

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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Righteousness - Part 1 - Joss Bray

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

MT 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

We've been looking at the Kingdom of God quite a lot recently. The theme of righteousness is very much linked to this and it runs through the whole bible. It is clearly very important to God - and therefore to us.

What is righteousness?

Righteousness is actually quite difficult to define but it includes the concept both of "right standing" and "right behaviour". So for us, in the biblical context, right standing is about being in a right relationship with God. Right behaviour is about what we do as a result of that.

Of course, there is a lot more to it, and it has been hotly debated through the ages. So perhaps the best thing to do is have a quick tour through the bible and get a flavour of how the term is used and what that means for us.

We'll look at the Old Testament first then make a start on the New Testament in part 1. Then in part 2 we can look at how righteousness features in the New Testament letters and what we can learn from that.

In the Old Testament -

Belief and faith were counted by God as righteousness:

GE 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

So from early times, it is clear that righteousness was something that God gave - Abram wasn't credited with it because of what he did, but what he believed. His standing with God depended on that.

Doing what God has commanded in His law was also important:

DT 6:25 "And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."

People realised that being righteous before God was important - and therefore doing what God had told them would be a sign of this. This is right behaviour.

So for example, Job was no stranger to doing the right thing:

JOB 29:14 "I put on righteousness as my clothing;

So he thought of it as clothing - echoing the robe of righteousness described in Isaiah 61:

ISA 61:10 "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,

So there we see again how righteousness originates from God and is given by God to us. He arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.

And as well as putting it on, Job also knew he needed to hold onto it:

JOB 27:6 "I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.

Job knew that the only way to a clear conscience was to be right before God. That still holds true now. Conscience isn't talked about much now - but perhaps it should be. Being in a right standing and relationship with God and doing the right thing is not high on the media's agenda - and sometimes not on the church's either.

But there is a reward for righteousness. David knew about it:

1SA 26:23 "The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and faithfulness.

2SA 22:21 "The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD; I have not done evil by turning from my God.

David had a clear conscience - not because he did nothing wrong - far from it. But because he kept coming in repentance to God, knowing that what he had done was wrong and seeking forgiveness.

David kept his faith through all the ups and downs of his life - he did not turn from his God. Therefore his righteousness with God was assured and rewarded.

The Psalms - many of which David wrote - are full of the righteousness of God - here is one example

PS 33:5 The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

And we will remember Psalm 23:

PS 23:3 He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Proverbs encourages righteousness as the road travelled by wisdom:

PR 8:20 I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice,

And also confirms that God values it highly when people seek righteousness:

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

Also in Proverbs there are some wise words when the wrong way seems to prosper:

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

So there is the encouragement that even if behaving in a righteous way leaves you with little, it is much better than gaining a lot in an unrighteous way.

And there is also a promise:

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

It may not be the life, prosperity and honour that the world understands - but it is much better than that and lasts forever.

Just as there are the fruits of the Spirit, there is the fruit of righteousness:

ISA 32:17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.

That is pretty inspiring - the more we seek righteousness, the more peace and quiet confidence we will have.

Jesus is the perfect example of righteousness in practice - and Isaiah is full of the righteousness of the coming King Jesus:

ISA 9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

And Isaiah was clear that the righteousness of God was coming soon:

ISA 51:5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations.

Righteousness will be accompanied by salvation and justice through Jesus. Acts of righteousness will follow:

ISA 58:6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

And again, it results in blessing - not just for the people who are on the receiving end of righteous acts, but for those showing righteousness through their actions.

And here in Isaiah, is the passage that Jesus quoted part of, at the start of his ministry. It is a prophetic picture of God's blessing through Jesus and his people:

ISA 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

In Hosea, we see God encouraging his people towards righteousness:

HOS 10:12 Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up our unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

But in the book of Amos there is a warning from God:

AM 5:22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

This is an important point to remember. Any amount of doing things - even if they appear to be sacrificial and religious and even musical, will not please God if there is no justice and righteousness flowing through the lives of the people. This is also a lesson for us - what is flowing through us like a river - is it righteousness, or something else?

Right at the end of the Old Testament - in the last book - there is an awesome promise. In the end, righteousness will burn up all evil and healing will come for the people of God:

MAL 4:1 "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings

Righteousness is not something weak or transient. It is hugely strong and everlasting. It is not something to be taken lightly.

Moving on to the New Testament

Righteousness was very much on the agenda for Jesus and it came with a promise:

MT 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

In part 2 we will look at righteousness in the New Testament and what that means for us in the way we live our lives.

Remember:

MT 6:33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Our first focus must be on the kingdom of God and his righteousness - and everything we need will follow from that - and the world will be blessed.