

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

¹⁵ “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

¹⁷ “But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

¹⁹ “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:11-21)

What does Righteousness Look Like?

Do you ever wish that you could’ve known some of the great heroes of faith? Guys like Abraham and Moses and John? Do you ever imagine meeting those saints in heaven? Lots of Christians have. I don’t know how eternal life will really work, but I hope we do get to meet people like Peter and Paul when our time comes. Now we probably have family and friends in heaven who we will want to see first, but it wouldn’t surprise me if we’re look forward to talking with those great believers of the past. But there’s a funny thing about those heroes of faith: the Bible never calls them that. And it generally presents them to us warts and all. The Virgin Mary lost Jesus in Jerusalem. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. The disciples misunderstood Jesus again and again. Those sins and failures do give us pause because it was the heroes of faith who committed them. When we consider that most of the best examples we have fall short, it’s natural for us to ask a tough question: **what does righteousness look like?** What are our lives supposed to look like?

I.

Righteousness looks different than we expect it to. That’s just a reality of life in this world. It can’t be like we’re in heaven already. In our epistle lesson for today, the apostle Paul gives us an example. He wrote about Cephas coming to Antioch and allowing church politics to lead him into a series of unloving actions. Who is Cephas? That’s the apostle Peter, the great leader among the apostles, the author of two New Testament books, a man who eventually gave his life for his faith. But that didn’t make him sinless. The church in Antioch was divided between Gentile believers and Jewish believers. The Jews tended to follow the rules God gave at Mt. Sinai, even though they didn’t have to anymore. They didn’t eat pork. They avoided becoming “unclean.” They were committed to circumcision. That was a requirement for Old Testament Jews. And Jewish Christians wanted to make it – and all the rest of those Jewish practices – mandatory for Gentile Christians. Until the Gentiles fell in line, the Jewish believers refused to eat with them, and probably refused all kinds of other interactions as well.

When Peter first came to Antioch, he didn’t have a problem eating with Gentile Christians. Some years earlier, God had given Peter a vision in which he told him to accept Gentile believers. So he ignored all those old Jewish laws while he was in Antioch. But then some people came from James. This James is not the brother of John. This is the brother of Jesus and the author of the book of James. He was more or less the head pastor of the church in Jerusalem. Now, the fact that these men came “from James” doesn’t necessarily mean there was a conflict between Peter and James. It may just be a way of saying that they came from the big, Jewish congregation in Jerusalem. But they definitely belonged to the group who insisted on all those old

Jewish laws. And Paul says, **“When they arrived, [Peter] began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.”**

Like almost every pastor who has ever lived, St. Peter wanted peace in his congregation. He tried to appease these men by doing what they wanted. And it totally backfired. It made it look like there really was something wrong with those Gentile believers. Now, it would be easy for us to view this through a prism of race relations, and there definitely is a racist aspect to this. But this was also a deeply entrenched religious issue. At the heart of the problem was the belief that being circumcised and obeying all those Old Testament laws earned you heaven – even if you were a Christian. Peter knew better than that, but fear of conflict caused him to give way to false teaching and unchristian practice.

Some hero of faith, huh? But that’s the thing about the great examples of faith that God gives us in the Bible. He shows us people like us – real people with real sins. I tend to call them St. Peter and St. Paul, but they were only saints in the sense that Jesus had taken their sin away. Like you and me, they still had that sin here. They were sinners and saints at the same time. And that is the mystery of being a Christian. You are, right now, righteous in God’s sight. Peter was righteous in God’s sight, even though Paul had to call him out for his hypocrisy! How can that be true?

It’s true because there are two kinds of righteousness. The first kind of righteousness Luther called foreign or alien righteousness. In other words, it’s not our righteousness at all. It belongs to Jesus. And God gave it to us. The Son of God took on human flesh and was born in stable and died on a cross. That God made man, Jesus, lived a truly righteous life. Imagine what that would be like, if you even can. Imagine all the dysfunctions in your family, all the bitter words and selfish actions – and you always dealt with it in perfect love. Imagine always knowing when to insist on the law and when to offer the gospel. Imagine never losing your temper, never being selfish, never saying something you wished you could take back. Jesus was all that and more. For his entire life, he served God perfectly.

Then he died and paid for all of us sinners who never even get close to being righteous. Jesus paid for all the dysfunctions that we bring to our families, for all the bitter words and selfish actions that we are guilty of, for all the times we failed to show love, for all the times we gave in when we should’ve preached the law and were self-righteous when we should’ve preached the gospel, for all the times we lost our temper and said things that can never be unsaid. Jesus died and paid for all those sins and every other sin we’ve ever committed. He died and paid for the sinfulness in our hearts that keeps giving birth to more sin. He paid all that we owe. Then he rose to say that we are forgiven. God simply wipes our sin away.

And when God came to us in the gospel and reached into our hearts and gave us faith, he gave us personally the righteousness of Christ. Now, God only sees Jesus when he looks at us. In God’s mind, we lived when Jesus lived. We died when Jesus died. All our sins are paid for and we are now righteous in God’s sight. That’s true, even while we struggle with our sin here on this earth. Peter was still perfect in God’s sight while he sinned and made those Gentiles question their place in God’s kingdom. You and I are still perfect in God’s sight every time we fail to act in love towards each other. We are perfect because God laid the perfection of Jesus on us. We are righteous because we have that foreign righteousness, that righteousness that came from outside us and really belongs to Jesus. He has covered us with it and now that’s all God sees. And so we will live with him forever.

II.

So that means we don’t need to worry about being righteous here in this life, right? We can do whatever we want because we’re going to heaven either way, so why worry about it at all? That is not what God teaches. And it confuses the two kinds of righteousness. Up to this point, we’ve only talked about one kind. But the other kind is very important, too. The first one, the righteousness of Jesus, you can’t actually see in this life. God sees it covering us, but you and I can’t. Last week, I pointed out that things like kindness to your spouse and caring for your children are part of a Christian life. I also noted that unbelievers do those things, too. So what’s the difference between us and them? That is the other kind of righteousness. **What does righteousness look like? It looks like Christ living in me.**

You see that kind of righteousness in Paul’s words to Peter. He called him out. Paul pointed out that living as a Jew doesn’t get us to heaven. Peter knew that but he wasn’t living according to his faith. I’m sure he didn’t like hearing about his sins. I’m sure that Paul didn’t like pointing it out. But Paul’s willingness to do it is an example of the second kind of righteousness: the righteousness that flows out of our faith and serves our

neighbor. This righteousness doesn't earn anything and it's not perfect, at least not on this side of heaven. But it is real.

To have this second kind of righteousness, you have to understand what Paul says here: no one will be declared righteous from works of the law. Our efforts to be good are not a form of righteousness. Does that seem confusing? I can understand why. But when our goal is to look good, when our goal is to feel good about ourselves, that's not the righteousness of faith. It's ego. That is, in fact, the difference between a life of faith and the good deeds of unbelievers. Most unbelievers do all kinds of things that are good for society. Unbelieving firemen rescue people from burning buildings. Unbelieving police officers protect and serve society at large. Unbelieving social workers help abused children. All those things bring tremendous benefits to our society. But they are not righteousness, at least not the way God sees it, because those people do all those things so that they can feel like they are "good people."

True righteousness is the righteousness of Christ. God lays that on us and then God changes us. Paul says, "**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.**" Jesus died and paid for all the sins of all the world. That was real. It happened. When the Holy Spirit came in the good news of that death and reached into your heart and my heart, we died with Christ. In other words, God did two things. First, when God gave us faith, in that very instant, God applied all that Jesus did to you and me. Our records in heaven were changed and we became perfect – righteous in God's sight. But in that same instant, God put a new person inside us. In other places, Paul calls him the new man and a new creation. God remade us. He planted a believer in our hearts. He planted Christ himself in our hearts to live in us and through us. Every day in everything we face, Jesus dwells in us to give us strength to live a new and holy life.

Paul goes on: "**The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**" What does that mean? First it means that my new life is gift to Jesus. He gave himself for me. He loved me. Faith in that gift drives me to love him and to give myself for him. I do that by living a life of service to God and to the people around me. But it means more than that. It also means that my new life is a life of trust. Just as an example, why would anyone ever call out the sins of another Christian? They almost never thank you for it. It's much easier to say that's none of my business. It's much easier to preserve your friendship by saying nothing. But when sin is winning, it's what that Christian needs most. But there still is a risk. There still could be a cost. So why do it? We do it because we trust in Jesus who tells us to go to our brother or sister when they're trapped in sin. We do it because we trust in Jesus who says that we will be blessed if we follow his plan. We do it because we trust in Jesus even when it seems like his promises aren't coming true. But he died and he rose for us. He will carry us even when living as he calls us to is hard and painful. When we get to heaven, we will see just how blessed we were to follow him.

So what does righteousness look like? It looks like Jesus. It lives like Jesus did in perfect service to God and to our neighbor. But it also looks like an expression of faith. It looks like I am different than I used to be. Now, maybe even the people I love most can't see the difference, most of the time. Sometimes, maybe even I can't see the difference. But Jesus can. He died. He rose. He gave me my faith. Now he lives in me and strengthens me to live for him. That is true for you, too. Trust in Jesus and devote your life to serving God and your neighbor, not to win eternal life. But because eternal life is already yours. Amen.