

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 20, 2022.

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:5–13).¹

The descriptive adjective “Judeo-Christian” refers to “those religious, ethical, or cultural values or beliefs regarded as being common to both Judaism and Christianity.”² Whether we know them by this label or not, we know their impact on our culture. Values such as compassion for the needy, the importance of marriage, personal responsibility, and the value of human life are derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition within our country. Of course, the cynic in us may wonder where such values have gone, lamenting the cultural erosion of these values, but in actuality they still exist in various ways. One doesn’t have to be a student of the bible to see how many of the laws and traditions of the Old Testament scriptures have been woven into the fabric of our civilization. For example, historian Thomas Cahill observes, “The heart of the Torah is not obedience to regulations about such things as diet—what one may eat, whom one may eat with, how one must prepare oneself beforehand—but to *tzedakka*, justice like God’s justice, justice toward the downtrodden.”³ And while many today may not know the idiom, the “Golden Rule,” “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12), everyone still wants to be treated fairly by others.

Underlying the Judeo-Christian ethic is the belief that our Creator knows what is best for his creation. And what he reveals in his Word is not merely good for the Jew or Christian but everyone. For example, the wisdom of the book of Proverbs is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago, providing timeless admonitions for living life. We are told, “In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death” (Prov. 12:28), truth to heed for a long and full life. Or, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life” (Prov. 16:31), telling us evidentially of the happy result of righteous living. But it is not only Proverbs where we find timeless wisdom, but also in God’s law and in keeping his commands.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² “Judeo-Christian,” Lexico, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/judeo-christian>.

³ “What is the Judeo-Christian ethic?,” Got Questions, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.gotquestions.org/Judeo-Christian-ethic.html>.

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

Historically, we see this in Moses' admonition to Israel in their preparation to occupy the promised land, when he instructed them, "And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (Deut. 4:1). Warning Israel of the moral snares they would encounter, God said,

You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Lev. 18:3-5).

He who miraculously redeemed Israel from Egyptian slavery describes the rules to remain free from slavery, morally and materially. Follow "my rules," follow "my statutes," walk "in them," God says, and "if a person does them, he shall live by them," words of wisdom, rules for living, for Israel then and even us today.

But what happens when God's rules for living are reinterpreted as rules for earning, a doing for determining righteous favor? What if living by grace becomes living to gain it? What if righteousness by faith is forgotten and righteousness by rules becomes religion? What if the natural descendants of Abraham, who "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3), instead sought to establish their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3), a religion not based on mercy and grace but obey and live?

Obey and Live?

Some would have us believe that this was Israel's hope for salvation, that prior to Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection salvation came by keeping the law. Righteousness by faith was relegated to Abraham, under a different dispensation, while the Mosaic Law became the means to eternal life. Like Mount Sinai upon which the law was given, the law became a mountain to climb, a stairway to heaven. Obey and live became more than ethic but a path to eternity.

This way of thinking, however, is in contradiction to New Testament testimony. God's covenant of grace didn't skip over Israel but runs from the Fall on to glory, from the women's "seed" of Genesis (3:15) to the new heavens and earth (Rev. 22). Even when God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, he didn't begin with the imperative of his divine will, but the indicative of Israel's redemption: "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery'" (Ex. 20:1-2). The imperative command is preceded by the indicative of grace.

The problem, of course, is not with God's law, which is "holy, righteous, and good" (Rom. 7:12), but our sin within. If obedience to God's law is the way of salvation, who is obedient enough to satisfy what the law demands. Is God's standard of righteousness relative? Does he

grade on the curve? The first century Jews apparently thought so, which would explain their zeal (Rom. 10:2). Salvation by works is a graceless yet powerful motivator.

What God gave as his law for living became their striving though never arriving? But Paul says that in pursuing righteousness by keeping the law they were actually “being ignorant of the righteousness of God,” working to keep the rule of righteousness rather than submitting “to God’s righteousness” (Rom. 10:3). In seeking to establish their own way, they had forgotten the old way.

According to the old way, “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” (Heb. 11:4); “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death” (Heb. 11:5). “By faith Noah...in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household...[condemning] the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” (Heb. 11:7). The old way, long before Abraham was born, was never obey and live but believe and live. So also after Abraham—all the way to Moses and onward to Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, the prophets, and even the unnamed “of whom the world was not worthy” (Heb. 11:29-32, 38)—they all were saved by God’s grace through faith. The old way then is not just old but new and the *only way* to forgiveness, peace with God, and everlasting life: through faith.

Under the entirety of God’s Covenant of Grace, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Gal. 3:11), which is why Paul goes back to Deuteronomy to Moses’ warning to Israel. When they would enter the promised land, they must not think that they had earned it (Deut. 9:4). God graciously redeemed Israel from Egypt, gave them his law, and placed them in the land he had promised. Israel was the embodiment of God’s favor on earth. There was no need to ascend to the heavenlies or descend to the underland to find salvation, because God revealed himself in time and space to Israel, a revelation that would find its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. When the fullness of time had come, God did not rapture Israel up to heaven or plunge them down to *sheol* but instead “sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5), Jew and Gentile alike.

Confess and Believe

God gave Israel his Word: “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (10:8). But to have God’s Word is not the same thing as believing it. In this sense, Israel was so close but so far away from the gospel. They had the “word of faith” to believe and be saved, but they had turned it into a canon of rules and regulations and a system of meriting favor with God.

Of course, this is no different from what we do when our Judeo-Christian ethic, our moral values, supersede the gospel. Like the Jews, we can be zealous and ignorant of the righteousness of God, building our lives on good moral values, even defending them, but finding we have forgotten the gospel. Have we forgotten the beautiful simplicity of the gospel, substituting instead a modern version of legalism? Has our rage against the cultural erosion of Judeo-Christian values led us to become like the Pharisees, fighting for righteousness’ sake at the expense of Christ? I think in many ways we have, forgetting that moral transformation was never a political or social movement but a supernatural work in the heart that begins with this simple

truth: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:9).

God told Israel, “The word is near you, in your mouth,” but you must “confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.” God told Israel, “The word is near you. . .in your heart,” but you must “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.” Why is confession and belief imperative? Because, “with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (10:10). To be justified as righteous before God doesn’t require your best efforts, just simple faith from the heart. To be saved from God’s wrath and adopted as his own unto eternity, doesn’t require eloquent persuasion, just simple confession that Jesus is Lord.

And this is good news the whole world should know. Though God first gave his revealed will to Israel, the word of faith was not exclusively for Israel but for Jew *and* Gentile. As the prophet proclaimed, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (10:13). Regardless of race, regardless of language, regardless of nationality, no matter your family, or even your past, Jesus Christ is the same Lord for all who believe on him. And through faith we who were once not a people have become God’s people (1 Pet. 2:10). Once spiritual paupers, Christ Jesus our Lord has bestowed his saving riches upon us. Through faith, true Israel is revealed, in which Jew and Gentile together as one, all who call on the name of the Lord, have become “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,” a people proclaiming “the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Believe and Live

We who have then received the Lord’s saving riches, live by faith, experience the joy of faith, do the work of faith, hope through faith. Our faith not only guarantees eternal life, but it informs how we live today. We who have been justified as righteous through faith in Christ are called to live out our faith in Christ, righteously living for Christ’s sake. We, who know that our obedience does not make us righteous before God, know because we are righteous before God through faith we live out our faith in righteousness. Or put another way, we do not obey to live eternally, but in Christ we believe and live obediently for his glory unto eternity.

For this reason, we are grateful for the Judeo-Christian ethic we enjoy in our country. We believe that morals do matter for the sake of civilization. We want to encourage righteous living through our influence and especially our example (Matt. 5:16). But we must not fall into the trap of believing or promoting the belief that God desires and blesses obedience to an ethic at the expense of believing the gospel. Pro-life includes more than the unborn but eternal life too. The sanctity of marriage includes not only a covenant between one man and one woman but also the gospel marriage preaches. Conversion therapy should be outlawed but conversion of the soul by faith in Christ is essential. Christian, Cultural wars are not the answer—the gospel is.

God desires that all kinds of people be saved, including those with whom you disagree and differ, and “come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4) of the gospel: “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. . .For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (10:10, 13). This is the gospel, good news for you, good news for me, good news for our nation, good news for the world.