

# Righteousness for the Unrighteous

Claude Duval Cole (1885-1968)

*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”—Romans 1:16-18*

**I**f I had but one sermon to preach and the whole world for an audience, this is the message I would bring. I must not allow a false modesty to keep me from saying that the truths of this message are most vital to every man.

Paul declares he is not ashamed of the gospel of Christ because it is the instrument God uses in saving sinners. Then he tells how it saves sinners, namely, by revealing “the righteousness of God,” or how an unrighteous man may become righteous before God. Here is the touchstone of the true gospel: it must show how a sinner can become right with a holy and just God.

1. Salvation is a dire necessity for men because they are *unrighteous*, both by inheritance and practice. Unrighteousness has been defined as any lack of conformity to or transgression of the law of God. God is a lawgiver and the failure of moral beings to obey His law makes them unrighteous in His sight. And this unrighteousness merits and must receive penal punishment from God. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”

2. Unrighteousness is *universal* among men, “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom 3:10). This means that no man is righteous by his own record, on his own account, in his own right. In himself considered, every man is ruined by the fall and cursed by the law. “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal 3:10). “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God” (Rom 3:19).

3. Every man out of Christ is *under* the moral law of God as the way of life (Rom 10:5). Many think that all were under law before the coming of Christ and that since His coming all are under grace. If this were true, all before Christ were lost and since Christ are saved. It is the function of law to punish the disobedient; it is grace that saves the disobedient. Every man is under law who has not believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is, “the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom 10:4). Every

man in Christ is under grace and sin shall not have dominion over him (Rom 6:14). The only way to be saved is to get out from under the moral law of God and the only way to get out from under it is to believe in Christ. "Who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" (1Co 1:30).

4. To be saved a man must have a righteousness that conforms to *all* that the law of God demands. Otherwise the sinner would be saved at the expense of justice. No attribute of God suffers in the salvation of sinners. The principle of justice operates in salvation as truly as in damnation, the difference being that in salvation the attributes of mercy, grace, and love come in to satisfy justice by giving up Christ to be punished by justice as the Surety of His people.

If sinners are saved it must be through a plan whereby God can remain just and yet justify the ungodly. A man was once asked if he would not like to be saved. He replied, "Yes, if God can save me without doing wrong." He could not see how God could be just without punishing him for his sins. The gospel reveals what he could not reason out, "how that Christ died for our sins" (1Co 15:3). Christ died for our sins in the sense that He was punished for them, and if He was punished for my sins then a just God will not punish me for them.

*"Free from the law, O happy condition,  
Jesus hath died, and there is remission."*

The righteousness of the believer is called "the righteousness of God." This phrase, "the righteousness of God," occurs frequently and is one of the most important and meaningful expressions in all the Bible. To be saved the sinner must have the righteousness of God, and this is what is revealed in the gospel.

### **Meaning of the Expression**

"The righteousness of God," does not mean the justice of God. God is righteous in the sense that He is just, but the gospel does not save by telling us that God is just and will give the sinner what he deserves. It is no good news to the murderer to tell him that the law will give him justice. Nor is it good news to the sinner to tell him that God will give him justice. So it is obvious that the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is not the revelation that God is personally righteous or just. Neither can the expression refer to a righteousness that God requires from the sinner. If the gospel were a revelation of the righteousness required of the sinner, it would not be good news, and could not be the means of salvation, but would be a revelation of damnation. To tell a sinner that God will save him if he will perform all the righteous acts required in the law is to mock him in his helplessness and leave him forever hopeless.

The expression we have before us refers to the righteousness God has provided for sinners. This is good news indeed! Man needs a righteousness and without it is eternally doomed, and to be told that God has provided through grace the righteousness demanded in His law is the best news ever to reach the ears of men. The gospel reveals a righteousness provided and not a righteousness demanded; a righteousness imputed (placed to the sinners account) and not a righteousness imparted; a righteousness reported from heaven, and not a righteousness exported from earth. The righteousness

of God is a garment divinely woven and not one of human manufacture. When the fig-leaf aprons of Adam and Eve would not avail, “The Lord God made coats of skins and clothed them” (Gen 3:21)—a striking type of the failure of human works in salvation.

The righteousness of God becomes the property of the sinner through faith. “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested...even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe” (Rom 3:21, 22). “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom 10:4). “Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2Co 5:21, RV). My reader, if you are lost, let me urge you to acknowledge before God and men that you have no righteousness of your own, and trust Christ for the righteousness God has provided in Him. “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God, for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation; He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa 61:10).

*“Jesus, thy robe of righteousness  
My beauty is, my glorious dress,  
Mid flaming worlds, in this arrayed,  
With joy shall I lift up my head.”*

### **The Righteousness of God Described**

**1.** As to its *Author*. Jesus Christ is the Author of this righteousness. He provided it on the cross when He was obedient unto death. He came to this earth to prepare a righteousness that the sinner needed but could not prepare for himself. “For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). This verse unmistakably teaches that we are guilty by the disobedience of Adam and righteous by the obedience of Christ. To be justified before God we must either be righteous in person or by proxy. Theoretically, there are two ways for men to be righteous before God: one is by personal obedience, the other is by the obedience of a substitute and Surety. Practically, there is but one way for men to be righteous before God. The way of personal obedience has been forever closed and barred by the fact that every man has sinned. The only way open for acceptance with God is through the obedience of Christ our Substitute and Surety.

**2.** In its *nature*. The righteousness that Christ wrought for us is two-fold. He kept the law for His people that they might have its blessings, and He met the penalty that they might not have to meet it. He obeyed all the law demanded of us and suffered all it threatened against us.

**3.** In its *extent*. The righteousness that Christ wrought for sinners reaches to every believer. (Rom 10:4; 1Co 1:30; Rom 3:21, 22; Rom 5:1; Joh 5:24). The righteousness Christ provided was not needed for Himself, for He was God. Inherently, He was the lawgiver, and prior to His incarnation He was “in the form of God,” that is, He behaved as God, and His righteousness was the righteousness of the lawgiver and not of a law-keeper. Let us distinguish between the righteousness of a lawgiver and that of a law-keeper. To be righteous as a lawgiver the law must be enforced and the disobedient punished. To be righteous as a law-keeper the law must be obeyed.

The Lord existed as a man for the sake of other men. He did not exist as a man on His own account. In His relation to the law, He existed as a man only in a representative character. As God, He had no obligations of a law-keeper. Here is an irrefutable argument for His Deity. If Jesus Christ were only a man He had personal obligations to the law of God, and all He could have done by His own perfect obedience would have been for His own sake: He could not have secured righteousness for others. A Christ who is only human, however sinless, could not be the Savior of sinners. Every mere man has his own personal obligations to the law of God and cannot answer for others. We sometimes hear people say that they would trust Jesus Christ as Savior regardless of the fact of His deity. But I make bold to say that I would not trust Him if He were only a man, however good and glorious. "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils" (Isa 2:22), that is, do not trust any man as Savior who is a created being. The eternal Son of God became incarnate, but He was not created. The Godhead of the Lord Jesus is absolutely necessary to His Savior-hood.

### **The First and Last Adam**

In 1 Corinthians 15:45 and 47, Jesus is called the second man and the last Adam. This is because He is considered not personally but representatively. Considered as an individual, He was not the second man nor the last Adam. There were many men between the Adam of Eden and the Adam of Calvary, and there have been many men since Christ. He is called the second man and the last Adam because there are but two representative men. God deals with all men through two men, and our destiny depends upon which of these two men we have our standing in before God. Believers are accepted in the Beloved (Eph 1:6) and complete in Him (Col 2:10). So, believers, considered as men, have obeyed the law in the person of their representative and substitute and are therefore righteous before God. Jesus Christ is "The Lord our Righteousness" (Jer 23:6).

*"When from the dust of death I rise  
To claim my mansion in the skies,  
E'en then shall this be all my plea  
'Jesus hath lived and died for me.'"*

4. In its *duration*. How long will the righteousness Christ provided last? No argument ought to be needed to prove that it will last forever. "Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is truth" (Psa 119:142). "For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified" (Heb 10:14).

"The righteousness of Adam or angels could only exist while they were in a state of obedience. The law was binding on them in every moment of their existence. The moment they disobeyed the advantage derived from all their previous obedience ceased" (Robert Haldane, 1764-1842).

Christ was the God-man and all that He did partook of His personal excellencies; therefore in a limited period of time He could work out a righteousness of infinite value in every respect—with respect to time as well as in other respects. "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die

in like manner: but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished” (Isa 51:6).

This righteousness wrought for us by the Lord Jesus Christ is the ground of eternal salvation. God saves sinners by providing righteousness, and this righteousness becomes ours through faith in Christ. The paradise in which Adam was placed at his creation was a paradise on earth. It could and did become corrupted and fade away. But the paradise which we by virtue of the righteousness we have in Christ is an inheritance which is incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, received in heaven for those who are kept by the power of God through faith (1Pe 1:4-5). It is on the ground of this righteousness that God justifies the believer from all things and delivers him from going down into the pit of everlasting destruction.

*“This spotless robe the same appears  
When ruined nature sinks in years;  
No age can change its glorious hue;  
The robe of Christ is ever new.”*



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