

Of Fulfillment and Righteousness

“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:7-9).

To speak of fulfillment in Christ is all well and good, but how do we humans really accomplish that? How can we ever live up to God’s standards? But if, on the other hand, we have Christ in us, why are we not more Christ-like in our behavior? Why the struggle to perform more adequately? Can this really be fulfillment?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul deals with this subject very thoroughly. Introducing the subject, Paul says, *“For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh”* (Philippians 3:3). And so at the outset, Paul establishes something of the “ground rules.” The flesh, which is the natural human mind, cannot be depended on to satisfy the righteous requirements of God. It is well to remember that we are merely ionized particles in the vastness of space. As well might an ant be expected to satisfy the requirements of humans. If we could only convey to ants better social habits—“Stay away from our picnics and stay out of the butter and honey.” That is of course, not to excuse us from moral responsibility, but rather to say if God is going to lift us “ants” out of the human into the Divine, it will have to be by more than our own human morality. The Pharisees are the prime example of those who tried to “save themselves” by their own righteousness. Even Paul said that when he was in the camp of the Pharisees, he was “blameless” as far as the law was concerned. Even if ants, to carry the analogy, were to somehow sense that humans did not appreciate their intrusion, and decide to stay on their own ant hills, that would never make humans of them. Nor could any human, were he able to communicate with ants, ever promise to make humans of them if they would behave themselves. If the analogy is somewhat over simplistic, it does convey a fundamental point—behavior, however perfect, cannot change one’s human nature into Divine nature. On the other hand, our only hope of salvation is to possess the Spirit of God within and thus change the very essence of our being to allow us to identify with God forever.

So whence then is our righteousness? It is Christ within our spirits. He is our righteousness. Paul declares plainly to the Corinthians that Christ has *“become wisdom to us from God, both righteousness and sanctification and redemption. . .”* (I Corinthians 1:30). In fact, the word “sanctification” is the same word used in (Hebrews 12:14)—*“Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no one shall see the Lord. . .”* The word literally means to be “set apart.” It does not have to do with piety *per se*, but with being identified with God as His children or people. There is nothing more certain in all the New Testament than the truth that our only hope of salvation is in the righteousness of Christ. Of course, that is a righteousness which is conveyed to our spirits, when Christ dwells there.

Why then do we not act righteously as a part of our nature?

The answer really lies in the definition of “righteousness.” We are inclined to think of righteousness as something like “piety” or “good behavior.” Although that definition is common and probably valid in terms of the English language, it is not the meaning of the Greek word that is so translated. The Greek word—*dikaio suné* is from the basic word *dikaios*, which means “right” in the sense of “straight.” Our English word “righteous” comes from two Anglo-Saxon words—*riht* and *weis*—which meant “the right way.” The verb form of *dikaios* is translated by “justify” which really meant to the English translators—“to set straight.” The best example of the usage in modern English is in the printers trade. A printer uses the word in connection with lining up columns of type. Thus, to the printer a “justified right” means that the right-hand margin is lined up evenly. A “ragged right” means that the right-hand margin is uneven, as in a type-written letter.

Thus, in its proper usage, “righteousness” means “being on the right way.” When we are justified by Christ, or made righteous, we are simply being put on the right way, or “lined up” figuratively speaking. We do not automatically become “pious.” We do not automatically become lined up on the right side or made a part of God’s Kingdom. Good behavior is an outgrowth of our place in the Kingdom of God, but is not an intrinsic part of justification.

The reason for the above discussion, of course, is the mistaken assumption that if one becomes a Christian, one must *de facto* pursue perfection, in order to be fulfilled. The truth of the matter is that our fulfillment is in the spirit, as a result of the indwelling presence of Christ and not in flawless behavior in the flesh. On the other hand, however, that is not to say that behavior in the flesh is unimportant. On the contrary, the very presence of Christ within us gives us a motivating factor to give attention to our conduct and to seek to please Him. The need for the clear understanding of the meaning of righteousness is that the fleshly conduct does not always comport with the aspirations of the spirit. Paul made this abundantly clear in his oft repeated frustrations with his own flesh. In the text that we are considering, he states emphatically that he has “no confidence in the flesh.”

In this season of the year when peace is such a prevailing hope and prayer, it also evokes the penetrating query—“If the angels proclaimed that the coming of Christ was bringing peace on earth, where is the peace?” This question seems to plague Christian and non-Christian alike. It is easy to understand why the non-Christian does not have peace. But why the Christian? The answer lies in the understanding of the difference between the flesh and the spirit. “The fruit of the Spirit is peace.” But there is no guarantee of peace in the flesh. While we are promised help and strength in our problems, it is certainly a misapplication of the truth to assume that every problem will get solved. There are problems we have that are the result of human failure which have their consequences to be lived out. These problems occur in a great many areas of life—marriage, family, business, social relationships—and may not be resolved as long as we are on the earth. However, the great expectation which we have is that in the process of dealing with our problems, we do have peace with Christ in our spirits. He has

promised to give us strength and grace in the midst of our human odyssey. The problem may not be readily resolved, but the presence of Christ in our spirits assures us of the transient nature of these problems that one day will disappear in the ultimate glorification.

Most of the mistakes we make are made long before we have an understanding of the implications of the decision. This is true of marriages and business ventures and social entanglements. How many young people have the slightest idea of what life is all about when they get married? Nor is divorce a ready answer. The consequences of divorce can follow one for the rest of one's life. But God understands human frailty and, while He does not always eliminate the consequences, He does nevertheless "*help us in our weaknesses*" (Romans 8:26). A key phrase in that text is "*For we know not. . .*" What do we humans ever really know for sure. At what age do we ever cease to make mistakes? The Old Testament is replete with illustrations of God's dealings with His people in utmost long-suffering and mercy. The Psalms echo and reecho the phrase—"*His mercy endureth forever.*" So whether the problems in the flesh get resolved or not, the spirit can be at peace in the realization that Christ will "*never leave us nor forsake us.*" He will give the grace day by day to handle our problems.

We have used the analogy of the "junk box." And who does not have such a place—drawer or closet—where all manner of items—usable, reusable and unusable—are tossed. By the same token we may consider that we have such a "junk box" in the flesh. As life continues, we collect a large assortment of events and episodes and decisions, positive and negative; of mistakes and missteps and mishaps; of ideas and attitudes and experiences, positive and negative. All of these things go to make up the substance of our lives. Out of this human miscellany, God picks out the things that He can use and somehow brings us through to glory in spite of all.

Christ comes to dwell within us when we ask Him, not on the basis of any kind of human trust or confidence of our own, but through His faith with which He energizes us and establishes our oneness with God. He brings with Him His own righteousness and sanctification and peace, which pervades our spirits in spite of the foibles and follies of the human flesh, with which, unfortunately, we will struggle as long as we are on the earth.

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