

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.” —Romans: 3:21.

It is of sin and righteousness that the apostle speaks so fully and so minutely throughout this whole Epistle. Up to the verse from which our text is taken, he has been settling this point, that man is a sinner, and needs a righteousness, else he cannot stand before God. Circumcision cannot give a righteousness; it merely tells us that a righteousness is needed, no more. The law cannot give a righteousness; it is merely a declaration of what righteousness is, and that the unrighteous shall not stand before God. It condemns, it cannot justify. By the law is the knowledge of sin, and thus every mouth is stopped, and the whole world brought in guilty before God. But notwithstanding this, there is a righteousness; a righteousness which meets the case of the unrighteous in every part; a righteousness which can reverse even the verdict of the law against the unrighteous; a righteousness on the footing of which we can stand with boldness in the presence of the holy God without either shame or fear. It is of this righteousness that he proceeds to speak in the words before us. Let us hear what he affirms regarding it.

1. It is the righteousness of God. It is a divine, not a human righteousness. That righteousness which we had lost in Adam was, after all, but a human thing, finite like him who lost it; but that which we gain is a divine righteousness, and by being divine, forms an infinite compensation for that which Adam lost for us; and we, in receiving it, are made partakers of a most glorious exchange. It is called the righteousness of God because it is a righteousness provided by Him; a righteousness which was conceived by Him, set on foot, and carried out in every part by Him entirely, and by Him alone; a righteousness in the providing of which we had nothing to do, even in thought or in desire, far less in execution; a righteousness the origin and accomplishment of which are wholly and purely God's, not man's at all. Again, it is called the righteousness of God because it is a righteousness founded on the sufferings of the Son of God. It behoved Him, who is the only-begotten of the Father, to take flesh and suffer, ere the very first step towards the providing of that righteousness could be taken. And He has suffered, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God; and thus the foundation of a divine righteousness has been laid.

Again, it is called the righteousness of God because it is a righteousness made up of the doings of the Son of God. It is not merely with His sufferings that this righteousness has to do, but it is with His doings as well. These two things enter into its composition, so that, without both of them, it would be imperfect. What He did on earth in magnifying the law and making it honourable,—what He did on earth in obeying the Father's will in every jot and tittle, makes up this righteousness. These doings of His were infinitely pleasing to the Father, infinitely glorifying to the Father's holiness, and infinitely honouring to that law which our unrighteousness had violated and dishonoured.

Further, it is called the righteousness of God because it provides such a compensation for human unrighteousness that it not only takes it all away, but brings in a new and far higher and surer footing for the sinner to rest on. It introduces a new standing of acceptance, so that the man who becomes a partaker of this provided righteousness becomes divinely accepted, divinely righteous, divinely blessed. It is not a mere simple righteousness that God sets forth; it is a superabounding one, an infinite one, one which can leave no room for doubt on our part at all, one that is most amply sufficient to meet our case were we the very guiltiest on whom the sun has ever shone.

2. It is a righteousness without the law. He does not mean that it is in any sense an unlawful righteousness, a righteousness not based on law,—a righteousness in providing which law has been set aside in any sense; but it means a righteousness which, in so far as we are concerned, has nothing to do with law at all. It is not a righteousness which asks any doing, or working, or obeying, on our part, in order to complete it, in order to make it what it is “the righteousness of God;” for did it require anything of this kind on our part, it would cease to be what it is here represented to be, “the righteousness of God,” and would become, to a large extent at least, “the righteousness of man.” This righteousness does not send us to the law in order to be justified; it does not throw us upon our own works, either in whole or in part; it proceeds from first to last upon such principles as these,

announced elsewhere in this Epistle, and in the Epistle to the Galatians: “By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified.” And again, as it is written: “To him that worketh not, but believeth in Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” In no sense, and at no time, does it say to us, “Do this, and thou shalt live; do this, and thou shalt be saved.” In no sense does it give us the idea of a thing far off, but of a thing nigh, at our very side; not of a thing to be toiled for, a thing to be waited for on our part. In no such sense has this righteousness anything to do with law, or with our doing of the law. For what is the whole of the Epistle to the Galatians but a protest against the idea that this righteousness of God has anything to do with law-keeping, in so far as the sinner is concerned? In so far as God is concerned, in so far as the Son of God is concerned, it had everything to do with law; but in so far as we are concerned, it has nothing to do with it; it is a righteousness without the law. Let us hold fast, then, this truth of the gospel, this foundation truth,—righteousness without law, righteousness founded in no sense upon our keeping of the law, but wholly and absolutely upon this fact, that another has kept the law for us, and that other no less than the Son of God Himself.

3. *This righteousness has been “manifested.”*—“Now,” he says, “the righteousness of God is manifested;” it has been clearly brought to light, so that there can be no mistake concerning it, and no mystery in it. It is not a thing hidden, wrapped up, reserved, held back, veiled from our view. It is a thing clearly brought out today, and shone upon by God’s own light, so that the difficulty seems to be, not how to see it, but how to miss seeing it, how to keep ourselves from apprehending it. It has been clearly manifested. God has been at infinite pains to bring it forward to view, both on our own account and on account of Him whose righteousness it is. In every way He has sought to guard it against the possibility of being mistaken by man. In every way has He taken precautions against this being hidden from view or darkened by the words of man’s wisdom. He has set this righteousness as a star in the firmament above us, that every eye may see it, that no mountains of earth may come between us and the heavenly vision; He has made it peculiarly bright, that every eye may be attracted to it. He has removed other stars from around it, that it may not be mistaken, but stand alone in its brilliance. It is to this star we point the eye of each sinner here,—the Star of Bethlehem, the brightest in God’s firmament, the bright and morning star, the star which God has set there as His light to the world. He presents it to each one of you, that on recognizing it you may not walk in darkness, but have the light of life, and that, knowing it as it has been manifested, you may no longer stand in doubt as to your relationship with God, as to your personal acceptance. He so puts this righteousness at your disposal that you may come to Him in confidence, using it as if it were entirely your own.

4. *This righteousness is a righteousness “to which the law and the prophets bear witness.”*—By this expression we understand the whole of the Old Testament. It is not something (he means to tell us) now come to light for the first time, not understood in the ages gone by; it is something which has been proclaimed from the beginning hitherto. To these oracles the eye of every saint, from Abel downward, has been directed; on this righteousness the feet of every saint from the beginning have stood; of this righteousness every prophet has spoken; to this righteousness every type has borne witness; and this righteousness every sacrifice has set forth. It is this Star which shone down upon the pilgrimage of Old Testament worthies, and in the light of which they walked; it is this Star which sheds light on every page of their history; it was to this Star that they, with one consent, age after age, pointed the eye of all around. They knew none but this; they cared for none but this; to them, as to those who believe now, Christ was “all and in all.” On this righteousness they rested; in it they rejoiced. It is no new righteousness which we preach. It is no new foundation of which we tell. It is the old one, the well-proved one. It has been abundantly sufficient in past ages, and it has lost none of its efficiency now in these last days. It was enough for the saints in former ages, it is enough for us now. They who found salvation, ages and generations ago, found it here; and he who finds salvation now finds it also here.

5. *This righteousness is a righteousness which is by the faith of Jesus Christ.* “Even the righteousness of God, which is by the faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference.” He means to say by this expression, that it is a righteousness which comes to us by believing in Jesus Christ. It is not our faith that is our righteousness; it is not our act of believing that justifies. If your faith were your righteousness, then faith would be just reduced to the level of all other works, and would be itself a work. If it were our faith, our act of faith, that justified, then should we be justified by our own acts, by our own deeds. The

expression, then, “the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ,” means simply that it is a righteousness which passes over to us, and becomes available for us, by believing in Him whose righteousness it is; that is, by receiving the Father’s testimony concerning Jesus Christ. It is by believing that we are identified with Him, so that His doing becomes our doing in the eye of God and in the eye of the law; His suffering becomes our suffering; His fulfilling of the law becomes our fulfilling of the law; His obedience to the Father’s will is our obedience to the Father’s will. Such is the position into which we are brought, by being made, in believing, one with Him. Thus “the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ,” is presented to us, that in believing on Him He may become ours. Righteousness is here laid down at our feet. It is there, whether we receive it or not. It is there, whether we believe it or not—whether we reject it or receive it. Your receiving it does not create it; your receiving it does not complete it; it is all created, it is all completed, it is all free, it is all at our feet, whether we take it or thrust it away; and our condemnation hereafter, if we be lost, will be not that there was no righteousness, not that we refused to complete a righteousness which had been begun, but that we rejected the righteousness which was completed, and which was so presented to us by God Himself. It is in believing, or, as the apostle expresses it, by faith in Jesus Christ, that this righteousness, with all its privileges, and with all its results, passes over to us. For in believing, what are we saying but just this: I have no works to bring to God; I am a sinner, but I take this work of the Son of God, and I ask to be dealt with by God according to its value, and just as if I had done the work, and not He”? Or, it is just as if we were saying, “I have no righteousness, seeing I am wholly a sinner; but I take this righteousness of the Son of God, and I draw near, expecting to be treated by God just as if I and not He were the righteous person. I cannot present any suffering to Him in payment of penalty; but I take this suffering of the Son of God, and I claim to have it reckoned to me as payment of my penalty.” Thus it is, Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.

6. *This righteousness is a righteousness for the unrighteous.*—It “is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” It is righteousness for the unrighteous. It is not righteousness for the good, but for the evil. It is not righteousness for the worthy, but for the unworthy. It is our unrighteousness that fits us for this righteousness. It is the evil that is in us that fits us for the excellency that is found in it. How foolish, then, to say, as men when convinced of sin, or when going back into former iniquity, are sometimes found saying, “I am too great a sinner to be forgiven!” Why, if you were not such a sinner, you would not need such a righteousness. It is the extent of your unrighteousness that fits you for a righteousness so infinite, so divine. If the righteousness were not the righteousness of God, if it were a human not a divine righteousness, if finite and not infinite, your fear would be natural; but seeing it is divine not human, infinite not finite, can anything be more foolish, more presumptuous, more profane than to say, “My unrighteousness is too great for the righteousness of the Son of God”? This righteousness for the unrighteous is said by the apostle to be “unto all.” It is a righteousness which is like the sun in the heavens. It is one sun; yet it is enough for every one, it is free to every one. God works out a righteousness, and then sets it down on this fallen earth, that every one may avail himself of it. We are, therefore, not to say, Is this righteousness provided for this one or for that one, for many or for few? but there it is, there is the righteousness, go and take it. That is the gospel. Looking at the natural sun, do you ever think of asking, Is it for me, for this man or for that, the many or the few? You open your eye and enjoy its beams without asking any questions. Your making such inquiries would indicate a very unhealthy state of body; and so your asking such questions regarding God’s intention as proposed in this righteousness indicates an unhealthy state of mind. To every sinner here we preach the good news of this righteousness; a righteousness not only suitable and sufficient, but glorious and free; righteousness for the unrighteous; righteousness for the most unrighteous of the children of men.

Again, it is a righteousness which is “upon all them that believe.” It is “unto all;” but it is only “upon” them that believe. The moment that we believe through grace, we are accepted in the Beloved, redeemed from condemnation and from wrath. Till then the wrath of God abideth upon us. It is in believing that this righteousness is put upon us; and in believing—what? In believing what God has testified concerning this righteousness, and concerning Him whose righteousness it is.

Again, the apostle affirms regarding this righteousness for the unrighteous that “there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” There is no difference as to its fitness for the sinner, whatever

his sin may be; and there is no difference as to the fitness of the sinner for the righteousness. There is this twofold fitness: the fitness of the righteousness for the sinner, and the fitness of the sinner for the righteousness. "There is no difference;" there is no man more fit than another; all are equally fit or equally unfit, equally qualified or equally unqualified, for "all have sinned;" and it is this that brings down all to the same level, and down to this level it is that the righteousness comes. For it is not a righteousness which has only come down to a certain level,—which has lighted upon earth, but only upon some of its highest peaks; it is a righteousness which has come down to the very lowest valleys, a righteousness which may be found out without climbing, and even beside our very dwellings. No one, then, can say, "I deserve it, therefore it is for me;" and no one, on the other hand, can say, "I do not deserve it, therefore it is not for me." There is no difference, for "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Thus it suits the case of all; so that no one can put it away, and say, "It does not suit my case, but it may suit others." Nay, friend, if you are not an unrighteous man it will not suit you, I grant; but if you are an unrighteous man it must suit you. There is no question as to the kind of your unrighteousness, the length of time, the amount or degree; there is no question about that; the simple question is, Are you an unrighteous man? Then it suits your case. And it is a righteousness near to each one of you; it is not afar off: it is not in heaven above, so that you have to climb to the seat of God to obtain it; and it is not down so low that you must dig to earth's centre to find it: it is near; it is at your very side; and if you reject it, it cannot be because of its distance. God has brought it near. He tells you it is near. "I bring near my righteousness." God says that; and who are you that you should say, It is far off? Nay, more, it is free,—“Without money and without price.” There is no payment asked; no payment can be taken. The very idea of payment is insulting to the righteousness, and insulting to Him whose righteousness it is. Yet many seek to buy it,—not perhaps by their gold and silver, but by other things equally worthless. Some would buy it by their penances and fastings, some by their confessions; some would buy it by their repentance, some by their prayers; some by their self-mortification and privations, some by their fair lives and excellent deeds.

It is righteousness for the unrighteous that we proclaim, the righteousness of God,—a righteousness which has come down from heaven to earth on very purpose that it may be presented to you. It is God's wish that you should take it. Do you refuse it? He hinders not. Where, then, lies the hindrance? In you, not in Him. The refusal will not be on His part; it must be on yours. And if you perish, you perish not because He would not be reconciled to you, but because you would not be reconciled to Him; not because there was not a provided righteousness, but because you rejected it; not because there was not sufficient love in God to give you that righteousness, but because you wilfully put away from you both the righteousness and the love.

Justification by faith is a very old doctrine,—one of the oldest dogmas on record. It is as old as Abraham, as old as Abel. The patriarchs knew it well, and lived thereby. It was as believing men that they were justified. The old pagans had not so much as a glimpse of this. It required a divine revelation to communicate even the idea or possibility of it, much more the actual thing.

The apostle goes back to Abraham for his illustration of this free justification, and reminds us that his faith was counted for righteousness,—that is, his believing was reckoned instead of his working, in the great question of acceptance. He took God at His word, and in thus honouring Him "pleased God." Hence the apostle thus strongly puts the matter,—“To him that WORKETHNOT, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”

1. Who justifies?—“It is God that justifieth.” The Judge, the Lawgiver, is the Justifier. Self-justification is as useless as it is impossible. To acquit myself is of no avail, unless the law and the Lawgiver do the same. I must have my sentence of acquittal from God Himself. It is only His verdict that can satisfy me now, or can avail me in the day of the great reckoning. “Not guilty” from my own lips, or from man's lips, will profit nothing; “Not guilty” from His lips is altogether sufficient; I need no more to set my soul at rest, and to give me peace of conscience, boldness in the day of Christ.

2. What sort of justification does He give?—Man's ideas of justification are vague and low; we must recognise God's thoughts upon the question. His justification is,

Righteous.—The adjustment of the question between us and God is a righteous adjustment. Its basis is righteousness. Nothing but this would satisfy God or ourselves, or make us feel safe in accepting it in our

dealings with a holy God. This righteousness is secured by the full payment of the penalty by a surety or substitute. He does what we should have done; He suffers what we should have suffered; He lives our life, He dies our death, He descends to our grave. Thus He exhausts the penalty, and so makes justification a righteous thing; and our justification is that of men who have suffered the law's full penalty for our sins; our pardon is that of men who, in the person of their substitute, have undergone all that they deserved eternally to undergo. The Just One suffering for the unjust makes the justification of the unjust a just and righteous thing.

Complete.—It extends to our whole persons; to our whole lives; to every sin committed by us. The whole man is justified. It is no half-pardon, no semi-acceptance, that we receive, but something complete and divine; perfect as God can make it; so perfect as to satisfy conscience here, and to stand the test of the judgment-seat hereafter. Nothing in us or about us that goes to make up our characters as sinners is left unjustified.

Irreversible.—No second verdict can alter our legal position. God is not a man that He should lie. Pardoned once, then pardoned for ever. "Who is he that condemneth?" "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?"

Divine.—It is a justification worthy of God; a justification which shall place the justified on a far higher level than the first Adam stood upon; a justification which can only be likened to that of the Son of God Himself when He rose from the dead, being "justified in the Spirit" (1 Tim 3:16).

3. For whom is it?—For the ungodly. Yes; for such alone. Righteousness for the unrighteous is that which the Righteous One came to bring. In this matter of pardon and acceptance, the principle is not, "To him that hath shall more be given," but, "To him that hath nothing shall all be given." It is not partial or incipient godliness that attracts this justification to an individual. The only fitness or qualification is our need, our ungodliness, our unrighteousness, total and complete, without one particle of goodness, deservingness. It was for the ungodly that Christ died. It was for the ungodly that this righteousness was provided; and he who thinks to have it on any other footing save that of simple need, or in any other character save that of unrighteousness or ungodliness, cannot possibly obtain it. The "good news" which we bring concerning this righteousness is that it is for the ungodly,—for the ungodliest; and he who would qualify or explain away that word ungodly, subverts and denies the whole gospel of the grace of God.

4. How we get it?—By believing. In accepting God's testimony to the righteousness,—in crediting His word concerning this justification,—we are justified at once. The righteousness becomes ours, and God treats us henceforth as men who are righteous; as men who, on account of the righteousness which has thus become theirs, are entitled to be dealt with as righteous, out and out. Of Abraham it is said, "His faith was counted for righteousness;" that is, God counted this believing man as one who had done all righteousness, just because he was a believing man. Not that his act or acts of faith were substituted as equivalent to work, but his believing brought him into the possession of all that working could have done. Thus, in believing, we get the righteousness. Our believing accomplishes for us all that our working could have done. The apostle's words are very bold, and the comparison between the working and believing which they embody brings out the great distinction between man's thoughts and God's, man's ways and God's, "To him that worketh not, but believeth." We are so apt to mix up the two together, the believing and the working, that it is needful to have a strong statement like this thoroughly to clear up our thoughts, and to prevent confusion. Not to him that worketh, but to him that believeth, does the divine righteousness belong. This is God's message to the sons of men!

The Work That Saves

Done is the work that saves!
Once and for ever done.
Finished the righteousness
That clothes the unrighteous one.
The love that blesses us below
Is flowing freely to us now.

The sacrifice is o'er,
The veil is rent in twain,
The mercy-seat is red
With blood of victim slain;
Why stand we then without, in fear?
The blood divine invites us near.

The gate is open wide,
The new and living way
Is clear and free and bright,
With love and peace and day;
Into the holiest now we come,
Our present and our endless home.

Upon the mercy-seat
The High Priest sits within;
The blood is in his hand
Which makes and keeps us clean.
With boldness has banished every fear.

Then to the Lamb once slain
Be glory, praise, and power,
Who died and lives again,
Who liveth evermore;
Who loved and washed us in his blood,
Who made us kings and priests to God.

—Horatius Bonar