

Our Righteousness

Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5; 13-17

When Christian singer-songwriter Matt Maher wrote the worship song Lord, I Need You, music leaders at several prominent non-denominational churches refused to use it. They took issue with the chorus: “Lord, I need you, how I need You, Every hour I need You. My one defense, *my righteousness*, Oh God, how I need You.” They argued that the Apostle Paul had been surpassingly clear in Romans 3:10, quoting the Psalmist, when he had written, “None is righteous, no not one.” How could we claim to possess righteousness (“my righteousness”) when no one can possibly be righteous in the eyes of God? The answer is that those music leaders—and an awful lot of Christians in general—do not understand righteousness.

Righteousness does not equal goodness. Certainly, in Greek and Roman philosophy, as well as in the Old Testament, righteousness meant living in obedience to whatever laws your god or gods imposed on you. For the Jews, it became wrapped up with the concept of justice—God's perfect justice expressed through human behavior. But Paul, Augustine, Martin Luther and other great Christian thinkers came to see righteousness in a rather different light. Citing Romans 1:17, Luther realized that in Christ, our righteousness has come to us from God as an act of gracious generosity. We are not righteous; Jesus Christ is righteous. But when we believe in

him as Lord and Savior, he *counts* us as righteous.

Romans 1:17: “For in (the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed through faith, for faith. For as it is written, 'Those who through faith are righteous shall live.’” The Oxford Study Bible contains a textual note which admirably summarizes this important train of thought. The “righteousness of God is a state of pardon, or acceptance by God, which is not our achievement but God's gift...” Paul cites Genesis 17 to reinforce this point: “Abraham believed God, and his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Because Abraham believed God's outlandish promises that even in extreme old age he and his wife would become the father and mother of a great nation, God *reckoned* him as righteous. God *saw* him as righteous. As Luther understood, we cannot earn God's favor. But when we trust in the plan, when we believe God's promises, God sees us as righteous. As God's faithful people.

Two historical illustrations, may help us understand not only what all this means, but also what it suggests about how we might live as followers of Christ. George Whitefield, born in 1714 into a fishing family in Gloucestershire, England, became an Anglican cleric. Working with the Wesley brothers, he helped develop a fiery theology and preaching style that resulted in the formation of Methodism. He traveled to the colonies and became the best-known preacher of the First Great Awakening, a spectacular movement that helped tens of thousands of Americans to convert to Christ. In a day when the average American male consumed about one whole barrel of whiskey every two weeks, Whitefield helped them to restrain their destructive habits

and to join churches.

But George Whitefield had a spiritual secret. He struggled to hold on to his faith in a loving God. A wrathful God, a vengeful God, he could accept. The American theologian Jonathon Edwards, co-founder of the seminary I attended, famously also traveled and preached. He stuck to one sermon, the scalding Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Lasting longer than two hours, Edwards' sermon threatened sinners with the rage of a just God. He told them God would throw them into the flames of hell if they did not renounce sin and seek righteousness, by which Edwards meant lock-step obedience with the law of God. Whitefield heard Edwards deliver this sermon in person a number of times. Curiously, it had a contrary effect on Whitefield. It caused him anxiously to read Romans over and over again, seeking to understand the true nature of righteousness and the true path to it. In the end, he decided his faith in God did not rely on God's anger. It relied on God's faithfulness to God's own promises. He died at 56 years of age, about average for that time, but his death did cut short the first Awakening. How many more souls might have found relief had he lived and preached for even a few more years?

Our other illustration of the place "our" righteousness plays in following Christ, comes from a 20th century Presbyterian theologian named Letty Russell. A member of the first class at Harvard Theological Seminary to admit women, Russell went on to earn degrees at Yale and Union, a Presbyterian institution. Following a decade in parish ministry in Harlem, she taught theology at Yale for many years. She specialized

in liberation theology and ecumenical relations, but her 1982 work Becoming Human explored how our nature and being to a great extent determine our behavior. Giving this question a theological edge meant for Russell working carefully through the first seven chapters of Romans, where the Apostle Paul wrestles with the relationship between law and grace, righteousness and salvation.

Letty Russell's studies led her to a renewed appreciation of the earliest church theologians, Origen and Augustine. These two men had come from privilege and wealth, and in their early years they had lived at least as badly as the Prodigal Son. But as they aged they began to confront the deep questions. Approaching mortality has a way of doing that. Russell taught from 1969 to 2001, years when many intellectuals forsook faith in God. She ran in the other direction. She wrote of how she could not imagine living without faith in Jesus, and that she understood with increasing clarity that even our faith itself was a gift from God. Her righteousness, she wrote, as Origen and Augustine had noted some 1,650 years before, relied entirely on God's grace. And everything else she cherished and hoped for relied on her righteousness.

Our ten verses from Romans weave in and out of a complicated argument. Like almost everything we have that Paul wrote, they can confuse us. But these verses distill down into a very simple message: Our walk with God relies on our righteousness. Our righteousness comes as a gift from God. Believe it and live!