

Romans 4:18-25. ¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. ²² This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." ²³ The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

***The Book of Romans:
The Basics of the Christian Faith, One Word at a Time:
Righteousness***

Aside from the clicking of camera shutters, the crowd that was gathered in a room in Eden Prairie this past Friday was silent, as audience members intently waited for the Dalai Lama to respond to a series of questions.¹ As the man spoke he promoted compassion, warned against the dangers of materialism, and spoke against hatred and anger all with a touch of humor and many listened with rapt attention. They listened with reverence, with awe, and when they spoke to him or about him, they referred to him as his Holiness. Surely this much-revered spiritual leader who speaks so passionately on compassion, who treats people with such kindness, who teaches and lives in a way that seems so good and upright, certainly he is righteous and his teaching are righteous; right? Not exactly. As it turns out there is more to it than that, there is more to righteousness.

As we continue in our sermon series today, as we get back to the basics of Christianity, and discuss our faith one word at a time, we will learn that there is indeed much more to righteousness.

So what does it mean to be righteous? How do we define righteousness? Almost automatically we think of those who are morally upright. We might not think of the Dalai Lama right away, but we might think of those who have a fine reputation of service in our community. We think about upstanding citizens, who do things that are good and right. This must be what it means to be righteous, and I should be like that, more like that. That's how we as civilized people so often see it. Righteousness, as seen by so many in our world, is this characteristic gained and displayed by good character, good choices, by civilized and upright behavior. That's what most people think, that's what respected spiritual leaders of the past and the present think and teach, and that effects our thinking too. The Bible, however, makes it clear that there is much more to it than that.

In our Gospel lesson for today we see how the Pharisees had thought they had cornered the market on righteousness. They carefully followed the requirements of the law of Moses,

¹ Jarvis, Sarah. *Dalai Lama visits Eden Prairie for discussion on compassion*. June 24, 2017. <http://www.startribune.com/dalai-lama-visits-eden-prairie-for-discussion-on-compassion/430463413/#1>

they even added hundreds upon hundreds of the own laws, so that they could appear more righteous in the eyes of others. *They* were the religious of leaders of the day who may have elicited a hush over the crowd when they entered a room, when they talked or taught. However, their idea of righteousness was actually quite deficient, as it fell far short of God's definition. And this account from Matthew chapter 9 shows us that Jesus did not hide his disdain for their false definition. ¹⁰ *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples.* ¹¹ *When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"* ¹² *On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.* ¹³ *But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* (Matthew 9:10-13)

Here Jesus uses their inadequate definition of righteousness against them. Clinging to a false righteousness, a righteousness of works, of human merit, might gain them a social advantage with their peers, but it will never help such stubborn and prideful sinners before a perfectly holy God. On the contrary, we must all realize that we are all sinners, who fall short of God's righteousness and holiness, and Jesus is the Savior who comes to heal and restore us to the righteousness that we lost when sin came into the world.

A person might be a good and upright citizen, someone who is respected in his community, such a man may very well be righteous by the world's standards, however, he is not necessarily righteous in the eyes of God. To be righteous in God's sight is impossible to earn or merit on our own. We may be able to do a pretty good job of hiding the outbursts, the anger, the jealousy, the bad habits, and all our other transgressions from our neighbors, but we can't hide them from God. We may be able to conceal the choice words under our breath, we may be able to restrain the envy, jealousy, hatred, and lust in our minds, we may do a pretty good job of keeping all that hidden from our neighbors, from the people at work, even from our family members, but we can't hide it from the Lord of all. We can't do it, not at all. He is well-aware of all our unrighteousness. He is well-aware of our vile and voluminous record of sins. He is well-aware of how even our righteous looking acts are filthy rags, constantly corrupted, stained and soiled by sin, by false and self-serving motives. We cannot make ourselves pure, when we are impure by nature. Have you ever tried to clean with a dirty, oily, rag? All you end up doing is moving dirt around.

Earlier in the book of Romans the Apostle Paul quotes from a number of Old Testament references that make it clear that not a single one of us could ever achieve the perfection that makes one righteous in God's sight. ***There is no one who is righteous, not even one.*** Shortly after this Paul goes on to make this definite statement regarding righteousness, he writes in Romans 3:20, ***Therefore no one will be declared righteous by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscience of sin.*** The law does not pave the way to a gainful pursuit of God-pleasing righteousness, for righteousness cannot come from such sinful creatures. Righteous and pure actions cannot come from human minds so fully tainted and depraved by sin. It must come from somewhere else, someone else. And this is where our text from last week picks up. ***But a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.*** Jesus was the fulfillment of these promises. He was the one who would keep all of God's commandments perfectly. He is the only source of the perfection that makes sinners right with a holy God. No wonder the Prophet Jeremiah refers to the coming Messiah as ***the LORD our Righteousness. (Jeremiah 23:6).*** Our pure and holy Savior is the one who cleanses us from all our sin and gives us his perfect obedience.

And so last week we learned about atonement, and today we learn that atonement and righteousness very much go hand in hand. Atonement has with it the meaning of the removal of sin, the subtraction of sin's guilt and punishment, so that we are set at one with a holy God. Righteousness, therefore, could be described as the other side of the equation. It's the addition of the perfection, the holiness, that we lack. And that comes from outside of us as this comes from God. God in his mercy would fulfill those promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and God would send a perfect substitute in Jesus who would keep all the commandments perfectly. No one, except, true man yet God in the flesh, Jesus Christ, could achieve perfection, could live a holy life, could keep all the commandments, and love God and neighbor, perfectly. In his mercy and grace, Jesus the promised Messiah came and did that for us, because we could not do it on our own.

Martin Luther and other bible scholars would speak of this as alien righteousness (not that it came from some sort of extraterrestrial being) but it is something very much foreign and from outside of the normal human experience. That alien righteousness could not come from us, and so it comes from somewhere else, as a gift of God in Christ Jesus. And that alien righteousness then becomes ours through God's gift of faith. It is credited to our account. Wiped clean of sin, now we are also given Christ's perfect record of obedience. This is a gift that God gives to those who by the Spirit's help believe in the promised Savior.

Paul uses an example to highlight this point even more. The Old Testament makes it rather clear that Abraham was a good man. He looked after and was generous toward his nephew Lot. Other accounts of his life often depict him as a fair and honest and brave man, but he wasn't without fault, was he? On at least two occasions he acted in cowardice and deception as he told his wife Sarah to lie to certain dignitaries and say that she was his sister instead of his wife in a strange effort to try to attain their favor. He was a good man, but with some rather obvious faults. However, righteousness was credited to his account. And this happened not because of his own personal flawless record, but it was given to him as a gift of faith. Abraham believed in the promises of God. He believed that God would send the Messiah, a Savior. This promised Messiah would cleanse him of his sin and live a life of perfection in his place.

Abraham believed all that God had said about this promised Savior. Abraham believed that this Savior would come from his descendants. Even when all worldly opinion and expertise told him that his body was as good as dead, and that his wife would no longer be able to bear children at her advanced age, Abraham through the gift of faith, trusted in God's promises, he believed. He believed in the promises of God and all that was said to him by his ever-faithful LORD. Paul goes on to explain... ***18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."***

This was a righteousness given by God through faith in the promises of God. But this was not just a one-time thing, or a single particular case. Instead with this example of Abraham placed before us Paul goes on to speak to all those who would believe. ***23 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He***

was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

There is no one righteous, not even one. Except for Jesus. And this perfect son of God and son of Abraham came to achieve perfection in our place and give us righteousness. He was then crucified as the sacrifice of atonement that would pay for all our sin, he was also raised to life declaring that we are not only not guilty but we are innocent in God's eyes. You are made at one with God. You are might righteous and holy in his sight, through faith in Jesus Christ, our perfect substitute, our crucified and risen Savior.

Righteousness does not come from a noble pursuing a meritorious life, it could not, no matter how hard we tried. Even those who the world classifies as great and noble men like the Dalai Lama, we all fall short. But there is a righteousness that comes from God and comes to each one of us by God's gift of faith. The word works, the Spirit creates and strengthens saving faith, and the sacraments bestow their wonderful gifts and by God's grace we believe in that which was told to us. This is the only way to be righteous before God. We are righteous through faith. And this is all to the glory of God. Thanks be to God we are righteous before God through his gift of faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus has come, he was delivered over to death as he died to pay for sins and he was raised to life for our justification. The resurrection serves as glorious proof that we are declared righteous. Declared justified. Just as if we had never sinned. Just as if we have kept all the commandments perfectly. Right with God. Spotless, blameless, righteous through his mercy and grace in Christ. Jesus gives us his record of perfect obedience. Jesus is our Righteousness, the Righteousness of God.

Having established the real source of righteousness we can also speak of upright behavior that is a blessed result of our faith. Knowing that we have made right with God, we are motivated by this mercy, this undeserved favor, we have this new and daily desire to do right by God. The righteous not only have the gift of faith, but we live by this faith. We put his words into practice. We gladly listen to his word. We have a desire to follow his commands, and by his grace we do what he wants us to do, we do what is good and right. We live godly and righteous lives out of thanks to God, who called unrighteous sinners to be his own. We live godly lives out of thanks to God who called unworthy unrighteous sinners to serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Some have described this a fruit and evidence of the righteousness given to us.

The room may not fall into silent awe when you walk in, and very likely no one will ever address you as "Your Holiness", but this is the wonderful teaching that God has for you today: you are righteous, you are holy, through faith in Christ Jesus. That's how God sees you in Christ. Christ's perfect righteousness has been placed upon you like a robe in baptism. And each day through God's gift of faith we will live in that undeserved love and that righteousness that is freely given, credited to our account, or imputed to us. And so it is, that having this righteousness we live our lives in a way that the world would see as righteous, we show love and compassion to our neighbors, we do our best to avoid hatred and harm to our neighbor, but that's just the back end of the equation, the result of our faith. The righteous looking things that we do as we live out our faith, are simply a reflection of the righteousness from God that has been given to us. Let us give all glory to God as we live righteous lives for him who lived a perfect life for us and died to pay for all our sins. Thanks be to God for the power of his Word. For the LORD in his grace and mercy gives us the righteousness that comes from God, the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.