

Righteousness

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Righteousness. The basic meaning of 'righteousness' and its cognates in the Bible derives from the Hebrew *sedeq*, which was usually translated in the LXX as *dikaïosynē*. It thus denotes not so much the abstract idea of justice or virtue, as right standing and consequent right behaviour, within a community. English translates this semantic field with two different roots: 'right', 'righteous', and 'righteousness' and 'just', 'justice', 'justify' and 'justification'. In Heb. and Gk., however, these ideas all belong together linguistically and theologically.

In the OT (upon which the NT idea is based) two fields of thought give specific shape to the idea:

1. The lawcourt setting gives 'righteousness' the idea of the standing of a person in relation to the court's decision. In the Hebrew court there were no public prosecutors: all cases had to be brought by a plaintiff against a defendant. Righteousness is the status which results, for either party, if the court finds in his favour. Since the standard of judgment is the covenant law of God, 'righteousness' can acquire the sense of 'behaviour in conformity with the covenant requirements', bringing about the possibility that right covenant standing can be observed in ordinary behaviour. In addition, the judge, or king, must conform to a different sense of righteousness: he must try cases fairly, i.e. he must be true to the law and/or the covenant, must condemn evil, show no partiality, and uphold the cause of the defenceless. This complex meaning explains the occasional instances when the Septuagint uses *dikaïosynē* to translate not *sedeq* and its cognates but other roots such as *hesed* (grace, covenant mercy), *mišpāt* (judgment, justice), etc.

2. The covenantal setting merges with that of the lawcourt: this is due partly to the fact that the law (Torah) is the covenant charter. Though sometimes God himself is seen as Israel's adversary at law, the more frequently encountered picture is of God as judge or king, with Israel as either plaintiff (pleading her cause against her enemies) or defendant (on trial for failure to keep the covenant). God's righteousness is then invoked as the reason why he can be expected to deliver his people: he is committed by covenant to do so. When this is apparently called into question (in the exile, and later in the Maccabean revolt and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70), the writers of these periods reply that God is righteous in judging his sinful people; that he is righteous in waiting before judging their enemies, granting time for repentance; and that he will show himself righteous in restoring the fortunes of his people, in renewing the covenant (Dn. 9; Ezr. 9; etc.). The book of Job can be seen as a long lawcourt scene in which Job pleads his righteousness, imagining that God is his adversary, only to discover that God cannot be brought into court: the first two chapters reveal Satan (see Devil) as the real prosecutor, with Job's comforters as his unwitting assistants.

These two settings (lawcourt and covenant) combine to produce the developed covenantal theology which underlay Judaism at the time of Jesus. To have 'righteousness' meant to belong to the covenant, the boundary marker of which was the Torah, and the hope of which was that God, in accordance with his own righteousness, would act in history to 'vindicate', to 'justify', his people (i.e. to show that they really

were his people) by saving them from their enemies. These meanings are reflected particularly in Matthew, where 'righteousness' is shorthand both for the saving plan of God (Mt. 3:15) and for the covenantal obligations of his people (5:20; 6:1), and Luke, which emphasizes the 'righteous' standing of many of the key actors in the drama (Lk. 1:6; 2:25; 23:50; Acts 10:22). Jesus himself is sometimes called 'the righteous one', in virtue of his being the one designated by God as his true covenant partner (e.g. Acts 3:14; 7:52, 22:14, Jas. 5:6). The Jewish belief that God would judge the world justly is echoed repeatedly in the NT, e.g. 2 Thes. 1:5-6; Rom. 2:1-16; Heb. 12:23. But the fullest development comes in Paul, particularly with his exposition in Romans of the righteousness of God.

Paul saw that the Jewish problem of God's righteousness (if the creator of the world is Israel's covenant God, why is Israel still oppressed?) had been answered in a new and striking way in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The answer had, in fact, forced a restatement of the question, demonstrating as it did the universal sinfulness of Jews as well as pagans. The gospel, Paul declares, proves that God is in the right despite appearances: he has kept covenant with Abraham, has dealt properly with sin, has acted and will act without partiality, and upholds all those who cast themselves, helpless, on his mercy (Rom. 1:16-17; 2:1-16; 3:21 - 4:25). God has, in other words, shown 'righteousness' in the sense appropriate for the judge and the Lord of the covenant. He is thus able to anticipate the verdict of the last day (Rom. 2:1-16) and to declare in the present (Rom. 3:21-26) that all who believe the gospel are already within the covenant community (see Justification).

The view that 'the righteousness of God' refers to a righteousness which God gives to, bestows upon, or recognizes in human beings came initially from Augustine, but gained its force (in terms of the development of modern theology) from Luther's reaction against a *iustitia distributiva*. The term *iustitia*, as found in the Latin Vulgate, had indeed pulled the understanding of texts such as Rom. 1:17 in the (false) direction of a merely 'distributive' justice, in which God simply rewards virtue and punishes vice. Luther's alternative, however fruitful in opening new worlds of theology to him, was in some ways equally misleading, for it directed attention away from the biblical notion of God's covenant faithfulness and instead placed greater emphasis upon the status of the human being. In the period after Luther, Protestant theology largely returned to the notion of the distributive justice of God: because God is righteous, he must in fact reward virtue and punish sin, and this satisfaction of divine justice took place in Christ.

According to the NT, the people of God do indeed have 'righteousness'. This is not, strictly speaking, God's own righteousness (though cf. 2 Cor. 5:21), but that which is proper to the person in whose favour the court has found; within the covenant context, it is the right standing of a member of the people of God. 'Righteousness' thus comes to mean, more or less, 'covenant membership', with all the overtones of appropriate behaviour (e.g. Phil. 1:11). The terminology plays a central role in Paul's debate with those who sought to keep the covenant community within the bounds of physical Judaism: they, Paul says, are ignorant of God's righteousness (i.e. of what God is righteously accomplishing, of how he is fulfilling his covenant) and are seeking to establish a righteousness of their own (i.e. a covenant membership for Jews alone), whereas in God's plan Christ offers covenant membership to all who believe the gospel (Rom. 10:3-4). (See further Paul.)

The central biblical discussions of righteousness thus principally concern

membership in the covenant and the behaviour appropriate to that membership. Since, however, these passages depend on a theology in which God is creator and judge of all the earth, and in which God's people are to reflect God's own character, it is not illegitimate to extrapolate from them to the 'justice' which God desires, and designs, for his world. The church is to be not only an example of God's intended new humanity, but the means by which the eventual plan, including the establishment of world-wide justice, is to be put into effect. Lack of emphasis here in older theological writing, due sometimes to individualism and sometimes to a dualistic split between church and world, has led to a reaction (e.g. in some liberation theology) in which 'justice' as an abstract virtue has been elevated in an unbiblical manner (e.g. at the expense of mercy). This should not prevent a balanced orthodox view of world-wide justice from regaining, and retaining, its place in the church's teaching and practice.

Bibliography

On 'justice': P. Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on Government and Politics Today* (Basingstoke, 1984); R. J. Mouw, *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983); N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1984); J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1972). On 'righteousness' see under Justification.

The Path of the Righteous

2:20 Thus you will walk in the ways of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous.

4:18 The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

8: 20 I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, (**Wisdom is speaking.**)

11:5 The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness.

12:28 In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality.

15:19 The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway.

28:6 Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a rich man whose ways are perverse.

28:18 He whose walk is blameless is kept safe, but he whose ways are perverse will suddenly fall.

Discussion Time:

1. Select a discussion facilitator and someone to share your results with the larger group.
2. Share observations about the passages; cross references; life stories, etc.
3. Talk about the "so what" of the passages – implications, applications, etc.
4. Prepare a brief devotional to share with the class based upon what you discussed.

The Righteous' Relationship to God

3:33 The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the home of the righteous.

10:3 The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.

10:29 The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous, but it is the ruin of those who do evil.

11:20 The LORD detests men of perverse heart but he delights in those whose ways are blameless.

15:9 The LORD detests the way of the wicked but he loves those who pursue righteousness.

15:29 The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

18:10 The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

21:12 The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked and brings the wicked to ruin.

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The Speech (Lips / Mouth) of the Righteous

10:11 The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

10:20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value.

10:21 The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment.

10:31 The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom, but a perverse tongue will be cut out.

10:32 The lips of the righteous know what is fitting, but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.

11:9 With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape.

12:6 The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the speech of the upright rescues them.

12:13 An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk, but a righteous man escapes trouble.

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The Righteous and Money / Possessions

10:2 Ill-gotten treasures are of no value, but righteousness delivers from death.

10:16 The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.

11:18 The wicked man earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward.

11:28 Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

12:12 The wicked desire the plunder of evil men, but the root of the righteous flourishes.

13:25 The righteous eat to their hearts' content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry.

15:6 The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings them trouble.

16:8 Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.

21:26 All day long he (the sluggard) craves for more, but the righteous give without sparing.

28:8 He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.

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The Stability of the Righteous

10:25 When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.

10:30 The righteous will never be uprooted, but the wicked will not remain in the land.

12:3 A man cannot be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted.

12:7 Wicked men are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous stands firm.

14:32 When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge.

21:29 A wicked man puts up a bold front, but an upright man gives thought to his ways.

24:15 Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man's house, do not raid his dwelling place; **24:16** for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again, but the wicked are brought down by calamity.

25:26 Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.

28:1 The wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.

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The Righteous and Society

11:10 When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.

12:10 A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.

13:5 The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked bring shame and disgrace.

14:34 Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.

16:12 Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.

21:15 When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.

25:5 remove the wicked from the king's presence, and his throne will be established through righteousness.

28:5 Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.

28:12 When the righteous triumph, there is great elation; but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding.

28:28 When the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding; but when the wicked perish, the righteous thrive.

29:2 When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice; when the wicked rule, the people groan.

29:7 The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

29:16 When the wicked thrive, so does sin, but the righteous will see their downfall.

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The Righteous' Relationship to Others

10:7 The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.

11:3 The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

11:30 The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise.

12:26 A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

12:5 The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.

14:9 Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright.

15:28 The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.

20:7 The righteous man leads a blameless life; blessed are his children after him.

23:24 The father of a righteous man has great joy; he who has a wise son delights in him.

29:6 An evil man is snared by his own sin, but a righteous one can sing and be glad.

29:27 The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright.

31:30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

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The Future of the Righteous (and the Wicked)

10:6 Blessings crown the head of the righteous, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.

10:24 What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted.

10:28 The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.

11:6 The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.

11:8 The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead.

11:19 The truly righteous man attains life, but he who pursues evil goes to his death.

11:21 Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will go free.

11:23 The desire of the righteous ends only in good, but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.

11:31 If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner!

12:21 No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.

13:6 Righteousness guards the man of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

13:9 The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out.

14:11 The house of the wicked will be destroyed, but the tent of the upright will flourish.

21:18 The wicked become a ransom for the righteous, and the unfaithful for the upright.

21:21 He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity and honor.

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