

Romans: Themes

I will be moving through some of the themes in Romans in this lecture, but I will not be able to cover all of them. I am starting from the beginning, particularly focusing on Romans 1:16-17. We will go into some detail on that passage here. The first phrase we will study is that of “the righteousness of God,” from verse 17. Perhaps you know that in the history of the church the study of Romans has been a very significant factor in bringing the Gospel back to a church that had fallen into legalism and treating tradition as inspired revelation. In particular, the Reformation was sparked by a renewed study of Romans by Martin Luther. But if you wanted to be more specific, it was a renewed study of the phrase “righteousness of God.” And if you want to be even more specific than that, it was a correct understanding of the genitive of God that sparked the Reformation. So if you insist that grammar is not important, church history will teach you something different.

The righteousness of God was the question Luther was dealing with. The way Luther had been taught to understand that phrase was as the righteous demands and expectations of God, commensurate with His righteous character. That is why you have an Augustinian monk reflecting in his cell and pacing around the central circuit in the monastery, asking a simple question: “How can I find a merciful God?” He is a man who is willing and desirous to do what is right before God and who understands this phrase, “the righteousness of God,” as the righteous character of God—the righteous demand and expectation of God. As he slowly came to see in his studies of the Psalms, Galatians, and of Romans in particular, there is only one way to interpret the phrase, “the righteousness of God,” properly: there is righteousness coming from God—outside of man—reaching to man. That is commensurate with the character of God, but it is more than that.

It is perhaps Adolf Schlatter who has gone even beyond the Reformational—and particularly Martin Luther’s—understanding of what righteousness coming from God really conveys. His commentary on Romans that has recently been translated into English is called *The Righteousness of God*. I would recommend that to you. In it he states that it really goes beyond the righteous act of God—it is the righteous way of salvation, of reconciling the people unto Himself. Thus the phrase, “the righteousness of God,” is not only a legal term of declaring someone justified. The righteousness of God is displayed in more than pardoning sinners on the basis of the substitutionary atonement of Christ. His righteousness is displayed when God enters into a relationship with me, as He sets the relationship right. Thus righteousness does not only have a legal dimension, but also a relational dimension. Schlatter does great justice to the analysis of these various words. When the verb for being made righteous, or verbs to that effect, is used, there may be only a legal connotation there. But when the noun, “righteousness of God,” is used, there is a relational dimension. The provision in Christ is part of the righteousness of God. When you look at all of Romans, you see that the righteousness and godliness of God and His godly actions on behalf of man are revealed. Romans speaks about the true character of the human condition, the provision of Christ in justifying an undeserving sinner, a new life in Christ, and the fruit of the Spirit growing out—all in a dependent relationship with God. Thus the righteousness of God implies and communicates those aspects in the various contexts in Romans.

There are Old Testament references that we could draw attention to, particularly Isaiah 46, 51, 54, and 56, in which we see that the righteousness of God revealed begins with an exposure of the human condition. Thus it is very significant that when Romans 1:17 speaks about the Gospel being revealed, that Gospel is being spoken to you rather than arising from some human endeavor. It also makes it very clear that it is not only God's word, but God's work that is expressed in the righteousness of God being revealed. When we hear that the righteousness of God is being revealed, we see that a righteous God is making provision for a reconciled relationship with Him. It is this all-embracing movement; it is an

activity of inclusion that includes the elements of sacrifice and justification, but it does not stop there—all this despite the unrighteousness of man. It is fatherly care poured over the utter neediness and exposure of His children that is implied and communicated with the righteousness of God—the very contrary of what Luther originally thought “righteousness of God” communicated.

It is God’s desire that the now-reconciled people live in communion with Him; that is the original design of man. But our reconciliation also has immediate, once-and-for-all effects. The atonement of Christ is a once-and-for-all deed, but it has eternal validity for those who embrace that deed of God in their lives. Thus there is finality and uniqueness to the deeds of God, but there is a continuing effect and outgrowth of that. That is why Paul says, “Do not only begin to live by faith, but continue to live by faith.” We will come to that understanding of what faith means.

But you also see that if you understand righteousness of God this way, you cannot say that there is human merit. If you understand this total activity of revelation and of deed of God on behalf of man, that all-embracing activity, how can you turn around and say, “I merit God’s favor, mercy, and grace?” It is absolutely undeserved. It is something that arises from the heart of God that is not conditioned, initiated, or triggered by anything that I do. My state is utter helplessness. The image of a newborn baby is good to illustrate that. The baby must utterly depend on others for his provision. He has no clue of what the dangers of life are, no clue of what the needs are; he simply has needs. His exposure and the vulnerability to his parents is complete. That is the counterpart to the righteousness of God. There is absolutely no place for self-contribution. This is why Luther’s initial understanding of the righteousness of God as the righteous demands of God to live an acceptable life before Him is so wrong. When you read this phrase in the total context of the argument of Romans, there is no place at all for our merit in anything that God would do in leaning toward me and showing His favored embrace toward me. He demonstrates His righteousness, which is utterly unmerited by us and without any contribution from us. Thus the term, “synergism,” that you may have heard in terms of finding favor with God (“How can I contribute something?”) fails to see and accept the righteousness of God that is revealed in chapters one to three. You need to read all of Romans to understand what the righteousness of God is. It does include the purity, godliness, and clarity of God. But it is this wonderful act; the righteousness of God is clearly the righteousness expressed and provided by God.

I think we need to look at all of Romans from this particular perspective: God reaches out. In this context, then, you can understand election. That is a difficult issue and it has been a challenge for me to understand why God would elect—why God would be so sovereign in His deeds. If you recognize that your condition is as dependent as a newborn baby, and that you can bring nothing to God except your need, then you can recognize that what God does is His good pleasure. When He expresses grace to you or anybody, it is His great deed, great choice, and great act of election. It is not your merit. So when we think about the connection between the expression, “the righteousness of God,” and election, we need to understand this unmerited state; what God does, I do not deserve. This is difficult, but it is also highly freeing because, when I receive the Gospel, when this truth of unmerited favor from God reaches my thought and my being, it drives me to an understanding of gratitude and thankfulness. I cannot boast, as Paul says, in my accomplishment. I can only boast in God’s accomplishment. It frees me up to a sincere acknowledgment of God’s goodness. Sometimes we can say things that sound pious like, “It is just God’s greatness,” but we are saying these things with the undertone, “I did a pretty good job but I want to say, ‘It is really just God’s greatness’ so that others will know how great I am.” When we understand deeply the unmerited favor of God, we can sincerely say, “Praise God! It is His great deed that I stand here tonight before you. I do not take any credit for it. If I were without God’s hand I would be in the pits. The fact that we can grow and move is God’s wonderful grace.”

Some people misuse the grace of God and treat it cheaply by saying, “Therefore, let me sit back in my rocking chair and do nothing.” The grace of God that cost Him so much compels me to grow and even to pray that I would have grateful eyes and a grateful heart toward all that God has provided. There is a responsive gratitude and Romans chapters 12 to 15 could be described as a response of gratitude to God's provision—by God's help. In a way the righteousness of God relates to the election and the sovereignty of God. Another important point here, connected with the righteousness of God and justification, is that of sonship—that we are reinstated as children of God. God brings us into a familial relationship with Him. Obviously I am not saying we are like Jesus—divine sons and daughters of God—but we are considered as and called to be sons and daughters of God in His household. We are taken into the family. My wife is currently taking a course on this idea of sonship and is greatly appreciating learning about that particular ramification of being justified before God—being brought into the household of God and into a right relationship with Him on the basis of His deeds. Now we are sons and daughters and not orphans. It is a very deep truth that brings us into a healthy place of existence and perspective.

When we meditate on the ramifications of the righteousness of God displayed toward us, that brings us into a right relationship with Him; we are strengthened to understand our life not in separation from God, but in dependency upon God. Then we can understand the process of sanctification—the process of living in godliness (Romans 12). Sanctification follows as a growth of that which God has begun rather than of anything else. This leads us directly to the question of what faith is. I think a lot has been said and done concerning the understanding of faith. But, please believe me, you cannot define faith if you do not understand what the righteousness of God means. You cannot define faith if you do not understand what salvation really means. If you miss Romans one to three and five, you will define faith as your contribution to your salvation: “God has provided His part; now I will provide faith.” But what is faith? We see clearly in Romans, and also in Galatians, that there is an antithesis between works and faith. There is a contrast. You can either live by works or you can live by faith. You need to understand what it means to live by works before you can understand what living by faith cannot mean. Living by works is striving to live by means of the law, or seeking to conduct your life according to your own desires. Either way, someone who is living by works is seeking to please God in his own strength. This is basically Gentile and Jewish existence without Christ. Living by faith, therefore, cannot mean that you bring a contribution to your salvation, but some inner disposition to at least say, “I believe.” If faith were a work that we could contribute, that would be, according to Paul, living by works. Paul says that there is no boasting in faith, and that means you have to understand faith as something different from anything that you can generate yourself.

Living by faith is a new order. Romans 3:22 has one definition of faith, which we will look at. This passage also, by the way, includes a reference to the righteousness from God or the righteousness of God that we have just discussed. Romans 3:22 defines faith this way: “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Some people have translated this to say, “through the faith of Jesus.” I do not think that is tenable in this passage. It is not that Christ brings faith—it is the faith of the individual and of the group of believers. So this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. What is this faith in Jesus Christ? It must be maintained in contradistinction to works. And it must be understood that there is a great object of faith. Paul speaks about faith as something that is located inside of us or inside the community of believers. We could focus on the origin of faith or on the object of faith—“faith in Jesus Christ.”

I believe it was Corrie Ten Boom who was once praised by someone who said, “Corrie Ten Boom, I am so impressed by your faith.” Her response was, “I have little faith in a great God.” I would like to push that a little further. Our God is so great that we do not need to focus on our faith, but rather on our God. Our focus and disposition ought to be, “Look at what God has done, look at what He has provided, look

at how He has reached down into my life.” That is described as faith, but it is completely focused on the one who is being trusted rather than on the one who is trusting. True faith could not come from someone who had a boastful disposition, saying, “I have great faith. I have believed what Jesus has said; I have embraced what He has done, etc.” Paul is very clear: if you are boasting in anything other than Christ, you are not in the area of faith. Faith is focused on the object, the one who is being trusted.

I believe the final answer to the question, “What is faith?” is not so much found in Romans as it is in Ephesians. Obviously you can have a long discussion about the Ephesians passage as well, but I still want to give it to you. I want to tell you what I believe faith to be. In Ephesians 2:8 it says (summarizing what we have just thought about in the Gospel to the Romans), “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Grace is the unmerited deed on our behalf, the righteousness of God communicated through faith. And this faith is not from us; it is the gift of God. Some people debate whether this gift of God speaks about grace or faith, or both; I would say both. Thus, in the end, God provides us with the ability to believe. Faith is a gift of God, part of His reconciling work, part of His righteousness. It is His provision of regenerating your heart and making you able to look at Him and acknowledge Him, to enjoy and appropriate the gifts that He has provided for you. That would be defined as faith. We might ask, if a person is able to reject the gift—if it is possible to reject the gift of God. We do know that Scripture speaks about suppressing, or hindering, the Spirit of God. We see that our ability as human beings is that of denying and rejecting that which God is doing. I would not go as far as to say that we can really reject faith, but we certainly have the ability to keep God's call and prodding at bay. Some people have the testimony of running away from God for 5 or 10 years, and God coming back; that is kind of an experiential description of that. So I would say yes and no to that question. Yes, in part; no, in general. God is accomplishing His work, including that of providing faith, but we certainly have the ability to hinder and suppress.

The basic Gospel truth from Romans (particularly in chapters one to three) that is so hard, I would say, is this: without God's intervention, He does not owe us anything. He is under no obligation to save one human being. Therefore what He does, even in this sense, is utterly unmerited on our part. Now, human perspective certainly says, “That cannot be fair. That cannot be true. God has created me, so He owes it to me to save me out of this condition. He sees what a mess I am in.” But the Gospel truth is that, as a child of Adam, I have fallen and I have no claim before God. That is why, in the little Gospel story in John 3:16, it is assumed that everyone deserves to perish, and so all those who believe shall not perish. That is the starting point: everybody deserves to perish. When you talk with people, that is part of the harshness of the Gospel. We might say, “How can a loving God think in such a way? How can He approach His creation in such a way?” But we need to come back to the image of the potter; we need to say, “Who am I to tell God how He is to conduct His business with us?” Our approach as mankind, based on the Gospel, is that God does not owe us anything. If he chooses to be gracious to us, if He inclines His heart and grace toward us, we do not deserve it. That is the point of Romans nine. In all of this hard teaching we trust that He is righteous. It eludes me; I cannot make sense of it. I would rather say, “God will save everybody; everybody fell, everybody will be saved.” There is a passage in Romans 11 which could be read in this way, that all get saved. But it is impossible; you cannot come up with a universal salvation scheme. It is not possible in the Gospel; there is such a thing as those who do not come into the covenant of God. That is the hard point that we need to leave, but one thing we must retain is that we cannot boast before any human being that we have a favored place. We cannot boast—and many people in reformed circles have boasted about being among the elect people and all of that. God's mercy is what we can boast in, but that is about all. Thus we have to be very careful that we do not say, “Look at me, I have faith. Where are you?” That is not the Gospel at all.