

april

The Scriptures reveal discussions concerning four distinct kinds of righteousness; human, Christ's earned then imputed, practical and divine. While there may be some disagreement between various theologians concerning the biblical teachings on this subject, whether liberal Protestant, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Evangelical and Conservative, this discussion will center on the one espoused by a majority of those holding to a Reformed theology, the author included.

The author of Hebrews (Paul??) wrote this somewhat scolding statement in his letter to the 1st Century, Jewish converts to Christianity, but it also pertains to many Christians in the 21st Century: *We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are so slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food. Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant is not acquainted with the teaching about **righteousness**.* (Hebrews 5:11-13, emphasis added) Milk is a food that someone else has digested [i.e. a teacher (spiritual food), or physical food by a cow or a goat] and those who do not search out the eternal truths of God's Word (spiritual meat) for themselves and continue in spiritual infancy are, in Paul's estimation, incapable of understanding the more difficult concepts of righteousness.

Human Righteousness

The prophet Isaiah described this type of righteousness as follows: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.* (Isaiah 64:6) The "uncleanness" of which he spoke is that which occurs during the menstrual period (See Leviticus 15:19-27) and the "rags" are the menstrual cloths (today's sanitary napkins) which women in his day used during that time

of the month. That my friend is a pretty graphic description of how God views our so called “good works.”

It was this kind of action with which Adam and Eve first attempted to cover their immediate shame, a consequence of the fall. They sewed fig leaves together and made loin cloths, but they were bound to shrivel and blow away with the passage of time. Today, the good works that people do in order to salve their own consciences, cover the shame of their indiscretions or “get right” so to speak with God, are often referred to as “fig leaves.” They include every imaginable good community service that one can possibly perform. However, this kind of activity is not going to save anyone. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith_ and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God_ **not by works**, so that no one can boast.* (Ephesians 2:9-10, emphasis added) There is no amount of work that any of us can do which will ever satisfy God and eliminate or atone for our sin. That effort was accomplished by Christ alone; which brings us to the second kind of righteousness. Our sin was committed against an infinitely holy Person (God the Father) and only an infinitely holy Person (God the Son) can atone for that.

Christ’s Earned and Imputed Righteousness

When God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, He chose to do for His elect what they could not accomplish on their own; and that is to attain a perfect, God pleasing state of righteousness. That refers to a right standing before God. There is no possible way for a fallen creature, who possesses original sin, whose every inclination is only evil all the time (Genesis 6:5 and 8:21) to have the ability to live a perfect, God pleasing life. Because Christ was born without sin He was able to be perfectly obedient to every God given law that was ever established since the beginning of time. In His human form He thus became progressively sanctified by a continual process of obedience and thereby earned for Himself a state of practical human righteousness.

The Bible clearly teaches, *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are_ yet*

was without sin.(Hebrews 4:15) In Paul's letter to the church at Philippi he wrote, *And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.*(Philippians 2:8) When Christ spoke from the cross the words, *It is finished*, He meant that He had been perfectly obedient and had accomplished exactly what the Father had sent Him into the world to do. He had earned a perfect human righteousness.

Christ did for us what Adam had failed to do and what we in our sinful state are incapable of doing for ourselves; He lived a perfect life. He thus became utterly and progressively sanctified; perfectly holy in His humanity. He was obviously already holy in His divine state, for that is the most basic of all the attributes of God. However, when He became a man, 100% human (while remaining 100% God), He needed to earn His own human righteousness through good works and obedience. Thus through a process of progressive sanctification he became the perfect man and thus the perfect sacrifice for all of His fallen sheep (John 10:15). In Christ's high priestly prayer to the Father He said, *For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.* (John 17:19) As a result of what Christ accomplished for us, at the very instant that we believe by the gift of faith, we stand before God as "truly sanctified" because of what Christ's works accomplished.

His righteousness was not like the "filthy rags" that Isaiah so vividly and graphically described. While his garments did become blood stained, the stains were not like that uncleanness that menstrual bleeding brings on. His blood, which He shed specifically for His sheep (John 10:11 and 15), is able to wash away all sin. His righteousness was pure, white and spotless and He transferred that purity as a robe of righteousness to every believer. When a person is born again that person immediately becomes positionally sanctified. That is, that Christian appears to be perfectly holy when viewed by God. Paul put it this way, *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now, he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight without blemish and free from accusation.*" (Colossians 1:21-22)

The prophet Isaiah also spoke of this kind of righteousness when he wrote, *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and*

arrayed me in a robe of righteousness. . .(Isaiah 61:10) The apostle Paul also described this process in his second letter to the church at Corinth. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* (II Corinthians 5:21) In theological terms that is called double imputation. Our sins were imputed to Christ and His righteousness was imputed to us. Luther called it “the great double switch.”

Practical Righteousness

Once a person has been born again that new believer is expected to perform good works; to practice righteousness. It is basically an outward display that the faith one professes is real. James teaches, *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him?* (James 2:14) Those questions are rhetorical in nature, for James knew full well that true faith in Christ manifests itself immediately and inevitably in a changed life; I.e good works.

The apostle Paul, having said that we are saved by grace, through faith, because of Christ, then went on to say, *For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*(Ephesians 2:10) God has a job for each of His children to do for His glory and the good of the Kingdom, and He has gifted each believer with the tool or tools to accomplish those ends.

Christians are to grow into an image of Christ through worship, partaking in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, through prayer, in the study of God’s Word, in the practical application of the truths revealed in God’s Word, through witness (being salt and light in a fallen world, ala Matthew 5:13-16) and though being sensitive and attentive to the convicting guidance of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. The process is slow, agonizing, heart rendering, humbling, frustrating, not always steadily upward and sometimes painful; but the rewards are tremendous. The apostle Paul clearly explains the process this way, *And we, who. . .all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with **ever-increasing glory**, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*(II Corinthians 3:18, emphasis added) That is ever-increasing glory is referred to as progressive sanctification.

When each of us enters heaven we will apparently wear those robes which Christ imputed to us, but will also have some that represent our good works while walking in the faith. The reason for saying that is found in the 19th chapter of the book of Revelation. The scene is the marriage supper of the Lamb, a time when the Bride of Christ, the Church is celebrating her wedding to the Savior. John described this glorious event as follows; *Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and the bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.* Then the angel said to me, *'Write, blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb'...* (Revelation 19:7-9, emphasis added) Those "righteous acts" are the practical ones that the believer accomplished during the process of progressive sanctification.

Divine Righteousness

This kind of righteousness is unique to the triune God alone; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Like all of their other attributes, they share equally in the infinite righteousness which they each possess. We are to love, but God's love is infinite. We have intelligence, but God is omniscient, His wisdom is infinite. We have the power of the Holy Spirit within us, but God's power is infinite, He is omnipotent. We are called to live a holy life but His holiness is impeccable, eternal and infinite. We have free wills, but God's will is sovereign, immutable and perfect. Thus the progressive righteousness that believers attain to out of obedience to God can never reach the infinite state that His righteousness represents.

The Bible speaks metaphorically of righteousness as a "robe." The righteousness that Christ earned as a human will fit any believer; i.e. one size fits all. However, the righteousness of God is not "suited" for mortals, no pun intended, but only for each of the uniquely distinct, three Persons of the God-head (The Trinity.) Christ never gave up that or any other attribute, save His ubiquity, when He entered the world. That righteousness which He earned has been imputed to all the believers of all time, and will continue to be distributed to all believers in the future. Now that Christ in heaven He has once again attained the glory that He had with the Father from eternity past. That was accomplished in accordance with, and answer to His

prayer in John17:5.

Conclusion

It is an often stressed fact that we do not work for our salvation, and that is true; salvation is a free gift. However, our salvation is the result of Christ's finished work and the continual work of the Holy Spirit in each of our lives. It was this Holy Spirit of whom Paul wrote, . . . *for it is God who **works** in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.* (Philippians 2:13) Prior to that passage however, Paul also told his readers to . . . *continue to **work** out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*(Philippians 2:12) Both of those have to do with the works that a believer accomplishes after being born again. Yes, there is an element of works in our salvation; Christ's work long ago, to save us and ours now in conjunction with the work of the Holy Spirit to grow us so that we may. . . *become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.* (Ephesians 4:13)

If we continue to rely on our own human righteousness, our destiny will be hell. However, if we submit to Christ and His finished work for us, He imputes to us His human righteousness and our destiny will be heaven. The only question remaining is, how much progressive righteousness will be woven into the fabric of robe we will wear when we reach our eternal home with Christ?

To enable us to accomplish His purpose in us God has given us the tools, our spiritual gifts and our instruction manual, His Word. Of that the apostle Paul wrote, *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in **righteousness**, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good **work**.*(II Timothy 3:16-1, emphasis added)

Soli Deo Gloria

