

Righteousness

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God the Father is righteous (just); Jesus Christ his Son is the Righteous (Just) One; the Father through the Son and in the Spirit gives the gift of righteousness (justice) to repentant sinners for salvation; such believing sinners are declared righteous (just) by the Father through the Son, are made righteous (just) by the Holy Spirit working in them, and will be wholly righteous (just) in the age to come. They are and will be righteous because they are in a covenant relation with the living God, who is the God of all grace and mercy and who will bring to completion what he has begun in them by declaring them righteous for Christ's sake.

The noun righteousness/justice (Gk. *dikaïosune* [[dikaïosuvnh](#)]) bears meanings in the New Testament related to two sources. The major one is the Hebrew thought-world of the Old Testament and particularly the *sdq* [[q:d'x](#)] word group, which locates the meaning in the sphere of God's gracious, covenantal relation to his people and the appropriate behavior of the covenant partners (Yahweh and Israel) toward each other. The other is the regular use of the words in everyday Greek as spoken in New Testament times, which fixes the meaning in the sphere of a life in conformity to a known standard or law — thus honesty, legality, and so on. This latter meaning in terms of doing God's will is of course also found in the Old Testament.

When we translate the Greek words based on the stem *dikai-* into English we make use of two sets of words based on the stems, just and right. So we have just, justice, justify and right, righteous, righteousness, rightwise (old English). The use of two sets of English words for the one set of Greek words sometimes causes difficulties for students of the Bible. This is especially so when the verb "to justify," describing God's word and action, is used with the noun "righteousness," pointing to the result of that action.

The Gospels. The appropriate background to bear in mind for understanding the teaching of both John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ on righteousness/justice are two of the dominant ideas of the Old Testament. First, Yahweh-Elohim, the Lord God, is righteous in that he speaks and Acts in accordance with the purity of his own holy nature; further, what he says and does for Israel is in accordance with his establishment of the covenant with this people (see [Psalm 22:31](#) ; [40:10](#) ; [51:14](#) ; [71:15-24](#) ; [Amos 5:21-24](#)). Micah declared the righteousness of God as his faithfulness to keep and act within the covenant and thus to save Israel from her enemies, as well as to vindicate the penitent.

Second, the covenant people of God are called to live righteously, that is, in conformity to the demands of the covenant and according to God's will (see [Psalm 1:4-6](#) ; [11:7](#) ; [72:1](#) ; [Isa 1:16-17](#)). Having within the covenantal relation with God the gift of salvation, they are to behave as the people of the holy Lord. Hosea, the prophet of divine love, ties righteousness with mercy, loving kindness, and justice ([2:19](#) ; [10:12](#)).

John the Baptist called for repentance and righteous behavior such as is pleasing to God ([Luke 3:7-9](#)). Further, it was because of the demands of such righteousness fulfilling the will of God that he actually was willing to baptize Jesus ([Matt 3:15](#)). Likewise Jesus presents righteousness as conformity to the will of God expressed in the Mosaic law ([Matt 13:17](#) ; [23:29](#) ; [Matthew 27:4](#) [Matthew 27:19](#) [Matthew 27:24](#)) and also conformity to his own teachings concerning the requirements of the kingdom of heaven ([Matt 5:17-20](#)). However, conformity to his own teachings presupposes that he is the Messiah, that he fulfills the Law and the Prophets, and that what he declares is the morality of the kingdom of God relating to the totality of life, inward and outward, seen by God. Further, Jesus does allow that conformity to the norms of the scribes and Pharisees is a certain kind of (inferior) righteous living, but he contrasts it with the proper righteousness he exhibits, proclaims, and looks for ([Luke 5:30-32](#) ; [15:7](#) ; [18:9](#)) in the disciples of the kingdom. So in a fundamental sense, in the four Gospels righteousness as a quality of living is intimately related to the arrival and membership in the kingdom of God and is only possible because God has come to his people as their Redeemer.

The Gospel of Matthew makes clear that from the beginning Jesus' mission is to fulfill God's righteousness ([3:15](#)). This is brought to realization in his words and ministry so that the kingdom and salvation of God are in him and come through him. Alongside this is the righteousness in the new covenant, which is right thinking, feeling, speaking, and behavior on the part of disciples of the kingdom, who do what God approves and commands. This moral substance is very clear from the detailed contents of the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5-7), where the will of God is set forth by Jesus and is contrasted with a mere legalism. Yet what Jesus proclaims and outlines is certainly not a self-righteousness, for it is portrayed as the outflowing of a life that is

centered on submitting to, worshiping, and seeking after God and confessing Jesus as the Messiah (see especially [5:17-42](#)).

In the Gospel of Luke, we read of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Joseph of Arimathea being called righteous ([1:6](#) ; [2:25](#) ; [23:50](#)) because they embody genuine religion according to the norms of the Old Covenant. They trust in and obey God. Further, Jesus himself as the Servant of Yahweh is the righteous or innocent one ([23:47](#)), even as the centurion confessed at the cross. The righteousness of the kingdom of God is practical and reverses the standards of the regular social order ([Luke 3:11](#) [Luke 3:14](#) ; [6:20-26](#)). At the last day it will be those who have been genuinely righteous in terms of doing the will of God who will be declared just ([14:14](#)).

In the Gospel of John, God is righteous ([17:25](#)) and the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, has a specific role with respect to righteousness ([John 16:8](#) [John 16:10](#)). It is the unique work of the Spirit, who comes into the world in the name of Jesus the Messiah, to convince/convict the world of righteousness. The Spirit both vindicates Jesus as the Righteous One, whom the Father has raised from the dead and exalted into heaven, and also makes clear what kind of righteous life is required by, and, in grace, provided by God.

The Letters of Paul. He uses the noun *dikaiosisune* [[dikaiosisunh](#)] (righteousness), the adjective *dikaioi* [[divkaio](#)] (righteous), and the verb *dikaio* [[dikaiovw](#)] (to justify or to declare and treat as righteous) over one hundred times and his usage reflects a particular development from the use of *sdq* [[q:d'x](#)] in the Old Testament. God is righteous when he Acts according to the terms of the covenant he has established. Righteousness is God's faithfulness as the Lord of the covenant. God Acts righteously when he performs saving deeds for his people and thereby in delivering them places them in a right relation to himself (see especially Isa. 51 and 61). The interchangeability of righteousness and salvation is seen in this verse: "I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel" ([Isa 46:13](#)).

Thus God's people are righteous when they are in a right relation with him, when they enjoy his salvation; they are considered by God as the Judge of the world as righteous when they are being and doing what he requires in his covenant. So it may be said that the concept of righteousness in Paul belongs more to soteriology than to moral theology, even though it has distinct moral implications.

God's righteousness is, for Paul, God's saving activity in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Son. It is activity that is directly in line with the saving activity of God in the Old Testament. The acceptance of the unique saving deed of God at Calvary by faith in the person of Jesus Christ is that which God has ordained to be the means for sinners (the unrighteous and the disobedient ones) to enter into the right with God, the Father, and receive the forgiveness of sins. God as the Judge justifies believing sinners by declaring them righteous in and through Jesus Christ; then he expects and enables these sinners to become righteous in word and deed. Faith works by love.

The righteousness of which Paul speaks, especially in the letters to Galatia and Rome, stands in contrast to the righteousness that is based on the fulfillment of the law by man as the covenant partner of God. It is "the righteousness of faith" and "the righteousness of God" ([Rom 10:6](#) ; [Php 3:9](#)), and is most certainly the gift of God. From the human standpoint what God looks for in those who receive the gospel is "faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" ([Gal 2:20](#)). God's gift to those who believe is a righteousness that exists and can be given only because of the sacrificial death of Jesus for sinners and his resurrection from the dead as the vindicated Lord of all.

So God as the righteous Judge justifies places in a right relation with himself within the new covenant of grace those who believe the gospel of the Father concerning his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And he justifies Jew and Greek alike on precisely the same basis, by faith alone without works, and he makes no distinction whatsoever between the people of the Old Covenant and the Gentiles. Abraham, says Paul, was himself justified by faith alone ([Gen 12:3](#) ; [15:6](#) ; [18:18](#) ; [Rom 4:3](#) ; [Gal 3:8](#)). In fact, Paul confessed that the power of the gospel to be the word of salvation to both Jew and Greek was based on the revelation of the righteousness of God therein of God the Father acting justly for the sake of his Son ([Rom 1:16-17](#)).

The gift of a right relation with the Father through the Son in the Spirit, which is justification, creates a relationship for believers both with God and fellow believers that they are to dedicate to righteousness in the sense of obeying Christ ([Rom 6:12-14](#) ; cf. [2 Corinthians 6:7](#) [2 Corinthians 6:14](#) ; [9:10](#) ; [Eph 4:24](#) ; [Php 1:11](#)). Though they could never become righteous before God by their efforts to conform their lives to his will, out of gratitude and love they are to serve him because he has given them the gift of salvation through the grace of

the Lord Jesus Christ. He has pronounced them righteous, he has reconciled them to himself and removed their alienation, and he has transformed their relation to him into that of friendship. Therefore, since God has made them his own and given to them his righteousness, their duty and privilege is to be righteous in conduct. And he promises that on the last day and for the life of the age to come he will actually make them to be truly and effectually righteous in all that they are, become, and do.

The word "eschatological" is often used with reference to this gift of righteousness. The reason is this. It is in anticipation of what God will do for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ at the last day that he pronounces guilty sinners righteous now in this evil age. At the last day, God the Father will be vindicated and all will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Those who believe will become and remain righteous in their resurrection bodies of glory. Now and before the new age arrives, by the proclamation of the gospel and by the presence of the Spirit, that which is not yet (the fullness of righteousness of the age to come) is actually made available by the will and declaration of the Father, through the mediation of Jesus Christ the Lord and by the presence and operation of the Holy Spirit. Already there is the provision of a right relation with God through the preaching of the gospel, but there is not yet the experience of the fullness of righteousness as an imparted gift. Now believers merely have the firstfruits of that which awaits them in the age to come.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Paul does not use the word "righteousness" in its more familiar meaning as a virtue. In fact he does so particularly in 1 and 2 Timothy. He commends striving for righteousness ([1 Tim 6:11](#)) as the right motivation of a person of God; and he sees the use of the inspired Scriptures as being to train Christians in righteousness ([2 Tim 3:16](#)). Further, as a reward for his efforts for the kingdom of God he looks for "the crown of righteousness" ([2 Tim 4:8](#)).

Other New Testament Books. Righteousness in terms of the actual doing and completing the will of God is found outside the Gospels in various places. It is found in Acts 10:35 in terms of fearing God and doing righteousness. In Hebrews 12:11 we read of the peaceful fruit of righteousness. In 1 Peter Christians are to die to sin and live to righteousness ([2:24](#)) and be prepared to suffer for righteousness' sake ([3:14](#)). In 1 John the doing of righteousness in terms of following Jesus Christ, the righteous One, who came in flesh and will come again in glory, is what vital Christianity is all about. Believers who act righteously in word and deed proclaim their righteous Lord and show the error of the false teachers ([2:29](#) ; [3:7-10](#)).

The most discussed passage outside the Pauline corpus with respect to righteousness and justification is James 2:14-26. Here, at least on the surface, it appears that James is disagreeing with Paul. In fact the truth is that they have different starting points and are facing different missionary and pastoral situations.

A faith without works is said by James to be a dead faith, and Abraham is presented as being justified by his works because he was prepared to sacrifice his beloved son. For James, faith comes to completion in practical works and it was this completed faith of Abraham, says James, which was reckoned to him for righteousness ([Gen 15:6](#) ; [James 2:23](#)). Thus for James a person is placed in a right relation with God by a faith expressed in works. It is possible to reconcile Paul's approach and that of James if it is remembered that Paul himself spoke of "faith expressing itself through love" ([Gal 5:6](#) ; cf. [James 2:1](#) [James 2:8](#)).

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See also [Ethics](#); [God](#); [Justice](#)

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