

Doctrinal Statements (4): Righteousness

When considering the subject of righteousness it is important to notice its link with justification. We noted that justification means to declare a person righteous. Justification affects my standing. I was once guilty, but through faith in Christ I have been declared righteous by the highest court in the universe (Rom 8:1). In Greek, as in Hebrew, the words which we translate in English as righteousness and justification belong to the same word group. It is difficult to define either the Hebrew or Greek words in question by a single English equivalent. As W. E. Vine notes, “(*dikatosyne*, *Strong’s* #1343) is the character or quality of being right or just.” The words “righteous” and “righteousness” include the ideas of a right relationship and standing before God. This will lead to right actions in my life and anything that is right or just which conforms to the will of God.

Righteousness – The essential character of God

Righteousness is manifested in the essential character of God, as Psalm 97:2 intimates. “Clouds and darkness are round about Him: Righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne.” The righteousness of God is as eternal as His person (Psa 119:142). His actions (Dan 9:14), rule (Jer 9:23-24), faithfulness (Neh 9:8), justice (Gen 18:25), and law (Rom 7:12), are all righteous. When the Lord Jesus prayed prior to entering into the Garden of Gethsemane, He addressed God as “Father” (John 17:1), “Holy Father” (John 17:11), and “O righteous Father” (John 17:25). It has often been pointed out that, in regard to His nature, God is holy, and in regard to His character, God is righteous. The way that the Saviour addressed God is an example for us. When we pray, we should be conscious that we are speaking to the same God and we need to approach Him with utmost reverence.

Righteousness – Manifested in the Lord Jesus

In the Old Testament testimony is given to the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. We are reminded from prophets such as Isaiah, “By His knowledge shall My righteous servant justify many” (Isa 53:11). He is called the “Branch of righteousness” (Jer 33:15) and “just” (Zech 9:9). Testimony is also given to Him in the New Testament; Pilate’s wife said “Have thou nothing to do with that just man” (Matt 27:19). The centurion at the cross said, “Certainly this was a righteous man” (Luke 23:47). He is referred to as “the just” (Acts 3:14; 1Peter 3:18), “the righteous judge” (2Tim 4:8), and as the “righteous” (1John 2:1). As believers, we rejoice to consider One Who moved for God in a scene of defilement, Who in His own person was, and is, intrinsically holy and righteous.

Righteousness – As revealed by the gospel

From the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, we have tried by works or human effort to gain favour with God. Of the 14 indictments presented against mankind in Romans 3:10-18, the first of these reminds us, “There is none righteous, no not one.” We are defiled by sin and any effort of our own will never attain a righteous standing before God (Isa 64:6; Rom 10:3). We are reminded that salvation is “not by works of righteousness

which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us” (Titus 3:15). One of the major themes emphasized in the book of Romans is righteousness. The noun form (*Strong’s* #1343) occurs 36 times in the book. The book opens with three personal affirmations from Paul. “I am debtor” (Rom 1:14), “I am ready”(v15), and “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ”(v16). He then proceeds to cite the reasons why he is not ashamed of the gospel. Inherent in this message is “the power of God unto salvation.” In this message the “righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom 1:17).

This phrase, “the righteousness of God,” has been interpreted in different ways. Some have suggested that it means the righteousness which God Himself exercises, or righteousness as an attribute or quality of God. These do not fit the context of Romans 1:17 or Romans 3:21, 22. “The righteousness of God,” expresses origin. Taken in this sense, it is a righteousness which comes from, and is provided by, God. As Leon Morris states, “In which case the whole expression means ‘a righteousness from God,’ ‘the right standing which God gives,’ a meaning which is required in Romans 3:21, 22; 10:3, etc. and is made abundantly plain by the use of the preposition in Philippians 3:9.” This righteousness from God is “received by faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:22).

One of the errors taught by the reformers, and which is still perpetuated today, is that, by faith, we received the righteousness of Christ, and that the righteousness of His life is imputed to the believing sinner. This is unbiblical, as the phrase “the righteousness of Christ” is not mentioned in the Scriptures. Our standing before God is not based on the righteous life of the Lord Jesus, it is based on His atoning death. At conversion, we did not receive the personal righteousness of Christ; one person’s personal righteousness cannot be transferred to another. We have received a righteous standing before God, which was provided by God through the death of the Lord Jesus.

Righteousness – Marking the lives of believers

The New Testament makes it clear that a Christian’s life should be marked by righteousness. We are reminded “that we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Titus 2:12). Righteous living should characterize the lives of all believers (2Tim 2:22). The results of such will be manifested in a coming day at the marriage of the Lamb (Rev 19:8-9).

Righteousness – In the millennial and the eternal state

It would be hard to conclude without mentioning that righteousness will mark the millennial reign of the Lord Jesus. In this 1000 year period, “a king shall reign in righteousness” (Isa 32:1). In the millennium, righteousness will reign, however, in the eternal state, righteousness will dwell. “Nevertheless, we, according to His promise look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2Peter 3:13). As believers living in a world of sin and unrighteousness, we echo the sentiments of John, “Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20).

