

Christ Is the End



Gary Wilkerson June 11, 2012

Every follower of Jesus has a certain hunger in his heart. It's a passionate zeal to be holy before God — free from sin, victorious over flesh, pure and spotless before the Lord.

This desire is actually something the Holy Spirit plants in the heart of every human being. It's an innate longing to live rightly. People of every religion — and even no religion — are moved to live well, do right, love others, be the best person they can be. Some obviously flee that desire and do the opposite — but they're still conscious of a deep desire to do right.

Of course, we all fall short of this desire because of our sinful nature. For non-believers, the spirit of this world can darken the mind to any sense of rightness. For believers, failure to live in a way that honors God can crush the spirit.

This desire to live rightly is behind the meaning of the word *righteousness*. It means to be in right standing with God — to live with right motives, emotions and behavior. It's to take what's wrong in us — what's out of sync with God — and establish right alignment with his purposes.

To truly be righteous, we have to know what it is and isn't. Is righteousness right behavior? No, you can do the right thing while having wrong motives. Some Christians do right things but are motivated by a pharisaical spirit. Their outward behavior is right, but inwardly they are “dead man's bones.” So, is righteousness the desire or will to be right? No, a lot of people seek righteousness with great passion but fail to attain it.

The Bible describes our righteousness in two words: *justification* and *sanctification*. As Christians, we need both in our lives. The first term indicates our position, or right standing, with God. The second refers to our walk with God, our ongoing relation to him.

First, if we aren't *justified*, we can never be righteous. We can do all good works and spend hours in prayer, but these things won't make us righteous. That's because justification is associated with justice; it's about making things just. For that to happen, God's wrath against sin has to be addressed. A penalty has to be paid for our sins so that God will pardon them.

We all know Jesus makes this payment (or propitiation) for our sin. His sacrifice on the cross quenched God's holy wrath toward our sin. Our Savior has met every requirement for us to be accepted fully by the Lord. He gives us right standing once and for all.

The second word associated with righteousness is *sanctification*. This isn't about the position we're given, but about a grace to function in righteousness. In other words, sanctification addresses the *ongoing process* of walking rightly before God.

Jesus provides our sanctification as well. In a corrupt world, he's continually at work shaping us into God's image. In fact, his work makes us saints in God's eyes. (The word *sanctified*, shortened in Greek, means “to be a saint.”)

Don't get me wrong: Sanctification isn't about withdrawing from the world to try to keep from being stained.

Sincere believers have done this throughout history and failed miserably. That was never the mission God gave us. Sanctification is the Christ-powered ability to fully engage with the world without becoming *of* the world.

So both words — *justification* and *sanctification* — are essential to our righteousness. What justification establishes in *position*, sanctification establishes in *function*. We have right standing before God through Christ; that's our justification. And we're continually cleansed and made into God's image through Christ; that's our sanctification.

How do we practically live out justification and sanctification?

Is it possible to have one without the other? Can we be justified without being sanctified and vice versa? The answer to each of these questions is an absolute, "No."

Paul helps us understand all this in Romans 9. He begins with a strange statement: "(The) Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith" (Romans 9:30). How could people who didn't pursue righteousness attain it?

Paul then makes an even stranger statement. He says God's people, Israel, *did* pursue righteousness — but they *didn't* attain it: "Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law" (9:31).

What is Paul talking about? How did Israel, in all its zeal for God's righteousness, not attain it? The apostle explains: "Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works" (9:32). Paul is making it all very plain for us: *Righteousness is found in Christ and his work alone*. Our faith must be in him, not in anything of ourselves.

That's where Israel fell short. Paul says, "They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense'" (9:32-33). Paul is using Israel as an example to teach what true righteousness is and isn't. "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:1-4).

Let's say you're someone with a passionate zeal to live righteously. You want to lead a clean and holy life, to be a true saint in God's eyes. You want the world to be transformed because of the way you live. Guess what? Israel was all of these things. So, why did they fail? And what does their failure teach us?

Paul's text challenges us with several questions. Does being *justified* make us righteous? Yes, in the sense that justification *positions* us as righteous. Does being *sanctified* make us righteous? Yes, in the sense that sanctification is *the process* of experiencing Christ's righteousness functioning in our daily lives. Jesus is our source for both justification and sanctification; we attain both through his gift of grace.

Most Christians give lip service to all this, saying, "Jesus is my source for everything." But does their walk actually reflect that? **Here's the sad truth for many Christians: They live as if justification comes from God alone — and as if sanctification is accomplished through their daily performance.** It's as if they say, "I have attained grace through faith in Jesus. Now I have to conduct a relentless personal campaign to be sanctified."

In a sense, they're telling God they want to pay him back for his great gift to them: "Thanks for justifying me, Lord. You've put me in right standing with you through the cross. In return, I'll be sanctified by obeying you. You do the first half of the work, and I'll do the second half."

This mindset leads straight to a life of bondage. How many times have you driven by a church marquee that reads, "CHRIST DIED FOR YOU. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR HIM?" It has become pervasive throughout the church.

Jesus was crucified, buried and rose on the third day that we might have eternal life. What could we possibly do in return for that? Tithe? Go to prayer meetings? Evangelize more? That's pretty much what Israel tried to do. They "pursued a law that would lead to righteousness" (9:31). They tried to engage their wills to achieve righteousness, but they could never attain it.

We tend to knock the Pharisees of Jesus' and Paul's day. But consider this: If they were to show up in one of our

churches today, we would probably give them leadership positions. We would see them as the most holy people around. We would ask them to pray for us. We would ask them to teach Sunday school classes so we could learn all they know about holiness.

Paul said, “They have a zeal for God” (10:2) — and zeal is very alluring to us. It’s an attractive trait in a Christian. When you see someone zealously pursuing God in prayer, evangelism and honorable behavior, you assume they’re “all in” for Jesus. But the Pharisees didn’t succeed. They pursued righteousness with their all, but they missed the mark.

Have you had this experience — giving your all to be righteous but failing?

Have you pursued righteousness and not succeeded? Have you said, “That’s the last time I’ll commit this sin,” only to commit it the next day? Have you promised you wouldn’t get angry again, only to explode at the person dearest to you?

Have you committed and recommitted to willpower? Have you asked your accountability group to hold your feet to the fire? Have you prayed, “Lord, whatever it takes, I’m going to stir up zeal in my heart,” only to cool off and fall into your old habits? When you didn’t succeed, did you try harder? Did you work at it relentlessly? And did you keep failing?

At some point in all this, did you ever wonder, “Why didn’t God help me? I have such a passion to be righteous. But I fail time after time.”

So, where is God when it comes to our sanctification? Where is his help when it comes to leading a holy life? Let’s be honest: At times it seems like we don’t have the support of heaven. Here’s why: *We don’t have the support of heaven.* Heaven does not come down to support our fleshly efforts. God isn’t moved to act when he hears us pray, “Lord, I’m redoubling my efforts. Please, bless me.” Zeal and passion can disguise themselves as a righteous pursuit when deep down they’re fleshly pride.

“They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2). According to Paul, Israel was wrong in their view of God’s righteousness. They thought they needed only to know *what to do*. According to Paul, attaining righteousness is about *who we know*. Like Israel, we have access to God’s all-prevailing righteousness, by faith in Christ. But we can reject that access as easily as they did — by relying on our performance instead of on faith in Jesus’ work for us.

God won’t bless anyone’s effort to establish their own righteousness. He blesses only the work of his Son, Jesus. We are sanctified — our holy walk is sustained — only by faith in Christ and his shed blood on our behalf. In this way, Paul says, Israel refused to “submit to God’s righteousness.” How often do we do the same? How often do we tell ourselves, “I can live righteously,” but don’t trust in Jesus’ provision for righteousness? Here are four indications we’re zealous for our own righteousness instead of God’s:

- *We get angry when we fail.* We think, “I expect better of myself.”
- *We get proud when we succeed.* We tell ourselves, “I’m more spiritual than before.”
- *We judge others’ failures.* We think, “Thank God, I’m not like him.”
- *We get jealous of others’ successes.* We think, “Why doesn’t my pursuit of righteousness work like theirs?”

Stop and think about the goal we set for ourselves when we pursue our own righteousness. It’s to achieve 100 percent perfection — and we measure our progress. We tell ourselves, “I’m doing a lot better than before. I haven’t fallen into that old, nagging habit for months.” This is a measurement of our own righteousness, not God’s. That’s why we feel miserable when we fail, growing bitter and judgmental.

When we fail, we think, “I have to re-establish my righteousness.” So we ratchet up our efforts. The problem is, we didn’t establish our righteousness in the first place — God did. Being restored to right standing with him doesn’t happen by anything we do. It happens by faith in him. This calls for a repentant heart and brokenness, and those aren’t things we “do.” They’re a condition — a humble acknowledgment that his power alone restores us to right standing.

The problem with trying to achieve righteousness is that sin and failure are ever present in our lives.

Whenever I try to stir up zeal for righteousness, it only stirs a greater passion for sin. That's the effect of focusing on the law. Paul says, "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7).

The law doesn't cause us to sin. It simply awakens what's already inside us. Let's say I'm determined not to lust. That actually introduces lust to my heart. "Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (7:8). By focusing on sin, my mind is flooded with overwhelming desires, robbing me of peace and joy. Sin loses its hold on us only when I stand on faith in Christ, rather than seek perfection through the law. "For apart from the law, sin lies dead" (7:8).

A lot of Christians today are worn down from their efforts to ward off sin. They pour all their energies into it until they're drained of every last ounce of joy. The victory Christ has won for them gets lost in their dogged efforts to establish a righteousness of their own.

Righteousness that's pursued by anything other than faith will always fail. You see, there can't be two "righteousnesses," God's and ours. That would mean there are two gospels: his and ours. We can't mix our self-righteousness with God's holy righteousness. There is only one righteousness: God's. His gospel doesn't just wash us — it also sustains us. That is good news for all: It doesn't depend on us. It depends entirely on Jesus.

Maybe you're wondering, "But aren't we supposed to put forth some effort? Doesn't the Bible say we're to avoid sin?" There's only one way for you to avoid sin: His name is Jesus. He isn't just a truth you accept; he's the living God and your Sanctifier. His sanctifying work in you never stops day or night.

Paul answers the question of self-effort in Romans 9. He speaks of a second type of people who actually attained righteousness: "(The) Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith" (Romans 9:30). These people didn't get worn down by their own efforts. They weren't weighed down by their failures. They put all their faith in Jesus' work on the cross for them — and they were sustained by his abundant life.

There is a verse that has brought freedom to all generations of believers: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4). *Christ is the end*. There is nothing else! "So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy" (9:16).

Paul warns those who would add to Christ's gospel by their own efforts: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?...Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:1-3).

Friend, are you worn down from trying to do better? Are you weary of the endless cycle of recommitment and failure? Put it all behind you. Let all your striving cease. Your right standing with the Lord doesn't depend on your will but on God, who has mercy.

Jesus is the end to "law keeping" in your life. You are now free indeed. He is your victory, your power, your newness of life. Let him alleviate all the pressure you've felt to be righteous. He fills you with true power for righteousness. Trust in him alone for your victory.

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