



# The Plumbline

Assessing Current Teachings, Issues and Events with Scripture

## **The Gift of Righteousness** **at Christmas, all year long and for eternity**

Long before Saint Nicholas started Christmas gifts and long before the medieval church started Christmas. God gave us the Unspeakable Gift of Jesus our Savior But more specifically the Gospel gives the gift that keeps on giving, namely "the gift of righteousness." This is not my invention for Romans speaks of the "gift of righteousness." Romans 5: 17 : " because one man's (Adam) trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ." Indeed, we all understand about giving gifts at Christmas now let us also celebrate the "gift of righteousness." A gift is a gift and the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus is a pure unearned gift. Mike Riccardi in the blog "Cripplegate" masterfully describes the "righteousness of God" that is at the center of the Gospel and the meaning of justification. The Greek word for "justification" is derived from the Greek word righteousness and can be translated as "being made righteous."

As John MacArthur has often said, there are only two categories of religion in the world: (a) the religion of human achievement, where man works to achieve his own righteousness; and (b) the religion of divine accomplishment, where God accomplishes righteousness on man's behalf and then freely gives that righteousness as a gift. The religion of divine accomplishment is Christianity. The religion of human achievement is every other religious system in the history of mankind. These two religions are delineated very carefully in Philippians 3:9 (L).

### **The Source of Righteousness**

Note first the source of saving righteousness. Paul says, "...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 religion of human achievement, the source of righteousness is law-keeping. There is some moral and/or ritualistic standard by which man is to order his life, and if he does that successfully, he may achieve a righteousness that is acceptable to his god. He earns his righteousness by keeping a law—by doing good works—whether that's the Law of Moses or Roman sacramental system, his hope is that obedience to that standard is able to provide righteousness.

But in the religion of divine accomplishment, the source of righteousness is *God Himself*. In Galatians 3:21 {L}, Paul says that no law has been given which is able to impart life. Because of humanity's total depravity—because the depth of our sinfulness runs to the very core of our being—the only thing that law could do was to arouse our sinful passions and demonstrate our inability to obey as we ought. That's why Paul says in Romans 3:20 {L}: "...by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in [God's] sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." Because we are sinful to the core, the standards of God's righteousness can never free us from sin; they can only point out where we have continued to fall short of God's standard.

And so Paul doesn't want a righteousness that is sourced in the law; no such thing could exist! Rather, he says, "But now *apart* from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested...even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom 3:21 {L}). Paul says, "My old way of life in Judaism could only have provided me a righteousness sourced in the Law. But that kind of righteousness could never save. I count that kind of righteousness as refuse, for the sake of gaining Christ. Because in *Him*, I have the righteousness which comes *from God*."

### **The Basis of Righteousness**

Secondly, notice the basis of saving righteousness. In the religion of human achievement, the basis of righteousness is man's own obedience. Paul says at the beginning of verse 9, "...not having my *own* righteousness...." He says, "I don't want *my own* righteousness. I don't want a righteousness that is *intrinsic* to me, based upon my own obedience. The righteousness that saves must be *outside of me*. It must be," as the Reformers called it, "*an alien* righteousness."

And the religion of divine accomplishment provides an alien righteousness. Paul says he wants to be found having the righteousness "which is through faith in *Christ*." Now, whatever you put your faith in for righteousness is the *basis* of your righteousness. Paul says the true Christian trusts *Christ* for righteousness. He puts his faith in the alien righteousness of *Christ* to earn his acceptance before God.

All of us have broken God's law. Romans 3:23 {L} says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But the Lord Jesus Christ paid the penalty that the law required when He died on the cross for the sins of His people. And He not only paid the law's penalty but also obeyed all the *positive* demands of the law as well. And the good news is that when a sinner turns from his sin and puts his faith in Christ for righteousness, God treats Christ as if He lived *your* life and punishes Him on the cross, and then God treats *you* as if

you lived *Christ's* life and gives you eternal life. That's 2 Corinthians 5:21 {L}: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the *righteousness of God in Him.*"

And so Paul says the basis of justification isn't our own intrinsic righteousness that we've obtained by our own good works. No, the basis of our righteousness is the *alien* righteousness of Christ that He achieved by dying in our place to pay sin's penalty, and by living in our place to accomplish righteousness. Judaism could only ever get Paul his own righteousness. And so he counts that righteousness as *refuse* so that he may be found in Christ. Because united to *Him*, he gains the righteousness of Christ Himself.

### **The Means of Righteousness**

Third, we need to understand the means by which Christ's righteousness can be counted to be ours. And it's very clear in this text. Paul repeats it. He says, "...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.*"

This is the foundational doctrine of the New Testament—the very heart of the Gospel. Sinners cannot be made right with God by earning their own intrinsic righteousness by keeping commandments—whether the Law of Moses or any other law. No, Paul says, Romans 3:28 {L}, "For we maintain that a man is justified *by faith apart from works of the Law.*"

Why is faith so key to all of this? Well, in Romans 4:16 {L}, Paul makes a comment that exposes the logic of salvation. He says in that text, "For this reason, it [i.e., salvation] is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace." Salvation is by *faith*, in order that it may be in accordance with grace. Paul is teaching us that there is something inherent in the nature of faith that uniquely corresponds with the free gift of God's sovereign grace. Paul says elsewhere that if works have any part of salvation, "grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6 {L}). Rather than being the ground upon which we boast, faith is "something which looks out of self, and receives the free gifts of Heaven as being what they are—pure undeserved favor. ... Faith justifies, not in a way of merit, not on account of anything in itself, ... but as uniting us to Christ" (Andrew Fuller).

Now that is so important, because if my righteousness depends on my doing anything, it becomes *my own* righteousness. It is no longer an *alien* righteousness, and it is *not* the righteousness of God. Faith is then made into a work, and then grace is no longer grace. If any part of justification is *our doing*—if we contribute to the *basis* of our righteousness in

any way—then there is no Gospel, and we are all damned in our sins. God's holiness is so magnificently perfect, His standard is so high, and our depravity is so pervasive, that all of our righteousness must be a free gift of His sovereign grace, because we could never earn it.

### **The Hope of Righteousness**

And if it wasn't that way, friends, we could never taste the sufficiency of Christ in justification. We could never know Jesus in the way that we do now, as He is all the ground of our righteousness. If there was something we could do that could contribute to our justification, there would be something we could do that could disqualify us from it.

But because your righteousness is an *alien* righteousness—because your salvation depends on the righteousness of *another*: the perfect righteousness of the Son of God Himself—you never have to fear that your justification is in jeopardy. If you have truly been born again, if you have been granted the gifts of repentance and faith, and if you presently abandon all hope in a righteousness of your own derived from commandment-keeping, you are justified! You can never be lost! **You are as secure in your salvation as Christ is righteous.** You can cry with the hymn writer: "Upward I look and see *Him* there who made an *end* to all my sin!" and "Behold *Him*, there, the Risen Lamb! My perfect, spotless *righteousness!*" and "Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free. For God the Just is satisfied to look on *Him* and pardon me."

There is Jesus, our perfect, spotless, righteousness, who ever lives to make intercession for His people (Heb 7:25 {L})—ever pleading our case before the Father: that He lived, died, and rose again on our behalf—that He has accomplished the righteousness that we could not, and that we have been united to Him by faith. And because of the righteousness of Christ, God graciously counts us to be righteous before Him.

This is the Gospel that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. This is the Gospel in which the righteousness of God is revealed. "

A joyous Christmas and a blessed New Year.

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