

Righteousness

What Is “Righteousness” in the Bible?

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."
(Romans 1:16-17)

<https://tinyurl.com/RightWithGod>

What is “Righteousness” in the Bible?

Discussion Questions

How would you explain “righteousness” in simple words?

Why must God define righteousness, not people?

What parts of God’s character stand out most in these verses?

How does knowing God’s righteousness change the way we see sin?

Early Christian Understanding of Righteousness

Early Christian teachers understood righteousness as:

- God’s nature.
- God’s gift.

- God's work in His people.
- They rejected the idea that righteousness is earned.
- They taught that righteousness is shared by God through faith and obedience.

This fits with apostolic teaching:

Romans 1:17 "For the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel from faith to faith, just as it is written, 'The righteous by faith will live.'"

- Righteousness flows from God to people.
- It does not rise from people to God.

Why This Matters for the Whole Study

- If we misunderstand righteousness at the start, everything else breaks.
- If righteousness starts with man, we end in pride or despair.
- If righteousness starts with God, we end in humility and trust.

This sets up the entire contrast of the study:

- **The righteousness of man** is self-made and unstable.
- **The righteousness of God** is revealed, given, and life-giving.

Expanded Discussion Questions

If righteousness comes from God's nature, how should that shape our view of morality?

Why is it dangerous to define righteousness by culture or personal experience?

How does seeing God as righteous before seeing ourselves as sinners change our response to Him?

In what ways does God's righteousness expose both our sin and our hope?

Behold the Man!

John 19:5



*“So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘**Look, here is the man!**!’”*

Ecce Homo

(“Behold the Man”)

by **Antonio Ciseri, 1871**

The title comes from **John 19:5**: *“So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, ‘**Look, here is the man!**!’”*

Subject and Scene

The painting depicts **Pontius Pilate presenting Jesus to the crowd.**

Jesus stands:

- silent

- bound

- crowned with thorns

- wearing a faded purple robe

The crowd below is chaotic and aggressive.

Roman authority stands firm and detached.

This visual tension is intentional.

Biblical Context

John 19:4–6 : *“Then Pilate went outside again and said to them, ‘Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no reason for an accusation against him.’*

So Jesus came out... When the chief priests and their officers saw him, they shouted out, ‘Crucify! Crucify!’”

Ciseri paints the moment where:

- innocence stands exposed
- power avoids responsibility
- the crowd demands judgment

Theological Emphasis

This is not a sentimental Christ.

Jesus is:

- humiliated
- restrained
- visibly human

Yet He stands above the crowd, literally and morally.

This reflects **Isaiah 53:7**: *“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.”*

Ciseri emphasizes:

- moral contrast, not drama
- silence over spectacle
- righteousness without defense

Connection to this Study Theme

This image visually captures:

the righteousness of God standing silent

the righteousness of man expressed through law, crowd pressure, and political calculation

Pilate represents system-driven order.

The crowd represents fear-driven morality.

Jesus represents God’s righteousness without control.

John 18:36 : *“My kingdom is not from this world.”*

That contrast is the heart of the painting.

Uncertainty

The Soil of Human Righteousness

Uncertainty, Human Righteousness, the Rise of Man-Made Systems

- From the beginning, sin introduced uncertainty.
- When man lost trust in God, he gained fear.
- Fear demands control.
- Control produces systems.

Genesis 3:10 “I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”

Fear leads people to ask:

Am I safe?

Am I accepted?

Am I right?

Instead of resting in God's righteousness, humans build substitutes.

Uncertainty → Systems → Culture → “Path to Good Life” → Enforcement
(...against those who threaten or question the Systems)

Pharisees - Cultural Codes - God had stopped speaking to them and hadn't sent a prophet to them in about 400 years. So, they believed that if every Israelite were to perfectly observe all 613 commands in the Torah, then it would appease God and He would restore the Judean kingdom in Israel.

Uncertainty, Human Righteousness, and the Rise of Man-Made Systems

Cultural Identity – the Pharisees, the Sadducees – Developed Theological Systems – Drove Culture – Enforced Their Own Righteousness

- The Levites (scribes and priests) were prohibited from owning their own land, so they depended on contributions for food and goods.
- That also means they never had to work the land or do the manual labor needed to produce what they ate.
- They were of a higher class in society and culture.
- They were insulated from the consequences of their own teaching.
- Jesus identifies this problem...
- It's easy to write a law that says “don't pick heads of grain on the Sabbath because that's work” when you yourself are never starving or hungry enough to consider doing that.

- **Matthew 23:4** : *“They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to life a finger to move them.”*

How does this relate to the Church today?

- This same generalized pattern leads to Churches forcing truth-tellers out of the community for making everyone else uncomfortable.
- Once the truth-tellers are gone, though, the culture inevitably loses touch with reality.

When the people creating the systems and creating the culture and enforcing their own righteousness don’t experience the consequences of what they teach then they will always drift farther from reality.

But, we have God’s word...! (they said)

- When the religious leaders drifted away from truth, they didn’t see any difference between God’s word and their own words about God’s word.
- Do we (i.e. broader Christendom) have a similar problem today?
 - Is the Bible silent on some cultural topics? (Does the Bible provide clarity on all cultural topics?)
 - Does this cause uncertainty?
 - How do we deal with that...? Extrapolate using Human Reasoning?

Consequences

- Just like in Jesus’ time, things get harmful when you have this combination of culture that has drifted from reality and teachers who stop seeing any difference between their extrapolations from scripture and the actual scripture itself.
- They have stopped teaching with humility and all those personal beliefs and interpretations get codified into man-made systems of theology.
- Some will benefit... some will be harmed.
- There are a lot of instinctual and emotional forces working against those who seek God’s righteousness in every aspect of their life’s.
- When humans elevate their systems of theology to be indisputably correct (certain), then they are essentially claiming to be God.
- The “system” and “cultural norm” makes them feel certain. They want that feeling more than they respect Truth.

We won’t be able to withstand the culture around us if we aren’t SECURE IN HIM first. Trust and Obey.

We need to prioritize Christ as Truth personified and respect God’s Word as His revelation of truth accordingly. Human interpretation or extrapolation are theory only.

We need to prioritize relationship... this is the heart of the New Covenant, relationship with God Himself, and relationship with one another. (Matthew 22)

Relationship can be uncertain, messy, not logical. Systems are certain, logical. But, relationships are better, spiritual, and meaningful, and come with God's blessings.

Uncertainty Leads to Systems

What People Crave...

Why Uncertainty Pushes Us to Create Systems

- Uncertainty makes people crave stability.
- Systems promise clarity.
- Rules feel safer than trust.
- Formulas feel safer than faith.

Romans 10:3 *"For ignoring the righteousness that comes from God and seeking instead to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God's righteousness."*

Paul does not say they rejected righteousness.
They created their own.

Human righteousness reduces fear by:
Defining who is "in" and who is "out".
Measuring worth by performance.
Rewarding conformity.

Systems and Theology

From Uncertainty to Control

Theology Can Become a Righteousness System

- Theology itself is not the problem.
 - Self-trust is.
- When theology is used to manage uncertainty, it becomes a system of control.
- Jesus confronted this directly.

Matthew 23:4 *“They tie up heavy loads, hard to carry, and put them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.”*

- The Pharisees built certainty through precision. But their righteousness was external.
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Replacing God's Righteousness

Ideology – Cultural Morality

Ideology as a Replacement for God's Righteousness

- Ideology promises moral clarity without God.
- It defines:
 - Good and evil.
 - Insiders and outsiders.
 - Acceptable behavior.
- The Bible does not define righteousness by culture, feelings, or majority opinion. The Bible defines righteousness by God's character.

Isaiah 5:20 *“Those who call evil good and good evil... are as good as dead.”*

Isaiah 33:22 *“For the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will deliver us.”*

Regardless of God's display of righteousness, mankind, throughout history, has sought to establish himself as the measure of all things. Why?

- Ideology thrives on fear and division.
- It offers identity without repentance.
- This is human righteousness wearing modern clothes.

Ideology as a Replacement for God's Righteousness

Biblical Righteousness Is Relational, Not Cultural

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- It defines righteousness by God.

Isaiah 33:22 *“For the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will deliver us.”*

- When people define righteousness, it shifts.
- What is “right” today may be “wrong” tomorrow.
- When God defines righteousness, it is stable and true.
- This is why Scripture consistently warns against doing what is “right in one's own eyes”

Judges 21:25 *In those days there was no king in Israel; **everyone did what was right in his own eyes.***

From Cultural Morality to Cultural Norms

Social Contracts

Social Contracts and the Righteousness of Man

- A social contract says:
 - *I will behave if you do.*
 - *I will accept you if you follow the rules.*
 - *We are righteous because we agree.*
- This is not covenant.
 - It is transaction.

Romans 2:14–15 *“For whenever the Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature the things required by the law... they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.”*

- Social contracts appeal to conscience.
 - But they cannot transform the heart.
- They manage behavior.
- They do not produce righteousness.

Moral Assurance

Feeling Righteous

Why Social Contracts Feel Righteous

- Social contracts reduce chaos.
 - That feels moral.
- They create predictability.
 - That feels safe.
- But safety is not righteousness.

Jeremiah 17:5 *“Cursed is the one who trusts in human beings... and whose heart turns away from the LORD.”*

Social contracts replace trust in God with trust in consensus.

Covenant versus Contract

Knowing God is Relationship – Covenant Faithfulness

Apostolic Contrast: Covenant vs. Contract

- God does not relate by contract.
 - He relates by covenant.
- A contract is based on mutual performance.
- A covenant is based on God's faithfulness.

Hebrews 8:10 *"I will put my laws in their minds, and I will inscribe them on their hearts."*

- God's righteousness does not come from agreement.
 - It comes from transformation.
- Early Christians rejected civic morality as a basis for righteousness.
 - They lived by allegiance to Christ, not social approval.

Covenant Faithfulness, Trust, and Grace

How Systems Deal with Grace

Why Human Righteousness Always Hardens

- Systems cannot tolerate grace.
 - Grace introduces risk.
- Systems demand certainty.

Galatians 2:21 *"I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing."*

The Root Issue Is Trust, Not Knowledge

Human righteousness is not created because people lack information. It is created because people fear dependence.

Trust feels risky.

Systems feel secure.

But only trust leads to life.

When certainty replaces trust, Christ becomes unnecessary.

Summary

Foundations of Man's Righteousness

- Uncertainty drives fear.
- Fear demands control.
- Control creates systems.
- Systems produce human righteousness.

- Social contracts, theology, and ideology all become substitutes when they replace trust in God's righteousness.

- The gospel does not remove uncertainty. It relocates trust.

Proverbs 3:5 *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding."*

Behold the Man!

John 19:5



Pharisaic Righteousness: Managing Uncertainty With Religious Systems

1. Pharisaic Righteousness: Managing Uncertainty With Religious Systems

Pharisaic righteousness did not start with rebellion.

It started with fear.

Israel feared losing identity, purity, and God's favor.

So they built layers of rules to protect themselves.

Jesus exposes this.

Matthew 23:23

"You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness."

The Pharisees were not rejecting righteousness.
They were trying to control it.

How uncertainty shaped their system

Fear of disobedience led to rule expansion
Fear of impurity led to separation
Fear of judgment led to performance-based assurance

Their system promised certainty:

If I do this, I am righteous.
If I avoid that, I am safe.

Jesus shows the flaw.

Luke 18:9

“Jesus also told this parable to some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else.”

Confidence replaced trust.
Comparison replaced repentance.

This is the righteousness of man wearing religious clothing.

2. Modern Church Culture: New Systems, Same Instinct

The forms change.
The instinct stays the same.

Modern churches often rebuild Pharisaic righteousness without realizing it.

Common modern versions

Moral performance as spiritual proof

Doctrinal precision as righteousness

Political alignment as holiness

Ministry output as faithfulness

None of these are evil on their own.

They become dangerous when they provide identity and assurance.

Galatians 3:3

“After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort?”

Uncertainty drives this.

Fear of being wrong

Fear of being excluded

Fear of losing control

So systems form:

behavioral codes

cultural expectations

unspoken social contracts

You belong if you comply.

You are “righteous” if you align.

This is not covenant.

It is managed morality.

3. Faith-Based Obedience vs System-Based Morality (Scriptural Contrast)

A. Faith-Based Obedience

Faith-based obedience flows from trust.

It begins with God's action, not ours.

Romans 4:5

"But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Key traits:

obedience grows from relationship

repentance stays central

humility remains possible

love fulfills the law

Galatians 5:6

"The only thing that matters is faith working through love."

Faith does not remove obedience.

It roots obedience in trust.

B. System-Based Morality

System-based morality flows from fear.

It begins with control.

Colossians 2:20–23

“Why do you submit to them as if you lived in the world? ... They have the appearance of wisdom... but they are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

Key traits:

obedience replaces trust

rules replace conscience

conformity replaces transformation

pride or despair results

Systems can shape behavior.

They cannot produce righteousness.

C. Jesus' Summary of the Difference

Matthew 5:20

“Unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

“Beyond” does not mean *more rules*.

It means a different source.

One comes from man upward.

The other comes from God downward.

Final Synthesis

Pharisaic righteousness, modern church systems, and moral ideologies all share the same root:

Uncertainty without trust.

So humans:

build systems

form contracts

enforce conformity

call it righteousness

But God offers something else.

Romans 1:17

“The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel from faith to faith.”

God’s righteousness is not negotiated.

It is revealed.

And it is received by trust, not managed by systems.