

Righteous

One of the terms in Romans that plays an important role is the word group that is translated, “right,” “righteous,” “righteousness,” “just,” “justify,” or “justification.” These terms are found 63 times in Romans. As this paper will point out, our modern definition of the above-mentioned words is not the same as the original understanding and, as a result, our interpretation of these words in their biblical context has lost the intended richness. While recognizing there is much more to this word group than can be discussed in this short document, this document is an attempt to give some help in the understanding of the meaning of the phrases “righteousness of God” and “reckoned as righteous.” Although this document will mostly use the terms “righteous” or “righteousness;” the words “just,” “justify,” “justified,” and “justification” when speaking of God or of people’s standing before God, all carry aspects of this same basic meaning.

This document will show that biblical righteousness is primarily about covenant relationship and covenant faithfulness. Two quotes from Onesti and Brauch from their article “*Righteousness, Righteousness of God*” in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters (pg. 828) are helpful in this discussion. “The concept of righteousness in the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the relational aspect of God and humanity in the context of a covenant.” Later they state, “Usually the word suggests Yahweh’s saving acts as evidence of God’s faithfulness to the covenant.” This understanding is supported by Marshall’s statement (pg. 47), “For this reason, righteousness language frequently appears in covenant making contexts, for ‘covenant’ was Israel’s term for a **committed relationship**.” Notice the emphasis on “relational,” “covenant,” and “faithfulness.” These are some of the aspects of these words in their original context that we often miss.

Referring to the Hebrew word for “righteousness” is important because Paul quoted from OT texts to make his point in Romans. For example, Paul quoted from Habakkuk 2:3f in Romans 1:17 and from Genesis 15:6 in Romans 4:3 to make the point that people are declared righteous on the basis of faith rather than works. Paul was basing his understanding of righteous on the original Hebrew understanding of this concept.

Genesis 15 helps us understand the concept of righteousness and the connection between righteousness and covenant. God initiated, set in place a promise/covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12 and, for the most part, Abraham had responded to God’s call with amazing faith. However, at the beginning of chapter 15, Abraham was afraid that the promises God had made in Genesis 12 would not come about because God had not yet given him the promised heir.

In response to Abraham’s fear, God restated the promise and Abraham responded in trust (“he believed”) that God would do the impossible (what he and Sarah could not do) and give Sarah and him (two dead people in terms of fertility) a son. This statement about Abraham’s response is not an indication that he had not trusted God in the past. The word “believed” in this text is in a form that gives the sense of repeated action. In other words, this was a renewed response of Abraham to the covenant he already had with God. Abraham’s reiterated trust in the covenant elicited a response from God that was intended to relieve Abraham’s fear. The text says God reckoned Abraham’s trust as righteousness. This was not an expression of something new

between God and Abraham but an affirmation that the covenant that was first established in Genesis 12 was working properly. It may also be understood as an act that formalized the covenant made in Genesis 12.

There is more to the story that must be included in order to have a Hebrew understanding of the concept of righteousness. Abraham still desired more assurance from God and requested more confirmation (15:8). In response to Abraham's fear, God asked Abraham to cut five animals in two. God then walked between the pieces of sacrificed animals by Himself in the form of a flaming torch stating something like, "May the same thing happen to me (God) if I do not keep my covenant." Normally two parties walked between those pieces of animals indicating they both had obligations in the covenant. But God and Abraham both knew neither Abraham nor Abraham's descendants could faithfully perform any covenant obligations that might be placed upon them. So God visibly demonstrated to Abraham that He, and He alone, would be the guarantor of the covenant. This connection between "reckoned righteous" and affirming a promise is important to understanding righteousness.

"While the OT uses righteousness terminology in numerous contexts involving all areas of life, the touchstone of righteousness is Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh. It is based on the standard of God's covenant faithfulness. Righteousness is not primarily an ethical quality; rather it characterizes the character or action of God who deals rightly within a covenant relationship and who established how others are to act within that relationship (Onesti and Brauch, pg. 829)."

Not only did Israel experience God's righteousness when God made or affirmed a promise/covenant, Israel experienced God's righteousness in all of His actions. For example, when God gave them victories over their enemies He was not just doing something good for Israel. He was being faithful to his covenant. God's jealousy is not some arbitrary emotion that erupts in wrath. God's jealous actions are all about either promoting things that restore life back to creation or stopping things that hinder those purposes.

What happened between God and Abraham in Genesis 15 needs to be considered in this context of covenant making. "Reckoned" is a bookkeeping term that gives the picture of God writing in Abraham's ledger, "I affirm that I have given to you (Abraham) the status of being my covenant partner" (reckoned righteousness).

Israel was described as acting justly when they helped the oppressed, showed kindness toward their neighbor, and etc (or unjustly when not doing so). But to be "just" their actions had to be expressions of their faithfulness to God and the covenant. It was to be an expression of who they were in their being (in their heart) not just an outward behavior with the intent of appeasing an angry vengeful god.

Over time, the relational promise-keeping understanding of "justice" and "righteousness" language from the Hebrew Scriptures was replaced with retribution, courtroom images from Roman law. In the Hebrew Scriptures; justice, faithfulness, and mercy are deeply interrelated. While contemporary Western views derived from Roman legal theory pit justice over against mercy. Notice the synonymous way the terms justice, mercy, love, salvation, faithfulness, and righteous are used in describing God's

actions (Isa 30:18; Psalm 33:5; Psalm 36:10; 40:11; 85:10; 89:14; 119:149, 156; 143:11,12).

This unbiblical shift in meaning began with the Latin Vulgate (5th century) and previous Latin NT manuscripts. From that time forward, “righteousness” was associated with a courtroom scene where a sinner stood before God’s tribunal. Later the Reformers (17th century) placed more emphasis on the individual and adopted more of a Greek understanding of righteousness. Focus was placed on a universal law to be kept rather than a covenant relationship people are called to faithfully live within. God’s justice was viewed as distinct from His love and mercy with His justice being expressed through punishment for law breaking. God was primarily a judge who made up laws for the purpose of testing people’s faithfulness with a desire to punish them if they stepped outside the line. In a now common way of understanding the meaning of Jesus’ death (based on Roman legal theory), Jesus’ death satisfied a now supposed legal punishment required by a universal law of recompense assumed to have been set in place by God. Because the concept of covenant relationship was set aside in favor of a necessary legal retribution, God’s exercise of “justice” came to look like a vengeful God having to beat and kill someone—Jesus—in order fully to deplete God’s anger toward humanity for its sin. This portrayal of a vengeful, violent God is in keeping with pagan views of the gods from the ancient world; it is not only unbiblical, it is the opposite of the non-violent, forgiving, self-sacrificing God we encounter in Jesus. So, God was either an angry God to be appeased, or as Calvinism says, God arbitrarily predetermined, like a puppet master, who God would give his love to and whom He would pour out His wrath on.

The ancient world understood covenant more like we view a marriage. Not the modern marriage that includes a contract involving things like a financial pre-nuptial agreement, but a marriage where people commit themselves to love, serve, and forgive in order to maintain the covenant. Imagine the relational harm that would come if we described roles in marriage relationships with the images of a judge, defendant, and prosecutor.

When God said to Adam that if he ate from the tree of life he would die, this was not some arbitrary sin/punishment statement. Humankind was created in the image of God with the purpose of reflecting the glory of the God of life. Sin missed that mark and instead distorted the image of God. Death was the natural promised consequence of sin (not reflecting the glory of the God of life). Notice the following words from the Apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon* 1:12-16.

“Do not invite death by the error of your life, or bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal. But the ungodly by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away and made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his company.”

God is the creator of life. Humankind created and made a covenant with death. Death is foreign to God's purposes. So, when Adam brought death into the world, God made a covenant with the world to destroy sin and its consequences of death. God's covenant (His righteousness) with the world is a loving commitment to restore the world back to its original purpose. In order to do that, God had to destroy the consequences of sin. He had to destroy death. The ultimate expression to this point of His faithfulness is seen in the cross. In that event God allowed Jesus to suffer the consequences of our covenant with death. This was God's wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18ff) that flew in the face of human wisdom. It was in this way God destroyed the consequences of sin, which is death. This was God's faithfulness (righteousness) in keeping the covenant to restore His creation.

Along with the above view of God's justice was a "legal fiction" theory to explain "reckoned righteous." This concept imagines a courtroom scene where a defendant is judged to be guilty but then someone comes along and stamps "not guilty" on the person's legal file. The guilty party is deemed righteous even though he/she is not. It is described as "legal fiction" because it portrays an untrue situation, that of a guilty person being made what he/she is not, an innocent person. Being 'reckoned as righteous' has to do with God counting one a covenant partner. It does not carry any simplistic idea of being morally perfect.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to do is to show that God's righteousness is not simply about His character of always doing what is right, although He does always do what is right. In the OT God's righteousness is associated with His "steadfast love" (Isa. 16:5; Psalm 89:14) and salvation (Psalm 85:7-13). "Thus God's righteousness may be rendered as "saving deed" or "relation-restoring love (Onesti and Brauch, pg. 836)." God's righteousness was revealed (Rom. 1:17) when, because of His faithfulness in keeping covenant, He acted with saving, relation-restoring love by sending Jesus into the world to live and die, and then raised Jesus from the dead removing the power of sin that alienated humanity from God.

Being reckoned righteous is not about being declared something that is not true (morally righteous). "It declares (affirms) the restoration of the divine-human relationship through what Christ did by his death (Onesti and Brauch, pg. 836)." Onesti and Brauch later state:

"The righteousness of God is God's redemptive saving act. God's saving action has always been at work, as evidenced in the OT, but has now been clearly revealed in the Christ event. For those who believe in Christ, the reality and power of sin have been put aside. God's new created order, which is the removal of the alienation of sin, has been brought into being. To be reckoned or declared righteous is neither a juridical act nor an ontological transformation (being given the essence of God), but a state of being restored to right relationship with God because the alienating reality of sin has been set aside."

Those who are “reckoned righteous” are those whom God declares Himself to be in relationship with. It is God’s declaration, based completely from his own relationship-creating love. For God to declare someone righteous is for God to make someone a covenant partner with Himself. That relationship, established by God at the cross, brings the expected give-and-take responses of growing together in love and trust.