

## § 7. Doctrine of Christ

### Lecture 11

#### Divine Righteousness and the New Perspective on Paul

In our study of the atonement, we've been looking at some of the principal motifs in the New Testament that characterize the atonement wrought by Christ. The first of these, you will remember, was sacrifice. The second is Isaiah's righteous Servant of the Lord. Today we want to bring to a close that section before we turn to the third motif.

We've seen that in Isaiah 52:12 to the end of chapter 53 there appears this enigmatic figure called the Servant of the Lord who suffers innocently and unjustly the punishment for Israel's sins in the place of the people. When we turn to the New Testament, we find that Christian New Testament authors consistently interpret Jesus to be this sin-bearing Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53.

For example, 1 Peter 2:24 says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." echoing clearly the language of Isaiah 53. In light of Isaiah 53, texts like 1 Corinthians 15:3 which say that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures" become pregnant with meaning. Taken in isolation, a text like this - "Christ died for our sins" - is ambiguous in what it means to "die for sins." But read in the light of Isaiah 53, it takes on deep meaning. It says that Christ, the Messiah, died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures – the Old Testament. There simply is no other passage in the Jewish Scriptures (apart from Isaiah 53) that could be construed as even remotely about the Messiah's dying for people's sins. What that means is that the expression "died for our sins" refers to substitutionary, punitive suffering. This meaning of the word "for" (translated by the word "for" in 1 Corinthians 15:3) is ambiguous in itself. It is the Greek word *hyper* which in and of itself doesn't tell you exactly what "for" means. But this, as I say, takes on this deeper significance in light of Isaiah 53. We see that it is referring to the substitutionary suffering of Christ. This meaning of "for" is made clear by other New Testament expressions like Romans 4:25 where it says Jesus was "delivered up for our trespasses." Here the word "for" translates a different Greek word *dia* followed by the accusative case. In this case the word "for" means "on account of." The words "delivered up" and "for our trespasses" again echo Isaiah 53:7-8. So being delivered up for our trespasses – on account of our trespasses – indicates substitutionary, punitive suffering.

This is also clear in Mark 10:45, the famous ransom saying, where Jesus says "the Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." In this verse, the word "for" translates yet another Greek preposition *anti* which means "instead of" or "in the place of" or "in

exchange of.” We can see that, in light of Isaiah 53, to say that Christ died for our sins takes on a deep meaning of substitutionary, punitive suffering.<sup>1</sup>

This is also clear, I think, in 2 Corinthians 5:21 where Paul says, “For our sake he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This verse reflects in all of its parts Isaiah 53. The expression “him who knew no sin” recalls Isaiah 53:9, 11 where it says “the righteous one, my servant,” in whose mouth was no deceit. The phrase “for our sake he made him to be sin” recalls verse 6 of Isaiah 53: “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The expression “in him we might become the righteousness of God” recalls verse 11 of Isaiah 53: “the righteous one, my servant, [shall] make the many to be accounted righteous.” I think you can see that in 2 Corinthians 5:21 you have the echoes of Isaiah 53 with respect to Christ. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Once again, there is no other Old Testament passage that even remotely approaches the content of this sentence in 2 Corinthians 5:21.

In summary, the New Testament authors, following Jesus’ own self-understanding as expressed in his words at the Last Supper, saw Christ as the suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53, who suffered in the place of sinners, bearing the punishment that they deserved so that they might be in turn reconciled to God.

Let’s go on to our third important motif concerning the atonement – one that is prominent in Paul’s letters. This is divine justice or righteousness.

We are interested here, not primarily in Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith, since that concerns, not the atonement itself, but rather the appropriation of the benefits of the atonement. We want to inquire about the role of divine justice or righteousness in the act of atonement. Paul’s exposition of the way in which Christ’s death achieves reconciliation with God is suffused with forensic terminology (or judicial terminology) that is rooted in Jewish notions of law and justice.

In the Old Testament, God is addressed with the legal title “Judge” and he acts righteously in that capacity. In Genesis 18:25, Abraham says to the Lord, “Shall not the Judge of all the Earth do right?” Of course the answer is yes, he will. Moreover, the God of the Old Testament is not merely the Judge; he is also the lawgiver. He is both the giver of the law and the Judge. The heart of Old Testament Judaism was the divine Torah (or law) given by God to his people. This governed all of life and man’s relationship to God. Even the notion of a covenant in the Old Testament is the notion of a legal contract between God and man.

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<sup>1</sup> 5:13

It is very interesting to notice how often Old Testament writers actually prefer to use legal analogies and imagery when they are referring to what God does. To pick out just one example of several, Micah 6.1-2. Here is what the prophet says:

Hear what the Lord says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

Here God presents himself as having a legal controversy with the people of Israel and he calls upon them to plead their case – to present their case – before him.<sup>2</sup> He calls upon the mountains to bear witness to the trial to which he calls Israel.

According to Leon Morris, a biblical scholar, the use of legal categories with respect to God in the Old Testament is “is frequent, so frequent indeed that it is plain that it corresponds to something deep-seated in Hebrew thinking. Law and the Lord went together.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, it would be difficult, I think, to find a religion which is more wedded to legal categories than Old Testament Judaism.

So when you turn to the New Testament you find that it is filled with judicial language reflective of its Jewish background. Listen to how Paul blends both cultic (that is to say, liturgical or ritual language) with judicial language in characterizing Christ’s death. This is from Romans 3:21-26. Paul says,

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

You notice that this translation that I’ve read alternates between righteousness terminology and justice terminology. They actually translate the same word or cognates of the same root which is *dikaioayne* (which means either righteousness or justice).

You could have used righteousness terminology throughout this passage by adopting Paul’s expression from Romans 4 about “reckoning righteousness” so that instead of “justify” you would read something like this: “they are now reckoned righteous by his

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<sup>2</sup> 10:26

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1983), p.181.

grace.” On the other hand, if you wanted to, you could substitute justice terminology throughout and that would help to make clear the wordplay or pun that Paul has in verse 26 where he says it was to prove at the present time that he himself is “just and he justifies” the one who has faith in Jesus. God is both “just and the justifier.”

Classically, there has been a debate over whether or not the expression *dikaiosune theou* (the righteousness of God) refers to an attribute of God or to the righteousness that he reckons to believers. Is the righteousness of God a property of God himself, akin to, say, his eternity, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience? Or is the righteousness of God something that he bestows upon people in Christ when he reckons righteousness to them? I think it is pretty clear that the expression “the righteousness of God” is multivalent.<sup>4</sup> That is to say it has multiple meanings. For example, when Paul speaks of the righteousness of God through faith, it is clearly referring to reckoned righteousness because God’s attributes are not through faith. God’s attributes exist objectively, independently whether anyone knows about them or not. So when Paul speaks of the righteousness of God through faith he is talking about the righteousness which God reckons to us on the basis of faith. On the other hand, just as clearly, I think, when Paul says “he himself is righteous” that clearly indicates a property that God has. God is righteous. This is part of the moral character of God.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I don’t see how that is a property of God. I see how he bestows it on people. You can be justified but without that reconciliation the justification would really go nowhere. Is that appropriate to say? For example, if somebody gave you a bank account with a million dollars in it but you didn’t have the ability to access that account, it would do nothing.

*Dr. Craig:* I think the issue you are raising is a good one, and it is a matter of controversy. Actually, people that are in the Reformed tradition (the Calvinist tradition) I think would tend to disagree with you. They would say that if God has redeemed or justified the elect through the sacrifice of Christ then there is an unbroken chain between that act and their ultimate salvation. That is why the Reformed believe that Christ only died for the elect because you cannot have an inefficacious death of Christ. Therefore Christ really did not die for the non-elect. Otherwise it would be inexplicable why they are not redeemed. On the other hand, Lutherans and other Arminian types would say that your point is quite right. Christ’s death can be sufficient to cover everyone’s sins – he died for everyone – but there needs to be some appropriation of that atoning death. Otherwise, it is not efficacious for people. We can talk about that later on, but I don’t think that it is germane to the point that I am wanting to make right now, and that is that

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the expression “the righteousness of God” is, as I think, multivalent. It can refer either to a property God has (like his holiness and goodness) – God is righteous even before human beings are created, I would say. But then it is also this righteousness that is given or reckoned to those who have faith in him. So it is not an either-or, it is a both-and, I am suggesting.

*Student:* Continuing with the earlier metaphor, it is like a righteousness of God is his attribute, and the appropriation to the believer is through faith. So faith is the accessing process to get the righteousness. Does that make sense?

*Dr. Craig:* I think so. If we think that because God is righteous in and of himself objectively, he can then reckon to us righteousness. Then we have the property of being righteous. This is something that Paul says is reckoned to those who have faith in Christ. There is a righteousness of God through faith.

*Student:* Faith depends on the individual that wanted to be reckoned.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, although again, as I say, Reformed (Calvinistic) theologians would say that that faith is itself a gift of God. It is not something you do. They would say in a sense it is all of God. But that is not the point that I want to make. I don’t want to divide the brethren at this point! On the contrary, to reconcile is saying that both of these views are proper understandings of God’s righteousness, and both of them appear in this very passage.<sup>5</sup>

## **END DISCUSSION**

More recently, on the contemporary scene, a new debate about the expression “the righteousness of God” has arisen as a result of the so-called “new perspective on Paul.” This new perspective on Paul construes God’s righteousness in terms of his covenant faithfulness – his faithfulness to the covenant that he has made with Israel. On this view, when the Scriptures speak of the righteousness of God, what they really mean is God’s faithfulness to his covenant.

If you adopt this sort of reductive analysis of God’s righteousness – that it just means covenant faithfulness – then this is going to radically impact your doctrine of the atonement because then justification will be about God’s reckoning covenant faithfulness to you, not moral righteousness. He reckons to you faithfulness to the covenant. It seems to me that that is dubious as to whether or not it even makes sense. What does it mean to reckon covenant faithfulness to someone? Moreover, it seems that on the basis of what Paul says that would be insufficient for salvation. Look at Philippians 3:6-9 where Paul talks about his life as a faithful Jew prior to becoming a believer in Christ. He says,

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<sup>5</sup> 20:08

as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith;

Here Paul says that as a Jew he was faithful to the covenant. He says, “As to righteousness under the law I was blameless.” That is what he says. If anyone could say he exhibited covenant faithfulness, it was the pre-Christian Paul. Yet he said *I regard that as dung now compared to the righteousness that I have in Christ*. Merely reckoning to us faithfulness to the covenant wouldn’t suffice for salvation. Paul already had that, and he said it availed for nothing.

Moreover, this reductionistic understanding of the righteousness of God has been exposed now as fallacious through the work of writers like Charles Lee Irons in his book *The Righteousness of God*. Irons does a lexicographical study of this phrase in the Hebrew Old Testament, in the Greek Old Testament, in Greek literature outside the Bible, and finally in the New Testament and shows that never does the phrase “righteousness of God” mean the faithfulness of God. I think that the implausibility of such a reductionistic understanding of God’s righteousness can be very clearly seen by just asking yourself: what is the opposite of righteousness? That is to say, what is unrighteousness? What is that said to be? Unrighteousness is not unfaithfulness, but rather, as Paul says in Romans 1:18, it is wickedness and ungodliness. He says in Romans 1:18 that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of man who by their wickedness suppress the truth. Faithlessness is just one of many sins that go to make up ungodliness and wickedness. In Romans 1 Paul gives a whole litany of sins that characterize human iniquity and wickedness and one of those is faithlessness, interestingly enough.<sup>6</sup>

Righteousness then is a general moral property which entails faithfulness but it isn’t reducible to faithfulness. There is a lot more to righteousness than just faithfulness. Righteousness entails faithfulness because it would be wrong to break your word. If you are a righteous person you keep your word. So God, being righteous, will be faithful to his covenant. But righteousness is not reducible to faithfulness.

Moreover, if you do reduce God’s righteousness to his faithfulness to the covenant then it makes no sense at all to speak of God’s relationship to Gentiles, because the Gentiles stand outside the covenant with Israel. If unrighteousness means unfaithfulness to the

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<sup>6</sup> 25:08

covenant, then the Gentiles cannot be said to be unrighteous, because they are not unfaithful to the covenant, they are not part of the covenant! Yet Paul expressly says in Romans 1-3 that the Gentiles are unrighteous and therefore stand condemned before God. Nor could a Gentile like Job be said to be righteous, because Job was not part of the covenant in the Old Testament. He was a Gentile. Yet God calls him “my righteous servant, Job.”

It seems to me that this claim that the righteousness of God is to be understood as his faithfulness to his covenant is really quite hopeless. It is unjustified lexicographically and moreover it really makes nonsense of several of the factors that I mentioned.

Fortunately, I am pleased to report, the proponents of the new perspective have more recently now backed away from their overly simplistic claims about righteousness being the same as faithfulness to the covenant. For example, James D. G. Dunn (one of the principal proponents of the new perspective), acknowledges in response to his critics that the Hebrew concept of righteousness cannot be reduced to covenant faithfulness or to salvation. He says that the righteousness language in the Hebrew Scriptures also involves punitive divine justice, according to which righteousness is “understood as measured by a norm, right order, or that which is morally right,” with the qualification that “the norm is not seen as some abstract ideal. . . , but rather as a norm concretised in relation” between God and creatures.<sup>7</sup>

So righteousness language not only refers to God’s salvation of Israel when he vindicates Israel against her enemies, but it also means the condemnation of those enemies and judgment upon them. As one author, I think, put it very effectively, punitive justice is the backside of God’s righteousness. Yes, God’s righteousness does save and vindicate Israel, but the backside of that is that the enemies of Israel are thereby judged and condemned.

When we come to the book of Romans, says Dunn, “That God’s righteousness towards the peoples he has created includes wrath and judgment as well as faithfulness and salvation is clearly implicit in the sequences Rom. 1.16-18 and 3.3-6”<sup>8</sup> where it talks about the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men. He says those who deny that *dikaiosyne* is a forensic term pay insufficient attention to Roman 4:4-5. Let’s read those very interesting verses:

Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

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<sup>7</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective: whence, what and whither?” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 63-64

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-65.

Notice that phrase, “him who justifies the ungodly.”<sup>9</sup> Dunn says here “the forensic background is clear in the allusion to the legal impropriety of a judge ‘justifying the ungodly.’<sup>10</sup>” In fact this is exactly what the Old Testament says God will not do! He will by no means clear the guilty. He will not justify the ungodly. This is what the corrupt judge does. Yet here God is said to justify the ungodly. Dunn says here, “again the thought is entirely of attributing a righteous status to one who is unrighteous.”<sup>11</sup> (namely, Abraham). You have here judicial forensic terminology that shows that righteousness involves not only salvation and faithfulness, but it also involves punitive justice and condemnation of the unrighteous.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Is there some kind of agenda behind this new perspective that is trying to be pushed somehow? Or is this just an attempt to add a new reading of Paul’s theology?

*Dr. Craig:* I do think it is a new reading of Paul’s theology. It has radical implications. Whether there is an agenda, I’d hate to try to psychoanalyze the proponents of this perspective. I do think that sometimes they are very opposed to traditional Reformation doctrine with regard to justification and atonement. This is one way to try to escape Luther’s snatches by reinterpreting the righteousness of God to mean not a normative concept which condemns as well as justifies, but to reinterpret it as just God as faithful – God will keep true to his covenant and his promises. Fortunately, I think through the work of people like Charles Irons this reinterpretation has now been really exposed as untenable.

*Student:* I thought of the example that Jesus took with the rich young ruler where his righteousness is his own quality but Jesus wanted him to be relational in righteousness. Can we say that it is an emotional quotient (righteousness in relational terms) versus this IQ of “I understand what righteousness is and I attained it” kind of thing?

*Dr. Craig:* I wouldn’t want to put it that way. I like your example of the rich young ruler who says *all of these commandments I have kept since my youth*. Here was a man who was faithful to the covenant, and yet Jesus said he fell short of the Kingdom of God. I think that is a good point. But we must not interpret this as some sort of emotional, relational thing. It is a legal thing. It is a judicial thing. That is what is so novel about the Reformers’ doctrine. God legally declares us acquitted – not guilty. It is like a legal pardon. This doesn’t immediately affect the moral character of the person pardoned. Think of a criminal who has been pardoned by the President. When he is pardoned his crime is gone, it is expiated, he no longer has to pay the punishment. But he doesn’t suddenly become a good and virtuous person. That is going to take time and effort for

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<sup>9</sup> 30:09

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

him to reform morally. But the pardon is a legal act whereby his guilt is canceled and his debt is canceled. That is what the righteousness of God does in Paul's thinking. It is a legal or forensic declaration of God that this person is acquitted.<sup>12</sup>

*Student:* I understand Catholics have a different view. They like to call it a “legal fiction” - that view. They think that the justification is God infusing righteousness into the person. Can you comment on that?

*Dr. Craig:* I wasn't going to mention that but since you brought it up. In contrast to the Reformers' view that justification is a forensic or judicial declaration, the traditional Catholic view is that God actually infuses into you the moral property of righteousness. It actually does make you become a virtuous person. This is not simply a legal act; it is something that God actually infuses into you and thereby transforms you. The Reformers of course have a doctrine of the transformation of the life but that is called sanctification. They would say justification is a legal forensic act whereby you are declared righteous before God's bar of justice, but then through the work of the Holy Spirit – as you walk in the Spirit and are conformed in the image of Christ – you are sanctified and become more and more like what you are declared to be in Christ. You are quite right. This is a very different view than the Catholic view.

*Student:* Along the same lines, I was thinking about this idea of the legal fiction and the pardon that a criminal can get, say from the President or from a judge, is not the same thing as being declared righteous. Even when we acquit a criminal, we are not declaring them innocent; we are saying that they don't meet the standards that requires us to declare them guilty. So it is a difference when like Casey Anthony got off from killing her daughter. The court did not say she did not kill her daughter. They said that they didn't have evidence to prove her guilt. So it is a different thing to declare us righteous versus to pardon us for something that we did.

*Dr. Craig:* Boy, you've raised a whole Pandora's box here and I am out of time! We will have to come back to this issue later on.

**END DISCUSSION<sup>13</sup>**

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<sup>12</sup> 35:00

<sup>13</sup> Total Running Time: 38:09 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)