



April 2015

# Righteousness

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
2014-15 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

---

## **PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE**

**Author: Rev. Herbert C. Mueller III**

Pastor, St. Peter Lutheran Church, Westgate, Iowa  
[pastorhcm3@gmail.com](mailto:pastorhcm3@gmail.com)

**General Editor: Rev. Mark W. Love**

Pastor, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Rockford, Mich.  
[markwlove@gmail.com](mailto:markwlove@gmail.com)



## FOCUS OF THE STUDY

---

“Righteousness. What is it? Simply put, righteousness is moral rectitude, goodness, the quality of being morally right or justifiable. And with that last bit on justifiable, we enter into language of vindication and salvation. The term is broad in application and scope in the Scripture. The question, however, that is perhaps lurking behind the definition is this: Whose righteousness are we talking about? Who is righteous? What does it mean that God is righteous? What does it mean that man is righteous? What or who is our righteousness before God? What is our righteousness before men?”

Martin Luther wrote perhaps the best introduction to any biblical study on righteousness in his great Galatians commentary of 1535:

*“First of all, we must speak of the argument, that is, of the issue with which Paul deals in this epistle. The argument is this: Paul wants to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness, so that we may have a perfect knowledge and know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.”*

*Over and above all these there is the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, which is to be distinguished most carefully from all the others ... . For these kinds of righteousness of works, too, are gifts of God, as are all the things we have. But this most excellent righteousness, the righteousness of faith, which God imputes to us through Christ without works, is neither political nor ceremonial nor legal nor works-righteousness but is quite the opposite; it is a merely passive righteousness, while all the others, listed above, are active. For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God. Therefore it is appropriate to call the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness ‘passive.’ This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not understand. In fact, Christians themselves do not adequately understand it or grasp it in the midst of their temptations. Therefore it must always be taught and continually exercised.”*

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

---

### Righteousness in the Old Testament

In general, righteousness in the Old Testament is used in the following ways:

- › What is fair: Deut. 33:19
  - › What judges and kings ought to be: Lev. 19:15; 2 Sam. 8:15
- God is righteous. He is morally upright and fair. We see this in conjunction with the following:
- › God’s gift of salvation: Is. 51:4–8
  - › God’s gift of deliverance: Ps. 40:9–10

God saves for His righteousness’ sake. This is especially clear in the Books of Isaiah and in the Psalms. Isaiah 51 is a beautiful poetic explanation of God’s righteousness for His people. His righteousness draws near, and His salvation goes out. God’s righteousness and God’s salvation will endure to all generations. Psalm 40 is where we see the closest

tie between righteousness, deliverance and salvation. In fact, the word “Tsedeq” is translated as deliverance in this Psalm. God’s righteous deliverance of His people is something to be proclaimed in the congregation.

1. But how is this salvation and deliverance delivered? The language of crediting, imputing and reckoning is closely related to the concept of righteousness. Read Gen. 15:4–7 and reflect.
2. The name of the Messianic king is deeply tied to the concept of righteousness and salvation. Read Jer. 23:5–6 and reflect on this concept of righteousness.

---

1 *Luther’s Works*, volume 26, p. 4–5.

## Righteousness in the New Testament

1. As with the Old Testament, many uses of the word “righteous” and “righteousness” in the New Testament are those speaking of fairness, uprightness and justness. Read and discuss the following and the relationship of each with righteousness:
  - › Qualification for overseers: Titus 1:8
  - › One who practices righteousness: 1 John 3:7
  - › Works done by us in righteousness: Titus 3:5
2. Jesus Himself is described as “the Righteous One.” Read the following and reflect in light of this: 1 John 2:1 and Acts 3:5.
3. The righteousness of God means that God dispenses justice equitably without reference to the Law by making salvation available to all humanity. Read the following and reflect in light of this:
  - › Rom. 3:21
  - › Gal. 2:21
  - › Gal. 3:21
4. In Paul’s argument in the Book of Romans, we see the clearest presentation of this idea of the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ. Read these two texts, and discuss the role of faith in the daily life of righteousness: Rom. 1:16–17 and Rom. 2:13.
5. Because both Jew and Greek have failed to keep the Law, they are all under God’s wrath. Read the following and discuss this failure and the wrath it brings: Rom. 3:10; 3:21–26.
6. In Romans 5, Paul goes on to make another wonderful case for righteousness by faith in Christ. Jesus Himself is our righteousness because He fulfilled all of the righteous requirements of the Law in our place and underwent the punishment we deserved for breaking that Law. Read Rom. 5:12–21 and Matt. 3:13–17, and then discuss the substitutionary role and righteousness of Christ.

## CONFSSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

---

### Righteousness in the Augsburg Confession

In the Augsburg Confession, the righteousness that comes by faith is a central theme. This is first seen in AC Article IV on Justification, paragraph 3. *“For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness.”*<sup>2</sup>

### Righteousness in the Formula of Concord

In the Formula of Concord, we find the clearest presentation of what the righteousness of faith is. This all came about through a controversy. Andrew Osiander attacked the proposition that God declares sinners righteous for Christ’s sake. Justification, in his understanding, was not about how God declares sinners righteous, but about how God gradually makes a person righteous by dwelling in Him with Christ’s divine nature. Justification, therefore, is a process whereby we actually become righteous because of

Christ’s indwelling righteousness. Francis Stoncaro, along with Peter Lombard, said that Christ is our righteousness only according to His human nature.

Against both parties in this debate, the theologians of the Augsburg Confession, most notably Martin Chemnitz, confessed that Christ is our righteousness, not according to the divine nature alone or the human nature alone, but according to both natures. By His perfect obedience, Christ, the God-man, redeemed us from all sins, justified us and saved us.

Note Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III. *“Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe, teach, and confess unanimously, in accord with the summary formulation of our Christian faith and confession described above, that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present,*

---

<sup>2</sup> Tappert, Theodore G., Trans., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 30.

or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.”<sup>3</sup>

The righteousness that comes from faith is not an indwelling righteousness, but it is Christ’s righteousness, that is, His total obedience under the Law and His complete sacrifice for our sins on the cross. *“The result of this righteousness is that God forgives us and counts us as holy and right. He saves us forever on account of Christ’s earlier obedience. This righteousness is offered by the Holy Spirit through the means*

*of Grace, i.e. the Gospel and the sacraments.” (See Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III, paragraphs 14–17.)<sup>4</sup>*

This results in the complete separation of our good works from justification before God. Good works do not factor into our justification before God, even in the smallest bit. Also, faith is properly defined as the only way we obtain the merit of Christ in the promise of the Gospel. The good works that we do, the renewal and new life that we experience and the virtue that we pursue are not our righteousness before God. They ought not be mixed with the doctrine of justification. (See paragraphs 37–39.)<sup>5</sup>

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

---

### Righteousness in the context of Law and Gospel, using biblical examples

Righteousness is a word used in both the Law and the Gospel.

Righteous requirements are those that God places upon us. We were originally created in righteousness and for righteousness, but we rebelled against God. Therefore, Rom. 3:10 states it clearly: “None is righteous, no, not one.”

Jesus clearly said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20) He then goes on to preach the Law in a spiritual manner (cf. vs. 21ff), that is, in a way to destroy all reliance on human self-righteousness before God and to leave only one righteousness open to us for our salvation. This is what the preaching of the Law is meant to do. Yes, it can inform. Surely it can guide a Christian. But the chief purpose of the Law is to destroy any pretention of our own righteousness, merit, worthiness or ability before God. It is to take away any prop that someone might cling to, any righteous scrap, to imprison all of that until Christ comes in the proclamation of the Gospel to set us free from sin, death and Satan.

Our righteousness, according to the Decalogue, will always be imperfect and wanting on this side of eternity. The Law of God fronts us up to this reality. Yet there is another righteousness that is pure Gospel. Here the preacher can change his whole demeanor concerning righteousness! This is no longer a demand placed upon us, but a promise given to us, a promise of redemption and salvation that the whole of Scripture speaks of. God is righteous. His righteousness is

revealed apart from the Law, but given through faith in Jesus Christ. God shows His justice in Christ, that is, our sins find their just punishment in Him. There is no legal fiction here. There is simply one standing in place of another, the righteous one for the unrighteous. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

It is of utmost importance for the Gospel preacher to help his congregation understand that the righteousness of faith is the same thing as forgiveness of sins, salvation, redemption and the non-imputation of sins. Simply put, they don’t count anymore before God because God the Father has done away with the sins in His Son, Jesus. The one who believes this has that righteousness, forgiveness, salvation, non-imputation of sins and the like applied to him by grace for Christ’s sake. There is simply nothing of ourselves in the Gospel promise; we merely receive it by faith in Jesus the propitiator. The Gospel preacher can juxtapose works and faith, as Paul does in Romans 4, or the two Adams, as Paul does in Romans 5. Here there is much comfort!

The Gospel preacher can also look forward to the revelation of this righteousness on the Last Day. It is the eager hope and expectation of the Christian to attain to the crown of righteousness, the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness dwells, and to be found in a righteousness, not his own, but that belonging to Christ. This is our righteous robe before God. And it is all delivered to us solely by faith in Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 540–541.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 541.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 546.

## False Understandings of Righteousness and the Implications

Read the following and discuss some of the implications to hearers if they have such false understandings of righteousness.

### 1. My Good Works Are Righteous Enough.

Since the biblical concept of righteousness has a general definition of what is right, just, normal and fair, one can clearly see how many Scripture passages preach the Law to us concerning our own unrighteousness before God. But Scripture goes deeper than a mere surface understanding of our unrighteousness. I remember having an extensive conversation with a fellow college student concerning good works. The topic of the conversation was simply this: Do we need Jesus' blood and forgiveness for our good works? Before men, our good works actually appear good. But before God, even our good works are as filthy rags. Even as we understand that civil righteousness and the righteousness of the Decalogue is what God desires and is attainable by us outwardly, we must clearly state that it is not our justification and salvation before God. Even that civil righteousness and righteousness of the Decalogue is acceptable before God only because of the righteousness of faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior. There is no part of a Christian's life that does not need the saving blood of Jesus, the propitiator.

This incorrect understanding of righteousness can have detrimental effects on our *koinonia* in Christ. It can lead to an understanding that, although we need the forgiveness of sins for those things that we believe are sinful, we do not need forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ for those actions which we have done that are not sinful. Any belief that we have actions that are not tainted with sin becomes a tool for the devil to take our focus off Christ and onto our own perceived uprightness. And with our eyes diverted from Christ, it is easier for righteousness to become something of a measurement between people. Our causes become righteous causes. Our positions become entrenched. We no longer see our sinfulness and our need for mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, but we see only the justice of our cause and our own righteousness in that cause. The righteousness of faith is manifested in the forgiveness of sins. Imagining ourselves to be without sins to confess, we become manifestly self-righteous and therefore unrighteous.

### 2. How Do I Know I'm Saved? Jesus Dwells in My Heart.

Another detrimental misunderstanding of righteousness can be found in the Jesus in the "us v. Jesus for us" debate. Jesus does indeed dwell in us, but Jesus in us does not make for our justification and righteousness before God. Jesus in us does indeed impel Christians to live godly lives, but

that does not make for our justification and righteousness before God either. That inchoate righteousness is not the righteousness that avails before God. The only righteousness that avails before God, that forgives sins and redeems sinners, is the righteousness of Christ, who lived a perfect life for us in our place and died on the cross for our sins. This is only appropriated by faith.

This incomplete understanding of righteousness can lead to much mischief when it comes to certainty of salvation. As Dr. Norman Nagel is fond of putting it, "Doubt is inimical to the Gospel." Any focus on Christ in us, impelling us to do good works, as being the whole or a part of our justification before God, leads to uncertainty. In turn, that uncertainty leads to a misunderstanding of righteousness as being about good deeds balancing out evil deeds, and therefore, not about Christ's suffering and death for sinners. Satan doesn't care whether we end up leaving the Christian faith in despair or becoming self-righteous pseudo-Christians. Either way, he wins. Either way, the certainty of salvation is robbed from Christians when they look to and trust their own righteousness before God, either in whole or in part, whether or not they perceive it to be impelled by Christ's indwelling. Any focus on the heart is simply focus on our sin.

## Objective Realities

Identify the ways the proper understanding of the word serves to identify the objective realities revealed in and worked by Jesus Christ for the hearers.

The proper understanding of the righteousness of God would bless and enhance our *koinonia* in Christ. If we grow in our understanding that our righteousness before God is not the civil righteousness, nor the righteousness of the Decalogue, but the righteousness of faith in Christ, it becomes easier mutually to forgive one another. Our righteousness will not consist in defending particular practices or pointing to worldly success, but to simply and humbly trust in Christ, the propitiator.

A proper understanding of the righteousness of God would also lead to greater certainty in salvation. The righteousness of God in Christ is the greatest source of certainty and joy for the Christian.

A proper understanding of the righteousness of faith in Christ alone would also help both pastors and people better understand what church is for. Church is for the proclamation of Christ's saving work for the world. It is for the delivery of the Word of God and the Sacraments. Through these, the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ the propitiator, and this faith is reckoned as righteousness before God.

## DISCUSSION

---

Perhaps some of the best discussion questions produced concerning the righteousness of faith in Christ come from a book called *The Fire and the Staff* by the Rev. Klemet Preus. Preus helped us get at the debate between the objective accomplishments of Christ and the subjective feeling or heart situation in which we find ourselves. Read through, discuss and identify which is the objective accomplishment and which is the subjective. How can these best be addressed in Bible Class setting, sermons, Confession and Absolution and the like?

1. A. I am righteous before God because Jesus lived for me in time.  
B. I am righteous before God because Jesus lives in my heart.
2. A. That righteousness that avails before God is inside of me.  
B. The righteousness that avails before God is outside of me.
3. A. God accepts me because my attitude toward God has changed.  
B. God accepts me because God's attitude toward me has changed.
4. A. I am saved because God counts the merit and worthiness of Christ to my credit.  
B. I am saved because God pours the merit and worthiness of Christ into my heart.
5. A. The righteousness that counts before God for me is the righteousness that Jesus always possessed as the Son of God.  
B. The righteousness that counts before God for me is the righteousness that Jesus earned through His life and death.
6. A. God accepts us only because of the forgiveness of sins.  
B. God accepts us also because Jesus lives in our hearts.
7. A. Justification happened 2,000 years ago and is received by faith.  
B. Justification depends on faith and did not happen 2,000 years ago.
8. A. I know Jesus lives because I feel Him in my heart.  
B. I know Jesus lives because of the Gospel.<sup>6</sup>

## SUMMARY

---

The most important thing that we should understand about the proper use of the word “righteousness” is that the proper use can give abundant comfort to the penitent sinner. The improper use robs pious consciences of this peace. Luther, in his Galatians commentary, has this beautiful way of emphasizing this point while commenting on Gal. 2:20, “Who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

*“Therefore let us learn to distinguish carefully between Christ and a lawgiver, not only in word but also in fact and in practice. Then, when the devil comes, disguised as Christ and harassing us under His name, we will know that he is not Christ, but that he is really the devil. For Christ is the joy and sweetness of a trembling and troubled heart. We have this on the authority of Paul, who adorns Him with the sweetest of titles here, calling Him the one ‘who loved me and give Himself for me.’ Therefore Christ is the Lover of those who are in anguish, sin, and death, and*

*the kind of Lover who gives Himself for us and becomes our High Priest, that is, the One who interposes Himself as the Mediator between God and us miserable sinners. I ask you what could be said that would be more joyful and happy than this? If all this is true — and it must be true, otherwise the whole Gospel is false — then surely we are not justified by the righteousness of the Law, much less by our own righteousness.”<sup>7</sup>*

---

<sup>6</sup> Preus, Klemet I., *The Fire and the Staff: Lutheran Theology in Practice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), p. 61–62.

<sup>7</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 178–179.