

In the New Testament we are told that our righteousness is to be found in Jesus Christ. This is well said by Paul in Romans 5. He tells us that unrighteousness came by Adam and righteousness by Jesus Christ. In Romans 3 he explains that there are none righteous and that only through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the righteous for the unrighteous, are we counted righteous. All of this, of course, must come through the operation of our faith - we must believe. This is the teaching of Romans chapters 3-5.

Let's back up just a little. Romans 4 says that we are counted righteous through faith. What does that mean, counted righteous? The correct way to look at this is through the eyes of a judge in a courtroom. Imagine a thief is standing before a judge. He is looking at life in prison for numerous offenses and a history of violence. The judge decides to give him a second chance and tells him his crimes have been pardoned and he is free to go. He is counted righteous. He is still a thief in his heart. In the eyes of the law and the judge he is not guilty; he is not a thief anymore. Before the thief leaves his courtroom the judge informs him just as any other judge in the world would do, "if you are caught stealing again you will be put in prison and pay your debt." The thief is expected to change. In the Christian world this is commonly called repentance.

The scenario just described in many ways mirrors our relationship with God. The big difference is that if we fail to change right away, God will discipline or chastise us to try to bring change in us instead of condemning us. He gives us time to change; possibly our whole lives. Jesus said I did not come to judge but to save, John 3:17. He demonstrated this with the woman at the well in John 4. Jesus let her know that he knew about her sinful lifestyle. It was up to her to decide to make a change. If He condemned her she might repent because of guilt instead of love. God is trying to start a relationship of love with us so that we decide not to offend Him because He is our Father; because of love.

There are some who say that God will overlook the sin of the thief even if there is no change or repentance. They say his faith saved him and that's the end of it. Is this true? Does God expect change or not? Will the blood of Christ cover his sin at the judgement? Are the judges of this world more righteous than God or is He just more merciful than them? Is it true that the death of the Lord is sufficient? I believe all of scripture should be taken into consideration. If we find contradictions; probably something is wrong with our doctrine or belief system. When the apostle Paul was preaching the gospel in Athens he said, "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead," Acts 17:30-31. In Paul's letters to the churches he warned them many times of the judgement seat of Christ. He says we will be judged according to our works and not what we believed. It is true that we cannot even get through the front door without a saving belief; but then love and righteousness have to be added to the mix. God expects us to become righteous and not just be counted righteous. This is why Paul uses the story of Abraham to begin to explain the grace of God. If we believed while yet sinners then righteousness and life are a gift by favor and not earned. Abraham just simply believed God's promise and he was counted righteous. Paul does not end the story there. In Romans 6-8 he lets us know that we have the responsibility to walk in the Spirit. In a parallel teaching in Galatians 5 he explains "if we live in the Spirit we should also walk in the Spirit."

The book of James tells the same story but in a different way. It picks up where Paul left off with the story of Abraham. James 2 tells us that Abraham added works to his faith. Abraham knew that God would raise Isaac from the dead if he went through with God's request to sacrifice his son. He believed the promise, "Look up at the sky and count the stars - if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall

your offspring be.” Abraham knew that Isaac would have to have descendants. Believing this he offered up Isaac and so his work matched his faith with the result that Abraham was made righteous instead of only being counted righteous. You see, God wants to teach us and make us righteous like His son, Jesus. He is creating us in His image. This is what the Gospel is all about, a new creation. This is why 1John was written; so that we can examine ourselves and make sure that we are walking in the light, continuing in the Gospel and continuing our new birth process. 1John 3:7, “Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.” The scriptures are telling us we can be and should be righteous. 1John 2:28-29, “And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.” We have to conclude that as God’s children He expects us to become righteous. After all, how do you love someone if you are cheating them at the same time? I think we all believe that God expects us to love one another. 1 John 3 and many other passages clearly let us know that we need to overcome our sin. This is the power of God and His word.

All of the scriptures teach this concept, new and old. Jesus, the chief scribe taught these things. He taught the people plainly: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” In other words, if you believe you are forgiven then you need to add a work of love to your faith, forgive others. We see Him in the next chapter in Matthew 7 exhorting the people concerning their actions and in verse 24, “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock.” In verse 26, “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.” The scriptures are exhorting us to do something.

Some may ask, what about the “filthy rags” verse in Isaiah 64:6, “But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.” This has to be talking about our condition before we came to God or those who are self-righteous. Many people think they are righteous because they don’t steal or because they obey some kind of command. Clearly Jesus taught as do all of the scriptures that you are righteous if you show mercy and love from the heart. Luke 6:35-36, “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.” Jesus is telling us to be righteous like our Father. Jesus said, “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Again, we are being created in His image. Not only was Jesus teaching to do something, He was always doing the will of the Father - works of love. He set the example of service. As we all know it is easy to do an act of service without love.

Having said all of this we still are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. We make mistakes. We have the promise if we walk in the light we will be forgiven, 1John 1:7. We should not take this as an excuse or license to sin. God gave us favor not to continue in sin but to overcome sin. Titus 1:11-12, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age.” He expects us to walk in the light, walk in the fruit of the Spirit, sowing to the Spirit and reaping eternal life. Paul told the Galatians, the church of God, that if they sowed to the flesh they would reap corruption. How much more are we accountable who have the entire New Testament scriptures at our fingertips; teaching us the will and ways of God with Jesus Christ as our example?