

The Exchange Between the Sinful and the Sinless

by Horatius Bonar

“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”—2 Corinthians 5:21

In showing favor to a criminal, an earthly sovereign must consider whether he can do so (1) without loss of character; (2) without breach of law; (3) without encouragement to crime; (4) without infringement or compromise of government. All these things have been amply provided for in the divine scheme of pardon; that scheme being the embodiment of such provision,—not only containing the prevention of any such wrongs to God and to His universe, but the development of principles and the revelation of facts, which far more than compensate for threatened evils, and bring immense glory to God and His government, out of that which otherwise would have been big with dishonour and confusion.

That scheme is announced in these words, “He hath made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us, that we might be made (or be, or become) the righteousness of God in Him.” Thus God is just, and the Justifier of the unjust. Here are two special points: (1) The sinless one made sin for the sinful; (2) the unrighteous becoming the righteousness of God in the righteous One.

I. The SINLESS One made SIN for the SINFUL. He was “without sin;” He “knew no sin;” not the shadow of evil was to be found in Him; He was the “righteous one,” the “holy one,” the “Lamb without blemish, and without spot;” altogether perfect, yet partaker of our very flesh, our true humanity; very man, of the substance of the virgin, partaker of the dust of earth, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, still SINLESS in the entirest sense of that word; loving righteousness and hating iniquity, this sinless One was made sin, made sin by God: “He hath made Him sin.” The connection between Him and sin, between Him and the sinner, was one made, constituted by God. It was the Lord that laid our iniquity upon Him (Isa 53:6); that bruised Him and put Him to grief; that made His soul an offering for sin (Isa 53:10); that made Him a curse for us (Gal 3:13). Our guilt was transferred to Him by God, and He was treated as if He were really the doer of it all. God “spared Him not, but delivered Him up” (Rom 8:32). In the Psalms He confesses our sin as if it were His own (see 38, 40, 69); during His life He acted as one shut out because of guilt; at His trial He was dumb, and answered not a word; on the cross He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” It is not merely that He was made a sin-offering, but he was “made sin,” as if no words could fully express the closeness of His connection with our transgressions. He was treated as a sinner from His cradle to His cross. His was a vicarious life and a vicarious death. It was this that made Him the man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. On no other ground can we account for His profound and life-long sorrow, save that all His life long He was bearing sin for us,—He was being led as a lamb to the slaughter; and this leading to the slaughter was the real meaning of His sorrowful and burdened life. He was moving to the altar with the sins of His church upon Him; He was going to the cross, laden all through with this infinite burden which was laid upon Him, when He took flesh by the power of the Holy Ghost. As sacrifice, burnt-offering, sin-offering, trespass-offering, substitute, surety, sin-bearer, we find Him here on earth, till He had finished the work which was given Him to do, till He had by Himself purged our sins (Heb 1:2). Men call this a “fiction,” or a “make believe;” it is the truth of God, with which the whole Bible is full,—the transference of our human guilt to our divine Substitute, that He might bear it all for us, the transference of legal condemnation and divine displeasure from us to Him, that only acquittal, and pardon, and favour, and love might belong to us. “Thy wrath lieth hard upon me” (Psa 88:7), are the words of the Sin-bearer; and that this was felt in a measure all His life through (though consummated on the cross), is shewn by what follows: “I am afflicted and ready to die (“sorrowful unto death”) from my youth up” (Psa 88:15). The sinless One made sin for the sinful is the pervading doctrine of both Testaments; such books as Leviticus and the Epistle to the Hebrews are unintelligible otherwise. It is this that so strongly and awfully establishes the doctrine of eternal recompense for sin. If sin deserves no eternal wrath, what an unmeaning thing is this divine sin-bearing! What a gratuitous expenditure of labour, and suffering, and death.

II. The UNRIGHTEOUS becoming the RIGHTEOUSNESS Of God in the RIGHTEOUS One. The name of our Substitute is, "Jehovah our Righteousness"; and, the justifying righteousness is called by an apostle, "the righteousness of Him who is our God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1). Thus the "righteousness of God" and the "righteousness of Christ" are declared to be the same, and our common use of the expression, "the righteousness of Christ," is amply vindicated from the cavils of Socinians and others of like mind. Luther exhorted the brethren to learn, as their constant song of praise, "Lord Jesus, thou art my righteousness, and I thy sin." So must we, if we would enjoy Luther's doctrine, his twofold teaching, "That a man is justified by faith; and that he is to know that he is justified." We are "unrighteous." There is no question as to that. Yet, says the apostle, "We become (not merely "righteous," but) THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD," in this righteous One. What is ours passes over to Him; what is His passes over to us. We become righteousness! As if, from the moment that we believe God's testimony to, the righteous One and His work, we and righteousness become one and the same thing. So completely are we justified, and lifted up into the same righteous level or standing which the righteous One himself occupies in the sight of God. Thus are we "complete in Him,"—"found in Him,"—recognised as one with Him in righteousness, and entitled to possess all He possesses. What a transference! And how simply effected! Receive the Father's testimony to the righteousness of the beloved Son, and all that righteousness becomes yours! O man, canst thou refuse an exchange like this? A salvation so complete, so perfect and divine.

Yes; "It is finished!" On the cross it was finished. Then the blood was shed with which the sinner is sprinkled and purged in conscience; and all that followed (both resurrection and ascension) assumed the completion of the great sacrifice on Golgotha. Then the righteousness was finished also, in virtue of which we are "accepted in the Beloved." During all the preceding ages the voice of each sacrifice laid on the altar, morning and evening, was, "It is NOT finished;" but then the one voice of the one Sacrifice proclaimed before earth and heaven, "It is finished." Nothing was from that moment to be added to it or taken from it. All was done.

It is the ministry of this "righteousness" that is now preached to the unrighteous. There are many "ministries." There is the ministry of "the word" (Acts 6:24.); the ministry of "the grace" (Acts 20:24); the ministry of "the reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18); the ministration of "the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:8). There is also the ministry of "the righteousness" (2 Cor 3:9). Righteousness for the unrighteous is God's message to the world; righteousness for those whose only qualification is, that they need it; righteousness to the most unrighteous of the sons of men; for it is to the wretched prodigal, the wanderer in the far country, that the Father says, "Bring forth THE BEST ROBE, and put it on him:"

In Jesus, the sinner's substitute, we have "the perfect One." God sees perfection in Him. But this perfection, while it detects and condemns our imperfection, provides also for its forgiveness. It is by means of this perfection that God is enabled to deal in love with our imperfection, however great and manifold it may be. The good swallows up the evil, and yet is not tainted thereby. The sinner hands over his sins to the perfect One; and the perfect One hands over His perfection to the sinner. Thus, by reason of this blessed transference or exchange, the imperfect one becomes as the perfect One in the sight of God, and is dealt with as such in regard to all favour and blessing. Perfection covers imperfection, and the believing sinner stands "complete" in the perfect One: "accepted in the Beloved." Crediting God's testimony to the perfect One, and His perfect sacrifice, we stand before God on a new footing,—as men who have "become the righteousness of God in Him,"—and who now get life, and peace, and pardon, and blessing, simply because the perfect One has deserved it for them. We have all in Him.