

RIGHTEOUSNESS

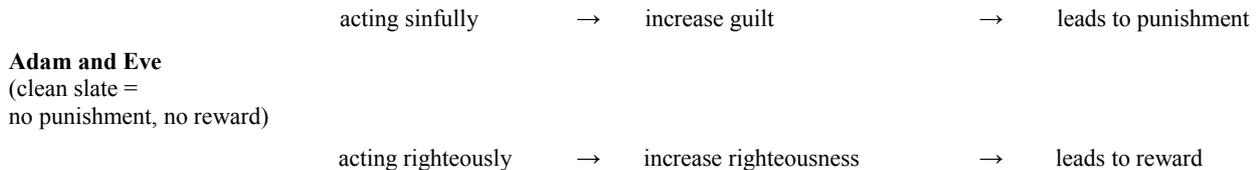
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*Phil. 3:8-9 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having **my own righteousness**, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, **the righteousness which is from God by faith***

In the Bible and in the confessions, the word righteousness is often used in a very specific way which may seem uncommon. In this sense, righteousness is something you can *possess*. Apart from Christ a man can only come to righteousness by acting *rightly* (i.e. according to God's law). The opposite of this is acting unrighteously (i.e. in violation of God's law) by which you come to possess guilt and not righteousness.

Righteousness can therefore be described as *positive* credit. It is not to be identified with innocence. Innocence only says that a person has not acted improperly. It says nothing about whether that person has acted righteously and therefore gained righteousness.

The position of Adam and Eve before the Fall provides us with a simple example. Straight after their creation they stood before God with a clean slate. They had done nothing good nor bad. Two possibilities presented themselves. By serving God according to His Word they could gain righteousness. But if they chose the way of sin (= acting in violation of God's law) they would accumulate guilt.



In normal social intercourse (the relationship between people) life is an interplay between these two pathways. If someone regularly acts righteously and thus gains righteousness we call him a "righteous man." He may sometimes fall into sin, but by sincere repentance and the willingness to make reparation for his sin he removes his guilt.

In God's civil law, the penalty provided for a crime is aimed at removing the guilt over against the victim. If someone steals 100 dollars from his neighbour, he must, according to the law (Exod. 22:4), return the money (restitution) and in addition pay a fine of the same value (punishment). He therefore gives 200 dollars to the victim. God asks the victim to be satisfied with this. The guilt is erased and the thief has – as far as this incident is concerned – a clean slate.

The major problem with humanity comes when we acquire guilt before the almighty creator of heaven and earth. Every sin (however large or small) accrues an unprecedented large amount of guilt. (This has to do with the fact that every sin is a violation of the sanctity of a Being so much more majestic than we are. On a human level, compare the difference between spitting in the face of your neighbour and spitting in the face of the queen). The punishment for every sin against God is so great that we are never able to pay it. This fact condemns every sinful man to an eternity in hell.

It is this hopeless situation into which God springs with his gospel. Jesus Christ was found willing to humble himself and become a man. He wanted to take our place before God. As a man he lived in obedience to God even unto the death on the cross without ever sinning. He therefore obtained a perfect righteousness. He underwent the gruesome punishment of death on the cross to bear God's wrath against the sins of men. He bore this punishment in love in order to save his sheep. When people bind themselves through faith to Christ and identify with him (they form part of his body, in the Lord's Supper they symbolically eat and drink his

body and blood) then the value of his crucifixion is attributed to them. Thus their guilt is paid off and their sins are forgiven. Due to this faith, they can say that they have been crucified *with Christ* and thus have paid for their sins in full (cf. Gal . 2:19).

But it does not stop here. If this was everything, they would indeed have a clean slate before God, but still no positive credit with Him, which would deserve a reward. Through faith in Christ not only the value of the crucifixion is reckoned to them, but also the personal *righteousness* of Christ, that He obtained in his life on earth. In this way the believer obtains the reward of eternal life on the basis of this righteousness, which was earned by Christ. This also stems from the fact that the believer identifies totally with Christ by faith. The Confession puts it this way (after having explained that our complete salvation is to be found in Jesus Christ):

Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we are justified by faith apart from observing the law (Rom. 3:28). Meanwhile, strictly speaking, we do not mean that faith as such justifies us, for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness; He imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place. Therefore Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and faith is the instrument that keeps us with Him in the communion of all His benefits. When those benefits have become ours, they are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins. (Belgic Confession art. 22)

It may therefore be stated in this way: that through faith in Christ an *exchange* takes place. Our guilt is exchanged for the righteousness of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

We can attempt to summarise all of this as follows:

Sins must *be put right* before God. Sin is a violation of God's *holiness*. Because God is righteous, He must punish sin to set the record straight. But God is *merciful*. He permits another to make our payment through an exchange. This person must be both *human* (to pay for human sin) and *God* (to be able to bear the full extent of God's wrath within a limited time so that he can pay the complete penalty and that for more than one person). This exchange is achieved by trusting in Christ with true *faith* whereby a spiritual *unification* with Christ is achieved. This union is so strong that it can be said that we ourselves hung on the cross with Christ and bore God's wrath and therefore share in Christ's righteousness and the reward which that righteousness yields. From this faith flows a grateful life according to God's law because Christ lives in us. God's law no longer accuses and threatens the believer.

God = Judge

| We | Exchange by unification with Christ | Jesus |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <i>accusation</i> : transgression of the law | ↔ | <i>justification</i> : obedience to the whole law |
| <i>state</i> : sinful / guilty | ↔ | <i>state</i> : obedient / righteous |
| <i>characteristic</i> : sin / guilt | ↔ | <i>characteristic</i> : righteous |
| <i>punishment</i> : eternal death | ↔ | <i>reward</i> : eternal life |