

# Righteousness

by George MacDonald

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*The righteousness that is of God by faith is God's righteousness wrought out in us, so that as he is righteous we too are righteous.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:48, Romans 4:3, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 3:8, James 2:23

**Topics:** "Righteousness By Faith", "Christian Character"

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## Description

George MacDonald preaches about the righteousness that is of God by faith, emphasizing that it is not based on legalistic concepts like imputed righteousness or vicarious sacrifice, but rather on a deep, obedient relationship with God. He challenges the idea that righteousness is merely following laws, highlighting that true righteousness is a transformation of character that aligns with God's nature and will. MacDonald stresses the importance of faith in God as the foundation of righteousness, leading to a life of love, justice, and mercy towards others, reflecting God's righteousness in our own lives.

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## Transcript

--that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.--Ep. to the Philippians iii. 8, 9.

What does the apostle mean by the righteousness that is of God by faith? He means the same righteousness Christ had by his faith in God, the same righteousness God himself has.

In his second epistle to the Corinthians he says, 'He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him;--'He gave him to be treated like a sinner, killed and cast out of his own vineyard by his husbandmen, that we might in him be made righteous like God.' As the antithesis stands it is rhetorically correct. But if the former half means, 'he made him to be treated as if he were a sinner,' then the latter half should, in logical precision, mean, 'that we might be treated as if we were righteous.'

'That is just what Paul does mean,' insist not a few. 'He means that Jesus was treated by God as if he were a sinner, our sins being imputed to him, in order that we might be treated as if we were righteous, his righteousness being imputed to us.'

That is, that, by a sort of legal fiction, Jesus was treated as what he was not, in order that we might be treated as what we are not. This is the best device, according to the prevailing theology, that the God of truth, the God of mercy, whose glory is that he is just to men by forgiving their sins, could fall upon for saving his creatures!

I had thought that this most contemptible of false doctrines had nigh ceased to be presented, though I knew it must be long before it ceased to exercise baneful influence; but, to my astonishment, I came upon it lately in quite a modern commentary which I happened to look into in a friend's house. I say, to my astonishment, for the commentary was the work of one of the most liberal and lovely of Christians, a dignitary high in the church of England, a man whom I knew and love, and hope ere long to meet where there are no churches. In the comment that came under my eye, he refers to the doctrine of imputed righteousness as the possible explanation of a certain passage--refers to it as to a doctrine concerning whose truth was no question.

It seems to me that, seeing much duplicity exists in the body of Christ, every honest member of it should protest against any word tending to imply the existence of falsehood in the indwelling spirit of that body. I now protest against this so-called doctrine, counting it the rightful prey of the foolishest wind in the limbo of vanities, whither I would gladly do my best to send it. It is a mean, nauseous invention, false, and productive of falsehood. Say it is a figure, I answer it is not only a false figure but an embodiment of untruth; say it expresses a reality, and I say it teaches the worst of lies; say there is a shadow of truth in it, and I answer it may be so, but there is no truth touched in it that could not be taught infinitely better without it. It is the meagre misshapen offspring of the legalism of a poverty-stricken mechanical fancy, unlighted by a gleam of divine imagination. No one who knows his New Testament will dare to say that the figure is once used in it.

I have dealt already with the source of it. They say first, God must punish the sinner, for justice requires it; then they say he does not punish the sinner, but punishes a perfectly righteous man instead, attributes his righteousness to the sinner, and so continues just. Was there ever such a confusion, such an inversion of right and wrong! Justice could not treat a righteous man as an unrighteous; neither, if justice required the punishment of sin, could justice let the sinner go unpunished. To lay the pain upon the righteous in the name of justice is simply monstrous. No wonder unbelief is rampant. Believe in Moloch if you will, but call him Moloch, not Justice. Be sure that the thing that God gives, the righteousness that is of God, is a real thing, and not a contemptible legalism. Pray God I have no righteousness imputed to me. Let me be regarded as the sinner I am; for nothing will serve my need but to be made a righteous man, one that will no more sin.

We have the word imputed just once in the New Testament. Whether the evil doctrine may have sprung from any possible misunderstanding of the passage where it occurs, I hardly care to inquire. The word as Paul uses it, and the whole of the thought whence his use of it springs, appeals to my sense of right and justice as much as the common use of it arouses my abhorrence. The apostle says that a certain thing was imputed to Abraham for righteousness; or, as the revised version has it, 'reckoned unto him:' what was it that was thus imputed to Abraham?

The righteousness of another? God forbid! It was his own faith. The faith of Abraham is reckoned to him for righteousness. To impute the righteousness of one to another, is simply to act a falsehood; to call the faith of a man his righteousness is simply to speak the truth. Was it not righteous in Abraham to obey God? The Jews placed righteousness in keeping all the particulars of the law of Moses: Paul says faith in

God was counted righteousness before Moses was born. You may answer, Abraham was unjust in many things, and by no means a righteous man.

True; he was not a righteous man in any complete sense; his righteousness would never have satisfied Paul; neither, you may be sure, did it satisfy Abraham; but his faith was nevertheless righteousness, and if it had not been counted to him for righteousness, there would have been falsehood somewhere, for such faith as Abraham's is righteousness. It was no mere intellectual recognition of the existence of a God, which is consistent with the deepest atheism; it was that faith which is one with action: 'He went out, not knowing whither he went.'

The very act of believing in God after such fashion that, when the time of action comes, the man will obey God, is the highest act, the deepest, loftiest righteousness of which man is capable, is at the root of all other righteousness, and the spirit of it will work till the man is perfect. If you define righteousness in the common-sense, that is, in the divine fashion--for religion is nothing if it be not the deepest common-sense--as a giving to everyone his due, then certainly the first due is to him who makes us capable of owing, that is, makes us responsible creatures.

You may say this is not one's first feeling of duty. True; but the first in reality is seldom the first perceived. The first duty is too high and too deep to come first into consciousness. If any one were born perfect, which I count an eternal impossibility, then the highest duty would come first into the consciousness. As we are born, it is the doing of, or at least the honest trying to do many another duty, that will at length lead a man to see that his duty to God is the first and deepest and highest of all, including and requiring the performance of all other duties whatever.

A man might live a thousand years in neglect of duty, and never come to see that any obligation was upon him to put faith in God and do what he told him--never have a glimpse of the fact that he owed him something. I will allow that if God were what he thinks him he would indeed owe him little; but he thinks him such in consequence of not doing what he knows he ought to do. He has not come to the light. He has deadened, dulled, hardened his nature. He has not been a man without guile, has not been true and fair.

But while faith in God is the first duty, and may therefore well be called righteousness in the man in whom it is operative, even though it be imperfect, there is more reason than this why it should be counted to a man for righteousness. It is the one spiritual act which brings the man into contact with the original creative power, able to help him in every endeavour after righteousness, and ensure his progress to perfection. The man who exercises it may therefore also well be called a righteous man, however far from complete in righteousness. We may call a woman beautiful who is not perfect in beauty; in the Bible men are constantly recognized as righteous men who are far from perfectly righteous. The Bible never deals with impossibilities, never demands of any man at any given moment a righteousness of which at that moment he is incapable; neither does it lay upon any man any other law than that of perfect righteousness. It demands of him righteousness; when he yields that righteousness of which he is capable, content for the moment, it goes on to demand more: the common-sense of the Bible is lovely.

To the man who has no faith in God, faith in God cannot look like righteousness; neither can he know that it is creative of all other righteousness toward equal and inferior lives: he cannot know that it is not merely the beginning of righteousness, but the germ of life, the active potency whence life-righteousness grows. It is not like some single separate act of righteousness; it is the action of the whole man, turning to good from evil--turning his back on all that is opposed to righteousness, and starting on a road on which he

cannot stop, in which he must go on growing more and more righteous, discovering more and more what righteousness is, and more and more what is unrighteous in himself.

In the one act of believing in God--that is, of giving himself to do what he tells him--he abjures evil, both what he knows and what he does not yet know in himself. A man may indeed have turned to obey God, and yet be capable of many an injustice to his neighbour which he has not yet discovered to be an injustice; but as he goes on obeying, he will go on discovering. Not only will he grow more and more determined to be just, but he will grow more and more sensitive to the idea of injustice--I do not mean in others, but in himself.

A man who continues capable of a known injustice to his neighbour, cannot be believed to have turned to God. At all events, a man cannot be near God, so as to be learning what is just toward God, and not be near his neighbour, so as to be learning what is unfair to him; for his will, which is the man, lays hold of righteousness, chooses to be righteous. If a man is to be blamed for not choosing righteousness, for not turning to the light, for not coming out of the darkness, then the man who does choose and turn and come out, is to be justified in his deed, and declared to be righteous.

He is not yet thoroughly righteous, but is growing in and toward righteousness. He needs creative God, and time for will and effort. Not yet quite righteous, he cannot yet act quite righteously, for only the man in whom the image of God is perfected can live perfectly. Born into the world without righteousness, he cannot see, he cannot know, he is not in touch with perfect righteousness, and it would be the deepest injustice to demand of him, with a penalty, at any given moment, more than he knows how to yield; but it is the highest love constantly to demand of him perfect righteousness as what he must attain to.

With what life and possibility is in him, he must keep turning to righteousness and abjuring iniquity, ever aiming at the perfection of God. Such an obedient faith is most justly and fairly, being all that God himself can require of the man, called by God righteousness in the man. It would not be enough for the righteousness of God, or Jesus, or any perfected saint, because they are capable of perfect righteousness, and, knowing what is perfect righteousness, choose to be perfectly righteous; but, in virtue of the life and growth in it, it is enough at a given moment for the disciple of the Perfect.

The righteousness of Abraham was not to compare with the righteousness of Paul. He did not fight with himself for righteousness, as did Paul--not because he was better than Paul and therefore did not need to fight, but because his idea of what was required of him was not within sight of that of Paul; yet was he righteous in the same way as Paul was righteous: he had begun to be righteous, and God called his righteousness righteousness, for faith is righteousness. His faith was an act recognizing God as his law, and that is not a partial act, but an all-embracing and all-determining action.

A single righteous deed toward one's fellow could hardly be imputed to a man as righteousness. A man who is not trying after righteousness may yet do many a righteous act: they will not be forgotten to him, neither will they be imputed to him as righteousness. Abraham's action of obedient faith was righteousness none the less that his righteousness was far behind Paul's. Abraham started at the beginning of the long, slow, disappointing preparation of the Jewish people; Paul started at its close, with the story of Jesus behind him.

Both believed, obeying God, and therefore both were righteous. They were righteous because they gave themselves up to God to make them righteous; and not to call such men righteous, not to impute their faith to them for righteousness, would be unjust. But God is utterly just, and nowise resembles a legal-minded

Roman emperor, or a bad pope formulating the doctrine of vicarious sacrifice.

What, then, is the righteousness which is of God by faith? It is simply the thing that God wants every man to be, wrought out in him by constant obedient contact with God himself. It is not an attribute either of God or man, but a fact of character in God and in man. It is God's righteousness wrought out in us, so that as he is righteous we too are righteous. It does not consist in obeying this or that law; not even the keeping of every law, so that no hair's-breadth did we run counter to one of them, would be righteousness. To be righteous is to be such a heart, soul, mind, and will, as, without regard to law, would recoil with horror from the lightest possible breach of any law. It is to be so in love with what is fair and right as to make it impossible for a man to do anything that is less than absolutely righteous. It is not the love of righteousness in the abstract that makes anyone righteous, but such a love of fairplay toward everyone with whom we come into contact, that anything less than the fulfilling, with a clear joy, of our divine relation to him or her, is impossible. For the righteousness of God goes far beyond mere deeds, and requires of us love and helping mercy as our highest obligation and justice to our fellow men--those of them too who have done nothing for us, those even who have done us wrong. Our relations with others, God first and then our neighbour in order and degree, must one day become, as in true nature they are, the gladness of our being; and nothing then will ever appear good for us, that is not in harmony with those blessed relations. Every thought will not merely be just, but will be just because it is something more, because it is live and true. What heart in the kingdom of heaven would ever dream of constructing a metaphysical system of what we owed to God and why we owed it? The light of our life, our sole, eternal, and infinite joy, is simply God--God--God--nothing but God, and all his creatures in him. He is all and in all, and the children of the kingdom know it. He includes all things; not to be true to anything he has made is to be untrue to him. God is truth, is life; to be in God is to know him and need no law. Existence will be eternal Godness.

You would not like that way of it? There is, there can be, no other; but before you can judge of it, you must know at least a little of God as he is, not as you imagine him. I say as you imagine him, because it cannot be that any creature should know him as he is and not desire him. In proportion as we know him we must desire him, until at length we live in and for him with all our conscious heart. That is why the Jews did not like the Lord: he cared so simply for his father's will, and not for anything they called his will.

The righteousness which is of God by faith in the source, the prime of that righteousness, is then just the same kind of thing as God's righteousness, differing only as the created differs from the creating. The righteousness of him who does the will of his father in heaven, is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, is God's own righteousness. The righteousness which is of God by faith in God, is God's righteousness. The man who has this righteousness, thinks about things as God thinks about them, loves the things that God loves, cares for nothing that God does not care about. Even while this righteousness is being born in him, the man will say to himself, 'Why should I be troubled about this thing or that? Does God care about it? No. Then why should I care? I must not care. I will not care! 'If he does not know whether God cares about it or not, he will say, 'If God cares I should have my desire, he will give it me; if he does not care I should have it, neither will I care. In the meantime I will do my work.' The man with God's righteousness does not love a thing merely because it is right, but loves the very rightness in it. He not only loves a thought, but he loves the man in his thinking that thought; he loves the thought alive in the man. He does not take his joy from himself. He feels joy in himself, but it comes to him from others, not from himself--from God first, and from somebody, anybody, everybody next. He would rather, in the fulness of his content, pass out of being, rather himself cease to exist, than that another should. He could do without knowing himself, but he

could not know himself and spare one of the brothers or sisters God had given him. The man who really knows God, is, and always will be, content with what God, who is the very self of his self, shall choose for him; he is entirely God's, and not at all his own. His consciousness of himself is the reflex from those about him, not the result of his own turning in of his regard upon himself. It is not the contemplation of what God has made him, it is the being what God has made him, and the contemplation of what God himself is, and what he has made his fellows, that gives him his joy. He wants nothing, and feels that he has all things, for he is in the bosom of his father, and the thoughts of his father come to him. He knows that if he needs anything, it is his before he asks it; for his father has willed him, in the might and truth of his fatherhood, to be one with himself.

This then, or something like this, for words are poor to tell the best things, is the righteousness which is of God by faith--so far from being a thing built on the rubbish heap of legal fiction called vicarious sacrifice, or its shadow called imputed righteousness, that only the child with the child-heart, so far ahead of and so different from the wise and prudent, can understand it. The wise and prudent interprets God by himself, and does not understand him; the child interprets God by himself, and does understand him. The wise and prudent must make a system and arrange things to his mind before he can say, I believe. The child sees, believes, obeys--and knows he must be perfect as his father in heaven is perfect. If an angel, seeming to come from heaven, told him that God had let him off, that he did not require so much of him as that, but would be content with less; that he could not indeed allow him to be wicked, but would pass by a great deal, modifying his demands because it was so hard for him to be quite good, and he loved him so dearly, the child of God would at once recognize, woven with the angel's starry brilliancy, the flicker of the flames of hell, and would say to the shining one, 'Get thee behind me, Satan.' Nor would there be the slightest wonder or merit in his doing so, for at the words of the deceiver, if but for briefest moment imagined true, the shadow of a rising hell would gloom over the face of creation; hope would vanish; the eternal would be as the carcase of a dead man; the glory would die out of the face of God--until the groan of a thunderous no burst from the caverns of the universe, and the truth, flashing on his child's soul from the heart of the Eternal, Immortal, Invisible, withered up the lie of the messenger of darkness.

'But how can God bring this about in me?'

Let him do it, and perhaps you will know; if you never know, yet there it will be. Help him to do it, or he cannot do it. He originates the possibility of your being his son, his daughter; he makes you able to will it, but you must will it. If he is not doing it in you--that is, if you have as yet prevented him from beginning, why should I tell you, even if I knew the process, how he would do what you will not let him do? Why should you know? What claim have you to know? But indeed how should you be able to know? For it must deal with deeper and higher things than you can know anything of till the work is at least begun. Perhaps if you approved of the plans of the glad creator, you would allow him to make of you something divine! To teach your intellect what has to be learned by your whole being, what cannot be understood without the whole being, what it would do you no good to understand save you understood it in your whole being--if this be the province of any man, it is not mine. Let the dead bury their dead, and the dead teach their dead; for me, I will try to wake them. To those who are awake, I cry, 'For the sake of your father and the first-born among many brethren to whom we belong, for the sake of those he has given us to love the most dearly, let patience have her perfect work. Statue under the chisel of the sculptor, stand steady to the blows of his mallet. Clay on the wheel, let the fingers of the divine potter model you at their will. Obey the Father's lightest word; hear the Brother who knows you, and died for you; beat down your sin, and trample it to death.

Brother, when thou sittest at home in thy house, which is the temple of the Lord, open all thy windows to breathe the air of his approach; set the watcher on thy turret, that he may listen out into the dark for the sound of his coming, and thy hand be on the latch to open the door at his first knock. Shouldst thou open the door and not see him, do not say he did not knock, but understand that he is there, and wants thee to go out to him. It may be he has something for thee to do for him. Go and do it, and perhaps thou wilt return with a new prayer, to find a new window in thy soul.

Never wait for fitter time or place to talk to him. To wait till thou go to church, or to thy closet, is to make him wait. He will listen as thou walkest in the lane or the crowded street, on the common or in the place of shining concourse.

Remember, if indeed thou art able to know it, that not in any church is the service done that he requires. He will say to no man, 'You never went to church: depart from me; I do not know you;' but, 'Inasmuch as you never helped one of my father's children, you have done nothing for me.' Church or chapel is not the place for divine service. It is a place of prayer, a place of praise, a place to feed upon good things, a place to learn of God, as what place is not? It is a place to look in the eyes of your neighbour, and love God along with him. But the world in which you move, the place of your living and loving and labour, not the church you go to on your holiday, is the place of divine service. Serve your neighbour, and you serve him.

Do not heed much if men mock you and speak lies of you, or in goodwill defend you unworthily. Heed not much if even the righteous turn their backs upon you. Only take heed that you turn not from them. Take courage in the fact that there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known.

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