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LISTENING TO THE WORD IN FOUR STEPS (continued)

2 Timothy 3:16-17 - "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

The *fourth* step in Biblical listening is described by Paul with the phrase *training in righteousness* - the Word is profitable for *teaching*, for *reproof*, for *correction*, and now finally, for *training in righteousness*. Before we analyze this fourth step in the Biblical listening process, we need to clear up some misunderstandings about the different ways that word "*righteousness*" is used in the Scriptures.

1) HOW THE WORD "RIGHTEOUSNESS" IS USED IN THE SCRIPTURES

The word is actually used in *three* different ways - two of them *positive*, and one of them *negative*:

a) First, on the negative side, the Bible talks about *self-righteousness*:

Isaiah 64:6 - "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

Romans 10:3 - "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."

Matthew 23:28-33 - "So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. [29] "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, [30] saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' [31] Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. [32] Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. [33] You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?"

Now the striking common feature of all those strong words of Scripture is they are directed against people who *do* possess a certain brand of *righteousness*. Probably the best description of that righteousness is in the **Romans 10** passage. Paul defines the kind of righteousness most admired by the man on the street. It is the righteousness of people who want to make an approach to God, the Creator, without acknowledging Jesus Christ:

Romans 10:3-4 - "For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, [righteousness] they did not submit to God's righteousness. [4] For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

Those are the two trademarks of the religion of the common man. He *ignores Jesus Christ*, and he seeks to *establish his own* standard for pleasing God. He creates a god - not the God of the Bible - who will be pleased and pacified by virtues of *tolerance, human love, acts of charity, and being "true to oneself"*.

This is the *kind* of righteousness the prophet Isaiah condemned in the first passage we read from **Isaiah 64:6** - "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

It's important to note that the prophet isn't talking about our *sins*. Of course *they* are offensive to God. We would all understand that. But the prophet is talking about the people's *righteousness* - "*our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*."

Why are the prophet's words so heavy here? Why won't God give us a break? His word only *sound* harsh. Actually they're loving. God knows that my self-righteousness is actually more deadly to me than my sin. After all, He *died*

cleanse me of my sin. But self-righteousness - my standing on my good works - will **keep me** from confessing my sin and trusting in Christ's atoning work.

So God is not unloving in His ruthless condemnation of my self-righteousness. It's His love that keeps Him from accepting whatever people sincerely offer Him as their form of righteousness. When God isn't approached **on His terms** whatever else we offer isn't acceptable, and isn't **safe** for human trust.

This is a lesson God has been trying to teach from the beginning of time. We have no excuse except our own pride and willfulness for missing it. God has been reinforcing this truth right from the very first forms of worship and sacrifice in the Bible. Right from the offerings of Cain and Able we learn God doesn't accept whatever kind of religion we want to bring him. One offering was accepted. One was rejected. There was no difference in the **sincerity** of the worshippers. The issue was **following God's instructions**, not sincerity of heart.

This is the Bible's answer to the questions people have about the need for **nice people** to hear about Jesus and accept His grace and Lordship to be saved. Of course your unsaved neighbor is nice. He's probably very polite. He may give more to the poor than you do. He may hold his own beliefs about God and morality with great sincerity and devoutness.

But niceness never has been a ticket to heaven. Politeness won't gain eternal life. Sincerity won't cleanse the heart of inward sin. Paul says, speaking of the devoutly religious Jews, "**Whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord will be saved**"(Romans 10:13).

Leaving Jesus out is eternally fatal. This was what Jesus was referring to in the Matthew 23 passage when He accused the Pharisees of being the **sons of those who killed the prophets**. They claimed righteousness, but they never embraced the message of the prophets. What was the message of the prophets? The prophets told of a future day when the Messiah would come - the **suffering, bleeding Lamb of God** who would die for the sins of the people.

Jesus said the Pharisees **rejected** the message of the prophets just as surely as those who had literally put them to death years before. And the **reason** these morally upright Pharisees rejected Jesus was they were full of **self-righteousness**.

Any true conversion experience must come to terms with the sinfulness of any kind of spiritual pursuit that leaves Jesus Christ out of the picture. Paul talked about this in his own conversion:

Philippians 3:2-7 - "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. [3] For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— [4] though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

There is no time to comment on all those verses. My only point is there is a kind of righteousness (**self-righteousness**) that is totally contrary to God's will and counterproductive to genuine inner humility and holiness. We need to forsake more than our sins. No one can truly come to God genuinely without confronting and forsaking self-righteousness.

That's a very quick look at the negative use of the term "**righteousness**" in the Scriptures. There are also two positive uses of the same term:

- b) Second, there is **imputed righteousness**. If God **rejects** self-righteousness (however sincerely offered), this imputed righteousness is the kind He loves and **accepts**:

Romans 3:21-24 - "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from the law**, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who

believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....”

2 Corinthians 5:21 - “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

In Romans chapter three Paul says God had always revealed His gracious intent to *provide* the very righteousness He *required*. That was the whole point of the Old Testament account of Abraham being told to offer his own son Isaac to the Lord. At the very last minute, we are told, *God provided the lamb*.

In our last point we saw how the Pharisees were of the same mind as the crowd who killed the prophets who came with this message of imputed grace and righteousness in Jesus Christ. Fallen man has always rejected God’s terms of righteousness. People still do the same today.

Imputed righteousness is the righteousness received, apart from works, through commitment to the reality and adequacy of the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. We are “*declared righteous*,” Paul says, before the throne of God.

No one, not even our own hearts, can accuse or condemn us, because God has declared us clean:

Romans 8:31-34 - “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? [32] He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? [33] Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. [34] Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Make sure you see the connection of important ideas in those verses. The only way to peace with God and freedom from fear and doubt and condemnation is the central place given to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is another positive use of the term “*righteousness*” in the Bible:

- c) Third, there is the *righteousness of sanctification*. This is the kind of righteousness Paul is winding up with in **2 Timothy 3**. And we’ll get back to that text in closing in just a minute.

The Bible talks about this kind of righteousness in a way that confuses many Christians. If *imputed righteousness* emphasizes the *inadequacy* of human works, the *righteousness of sanctification* emphasizes the *necessity* of good works springing from confidence in the finished atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross:

Romans 6:19 - “I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as *slaves to impurity* and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”

1 John 2:28-29 - “And now, little *children, abide in him*, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. [29] If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”

These kinds of verses raise problems for many believers. In a nutshell, the issue is this: *How can righteousness be both freely given, and yet rigorously required*? How can God be both *gracious* and *demanding* at the same time?

To answer those questions properly we need to make sure we fully understand what happens at genuine conversion. Conversion must never be reduced to a mere decision to “*accept Jesus*” (a phrase never used in the Scriptures). Accepting Jesus is fine as long as we *know* all that we are accepting and humbly *follow* the Lord as deeply as He leads.

Imputed righteousness cleans the slate of my sin and guilt. Whatever my past was, it can no longer separate me from the presence of a holy God. God justly dealt with my genuine guilt in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross: **2 Corinthians 5:21** - “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

What a blessed exchange! We should continually rejoice in this marvelous grace. But that grace must do something deeper than make me **thankful**. When God saved me, He did more than just change my **record**. He changed my **heart**.

Now, that transforming work isn't finished yet. But a **seed** of divine life has been planted in my being. I've, in Jesus' words, been "**born of the Spirit**." I'm not a slave to sin's lies anymore.

True, without His imputed grace and righteousness I could never achieve my own standing before Him. I could never be saved by my own good works in a thousand years. But, once I **have** received His freely bestowed grace, the **foundation is laid** for the total transformation of my whole being. The change isn't just **inward**. It manifests itself in an **outward, visibly transformed life**.

Time to wrap up. Here are the key truths the church needs to understand out of all this theology:

First, **God calls all of us to forsake any attempt at pleasing Him apart from faith in Jesus Christ**. There is a zero tolerance on God's part to anything that minimizes the central place given to Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord.

Second, **if we are saved at all, it is only through embracing the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ**. Our own works, apart from Jesus Christ, are still just **filthy rags**.

And third, **if free grace and imputed righteousness plant a seed of humble gratitude that grows in its desire to please and glorify God with my daily decisions**. This whole process doesn't happen over night. But the direction of the Christian is consistently settled:

Titus 2:11-12 - "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, [12] training us [the exact same term Paul used in his letter to Timothy] to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...."