

"Getting 'Right' with God"
Romans 1:16-17

Romans 1:16-17 contain the most important words ever written! The key word in these verses is "righteousness," a relational word that means you are "right with God." The truth that we are saved when we receive "a righteousness from God" in Jesus Christ has changed lives and changed human history. It transformed the life of Martin Luther. His transformed life sparked the Protestant Reformation, a history-making movement that took Christians, the church, and culture back to the Bible. Could God use this passage to change your life and human history today? I believe it could! I want to make four points about this great passage today.

First is the problem of righteousness. If righteousness means "right with God," then we are not righteous, no one is! Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins." This verse rightly notes that being rightly related to God means that you always do what is right and you never sin. No one has ever lived a life like that. Later in Romans Paul writes, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God." Regardless of whether people believe what the Bible teaches about sin, they know in here that they are not right with God. That's why they're constantly trying to change themselves, improve themselves, they pursue the false salvations that religion or education or ideology or wealth or psychiatry offer. Yet what's the result of all this human effort to "get right with God"? Failure and frustration; because on our side, nothing can be done. We do not have the power, ability, insight, or "know-how" to solve the problem, to get right with God.

What makes the gospel all the more wonderful, incredible, and glorious is the fact that in our helpless state, we find in these verses that God has done something. That's our second point. He's done precisely what needs to be done. He has provided a righteousness that is exactly what we need, a righteousness that enables us to "get right" with Him. It's perfect righteousness, God's righteousness, revealed to us, made known to us in His Son Jesus. It's from Him that we learn about righteousness, it's from Him that we receive it. Jesus is righteous in the sense that He, being God, is without sin. It is always right between Himself and His heavenly Father. Jesus said in John 8:29, "The One who sent me is with me...I always do what pleases Him." And He is righteous in that He perfectly obeyed the will and law of God while He lived on earth. Jesus could truly say, "I love the Father and...I do exactly what my Father commanded me." (John 14:31). As David Martyn Lloyd-Jones has written, "Jesus rendered perfect obedience to the law; He kept every jot and tittle of it. He failed in no respect. He fulfilled God's law completely, perfectly, absolutely."

In Jesus we see, we observe, we know in the human experience that righteousness truly exists. Next we see that God offers this righteousness of Jesus Christ freely. This is the heart of the good news. If God was not willing to give His righteousness to us, knowing that perfect righteousness exists would not be good news at all. No, it would be very bad news, because it would just increase our sense of futility and failure. This is the truth that transformed Martin Luther: that God freely offers the righteousness of Jesus to us. Luther was aware that Jesus displayed a perfect righteousness, and that Jesus' life was the standard of character God rightly demands from all human beings. But Luther also knew that he did not have this righteousness, and no matter what he did, he realized he couldn't do what was needed to be done to get right with God. At that place, he admitted that he hated God in His righteousness, because God was demanding something of him he couldn't give. But then he discovered that God's righteousness is also His free gift of Jesus, His offer to "get right" with Him through Jesus' death on the cross. And that by receiving that gift, instead of standing opposed to a righteousness he could never achieve, a righteousness that accused and condemned him, Luther now

knew he could peacefully rest in and with Christ's righteousness that was now his. That was Luther's "God moment." The good news is that God freely offers His righteousness to us.

The third point of our passage tells us how we receive this righteousness: by faith. Verse 17 says, "a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" What is faith? Is it something that requires our effort, our work? No, it's opening a hand to receive the righteousness of Christ that God offers. In the Bible, faith has three elements: trust, belief, and commitment. Like righteousness, trust is a relational term. You don't put your trust in things, you put your trust in people; and in the gospel, the one you put your trust in is God's Son, Jesus Christ. Faith is also belief, affirming knowledge, truth. The focus of biblical faith is the character of God, Who He is, what He has done in sending His Son into the world, dying on a cross, raising Him from the dead. Those are statements of objective truth. That truth is true whether you believe it or not. It becomes belief when it's truth you acknowledge and accept and affirm yourself. It's saying not, "Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior," but "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior." Finally, faith is commitment, the radical choice to entrust your destiny to God and His promises.

What is the result of God's righteousness received into your life by faith? On your outline I have a pictorial presentation of what happens. The first circle on the left represents your life at point one of today's outline. You are not right with God. The minus signs represent that fact (they also represent the reality of sin in your life). When Jesus enters your life as Savior and Lord, and you claim the forgiveness of your sins that comes through His work for you on the cross, you move from the first circle to the second circle. That's forgiveness as "your sins have been washed away," "wiping the slate clean," of "getting a fresh start." I think you'd agree that the second circle is good news. It's certainly better than the first circle, but from a moral perspective, it's a wash, it's neutral. That's not enough to get "right with God." You're got to have and possess His righteousness in order to get right with Him. That takes us from the second to the third circle. When you are saved, your sins are forgiven, AND God applies to your life the righteousness of His Son, represented by the + signs. That's how you're made right with God. "Imputation" is the word used to describe God's applying the righteousness of Jesus Christ to your life. Imputation is a technical, heavy-duty theological word, I know. Not a word you use two or three times a week. But it's so important, it can change your life, the way you relate to God, to others, to yourself! Let me try to explain it to you this way. If I look at you through these red sunglasses, you're still a good-looking group, but you look red. If I look at you through these yellow sunglasses, you look yellow. If I look at you through these dark blue sunglasses, you look dark blue. When you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, God looks at you through a new set of glasses, glasses through which He sees you in the clear and perfect righteousness of His Son. That's what it means to have the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to you. When God looks at you, He sees you, and He sees the righteousness of His Son! Do you know that? Believe that? That can be life-changing!

"In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.'" At this Table, we celebrate the righteousness from God that has been revealed in His Son, we celebrate the saving work of Jesus Christ, we celebrate that in Him, we have been made "right with God," because when He looks at us, He sees the righteousness of His Son, and that makes all the difference in our lives, in this life, and in the life to come!