

Christ Our Righteousness

God's holy law requires perfect conformity to its every precept. Failure to live up to the Divine standard of even the least of the commandments results in the breaking of the whole law. It is this law, in all its severity, that will be used to judge every man, woman and child at Christ's return. What confidence do we have that we will pass judgment and be declared righteous before the Holy One? Can we receive a positive verdict and escape condemnation?

The doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone has been a constant source of security and comfort for Christians in the face of God's law. It is the foundation upon which assurance of salvation is built. When this doctrine is corrupted or only partly taught all manner of problems arise. Of all the aspects of justification, the imputation of Christ's righteousness continues to attract the most criticism. According to John Owen, "there is nothing in the whole doctrine of justification which meets with a more fierce and various opposition."ⁱ Even within the Reformed tradition, surprisingly, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believing sinners has received its share of critics.

It is vital that the imputation of Christ's righteousness be manfully defended in our day as it was by Paul in the first century and the Reformers in the sixteenth century. To reject such a precious truth is to strip the gospel of its glory and to withhold from sinners an important means of comfort and confidence as they await the judgment of God.

Imputation and the Incarnation

Is the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness a central component of the apostolic gospel? This is the first question we must answer, and in order to do so it is helpful to understand how the apostles viewed the person and work of Christ. It is not an overstatement to say that a proper understanding of Christ and his work depends on a proper understanding of the law.

According to Paul, Christ's incarnation was necessary so that he might be "under law". By taking on flesh Christ entered into the plight of his people. Numerous times in Matthew's gospel Christ spoke of his mission as the fulfilling of the law. The incarnation was a means to an end. By being born of a woman Christ was enabled to be born under law.

What does it mean that Christ was born "under law"? This terminology is used by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. He uses the term in reference to the Galatians in 4:21. He speaks of them as desiring to be under law. It is this desire that deeply concerned Paul and motivated him to write the epistle. Under law is not referring to the law as a rule and guide for proper living. Paul would hold unwaveringly to such a view of the law. In the context of Galatians "under law" means obligated to obey the demands of the law for the purpose of being judged righteous by God.

This becomes clear in Galatians 5:4 where Paul wrote, "I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised (i.e. under the law) that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen

from grace.” By becoming “under law”, as symbolized in circumcision, the Galatians were expressing their commitment to the law as a means of gaining righteousness.

Imputation and Representative Righteousness

The same definition of “under law” must be applied to Christ in Galatians 4:4. Christ became man so that he might be under law as a means of obtaining righteousness. Some have argued that Christ was only able to gain righteousness for himself. Christ’s obligation to fulfil the law had a personal effect. It gained him a right standing before the Father and set an example for his people to follow.

Surely this does not correspond with Paul’s teaching. According to Paul Christ was made under the law for the purpose of redeeming “those who were under the law.” Christ came as a representative for those under bondage to law. He came to “redeem”, that is to liberate us from the bondage of law. Christ perfectly fulfilled all the requirements of the law for his people. Note the marvellous change in our relationship to the law as a result of Christ’s incarnation and life. He was “born under the law, to redeem those who *were* under the law.” We once “*were* under the law” as a means of gaining righteousness, but now, because of Christ’s redeeming work we are “no longer a slave” to the law but “a son” of God.

How is it that we move from being under law to being free from law as a means of gaining righteousness? According to Paul’s gospel Christ came “under law” to fulfil all the laws requirements for us. Christ has kept the whole law for us. His righteousness is imputed or transferred to us and legally becomes ours. “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness,” wrote Paul, “to everyone who believes.” (Rom. 10:4)

The Galatians were rejecting the liberty they had in Christ. By desiring to be under law again they were rejecting the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. Paul encourages them to “stand fast in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” (Gal. 5:1)

Imputation and the Moral Law

Some argue that Paul is concerned with the ceremonial law only. Those who make such an argument want the obligations of the moral law to continue to be binding on all Christians as a means of justification. This argument is flawed and undermines God’s plan of redemption.

There is a plausibility to this argument. In Galatians 4 Paul speaks of the futility of observing days, months, seasons and years. This is a clear reference to the Mosaic ceremonial system. Yet, in another place Paul warns them that if they become circumcised they are obliged to keep the “whole law”. In Romans 2:25 Paul wrote that “circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.” The point is this: if one becomes circumcised he is bound to keep both the ceremonial and moral aspects of the law. That is what is meant by the “whole law.” Failure to keep the whole law results in the curse (Gal. 3:10-11ⁱⁱ).

According to the apostolic gospel, Christ became man so that he might redeem us from the law. The law places two inescapable demands on us. The first is total conformity to its every command. The second is punishment for any breach of its precepts. Christ's person and work corresponds with both aspects of law. Christ came "under the curse" to free us from the punishment of law. He also came "under law" to free us from the righteous requirements of law for justification.

Imputation and Our Contribution

One question remains: Is Christ's imputed righteousness all that is required to secure our righteousness before God? At the heart of this question is a burning desire within the heart of every man to contribute something to his acceptance before God. There exists in us all a lust for self-righteousness. Some people teach that faith in Christ is a means of entering into the community of God's people. In order to maintain that standing we must live righteously. The emphasis is taken from Christ and placed on our individual effort. What contribution does personal righteousness and law keeping make toward our justification?

In Philippians 3:4-6 the apostle Paul speaks of his personal religious achievements as a Pharisee. In comparison with other Jews he boasts of excelling them all. He had pride in his religious pedigree as a Hebrew of Hebrews. He had pride in his religious performance as blameless concerning the righteousness of the law. In comparison with other Jews, Paul was the total package. He had it all. It is important to note in this context that Paul is dealing with positive contributions to righteousness. He is not dealing with the punishment of the law.

Although Paul had it all when compared to his contemporaries he knew that he was lacking when it came to God's holy law. It is one thing to be righteous in comparison to another human being; quite another thing to be righteous in comparison to God's law. Paul's great desire was to be righteous before God. Since he knew how unworthy his own contributions were he rejected them outright. Those things he once boasted in he now counts as "loss for Christ." All his personal achievements as a Pharisee he deems worthless.

What about Paul's achievements as an apostle? What about his growth in sanctification? Do these things have a positive contribution to make toward his righteousness? He continues by writing that he "also counts all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus." "All" is loss.

Every conceivable contribution toward righteousness is excluded. According to Paul there is no place for the idea that Christ has given Christians the power to work out their own righteousness. According to Paul there is no place for the idea that we are justified on the Day of Judgment by our covenant faithfulness. According to Paul there is no place for the idea that the good works of other saints can be transferred to us.

Paul is consumed by one goal. He wants more than anything to "gain Christ and be found in Him." The imputation of Christ's righteousness is what Paul rests in for justification. He could not make it plainer to his readers. He flees from himself and all his attempts at

righteousness. He flees to Christ and seeks to be identified with Christ at the judgment. “Not having my own righteousness from the law,” says Paul, “but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.”

We learn from Paul that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer is exclusive. Nothing can be added to it. We contribute absolutely nothing. What a glorious thought!

Conclusion

The doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness speaks comfort to the humbled sinner. The high demands of the law are fully met in Christ. The accusations of the Evil One are silenced in Christ. The declaration by the Father of justified is ours in Christ.

“If God is for us who can be against us?” “Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?”

It is our duty to embrace the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as a necessary article of faith. We are to apply this rich teaching to ourselves. Paul reminded that Galatians that “as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” What have we to fear in the judgment? When God looks upon us he will see us clothed in the glorious garments of Christ’s righteousness and he will be well pleased. It is no wonder that the apostles gave the message of salvation in Christ the title gospel. Truly it is good news.

ⁱ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. v (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust), 252.

ⁱⁱ Here Paul is referring to the pronouncement of the curse in Deuteronomy 27:11-26. It is important to note that the sins mentioned are moral rather than ceremonial. The curse falls upon the idolater, the rebellious child, the dishonest, the sexually immoral, etc. The same is true for Paul’s argument in Romans 1-3. The sins he condemns are moral rather than ceremonial (idolatry, sexual immorality, theft, blasphemy (Rom. 2:21-24)).