

Righteousness Sermon

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Verse: Romans 1:17

Confession:

Psalm 14: All fall short

Fools say to themselves, "There is no God."
"There's no one to hold us accountable. We can do what we like!
Stuff old fashioned morals, we'll do what we like!"
So they rip off the poor, devour human dignity like eating bread.

It's easy to see corruption and perversion in others
If only we were as willing to see it in ourselves.
Paul rips through our self-righteousness:
"No one is right with God, not even one.
All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"
You and I and the worst offender are equally in need of saving.

The Lord sees all of us, looking for faith, humility, goodness.
He doesn't find it here.
We can only cry - "Lord, save us from ourselves."
What of boasting? Not a chance!
What of keeping the rules? No!
Good works? Definitely not!
One thing and one thing alone sets us right with God,
the sacrifice Jesus made for us, the gift freely given of himself.

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion!
Then Jacob will rejoice, Israel will be overjoyed!

Bible Reading 1: Psalm 14

Sermon: "What on earth is Righteousness?"

I thought it was about time for a good solid meaty theology sermon ... and since I had promised to read up on Paul while I was on Study Leave I thought I'd better produce something at least about what Paul was on about.

I have chosen the hardest piece of Paul, the longest word in the New Testament and the most difficult to understand – Righteousness. I thought I'd better figure out for myself what it means. When I am working with Psalms I stumble over this word when it comes and up and I don't know how to translate it for children.

Can I start, then, by asking you what you think of when you read the word 'righteousness' in the Bible

It has the word 'right' in it, so obviously it has something to do with being right, but it is tricky to work out from the Bible who is considered right and why. ... perhaps the question is – what kind of being right is it?

The other word we tend to associate with righteousness is 'good'. For us these days we hear it through hundreds of years of church obsession about being 'good'. So is righteousness, then, our ability to keep the rules, to keep other people happy, to be 'good'?

Here is where we run into problems, because we aren't quite sure if we want to be 'good' or not! These days it is not cool to be good. If you asked most non-Christians what it means to be a Christian they might just answer 'you have to be GOOD'. No swearing, no sex, no getting grumpy ... in other words, no fun!

The down-side of course of being good is that you get accused of being 'Self-Righteous', and non-christians project that onto us, imagine us to be standing in judgment on them and their messy lives, wagging our fingers at them.

If that's what righteousness is I'm not at all sure I want it.

We probably need to dive right in to Paul and work out what he is saying about all this. Paul starts his letter to the church in Rome by launching off into a massive tirade, listing all the things he sees happening the roman society, blasting everyone left right and centre, accusing everyone of sin, hypocrisy and self-righteousness, calling down God's "wrath and fury" on it all, Jew and Greek alike. He backs this up by writing out most of Psalm 14: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one!". We've heard that already so we'll pick up his argument at chapter 3, verse 19, reading through to the

end of the chapter. It's a solid chunk of theology so if you could read along too that would be good, and please read slowly (take a breath after each sentence)

Bible reading: Romans 3:19-31

stop after verse 20:

Well, that puts paid to the idea that righteousness is keeping all the rules, being good. Paul completely destroys that theory, saying that no matter how many rules you keep you'll still not be put right with God. All law does is show us our sinfulness, he writes. Bummer. When all we wanted was a simple blueprint for a decent enough life, you know – be nice to people, work hard, love your neighbour, she'll be right.

Paul utterly de-stabilises us in 2 verses. Read on.

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Paul here is forging a whole new way through two different points of view which were tearing the early church apart, and which if I could restate them rather crudely we might recognize in our world and church today.

On one hand were the Jews. They had been taught with their mothers milk and every day of their lives – keep the law. The Torah is God's blueprint for us. Be a good Jew, keep your hands clean, stay within the fences. They believed they were God's chosen people, living out God's plan as best they could, so, well, obviously they were better than everybody else.

On the other hand were the Gentiles, the chaotic mish-mash of Greco-Roman society, a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-layered, mobile, changing world, a world of great extremes of wealth and poverty, of loose sexual ethics, a world in which women could participate freely, a world run by the mighty power of the coin and controlled by military might and the threat of violence. It was a world of many gods, pick and choose religion, fickle, dangerous gods in constant need of appeasement. Gentiles were just trying to make a living and look after their families as best they could, navigating the shifts in power, moving to a new place for work, trying to crawl up the ladder in a world with little common code of ethics or morality. Who cares about being righteous when there's money to be made or a good time to be had? Doesn't sound familiar to you at all?

To both Jew and Gentile Paul's call is simple and yet profound – have faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul is grappling for a common frame of reference for people from two utterly different world views. The common ground he puts this way:

The righteousness of God has been revealed. The Jewish law and prophets pointed to it. This righteousness of God is the person of Jesus the Messiah, and it is offered freely to each and every person who believes in him. Here there is no division, no distinction even, because each and every person has sinned and is far from God and is blind to his glory. But this free gift from the grace of God can here and now put each and every person right with God, if they choose to come in to Jesus the Christ. His suffering and death showed to all the world the righteousness of God.
(3:21-25)

Paul is doing his best to explode our categories and shatter our deepest assumptions about life is all about.

But to understand it we have to dig deeper into what the Bible means by God's righteousness. If it is not simply goodness, niceness or a moral purity gained from keeping all the rules, then whatever is it? I've been reading a rather delightful theologian called NT Wright. He defines God's righteousness as "God's saving covenant faithfulness".

Now that is a big idea ... saving, covenant, faithfulness

God is faithful. Faithful to what? Faithful to his promises.

What promises? The promises he made in his covenant with Israel.

What was the covenant? That he would be their God and they would be his people, and that he would save them from their distress, by at the right time sending a savior, the Messiah, the anointed King.

In Jesus' time, his people were pretty sure that God would keep his end of the bargain, and save them from their oppressors. They were eager to see how God would go about this. So when Jesus turned up and spoke with such authority and healed the sick and cast out demons and did miracles such as the feeding of the 5,000 with the 12 baskets of bread left over, one for each of the 12 Tribes of Israel, many people were genuinely starting to be convinced that this really was the Messiah they had been waiting for. Nothing could be more thrilling. The hopes of generation after generation were about to be fulfilled! No wonder crowds followed him everyone – not just for healings and miracles, but because this might be IT, this might be The Time ... when God would show his righteousness, his saving covenant faithfulness, in a dramatic way.

Have you ever hoped for something so bad? Have you known real longing in your heart ... maybe to be somewhere else, or maybe to have someone you love close to you again, or maybe for a way out of a stuck situation.

The people of Israel longed for the Messiah to come, to show them God's saving covenant faithfulness.

It explains, of course, the bitterness of the crowd who yelled "crucify him" that Friday morning. They felt they'd been fools to hope in this man. Nothing worse than hope dashed, trust betrayed. So, he wasn't the Messiah after all. Silly us. And to confirm this, he died on a cross, executed along with the other tricksters and troublemakers.

Romans chapter 6 Paul explains it this way:

6:6-10 "We know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin ... we have died with Christ, so we will also live with him. ... The death he died, he died to sin, once for all"

Paul makes the astonishing claim that in that in himself Jesus was both at the same time fully God present for humanity, representing God in the world AND also fully human representing all of humanity before God. This is what he means when Paul calls Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. This is what he means when he invites us to live "IN" Christ.

In a real way outside the bounds of space and time you and I were present with Jesus as he died on the cross. This is why we sing to Jesus *'you took the fall, and thought of me above all'* on the cross, not so much that a list of all the names of Christians throughout history flashed through his mind like a powerpoint on turbo, but that he opened himself up to all of humanity in all the world through all of time as he hung there on the cross.

Of course, if his death had been the end that would have got us precisely nowhere. But he carried us all with him through the grave and out the other side, bursting forth on glorious day.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus God's righteousness was revealed, says Paul. This is how God did it, this is God's saving covenant faithfulness in action – this is what it looks like, says Paul.

A big claim. As he admitted himself, it was an insult to the Jews and sounded pretty crazy to the Greeks. But then he did want to carve a way for Jew and Gentile to share together in the communities of righteousness, the church ... so what better starting point than to slack everybody off equally!

If it was just Paul's word on the subject nobody would have paid any attention and he'd have been dismissed by history as a lunatic. What happened, though, was that some people experienced it in a powerful, unexpected way. How? Through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" is a gift, something which has to be known in the heart and lived in fellowship. Jesus bought us a share in the saving covenant faithfulness of the One who made the universe. Jesus invited us into the covenant that had once been the exclusive property of the Jews. It cost him everything, but it is his free gift for you and for me.

It does have big implications for how we live, and we might well choose to live in ways that show different values from the people around us. But it's not about keeping the rules. It's not about being 'gooder' than anyone else. It is living as free members of Christ. It is knowing ourselves to be so highly valued and deeply loved that Christ died for us. This is who we are. This is our righteousness.

I want to invite you now to stand to say 'Yes' to this invitation. Renew your faith in Jesus Christ. Ask God to grow more of his righteousness in you.

Lord, we don't fully understand the mysteries of who you are
and what you have done for us.

We don't fully know you, and at times you feel far away.

Here as we stand we long for you. We place our hope in you.

Be with us, Lord Jesus Christ.

Deepen our faith in you.

Show us more of you.

Work out your righteousness more and more in our lives, we pray,
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.