



## The righteousness of god

Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup> & 3.<sup>21-22</sup>

### Introduction

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If we were to identify a “foundational” scripture for the LDS Church, we might with justification point to James 1.<sup>5</sup>—“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upraideth not; and it shall be given him.” This scripture inspired the Prophet Joseph Smith, led him to experience his own personal redemption from sin, and set him on his way to all that he accomplished in the Restoration.

By the same token, Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup> might justifiably be thought of as “foundational” for the protestant movement, itself preparatory for the Restoration. This passage was instrumental in Martin Luther’s understanding of the gospel message, *his* personal redemption, and his efforts to reform Christianity in his day. In what has been called “The Tower Experience,” Martin Luther tells us the following about these verses.

“I had been captivated with a remarkable ardor for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans. But up until then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single saying in chap. 1, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ that stood in my way. For I hated that word ‘righteousness of God,’ which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically of the formal or active justice, as they called it, by which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unrighteous. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with a most disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, indeed, I hated the righteous God who punishes

sinners. Secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

“Finally by the mercy of God, as I meditated day and night, I paid attention to the context of the words, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. This, then, is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, viz. the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous one lives by faith.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of all Scripture showed itself to me. And whereas before ‘the righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven. Then I ran through Scripture, as I could from memory, and I found an analogy in other terms, too, such as the work of God, i.e., what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Such foundational importance of Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup> justifies an in depth examination of the passage and its teachings.

#### Thesis and inclusion

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In addition to being foundational for the Reformation, Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup> also serves as a kind of thesis statement within the Book of Romans itself. It introduces one of Paul’s principle themes found in Romans, particularly Romans 1-5—the “righteousness of God.”

After presenting this thesis statement, Paul leaves behind the subject of the “righteousness of God” in order to spend the remainder of chapter 1, all of chapter 2, and chapter 3.<sup>1-20</sup> on the question of sin and its dire effects. In this portion of the book, Paul establishes that “all have

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “Preface to Latin Writings [1545],” in *Luther’s Works* 34:336-37; WAusg 54.185-86

sinned and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> Put differently, Paul asserts, with the authority of the Old Testament as his support, that there is no *self-generated* “righteousness” to be found among mankind. “There is none righteous, no not one.” Paul’s point seems to be that while righteousness resides independently within the Being of God, it does not do so within mortal beings. Yet, Paul maintains that mortals can be considered righteous before God through faith. We will discuss this important doctrine in a separate homily.

Having established that there is no righteousness to be found among man—with or without law—Paul, essentially, restates his thesis statement from 1.<sup>16-17</sup> in 3.<sup>21-22</sup>. Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup> through Romans 3.<sup>21-22</sup>, then, forms what is commonly called an *inclusio*. The two passages bracket, or envelope the intervening materials. The structure itself serves as an important clue as we seek to interpret Paul’s message: The “righteousness of God” is, first, the absence of sin. Certainly, there is an absence of sin in God Himself, and we will learn what this means to and for us. At the same time, Paul focuses on how God, in his righteousness, deals with and rids his Saints of sin so that there is an absence of sin in them as well.

In order to help the reader see the restatement in 3.<sup>21-22</sup>, we have placed 1.<sup>16-17</sup> and 3.<sup>21-22</sup> side by side with lines linking the key concepts.

<sup>16</sup>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

<sup>17</sup>For therein is the righteousness of God  
revealed from faith to faith.  
as it is written, “The just shall live by  
faith.”

<sup>21</sup>But now the righteousness of God  
without the law is manifested,  
being witnessed by the law and the  
prophets; <sup>22</sup>even the righteousness of God  
*which is by faith* of Jesus Christ  
unto all and upon all them that believe.  
for there is no difference:

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3.<sup>23</sup>

As can be seen, in both passages, Paul

1. Introduces the concept of the “righteousness of God.”
2. Reminds the reader that understanding and experience of the “righteousness of God” requires revelation.
3. Asserts that the ‘righteousness of God’ can only be experienced through faith.
4. Witnesses that the Old Testament taught, as he does, that the “righteousness of God” is available only through faith.
5. Maintains that the “righteousness of God” is available to Jews and non-Jews the same and by the same means: faith.

We might also observe that there is one element in each passage that has no direct parallel in the other. There is no direct parallel in 3.<sup>21-22</sup> to 1.<sup>16</sup>'s declaration that the “righteousness of God” is revealed in the good news (gospel) delivered about Christ and by Christ. On the other hand, there is no parallel in 1.<sup>16-17</sup> to 3.<sup>21</sup>'s assertion that the “righteousness of God” is now made manifest “without the law.” The absence of these elements in passages so otherwise parallel, highlights another of Paul's main themes. It is the gospel—or good news, which Christ delivers—that reveals righteousness and makes righteousness, or sinlessness possible. Law, or the observance of commandments—whether those of Moses or any other—cannot produce righteousness or sinlessness.

#### The righteousness of god

As we have suggested, the concept of the “righteousness of God” is a principle theme of at least the first five chapters of Romans. With chapter six, Paul will move to matters relating to sanctification. A close look at the vocabulary demonstrates the centrality of the concept of righteousness in the first five chapters. The words “righteousness” and “righteous” appear just under twenty times in chapters 1-5. But this does not tell the whole “arithmetic” story. The basic Greek root underlying English “right,” “righteous,” and “righteousness” appears another dozen or so times in these same five chapters. These other occurrences are reflected in the English words “just,” “justify,” and “justification.” It doesn't take a genius to see that

these chapters are about righteousness or justification. These two concepts—righteousness and justification—are, essentially, the same. To be right is to be just. To be righteous is to be justified. Righteousness is justification.

So, with our introductory passage’s presentation of the “righteousness of God,” and the saturation of our text with “righteousness” words, we must first come to grips with what is meant by the “righteousness of God.”

It might be best to begin with the conclusion. We will take it in steps.

### *Step 1*

The “righteousness of God” can be understood in at least two important ways. First, the “righteousness” of God is an attribute or state that Father possesses in Himself. It is part of His character. He always does “right” in and of himself. Second, the “righteousness” of God is a quality that can be possessed by others. The phrase can be read, the “righteousness *from* God,” so that “righteousness” is something God grants others.

### *Step 2*

The “righteousness *from* God” that humans experience is a “right standing with God.” It is a sense of being right with God, or being acceptable and accepted by Him.

### *Step 3*

This “right standing with God” is achieved through the forgiveness of sins that comes through faith in Christ. Only forgiven people are “right with God,” or “righteous.” Indeed, as others have noted, the relation between “righteousness,” or “justification,” and “forgiveness” is so tight that they are essentially the same thing.

“Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins...”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 727. The sentence continues with “and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.” This is an important concept and one that we will want to come back to. However, for now, for simplicity sake, we focus on righteousness as the forgiveness of sins.

“The apostle so connects forgiveness of sins with righteousness that he shows them to be exactly the same.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul’s corollary to this is that, because “all have sinned,” individuals cannot be thought of as “righteous,” or have “right standing with God,” through their own obedience to commandments. Again, it does not matter whether those commandments are based upon the Law of Moses or another law. Humans breach stipulations found in any and all law codes. Again, we quote Calvin.

“So says Augustine in one place: ‘The righteousness of the saints in this world consists more in the forgiveness of sins than in perfection of virtues.’ Bernard’s famous sentences correspond to this: ‘Not to sin is the righteousness of God; but the righteousness of man is the grace of God.’”<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

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To repeat simply, the “*righteousness of God*” or “*justification*” is the right standing with God that individuals experience through their faith in God’s willing forgiveness of their sins. This forgiveness comes to the individual through faith in Christ, and the good news that his life and ministry reveal—the revelatory news of a God who possesses a “forgiving disposition.”<sup>6</sup> This forgiveness of sins cannot be “earned” or “bought” by ourselves. Only the Savior can purchase our forgiveness.

We can, then, rewrite Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup>.

“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 [in the gospel] is *God’s own righteousness exhibited by His forgiveness of sins* revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’”

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 752.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Book III, p. 752.

<sup>6</sup> Lectures on Faith, Lecture 4.

And again, the final passage of our *inclusio*.

“But now *God’s own righteousness exhibited by His forgiveness of sins* without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; <sup>22</sup>*even the forgiveness of sins which is* by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference...”

From the introductory statement found in Romans 1.<sup>16-17</sup>, its parallel passage of Romans 3.<sup>21-22</sup>, and Paul’s explication of these passages, we understand Paul to declare that the “righteousness” which God, the Father, possesses within Himself is witnessed to and revealed by His willingness to make others “righteous” through the forgiveness of sin. Father’s “righteousness” is also found in the plan, instituted before the foundation of the world, that reveals the means by which individuals become righteous, or experience the forgiveness of sins. That plan calls for the personal ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ, God Himself, during which the Son delivers, by word and deed, the good news about Father’s “righteousness,” or his merciful readiness to forgive. The means of forgiveness is the individual’s faith, belief, or trust in Jesus’ good news about Father, particularly His “forgiving disposition.”