

The Righteousness of Faith

by John Wesley

The righteousness of faith, which requires only faith in Christ, is the way to salvation, while the righteousness of the law, which requires perfect and uninterrupted obedience, is impossible to achieve and leads to condemnation and death.

Scripture: Romans 10:5

Topics: "Faith", "Grace"

Description

John Wesley preaches on 'The Righteousness of Faith,' emphasizing the distinction between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of faith. He explains that the law demands perfect obedience, which is unattainable for fallen humanity, while faith offers a simple path to salvation through belief in Jesus Christ. Wesley urges listeners to abandon their attempts to establish their own righteousness and instead embrace the grace of God, which is accessible to all who believe. He reassures that salvation is not based on human merit but on faith in Christ's redemptive work. Ultimately, Wesley's heartfelt desire is for all to recognize their need for God's mercy and to accept the gift of salvation through faith.

Transcript

"Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them. But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: That is, the word of faith, which we preach." Rom. 10:5-8.

1. The Apostle does not here oppose the covenant given by Moses, to the covenant given by Christ. If we ever imagined this, it was for want of observing, that the latter as well as the former part of these words were spoken by Moses himself to the people of Israel, and that concerning the covenant which then was. (Deut. 30:11, 12, 14.) But it is the covenant of grace, which God, through Christ, hath established with men in all ages, (as well before and under the Jewish dispensation, as since God was manifest in the flesh,) which St. Paul here opposes to the covenant of works, made with Adam while in Paradise, hut commonly supposed to be the only covenant which God had made with man, particularly by those Jews of whom the Apostle writes.

2. Of these it was that he so affectionately speaks in the beginning of this chapter: "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they may be saved. For I bear them record, that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness," (of the justification that flows from his mere grace and mercy, freely forgiving our sins through the Son of his love, through the redemption which is in Jesus,) "and seeking to establish their own righteousness," (their own holiness, antecedent to faith in "him that justifieth the ungodly," as the ground of their pardon and acceptance,) "have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God," and consequently seek death in the error of their life.

3. They were ignorant that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth;" -- that, by the oblation of himself once offered, he had put an end to the first law or covenant, (which, indeed, was not given by God to Moses, but to Adam in his state of innocence,) the strict tenor whereof, without any abatement, was, "Do this, and live;" and, at the same time, purchased for us that better covenant, "Believe, and live;" believe, and thou shalt be saved; now saved, both from the guilt and power of sin, and, of consequence, from the wages of it.

4. And how many are equally ignorant now, even among those who are called by the name of Christ! How many who have now a "zeal for God," yet have it not "according to knowledge;" but are still seeking "to establish their own righteousness," as the ground of their pardon and acceptance; and therefore, vehemently refuse to "submit themselves unto the righteousness of God!" Surely my heart's desire, and prayer to God for you, brethren, is, that ye may be saved. And, in order to remove this grand stumbling-block out of your way, I will endeavour to show, First, what the righteousness is, which is of the law; and what "the righteousness which is of faith;" Secondly, the folly of trusting in the righteousness of the law, and the wisdom of submitting to that which is of faith.

I. 1. And, First, "the righteousness which is of the law saith, The man which doeth these things shall live by them." Constantly and perfectly observe all these things to do them, and then thou shalt live for ever. This law, or covenant, (usually called the Covenant of Works,) given by God to man in Paradise, required an obedience perfect in all its parts, entire and wanting nothing, as the condition of his eternal continuance in the holiness and happiness wherein he was created.

2. It required that man should fulfil all righteousness, inward and outward, negative and positive: That he should not only abstain from every idle word, and avoid every evil work, but should keep every affection, every desire, every thought, in obedience to the will of God: That he should continue holy, as he which had created him was holy, both in heart, and in all manner of conversation: That he should be pure in heart, even as God is pure; perfect as his Father in heaven was perfect: That he should love the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength; that he should love every soul which God had made, even as God had loved him: That by this universal benevolence, he should dwell in God, (who is love,) and God in him: That he should serve the Lord his God with all his strength, and in all things singly aim at his glory.

3. These were the things which the righteousness of the law required, that he who did them might live thereby. But it farther required, that this entire obedience to God, this inward and outward holiness, this conformity both of heart and life to his will, should be perfect in degree. No abatement, no allowance could possibly be made, for falling short in any degree, as to any jot or tittle, either of the outward or the inward law. If every commandment, relating to outward things, was obeyed, yet that was not sufficient unless every one was obeyed with all the strength, in the highest measure, and most perfect manner. Nor did it

answer the demand of this covenant, to love God with every power and faculty, unless he were loved with the full capacity of each, with the whole possibility of the soul.

4. One thing more was indispensably required by the righteousness of the law, namely, that this universal obedience, this perfect holiness both of heart and life, should be perfectly uninterrupted also, should continue without any intermission, from the moment wherein God created man, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, until the days of his trial should be ended, and he should be confirmed in life everlasting.

5. The righteousness, then, which is of the law, speaketh on this wise: "Thou, O man of God, stand fast in love, in the image of God wherein thou art made. If thou wilt remain in life, keep the commandments, which are now written in thy heart. Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart. Love, as thyself, every soul that he hath made. Desire nothing but God. Aim at God in every thought, in every word and work. Swerve not, in one motion of body or soul, from him, thy mark, and the prize of thy high calling; and let all that is in thee praise his holy name, every power and faculty of thy soul, in every kind, in every degree, and at every moment of thine existence. `This do, and thou shalt live: Thy light shall shine, thy love shall flame more and more, till thou art received up into the house of God in the heavens, to reign with him for ever and ever."

6. "But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise: Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? that is, to bring down Christ from above;" (as though it were some impossible task which God required thee previously to perform in order to thine acceptance;) "or, Who shall descend into the deep? that is, to bring up Christ from the dead;" (as though that were still remaining to be done, for the sake of which thou wert to be accepted;) "but what saith it? The word," according to the tenor of which thou mayest now be accepted as an heir of life eternal, "is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart; that is, the word of faith which we preach," -- the new covenant which God hath now established with sinful man, through Christ Jesus.

7. By "the righteousness which is of faith" is meant, that condition of justification, (and, in consequence, of present and final salvation, if we endure therein unto the end,) which was given by God to fallen man, through the merits and mediation of his only-begotten Son. This was in part revealed to Adam, soon after his fall; being contained in the original promise, made to him and his seed, concerning the Seed of the Woman, who should "bruise the serpent's head." (Gen. 3:15.) It was a little more clearly revealed to Abraham, by the angel of God from heaven, saying, "By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, that in thy seed shall all the nations of the world be blessed." (Gen. 12:15, 18.) It was yet more fully made known to Moses, to David, and to the Prophets that followed; and, through them, to many of the people of God in their respective generations. But still the bulk even of these were ignorant of it; and very few understood it clearly. Still "life and immortality" were not so "brought to light" to the Jews of old, as they are now unto us "by the gospel."

8. Now, this covenant saith not to sinful man, "Perform unsinning obedience, and live." If this were the term, he would have no more benefit by all which Christ hath done and suffered for him, than if he was required, in order to life, to "ascend into heaven, and bring down Christ from above;" or to "descend into the deep," into the invisible world, and "bring up Christ from the dead." It doth not require any impossibility to be done: (Although to mere man, what it requires would be impossible; but not to man assisted by the Spirit of God:) This were only to mock human weakness. Indeed, strictly speaking, the covenant of grace doth not require us to do anything at all, as absolutely and indispensably necessary in order to our

justification; but only, to believe in Him who, for the sake of his Son, and the propitiation which he hath made, "justifieth the ungodly that worketh not," and imputes his faith to him for righteousness. Even so Abraham "believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness." (Gen. 15:6.) "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith, -- that he might be the father of all them that believe, -- that righteousness might be imputed unto them also." (Rom. 4:11.) "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it," i.e., faith, "was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed," to whom faith shall be imputed for righteousness, shall stand in the stead of perfect obedience, in order to our acceptance with God, "if we believe on him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered" to death "for our offences, and was raised again for our justification:" (Rom. 4:23-25:) For the assurance of the remission of our sins, and of a second life to come, to them that believe.

9. What saith then the covenant of forgiveness, of unmerited love, of pardoning mercy? "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." In the day thou believest, thou shalt surely live. Thou shalt be restored to the favour of God; and in his pleasure is life. Thou shalt be saved from the curse, and from the wrath of God. Thou shalt be quickened, from the death of sin into the life of righteousness. And if thou endure to the end, believing in Jesus, thou shalt never taste the second death; but, having suffered with thy Lord, shalt also live and reign with him for ever and ever.

10. Now, "this word is nigh thee." This condition of life is plain, easy, always at hand. "It is in thy mouth, and in thy heart," through the operation of the Spirit of God. The moment "thou believest in thine heart" in him whom God "hath raised from the dead," and "confessest with thy mouth the Lord Jesus," as thy Lord and thy God, "thou shalt be saved" from condemnation, from the guilt and punishment of thy former sins, and shalt have power to serve God in true holiness all the remaining days of thy life.

11. What is the difference then between the "righteousness which is of the law," and the "righteousness which is of faith ? -- between the first covenant, or the covenant of works, and the second, the covenant of grace? The essential, unchangeable difference is this: The one supposes him to whom it is given to be already holy and happy, created in the image and enjoying the favour of God; and prescribes the condition whereon he may continue therein, in love and joy, life and immortality: The other supposes him to whom it is given to be now unholy and unhappy, fallen short of the glorious image of God, having the wrath of God abiding on him, and hastening, through sin, whereby his soul is dead, to bodily death, and death everlasting; and to man in this state it prescribes the condition whereon he may regain the pearl he has lost, may recover the favour and image of God, may retrieve the life of God in his soul, and be restored to the knowledge and the love of God, which is the beginning of life eternal.

12. Again: The covenant of works, in order to man's continuance in the favour of God, in his knowledge and love, in holiness and happiness, required of perfect man a perfect and uninterrupted obedience to every point of the law of God. Whereas, the covenant of grace, in order to man's recovery of the favour and the life of God, requires only faith; living faith in Him who, through God, justifies him that obeyed not.

13. Yet, again: The covenant of works required of Adam and all his children, to pay the price themselves, in consideration of which they were to receive all the future blessings of God. But, in the covenant of grace, seeing we have nothing to pay, God "frankly forgives us all:" Provided only, that we believe in Him who hath paid the price for us; who hath given himself a "Propitiation for our sins, for the sins of the whole world."

14. Thus the first covenant required what is now afar off from all the children of men; namely, unsinning obedience, which is far from those who are "conceived and born in sin." Whereas, the second requires what is nigh at hand; as though it should say, "Thou art sin! God is love! Thou by sin art fallen short of the glory of God; yet there is mercy with him. Bring then all thy sins to the pardoning God, and they shall vanish away as a cloud. If thou wert not ungodly, there would be no room for him to justify thee as ungodly. But now draw near, in full assurance of faith. He speaketh, and it is done. Fear not, only believe; for even the just God justifieth all that believe in Jesus."

II. 1. These things considered, it would be easy to show, as I proposed to do in the Second place, the folly of trusting in the "righteousness which is of the law," and the wisdom of submitting to "the righteousness which is of faith."

The folly of those who still trust in the "righteousness which is of the law," the terms of which are, "Do this, and live," may abundantly appear from hence: They set out wrong; their very first step is a fundamental mistake: For, before they can ever think of claiming any blessing on the terms of this covenant, they must suppose themselves to be in his state with whom this covenant was made. But how vain a supposition is this; since it was made with Adam in a state of innocence! How weak, therefore, must that whole building be, which stands on such a foundation! And how foolish are they who thus build on the sand! who seem never to have considered, that the covenant of works was not given to man when he was "dead in trespasses and sins," but when he was alive to God, when he knew no sin, but was holy as God is holy; who forget, that it was never designed for the recovery of the favour and life of God once lost, but only for the continuance and increase thereof, till it should be complete in life everlasting.

2. Neither do they consider, who are thus seeking to establish their "own righteousness, which is of the law," what manner of obedience or righteousness that is which the law indispensably requires. It must be perfect and entire in every point, or it answers not the demand of the law. But which of you is able to perform such obedience; or, consequently, to live thereby? Who among you fulfils every jot and tittle even of the outward commandments of God? doing nothing, great or small, which God forbids? leaving nothing undone which he enjoins? speaking no idle word? having your conversation always "meet to minister grace to the hearers?" and, "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, doing all to the glory of God?" And how much less are you able to fulfil all the inward commandments of God! those which require that every temper and motion of your soul should be holiness unto the Lord! Are you able to "love God with all your heart?" to love all mankind as your own soul? to "pray without ceasing?" in every thing to give thanks?" to have God always before you? and to keep every affection, desire, and thought, in obedience to his law?

3. You should farther consider, that the righteousness of the law requires, not only the obeying every command of God, negative and positive, internal and external, but likewise in the perfect degree. In every instance whatever, the voice of the law is, "Thou shalt serve the Lord thy God with all thy strength." It allows no abatement of any kind: It excuses no defect: It condemns every coming short of the full measure of obedience, and immediately pronounces a curse on the offender: It regards only the invariable rules of justice, and saith, "I know not to show mercy."

4. Who then can appear before such a Judge, who is "extreme to mark what is done amiss?" How weak are they who desire to be tried at the bar where "no flesh living can be justified!" -- none of the offspring of Adam. For, suppose we did now keep every commandment with all our strength; yet one single breach which ever was, utterly destroys our whole claim to life. If we have ever offended in any one point, this

righteousness is at an end. For the law condemns all who do not perform uninterrupted as well as perfect obedience. So that, according to the sentence of this, for him who hath once sinned, in any degree, "there remaineth only a fearful looking for of fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" of God.

5. Is it not then the very foolishness of folly, for fallen man to seek life by this righteousness? for man, who was "shapen in wickedness, and in sin did his mother conceive him?" man, who is, by nature, all "earthly, sensual, devilish;" altogether corrupt and abominable;" in whom, till he find grace, "dwelleth no good thing;" nay, who cannot of himself think one good thought; who is indeed all sin, a mere lump of ungodliness, and who commits sin in every breath he draws; whose actual transgressions, in word and deed, are more in number than the hairs of his head? What stupidity, what senselessness must it be for such an unclean, guilty, helpless worm as this, to dream of seeking acceptance by his own righteousness, of living by "the righteousness which is of the law!"

6. Now, whatsoever considerations prove the folly of trusting in the "righteousness which is of the law," prove equally the wisdom of submitting to the "righteousness which is of God by faith." This were easy to be shown with regard to each of the preceding considerations. But, to wave this, the wisdom of the first step hereto, the disclaiming our own righteousness, plainly appears from hence, that it is acting according to truth, to the real nature of things. For, what is it more, than to acknowledge, with our heart as well as lips, the true state wherein we are? to acknowledge that we bring with us into the world a corrupt, sinful nature; more corrupt, indeed, than we can easily conceive, or find words to express? that hereby we are prone to all that is evil, and averse from all that is good; that we are full of pride, self will, unruly passions, foolish desires, vile and inordinate affections; lovers of the world, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God? that our lives have been no better than our hearts, but many ways ungodly and unholy; insomuch that our actual sins, both in word and deed, have been as the stars of heaven for multitude; that, on all these accounts, we are displeasing to Him who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and deserve nothing from him but indignation and wrath and death, the due wages of sin? that we cannot, by any of our righteousness, (for indeed we have none at all,) nor by any of our works, (for they are as the tree upon which they grow,) appease the wrath of God, or avert the punishment we have justly deserved; yea, that, if left to ourselves, we shall only wax worse and worse, sink deeper and deeper into sin, offend God more and more, both with our evil works, and with the evil tempers of our carnal mind, till we fill up the measure of our iniquities, and bring upon ourselves swift destruction? And is not this the very state wherein by nature we are? To acknowledge this, then, both with our heart and lips, that is, to disclaim our own righteousness, "the righteousness which is of the law," is to act according to the real nature of things, and, consequently, is an instance of true wisdom.

7. The wisdom of submitting to "the righteousness of faith" appears farther, from this consideration, that it is the righteousness of God: I mean here, it is that method of reconciliation with God which hath been chosen and established by God himself, not only as he is the God of wisdom, but as he is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, and of every creature which he hath made. Now, as it is not meet for man to say unto God, "What doest thou?" -- as none who is not utterly void of understanding, will contend with One that is mightier than he, with Him whose kingdom ruleth over all; so it is true wisdom, it is a mark of sound understanding, to acquiesce in whatever he hath chosen; to say in this, as in all things, "It is the Lord: Let him do what seemeth him good."

8. It may be farther considered, that it was of mere grace, of free love, of undeserved mercy, that God hath vouchsafed to sinful man any way of reconciliation with himself, that we were not cut away from his hand, and utterly blotted out of his remembrance. Therefore, whatever method he is pleased to appoint, of his

tender mercy, of his unmerited goodness, whereby his enemies, who have so deeply revolted from him, so long and obstinately rebelled against him, may still find favour in his sight, it is doubtless our wisdom to accept it with all thankfulness.

9. To mention but one consideration more. It is wisdom to aim at the best end by the best means. Now the best end which any creature can pursue is, happiness in God. And the best end a fallen creature can pursue is, the recovery of the favour and image of God. But the best, indeed the only, means under heaven given to a man, whereby he may regain the favour of God, which is better than life itself, or the image of God, which is the true life of the soul, is the submitting to the "righteousness which is of faith," the believing in the only-begotten Son of God.

III. 1. Whosoever therefore thou art, who desirest to be forgiven and reconciled to the favour of God, do not say in thy heart, "I must first do this; I must first conquer every sin; break off every evil word and work, and do all good to all men; or, I must first go to church, receive the Lord's Supper, hear more sermons, and say more prayers." Alas, my brother! Thou art clean gone out of the way. Thou art still "ignorant of the righteousness of God," and art "seeking to establish thy own righteousness," as the ground of thy reconciliation. Knowest thou not, that thou canst do nothing but sin, till thou art reconciled to God? Wherefore, then, dost thou say, "I must do this and this first, and then I shall believe?" Nay, but first believe! Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Propitiation for thy sins. Let this good foundation first be laid, and then thou shalt do all things well.

2. Neither say in thy heart, "I cannot be accepted yet, because I am not good enough." Who is good enough -- who ever was -- to merit acceptance at God's hands? Was ever any child of Adam good enough for this? or will any till the consummation of all things? And as for thee, thou art not good at all: There dwelleth in thee no good thing. And thou never wilt be, till thou believe in Jesus. Rather, thou wilt find thyself worse and worse. But is there any need of being worse, in order to be accepted? Art thou not bad enough already? Indeed thou art, and that God knoweth. And thou thyself canst not deny it. Then delay not. All things are now ready. "Arise, and wash away thy sins." The fountain is open. Now is the time to wash thee white in the blood of the Lamb. Now he shall "purge" thee as "with hyssop," and thou shalt "be clean:" He shall "wash" thee, and thou shalt "be whiter than snow."

3. Do not say, "But I am not contrite enough: I am not sensible enough of my sins." I know it. I would to God thou wert more sensible of them, more contrite a thousand fold than thou art. But do not stay for this. It may be, God will make thee so, not before thou believest, but by believing. It may be, thou wilt not weep much till thou lovest much because thou hast had much forgiven. In the mean time, look unto Jesus. Behold, how he loveth thee! What could he have done more for thee which he hath not done?

O Lamb of God, was ever pain,

Was ever love like thine?

Look steadily upon him, till he looks on thee, and breaks thy hard heart. Then shall thy "head" be "waters," and thy "eyes fountains of tears."

4. Nor yet do thou say, "I must do something more before I come to Christ." I grant, supposing thy Lord should delay his coming, it were meet and right to wait for his appearing, in doing, so far as thou hast power, whatsoever he hath commanded thee. But there is no necessity for making such a supposition. How knowest thou that he will delay? Perhaps he will appear, as the day-spring from on high, before the

morning light. O do not set him a time! Expect him every hour. Now he is nigh! even at the door!

5. And to what end wouldest thou wait for more sincerity, before thy sins are blotted out? to make thee more worthy of the grace of God? Alas, thou art still "establishing thy own righteousness." He will have mercy, not because thou art worthy of it, but because his compassions fail not; not because thou art righteous, but because Jesus Christ hath atoned for thy sins.

Again, if there be anything good in sincerity, why dost thou expect it before thou hast faith? -- seeing faith itself is the only root of whatever is really good and holy.

Above all, how long wilt thou forget, that whatsoever thou doest, or whatsoever thou hast, before thy sins are forgiven thee, it avails nothing with God toward the procuring of thy forgiveness? yea, and that it must all be cast behind thy back, trampled under foot, made no account of, or thou wilt never find favour in God's sight; because, until then, thou canst not ask it, as a mere sinner, guilty, lost, undone, having nothing to plead, nothing to offer to God, but only the merits of his well-beloved Son, "who loved thee, and gave himself for thee!"

6. To conclude. Whosoever thou art, O man, who hast the sentence of death in thyself, who feelest thyself a condemned sinner, and hast the wrath of God abiding on thee: Unto thee saith the Lord, not, "Do this," -- perfectly obey all my commands, -- "and live;" but, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." "The word of faith is nigh unto thee:" Now, at this instant, in the present moment, and in thy present state, sinner as thou art, just as thou art, believe the gospel; and "I will be merciful unto thy unrighteousness, and thy iniquities will I remember no more."

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-wesley/the-righteousness-of-faith/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net