

Righteousness / Sanctification is a Gift From God, Not the Result of Our Efforts to Be Good

There appear to be two forms of righteousness given to us by God. First, we are “credited” with being righteousness as a part of our entrance into the new life (seen especially in Rom.4). This would be on the order of David's prayer, asking God to “renew a righteous spirit within me.” Secondly, God purifies as in an on-going process of sanctification, again as a gift to us, not as a result of our efforts. Understanding this is very important, because many Christians assume that once they are saved, it is up to them to become pure through willpower and self-effort (albeit, aided by the Spirit's power). In truth, God is much more actively involved in purifying our soul, by writing His laws on our heart, little by little over time. This is how we grow in righteousness.

The following verses emphasize God's action in regard to both forms of righteousness.

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Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled (Mt.5:6)

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Mt:6:33)

Father, sanctify them in the truth (Jn.17:17)

Much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ (Rom.5:17)

If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom.8:13)

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith (Rom.9:30)

For with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation (Rom.10:10).

By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption (1Cor.1:30)

If righteousness comes through keeping the Law, then Christ died needlessly (Gal.2:21)

You have put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph.4:24)

So that He might sanctify His church, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (Eph.5:26)

Having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ (Phil.1:11)

That I may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil.3:9)

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you (1Thess.5:23)

For God has destined you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and by faith in the truth (2Thess.2:13)

Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession (Titus.2:14)

By the sanctifying work of the Spirit (1Pet.1:2)

He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1Jn.1:9)

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Clearly, there is a part for us to do as well. Grace is not opposed to effort; it is only opposed to trying to earn what is freely given. There are many verses that tell us to “produce fruit” or to “cleanse ourselves” from sin. However, if we take these to be absolute commands that we must accomplish on our own, then we have missed the greater context of the New Testament which states emphatically, over and over, that we are incapable of any righteousness apart from the active work of God. And we are equally in error if we limit God's involvement to simply that of supplying the “power” to accomplish these tasks.

Far too often, Christians assume that the Spirit's primary task is to give us the strength to carry out the demands of the law and other biblical principles. To put this in theological terms, the New Covenant is different from the Old Covenant, in that God has given us the ability to do what we could not do before. In practical terms, this means that if we try hard to do what we are supposed to do, God will give us the strength to do it.

Unfortunately, there is almost no evidence that this is actually the case. First, this approach to victorious life is nowhere spelled out in Scripture. Second, if it were true, then there should be no such thing as burn out from ministry. Instead, all that effort to do the right things would be rewarded by God stepping in to see to it that we had the energy to finish the work. Similarly, there would be no relapse among Christians who were trying hard to recover from addiction and work their program. Nor would we ever open the Bible for the umpteenth time and feel no life there. According to the prevailing theory of the Spirit's work, He should have entered into all of these situations and provided the necessary power to complete what was begun. And finally, non-Christians quite often report doing things that seemed beyond their capacity – they have no idea how they did what they did at the time. So how are we to know, when we actually do accomplish something good, that it was God at work in us rather than our own human effort? How would we know where our strength left off and God's began?

No, the New Covenant is not about external compliance at all the way the Old Covenant was. Instead, an entirely new approach to righteousness has been inaugurated. Rather than spelling out what to do (or not do) and then encouraging us and strengthening us to do the right things, God has opted for changing what is inside us, making us more righteous, so that goodness comes out of us because of who we are, not because

we know the right things to do.

Righteousness is not just a kind of behavior – it is a condition of the heart. That is why learning how to receive God's righteousness into our life is so important, and why there are so many verses that speak of this as a gift instead of something we crank out. So how do we received this gift? That is what Christian formation is all about!