

# Thoughts on Imputed Righteousness

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## Introduction

No one can inherit the kingdom of God unless God considers him or her righteous (Mt. 5:20; 7:21). And yet, the Bible is clear that no one through personal effort ever attains to God's standard of righteousness (Rom. 3:10, 23). This paradox is resolved by the biblical doctrine of justification by faith: Though we are sinful and fall short of God's standard, God graciously offers to accept as full punishment for our sin the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross, so that we can be completely forgiven of our sins if we place our loyal faith in Christ. In this way, God can "be just [because every sin is punished in Christ] and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Justification, then, involves the remission of all of the believer's sins, and the accompanying divine declaration that the believer has been made right with God (i.e., imputed righteousness).

The doctrine of justification has traditionally been developed further, however, to say that imputed righteousness is based not only on the remission of our sins through Christ's substitutionary death (traditionally referred to as Christ's *passive* obedience, or in some current discussions as his *penal* obedience), but also on the imputation of Christ's own personal record of righteousness to our account (where Christ's righteousness comprises His perfect obedience to God's Law during His lifetime on earth; traditionally termed Christ's *active* obedience, or in some current discussions his *preceptive* obedience). [NOTE 1] This is seen to follow from the doctrine of the believer's union with Christ. Specifically, because we are in union with Christ, the traditional view is that we share Christ's record of experiential righteousness (i.e., His active obedience) in God's eyes. It is often argued that remission of sins based on Christ's passive obedience is not in itself enough to provide one with a righteous standing before God, being as it is a simple negation of sins committed. What is additionally needed, according to this view, is the positive crediting of a record of perfect Law-keeping to one's account, and the only available source for this is the life of the perfect man, Jesus Christ. As our sins were credited to Him, then, His personal righteousness (i.e., His active obedience) is credited to us. This two-pronged formulation of imputed righteousness (one prong appealing to the remission of sins based on Christ's passive obedience, the other prong appealing to the imputation of Christ's active obedience) is the standard view in evangelical churches.

In this essay I will argue that the two-pronged formulation of imputed righteousness, though perhaps having an intuitive appeal, is not supported by the biblical data. I will show that the Bible consistently grounds our justification not in Christ's life of active obedience (i.e., the second prong of the traditional view) but rather only in Christ's substitutionary death and the remission of sins that His death made possible. Thus, I will argue for a simpler, one-pronged view of imputed righteousness through the remission of sins based on Christ's passive obedience. In arguing for this position, I am, of course, not questioning the fact that Christ lived a life of perfect obedience to God's Law. I am, rather, questioning only whether this record of Christ's active obedience is directly imputed to the believer, or whether imputed righteousness is instead derived in Scripture solely from Christ's passive obedience. [NOTE 2]

I will begin by examining key passages used to support the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness, and will conclude that the context in each

case does not in fact support that interpretation. In so doing I will show that the Bible consistently grounds the imputation of righteousness in Christ's substitutionary death, never in Christ's life of Law-observance. I will then consider more closely whether the one-pronged interpretation of imputed righteousness based on remission of sins is internally coherent and consistent with the biblical data, concluding that it is so.

### ***The Ground of Justification***

The traditional two-pronged view of imputed righteousness teaches that the righteousness with which believers are credited is specifically the righteousness of Christ. Interestingly, however, the Bible never uses such phraseology to refer to the righteousness imputed to believers. Instead, the apostle Paul on several occasions refers to imputed righteousness as being the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:17; 3:21, 22, 26; 10:3; 2 Cor. 5:21), which is said to be *from God* (Phlp 3:9; Ps. 24:5) on the basis of faith in Christ (Rom. 1:17; 3:22, 26-30; 4:11-13; 9:30; 10:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:21-22; Phlp 3:9). Phlp. 1:11 does say that righteousness "comes through Jesus Christ," but this need refer only to the fact that it is through the agency of Christ's redemptive work that righteousness is made available to believers.

Despite this absence in the Bible of terminology such as the "righteousness of Christ" to refer to imputed righteousness, proponents of the two-pronged interpretation of imputed righteousness point to several key passages in support of their view. One of these is Rom. 5:18-19.

18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

These verses occur in the context of a series of parallel statements contrasting Adam and Christ. Whereas Adam introduced sin and death into the world by his sin in Eden, Christ brings "justification of life" and righteousness to all sinners who will believe in Him. Support for the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness has traditionally been taken from Paul's use of the phrases "through one act of righteousness" (vs. 18) and "through the obedience of the One" (vs. 19). If the "righteousness" and "obedience" mentioned here include Christ's complete record of perfect obedience to God's Law during His lifetime here on earth (i.e., His active obedience), then the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness provides a ready interpretation of these verses: God imputes Christ's own personal, active "righteousness" and "obedience" to the believer's account, the believer thereby being "made righteous" and receiving "justification of life."

There are several reasons, however, to believe that Paul did not have in mind such an imputation of Christ's personal record of obedience in these verses. First, notice in vs. 18 that Paul refers to Christ's "one act of righteousness" (as over against Adam's "one" transgression). This would be a peculiar way for Paul to refer to an entire lifetime of multitudinous acts of obedience, if (as is maintained in the traditional view) he were using this phrase to refer to Christ's lifelong record of obedience to the Law. We might instead have expected Paul to say that it was through Christ's "many acts of righteousness" that justification of life came to all men. But Paul does not say this.

If by the phrase "one act of righteousness" Paul did not mean to refer to Christ's lifelong observance of the Law, then to what was he referring? An important clue is found in vs. 16, where Paul says that the free gift of righteousness bestowed by Christ (cf. "gift of righteousness" in vs. 17) arose from "many transgressions."

Rom. 5:16

And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.

The phrase "many transgressions" can only refer to the sins of the world that put Jesus on the cross (cf. 4:25, "was delivered up because of our transgressions"); consequently when Paul says that "the free gift arose from many transgressions" he is making a veiled reference to the substitutionary death of Christ, the key event making our justification possible. This is important to keep in mind when interpreting the phrases "one act of righteousness" in vs. 18 and "the obedience of the One" in vs. 19, for the overall parallel structure of the passage is best preserved if we interpret these three phrases as all referring to the same event. That is, just as the various phrases referring to Adam's agency (i.e., "the transgression of the one," "one transgression," and "the disobedience of the one") in vss. 15-19 all are naturally interpreted as referring to a common event (i.e., Adam's initial sin act in Eden), so the various parallel phrases characterizing Christ's work in this passage (i.e., that which "arose from many transgressions," the "one act of righteousness," and "the obedience of the One" in vss. 16, 18, and 19) should be taken to refer to a common event. Taking vs. 16 as our cue, the obvious candidate for such an event is the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. Not only did Christ's death "arise from many transgressions," His willingness to submit to this death was the "one act of righteousness" and the crucial act of "obedience" (cf. Philp. 2:8) that makes possible our justification.

This line of interpretation is further confirmed by the fact that the pivotal role of Christ's death in effecting our justification and reconciliation was raised explicitly by Paul in 5:6-11, which is the backdrop to the passage currently being considered. Note especially vs. 9, in which Paul states that our justification is "by [Christ's] blood." The contrast between Adam and Christ in 5:12-21 should be interpreted with this backdrop in mind.

The above facts taken together strongly suggest that the phrases "one act of righteousness" and the "obedience of the One" in Rom. 5:18-19 refer *not* to Christ's personal record of righteousness (i.e., His active obedience), but instead to Christ's willingness to submit to a substitutionary death in order to make possible our justification (i.e., His passive obedience). One might argue, counter to the line of reasoning I am developing here, that the phrase "we shall be saved by His life" in 5:10 is a reference to the imputation to our account of Christ's life of active obedience.

Rom. 5:8-10

8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. 10 For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

However, the fact that Paul mentions Christ's "life" in juxtaposition to His "death" suggests that Paul has in view here Christ's *resurrected* life (not His pre-crucifixion life of obedience to the Law), as is explicitly the case only a few verses later in Rom. 6:5 ("For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection."). Moreover, whatever it is about Christ's resurrected life that is spoken of here as benefiting our salvation, notice that the benefit seems to point toward *the future* ("we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him," "we shall be saved by His life"), and it is a benefit that is

focused *beyond* our initial reconciliation to God. These observations suggest that Paul is not referring to imputed righteousness with the phrase "we shall be saved by His life," for imputed righteousness has an immediate, primary role in accomplishing our initial reconciliation to God. A better interpretation of this phrase that takes into account the above observations is that Paul is presenting the same teaching as is presented in Heb. 7:25; namely, that the resurrected Christ is the guarantor of our continued salvation in that He "is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

To summarize so far, it seems that one of the key passages traditionally used to support the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness, Rom. 5:18-19, does not in fact do so. That is, the "one act of righteousness" and the "obedience of the One" mentioned in these verses as making possible our justification does not refer to Christ's lifelong record of righteousness imputed to our account (i.e., active obedience). These phrases instead refer to Christ's willingness to submit to a substitutionary death on our behalf (i.e., passive obedience). Thus, in Rom. 5:18-19 (as in 5:9) Paul grounds our justification *not* in Christ's life of obedience but rather in Christ's substitutionary death and the remission of sins that His death made possible. This is consistent with the simpler, one-pronged view of imputed righteousness based on the remission of sins for which I am arguing. (For additional comments on the Adam-Christ parallel in Rom. 5:12-21, see my separate essay "[Thoughts on Original Sin](#).")

Two other verses often used to argue for the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness are Rom. 8:4 and 1 Cor. 1:30. Consider first Rom. 8:4. Some have taken the Law's fulfillment in the believer mentioned in this verse as referring to the imputation of Christ's perfect Law-observance to the believer's account.

Rom. 8:1-4

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

However, as I have discussed in the separate essay "[Thoughts on Original Sin](#)," verse 4 must be understood in terms of the "weakness" of the Law mentioned in verse 3; namely, the inability of the Law itself to foster experiential righteousness in one's life, as Paul vividly described in the preceding chapter (7:14-25). Paul's point in 8:4, then, is that Christ's death achieved what the Law could not: it provides the basis for the Spirit's work in our lives (8:2, 13), by which we may experience victory over the flesh and fulfill the Law as we "walk according to the Spirit" (i.e., grow in Spirit-enabled, experiential righteousness). The primary focus here is on our experiential walk with Christ, then, and not our objective legal standing before God. Therefore, the reference in 8:4 to the fulfillment of the Law's requirements in us refers not to the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us, but rather to the Spirit's enabling us to *experientially* keep the requirements of the Law, distilled in the law of love (Rom 13:8-10).

Turning now to 1 Cor. 1:30, Paul says in this verse that through our union with Christ, Christ "became to us . . . righteousness." This statement has often been interpreted to mean that Christ's personal record of righteousness has been imputed to our account, so that *His* righteousness has become *our* righteousness.

1 Cor. 1:30-31

30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The context here is Paul's response to the charge that the message of the cross is foolishness. Paul embraces the charge, in a sense, and replies that it is indeed a foolish message, according to the world's wisdom (1:23). But from God's perspective it is true wisdom, and what Jesus did on the cross makes possible everything pertaining to our salvation. It is through our union with Christ ("in Christ Jesus," vs. 30) that we experience God's wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. It is all only through Jesus, not through any man-based system of which we could boast.

There is nothing in this verse that requires us to adopt the traditional perspective that Jesus' personal record of righteousness is imputed to us. That Jesus became our righteousness need not mean that it is His personal righteousness credited to us, anymore than that Jesus became our wisdom need mean that His personal wisdom is somehow transferred to our minds. And in what sense would His "sanctification and redemption" be *imputed* to us? The traditional interpretation requires that we interpret "became . . . righteousness" in the sense of imputation, whereas we must interpret "became to us wisdom" and "became to us . . . sanctification and redemption" in a different sense, namely in terms of Christ's *agency*. That is, as a result of Christ's redemptive work (through His agency) we come to experience true wisdom, sanctification, and redemption. Contrary to the traditional view, the simplest interpretation would be to take the phrase "became to us . . . righteousness" in the same sense as also referring to Christ's agency. By dying as our substitute, Jesus made our justification possible, and in this sense He "became" our righteousness, wisdom, etc. It is through His agency that these results are accomplished for us. As discussed earlier, this agency is vividly described in Rom 5:18-19, without any hint of the imputed righteousness in question being Christ's personal record of righteousness.

So far, then, we have looked at three key passages often used to support the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness (Rom. 5:18-19; Rom. 8:4; 1 Cor. 1:30) and have found no support for the idea that justification involves the imputation of Christ's personal observance of the Law to the believer's account. What we have seen (particularly in Rom. 5:18-19) is that our justification is instead grounded in Christ's substitutionary death. It appears, in fact, from a survey of relevant passages that this can be stated as a generalization:

*Whenever a passage speaks of righteousness being imputed to believers, this is always tied to Jesus' substitutionary death, without any reference being made to Christ's personal (active) record of righteousness.*

Consider, for example, Rom. 3:24-26.

Rom. 3:24-26

24 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.

Notice that it is God's public display of Christ as a propitiation (on the cross) that "demonstrate[s] His righteousness" and allows God to "be just and the

justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Justification (i.e., the imputation of righteousness to the believer) is grounded in Christ's substitutionary death, with no mention being made in this passage of Christ's personal record of righteousness.

Similarly, in Rom. 5:1 Paul says that we have "been justified by faith," and therefore "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The preceding verse (4:25) shows that Paul has Christ's death and resurrection in mind when making this statement.

Rom. 4:25-5:1

25 He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of [on account of] our justification.

5:1 Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, . . .

Our justification is thus grounded in Christ's death, and here in Christ's resurrection as well, His resurrection being "the proof (or demonstration and vindication) of God's acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice (cf. 1:4). Thus because He lives, God can credit His provided righteousness to the account of every person who responds by faith to that offer" (John A. Witmer, *Romans*. In Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc. 1983, 1985).

Likewise, in Gal. 2:20-21 Paul says that righteousness comes through Christ's death:

Gal. 2:20-21

20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. 21 "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

In this passage Paul contrasts righteousness based on obedience to the Law (which no one can attain, though the Galatians were in danger of attempting that means) with righteousness based on faith in Christ. Paul clearly grounds the latter in Christ's death, as seen in vs. 21. That is, Paul can say "if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly," because Christ's death was accomplished for the express purpose of making possible an alternative to the Law for gaining righteousness, namely, righteousness through faith in Christ. As in the other passages considered, there is no mention here of righteousness being based on Christ's personal record of obedience to the Law.

Again, the above passages illustrate the generalization that *whenever a passage speaks of righteousness being imputed to believers, this is always tied to Jesus' death, without any reference being made to Christ's personal record of righteousness*. The final three passages considered below illustrate not only the above observation but another important observation as well:

*In those verses that speak explicitly of our sins being credited to Jesus, the converse relation (i.e., that Jesus' personal righteousness is credited to us) is never stated.*

This observation is especially significant in those cases where righteousness is overtly mentioned in the context. If anywhere we would expect the imputation of Christ's personal righteousness to be mentioned (if indeed the Bible were to teach this doctrine), it would be in these cases.

And yet, as elsewhere in Scripture, these passages are silent in regard to this hypothesized relation. Consider 1 Pet. 2:24.

1 Pet. 2:24

And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

Although this verse explicitly states that our sins were credited to Christ's account ("He Himself bore our sins"), no mention is made of Christ's personal righteousness being credited conversely to us. Moreover, though the statement that we "live to righteousness" may be taken to refer to our justification, this is tied only to Christ's death and not to His life of active obedience.

Another important passage in this regard is 2 Cor. 5:17-21.

2 Cor. 5:17-21

17 Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

The context here is Paul's appeal to the Corinthian church to be reconciled both with himself and with God. After defending his own ministry in the greater part of chapters one through five, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to be reconciled to God (vs. 20), who in the death of Christ already took the first and decisive step on His part to be reconciled to them (vss. 18-19). In vs. 21 Paul addresses the nature of this reconciliation by discussing the significance of Christ's death. Christ's death involved an exchange between us and Christ. He became sin (i.e., our sin was credited to Him), so that we could become God's righteousness "in Him."

Because it is *our* sin that was credited to Christ, it is often assumed that this passage teaches that it is *Christ's* personal righteousness that is conversely imputed to our account. However, the passage does not say this. The righteousness in question is instead referred to simply as being "of God" (vs. 21), though it is credited to us "in" Christ. It is not clear whether this phrase "in Him" is meant to refer to the believer's union with Christ; note that the same phrase is used in vs. 19 ("God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself"), where the sense seems to be that of *agency* (i.e., God accomplished reconciliation through the agency of Christ's redemptive work on the cross) instead of union. If we apply this same sense to "in Him" in vs. 21, the idea is then that because our sins were imputed to Christ on the cross, God can *on this basis* declare us righteous (i.e., on the basis of the remission of sins made possible through the agency of Christ's substitutionary death). Vs. 21 can then be seen as a paraphrase and expansion of vs. 19, the declaration of our righteousness in vs. 21 being grounded in the remission of sins described in vs. 19. In neither verse does Christ's record of personal righteousness come into the picture.

Finally, consider Is 53:11.

Is. 53:11

As a result of the anguish of His  
soul,  
He will see it and be satisfied;

By His knowledge the Righteous One,  
My Servant, will justify the many,  
As He will bear their iniquities.

Isaiah's statement that the Messiah will "justify the many" by "bearing their iniquities" is a clear reference to Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. Justification in this verse is thus again grounded in Christ's death, not in His perfect life. Moreover, though it is explicitly stated that our sins are credited to Christ's account, no mention is made in this passage of Christ's righteousness being credited to us.

From this brief survey [NOTE 3] we see that in those passages where we would most expect the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to be explicitly presented (i.e., passages which state that righteousness is imputed to believers, and passages which state that our sins were credited to Jesus), the biblical record offers no support for the doctrine in question. This observation provides strong evidence against the traditional two-pronged view of imputed righteousness. The biblical doctrine of the imputation of righteousness to believers is not grounded in Christ's personal record of righteousness, but rather only in Christ's substitutionary death on the cross.

### ***Is Remission of Sins Enough?***

We have seen that the Bible consistently grounds our justification in the substitutionary death of Christ and the remission of sins that His death makes possible, not in Christ's life of Law-observance. But is this one-pronged view internally coherent? That is, as was noted earlier, some people have argued that a doctrine of justification based solely on the remission of sins is incomplete because it deals only with a negation of sin, which (it is argued) is not enough to establish one's righteous standing before God. What is additionally needed is the crediting of a positive record of experiential righteousness (i.e., observance of God's moral Law) to one's account from another source, Christ's perfect life being the only such available source.

Though the reasoning here is appealing, it finds no direct biblical support. Consider, for example, what is perhaps the premier passage in the New Testament on imputed righteousness, Romans chapter 4. In 4:6 Paul says that the quotation in vss. 7-8 (taken from Ps. 32:1-2) speaks of imputed righteousness, and yet this quotation itself speaks only of the remission of sins. The argument above that righteousness cannot be imputed apart from some independent body of Law-observance appears to have been lost on Paul, who seems quite ready to speak of the righteous person as one who has received forgiveness, without any additional step of experiential righteousness being transferred from another source.

Romans 4:5-8

5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:  
7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. 8 "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

The centrality of the remission of sins is seen in other passages as well, such as the following:



Col. 2:13

And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, . . .

Acts 13:38

"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, . . ."

2 Cor 5:18-19

18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

In none of these passages is there any hint that forgiveness of sins by itself leaves our reconciliation to God fundamentally incomplete, as the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness would suggest. Instead, the remission of sins is consistently presented as the essential means by which a person is made acceptable to God.

It might be objected that the remission of sins by itself does not adequately satisfy the principle enunciated in Rom. 2:13, that "the doers of the Law will be justified" (cf. Rom. 2:6-10; Lev. 18:5; Mt. 19:17; Luke 10:25-28). An assumption behind the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness seems to be that justification *never* occurs apart from this principle, regardless whether the justification in question is by works (in which case one's own perfect observance of the Law is required--a hypothetical possibility that is never realized) or by faith (in which case Christ's record of Law-observance is imputed to the believer).

However, the principle expressed in Rom. 2:13 is best interpreted as applicable only to the case of justification by works, as is seen more clearly in a similar passage in Rom. 10. Notice that in 10:5 Paul applies this same Law-observance principle strictly to the case of "righteousness which is based on Law," *in contrast to* "righteousness which is based on faith" (vs. 6).

Rom. 10:3-10

3 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.

(See also Rom. 9:30-33; Gal. 2:16; 3:6-14; and Phlp. 3:9 for additional examples of Paul's contrast between these two kinds of righteousness.)

Paul seems to have had in mind a more radical break from the principle of righteousness through observance of the Law than the traditional two-pronged view assumes. Rather than seeking to apply this principle to faith-based righteousness (i.e., by arguing that Christ observed the Law on our behalf in order to impart to us His personal righteousness, as the two-pronged view assumes), Paul instead abandoned entirely any notion of righteousness based on observance of the Law (10:4). Righteousness by faith is neither righteousness through one's personal obedience to the Law (the means the Jews sought and failed to achieve; 10:3) nor righteousness through the imputation of Christ's active obedience (an interesting concept, but one which Paul apparently never entertained). Instead, righteousness based on faith is a *gift imparted solely by divine prerogative, not based on anyone's observance of the Law*. [NOTE 4] Of course, such a divine declaration can be made only in conjunction with the remission of sins based on a substitutionary sacrifice, otherwise God would be merely sweeping our sins under the rug, so to speak, and in so doing would be violating His own justice. But by virtue of the remission of sins made possible by Christ's substitutionary death, God is able to "justly" justify (i.e., impute righteousness to) the believing sinner through divine prerogative (Rom. 3:26). This radical departure from righteousness based on any observance of the Law gives fuller meaning to Paul's emphasis on justification and salvation as a free gift of God's mercy, as in Rom. 3:24.

Rom. 3:21-24

21 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; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

(see also Rom. 5:15-17; 6:23; Eph. 2:4-8; Tit. 3:4-8).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this essay I have questioned the biblical support for the traditional two-pronged understanding of imputed righteousness as being based both on the remission of sins through Christ's death (i.e., His passive obedience) and the imputation of Christ's personal record of Law-observance (i.e., His active obedience) to the believer's account. I have argued that:

- (1) The key passages commonly purported to support the traditional two-pronged view do not in fact do so; instead, the justification of believers is consistently grounded solely in the substitutionary death of Christ and the remission of sins which His death makes possible.
- (2) The Bible never states that the righteousness imputed to believers is specifically Christ's personal record of righteousness, not even in those passages where one would most expect this idea to be made explicit (i.e., in passages which mention the imputation of righteousness to believers, or else the crediting of our sins to Christ).
- (3) The one-pronged understanding of imputed righteousness (which grounds justification strictly on Christ's substitutionary death and the remission of sins) is internally coherent and biblically attested. Given the remission of sins, God can justly impute righteousness by divine prerogative as a free gift, without this declaration being based on anyone's observance of the Law.

To the extent that the above observations are biblically-based and internally coherent (which I believe they are), to that extent the one-pronged view of

imputed righteousness should be preferred over the traditional two-pronged view. This conclusion may, of course, have ramifications for a broader biblically-based systematic theology (see my essay "[Thoughts on Original Sin](#)" to see one example of how the above interpretation of passages dealing with justification can affect our views of a related doctrine, the effects of original sin on the human race). In any case it is essential that we allow the biblical text, rather than any particular existing systematic theology, to have priority in determining the construction of individual doctrines.

**Note 1:**

For a brief presentation of this view, see the entry for "Obedience of Christ" in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. by Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984, p. 785).

**Note 2:**

The view being espoused here is by no means original with me. Though the vast majority of Calvinists (and of evangelical churches since the Reformation) have subscribed to the opposing view (i.e., that both Christ's passive and active obedience are imputed to believers for righteousness), Arminius mentioned "a short controversy in relation to this subject, between John Piscator, Professor of Divinity in the University of Herborn in Nassau, and the French Churches" ("A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," in *Works of James Arminius, Vol. I*, London Ed., trans. by James Nichols, Baker Books, 1999, pp. 695-696). Piscator, a Calvinist, argued for the same position as I have in this essay, stating that "the scriptures deliver no other thing, than the obedience of the death of Christ [i.e., passive obedience], by which our sins have been expiated and the pardon of them obtained" (ibid., footnote p. 698). Arminius' biographer/editor also mentions a certain John Goodwin, well-known at that time as holding to this same position. Arminius himself stated that he held to the contrary position as presented in the Heidelberg Catechism, according to which "the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ will be imputed to me and bestowed on me . . . as though I had perfectly performed that obedience which Christ has performed for me" (ibid., footnote p. 584).

**Note 3:**

There are other passages which might be argued to support the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness, but each fails to do so upon closer examination. Several passages, for example, speak of believers taking on the "image" of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:44-49; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4-17). In some of these cases (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:49), the focus seems to be on believers ultimately having resurrected bodies just as Jesus has (cf. Philp. 3:21). In other cases (e.g., Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3 and 4) the main point seems to be the growth of experiential righteousness in believers as the goal of salvation. In none of these passages does image-bearing appear to be dealt with in the forensic terms of objective justification; consequently, these passages are irrelevant to the question of imputed righteousness. The apostle John's statement in 1 Jn. 3:7 might be argued to support the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness, in that he says those who practice righteousness are righteous, "just as [Christ] is righteous." However, the point here is simply that experiential righteousness naturally flows from objective righteousness, in both the believer and in Christ. If one abides in Christ, then one will exhibit the same sort of experiential righteousness that Christ exhibited (because He too was inwardly righteous; cf. 1 Jn. 2:5-6). Another set of passages which might be argued to support the two-pronged view is Jer. 23:6 and 33:16, in which the Messiah and Jerusalem are known by the names "The Lord our righteousness" and "The Lord is our righteousness," respectively. However, the preceding verse in each case (23:5 and 33:15) clarifies the intended meaning: The Messiah will execute justice and righteousness for his saints. Thus, forensic righteousness is not in view. Yet another passage which might be argued to support the two-pronged view of imputed righteousness is Is. 45:24-25,

which says that "in the Lord all the offspring of Israel will be justified." This is elaborated in Is. 53:11-12, however, where it is clear that the justification provided by the Lord is accomplished by the remission of sins on the basis of the Messiah's substitutionary death (in accordance with the one-pronged view of imputed righteousness for which I am arguing). Finally, 2 Pet. 1:1 speaks of us having received a faith "by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ." This, however, need only refer to the fact that Christ was righteous to be willing to provide for our salvation through His death, in the same sense that the term is employed in Rom. 5:18.

Note 4:

This same point is made by John Goodwin's biographer, surnamed Jackson, as cited by James Nichols in the footnotes to "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius" (in *Works of James Arminius, Vol. I*, London Ed., trans. by James Nichols, Baker Books, 1999, p. 697). Jackson notes the "absurdity" of supposing, in view of Romans 3:20 ("by the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified" in the sight of God), that "in every instance men are actually justified by an imputation or transfer to them of those very 'deeds,' performed by the Lord Jesus Christ!"