

The Paths of Righteousness

Genesis 15:5-6; Amos 5:21-24; Matthew 5:1-11; Romans 3:21-26; Psalm 23

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First Presbyterian, Luling

I've not forgotten to read the Scriptures—they're going to be interspersed throughout the sermon, so keep a Bible handy this week again.

This week's request comes from one of you who has been reading Psalm 23 and wonders about "righteousness," as in "he leads me in the paths of righteousness," or "he leads me in right paths," in the psalm. What is righteousness, anyway? Well, that's an excellent question. We're going to trace a path of righteousness through several passages of Scripture this morning and see what we can glean. We'll look at a couple of Old Testament passages and a couple of New Testament passages.

We could go off on a rabbit trail about the Hebrew and Greek words translated "righteous" and "righteousness," but then that ends up being a circular discussion, where you go to scripture to figure out what they mean, and then take those definitions to understand the scripture, and then you've tied yourself in knots.

First, let's turn to Genesis 15:5-6—on page 10 of the pew Bible. This is where God establishes the covenant with Abram, before he changes Abram's name to Abraham. God promises to make a great nation of Abram and his descendants, and remember that Abram and Sarai were already old and had no children. Here's verses 5 and 6:

"The Lord brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he (Abram) believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

The "reckoned it to him as righteousness" is a frequently quoted verse in the New Testament, so this is a good place to start. What can we figure out from this interaction? Righteousness is connected to belief. It's Abram's belief that gets credited to him as righteousness. So righteousness is, in part, right belief, which in this case is belief that God's promises, no matter how fantastical, are true. Righteousness as right belief is something that Abram does, a human action. But it isn't all Abram. It's also God. God reckoned it to him as righteousness. God gave Abram the opportunity to be righteous, or believe righteously, and God interpreted Abram's belief as righteousness. It's also a divine action. So keep this

in mind as we move on. Belief in God's promises, and human and divine action together.

We'll move to the prophets next. As a whole, they had a lot to say about righteousness. In the prophetic books, righteousness is often paired with justice. Almost any prophetic book could tell us about righteousness, but let's turn to Amos 5:21-24, on page 747 in the pew Bible:

This is God speaking, telling Amos to say this to the people: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals, I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Here's an example of justice and righteousness being in parallel in Hebrew poetry, which is a structure that makes them almost synonyms. Let justice roll down like waters, and then the parallel, righteousness like an ever flowing stream. So that's one bit of information. Righteousness is similar enough to justice that they can almost be synonyms. The contrast that Amos has here is important. The people thought they were being righteous by being religious, by following the law and instruction about how to give sacrifices properly. They observed the festivals and assemblies, they offered burnt offerings and grain offerings and well being offerings; they sang and played music. And the Lord *hates* it. *Despises* it. The Lord instead requires justice and righteousness. So righteousness is the opposite, or at least a strong contrast, to outward religious observances. This is pretty consistent across the prophets—a message from God that religious observances and actions mean nothing without righteousness and justice, particularly toward the poor.

Matthew continues the prophets' understanding of righteousness. Matthew uses righteousness more than any of the other gospels. Let's read the Beatitudes as a good example. Matthew 5 and let's start at verse 3 through 11. Page 785. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed

are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The Beatitudes and Matthew as a whole, along with the prophets, put the burden of righteousness on human action. It's clear here that righteousness is something that humans strive for, hunger and thirst for, something that isn't going to win them any friends among the powerful. Seeking righteousness is a way of living in the kingdom of God, even as it is not complete. It's a way of aligning one's actions—and here it seems to me to be actions, not belief—a way of aligning one's actions with God's purposes.

Once we get to the letters of the New Testament, righteousness picks up that right belief connotation again. Romans 3:21-26 is a good example, on page 916. “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Nobody writes a complicated sentence quite like Paul does, so let's slow that down and dissect it a bit. Here, righteousness is “the righteousness of God.” We're back to the idea from Genesis, that righteousness is, in large part, a divine action and a human response to that divine action, human and divine together. Righteousness is connected to faith in Jesus Christ, which again is a human response to the divine action of grace in Jesus. Through forgiveness on God's part, through faith in Jesus Christ on human's part, God makes us right in God's eyes, justifies us. This, Paul says, proves that God is righteous. In Romans, and throughout the letters, righteousness is an attribute of God, not so much of humans. Humans can only participate in God's righteousness because of God's action first.

So to bring all these passages together. Righteousness is both divine action and human action. Righteousness is also a way of living, a way of action, that is deeper and truer than religious ritual. Righteousness is all that.

These passages that we've looked at are representative of Scripture's treatment of righteousness, but there are other strands and other understandings

and nuances, too. It's a lot. Let me try to put what we've learned today into something somewhat straightforward.

Righteousness is right action, both on God's part and on ours. God's role in righteousness is to keep giving us opportunities to act and believe. Our part in righteousness is to make our responses to God's grace true and sincere, and not mindless outward action. Our responses to God take the forms of belief and action in the world, or to put it another way, our responses to God take the forms of loving God and loving neighbor.

Which leads us all back to the 23rd Psalm. I'm ever so grateful for the plural on "paths." There's not one path of righteousness, one prescription, one list of requirements. The paths of righteousness are for us to follow as God leads us. The paths of righteousness are human belief and human action and smoothed by the goodness and mercy of God's grace.