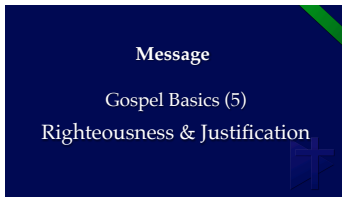


# Righteousness / Justice

November 2018



## Opening

Continuing series on the words of the Gospel. If we better understand the words then we will better get the message of the Gospel. Previous 4 messages in series are all available on church website as both text and audio in series ‘Grasping the Gospel’

This week’s word comes in English as two terms: ‘Justice and Righteousness’. They are a key component of the Gospel. As my grammar here suggests, these two words are about a single reality.

### The Words:

The Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. The Gospel was expressed in Koine Greek -a sort of Greek trade language- by people who wrote in Greek but were often thinking in Hebrew.

Then as you may know, The English language we now speak is largely derived from several Germanic and Latin languages, before we get to the ancient and modern loan words from diverse places. That development has made English a very rich language. However, also creates some confusion in translation and this morning we need to look at one example that undermines Gospel clarity.

In translating a single Gospel concept as found in both Hebrew and Greek, English went on to translate the one idea into 2 different words, one Germanic and the other Latin as is often the case. That is the recipe for confusion. Here is the situation:

<i>Hebrew</i>	צדק	<i>Tsadoq</i>
	&	
<i>Greek</i>	δικαιοσύνη	<i>Dikaiosuni</i>
<i>English</i> = Righteousness / Justice		



To the Hebrew minds who wrote the Bible in Hebrew and then Greek, the terms צדק / *Tsadoq* and δικαιοσύνη / *Dikaiosuni* that we read in English as ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’ were referring to a state of right-relationship between persons. It was about the relationships among people and within society and with God. This was what they meant by ‘righteous justice’.

To bring this home we moderns need to appreciate what Righteousness was not about. Hebrew Righteousness was not about compliance with a code or set of rules outside of a relational context.

The greatest expression of this came from the Hebrew Jesus who summed up the Law of Moses purely in relational terms. When he was asked what the greatest commandment in the Law was: (Matthew 22:37-40)

<sup>37</sup>... “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup>This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup>And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Righteousness and Justice were addressed in the Law of Moses but required love of God and People above mere compliance to specific rules. It simply does not mean anything outside that framework. Right and Just are about how you are relating to others, including God and as lived within society.

### Personal Awareness.

Before we go further with language let me ask. Can you set out in practical terms what constitutes a Right or Just way of life? Can you point to it? Being positive or defined with a prescription is impossible. It all depends.

However:

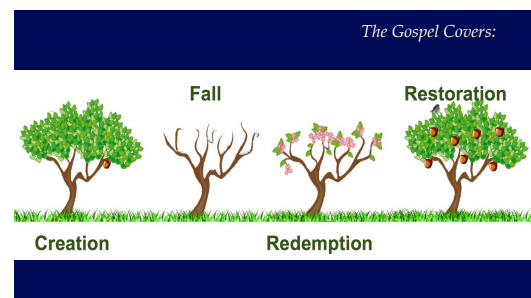
- Can you talk about having been treated un-rightly or suffering injustice?
  - I am sure you can.
- Can you witness to injustice in your circumstances?
- Can you point to injustice in the World?
- Can you recognise when you did not act rightly - Yes/No?

So it would seem that while we cannot easily define what righteousness consists of, we are much better at recognising when something is not right or not just. That goes for all people yet we may not agree.

It also seems easier to recognise Righteousness and Justice when we actually see it happening and being lived out than to describe it in advance? While it was not the point of the story the so-called Good Samaritan showed Righteousness that stood out and was indisputable. It requires love to do right.

### The Gospel

What the Gospel of God’s Salvation is concerned with is making right the relationships that are not right. That is the whole point of God’s involvement with the world and humanity.



Let’s quickly trace the shape of the Gospel:

#### A. Creation

God creates the Heavens and the Earth and it is good. Relationships between God and humanity are right, Relationships within humanity and among the genders are right. There is no shame. Relationships between man and woman, man and the earth, woman and child-birth are right, until-

#### B. Fall

In The Fall, relationships fall into unrighteousness and this unrighteous power described as sin grows to diminish every aspect of humanity and the world.

#### C. Redemption

In Jesus Christ God acts to redeem and save humanity from the power of sin manifest in unrighteousness throughout out every aspect of human existence.

God's mission in Jesus climaxes in him disempowering the biggest manifestation of unrighteousness in death by raising Jesus from the tomb. It was not right that God's righteous one be lost to death so God raised him to life in righteousness.

#### D. Restoration / Transformation

For those who receive Jesus as God's saving power they are transformed to share in the righteous life of Jesus Christ and participate in his resurrection.

So when the Bible and the Gospel talk about righteousness it is about relationships and conduct among persons, including God and within society. Righteousness is the prime concern.

A really important feature of this is Gospel hearted interest in making right what is not right - restoring righteousness where righteousness is needed. That is what Jesus pioneered in his death and resurrection. He took all that was unrighteous upon himself to the depths of the grave as the greatest injustice of all history so that the Father could do the greatest work of right-making justification ever.

That is the message of the Gospel. In Jesus Christ God sets out to make right what is not right in the world he loves, to restore relationships that are broken and trapped in unrighteousness, relationships between God and the world, among people and within people.

When relationships are right the Holy Spirit is pleased to flow and peace, joy and power flow.

So to say it again: The interest of the Bible and the message of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ God was and is at work to make right by right relationships by overcoming and defeating all that would maintain unrighteous.

#### **Distortions**

Now back to the English language and the common distortion of this good news.

The word 'Righteousness' is a noun.

It describes a state of relationship.

**Q:** How do you describe that as a process or action?

What form can the word 'right' take to describe the process of making right?

**A:** My best technical answer would be: 'Rectify'.

		<i>Terms</i>
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	&	
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'Rectify' is not used in the English Bible, instead when the Greek describes God's work of 'making right' to restore righteousness the English switches from Germanic to Latin roots and talks about 'Justification'. God's right-acting and right-making activity is related to Justice.

That creates a confusion that is not in the Greek δικαιοσύνη / *Dikaiousuni*.

Remember, the Hebrew mind of the Bible is concerned with right-relationships and seeks God's saving action to make the relationships right, to restore them to rightness.

When the modern English-speaking mind thinks of Justice it departs from the Hebrew mind and the Bible's vision of righteousness at cost to the Gospel.

Let me illustrate with an image of Justice in the Western world and ask if this represents the Biblical Righteousness I have been describing?

The big difference is the vision of Justice.



The lady here represents Retributive Justice.  
That leads to matching the punishments to the crime.

The Hebrew mind of the Bible and the message of the Gospel sees justice as that which makes right, not that which judges well and applies the right sentence.

This is very important.

It determines:

- The way we view God
- The way we practice Justice
- What we say to others about God.

This is Gospel defining.

Instead of a Pagan Greco-Roman 'Lady Justice' representing Justice we need to understand that word in the Bible as meaning right-making.

It is about restoration of what went wrong.  
Gospel justice is about restoration of relationship not retribution through appropriate punishment.



So when Jesus and those who followed him proclaimed Good News they were saying that God's Righteousness had come.

- In the person of Jesus as the Righteous One, right with God and right with people.
- In his words as words that were right and carried right-making power when believed.
- In his death and resurrection when God began the right-making of the world through Jesus' Resurrection among those who received him.

We may hear this commitment to restoration in Jesus' words (John 12:47):

<sup>47</sup>If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.

Jesus' purpose is to assure the sin bound prodigals of God's welcome embrace and bring the prodigals home not to judge and punish as if that would reconcile them to God or establish Justice.

St Paul understood this and introduced his legal exposition of the Gospel to the Romans by saying: (Romans 1:16-17)

<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

This passage was mystery for me until I understood what was meant by ‘God’s Righteousness’. God’s Righteousness is God’s active saving power to make right and restore relationships available for everyone who believes in Jesus.

Paul is rejoicing that in the acceptance of the Gospel God’s right-making power begins to work as we receive Jesus crucified and risen as God’s saving outreach to us.

This is God’s rectifying Justification at work, taking those who take hold of Jesus and through that right relationship doing his work of transforming Justice.

The Righteous shall live by faith in the one God has provided. There is no other way to be right with God. This is Justification as the Gospel offers it through Jesus Christ.

## Gospel

The gospel in a nutshell then is that God’s saving power to bring us into righteousness is provided in Jesus Christ. That is why we look to him.

If we understand ‘righteousness’ as I have described it, being in right standing with God and people, then being concerned about injustice and unrighteousness among others as well as among us, becomes a core Gospel value. God wants the World restored and extends his right-making power in Jesus Christ. Hallelujah!

I am going to end with a warning.

Righteousness as I have described it should be a core value but is easily lost sight of.

Many people come to God because they want to be happy.

Some preachers say that if you come to God you will be happy-even rich!

*Distractions to Righteousness*

- Legalism
- Libertinism
- Self-interest over Righteousness

<sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

There are three distractions or distortions possible.

- A. The first is **legalism** as practiced by the Pharisees in Jesus’ Day. It defines righteousness as compliance with law and focuses on keeping the rules. This is inadequate and degenerates into petty self-justification. This is not so common today but still around in some Christians.
- B. On the other hand there is the deception of **libertinism** where the deluded think whatever they do is OK because the rules don’t matter and God has set us free. That fits well with the Epicurean spirit of this age. This is what took hold in Corinth and thinks freedom of conscience assures the righteousness of those involved whatever they do.
- C. I don’t see many hardcore legalists or libertines around. What I do meet is a weak interest in or commitment to righteousness. **Happiness or personal fulfilment** are often given much more priority than righteousness. This reflects our consumerist cultural environment.

The last verse of the Book of Judges may apply today to us in our context today.

<sup>25</sup> In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in *their* own eyes.

The Gospel declares that there is a king today. He is our righteous King -our Melchizedek- and his name is Jesus. Jesus is Lord! God’s right making power is there in his words and by his living spirit at work in us, if we want it that way. If our heart is set on being right and seeing justice.

If however our heart is set on what we want rather than What Jesus would do, we will not listen to his righteous right making words and the Gospel will be denied.

Jesus says to us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:32-35) -

<sup>32</sup>For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup>But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Prayer: