

# **JUSTIFIED BY GRACE**

*Martin Bleby*

## **Study One**

### **WHAT IS TRUE HUMAN LIVING?**

#### **The Creational Mandate**

The beginning of human living is set out in the original 'creational mandate':

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind [Heb *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, [Syr: Heb and over all the earth] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind [Heb *adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them; [Heb him] male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' (Gen. 1:26–28)

'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'—this is a full-time occupation. Virtually every human activity is covered by it, whether it be raising families, housing, clothing and educating them, gardening and agriculture, or other forms of primary and secondary industry, business and commerce, government and Human services. In all these ways we are to be exercising our human authority and responsibility in fruitful and fulfilling ways.

*What is your present or future occupation? How does this relate to the creational mandate?*

#### **The Image of God**

We may think that we are, then, doing all these things, and so fulfilling the creational mandate. If so, we are missing two things.

First, if we are made to be in the image and according to the likeness of God, then we will need to be exercising our authority and responsibility in the creation in the way that God does, serving and caring for it.

*To what extent do we see human beings carrying out the creational mandate in this way?*

#### **Actional Relational Intimacy with God**

Also, we need to see where the command was given. According to Genesis 2, it was in the garden of Eden:

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And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides ... The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gen. 2:8–10, 15).

Eden, we find in Genesis 2–3, is the dwelling-place of God. It is where God talks, walks, commands, rules and judges. Elsewhere it is called the ‘garden of God’ (Ezek. 28:13), where God enjoyed the company of His creatures (as indicated by His walking in the garden in Gen. 3:8), and the ‘holy mountain of God’ (Ezek. 28:14), the sanctuary where God is worshipped. In this setting, ‘fill the earth ...’ may well mean: take what is happening here—this intimate relational oneness with God in action—and extend it to the ends of the earth. This is indeed the vision of Numbers 14:21 and Habakkuk 2:14:

as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD  
the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

*To what extent do we see this happening in the world around us?*

**All from God**

How are we to be, in this action? In particular, how are we related with God in the action of living? The way the creation of the man is described in Genesis 2 gives us a clue:

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, [*Or* formed a man (Heb *adam*) of dust from the ground (Heb *adamah*)] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7)

*What is the significance of the ‘dust’? What is the effect of the breathing?*

We are made of perishable material, and completely dependent on God for our living. As the apostle Paul said:

he himself gives to all people life and breath and everything (Acts 17:25)

All of this is God’s free, pure and loving gift:

No one can receive anything except what is given from heaven (John 3:27).

*How does this leave us feeling?*

(There was a time when this verse came to mean everything to me, but something needed to happen in me for me to see and accept it.)

**How Do We Justify Our Existence?**

This is central to our study of being ‘justified’. ‘Righteousness’ and ‘justification’ are closely related in the Bible. We all think we have our own righteousness. We put the question to one another: ‘How do you justify your existence?’ This could be the wrong question—it assumes it is in our own hands to effect our own righteousness or justification—but that is how we see it.

*What kind of answers could we come up with if that question was put to us?*

We all have an answer to that question, or we think we should have. We consider that we have a right to exist, and a righteousness, or right being and action, that justifies our existence. But if righteousness is included in the 'everything' of Acts 17:25, and the 'anything' of John 3:27, concerning what is given to us from God, can we really say this?

### **The Righteous One**

Who would we say is one human being who would have had righteousness? Jesus was described by two of his closest friends in this way: 'He committed no sin' (1 Peter 2:22) and 'in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:5). There was a time when he was addressed as 'Good teacher'. Jesus' response is very instructive:

Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone (Mark 10:17).

Goodness is very closely associated with righteousness. What is Jesus saying here? Is he saying: Work it out: no one is good but God alone; you have just called me 'good'; so what does that make me? Was Jesus here claiming to be God? That was not Jesus' style—he never spoke of that in this blatant way. Was he feigning false humility? As if to say: Oh no, I am not good; only God can be called good. Jesus never put on any false pretences. He always spoke of things as they really are. Once he put the challenge to his hearers: 'Which of you convicts me of sin?' (John 8:46), and they were unable to answer. Jesus is not saying here that he is not good. Rather, he is saying: 'You call me good. But look to where the goodness comes from. No one is good but God alone. Any goodness I have comes from God, and is His goodness, His righteousness.' This is not to put down himself or any other human being. He is simply saying that this is the way things really are. For himself, as for everyone else, all things are from the Father—*righteousness included*.

A Roman centurion once sent and asked Jesus to come and heal his slave, who was very ill. As Jesus approached his house, the centurion sent friends to say to Jesus:

'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith' (Luke 7:6-9).

This is sometimes taken to be a recognition of Jesus' great power and authority: his ability to heal even from a distance, merely by speaking a word. But the centurion is saying much more than that. What does he mean when he says, 'For I *also* am a man under authority...'? He sees that Jesus is a person *under* authority, in the direct line of command from the Creator of the universe, and for that reason any word he speaks will be effective. The centurion has seen right into the heart of the Son's relationship with the Father. This is the 'faith' that Jesus so highly commends. This is the faith of absolute reliance on God, by which the righteous live as righteous (Habakkuk 2:4). This is the principle by which alone true human righteousness has operated from the beginning (Galatians 3:11).

*What does that teach us about Jesus?*

*What does that tell us about ourselves?*

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**True Human Living**

Thus when it says in John 3:27: 'No one can receive anything except what is given from heaven', that covers everything, *righteousness included*. To be a human being means to be in relationship with God, and dependent on God for all things, goodness and righteousness included.

That is how human beings were in the beginning in the garden of Eden. This is what was to be taken out to the ends of the earth. We were to fill the earth with this active, joyful, relational dependence on God that we knew there.

**Despoiling The Earth**

Living in this way is just how we have *not* been. Instead of this relational dependence on God, we have sought, with the man and the woman in the garden, to be *as God* ourselves (Gen. 3:5). We have been deceived into thinking that, from ourselves, over against any relational dependence on God, we can decide for ourselves what is good and evil:

*though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:21–22)*

Instead of moving out to fill the earth with the joyful knowledge of the glory of God, we have now clubbed together to set up our own little enterprises, that we think will secure us and make a name for ourselves (as with the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9). Instead of loving one another and caring for the earth, this inevitably has the effect of filling the earth and despoiling it, to the disadvantage of others (e.g. flood irrigation in the upper reaches of the Murray River system causes salinity further downstream).

*What other examples can you think of?*

**Sin Against God**

While this does great harm to other people and to God's creation, the worst thing about it is the despite done by us to God. King David saw this, when the full force of his sin came to him, not as a sin against Bathsheba, with whom he had committed adultery, and her husband Uriah, who he had arranged to be killed, but against God:

*Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment (Psalm 51:4).*

We do not see that, because of the foolish deception we have taken on by going out on our own.

That is why, for a long time, I could not see the truth of John 3:27: '*No one* can receive *anything* except what is *given* from *heaven*'. I was affronted by the following verse from an ancient hymn to the Holy Spirit:

*Where You are not, we have nought,  
Nothing good in deed or thought,  
Nothing free from taint of ill  
(Archbishop Steven Langton,  
Veni sancte Spiritus, circa AD 1200).*

But this is just what Paul the apostle was saying in Romans 7:18:

*I know that *nothing good* dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.*

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Paul is saying here that as a human being, of himself, he is morally incapable of good. He is not saying just that any goodness we may have had has been eradicated by sin, but that, in the very way we are made—in our make-up as human beings, in our God-given flesh—we have no inherent goodness of our own. We were never meant to have any, apart from God. I was never meant to be ‘of myself’ (v. 25; Greek: *autos*), on my own. Anything I come up with in that way, ‘good’ or bad, will be deadly sin, against God, against all the love-relationship He has made us to have with Himself.

To see this requires a revelation from God, such as came to Peter in Luke 5:1–11 when, after being blessed by Jesus with two boatloads of fish, perhaps suddenly overwhelmed by the generosity and goodness of God, was only able to say:

*Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man! (Luke 5:8)*

In that moment, Peter discovered something wonderful about Jesus, and something terrible about himself, and found himself commissioned by Jesus to be an ambassador of the love of God. Countless others since have done the same.

## Study Two

### JUSTIFICATION HAS TO DO WITH RIGHTEOUSNESS

#### 'For Our Justification'

Paul the apostle in Romans 4 is writing about Abraham believing God, and quotes Genesis 15:6:

Therefore it 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Here Paul is speaking about 'righteousness' and 'justification'. He is doing so in the same breath as he speaks of our 'trespasses' or sins, of death on account of sins, and of being raised from death.

#### Righteousness and Justification

These two words sound different in English, but in the Greek in which Paul was writing, they are the same word, or have the same root meaning. The various words are as follows:

- dikaios*** righteous, just, upright, innocent
- dikaioσune*** justice, righteousness, justification
- dikaioō*** make right, acquit, justify
- dikaioμα*** rightful act, just sentence, acquittal, justification
- dikaioσis*** declaration of right or justice, making right or just, acquittal, justification.

Note that these all have the same basic sound, 'dikai...'. We need to bear this in mind as we read the different-sounding words in English by which they are translated. It is as if we were to have a word 'righteousification', and used it consistently.

#### The Righteousness of God

In Study One we looked at the words of Jesus, 'No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:18). We saw that all righteousness is God's, and comes from God—as do 'life and breath and everything' (Acts 17:25)—as God's gift. We saw that this and all gifts are received rightly through being in a faith relationship with God (as in Habakkuk 2:4, Galatians 3:11). The 'attributes' of God (they are really all one, as God is one) are enumerated as: Holiness, Righteousness, Goodness, Truth and Love. Righteousness is of the very essence of God.

*How would you describe 'righteousness'?*

Here are some words from the Psalms that may help us:

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Your right hand is filled with righteousness (also translated vindication or victory) (Psalm 48:10).  
 righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Psalm 97:2).  
 He will judge the world with righteousness (Psalm 96:13)  
 his righteousness endures forever (Psalms 111:3; 112:3, 9).

These indicate that everything God does is righteous; that righteousness is the basis of all God's operations (as in Deuteronomy 32:4:

The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just.  
 A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he);

that all will be judged by nothing less than God's own righteousness (would we want it any other way?); and that God's righteousness alone will prevail in the end (which is very good news).

*What is our response to these revelations?*

**Like the Mighty Mountains**

One description of God's righteousness that particularly appeals to me is in Psalm 36:6:

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
 your judgments are like the great deep;  
 you save humans and animals alike, O LORD

'Like the mighty mountains' makes me think of the Himalayas, ten kilometers high: tall, strong, clear and crisp. This is God's righteousness, in contrast to the little sandcastles we try to build on the seashore, that get washed away at the next high tide.

Note here that God's righteousness includes God's unfathomable judgments, and God's saving action towards all creatures.

The whole of Psalm 36 contrasts the wickedness of humanity with the righteousness of God. These verses particularly tell us where we are to look to by faith for our righteousness, in relationship with God:

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,  
 your faithfulness to the clouds.  
 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
 your judgments are like the great deep;  
 you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.  
 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
 All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.  
 They feast on the abundance of your house,  
 and you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
 For with you is the fountain of life;  
 in your light we see light.  
 O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,  
 and your salvation to the upright of heart! (Psa. 36:5-10)

## Study Three

### I HAVE NO RIGHTEOUSNESS

#### Holy and Blameless before God in Love as His Children

We have said that true human living is to be in relationship with God, and dependent on God for all things, goodness and righteousness included. Ephesians 1:4–5 sets out God’s purpose for us from the beginning, that will be carried through in the end:

*he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.*

Is that where we would say we are now? What needs to happen for us to get to be there? Would not something enormous and utterly wonderful need to take place in us for this to be so? That is why Paul also says in the same passage that this is:

*to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (v. 6)*

and why he begins by saying:

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 2).*

#### No Righteousness Apart from God

We have said that the only righteousness we can have is from God in a faith-relationship with God. Abandon that, and there is nowhere for our righteousness to come from. In that state of apartness from God, whatever we do will have no righteousness about it. We may think that something is good, or bad, but if it is not part of the righteousness of God it will have the nature of sin.

*Is this a new thought for some of us? That the ‘good’ things we do—in the community, or coming to church—may have nothing to do with the righteousness of God, and may actually have the nature of sin?*

*On what basis do we assess something as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and who is making the judgment? How valid is that?*

We certainly have our own ways of judging something or someone to be ‘good’. We may even award them the Order of Australia medal, or some such, but is this really so? We may say: ‘We can sort out our own things, without God, and we can say something is good. Is not the sin we committed in the garden of Eden—choosing to decide for ourselves what is good or evil, apart from and over against God?’

In practice we find that it always goes wrong, one way or another. Even in the church, despite our honouring of particular individuals, we unearth adultery, child abuse, embezzlement, and the like, which can lead to cynicism and despair. Our unearthing and

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condemnation of these things is not what makes them wrong—as if it is our judgment that is the final arbiter. They are simply shown up for what they really *are*. If we go to church: is it because we are in a loving faith-relationship with God, or for some other reason? We can come to church for years and still have nothing to do with the righteousness of God—which simply compounds the sin and makes it worse! But if we come as part of knowing God in that way, then it is something different.

*What are some of the reasons we may have for being part of a church, that may still not participate in the righteousness of God?*

**Enemies of God**

It is not that if we are outside of this faith-relationship with God we are just neutral, or deprived. Anything that is done in refusal to participate in God's righteousness through a faith-relationship with Him, though it be the best thing in the world, is actually done in defiance of Him, and is an act of war. Paul the apostle makes it clear that, outside of this faith-relationship with God, we are actually 'enemies of God' (Rom. 5:10) and 'God-haters' (Rom. 1:30). When we saw the Son of God, we cried out, 'Crucify him!' We are not just deprived, but depraved. We may think we are so good, and clever, while all the time we are perverted, corrupt, spiteful, and bitter.

Hence we find in Psalm 36:1–4:

Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts;  
there is no fear of God before their eyes.  
For they flatter themselves in their own eyes  
that their iniquity cannot be found out and hated.  
The words of their mouths are mischief and deceit;  
they have ceased to act wisely and do good.  
They plot mischief while on their beds;  
they are set on a way that is not good;  
they do not reject evil.

If God's righteousness is like the mighty mountains, then our attempts at self-righteousness are not the harmless sandcastles that we have made them out to be. They are more like mountains of manure. Offences against God's righteousness and holiness are as big as those are—in reverse. If God's righteousness reaches to the heavens—fresh, high, clear, clean and strong, then our supplanting of that righteousness stinks to high heaven—as a foul and deadly stench in God's nostrils. And all our attempted 'good works' are no more than shoveling the manure from one pile to the other.

**No One Does Good**

Paul gathers a number of Old Testament scriptures together in Romans 3:9–18 to display the desperate condition of sinful humankind:

"There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one." "Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of vipers is under their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

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We might expect Jesus to put the best construction upon the lives of people, but we find in John 2:23–25:

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone.

What did Jesus see when he looked into the human heart? In Mark 7:20–23 he says:

It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

If that is what Jesus saw when he looked into the human heart, it is little wonder that he 'would not entrust himself to them'. Anything that does not come from the one source of goodness and righteousness that there is, must partake of its opposite.

We will not come to this realization unaided. We need to heed what the Scripture says to us about our true condition, and receive it as a revelation. Each of us also needs to come to a point where our actual unrighteousness is unmasked by God.

One such instance for me was when I was at a pastors' retreat camp. God was amongst us, and His word was coming through to us freely and powerfully. One morning at breakfast, mindful of my bowels, I was looking for some extra fibre to add to my cereal. Someone said there were a couple of bananas out in the kitchen. I went and got one, and started cutting it all up over my cornflakes. Someone called out: 'Ah, so Martin's got a banana!' Caught out, but undeterred, I kept on cutting it all up over my cornflakes, regardless of whether anyone else might like some. Others thought they would like to do the same, and the other banana quickly went. It was only after I had eaten it all that I learned that those bananas had been especially intended for one person there who had diabetes.

You can be ashamed at being caught out, but when that comes to you with the force of a revelation from God, that is something different and, hopefully, more permanent. It was in the wake of that more-than-embarrassing incident that I wrote this song:

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|---|--|
| 1. I have no righteousness<br>But the righteousness<br>In which I stand with God in Christ,<br>And all that I confess<br>Is God's righteousness,<br>By which the Lamb was sacrificed.               | 4. Sent from the Holy One,<br>He is the Father's Son,<br>(No one is good but God alone);<br>That He might take His grace<br>Into the darkest place,<br>And there for all our sins atone.       |
| 2. There once was righteousness<br>In Eden's happiness,<br>When we with God-given glory<br>shone,<br>But then in wrong despite<br>We turned against the light—<br>The image marred, the glory gone. | 5. He is our righteousness,<br>Our saving Holiness,<br>Our Wisdom, Life and Light and<br>Peace.<br>Set free in righteousness,<br>His praises we express,<br>And look to joys that never cease. |
| 3. All our self-righteousness<br>And goodness we profess<br>Is filthy rags and naked shame:<br>Helpless in our distress,<br>In spite and bitterness,<br>Until the Man of Glory came.                | 6. I have no righteousness<br>But the righteousness<br>In which I stand with God in Christ,<br>And all that I confess<br>Is God's righteousness<br>By which the Lamb was sacrificed.           |

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7. And O what joy is mine  
 To know this love divine—  
 The length and breadth and depth and height!  
 Now I am undefiled  
 That I might be Your child,  
 And be most precious in Your sight.

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**Saving Righteousness**

While such a humbling, rebuking and chastening revelation is not welcome to the sinful heart, and will never be looked for by it, nevertheless it is a great mercy from God. For God does not show us such an unlovely thing merely to rub our nose in it, but because, in that very action, He wants us to know His saving antidote to it. God's righteousness is not just that which shows up the hideousness of our unrighteousness; it is that which reaches down to us with saving, cleansing and life-transforming power. Psalm 36 goes on to say that God's righteousness, high as it is, has a saving purpose and action:

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
 your judgments are like the great deep;  
 you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.  
 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
 All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.  
 They feast on the abundance of your house,  
 and you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
 For with you is the fountain of life;  
 in your light we see light.  
 O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,  
 and your salvation to the upright of heart! (Psa. 36:6–10)

There is a lovely instance of this given in Zechariah 3:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was dressed with filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And to him he said, "See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you with festal apparel." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with the apparel; and the angel of the LORD was standing by. Then the angel of the LORD assured Joshua, saying "Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here."

The Lord then goes on to speak of the one who is coming, by whom this cleansing and peace will come:

"Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are an omen of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch. For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the LORD of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree."

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Jesus is that one, and it is by him that we receive that 'righteousification'. Apart from the faith-relationship that is restored to us in him, we have no righteousness. The Anglican Article XIII (1562) puts it starkly this way:

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve the grace of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath commanded them to be done, we doubt not but that they have the nature of sin.

## Study Four

### GOD JUSTIFIES THE UNGODLY

#### God's Justifying Righteousness

For those who are sinners (which is all of us) the law of God, far from giving us a way out of our sin and guilt, serves to show up our evil more starkly, and bring us into condemnation for it. Paul the apostle is saying this in Romans 3:9–18. He goes on to say:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law (Rom. 3:19–28).

It is this justifying righteousness of God that we all need to know.

So far we have said that true human living is being in glad dependence on God in a loving faith-relationship with Him for all things—goodness and righteousness included. 'No one is good but God alone' (Mark 10:18); 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven' (John 3:27)—all is from God. We have seen that 'justification' and 'righteousness' are much the same word in the New Testament, and that the righteousness of God 'is like the mighty mountains' (Psalm 36:6). We have no righteousness outside of the loving faith-relationship with God. Accordingly, in that condition, any professed self-righteousness, including all our supposed 'good' works, will amount to nothing more than mountains of manure, that stink to high heaven. All that we seek to do 'from the ground up', from our own flesh as the base of our operations over against God, will be enemy actions.

It is right into this desperate situation that the righteousness of God comes as justifying righteousness. *The righteousness of God is that which moves out to bring into its righteousness that which is unrighteous.* Peter's summary is most succinct:

Christ also suffered [or died] for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

This is the justification that Paul is speaking of in this central passage in Romans 3:

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he

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had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:23–26).

To understand this, we need to see three actions by which God moves out to justify us who are ungodly. These are: *God's Law*; *God's Wrath*; and *God's Justification of Us*. Each of these are the expressions and actions of God's own righteousness, and not one of them is bypassed.

**God's Law**

Psalm 119:172 (NKJV) says:

all Your commandments are righteousness.

God's law is the expression of God's righteousness: in Himself, and in relation to us, as that works out in the life of the creation and in humanity. We see this in operation in Genesis 1:31:

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Creation and human beings are created to participate with God in His moral-relational fullness. This is so whether the law of God is spelled out in writing or not: we are told that 'Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws', even though the law of God was not spelled out as such until much later at Sinai.

How does the law give expression to the righteousness of God as He is in Himself, and in relation to us? Let us take a couple of examples. The seventh of the 'ten commandments' is:

You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14).

This is a commandment to faithfulness in marriage. How does it relate to the nature of God? God is saying: Faithfulness is part of my being. I am faithful in My covenant-relationship with you. As I am with you, so you are to be with each other. You shall not commit adultery!

Or take the fourth commandment:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it (Exodus 20:8–11).

This is a commandment to rest on one day in every seven. At the heart of God is a wonderful rest and peace, a full satisfaction and deep contentment with all that He is and all that He has done. He wants us to participate in that with Him, and to enter into His rest (see Heb. 3:7–4:11). So he gives us the gift of His holy sabbath.

*Take some of the other commandments, and think of how they give expression to the nature of God in relationship with us.*

All of that is fine while we are in a loving faith-relationship with God. But this is what we have rejected. Now taking the commandments detached from that relationship with God, any attempts we make to 'keep' them will be acts of disobedience and enmity, in so far as we are

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refusing to participate in the relationship with God that is the heart of the law, as in Deuteronomy 6:4–5:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Trying to ‘keep’ the law of God under those circumstances will do more harm than good. Especially if we are seeking to use our ‘keeping’ of the law to get ourselves out of the guilt of sin without recourse to God Himself. We can take the law and set it up as our way of being ‘right’, even over against God. How perverse! That only makes matters worse.

Against all of that, the law itself comes: holy, pure, and true—God comes in His law—and shows up our guilt for what it is, even compounds it, and brings it into rightful condemnation. This is the best that the law can do for a person still under the guilt of sin. It certainly cannot get us out of it. As Paul says in Romans 3:20:

For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Paul expands on this sin-exposing, death-imposing action of God’s holy, just and good law in Romans 7:7–13:

What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

Note that Paul is speaking here from his own experience. The law prohibiting covetousness showed him the covetousness that was in his own heart, of which he was previously unaware. The sinful inclination of his own heart seized upon this commandment as another one to break, in furtherance of its purposeful and directed campaign against God. (How many ‘No Shooting’ signs do you see full of bullet-holes?) Having thus shown up the true and deadly nature of his sin, compounding his guilt in the process, the law then moved in and rightly condemned the sinner, sentencing him to death.

Paul again testifies to this reality in his life in Galatians 2:19–21. Here, however, he makes it clear that at the very moment he saw the law sentencing him to death and executing him, he also was shown something else: Christ, bearing that penalty of the law for him and with him in his place on the cross. Christ’s death was Paul’s execution. Paul was crucified there with Christ, and only by that does he now live.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, [or by the faith of the Son of God] who loved me and gave himself for me.

This has put an end to any hope Paul might have had of using his keeping of the law to bring himself, as a guilty sinner, into a state of justification or righteousness:

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification [or righteousness] comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

This is the law of God, by which we are judged, and the best the law can do for a guilty sinner is to bring us into dreadful condemnation. In the action of justifying us, God does not bypass His law. Through it He closes us off from any attempts we might make to justify ourselves. God's law shuts us up, either to having been crucified with Christ, or else to suffer the death-penalty in ourselves, out there on our own.

### God's Wrath

Psalm 7: 11–17 sets out the action of the wrath of God, as a righteous Judge who is provoked every day:

God is a righteous judge,  
and a God who has indignation every day.  
If one does not repent, God will whet his sword;  
he has bent and strung his bow;  
he has prepared his deadly weapons,  
making his arrows fiery shafts.  
See how they conceive evil,  
and are pregnant with mischief,  
and bring forth lies.  
They make a pit, digging it out,  
and fall into the hole that they have made.  
Their mischief returns upon their own heads,  
and on their own heads their violence descends.  
I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness,  
and sing praise to the name of the LORD, the Most High.

We see an instance of this action of God's wrath in the judgment that comes upon the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28. The state of this king's heart is shown in v. 2:

your heart is proud  
and you have said, 'I am a god;  
I sit in the seat of the gods,  
in the heart of the seas,'  
yet you are but a mortal, and no god,  
though you compare your mind  
with the mind of a god.

The judgment comes in vv. 17–18. It takes the form of God personally bringing out what is in this king's heart, and giving him over to the fearful consequences of it:

Your heart was proud because of your beauty;  
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour.  
I cast you to the ground;  
I exposed you before kings,  
to feast their eyes on you.  
By the multitude of your iniquities,  
in the unrighteousness of your trade,  
you profaned your sanctuaries.  
So I brought out fire from within you,  
it consumed you,  
and I turned you to ashes on the earth  
in the sight of all who saw you.

The action of the wrath of God is similarly depicted in Romans 1:18–32:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18).

Three times (vv. 24, 26, and 28) Paul speaks of this in terms of God giving people up to the sin that is in their hearts, so that it will come out in practice, horrendously, and with deadly effect, in ever-compounding evil, from the self-abuse of false worship (vv. 24–25; compare 1 Kings 18:28), through the perversion of the created order and its right relationships (vv. 26–27), to the active pursuit of every kind of wickedness (vv. 28–31), and the dulling or reversal of all moral sensitivity (v. 32). This has led one person to say: ‘God’s wrath is not sin, but sin [unconfessed, internally active] *is God’s wrath*’<sup>1</sup>

To bear God’s wrath, then, is to experience in oneself the dark deceit, the impurity and degradation, the shame and perversion, the guilt and debasement, the relentlessness of evil, in all its horrific dimensions, under the personal pressure of God’s holy love. Psalm 38:1–8 speaks frighteningly of how this impacts in the life of a person:

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
For your arrows have sunk into me,  
and your hand has come down on me.  
There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation;  
there is no health in my bones because of my sin.  
For my iniquities have gone over my head;  
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.  
My wounds grow foul and fester  
because of my foolishness;  
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;  
all day long I go around mourning.  
For my loins are filled with burning,  
and there is no soundness in my flesh.  
I am utterly spent and crushed;  
I groan because of the tumult of my heart.

It is not as if this is some ‘punishment’, detached from the crime, that can be separately imposed on it. The punishment is inherent in the sin itself and in its outworking, under the hand of God. When Peter 2:24 says that Christ ‘himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, [or carried up our sins in his body to the tree]’, he is saying in one way what Paul is saying in another way in Galatians 3:13, where Christ redeemed us ‘by becoming a curse for us’ or in Romans 8:3, when God ‘condemned sin in the flesh’ of Jesus—in our human flesh. God did not bypass or withhold any of His wrath on us in the process of bringing us to justification and righteousness. His own Son, by His own appointment in love for us, was in the one place where that wrath was fully carried through and concluded. The cost and the impact of that—the sin of the whole world, and its fitting condemnation—upon the person of Jesus Christ at the cross, is beyond computation.

These two things—God’s law and God’s wrath—strike terror into the heart of every sinner. Deep down, we all know it. We seek to evade it, or pretend it is not there, or try to put it onto others. We can come to Christ and ‘make a commitment’ (for what that is worth), and still fear it. But it is possible to know God’s law as fulfilled, and God’s wrath as fully

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind?*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1991, p. 42.

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expended, in Christ, such that we never need fear again. Then it will not depend any more on our feelings, or on our works—good or bad.

### **God's Justification of Us**

The good news that the apostles brought was that the crucifixion of Jesus, while being a shameful act of sinful human beings, for which they are fully responsible, was even more a saving action of God:

*this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law (Acts 2:23).*

The one who is holy and righteous in word and deed, the one with whom the Father is 'well pleased' (Mark 1:11), came from God. He was innocent, yet he suffered this terrible death, and this was in obedience to the Father's will (Luke 23:13–15; 22:42). If he was not there on his own account, on whose account was he there? Paul speaks out the wonderful mystery of Christ's total identification with us, and of us with him, in this terrible action:

*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Cor. 5:14–15).*

Jesus himself said that his lifting up on the cross is when we would all be drawn in to him, for a final victory over evil:

*'Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12:31–33).*

This is the place where he who knew no sin in himself was made by God 'to be sin' for our sake (2 Cor. 5:21). Here 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross' (1 Pet. 2:24), the 'tree' on which he became 'a curse for us' (Galatians 3:13), where God 'by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh' (Rom. 8:3). This was when, as God had prophesied in Zechariah 3:9, 'I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day'.

The Son of God in the love of the Father entered our sinful condition, and took it on himself. In our flesh he bore all our sin in all its inherent judgment of pain, shame, horror, confusion, darkness, grossness, defilement, agony. He bore our death. He was buried in our grave. This needed to happen to our flesh that was dead set against God. The law was fulfilled, and God's wrath was carried through to the end, in our flesh—*in us*. This was 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21); 'so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness' (1 Pet. 2:24); 'in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Gal. 3:14); 'so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (Rom. 8:4). God laid aside neither His law nor His wrath in bringing us to forgiveness. Rather, *it was by pressing through His law, and pressing through His wrath, gathering these up without leaving a scrap of all that behind, as He came to the placing of His own Son on the cross, there to grasp hold of us in justification.*

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For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18)

All of this, as Paul says, is the action of God's righteousness:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law (Rom. 3:19–28).

It is said that in the old Scottish statute books, when a man was executed for a crime, they would write: 'John Brown was *justified* today'. The law was fulfilled; the debt was paid in full. Should John Brown, by some miracle, survive the execution, he could never again be arraigned for that crime. Paul the apostle wrote:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed [*lit.* justified *or* 'righteousified'] from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him (Rom. 6:6–8).

If you know and believe that you are one for whom Christ died—that you were there in him, and in him you were rightly put to death—then you are now a justified person. You have received God's grace, through the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

## Study Five

### FLESH AND SPIRIT—THE BIG BATTLE

#### Live by the Spirit

Paul the apostle wrote to the Christians in Galatia:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

This says that there is a battle on—and we are the battle-ground: ‘For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want’. The battle is between ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’.

*What would you say is ‘flesh’? What is ‘spirit’? How are they opposed to each other?*

We think we know all about that. We may say: the ‘flesh’ is my ‘lower nature’ (some translations of the Bible actually use such terms), which is the sinful things that come in me, and the ‘spirit’ is my ‘higher nature’—the good things in my life. The aim of the Christian life is to put down my lower nature and try to make sure that the higher ‘spiritual’ side of me prevails. Right? Wrong! Devilishly wrong. We need to know what the Bible means by ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’.

#### The Spirit is Life-giving

The first mention of ‘spirit’ comes right at the beginning of the Bible:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light... (Gen. 1:1–3)

And so followed the coming into being of the whole creation, including the life of plants and animals, culminating in the life of human beings. The ‘spirit’ here is the spirit from God, God’s own Spirit. The Spirit gives life:

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7).

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‘Breath’ and ‘spirit’ are the same word in Hebrew. The ‘spirit’ or ‘breath’ of God brings *life*. Without the Spirit from God, we either do not yet exist, or we are dead:

These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;  
when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.  
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.  
When you send forth your spirit [*or* your breath], they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground Psalm (104:27–30).

We are not talking ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ natures here. We are talking about life, that comes from God, or being dead.

Jesus says the same in the New Testament:

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63).

He is saying that it is the Spirit from God that gives life. The flesh cannot give life from itself. He is also saying that he himself, and the word he brings, are from God, in this life-giving out-breathing of God (much as spoken of in Genesis 1:3; 2:7; Psalm 104:30). Jesus in John 4:23–24 speaks to the woman at the well of true worship:

the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

The Father is the initiator. True worship is in the truth and reality that is God Himself. Only the Spirit that is from God can impart this.

**Flesh is Good**

‘Flesh’ is the stuff we are made of, created by God. It is part of the good gift of God. The flesh is where we still live, even after we have been born again of the Spirit:

the life I now live *in the flesh* I live by faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:20).

Flesh is so good that the Son of God came to be made flesh:

the Word became *flesh* and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)

To acknowledge this is to belong to God, and to deny this is not to belong to God:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God (1 John 4:2–3).

In Jesus we see human flesh come into its own. Human flesh is wonderfully designed by God to be enlivened by the Spirit of God—and never otherwise (see Gen. 2:7; compare Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17). The flesh is never left behind or discarded for something else: Job expected that it would be in his flesh that he would be face to face with God, even after he died:

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For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then *in my flesh* I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and *my eyes shall behold*, and not another (Job 19:25–27).

For this to happen, something even more wonderful will need to happen to human flesh: it will be glorified and eternalised, to be made capable of sustaining ‘an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure’ (2 Cor. 4:17). It is in such terms that the New Testament speaks of the resurrection of the body—in the ‘flesh’ (see 1 Cor. 15:35–56). Human flesh is indeed a marvellous creation of God.

**‘The Flesh is Useless’**

What, then does Jesus mean when he says, ‘the flesh is useless’ (John 6:63)? He is saying that the flesh cannot do anything by or of itself. It was never designed to! The full quotation is:

It is the *spirit* that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (John 6:63).

The flesh was only ever meant to live always from God, by the Spirit, in a faith-relationship. But that is just what we have not done. Instead, we have tried to live *using our own flesh as the base of our operations, over against God*. We have sought to be self-existent, ‘as God’ ourselves (Gen. 3:5), deciding on our own system of what is right and wrong according to what we think suits us best, in rejection of any reference to God. God had said that if we did that, we would die (Gen. 2:17), and we can see why. We have cut our flesh off from the source of its life. We have died relationally, to God and to each other (see Gen. 3:8–10, 12, 16), and this, in the end, issues in physical death (see Gen. 3:22; Rom. 5:12). By God’s forbearance we are still biologically alive (compare 1 Tim. 5:6), so we think we are still OK. But once we have seen our rightful death in the death of Jesus, the horrific nature of our perilously deadly state is seen clearly:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else (Eph 2:1–3).

It takes a resurrection commensurate with that of Jesus to get us out of that death and into life:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2 4–7).

**The Flesh is Opposed to the Spirit**

The flesh in its unsaved condition, like a chook with its head chopped off, ‘is dead, but it won’t lie down’. All it can come up with are ‘dead works’ (Heb. 9:14) that are deadly. But the flesh thinks they are fine. So there is a battle on—to the death:

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For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want (Gal. 5:17).

For all its 'good intentions', the best the flesh can come up with are these deadly 'works of the flesh':

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21).

Such works can never be pleasing to God:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5–8).

*What is it about the 'works of the flesh' that makes it impossible for them to be pleasing to God?*

### **Religious Practices as an Indulgence of the Flesh**

We can agree that the things that Paul lists in Galatians 5:19–21 are terrible. But what of the 'good' things people do, and particularly the religious things? In so far as these are attempts to justify ourselves, in the sight of ourselves and others, by the self-directed efforts of our own flesh, they stand condemned:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, [*or* the rudiments of the world] why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence [*or* are of no value, serving only to indulge the flesh] (Col. 2:20–23).

These are often exercises by which we seek to make sure the higher 'spiritual' side of us prevails over the lower 'fleshly' nature. As such, they are nothing more than a God-defying indulgence of the flesh.

### **The Flesh and the Evil Powers**

The reference to 'the elemental spirits of the universe' in Colossians 2:20 (compare 2:8) could be taken as an indication that the flesh here is, consciously or unconsciously, in league with the evil powers, and 'enslaved' to them (Gal. 4:3). Not everything 'spiritual' is good. There are both good spirits and bad spirits. We are reminded that the devil himself is a most 'spiritual' being (see e.g. 2 Cor. 11:14). Certainly the principles and powers of 'the elemental spirits of the universe' are actively sought out by those who espouse the 'New Age' movement. Unhealthy interest in them is not unknown even in the Christian Church.

The flesh is canny: while still denying and avoiding the true faith-relationship with God, it can take up very convincingly the 'appearance' of wisdom and true religion, using even the law of God as its regulation. We can take up 'the law of God', *separate* from the faith-

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relationship that is at its core, *apart* from the Spirit, as something that the flesh, of itself, can keep! How distorted—and deadly! We can take something like circumcision, given by God to those under the old covenant to be a sign of the heart-and-soul love relationship that God will make us to have with Himself (see Deut. 30:6), and boast of that as a mark of the devotion of our own flesh, and scorn others that do not have it as lesser beings! This is what was being done in Paul's day. We can do the same with the good and true confessions of our faith, and use them as proof to shore us up against the underlying uneasiness of sin that still refuses to undergo the treatment of the Cross of Christ.

**Reinforced by Human Praise**

To be able to sustain this untenable position, we need and look for the back-up of other people. Paul saw this people-pleasing drive as opposed to the justification by grace that is in Jesus Christ:

Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant [*Gk* slave] of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

Paul knew his own commission as an apostle to have come, not from any human authority, but directly from Jesus Christ and God the Father (see Gal. 1:1). He sees those who look for human approval and act on that basis as those who seek to evade the offence of the Cross, and the opprobrium that comes with it:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh (Gal. 6:12–13).

While it is good to receive approval from others for what is good and right, it is false to seek and bestow approval as reinforcement for a wrongful position:

They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you (Gal. 4:17–18).

Jesus himself had to contend with this same people-pleasing mindset and practice:

Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of people more than the praise of God (John 12:42–43, *RSV* modified).

'The praise of God' is translated by the *NRSV* as 'the glory that comes from God'. It refers here to God's praise of us rather than our praise of God. That we should be objects of God's praise will only make sense to a justified person, and even then will still come as a wonderful surprise. Jesus knew the affirmation that came to him from the Father, and that is what he wanted us all to look for and experience:

How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? (John 5:44)

So Paul spoke of the praise that comes from God for those whose hearts have been changed:

a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart--it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God (Rom. 2:29).

*How can it be that God should give unqualified praise to a person who has been a sinner?*

### **Put to Death and Made Alive**

This deadly playing with the holy, true and good law of God—resorting to ‘the elemental spirits of the universe, and seeking praise from others as reinforcement—condemns the sinner to death, as we have seen—and rightly so. And Jesus is there, with and for the sinner, in the place of execution, when the sentence is carried through:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’ ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’-- in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10–11, 13–14).

The full force of the law and the wrath of God on us is carried through in him, to bring us to justification:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1–4).

As a result, we are back on the basis of the faith-relationship that the flesh was only ever meant to have with God. We are in alive Christ, and we now ‘walk’, or live, by the Spirit, in all that flows from this:

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another (Gal. 5:22–26).

### **The Flesh Does Not Give In Easily**

Once the message and reality of justification by God’s great grace comes to us, it would be good if we simply embraced it. But the flesh holds on, even after we have been born of the Spirit. It is not to be trusted. This is what happened so easily and quickly to the believers in Galatia after they had received the word of faith:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? (Gal. 3:1–3)

Paul knew the same battle inside himself, even after Christ had laid hold of him and changed his mind and his ‘inmost self’:

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it ... For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war

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with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin (Rom. 7:18, 22-25).

It is by virtue of this rescue effected by Christ that he can immediately go on to say (8:1ff.): 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ...' Yet even, or especially, in his 'highest' moments, the propensity of Paul's flesh needed to be faithfully held in check by God:

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows-- was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

This side of our resurrection, as long as we are in this flesh, this 'body of death' in which sin has ruled, it is likely that we will have the same battle, and will need to return, constantly, to the same grace that has justified us before God.

## Study Six

### LIVING BY FAITH

#### Our Justification in Christ

In Philippians 3:2–17, Paul speaks of ‘the righteousness from God ... that comes through faith in Christ’. This is what we have been talking about right through this series on ‘justification’ (remembering that ‘righteousness’ and ‘justification’ are much the same word in the original language of the New Testament). Paul begins with a warning that relates to the previous session on the battle between flesh and spirit:

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law*, but one that comes *through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith*. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

We have looked at the heart of being justified by faith:

Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24)

For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21)

—like the ‘mighty mountains’ (Psa. 36:6)!

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith (Rom. 3:23–25).

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'Faith' we have described as a loving faith-relationship that comes from God. We have said that this has always been the way of righteousness for human beings:

the one who is righteous through faith will live

or

my righteous one will live by faith (Hab. 2:4 as quoted in Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 10:38).

We want now to see what it means to live by faith, in that loving faith-relationship that we have in Jesus Christ.

**Justification is Thoroughgoing**

First, let us not underestimate what justification is. There is nothing that God's justification of us is not more than equal to. Consider the Corinthian believers, and what happened to them:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

*What were some of the Corinthians before?*

*What was their relationship then to the kingdom or ruling of God?*

*What are they now?*

*What has happened to change them?*

Remember the thief on the cross alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39–43). He was one listed above who would not inherit the kingdom of God. Anyone who has resisted God's kingdom/authority/rule is not and cannot be a part of it. Yet Jesus said to him: 'today you will be with me in Paradise'—in the Garden, in the immediate presence of God. So he must have been 'de-thiefed' by the action of God.

The Father said to Jesus: 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22). Can we hear the Father saying the same thing to us who have been justified?

When the reality of justification broke through to me, after I had abandoned any hope of ever pleasing God, and after I had seen the false emptiness of trying to get others pleased with me, so I could somehow be pleased with myself, it came to me as the Father saying to me, 'I am pleased with you, my dear one, in everything you do' (see story 'The Hard Taskmaster'). I found this quite affronting at the time, and it is something I still marvel at. When, some time later, I relayed this to others, they took offence at it. They were intent on seeking to please God in their lives, and this appeared to them to undermine all their best efforts. They asked me: What about the things still in our lives that God would obviously be displeased with? And does not the apostle tell us in 1 Thessalonians 4:1 that we should live to please God more and more? I answered: As long as the focus remains on ourselves, these questions will confront us in an intractable way. But there is a deeper question: Is God displeased with Christ? And am I, or am I not, in Christ? It is not just a matter of accepting your justification and seeking to live in it by faith. Rather, it is to be in a personal relationship of love with the Justifier. It is to know that 'you have died [—and rightly so—], and your life is hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3). That is what it means to be justified, and to be living by faith:

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For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God [or by the faith of the Son of God] who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

How pressing and urgent, then, is the call to believe in the Son of God! As Jesus said, when asked what we must do to be doing the works of God:

*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:29)*

### **The Righteousness from God that Depends on Faith**

In another place, Paul spelled out some of the practicalities of what it meant for him to live by this faith:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may *gain Christ and be found in him*, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to *know Christ* and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:7–11).

*What are some of the things that Paul abandoned as the justification for his existence (see vv. 3–6)?*

*What are the implications of this for our own lives?*

This faith-relationship is something that we find ourselves in, wonderfully, by God's action, and so we have faith, and live in it, and desire to be nowhere else. The flesh still clamours round our heels like a yappy little dog; we tell it to be quiet, and we leave it be.

How did this justifying faith come to Abraham?

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:1–6).

God showed Abraham by revelation what He was going to do—bring into being a family of His children who would be holy and blameless before Him in love. Abraham believed this, and accepted his own place in it. God reckoned righteousness to Abraham. This depended in no way on Abraham's merit. In Genesis 12:10–20, before he was justified, and in Genesis 20, after he was justified, Abraham showed himself well capable of self-serving and dastardly deeds: he was prepared to put his wife, and all the promises of God through her, at risk to preserve his own life and fortune. The righteousness reckoned to Abraham covered all Abraham's sins—past, present and future—in God's eyes. How could this be? At the centre of what God was doing that God showed to Abraham, whether Abraham knew it or not, was the sacrifice of Christ for Abraham's sins, and for Abraham's righteous justification, and that of the whole world.

### **Living by Faith**

God, by His personal revelation, gives us assurance of faith, and so makes it effective in our lives. In Genesis 15:7–19, God went on to make a covenant with Abraham. The severed animals signified what would happen to either party if they broke the covenant (see Jer. 34:17–20). Abraham was prevented from passing between the pieces with God. God, in twofold form, passed between the pieces. This was a way of saying that if Abraham and his descendents broke the covenant-relationship with God, God Himself would bear the consequences of this for them.

That Abraham understood the heart of this was shown in Genesis 22 when he willingly without hesitation was prepared to give up in sacrifice even his own son, through whom the promises of God were to be fulfilled, while fully expecting God Himself to provide the sacrifice. God's delight that Abraham feared God, or related to God as He really is in this way, is shown in God's repetition of 'you have not withheld your son, your only son' (vv. 12, 15). Abraham had seen into the heart of what God Himself would do (see Rom. 8:32). In turn, nothing that God required of him would be withheld. James sees this as the effective outworking of the gift of faith in Abraham's life (see James 2:20–23):

Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God

Living by faith is a relational all-of-life thing.

### **Abide in Him**

So it is not a case of 'live in your justification'—as if justification is some abstract thing that we can possess. Rather, it is a case of live in the faith-relationship with the one who has justified you. Jesus said this the night before he died:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete ... You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another (John 15:1–11, 16–17).

In the Father's necessary cleansing judgment on the human race, Jesus takes the cutting in himself as the whole vine. We are to be in him in that action by faith, and so receive the cleansing, pruning action that is there for us in him. If we do not abide in him by faith in that action of the cross, by which alone we can live and bear fruit, the effect of that action will be to cut us off into fruitless death. So abide in him!

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Peter tells us that the 'virtues' of Christian living come directly from abiding by faith in that action by which we have been cleansed from our old sins:

Simeon Peter, a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you (2 Pet. 1-11).

Let the Apostle John have the final word:

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 2:28-3:3).

He is our saving justification, and our righteousness. Abide in him.

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Note:

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