

# How is a person made right with God?

## Lesson 3

A few years ago in the Dominican Republic I spent my spare time one winter asking people on the street a simple question: Who is a Christian? Most of these people were in one way or another, religious. Very few said that they didn't believe in God, yet their answers revealed a sad ignorance of the gospel message. Most of them answered the question by mentioning some activity or form of conduct. In essence, they said a Christian is someone who doesn't do this or does do that. They were thinking in terms of making themselves good enough to be accepted by God. Sadder still, when I began asking church-going Christians the same question, I realized they were struggling with the same issue. They too were trying to please God by what they did or didn't do.

Is the Gospel something we do or is the Gospel something that has been done for us? We may know the "right" answer, but do we really believe and live by it?

---

## Studying

Galatians 1:1-5

*Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the following questions.*

1. Paul was a Gospel-saturated missionary. In his opening remarks to the Galatians he gives a ringing review of the gospel. Read verse 4 carefully and write down at least three key phrases that capture the meaning of the gospel.
  2. Take each phrase and expand on the meaning of each.
  3. Who is an apostle (vs. 1)? Why do you think Paul started his letter by asserting his authority?
  4. What was happening to these churches that Paul had started? (Read Acts 13 and 14 for background).
  5. Compare this introduction to Paul's other letters. For instance, compare it to his greeting in the Philippians letter. Do you find this one to be "quite chilly" or "red hot"? How so?
- 

## Reading

*Read the following article entitled "A Righteousness Received" and your annotations in the margin.*

## The Gospel

# A Righteousness Received

By Paul Thompson

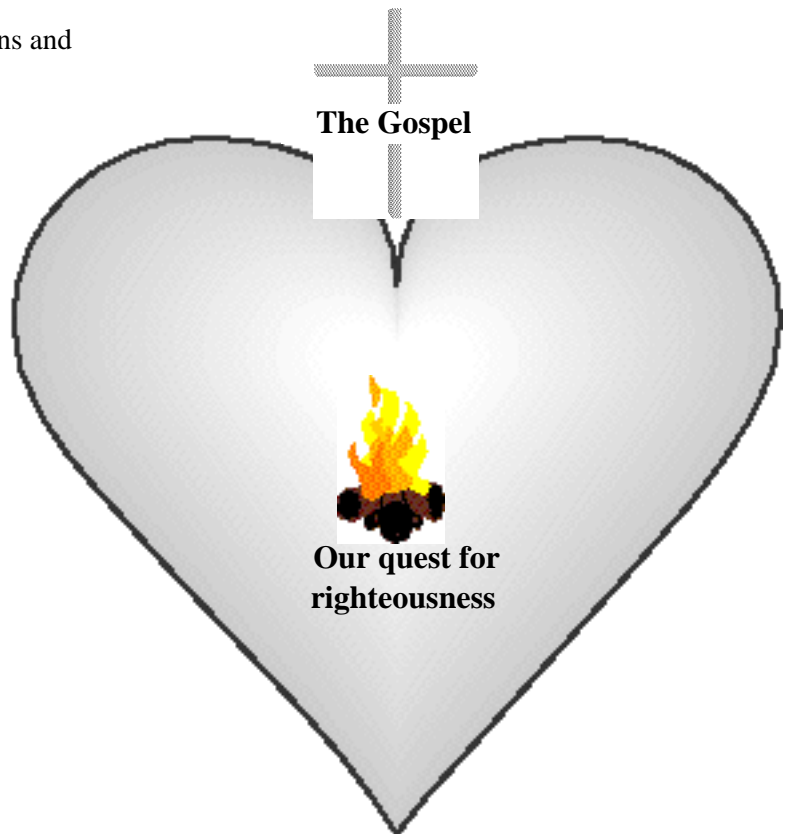
When it comes to the study of the Gospel, I find Christians make two very dangerous assumptions. One is to think that we understand the gospel and therefore don't need to reflect on it. The other is that the Gospel is something for non-Christians that belongs to the ABC's of our faith and therefore we must move beyond the gospel to deeper things.

The fact is that the Gospel is so profound and so complete that there really is nothing else. It is so endlessly wondrous that the angles long endlessly to look into it and meditate on it (I Peter 1:12). If the angles are finding infinite insights and riches in the gospel, then we clearly underrate the gospel if we think it is only for the beginner. The gospel is both milk and meat. Any child can grasp it; in fact, Jesus says that we must become like babes in order to accept it. At the same time, the Gospel is for the mature believer. It is not only the ABC's but it is also the A to Z of our faith. The Gospel is the essential Christian message for entrance into the kingdom of God and it is also the basic truth we are to live by as citizens of that kingdom. We are not only to accept the Gospel for salvation but also our lives are to be guided by the gospel.

Both the letters of Paul to the Romans and the Galatians are centered on the gospel. Both letters were written to Christians. To the Roman believers, Paul is giving a summary statement of the message he believed and preached; and to the Galatians, Paul is writing to Christians who hadn't quite gotten the gospel and were slipping away from it. Paul is attempting to bring these Christians back into the gospel. Christians need the gospel as much as non-Christians do. All kinds of problems plague Christians because they tend to forget and lose the gospel.

Notice on our gospel chart that the cross, the symbol for the gospel, stands outside the heart. The gospel is *extra nos*, which means it is something apart from us. We do not generate the gospel ourselves. It is something given to us.

There is no greater statement of the gospel than Romans 1:17: "*For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed...*" Our word gospel is the Greek word "evangel," which



means an announcement of a historic, life-changing event. Usually an “evangel” was the announcement of the crowning of a new king or of a major military victory. The gospel, then, is good news not good advice. The gospel is not instruction on how to do something, but rather an announcement that something has already been done and has life-changing consequences.

While visiting churches all around the world, I’ve begun to wonder whether evangelicals know what news is. News means that something has happened. Something has been done. What I hear so often from Christian pulpits is advice. Advice is something we have to make happen. News is an announcement that something has happened.

Herein lies a marked difference between religion and Christianity. Every single religion on the face of the earth has essentially the same message summarized by the word “do.” Each has a long list of requirements that must be followed in order to attain peace with God or the gods. Only Christianity is news. Only Christianity proclaims “done.” Jesus Christ has won peace with God. The word “done” is news; the word “do” is advice. The gospel proclaims that something has happened. Salvation has been won. It’s a gift bought by Jesus Christ.

The gift God gives us in the gospel is Christ’s righteousness. Note, we do not give to God “a righteousness,” but in the gospel he gives to us “a righteousness.” Paul says that God has made available to us “a righteousness from God.” This is the essence of Christianity. This is what marks the difference between Christianity and all other religions. We do not reach God by giving “a righteousness” to him, but by receiving “a righteousness” from him.

We are coming now to a crucial juncture in our study of the gospel. In lesson one, we said that Christianity is basically a love affair. We said that salvation is assured not through a series of actions but through a relationship. Christianity is based not upon what we do, or even what we believe, but on how we relate. In our second lesson we saw how we are all struggling for “righteousness” although we seldom use that word for it. We said that everyone has a profound need for a sense of personal worth or value which we defined as a burning fire in our souls. And we said that none of us could find this in ourselves though we desperately try.

Think with me now, because this is the very essence of the gospel. The word righteousness in the Bible brings together two themes: a record and a right. Remember that we talked about righteousness in terms of a history of right actions. If I were to apply for a loan in order to buy a house, I would have to demonstrate that I was “righteous,” that I had a record of paying my bills. That righteous record would then entitle me to a “right relationship” with the loan company. In the same way “righteousness” with God would mean a spotless life record on the basis that a person is entitled, or has the right to a place in God’s family and kingdom. The righteous record entitles one to a relationship. But I am a hopeless sinner under the “wrath of God.” What hope is there for me?

Here then is the startling good news. Other religions teach that we must provide the right record and then God provides us with the right relationship. This leads to a life of insecurity, fear and bondage. But the gospel reveals that God provides us with both the right record and the right relationship. How is God, being holy, able to do that and maintain his just character?

Paul answers in II Cor. 5:21, “*God made Christ who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Jesus Christ became sin for us. In other words, Jesus became our substitute. This does not mean that Jesus became selfish or conceited or cruel like we are. It means that He got our sinful record and he was punished for it. So how do we become “acceptable?” Just as Jesus did not become actually sinful, but “legally” sinful, so

as we become Christians we do not become actually righteous but “legally” righteous. We are “holy in God’s sight, without blemish and free from accusation (Col. 1:22, 23). Just as Christ was treated as if he was as sinful as we were, we are now treated as if we are as heroic, as beautiful, as perfect as Jesus.

And since we have his record, we are now entitled to full rights as sons and daughters, members of God’s family. We are entitled to relationship with God. Think of it! We get all the things Jesus has a right to—God’s eternal love, welcome and honor. We are fully accepted because of Jesus!

How can we receive this righteousness of which Paul speaks? He says it comes to everyone who believes. Believes what? You are not a Christian until you have accepted that your own righteousness cannot save you and that only Christ’s righteousness can. This is not only true of the unbeliever, but of the Christian also. As we shall see later in our study, the greatest problem the Christian faces is his own self-righteousness, thinking that his obedience earns him favor with God.

Not only must a person believe that his own righteousness cannot save him, but he must receive Jesus righteousness by directly and gratefully asking God for a family relationship. As we said in our first lesson, Christianity is primarily about a relationship. Therefore the most fundamental thing we can do is to go to God and pray to him, addressing him directly and simply asking him for a relationship. The Bible says that to “receive Christ” is to receive “the right to be children of God” (John 1:12). To be a child of God is to have both a personal relationship in which the Father loves us, as well as a legal relationship in which the Father becomes responsible for us permanently.

The apostle John says we are to ask for a relationship “in Jesus’ name,” relying on his work alone. We are not to come resting in anything we have done or will do. This is not as easy as it may seem. Some turn their faith into a work. Many think that to accept Christ by faith means to achieve a certain level of surrender, love and emotional certainty. Then, in response to this condition that they create, they think God is attracted into their lives and begins to bless them. This idea misses the gospel. The level of our faith is not the point. It cannot merit God’s favor however high we raise it. What saves us is the object of our faith. We are saved when we transfer the object of our faith from our own efforts to Christ’s efforts. Ironically, many people who think they have been born again have not transferred the object of their faith to Christ at all, but rather they are still doing self-salvation through the creation of an internal condition of surrender and love.

So we must be very conscious that we are not coming in our own name, not trusting in our external works or internal condition. We need to simply go to God and say, “Lord, if I have never done so before, I thank you for the magnificent, sufficient, free sacrifice of your Son for me and I ask you to receive me as your child, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Christ has done for me.”

## **Reflecting**

*In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson and your reading and interact with the following questions.*

1. Study together your answers to the questions on Galatians 1:1-5.
  2. Four-hundred and fifty years ago Martin Luther, a monk teaching the book of Romans, was puzzled by Paul's words in Romans 1:17. He wrote, "I sought long and knocked anxiously, but the expression "the righteousness of God" blocked the way...My situation was that although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant."
    - a. What was Luther's struggle?
    - b. Have you struggled in much the same way as Luther?  
Share your story with the group.
    - c. Luther hints at how his struggle was resolved.  
How does the Gospel resolve this issue?
  3. The gospel is news not advice. Has the good news penetrated your heart or are you still burdened with all the religious advice you have received over the years.  
Share your struggles with the group.
  4. We would agree that the main barrier, the sin the unsaved must most repent of, is the cause of their own efforts at self-salvation? Wouldn't this mean that people in church today (you and me) need to examine our own hearts? How do we Christians pursue our own efforts at self-salvation?
- 

## **Applying**

*Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week*

## **Words and Heart Project**

Project No 3

The project this week has to do with our words. Jesus said, "How can you who are evil say anything good? For it is out of what fills the heart that the mouth speaks." (Mat. 12:33, 34 – paraphrased).

**I.** This week I want you to LISTEN TO YOURSELF SPEAK and keep a record of it. Every night before you go to bed I want you to review your day recording your speech patterns, failures and successes. Use the three categories listed below: regarding yourself, regarding others, regarding life.

### 1. Regarding yourself (Gal. 6:14)

*For one week do not.....but rather*

Boast or defend yourself

Talk humbly, repentant, peacefully

Explanation: Don't brag or try to show how great you are; if criticized or if you fail in some way, take responsibility calmly for your part and don't point to what aided your error.

### 2. Regarding others (Gal. 5:15)

*For one week do not.....but rather*

Talk unkindly of others

affirm and sincerely praise others

Explanation: Don't cut anyone down to others or to their face; don't respond irritably; find sincere ways to complement people. When criticism must be done, lovingly confront the flaw, not the person.

### 3. Regarding life (Gal. 5:22-23)

*For one week do not.....but rather*

Complain or murmur

express gratitude and praise

Explanation: Don't murmur against life as if it were not a gift laced with many mercies. This is not "Pollyanna" optimism but putting all things in the context of God's grace and mercy.

**II.** *Bring your notes (or good memory) to your group and be prepared to discuss the following questions:*

- a. In which of the three areas do I have the most problem? (Or in which kinds of "mouth-sin" do I struggle with most.
- b. Discuss as a group how our mouth sins reveal what "fills our hearts" (Mat. 12:34).
  - 1) If you need to defend yourself from criticism, where are you finding your righteousness (worth)? How specifically can you go to God at those moments instead?
  - 2) If you need to run other people down or make them look inferior or if you have always to be right, where are you finding your righteousness (worth)? How specifically can you go to God at those moments instead?
  - 3) If you cannot be grateful and happy unless life is going according to your agenda, where are you finding your righteousness (worth)? How specifically can you go to God at those moments instead?
- c. Discuss the following statement: "The faith that surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness."