

God's Righteousness Revealed

Bob Hamilton, Copyright 2000

*developed from a sermon preached at St. Andrew's Evangelical Church,
Columbia, SC, 6/30/96*

Consider the apostle Paul's words:

Romans 1:16-17

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

What does it mean that "the righteousness of God is revealed" in the gospel? Presumably it means that in the gospel of Jesus, we learn something or experience something new of God's righteousness. But what exactly, and how?

This idea of the revelation of God's righteousness must be important for understanding what the epistle to the Romans is all about, not only because it is mentioned in what most commentators recognize to be the theme verses for the entire epistle (1:16-17 above), but also because we find similar statements recurring in the epistle. For example:

"the righteousness of God has been
manifested . . ." (3:21)

"This was to demonstrate his righteousness . . ."
(3:25)

"for the demonstration, I say, of his righteousness . . ."
(3:26)

"according to the revelation of the mystery . . ."
(10:25)

"but now has been manifested . . ."
(10:26)

God is said to be revealing, demonstrating, manifesting something about His own righteousness through the gospel of faith in Christ. But what exactly?

To begin to answer this question, let us look more closely at 3:21-22.

Romans 3:21-22

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe. . .

The phrase "apart from the Law" could be taken in two different ways. It may suggest that the Law did not reveal God's righteousness at all, in contrast to the gospel of faith in Jesus Christ, which does reveal God's righteousness. Or, it may suggest that the Law did reveal God's righteousness, though not in the same way (or to the same extent) that the gospel of faith reveals God's righteousness. I take this second interpretation to be more likely in terms of the larger context of Romans. A crucial passage in this regard is found in Romans 7:

Romans 7:7-13

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. 9 And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; 10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; 11 for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. 12 So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. 13 Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Paul says that the Law is inherently "holy and righteous and good" (vs. 12) and promises life to us (vs. 10). Sin, however, somehow takes advantage of the knowledge of God's will revealed through the Law and leads us instead to death. The Law might be said, then, to reveal God's righteousness in a limited way, but not in such a way that allows us to actually experience that righteousness.

Just how the Law does this is outlined by Paul in detail in the first several chapters of Romans. Notice that Paul does not begin with the revelation of God's righteousness at all, but with the revelation of His wrath:

Romans 1:18

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. . .

God reveals His wrath because men have rejected another of God's revelations, the revelation of His nature through the created order. Paul continues:

Romans 1:19-20

. . . because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Especially relevant to our present discussion is the fact that God has revealed His moral nature and moral requirements for humanity through the written Law and through the human conscience:

Romans 2:14-15

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, 15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them . . .

As we saw in 1:18 above, humanity rebelled against this revealed knowledge of God, and degraded the nobility that God had put in them as children "made in His own image" (Gen 1:27). Consequently, in 1:24-32 Paul lists a horrendous inventory of evil, degrading acts committed by men and women who suppress the truth of God and trade it for what is base, ugly, and delusory. Humans insisted on, and received from God, a free reign to do whatever their lower nature demanded, seemingly without having to immediately answer to their Creator (cf. Gen 8:21-22).

Though the manifestation of God's wrath may be deferred, however, it is none the less inevitable:

Romans 2:5-8

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6 who will render to every man according to his deeds: 7 to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; 8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

The "day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (vs. 5) is equivalent to the "wrath of God" being "revealed" in 1:18. God's wrath is revealed (or will be revealed) upon all those who break His righteous Law. Only those who "by perseverance in doing good" (i.e., who consistently do what is good) will fulfill the requirements of the Law to be rewarded with eternal life.

Don't shy away from this passage because it smacks of works salvation -- it *is* works salvation! And that's the point: Apart from the gospel of faith, which Paul is about to present in chapter three of Romans, there is only the Law, and the only kind of salvation you can squeeze out of the Law is a works salvation, a salvation based on your ability to merit God's favor through your own works of keeping the righteous requirements of the Law.

Unfortunately for us, this scenario of persistently keeping the works of the Law is never realized in the real world, for as Paul makes clear in 3:9, 23, "both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We all fail to consistently keep God's righteous Law.

This is where the Law has led us: Yes, it reveals God's righteousness in the sense that the Law embodies the moral standards required of God's people to reflect the righteousness of God's own holy character. "Do not bear false witness . . . Do not murder . . . Do not covet . . ."

However, even more so the Law reveals the wrath of God, because no one can consistently persevere in obeying it. No one can persevere in doing only what is good. Thus, the Law reveals God's wrath and judgment on us for our sin, and this overshadows the revelation of God's righteousness by barring me from personally experiencing the attainment of the righteous standards of God. Through the Law, I come to experience sin, not righteousness.

Romans 3:19-20

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; 20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

So then, the Law cannot fully demonstrate God's righteousness to us because our sinfulness obstructs the view.

Is there no other way that God's righteousness might be revealed? Yes, Paul says, there is another way.

Romans 3:21-22

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe . . .

Here is righteousness, revealed not by obedience to the Law (or the works salvation of Romans 2:5-8), but by faith in Jesus Christ.

In exactly what sense is God's righteousness revealed through the way of faith in Christ? Paul explains more in this regard in chapter ten. Speaking of the Jews who sought righteousness through the Law, he says:

Romans 10:3-10

For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. 5 For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. 6 But the righteousness based on faith speaks thus, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), 7 or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

In this passage Paul contrasts the righteousness based on Law to the righteousness based on faith. The key difference between the two, he says, is that whereas righteousness based on Law is attained when one practices it (vs. 5), the righteousness based on faith is attained when one is granted it as a result of faith (vs. 10). Put another way, we might say that Law-based righteousness is achieved by one's own efforts if one can perfectly keep the Law, but faith-based righteousness is imputed by God freely to the one who has faith in Christ. Though the first type of righteousness might be called the righteousness of man (cf. also Phlp 3:9), only the second type of righteousness qualifies to be called the "righteousness of God" (vs. 4 above), the kind of righteousness which only God can supply. Those who sought Law-based righteousness did not know of God's righteousness (vs. 3); that is, God's imputed righteousness was not revealed to them through their attempts to keep the Law, because as we saw earlier a focus on the Law leads simply to a heightened awareness of one's own moral failings, which tend to obstruct our view of God's righteousness.

Only those who have received imputed righteousness are free to see past their own moral failings to discover what God is truly like. We experience the righteous God through the reception of imputed righteousness in at least three important ways:

First, when we receive God's imputed righteousness, for the first time we experience a full acceptance before God. We are declared righteous, and thus we can have true fellowship with the Wholly Righteous One (1 John 1:3).

Second, having come into fellowship with God through Christ, we begin to experience the working into our own life and character a personal righteousness which mirrors the life and character of God. This is what is commonly termed sanctification, the process of becoming more and more like Christ. Through this process, the requirements of the Law of God, distilled in the law of love, are experientially fulfilled in us as we live a life of holiness unto the Lord (Rom 8:2-4).

Third, we discover a startling aspect of the character of God through His imputation of righteousness. Consider 3:24-26:

Romans 3:24-26

. . . being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The way of faith in Christ reveals God to be both righteous ("just") and the imputer of righteousness ("the justifier") of those who have faith in Christ. (Note that these words translated "just" and "justifier" in 3:26 come from the same Greek root word as the word translated "righteous" in this epistle, *dikaio*.)

On the one hand, this new way of faith in Christ retains the strength of the Law; namely, it still upholds and reveals the moral requirements of God's righteousness. The principle stated in 2:6 is still operative; namely, that evil deeds will be rewarded with wrath and judgment.

On the other hand, however, the way of righteousness through faith goes beyond the Law and reveals a God who **steps in and steps down** to justify the sinner. Solely on the basis of His grace, God provides a substitute, Jesus Christ, to receive the penalty of our sins. On this basis God can buy us back (redeem us, vs. 24) and his wrath can be satisfied (propitiated, vs. 25), without our being punished. The principle that sins must be punished is satisfied through the death of Jesus for our sins. The way of righteousness through faith, then, reveals the gracious character of God in a way that the Law could not, by showing God to be One who willingly stoops to justify the sinner. In this sense, imputed righteousness provides a more complete revelation of God's righteousness than was available through the way of righteousness by Law.

There is another observation worth making: In Romans 9:23 Paul uses an interesting phrase to describe the benefits of imputed righteousness in contrast to the wrath that is inevitably revealed to those who seek righteousness by way of the Law alone. Specifically, Paul speaks of the "riches of His glory" upon those "vessels of mercy" who receive His grace. Elsewhere in 10:12 Paul speaks of the Lord as "abounding in riches for all who call upon Him."

These references highlight one final important characterization of righteousness through faith: its benefits are rich, glorious, abundant, and overwhelming. Here again the way of faith reveals God's goodness and generosity in a way that the Law never could. Certainly the Law was "good" (Rom 7:7), but the Law could not be characterized as "rich and glorious" because it could not impart life to the lawbreaker (Gal 3:21).

We see, then, the central distinction between Christianity and all other religions, because virtually every other religion is based on the principle of man's works of merit, unassisted by God. Only Christianity fully reveals the righteousness of God, because other religions attempt to reach God on the basis of works of merit and thereby fail to recognize the impartial God who stoops to justify, the God who abundantly imparts life to the one who has faith.

Now let me ask you: Have you embraced the rich abundance of God's righteousness imputed to you, or are you still struggling under the limited revelation of Law, fearing at every step that you will not measure up to God's expectations. Even genuine believers in Christ can sometimes live under that cloud of partial revelation, hovering at the point of contradiction between Law and Grace.

If that is where you're living right now, please, step into the full revelation of God's righteousness, fully attributed to you if you have faith in the sufficiency of His Son to secure your salvation (Romans chps. 3-5). Recognize your position of security in Christ, and then take hold of the victory over sin available to you through the power of the Spirit of God in you (Romans chps. 6-8). Don't stay stuck in the second chapter of Romans, under the weight of Law.

I close with Paul's doxology to the God who has revealed the glorious gospel, as found in the closing verses of the epistle to the Romans:

"Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, which has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever, Amen."