

Justification by Faith

by John Murray

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and it is the righteousness of God brought to bear upon all the wretched squalor of iniquity.

Duration: 53:06

Scripture: Isaiah 40:5, Isaiah 56:1, Romans 1:16-17, Romans 3:21-22, Romans 3:28

Topics: "Justification"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the power and authority of the word of God. He highlights that when confronted with the message of the gospel, one is confronted with the voice of the living God. The gospel is described as the power of God unto salvation, able to lift people out of their sinful condition. The preacher also emphasizes the importance of faith that looks to the righteousness of God, rather than relying on oneself. Overall, the sermon emphasizes the transformative power of the gospel and the need for faith in God's righteousness.

Transcript

The Epistle to the Romans, chapter 1, verse 16. For I am not ashamed with the gospel of Christ, but it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith.

It might appear to us that the apostle would have drawn the curtain of concealment over the sins which he describes in the latter part of this chapter. For these sins fall into the category of which it is said that it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But what the apostle does is rather to draw aside the curtain of concealment.

He opens to our view the abominations of moral and spiritual degeneracy into which the nations of the world have fallen by their apostasy from the knowledge and faith of the living God. And we must remember that the apostle is writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. When we examine this chapter or this epistle more carefully, we can readily see that it is only in the context of that delineation of gross degeneracy which he gives in the latter part of this chapter that we can appreciate the keynote of this epistle, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.

Now we might think that that is a rather weak way of expressing his confidence. We might think that he would have expressed himself in stronger terms of confidence and of exaltation in view of the triumphs which the gospel had secured and of which the apostle speaks in another place when he says God always causes us to triumph in Christ and maketh known the savor of his knowledge and maketh known the savor of his knowledge by us in every place for we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish. The apostle Paul in another epistle does express himself in terms of the most exultant glory when he says God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world.

We might well ask the question why does the apostle Paul express himself in this particular epistle in what might appear in first blush as a very weak understatement. I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. Why does he express himself in terms of a contestation to the effect that he was not ashamed.

Now if we remember how full of reproach and apparent foolishness the gospel was as it confronted the worldly glory and pomp of the Roman political power. And if we think of the apparent weakness which characterized the gospel as it confronted that degenerate stupor into which the sin of the world had led man. If we remember these contrasts then I think we can sense a little better the undertones of confidence and of exultation in this very word of the apostle.

I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation. In reference to the prestige of the Roman political power he could say I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. And in reference to the degradation that is depicted in this particular chapter he could say the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

However degraded may be the condition of man, however stupefied in iniquity and false imaginations man may become because of their sin, nevertheless the gospel is the omnipotence of God operative unto their salvation. To lift them out of the quagmire, the inextricable tangle of iniquity, and free as the blood-born that is the power of God unto salvation. While the gospel we must always remember is a message, and it is a message proclaimed, a message proclaimed.

And we might well ask, how can a proclamation, how can a message be the power of God unto salvation? And perhaps we want to tone it down somewhat, and try to turn it around and give away from the forthright statement of the apostle that it is the gospel, the gospel as a message, the gospel as good news, the gospel as proclamation that is the power of God unto salvation. And if we tone it down, we do prejudice to the truth which the apostle Paul is here enunciating. This message proclaimed is divine omnipotence, active unto salvation.

And why? Because after all, it is the word of God. It is a divine message. It is not a human proclamation, but the proclamation of a divine word.

And we must always remember that the word of God is living and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, that the word of God is always invested with efficiency to the accomplishment of its purpose. He spoke when it was done. He commanded when it stood last.

That was true in the grand panorama of creation, and it is also true and true with greater glory in the sphere of His redemption. He speaks, He commands. The word of God is living and powerful.

And don't forget, my friends, that when you are confronted with the message of the gospel, you are confronted with the voice of the living God. Just as truly as Peter, as James and Peter and John, heard the voice of the Father speak from heaven when He said, This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. As you are confronted with the gospel, perhaps in its simplicity, but always in its power, it is the word of the living God.

It is that word that is able to lift us up from all this, and from all the squalid of the sin that is depicted in the latter part of this chapter. It is the power of God unto salvation. It is, therefore, divine omnipotence, divine omnipotence active to the very end of delivering man from the corruption and the power of iniquity and setting their feet on a rock and living.

Now, Paul tells us why it is the power of God unto salvation. You must notice that there is what you might call a continuous expectation in this particular verse, I am not ashamed of that. Why? I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.

Why? Because it is the power of God unto salvation. And why is it the power of God unto salvation? Because therein, he says in verse 17, because therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith. We have, therefore, here two attributes of God.

Power, or if you will, omnipotence, and righteousness. The omnipotence and the righteousness of God. And it is well for us to take note of that particular combination.

The gospel is power. It is divine omnipotence. But it is not mere divine omnipotence, not bare.

Of course, it is true that in no sphere of the divine activity do we have what we would call bare, abstract omnipotence. Even in creation, and God's space, and it was done. You don't have what you would call just bare omnipotence.

You have omnipotence exercised in wisdom, and even in righteousness. For the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork. The heavens declare his righteousness, the peoples see his glory.

So that even in creation, it is not bare or abstract omnipotence, but it is omnipotence exercised in infinite wisdom and in righteousness. But the combination of these two attributes in this particular case is quite unique. The power of God that was operative in creation, although it was a power that expressed his wisdom, and his mercy, and his righteousness, and his goodness, nevertheless, there is something in this exercise of divine power that is quite unique.

God could create the worlds by the fiat of his will. He simply spake, and it was done. He commanded, and it stood fast.

There was the exercise of his omnipotence. Omnipotence, of course, giving expression to his wisdom, and his mercy, and his goodness, and his righteousness. But, it was simply by the sovereign and omnipotent fiat of his will, but not so in connection with that subject with which Paul is dealing in this particular verse.

Not so in connection with the gospel. There is something here that could not be accomplished by the mere fiat of his will, for there were exigencies involved. There were claims at stake which could not be exercised, which could not be met by omnipotent fiat, and that is what Paul is enunciating on this particular occasion.

He has in the back of his mind, and also in the forefront of his expression, that marvelous combination that there is in the gospel of the omnipotent efficiency of God, and that omnipotent efficiency exercised in righteousness. It is the righteousness of God brought to bear upon all the wretched squalor of iniquity that is depicted for us in the latter part of this chapter. It is the righteousness of God supervening upon the wreck and the ruin of sin, the wreck and ruin of human misery.

Yes, it is the righteousness of God supervening upon that which is the very contradiction of itself. It is the righteousness of God supervening upon that contradiction in order to the deliverance of men from the very power of that which is the contradiction of the divine righteousness. It is the righteousness of God operated unto salvation.

Then we have to ask the further question, what is this righteousness of which the apostle here speaks? What is it? Now, the righteousness of God is an attribute of God. It is the justice of God as an attribute. It is that of which the apostle speaks in this very epistle, the third chapter of the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth verses, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are passed through the forbearance of God, to declare, I say at this time, his righteousness, that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

That is truly the righteousness of God as a divine attribute, that which we call the justice, the uprightness, the equity of God himself, and that of which the psalm speaks when it says, justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne. It is that of which another psalm speaks, of which we have been singing, mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Righteousness shall go before him and set us in the way of his death.

Yes, there is indeed the righteousness of God that is his only end. Now we must remember, of course, that the righteousness of God, that is the justice of God, is displayed very uniquely in this salvation. There is no place where you have such a magnificent display of the righteousness of God as you have on Calvary's accursed tree.

The salvation of which the apostle Paul here speaks would not be a divine salvation. It would not be a salvation in which divine omnipotence would be operative unless it comported with righteousness, the justice, the uprightness, the equity of God. Surely the gospel displays the righteousness of God, and it is that gospel that supervenes upon all the iniquity and the wretchedness of this fallen human world.

But there is good reason for thinking that the apostle Paul here is not speaking of that righteousness which is a divine attribute. Not in this place. And the reasons for saying that are very clear.

You must remember, first of all, that this righteousness of which the apostle speaks is a righteousness that is applied to us, a righteousness that is applied to believers. In the third chapter, at the twenty-first verse, you read, But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe. A righteousness, you see, that is done to believers, and therefore a righteousness that is applied to believers.

Do believers become partakers of the divine attributes? We do not become partakers of that which is the divine essence. Of course not. If we were to become partakers of the divine righteousness in the sense of a divine attribute, then we would cease to be creatures.

And again, it is a righteousness which we have. You remember what the apostle says in Philippians 3.9, Not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but the righteousness which is by faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. And the clear implication is that Paul has now the righteousness of God.

It's a possession of his. He couldn't speak of possessing the attribute, which is the attribute of God himself and of God alone. And then Paul also tells us that it is a righteousness which believers are made.

Him who knew no sin, he made to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Made the righteousness of God? Surely not made the attribute of God, of God's righteousness. Again, it is a righteousness that is mediated through faith.

Paul tells us that in this very passage. It is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith. As it is written, the just shall live by faith.

And finally, it is the righteousness which is the grand theme of this episode. The righteousness which is unto just to be. And therefore it cannot be the righteousness which is the divine attribute that is inalienable.

It belongs to God and it belongs to God alone. And this must be something else. Because it is a righteousness that is made over to us in order to our acceptance with God, in order to our just to be.

Now just because it is that. Because it is not the righteousness of the divine attribute. We are very liable to tone down the significance of what Paul here says.

We must not water it down. It still is the righteousness of God. Not the righteousness which is inherent to God himself.

But nevertheless it is still a righteousness of God. It is a divine righteousness. It is therefore a righteousness which is impregnated, shall we say, with divine quality.

It is a righteousness which, after all, is as it were a divine property. And perhaps the only way whereby we can express it very emphatically in English is to say that after all it is a God-righteousness. And it is nothing less than that.

A God-righteousness. And since it is a God-righteousness, it is contrasted not simply with human unrighteousness, but with human righteousness. And that seems to be the main point, the main emphasis of the apostle, shall I say it again? Contrasted not simply with human unrighteousness, human iniquity, but even contrasted with human righteousness.

And when you think of the situation that salvation contemplates, there is nothing else that would meet the exigencies, the claims of this particular situation except a divine righteousness. A righteousness which has divine quality. Now you do think of human righteousness, and you can think of perhaps the saints when they will be completely sanctified in glory, will be possessed in their whole person of a righteousness which is absolutely perfect.

They will be presented before the presence of God's glory without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. They will be completely conformed to the image of Christ in their whole passions, inherently, subjectively, in all of their thoughts and affections and ways, completely conformed to the image of Christ. And that will be a perfect righteousness, but after all, it will be a human righteousness.

A righteousness indeed which they have by the grace of God, yes. A righteousness which is bought in them entirely by the grace of God, by the Holy Spirit of God, when they are made completely conformable to Christ's glorious image. But remember, it will be a human righteousness, it will be a righteousness which will be in them.

But this is not that righteousness. And even that righteousness to which believers will be one day completely conformed, wouldn't meet the sins that Paul has imbued. No, it is a divine righteousness, and a divine righteousness alone that will meet the situation of our sin, of our condemnation.

It is a righteousness impregnated with divine property, with divine quality alone that will... The Roman Catholic teaches that justification consists, first of all, in the infusion of righteousness in us. The infusion of grace, and that just really amounts to what we call regeneration. And then second justification, which is a process, and which will not be complete until the saint is relieved from purgatory.

The second justification is a justification that is based upon human works. That by faith that is informed with love, the believer is enabled to bring forth good works, which are acceptable to God, and which have merit in them, and on the basis of these good works, they receive progressive justification until they will finally be fully justified, after they have made complete satisfaction for their sin in purgatory. Now you see what the Roman Catholic Church teaches in reference to justification, is that first of all, in the first, what they call first justification, it's just a human righteousness.

It's the infusion of righteousness, which is an inherent righteousness after all. And then the second justification is on the basis of human works, and human works are after all human righteousness. And perhaps there's nothing in the Roman Catholic doctrine that exposes its complete rottenness.

Then the whole conception by which it is governed, the whole doctrine of justification of the Roman Catholic Church, is a doctrine of justification which is after all human, human in its quality, human in its property. And it is just against that that the Apostle Paul is enunciating the gospel here, when he says that it is the righteousness of God. It's a God-righteousness, contrasted not simply with human unrighteousness, but with human righteousness.

And how is it a God? Well, it is the righteousness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That is how it is a God-righteousness. It is the righteousness and obedience of Him who did this indeed in human nature, but who in doing it was without any abbreviation whatsoever a divine person.

Oh, get the distinction. It was in human nature that He wrought this obedience. It was in human nature that He accomplished this righteousness.

Otherwise it would not be available for us. But nevertheless, in giving that obedience, in accomplishing that righteousness, He was without any abbreviation whatsoever, without any curtailment, the eternal Son of God, God manifest in the flesh. And that is why it is a God-righteousness.

Now we might well ask the question, how does this righteousness, which after all is not a righteousness, it is not a righteousness even wrought in us by the grace of God, how does that righteousness come to be upon our sinful? How? Well, the apostle tells us in this particular chapter, and it is in a word that we are very liable to glide over. It is the righteousness of God revealed. The righteousness of God revealed.

Now when we read that word revealed, we are thinking very likely of its being disclosed to us for our information, disclosed to us for our, and of course that is perfect, that it is made known unto us, so that we

may intelligently understand what it is. But in the usage of scripture, this word revealed is often used in a very much stronger sense than that. And if you go back to the prophecy of Isaiah, from about the fortieth chapter on, you'll find again and again that emphasis of the inspired prophet.

And it is particularly enunciated in the fifty-sixth chapter, when the prophet says, My salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. You see how pervasively in that part of the prophecy of Isaiah, you would have this salvation and righteousness. My salvation shall be forever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished.

For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And it is revelation, not simply in the sense of making known for our information and for our knowledge, but it is revelation in the sense of being dynamically active. You see the parallelism? My salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed.

There's a parallelism there. And the revealed, in the second clause, must be as dynamic and active as the salvation is in the first. Again, my salvation, salvation surely in action, is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed.

And that surely is what Paul has in view in this particular text, when he says, for therein is the righteousness of God revealed. It's not simply revealed for our information, for our knowledge, but it is revealed as dynamically active. That's it.

As operative. And that is the glory of the gospel. Because Paul's righteousness, after all, is not a human righteousness, and will never be a human righteousness, except by way of human possession.

It is, as Paul tells us in other passages, it is a righteousness that is made of. It is a righteousness which we come to possess. It is a righteousness, therefore, which is imputed to us, and therefore becomes operative to our account.

It's a righteousness that is dynamically active on our account, because it is ours by possession, by application, by imputation. And that is the glory of the gospel, which the apostle Paul is enunciating in this particular text. My friends, if you are appalled at the iniquity that resides in your own bosom, if you are overcome by the sense of your complete helplessness before the enormity of your guilt, and how you cannot even raise up your head to heaven but smite upon your own breast, I say, if you are overwhelmed by the sense of your own guilt, by the awfulness that belongs to you on account of sin, my friends, the glory of the gospel of God's grace is this, that a divine righteousness will supervene upon you in all your hopelessness, a righteousness which meets with the divine approval, and a righteousness which even elicits the divine approbation of that.

And it is not simply a righteousness that is a way off in the far distant abstract, but it is a righteousness which is brought to bear upon your situation. Now, finally, why is this righteousness of God, and this salvation, which is the omnipotent power of God, why is it not operated in everyone? Oh, because the gospel is the omnipotent power of God, and the omnipotent power of God's active righteousness, which is divine, why doesn't it sweep the whole human race within the sphere of its operation? Why? Is there anything that can resist the omnipotent righteousness of God? Well, the apostle Paul tells us here that, after all, it is not the righteousness of God dynamically operated in all. It is not dynamically operated in all of the human race.

There's a limitation, and that is the specific limitation which the apostle makes in this particular text, and in every other part of his inspired writings, as also throughout the whole Scripture. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. To everyone that believeth, remember you! And then when he comes to verse 17, he says, it is the righteousness of God, the righteousness of God revealed, from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith.

And just because there isn't a universality of faith, this gospel is not indiscriminate and universally operated to the accomplishment. That is the divine order. There is a necessity, a necessity arising from the very character of this salvation, and a necessity arising from the very character of this righteousness, that it becomes operated unto salvation and unto justification, only where, and that is where it comes right to our responsibility.

There is the point of discrimination. This expression, from faith to faith, which Paul uses here in verse 17, has been oftentimes greatly perplexed, I think. At least there has been a great deal of discussion of the meaning of that brief expression, from faith to faith, and it is not my purpose now to go into the various interpretations that have been given of that particular passage.

But simply to say, with confidence, but yet somewhat dogmatically, there are just two thoughts expressed in that very brief expression, and the first is this, that this is operated only in belief, that the righteousness of God, which is the divine provision for the dismal hopelessness of our sinful situation, is operated only for those who believe. Paul tells us that very explicitly in the third chapter. May I quote again? Even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all, and upon all them that believe.

After all, this is a faith righteousness, not a righteousness which consists in faith, oh no. It's not a righteousness which consists in any human doing, or in any human exercise, in any human movement whatsoever. It's a divine righteousness, and therefore the scope of its operation is only within the sphere of the divine, and it does not consist in any human activity, or movement, or exercise.

It is a faith righteousness, because it only becomes. We cannot underestimate, or in any way escape the emphasis of the apostle in that text which is probably about as well known as any text in the New Testament, not having my whole righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. And my friends, it is never a divine righteousness operated on your account, or in your situation, except as it is a faith righteousness, a righteousness which you yourself commit.

And the second emphasis which I think there is in that very brief expression, from faith to faith, is this, that it is not only operated on behalf of the believer alone, but it is operated by faith alone. You get the distinction. It's very simple.

It's a righteousness that is made over to the believer alone, but it is made over to the believer by faith alone. Now, there are other graces that are besides faith, and faith without works is dead. There is repentance, there is love, there is new obedience, and a faith that does not work is not a faith that unites to this righteousness.

It is never a faith that is alone, because a faith that is alone is dead, and a dead faith cannot unite to the righteousness of God. But nevertheless, although it is a faith that is never alone, it is by faith alone that we become the possessors of this righteousness. And that, my friends, is in this particular sphere of the very essence of the gospel.

There is a perfect congruity between these two things, that it is the righteousness, righteousness of divine making, of divine quality, of divine property, a righteousness that exists within the sphere of the divine, but it is of the very same, it is in entire congruity with that very emphasis of this righteousness, not by love, not even by new obedience, and it extracts something that belongs to the very essence of the simplicity of the gospel, as well as the power of the gospel of Christ, that we possess this righteousness by faith alone. And why, I think, the Lord, just for the specific quality of faith, is to rest his divine, the specific quality of faith, you see, is to rest upon another, it is self-commitment, it is self-abandonment, it doesn't look to itself, it looks to something else. Oh, take note of it.

This belongs to the very essence of your destiny, and mine. What is the character of our faith? Is it a faith by which we look within, or is it a faith by which we look back? It is the essence of faith, that it goes out of itself, it goes beyond itself, and it is entirely preoccupied, it is outside, entirely preoccupied with the righteousness of God, and the righteousness as it is embodied in him, of this faith. Oh, the gospel, it is simple because, in order that the righteousness of God may supervene from the wretchedness of our sinful situation, that which puts us in connection with, in possession of the righteousness of God, is that which is a going out of ourselves to the excellence and to the divinity of that which God has provided.

That is of the very essence of the gospel, it is the simplicity of the gospel of God's grace. But after all, it is just because it is the simplicity of the gospel, that it is so frequently a stumbling block. That is what constitutes it a stumbling block.

That's what constitutes the gospel and of faith. But it is by faith, and by faith alone, of the righteousness of God, because after the human heart is given to preoccupation with itself and with its own righteousness, and that which makes us willing to be entirely devout to the free grace of God, to the righteousness which is divine, is that which requires the miracle. The simplicity, after all, is the stumbling block of the gospel, my friends.

Don't be consumed by the devil. Don't be caught in that entanglement, which is the devil's masterpiece. Let us appreciate the simplicity that is in Christ, and let us be confident, let us be content to abandon all self, to consider all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, and thus to be in that righteousness which is undefiled and undefilable, because it is the righteousness.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul shall be joyful in my God, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has colored me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decketh himself, adorneth herself.

That is the testimony, and that is the testimony of the apostle. Righteousness, say, O Lord our God, do Thou grant unto us that we may know the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven, whose iniquities are pardoned, who has been accepted in that righteousness which is undefiled and undefilable, and may we know, O Lord, the power of that gospel, that it may be all our salvation, and all our salvation for Jesus' sake.

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