

Righteousness



Peter Dodd

Righteousness

I will be looking extensively at the book of Romans, as it is perhaps the fullest account of Paul's gospel that we have. Written to a church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, Paul was able to take from the Old Testament for the Jewish believers, and fully explain it for the Gentiles. (Romans 1:14-17)

What is Righteousness? Righteousness and *being righteous* is something that is often only partially understood and occasionally misunderstood entirely. Most from a Protestant Evangelical position will recognise righteousness as something inherited from Christ- i.e., imparted (freely given) by His grace. It is also almost impossible to fully understand without also understanding the idea of God's Justification, and to a lesser extent, Sanctification, but we will get to those later.

We are perhaps more familiar with what it is not, rather than what it is, but this of course actually makes it easier to understand by stripping away the incorrect associations we may have.

The scripture that does this best is Romans 3: (Where Paul quotes from several different Old Testament passages to make his point)

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Rom 3:9-12 ESV

- 9) ...For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,
- 10) as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;
- 11) no one understands; no one seeks for God.
- 12) All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

This strongly implies that seeking God and understanding His ways, along with keeping to His paths are associated with righteousness. Writing to the Romans, Paul stresses that there is no-one who has done this with their whole hearts. And even if they did, it is pointless, since the law only serves to show what is wrong. It does not make us *want* to follow the Law for His sake.

Rom 3:20 ESV

- 20) For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The law, in other words, is to show what is and is not right in God's eyes. The more we understand the law that He gave, the more we understand Him- the Giver of the Law. The more we know and understand Him, the more we understand what He does and does not approve of. (Because ultimately, it is always *His* law that defines right and wrong).

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But blindly following these laws simply because “it is the law” does not necessarily lead to righteousness – this is legalism. Doing right in God’s eyes, - acting righteously - is only achieved by wholeheartedly following at all times the spirit of the law in order to please God.

To give an example, the Ten Commandments lay out the basic principles of the life God wants us to live: Having no other gods before Him, remembering and honouring the Sabbath, honouring one’s parents, not committing murder, adultery, theft etc are all fairly straight forward except for the last one: “Do not covet.” In other words, not stealing your neighbours’ ox, donkey etc are easy enough in principle, but this commandment tells us that we should not *want to steal* either. And that is when we begin to see the capacity- the *desire to steal* is in our hearts already. (See Romans 7:7 and Matthew 5:20-22)

So, as we read our scriptures and begin to understand how God works, we realise that we follow His laws because of our relationship with Him. We are trying to please Him, not simply “tick the boxes.”

Our relationship comes through fully trusting in His mercy and forgiveness- again, in faith. It is this complete trust and willingness to obey for His sake- our faith in Him, that nullifies the need to blindly follow the rules as Paul wrote in Romans 4:13-14.

Examples of Righteousness

Let's take a quick look at two people who the Bible does call righteous: Noah and Abraham.

Gen 6:5-6 ESV

- 5) The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
- 6) And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.
- 9) These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.

“Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation.” Given the state of Noah's generation, this says a lot about Noah's integrity. It also says that he walked with God. Walking with God is an expression that implies both obedience and friendship. The author of Hebrews makes an interesting point:

Heb 11:7 ESV

- 7) By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

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In faith (Trust) Noah obeyed God and built the Ark. In doing so, he inherited the righteousness that comes from faith. As Bob Utley writes, he lived up to his understanding of the will of God. (Utley, 2014) He acted on his conviction of what God wanted of him.

Heb 11:8-9 ESV

8) By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.9) By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

Again, we see that Abraham is held up as an example of one who obeyed and acted in faith. He not only left his extended family behind when told to do so, but moved to a place he had never seen. But there is more to Abraham's story than simply following orders.

It is significant that some time *after* Abraham arrived in the land promised him, *after* he had refused the spoils of war offered by the king of Sodom, and *after* he had been blessed by Melchizedek, king of Salem that God spoke to him again, promising him children of his own.

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Gen 15:3-6 ESV

- 3) And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."
- 4) And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."
- 5) And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."
- 6) *And he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness.*
(Emphasis added.)

Significantly to the Jewish population of Rome, Paul makes the point that Abraham was declared righteous even *before* God gave him the sign of circumcision.

Rom 4:11-12 ESV

- 11) He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,
- 12) and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

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In both cases, Abraham and Noah, it is when they took God's words to heart and acted on them that their righteousness was noted. And in Abraham's case, it is clear that believing God in spite of apparent evidence was worth more to God than all the acts he had done so far – "He believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as if he had always done the right things for God at all times with all his heart." In the same way, if we do the right thing by trusting God to save us, we are placed in the same "category" as Abraham, or, counted as one of his offspring:

Rom 4:5 ESV

5) And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

Given it is only our trust in God's mercy, and our faith in His goodness that provides the justification for God granting us righteousness through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, we have no claim to any righteousness of our own. Paul makes it clear that the righteousness that makes us acceptable to God is provided entirely by Jesus. (Romans 5:17, also Philippians 3:8-11)

On one level, we are paying God the greatest honour by trusting Him with our lives. We are quite literally throwing ourselves on the mercy of His Court. To a holy, righteous and just God, this is the *only* "right thing" to do. (Romans 3:20-see also Galatians 2:16 and 3:11)

Defining Righteousness

At this point, we need to dig a little deeper into the fuller meaning and implications of righteousness and being righteous.

While the pop definition of righteousness is “Being in right-standing with God,” there is more to it than this: righteousness is also one of God’s attributes. It is described as always acting rightly, correctly or justly. It implies the combination of justice with moral integrity in one’s actions. Just as God is perfect in all His ways.

The word in Hebrew is צַדִּיקָה (tsaddiyq), which means to act according to God’s Law (Strong 1890). It also gives to one who is righteous the qualities of being blameless or innocent of wrong-doing. (‘New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance’ 1998) These qualities are the basis of Justification, which we will look at briefly later.

This idea is picked up by the Greek definition of righteousness. It is the word δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiousunē*) which Thayer (‘Thayer’s Greek Definitions’ 1889) interprets as,

1) in a broad sense: the state of him who is as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God

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1a) the doctrine concerning the way in which man may attain a state approved of God

1b) integrity, virtue, purity of life, rightness, correctness of thinking feeling, and acting²) in a narrower sense, justice or the virtue which gives each his due

While the Hebrew word mainly implies being just in one's actions, the Greek emphasises thinking the right thing. Broadly, the Hebrew word assumes an environment where the community is central. The Greek word, in common with the general Greek culture, emphasised the individual. Put together, we see developing an idea of both how we are to think about ourselves and the people around us, and act towards the people around us, especially in light of God's dealings with us.

The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* makes the point that it is also the fulfilment of the demands of a relationship with God. It must not be forgotten that being in relationship with God also necessarily means being in relationship with God's other children and acting accordingly to them as well.

A defining feature of being one of Christ's disciples is our love for each other. This Agape love looks to others' well-being and naturally demands that we act righteously towards our fellow believers at all times. This is seen in Job 31, where Job, a man described as blameless and upright (Job 1:8), describes his own dealings with his neighbours. In this passage, he is seen to act righteously.

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Also in this passage, Job makes several references to the judges, and it is worth noting that in the Old Testament a righteous judge made the right decisions for and on behalf of the entire community, not just the individual. He was one who could weigh up and correctly interpret, and carry out both the legal and moral duties in order to do the right thing- essentially acting on God's behalf on earth. ^[1] Those acquitted of wrongdoing were judged to have stood in right relationship to God, and to have fulfilled what was expected of them within that relationship.

Understanding Righteousness

If we then were to try to pull all the definitions and ideas together, it brings the idea of acting fully as one should in God's sight, through choice. But it is obvious however that we do not do this ourselves. The more we understand the Law, the more we realise that the desire to always fulfil the Law is not there. It is just not in our nature to always do the right thing for the right reason; we are just too selfish.

Put another way, the Law shows us what is wrong with ourselves. To be able to stand before a Holy and Just God will require something vastly more than we are capable of. Let us never forget that a Holy God cannot bear sin, and all unrighteousness is sin. A Just God also cannot simply wipe away sin as if it was never there; A Just God must punish sin and cast it from His presence. (See Exodus 23:7; Proverbs 24:24) We must not be tempted to think that God decides *if* we are or are not guilty; He simply confirms and makes judgement on the facts. In order to save us then, there must be some sort of logical or legal method of supplying justification- the means of seeing the individual as righteous.

This is why the faith of Noah and Abraham is important to us: it shows us what faith is, how it is used, and what it results in. Paul carefully explains this using Abraham as an example in Romans chapter 4.

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Abraham was declared righteous by God as a result of his complete faith and trust in God Himself to accomplish what was naturally impossible. In the same way, it is our faith and trust in the ability of God alone to save us from deserved condemnation that is credited to us as righteousness. (John 3:18) It is that complete reliance on God's willingness and ability that provides the justification for declaring us righteous in His sight. It becomes evident if understood rightly, that justification is an immediate thing, by the act of God. It is not a process of writing off the bad things by means of cancelling them out with good things. Its' effect is immediate and ongoing, and is the result of God's decree, not our efforts. That is why Paul writes in Romans 8 vs 1: "Therefore there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"

The means of this justification, God's saving work through Jesus Christ was essentially a swap (Romans 8:3). Being part of the Godhead, Jesus *could* be considered responsible for His creation, (John 1:3) but punishing Him on that basis alone still would not make us individually righteousness, since we have all individually sinned. At best, it would make us neutral at the point we received forgiveness. ^[2]

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God therefore provided for us the one person with his own acceptable righteousness in the form of His own son Jesus Christ. Having His own righteousness, He had the unique ability to stand in for another (1Peter 3:18). He stood righteous before His Father on His own merit. (See Hebrews 9:7-10 and vs 12-14) The righteousness He offered was His to give; He did not have to worry that His righteousness was first provided by another in which case His righteousness would not be His to give. He instead willingly took our punishment, the innocent for the guilty, offering us His freedom for our condemnation. "...But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us," Paul wrote in Romans 5:8. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God," wrote the Apostle John. (John 1:12)

It must not be thought that God provided this means of salvation because He thought we were worth saving. It shows not our own potential or worth, but how deep the need for a justice that only God Himself can satisfy. He did this because offering His creation a way of returning to Him was the just and righteous thing to do. It speaks more of God's goodness than ours ever can. Even Daniel crying out for his captive people in the Old Testament recognized this:

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Dan 9:18 ESV

18) ... Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy.

There is one more point to make: It is vital that we understand that God showed His acceptance of Christ's sacrifice by returning Him to life; There was no reason or justification for Him to remain dead, which is the result of sin; Christ had none. (c.f. Isaiah 59:2 and Romans 6:23) Paul makes the point in the next few verses:

Rom 5:9-10 NIV

9) Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

10) For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

It can be shown then that Justification does not remove the fact of our sin; rather it provides the means to cover or atone for it. It contains the idea of legally restoring one to a state of righteousness.

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If Jesus, who died in our place returned to life, we who are counted righteous by declaring our hope and trust in Him will also be returned to life, since His righteousness applies also to us. Our sin is effectively written off, being paid for by Christ. We are also declared righteous by “having done the right thing” – that is, trusting and relying on Christ’s work, rather than our own goodness, as Galatians 3:11 says.

At this point, we need to make a brief note about Sanctification. This again cannot be fully understood without an understanding of both Justification and the Grace that supplies Justification. But where Justification is an instant action, Sanctification is both immediate and ongoing.

Technically, to sanctify something is to set it aside for a specific use. something sanctified is said to be Sacred. Sanctification for us is the process of being made Holy- set aside for God’s use and purpose. Through Christ’s righteousness, we are also counted as righteous. We are seen as Holy. But the “Sin Nature,” - the will to do ‘our own thing’ over ‘the right thing’ remains strong. As part of the process of being Christ’s ambassadors in sharing the Gospel and demonstrating His love through our actions, God has prepared certain things for us to do.

Eph 2:10 ESV

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

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Doing what God has asked us to do once more returns us to the idea of righteousness- doing the right thing. But it also provides the opportunity to grow in maturity, which in turn highlights the sin still at work within us. As we repent and deal with that sin, we slowly become more Christlike, which is sanctification – the process of being made holy.

As we are counted righteous in Christ, we are already sanctified. But as we mature and become more Christlike, we continue in sanctification, a present and continuous action. This process is emphasised by the working of the Holy Spirit within us, illuminating both the wrong and the right in us (Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). It needs to be stressed however that because both our justification and our righteousness are provided by Christ, we can never be “more” righteous than the righteousness Christ has already given us.

That said, we must not be tempted to become proud of the righteous deeds that we do. Being proud of ourselves for the works that we have been told to do anyway is at best a sign of immaturity. Although God does recognise and reward our righteous deeds, as we will see later, we must not think that they add anything to our salvation. Doing the works that He has asked us to do implies a present and continuous relationship with God, just as Noah and other “great” men walked with God.

Consequences of Righteousness

So, what does Righteousness mean for us? Firstly, it means that God sees us as He sees Jesus. His righteousness covers our unrighteousness, just as the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant prefigured the sacrificial death of Jesus. Consequently, we have the right to come directly before Him with only Christ, our saviour and “High Priest” as mediator. (Hebrews 12:24, 1Timothy 2:5)

Heb 10:18-22 ESV

18) Where there is forgiveness of these [sins], there is no longer any offering for sin.

19) Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,

20) by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,

21) and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

22) let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Having the right to come before Him also gives us the right to be heard by Him.

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1Jn 5:14-15 ESV

14) And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

15) And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

Being righteous- having the moral integrity to do the right thing also means asking for the right reason. That is why the Apostle John wrote his epistle, urging the people of his church to do the right thing in their gatherings. That, no doubt would also mean asking with the right motives. Acting righteously will obviously mean asking for the right thing from God's point of view. Like the Righteous Judge of the Old Testament, it means looking for the good of the Community of Believers, as well as the individual concerned. When this is done, it delights the Lord, and He rewards those who have done so, as Paul reminded Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:8:

“Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

That the righteous deeds of God's people are recognized by God is also alluded to in Revelation:

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Rev 19:7-8 NIV

7) Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

8) Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

Recognition and reward from God are the greatest accolades that can be given. But it would be foolishness to think that He is the only one who will recognise righteous dealings with the World. As Psalm 37: 32 says, "The wicked watches for the righteous and seeks to put him to death." If we can keep our integrity, as did Noah in his time, we too are assured of God's recognition and eventual blessing, although it will not be without its price in this world. Job kept his integrity before God when accused by Satan and slandered by his friends, but he paid a heavy physical price for it even though he was blessed by God afterwards. Job recognised this, knowing he would see his Redeemer personally when he would see God's judgement upon his accusers -See Job 19:20-29

Jesus warned his disciples, and by implication us, what to expect: "A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." He warned in John 15:18-20. Significantly, the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 deal with righteous attitudes and living. It is summed up this way:

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Mat 5:10-12 ESV

10) “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11) “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Doing the ‘Right Thing’ because it is the right thing to do in God’s eyes is often a completely alien concept to many. It will lead to labels like “Fundamentalist” or “Fanatic” which are dangerous labels to have in today’s post-Christian world. It demands the integrity to continue in the face of wonder, ridicule and opposition, just as the prophets of the Old Testament experienced.

But we cannot be tempted to take pride in the opposition that we experience for its’ own sake. Opposition and persecution are not the territory of righteousness alone. As Peter said, “How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.” (1 Peter 2:20)

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There is one other point that must be made about righteousness. We have made the point that righteousness is given by God Himself. We inherit it through the death of His righteous Son. If we therefore have the righteousness of Christ - “He who had no sin,” then we cannot ever be *more* righteous. Righteousness cannot be earned, accumulated or stored.

In the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, God tells the people of Israel the same thing on two different occasions; Chapter 18 and Chapter 33:

Eze 33:13 NIV

13) If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered; he will die for the evil he has done.

In the New Testament, Paul makes the point very clearly that his own righteousness, which could be considered substantial, counted for nothing. In his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3, he sums up his possible reasons for self-confidence with the following:

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Php 3:8-9 ESV

8) Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

9) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

What then does God expect of us? We know that following The Law for the Law's sake is futile, but we also know that it serves the purpose of defining righteous thought and action. Perhaps the verse that defines this most succinctly is found in Micah chapter 6 verse 8:

Mic 6:8 ESV

8) He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

It is this attitude and way of life that lead us on to do the “Right Thing” in all circumstances. Needless to say, if all people did this individually, there would be no need for “Corporate Reconciliation!”

Conclusion: Living in Righteousness

How then do we live in Righteousness? We have seen that before our justification by God, any righteousness of our own is considered worthless. We are justified by Christ's work on the Cross, and sanctified immediately and continuously through the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Recognising this brings a blessing from God, for He will not cast out of His Kingdom those who mourn their own unrighteousness and unworthiness, recognising the hurt it has caused God, and the lengths He has had to go to in order to justify the sinner. Those who claim His mercy will not be turned away.

But when God supplied Christ's righteousness to us, making us righteous in His sight, in love and gratitude to Him, our way of life changes. Knowing our salvation and life are His brings about a certain humility or meekness as we learn to yield to His way of life. Consciously or unconsciously, we take on certain tasks for the sake of His Kingdom, because of our love and gratitude to Him, our love for our fellow man, and because they are the "Right Thing to do." For many, working for the Kingdom of God becomes a joy and a pleasure, something that they actively seek to do at every opportunity. The desire to see, do (and be) "the right thing," and to see Christ's work becomes, if not a passion, certainly a thirst or longing, even for the one who is not called into Christian ministry.

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Our righteous deeds are done not to earn our way into Heaven but rather done in gratitude to God, as a demonstration of our love for Him and His people. We serve in an ambassadorial role to represent Him, using our own words to make an appeal for people to be reconciled to Christ through repentance. We are his agents, advocating and explaining the means of salvation. In His name, that is, on His behalf we help the needy, and look after the widow and orphan. In His name we try to bring peace whenever we can, especially the peace of God that comes from having made peace with Him (Romans 5:1). Effectively, we are the result of His handiwork- we are “The Right Thing” to a world that needs to hear and see the Gospel in action. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “We are the righteousness of God,” – the “evidence” demonstrating in physical form His love to those who need it most.

We recognise that doing the right thing will make us enemies in this world, for it is a mark of the hatred between the Kingdom of Darkness, and the Kingdom of Righteousness. This may lead to slander and accusations against you, but we take comfort knowing who the Ultimate Judge is.

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Mat 5:3-12 ESV

- 3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
- 5) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- 6) "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
- 7) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
- 8) "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
- 9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
- 10) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- 11) "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
- 12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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1. See John 10:36. Jesus is referring to Psalm 82 where the judges are actually referred to as "gods" in Hebrew. ↑
2. This is in fact what the Roman Catholic Church teaches. Further righteousness is provided through the sacraments. ↑

Righteousness

What is Righteousness? Righteousness and being righteous is something that is often only partially understood and occasionally misunderstood entirely. Most from a Protestant Evangelical position will recognise righteousness as something inherited from Christ- i.e. freely given by His grace.

But what does this mean? How were people declared righteous before Christ? And what does it mean to us once we have it?



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