it. Here though we meet again the problem of combining God's righteousness with his desire to save unrighteous men. Somehow, he had to bridge an unbridgeable gap in order to make our salvation effective without losing his own righteousness. To demonstrate his righteousness in the sacrifice could therefore only mean that he himself bridged the gap by becoming man in Christ. That is also why faith in Christ is saving, justifying faith—because faith in Christ is faith in God. It therefore follows that there is no ground at all for boasting on our part. Even if we are Jews, we cannot really claim Jesus as one of our own, since Jesus is God. It is not by works, either ours or his, that we are saved, but by faith. Paul therefore concludes that man is justified before God not by works but by faith, and he even introduces the novel phrase, the *law of faith*. This somewhat strange expression does not apply to the law as such, but to the new principle of faith which has come to replace the old principle of a written code with specified do's and don'ts, against which we could expect to be measured.

The grand conclusion of all this, as we might expect, is that God does not belong to the Jews alone. His salvation, his love and his Covenant are intended for all men, and everybody, Jew and Gentile alike, is justified by faith. To enquire about circumcision, that is to say about one's status under the old covenant law, no longer has any meaning, because the distinction which it was meant to preserve has now been abolished. In its place has come a new division, which cuts right across all the old, familiar boundary lines. This division is between those who have faith in Jesus and those who do not, and faith, though it can and it must be made manifest in works, can never be created by them.

One final question, and Paul wraps up this section of his Epistle. What about the law after the coming of Christ? Is it now abolished, written off as a useless piece of antiquated rubbish? Not at all, says Paul. The sacrifice of Jesus, and the doctrine of justification by faith, in no way compromise or diminish the authority and validity of the law. On the contrary, they confirm it, because they are the fulfilment of what the law was all along meant to be teaching and pointing towards. It was not the law which was at fault, but the Jew's interpretation of it. Once that was cleared out of the way, the door was open for a new and better understanding of the law's true purpose, and it is that which Paul is now going to explore in greater detail.

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