

John Wesley

SERMON 20

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Preached at

THE CHAPEL IN WEST-STREET, SEVEN DIALS,

on Sunday, Nov. 24, 1765

"This is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord our righteousness." Jer. 23:6.

1. *How dreadful and how innumerable are the contests which have arisen about religion! And not only among the children of this world, among those who knew not what true religion was, but even among the children of God; those who had experienced "the kingdom of God within them;" who had tasted of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." How many of these, in all ages, instead of joining together against the common enemy, have turned their weapons against each other, and so not only wasted their precious time, but hurt one another's spirits, weakened each other's hands, and so hindered the great work of their common Master! How many of the weak have hereby been offended! -- How many of the lame turned out of the way! How many sinners confirmed in their disregard of all religion, and their contempt of those that profess it! And how many of "the excellent ones upon earth" have been constrained to "weep in secret places!"*

2. *What would not every lover of God and his neighbour do, what would he not suffer, to remedy this sore evil; to remove contention from the children of God; to restore or preserve peace among them? What but a good conscience would he think too dear to part with, in order to promote this valuable end? And suppose we cannot "make" these "wars to cease in all the world," suppose we cannot reconcile all the children of God to each other, however, let each do what he can, let him contribute, if it be but two mites, toward it. Happy are they who are able, in any degree, to promote "peace and good-will among men" especially among good men; among those that are all listed under the banner of "the Prince of Peace;" and are, therefore, peculiarly engaged, "as much as lies in them," to "live peaceably with all men."*

3. *It would be a considerable step toward this glorious end, if we could bring good men to understand one another. Abundance of disputes arise purely from the want of this; from mere misapprehension. Frequently neither of the contending parties understands what his opponent means; whence it follows, that each violently attacks the other, while there is no real difference between them. And yet it is not always an easy matter to convince them of this; particularly when their passions are moved: It is then attended with the utmost difficulty. However, it is not impossible; especially when we attempt it, not trusting in ourselves, but having all our dependence upon Him with whom all things are possible. How soon is he able to disperse the cloud, to shine upon their hearts, and to enable them both to understand each other, and "the truth as it is in Jesus!"*

4. *One very considerable article of this truth is contained in the words above recited, "This is his name whereby he shall be called, the LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS;" a truth this, which enters deep into the nature of Christianity, and, in a manner, supports the whole frame of it. Of this, undoubtedly, may be affirmed, what Luther affirms of a truth closely connected with it: *in articulo stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*: The Christian church stands or falls with it. It is certainly the pillar and ground of that faith, of which alone cometh salvation; of that Catholic or universal faith which is found in all the children of God, and which "unless a man keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly."*

5. *Might not one, therefore, reasonably expect, that, however they differed in others, all those who name the name of Christ should agree in this point? But how far is this from being the case! There is scarce any wherein they are so little agreed; wherein those who all profess to follow Christ, seem so widely and irreconcilably to differ. I say seem; because I am thoroughly convinced, that many of them only seem to differ. The disagreement is more in words than in sentiments: They are much nearer in judgment than in language. And a wide difference in language there certainly is, not only between Protestants and Papists, but between Protestant and Protestant; yea, even between those who all believe justification by faith; who agree, as well in this as every other fundamental doctrine of the gospel*

6. *But if the difference be more in opinion, than real experience, and more in expression than in opinion, how can it be, that even the children of God should so vehemently contend with each other on the point? Several reasons may be assigned for this: The chief is, their not understanding one another; joined with too keen an attachment to their opinions, and particular modes of expression.*

In order to remove this, at least in some measure; in order to our understanding one another on this head; I shall, by the help of God, endeavour to show,

I. What is the righteousness of Christ:

II. When, and in what sense, it is imputed to us:

And conclude with a short and plain application.

And, I. What is the righteousness of Christ? It is twofold, either his divine or his human righteousness.

1. His divine righteousness belongs to his divine nature, as he is *hO on*, He that existeth; "over all, God blessed for ever;" the Supreme; the Eternal; "equal with the Father, as touching his Godhead, though inferior to the Father as touching his manhood." Now this is his eternal, essential, immutable holiness; his infinite justice, mercy, and truth; in all which, he and the Father are One.

But I do not apprehend that the divine righteousness of Christ is immediately concerned in the present question. I believe few, if any, do now contend for the imputation of this righteousness to us. Whoever believes the doctrine of imputation, understands it chiefly, if not solely, of his human righteousness.

2. The human righteousness of Christ belongs to him in his human nature; as he is the "Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus." This is either internal or external. His internal righteousness is the image of God, stamped on every power and faculty of his soul. It is a copy of his divine righteousness, as far as it can be imparted to a human spirit. It is a transcript of the divine purity, the divine justice, mercy, and truth. It includes love, reverence, resignation to his Father; humility, meekness, gentleness; love to lost mankind, and every other holy and heavenly temper; and all these in the highest degree, without any defect, or mixture of unholiness.

3. It was the least part of his external righteousness, that he did nothing amiss; that he knew no outward sin of any kind, neither was "guile found in his mouth;" that he never spoke one improper word, nor did one improper action. Thus far it is only a negative righteousness, though such an one as never did, nor ever can, belong to anyone that is born of a woman, save himself alone. But even his outward righteousness was positive too: He did all things well: In every word of his tongue, in every work of his hands, he did precisely the "will of Him that sent him." In the whole course of his life, he did the will of God on earth, as the angels do it in heaven. All he acted and spoke was exactly right in every circumstance. The whole and every part of his obedience was complete. "He fulfilled all righteousness."

4. But his obedience implied more than all this: It implied not only doing, but suffering; suffering the whole will of God, from the time he came into the world, till "he bore our sins in his own body upon the tree;" yea, till having made a full atonement for them, "he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost." This is usually termed the passive righteousness of Christ; the former, his active righteousness. But as the active and passive righteousness of Christ were never, in fact, separated from each other, so we never need separate them at all, either in speaking or even in thinking. And it is with regard to both these conjointly that Jesus is called "the Lord our righteousness."

II. But when is it that any of us may truly say, "the Lord our righteousness?" In other words, when is it that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, and in what sense is it imputed?

1. Look through all the world, and all the men therein are either believers or unbelievers. The first thing, then, which admits of no dispute among reasonable men is this: To all believers the righteousness of Christ is imputed; to unbelievers it is not.

But when is it imputed? When they believe. In that very hour the righteousness of Christ is theirs. It is imputed to every one that believes, as soon as he believes: Faith and the righteousness of Christ are inseparable. For if he believes according to Scripture, he believes in the righteousness of Christ. There is no true faith, that is, justifying faith, which hath not the righteousness of Christ for its object.

2. It is true believers may not all speak alike; they may not all use the same language. It is not to be expected that they should: we cannot reasonably require it of them. A thousand circumstances may cause them to vary from each other, in the manner of expressing themselves: But a difference of expression does nor necessarily imply a difference of sentiment. Different persons may use different expressions, and yet mean the same thing. Nothing is more common than this, although we seldom make sufficient allowance for it. Nay, it is not easy for the same persons, when they speak of the same thing at a considerable distance of time, to use exactly the same expressions, even though they retain the same sentiments: How then can we be rigorous in

requiring others to use just the same expressions with us?

3. We may go a step farther yet: Men may differ from us in their opinions, as well as their expressions, and nevertheless be partakers with us of the same precious faith. It is possible they may not have a distinct apprehension of the very blessing which they enjoy: Their ideas may not be so clear, and yet their experience may be as sound, as ours. There is a wide difference between the natural faculties of men, their understandings in particular; And that difference is exceedingly increased by the manner of their education. Indeed, this alone may occasion an inconceivable difference in their opinions of various kinds; and why not upon this head, as well as on any other? But still, though their opinions, as well as expressions, may be confused and inaccurate, their hearts may cleave to God through the Son of his love, and be truly interested in his righteousness.

4. Let us then make all that allowance to others, which, were we in their place, we would desire for ourselves. Who is ignorant (to touch again on that circumstance only) of the amazing power of education? And who that knows it, can expect, suppose, a member of the Church of Rome, either to think or speak clearly on this subject? And yet, if we had heard even dying Bellarmine cry out, -- when he was asked, "Unto which of the saints wilt thou turn?" -- *Fidere meritis Christi tutissimum*; "It is safest to trust in the merits of Christ;" would we have affirmed that, notwithstanding his wrong opinions, he had no share in his righteousness?

5. But in what sense is this righteousness imputed to believers? In this: all believers are forgiven and accepted, not for the sake of anything in them, or of anything that ever was, that is, or ever can be done by them, but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for them. I say again, not for the sake of anything in them, or done by them, of their own righteousness or works: "Not for works of righteousness which we have done, but of his own mercy he saved us." "By grace ye are saved through faith, -- not of works, lest any man should boast;" but wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ hath done and suffered for us. We are "justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ." And this is not only the means of our obtaining the favour of God, but of our continuing therein. It is thus we come to God at first; it is by the same we come unto him ever after. We walk in one and the same new and living way, till our spirit returns to God.

6. And this is the doctrine which I have constantly believed and taught, for near eight and twenty years. This I published to all the world in the year 1738, and ten or twelve times since, in those words, and many others to the same effect, extracted from the Homilies of our Church: -- "These things must necessarily go together in our justification; upon God's part, his great mercy and grace; upon Christ's part, the satisfaction of God's justice; and on our part, faith in the merits of Christ. So that the grace of God doth not shut out the righteousness of God in our justification, but only shutteth out the righteousness of man, as to *deserving* our justification." "That we are justified by faith alone, is spoken to take away clearly all merit of our works, and wholly to ascribe the *merit* and *deserving* of our justification to Christ only. Our justification comes freely of the mere mercy of God. For whereas all the world was not able to pay any part toward our ransom, it pleased Him, without any of our deserving, to prepare for us Christ's body and blood, whereby our ransom might be paid, and his justice satisfied. Christ, therefore, is now the righteousness of all them that truly believe in him."

7. The Hymns published a year or two after this, and since republished several times, (a clear testimony that my judgment was still the same,) speak full to the same purpose. To cite all the passages to this effect, would be to transcribe a great part of the volumes. Take one for all, which was reprinted seven years ago, five years ago, two years ago, and some months since: --

Jesu, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress:
'Midst flaming worlds in these array'd,
With joy shall I lift up my head.

The whole hymn expresses the same sentiment, from the beginning to the end.

8. In the Sermon on Justification, published nineteen, and again seven or eight, years ago, I express the same thing in these words: (P. 55) "In consideration of this, -- that the Son of God hath `tasted death for every man,' God hath now `reconciled the world unto himself, not imputing to them their' former `trespasses.' So that for the sake of his well-beloved Son, of what he hath done and suffered for us, God now vouchsafes, on one only condition, (which himself also enables us to perform,) both to remit the punishment due to our sins, to re-instate us in his favour, and to restore our dead souls to spiritual life, as the earnest of life eternal."

9. This is more largely and particularly expressed in the Treatise on Justification, which I published last year: "If we take the phrase of imputing Christ's righteousness, for the bestowing (as it were) the righteousness of Christ, including his obedience, as well passive as active, in the return of it, that is, in the privileges, blessings, and benefits purchased it; so a believer may be said to be justified by the righteousness of Christ imputed. The meaning is, God justifies the believer for the sake of Christ's righteousness, and not for any righteousness of his own. So Calvin: (Institut. 1. 2. c. 17) `Christ by his obedience, procured and

merited for us grace or favour with God the Father.' Again: `Christ, by his obedience, procured or purchased righteousness for us.' And yet again: `All such expressions as these, -- that we are justified by the grace of God, that Christ is our righteousness, that righteousness was procured for us by the death and resurrection of Christ, import the same thing; namely, that the righteousness of Christ, both his active and passive righteousness, is the meritorious cause of our justification, and has procured for us at God's hand, that, upon our believing, we should be accounted righteous by him.'" Page 5.

10. But perhaps some will object, "Nay, but you affirm that faith is imputed to us for righteousness. St. Paul affirms this over and over; therefore I affirm it too. Faith is imputed for righteousness to every believer; namely, faith in the righteousness of Christ; but this is exactly the same thing which has been said before; For by that expression I mean neither more nor less, than that we are justified by faith, not by works; or that every believer is forgiven and accepted, merely for the sake of what Christ has done and suffered.

11. But is not a believer invested or clothed with the righteousness of Christ? Undoubtedly he is. And accordingly the words above-recited are the language of every believing heart:

Jesu, thy blood and righteousness

My beauty are, my glorious dress. That is, "For the sake of thy active and passive righteousness, I am forgiven and accepted of God."

But must not we put off the filthy rags of our own righteousness, before we can put on the spotless righteousness of Christ? Certainly we must; that is, in plain terms, we must repent, before we can believe the gospel. We must be cut off from dependence upon ourselves, before we can truly depend upon Christ. We must cast away all confidence in our own righteousness, or we cannot have a true confidence in his. Till we are delivered from trusting in anything that we do, we cannot thoroughly trust in what he has done and suffered. First, we receive the sentence of death in ourselves: Then, we trust in Him that lived and died for us.

12. But do not you believe inherent righteousness? Yes, in its proper place; not as the ground of our acceptance with God, but as the fruit of it; not in the place of imputed righteousness, but as consequent upon it. That is, I believe God implants righteousness in every one to whom he has imputed it. I believe "Jesus Christ is made of God unto us sanctification," as well as "righteousness;" or, that God sanctifies, as well as justifies, all them that believe in him. They to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed, are made righteous by the spirit of Christ, are renewed in the image of God, "after the likeness wherein they were created, in righteousness and true holiness."

13. But do not you put faith in the room of Christ, or of his righteousness? By no means: I take particular care to put each of these in its proper place. The righteousness of Christ is the whole and sole foundation of all our hope. It is by faith that the Holy Ghost enables us to build upon this foundation. God gives this faith; in that moment we are accepted of God; and yet, not for the sake of that faith, but of what Christ has done and suffered for us. You see, each of these has its proper place, and neither clashes with the other: we believe, we love, we endeavour to walk in all the commandments of the Lord blameless; yet,--

While thus we bestow
Our moments below,
Ourselves we forsake,
And refuge in Jesus's righteousness take.
His passion alone,
The foundation we own;
And pardon we claim,
And eternal redemption in Jesus's name.

14. I therefore no more deny the righteousness of Christ, than I deny the Godhead of Christ; and a man may full as justly charge me with denying the one as the other. Neither do I deny imputed righteousness: This is another unkind and unjust accusation. I always did, and do still continually affirm, that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to every believer. But who deny it? Why, all Infidels, whether baptized or unbaptized; all who affirm the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to be a cunningly devised fable; all Socinians and Arians; all who deny the supreme Godhead of the Lord that bought them; they, of consequence deny his divine righteousness, as they suppose him to be a mere creature; and they deny his human righteousness, as imputed to any man, seeing they believe everyone is accepted for his own righteousness.

15. The human righteousness of Christ, at least the imputation of it, as the whole and sole meritorious cause of the justification of a sinner before God, is likewise denied by the members of the Church of Rome; by all of them who are true to the principles of their own church. But undoubtedly there are many among them whose experience goes beyond their principles; who, though

they are far from expressing themselves justly, yet feel what they know not how to express. Yea, although their conceptions of this great truth be as crude as their expressions, yet with their heart they believe: They rest on Christ alone, both unto present and eternal salvation

16. With these we may rank those even in the Reformed Churches, who are usually termed Mystics. One of the chief of these, in the present century, (at least in England,) was Mr. Law. It is well known that he absolutely and zealously denied the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, as zealously as Robert Barclay, who scruples not to say, "Imputed righteousness! -- imputed nonsense!" The body of the people known by the name of Quakers espouse the same sentiment. Nay, the generality of those who profess themselves members of the Church of England are either totally ignorant of the matter, and know nothing about imputed righteousness, or deny this and justification by faith together, as destructive of good works. To these we may add a considerable number of the people vulgarly styled Anabaptists, together with thousands of Presbyterians and Independents, lately enlightened by the writings of Dr. Taylor. On the last I am not called to pass any sentence: I leave them to Him that made them. But will anyone dare to affirm that all Mystics, (such as was Mr. Law in particular,) all Quakers, all Presbyterians or Independents, and all members of the Church of England who are not clear in their opinions or expressions, are void of all Christian experience? -- that, consequently, they are all in a state of damnation, "without hope, without God in the world?" However confused their ideas may be, however improper their language, may there not be many of them whose heart is right toward God, and who effectually know "the Lord our righteousness?"

17. But, blessed be God, we are not among those who are so dark in their conceptions and expressions. We no more deny the phrase than the thing; but we are unwilling to obtrude it on other men. Let them use either this or such other expressions as they judge to be more exactly scriptural, provided their heart rests only on what Christ hath done and suffered, for pardon, grace, and glory. I cannot express this better than in Mr. Hervey's words, worthy to be wrote in letters of gold: "We are not solicitous as to any particular set of phrases. Only let men be humbled as repenting criminals at Christ's feet, let them rely as devoted pensioners on his merits and they are undoubtedly in the way to a blessed immortality."

18. Is there any need, is there any possibility, of saying more? Let us only abide by this declaration, and all the contention about this or that "particular phrase" is torn up by the roots. Keep to this, -- "All who are humbled as repenting criminals at Christ's feet, and rely as devoted pensioners on his merits, are in the way to a blessed immortality;" And what room for dispute? Who denies this? Do we not all meet on this ground? What then shall we wrangle about? A man of peace here proposes terms of accommodation to all the contending parties. We desire no better: We accept of the terms: We subscribe to them with heart and hand. Whoever refuses so to do, set a mark upon that man! He is an enemy of peace, and a troubler of Israel, a disturber of the Church of God.

19. In the meantime what we are afraid of is this: -- lest any should use the phrase, "The righteousness of Christ," or, "The righteousness of Christ is imputed to me," as a cover for his unrighteousness. We have known this done a thousand times. A man has been reprov'd, suppose for drunkenness: "O", said he, "I pretend to no righteousness of *my own*; Christ is *my righteousness*." Another has been told, that "the extortioner, the unjust, shall not inherit the kingdom of God:" He replies, with all assurance, "I am unjust in myself, but I have a spotless righteousness in Christ." And thus, though a man be as far from the practice as from the tempers of a Christian; though he neither has the mind which was in Christ, nor in any respect walks as he walked; yet he has armour of proof against all conviction, in what he calls the "righteousness of Christ."

20. It is the seeing so many deplorable instances of this kind, which makes us sparing in the use of these expressions. And I cannot but call upon all of you who use them frequently, and beseech you in the name of God, our Saviour, whose you are, and whom you serve, earnestly to guard all that hear you against this accursed abuse of them. O warn them (it may be they will hear *your voice*) against "continuing in sin that grace may abound!" Warn them against making "Christ the minister of sin;" against making void that solemn decree of God, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord," by a vain imagination of being *holy in Christ!* O warn them that if they remain unrighteous, the righteousness of Christ will profit them nothing! Cry aloud, (is there not a cause?) that for this very end the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, that "the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us;" and that we may "live soberly, religiously, and godly, in this present world."

It remains only to make a short and plain application. And, First, I would address myself to you who violently oppose these expressions, and are ready to condemn all that use them as Antinomians. But is not this bending the bow too much the other way? Why should you condemn all who do not speak just as you do? Why should you quarrel with them, for using the phrases they like, any more than they with you for taking the same liberty? Or, if they do quarrel with you upon that account, do not imitate the bigotry which you blame. At least, allow them the liberty which they ought to allow you. And why should you be angry at an expression? "O, it has been abused!" And what expression has not? However, the abuse may be removed, and, at the same time, the use remain. Above all, be sure to retain the important sense which is couched under that expression: "All the blessings I enjoy, all I hope for in time and in eternity, are given wholly and solely for the sake of what Christ has done and suffered for me."

I would, Secondly, add a few words to you who are fond of these expressions. And permit me to ask, Do not I allow enough? What can any reasonable man desire more? I allow the whole sense which you contend for; that we have every blessing through the righteousness of God our Saviour. I allow *you* to use whatever expressions you choose, and that a thousand times over; only guarding them against that dreadful abuse, which you are as deeply concerned to prevent as I am. I myself frequently use the expression in question, -- imputed righteousness; and often put this and the like expressions into the mouth of a whole congregation. But allow me liberty of conscience herein: Allow me the right of private judgment. Allow me to use it just as often as I judge it preferable to any other expression; and be not angry with me if I cannot judge it proper to use any one expression every two minutes. You may, if you please; but do not condemn me because I do not. Do not, for this, represent me as a Papist, or "an enemy to the righteousness of Christ." Bear with me, as I do with you; else how shall we "fulfil the law of Christ?" Do not make tragical outcries, as though I were "subverting the very foundations of Christianity." Whoever does this, does me much wrong: the Lord lay it not to his charge! I lay, and have done for many years, the very same foundation with you. And, indeed, "other foundation can no man lay, than that which is laid, even Jesus Christ." I build inward and outward holiness thereon, as you do, even by faith. Do not, therefore, suffer any distaste, or unkindness, no, nor any shyness or coldness in your heart. If there were a difference of opinion, where is our religion, if we cannot think and let think? What hinders but you may forgive me as easily as I may forgive you? How much more, when there is only a difference of expression? Nay, hardly so much as that? all the dispute being only, whether a particular mode of expression shall be used more or less frequently? Surely we must earnestly desire to contend with one another, before we can make this a bone of contention! O let us not any more, for such very trifles as these, give our common enemies room to blaspheme! Rather let us at length cut off occasion for them that seek occasion! Let us at length (O why was it not done before?) join hearts and hands in the service of our great Master. As we have "one Lord, one faith, one hope of our calling," let us all strengthen each other's hands in God, and with one heart and one mouth declare to all mankind, "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS."

[Edited by David A. Higle (Theological Editor, The Wesleyan Church) for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology of Northwest Nazarene College (Nampa, ID).]

