

Andrew Cook:

At the moment, here on Serving Today, we're looking at the Bible theme of the righteousness of God. We've seen from the Old Testament that this is God doing what is right for his people. There's also a very close link with justification by faith.

As our starting point we've taken the famous verse from Romans 1 verse 17, where Paul says, *'For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*

In this statement, which is a summary of the whole letter to the Romans, Paul declares that the gospel has resolved all contentious issues about the righteousness of God. It means that 'to be made righteous' is a legal declaration because before God, all believers are justified. In other words, it means that they are counted as righteous.

Having got the background from the Old Testament about this theme, we can now turn to see how the New Testament deals with 'the righteousness of God'. Justification by faith and the righteousness of God are linked because we are declared not guilty before God, the judge. We have pardon from sin and peace with God himself. This is a verdict that's gracious, unmerited and irreversible.

This is how Paul puts it in Romans chapter 8 verse 33: *'Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one.'*

How is it possible that there is now no condemnation? On what grounds? How can God, who is perfectly just and righteous, be able to equip those who are by nature condemned by his holy standards?

In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21, the apostle Paul sums it up like this: *'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'*

Jesus was born under the Law and kept it perfectly. Then, on the cross, he took our sin. He was treated as unrighteous in our place. He died at the hands of the unrighteous.

This was actually foretold in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah who uses the language of justification many centuries before the death of Christ, as we see from Isaiah chapter 53 verse 11: *'my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.'*

The result is that God's justice is served and upheld because the one doing the justifying is God himself, in his son the Lord Jesus. This is the ground, or basis, of justification. This is the reason why Paul is so excited and passionate about the gospel.

There's a further dimension to justification, and that is how we get righteousness. How does it become true of us that we are counted as righteous in God's sight when the opposite is what we justly deserve?

Coming back to Romans 1 verse 17, Paul says that 'righteousness is by faith' and that 'the righteous will live by faith'. There are two implications of this. One is that faith is the starting point of our justification. It means trusting God for the big things, like salvation. There is no other way for God to make us righteous.

But faith is also a way of living, especially when we face difficulties. It means trusting God that he will do what is right, in his time. Along with peace, grace and hope, Paul says in Romans chapter 5 verse 3 that being justified by faith means, *'we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance.'* This isn't easy but it's one of the implications of faith as the means of our justification. In Hebrews chapter 10 verse 38, the Habakkuk 2 reference is quoted to encourage perseverance. The writer says that giving up is not an option.

And perhaps we should also say something about the goal of justification. What is its purpose? Faith justifies us, we become the righteousness of God, we are treated according to what Christ has achieved for us. The aim of justification by faith is that we should produce good works, but we must be careful not to think that faith plus good works brings justification. This is really important because it ensures that the glory is God's and God's alone, and that of course, was one of the five main principles of the Reformation, which we're studying at the moment as well. Good works are the fruit or outcome of justification by faith, not the way we get justified or how we are made righteous.