

## Justification and Sanctification

Ellet J. Waggoner

The Signs of the Times | April 1, 1886

Having explained Rom. 3:28, we are prepared to understand a parallel text that, without the explanation already given, might be considered a difficult one. The text referred to is Rom. 3:21: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets." The righteousness of God, as we have already learned, is a term applied to the Ten Commandments, or rather to that righteousness which the Ten Commandments enjoin. But the question arises, "If the righteousness of God is the perfect righteousness which the law demands, how can it be manifested "without the law?" Let Paul explain for himself, as he does in the following verses: "Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe; for there is no difference; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God" (Rom. 3:22-25).

By this we see that the righteousness of God, which is manifested without the law, is simply the remission of sins that are past, for which no works of obedience on our part could make any satisfaction. Paul, speaking of Abraham, describes it as follows: "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:20-25).

"Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness." The same thing, says Paul, will be done to us also, if we also believe. The case, then, stands thus: The law demands perfect and unvarying obedience, but it speaks to all the world and finds none righteous; all have violated it, and all are condemned by it. (Rom. 3:9, 19.) Present or future obedience will not take away past transgression; therefore the law cannot help us. But Christ is perfect righteousness, for in him dwells "all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." *Now God says that he will impute the righteousness of Christ to every one who will fully believe on him. Impute means, "to set to the account of."* Therefore we are to understand that whenever we accept Christ, his righteousness is set to our account. Thus "the righteousness of God" is manifested in our past lives, even though we ourselves have never done a single act of righteousness. So we have the wonder of perfect obedience to the law, without a single righteous act on our part. The righteousness of God without the law—Christ's righteousness imputed to us.<sup>i</sup>

But what is the law doing all this time? Has it relaxed its claims? Not at all. Paul says, "The righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law." *The law stands by, and witnesses to the righteousness that is thus manifested in our*

*past life. Whereas it before condemned us, now it justifies us, for in the righteousness that is imputed to us it can detect no flaw. It makes no difference to the law that the righteousness to which it witnesses is not the result of our own works; the righteousness is accounted as ours, and that satisfies the law.*

Right here we may profitably note the force of Rom. 5:20: “Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” The “entering” of the law refers to the formal giving of it from Sinai. This will be readily seen from Rom. 5:13, 14, and has already been noted in our comments on that passage. Before the giving of the law, from Sinai, it did not exist in written form in the world. The remains of the law “written in their hearts,” and the instruction of men who, like Enoch, and Noah, walked with God were what the people had to depend on for their knowledge of right and wrong. The law existed before that time, for sin was imputed to the people, and “sin is not imputed where there is no law.” But the law was given “that the offense might abound.” The apostle does not mean that the law was given so that there might be more sin, but that it was given so that the sin, which already existed, might abound, that is, might appear greater than it did before. Paul expresses the exact meaning in another place when he says that sin, by the commandment, became “exceeding sinful.”

**To illustrate:** Here stands a glass of water; it does not look perfectly pure, yet it does not seem very impure. Now a rod is thrust down to the bottom of the glass and given a few vigorous turns, when, behold, the water at once becomes exceedingly foul. Did the rod make the water impure? No; the impurity was there all the time; the rod simply made it appear. So there was sin in the world; but the law, when it was written on tables of stone, and copies could be multiplied in books, and scattered among the people, made the extreme hideousness of sin to appear. And why was this necessary? The answer is implied in the last clause of the verse: “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” *Men could not be saved while defiled by sin, even though they did not realize its heinousness. So the law was brought close to them, to show them their deformity, and make them feel their need of help from some source outside of themselves.* And this effect it had; for no matter how much their sins were made to abound, “grace did much more abound.” Christ’s righteousness was seen to be sufficient to cover all the sins of the past. With Wesley, the repentant sinner may sing:

“Plenteous grace with Thee is found,  
Grace to cover all my sin;”

and with David he can realize the blessedness of the man “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered,” and unto whom the Lord will not impute iniquity.

We have seen that the law stands as a witness to the sinner’s justification. This shows that no act of Christ has in any way robbed the law of its force. Indeed, *without the existence of the law there could be no such thing as justification.* Now what about the man’s future relation to the law? It is evident that unless he keeps it he will again fall into condemnation. The man’s faith secured his justification; but that justification was simply the “showing to be just, or conformable to law.” His justification was simply pardon for

having violated the law; it was an act by which another's righteousness was put in place of his unrighteousness. Now since "faith without works is dead," it follows as a necessary conclusion, that if the man's faith was genuine (and if it were not he could not have been pardoned), it will now be proved by works of obedience. And therefore the characteristic of the justified man is that he keeps the law.

Of Abraham it is said that his faith was imputed to him for righteousness. But James takes the same subject up and says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" (James 2:21). This is no contradiction of Paul's statement in Rom. 3:28; for James immediately adds: "Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness" (James 2:22, 23).

By this we see that Abraham's faith could not have been imputed to him for righteousness but for the disposition to work. And since justification has reference to the law of God, *it is evident that the works that make perfect the faith that secures justification, must be the works, which the law requires.* But this continued obedience is sanctification; for Christ prayed for his disciples: "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

Paul says that God has chosen us to salvation "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13); but that by which the Spirit acts is the word of God, which is the sword of the Spirit. (Eph. 6:17.)

Again Paul says: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). But no one can accuse Paul of inconsistency, for he adds: "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). This is exactly in accord with our Saviour's words: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4, 5).

Peter also bears the same testimony. He says: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1 Peter 1:22). God's law is the truth (Ps. 119:142), and to purify is to cleanse from guilt or defilement, to sanctify. So Peter's sentence is that we are sanctified by obeying the truth; but he adds that this is done "through the Spirit." Sanctification, then, is the result of obedience; but as obedience is not simply a momentary act, but the work of a lifetime, it follows that sanctification is not an instantaneous, but a progressive work. A man is justified as soon as he exercises true faith in Christ; but the work of sanctification goes on as long as there is any truth for him to obey. And since a man, after he has been justified by faith, would fall into condemnation if he should refuse to do any duty that was presented to him, and can only retain his state of justification by continuing in obedience to the law, *it may be said that sanctification is but continued justification.* Each new duty only makes the performance of others possible, and so "the path of the just is as the shining light that

shines more and more unto the perfect day.”

“Faith without works is dead;” and on the other hand, *obedience without faith is impossible*, as is shown by our Saviour’s words in John 15:4, 5; also by the words of Paul. “They that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:8). The man who is destitute of faith in Christ cannot keep the law, or do any act that is really good. In our best efforts there is so much imperfection, that but for the continual imputation of Christ’s righteousness to make up for our deficiencies, we should be lost. The best that we alone can do is bad. Without faith it is impossible to please God. (Heb. 11:6). And thus we see the force of the words: “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

“Where is boasting, then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27). The redeemed saint will have no cause for boasting over the lost sinner. True, the law, when applied to their lives, reports perfection in the one case, and only sin in the other; but the saint cannot boast, for without Christ he would have been nothing. If Christ had not put his own righteousness upon him, he would be in as hopeless a condition as the sinner. And to all eternity the redeemed host will join with the heavenly choir in saying, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing” (Rev. 5:12).

“That no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:29, 30).

“Now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer. 23:6).

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<sup>i</sup> Italic emphasis has been added to this article, which was used for personal study. D. Peters