

Divine Righteousness

Determining the divine principles or standards upon which God acts, and distinguishing between them is vital to our understanding of the uniqueness and indispensability of Christ and His Gospel. The divine principles are not difficult to identify, because they are explicitly and repeatedly declared in Scripture. We are very familiar with the divine principles of love, grace, mercy and righteousness. Before we observe the place given to righteousness in divine things, it is necessary to provide a proper framework within which to do so. This involves an outline of what it is that God has done for us.

What God has done for us

There are four precious truths to note which remind us that everything that God has done for us, He has done through His beloved Son and on the ground of His shed blood at Calvary.

1. **Romans 8:32: God *delivered* Him up for us.** “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” This reverts to the determinations in the eternal counsels of God – we have here the doctrine of the *incarnation* of Christ.
2. **2 Corinthians 5:21: God *offered* Him up for us.** “For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.” We have here the doctrine concerning our Lord’s *crucifixion*.
3. **Romans 4:25: God *raised* Him up for us.** “Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” Here the Lord’s *resurrection* is in view.
4. **Hebrews 9:24: God *received* Him up for us.** “For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.” This speaks of the Lord’s *ascension* and *exaltation*.

What God has done *for us* through His Son composes the sure foundation of the doctrine that defines the Gospel of God’s grace and distinguishes our most holy faith. These verses take us to the beginning of the determinate counsels of God which saw the anointing of the Son and the establishment of the blessings we have in His exaltation.

The importance of divine righteousness

When asked to identify the divine principles upon which God acts, many of us readily echo the eloquent and endearing words of the patriarchs and psalmist and speak of God’s infinite love, grace and mercy. However, there is a divine principle that is often overlooked by sinners and saints alike - the principle of *divine righteousness*.

The saint

If, as believers we fail to appreciate the importance of the principle of divine righteousness, our worship and praise will be retarded. This is because true worship and praise must begin with a proper appreciation of the unique character of God - as it is revealed in Scripture. “Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things: O God, who is like unto thee!” (Ps 71:19). Fail here and we might as well pay homage to the deities contrived in the hearts and minds of fallen man. The psalmist – as always, declares the principle and directs our worship. “I will praise the LORD according to his righteousness” (Ps 7:17). “And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day-long” (Ps 35:28).

The sinner

Failure to acknowledge the righteousness of God can be eternally fatal to the sinner. To go no further than divine love, grace and mercy may fail to convict the sinner of his or her standing in sin and judgment before God. We know only too well today how fallen hearts and minds readily accept a gospel of love, but rebel at the notion of righteousness, because it convicts of sin and compels confession. Love, grace and mercy apart from righteousness misrepresents God as a Person who forgives without the need for repentance. It is because of divine righteousness that God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). Divine righteousness compels us to repent. We have the clear principle stated in Second Peter. "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). God's unwillingness that men should perish reveals His love, grace and mercy. But then righteousness comes in and requires repentance, for without it divine love, grace and mercy are of no avail. A sobering truth is it not? And if it were properly understood we would see a godly revision in many of the sermons of our day.

The divine principle of righteousness is inherent in God's own Son, for "He hath loved righteousness, and hated iniquity." He holds the sceptre of righteousness and has been anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows because of it (Heb 1:9). It is no mystery therefore that the ministry of the Spirit of God in the world is to convict it of sin, righteousness and judgment (Jn 16); or that Paul was moved by the Spirit of God to speak of righteousness, temperance and judgment before Felix (Acts 24). It is wholly consistent with the imperative of divine righteousness that, before the Lord entered His great work of reconciliation, we hear Him say to the Baptist – "suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). The Baptist preached righteousness to the Jews nationally. The Christ of God purchased and provided it to man universally, to be appropriated by faith individually. It is to the Righteous Father that He prays, "the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me" (Jn 17:4).

When therefore we come to the love, grace and mercy of God, we must bring in the truth of God's righteousness, not only in the proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace, but also in our priestly worship and praise unto Him.

Seven aspects of divine righteousness

Having seen something of the importance of the principle of divine righteousness, we can now regard what may be referred to as its *seven* aspects. We must begin where God begins - with what His Son has done *for God* in **fulfilling all** righteousness.

1. The **vindication** of a righteous God
2. The **glorification** of a righteous God

We consider next what God has done *for His Son* in **answering all** righteousness.

3. The **exaltation** of the righteous Son of God

These first three aspects of righteousness are foundational and are inextricably linked to the righteous counsels of God in which He acts in regard to *Himself* through His only begotten Son. Only after we have grasped this truth and considered these three aspects of righteousness can we properly consider what God has done *for us* – the sons of God in His **bestowing** of righteousness. The four latter aspects of righteousness are bestowed *instantaneously* and *simultaneously* upon our faith in His Son.

4. **Sanctification** – our being set apart unto righteousness
5. **Imputation** – our receipt of righteousness

6. **Justification** – our standing in righteousness
7. **Glorification** – our inheritance in righteousness

What the Son has done for God in fulfilling all righteousness

Vindication

A little illustration will help us to understand the meaning of vindication. Suppose a person with an outstanding reputation for integrity was accused of a serious impropriety and, as a result he was convicted and lost his present livelihood. His reputation had been spoiled. Everything he did from then on – even acts of unrequited goodness were stained with suspicion. Sometime later, an enquiry proved he had been wrongly convicted. The enquiry served to vindicate or uphold his reputation. It may be that upon his vindication he was reinstated and even awarded compensation.

God too has a reputation. He is a holy and righteous God who hates sin. He loves righteousness (Ps 33:5). The heavens declare his righteousness (Ps 50:6). When He speaks it is according to His holiness (Ps 60:6); When He swears it is according to His holiness (Ps 89:95); His sanctuary and throne are holy (Ps 47:8). “He is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look upon iniquity.” Sin entered God’s creation through the disobedience of Adam – a man that God Himself created, a man God created in His own image. This contradicted God’s *righteous character*. It challenged and impugned the righteousness of every principle upon which God acts – His love, longsuffering, grace and mercy. God’s righteous character had to be vindicated and so uphold and declare the righteous character of every one of His divine principles.

Unlike the illustration of the wrongly convicted man above, divine vindication is not about “compensation” or “restoration.” This is because God’s righteousness cannot be measured and neither can it be lost in part or whole. It is more to do with “exoneration” - being proved right after having been slighted and affronted by sin. Furthermore, unlike our illustration God must vindicate *Himself*. This is because no one else can meet His infinite standard of righteousness. “Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness” (Ex 15:11). So God sent His Son – His only begotten Son who is co-equal with God in loving righteousness and hating iniquity. In sending His only begotten Son to vindicate Him, God in fact sent Himself. His Son entered into death in order to bear God’s righteous judgment against sin and thus vindicate the holiness of God. To do this He had to come in fashion as a man. And so we have the clear testimony of Scripture, that “now once in the end of the world hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb 9:26). God *delivered up* His own Son who came as man – God incarnate, in order that He be *offered up* to bear the wrath of God against sin and vindicate His holy and righteous character.

Glorification

It is possible to vindicate a person out of a clinical sense of duty or to do it grudgingly and even be resentful of the outcome. When Christ died to put away sin and vindicate the righteousness of God He did it in perfect obedience and with all delight. He is the righteous Son who willingly entered into death and bore God’s wrath against sin in order to uphold the righteous reputation of God. His heartfelt motive is anticipated in Psalm 40. “I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8). In this He *glorified* God. His glorification of God is especially brought out in His filial relationship with God in the hours before drinking that bitter cup or wrath. “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt 26:39). The Son of God was given many a bitter cup from man. There was the bitter cup of *national rejection* – “He came unto his own, and his own received Him not” (Jn 1:11), “we will not have this man to reign over us” (Lk 19:14); the bitter cup of *unjust accusation* – “They hated me without a cause” (Jn 15:25); the bitter cup of *personal vilification* – “This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils” (Matt 12:24) and then the bitter cup of *public humiliation* – they hung Him on a felon’s cross “numbered with the transgressors” (Mk 15:28). The Lord in full stride accepted and drank every bitter cup from man. There was one cup however we reverently observe, that He trembled to take – the bitter cup that was given to Him by

His Father. It was never due to a lack of duty or devotion. It was because of the terrible necessity of Him who knew no sin being made sin – that is, being made an offering for sin and forsaken by God on the cross (2 Cor 5:21). “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Ps 22). God was glorified because it was His righteousness and the upholding of it that was at the heart of the Son’s willing pledge and purpose - “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” - and so not one dark bitter drop remained. “The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” (Jn 18:11). In the sacrifice offered by Abel – a sin offering we have the matter of sins and righteousness brought out. “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous [before God]” (Heb 11:4). In the sacrifice requested of Abraham in Genesis 22 – a burnt offering, we have the matter of God’s glory brought out through willing obedience. In His anticipation of His death at Calvary the Lord declared of Himself, “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do” (Jn 17:4).¹

What God has done in answer to all righteousness

We can now turn our attention to what God has done for His Son – His **resurrection** and **exaltation**. God *raised* Him up and *received* Him up, His great work of vindication and glorification having been accomplished on the cross – the working of God’s mighty power, “which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at his own right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:20). In connection with the burnt offering and glorification God comes in with blessing. We have it in the instance of Abraham. “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen 22:16-18).

God has left enduring monuments of His vindication and glorification by His Son: the *silent* witness – the empty tomb; the *angelic* witness – “He is risen; He is not here: behold the place where they laid Him”; the *disciples’* witness - first Mary Magdalene, another two and then the eleven (Mk 16); the *Spirit’s* witness in baptism on the day of Pentecost – “Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear” (Acts 2:33; 1 Cor 12:13). However, the greatest witness to God’s vindication and glorification is the witness of *heaven* itself – the vision glorious of the Son seated at God’s right hand. “Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21).

Christ’s exaltation

And so we come to what God has done for His Son - His exaltation. His exaltation is more than His ascension to a place – heaven. It relates to a *position*. Christ is *seated* at the *right hand* of God. “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3). His exaltation is because of His perfect work and subjection. “And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philipp 2:8-11). We are careful to observe the reciprocal truth identified by the term “also” in this passage. God has “also” highly exalted the Son, because the Son as we have continually noted, exalted God in the fulfilment of all righteousness by vindicating and glorifying God through His death and shed blood.

¹It was not Christ in His life – perfect and righteous though that was, that vindicated and glorified God, as the Reformers such as Luther and Calvin would have us believe. They attribute Christ’s life (and even His descent into Hades) to be as important as His death in the work of reconciliation. They were blessedly correct in that justification was *through* faith, but they missed the mark in regard to the basis upon which it was *provided*. It was the sacrificial death of Christ and His death *alone* that defeated sin and vindicated the holiness of God. The reason is simple – atonement and redemption is only upon the righteous ground of shed blood.

The pre-eminence of the exalted Christ

What we have then is an **exalted** Christ; His exaltation bearing testimony to the vindication and glorification of God. It would be a shame to leave this grand truth before noting the pre-eminence of the exalted Christ in regard to the *Church, Israel* and the *millennial* world.

- **Acts 2:33:** “Therefore being by the right hand of God **exalted**, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear” – “this” being the coming of the Church at Pentecost – the Church of the Firstborn.
- **Acts 5:31:** “Him hath God **exalted** with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” This looks beyond the Church to a distant day when God again takes up His *firstborn* – not the church now but the nation of Israel. “Prince” is a prophetic title of Christ as seen in Daniel 9:25. “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times.”
- **Philippians 2:9:** “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

What God has done for us in the bestowing of righteousness

With God vindicated and glorified and Christ exalted, God is free to act in **grace** towards man enabling him to obtain the righteousness of God on the basis of **faith**. And so we have the divine principle that “grace reigns through righteousness.” What then does grace reigning through righteousness bestow upon us? When by faith I come into the truth of the gospel of God’s grace I am the object of divine *sanctification, imputation, justification* and *glorification*.

Sanctification – our being set apart unto righteousness

We speak here of positional sanctification – not practical. “For by one offering He hath perfected for ever them that **are** sanctified” (Heb 10:14). It is the work of spiritual regeneration. Peter tells us we are “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:2).

Imputation – our receipt of righteousness

When man stands before God in Adam, he bears testimony to the solemn truth that “There is none righteous, no not one.” When he stands before God in Christ, he bears testimony to the glorious truth that “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom 4:8). “For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). The blessing to faith of imputed righteousness was the experience of Abraham. Imputation of righteousness is not an impartation of righteousness. God deems us as righteous in Christ.

Justification – our standing in righteousness

Justification means that God can never bring a charge against a person in Christ. If He did, He would be acting unjustly. He has after all declared that person forever righteous. As noted above, Christ bore the wrath of God on the cross against sin. This means that God can justify the sinner *on the principle of faith* and remain righteous. It is the “righteousness which is of faith.” If He is to be just, God must honor the work of Christ by accepting all who come to Him by the way of it. He must reckon them to be righteous and so they become the righteousness of God in Christ. This He delights to do because it honors His Son and His work, and brings glory to Himself – revealing His righteousness; for in the Gospel of Christ the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith (Rom 1:17). Conversely, God would be unjust if He were to declare a sinner righteous on any principle

other than faith – such as a person’s works. This would be tantamount to imputing righteousness apart from the finished and accepted work of Christ - which *demand*s faith and faith alone. This principle of faith held true in the past as Romans 3 tells us (as we have it in the case of Abraham and all the ancients of faith). “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God” (Rom 3:25). It holds true now and into the future. An abrogation of it would deny the Gospel of Christ and fail to reveal the righteousness of God – “which is of faith.” We see then how God is just and righteous when He justifies sinners because of their faith - and just and righteous when He judges sinners because of their unbelief.

Glorification – our inheritance in righteousness

“Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified” (Rom 8:30). As righteous in Christ we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

Blessed assurance

These seven aspects of divine righteousness have a practical blessedness because there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The shed blood of Christ vindicated God's love, mercy grace and longsuffering, and made them righteous, so that we can take the Gospel of Christ to every person and preach that God will justify all who place their faith in His Son.