Being Declared Righteous is the Opposite of Declaring Our Own Righteousness

1 Corinthians 15:1-2

Over the years, I have talked with many people who were seeking the reassurance that they were safe in Christ. In my experience these people have usually committed a sin or sins that led them to believe that Christ and Christianity didn’t take. What I find interesting is that, in the scriptures we don’t usually see “sinners” wondering if they are saved or not. Instead, there are several examples of people who believe they are better than other people or even especially righteous who, as it turns out, don’t get the gospel. They have, as the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 15, “Believed something that wasn’t true in the first place.” Therefore, as we examine a few biblical accounts today I would ask you to consider this one concept. That is, being declared righteous by God is the opposite of declaring your own righteousness. Let’s begin with the account of the Rich Young Ruler.

Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:16-29)

16 Someone came to Jesus with this question: “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

17 “Why ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. But to answer your question—if you want to receive eternal life, keep the commandments.”

18 “Which ones?” the man asked.

And Jesus replied: “‘You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. 19 Honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

20 “I’ve obeyed all these commandments,” the young man replied. “What else must I do?”

21 Jesus told him, “If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

22 But when the young man heard this, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, it is very hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. 24 I’ll say it again—it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

Pharisee (not the tax collector) (Luke 18:9-14)

9 Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: 10 “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer[b]: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! 12 I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ 14 I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7)

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. 37 When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. 38 Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She’s a sinner!”

40 Then Jesus answered his thoughts. “Simon,” he said to the Pharisee, “I have something to say to you.”

“Go ahead, Teacher,” Simon replied.

41 Then Jesus told him this story: “A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver[i] to one and 50 pieces to the other. 42 But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?”

43 Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt.”

“That’s right,” Jesus said. 44 Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn’t offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You didn’t greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume.

47 “I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.” 48 Then Jesus said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.”

49 The men at the table said among themselves, “Who is this man, that he goes around forgiving sins?”

50 And Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Teachers of the Law and Pharisees (and converts) (Matthew 23:15)

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. 3 So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. 4 They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.

5 “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. 6 And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. 7 They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’

8 “Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. 9 And don’t address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your Father. 10 And don’t let anyone call you ‘Teacher,’ for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you must be a servant. 12 But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

13 “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces. You won’t go in yourselves, and you don’t let others enter either.

15 “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell[f] you yourselves are!

People who view themselves as healthy (Mark 2; Matthew 9)

13 Then Jesus went out to the lakeshore again and taught the crowds that were coming to him. 14 As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at his tax collector’s booth. “Follow me and be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Levi got up and followed him.

15 Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus’ followers.) 16 But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees[b] saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, “Why does he eat with such scum?”

17 When Jesus heard this, he told them, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.”

Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8) (Believe and baptism)

9 A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, amazing the people of Samaria and claiming to be someone great. 10 Everyone, from the least to the greatest, often spoke of him as “the Great One—the Power of God.” 11 They listened closely to him because for a long time he had astounded them with his magic.

12 But now the people believed Philip’s message of Good News concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, many men and women were baptized. 13 Then Simon himself believed and was baptized. He began following Philip wherever he went, and he was amazed by the signs and great miracles Philip performed.

14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that the people of Samaria had accepted God’s message, they sent Peter and John there. 15 As soon as they arrived, they prayed for these new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. 16 The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them, for they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John laid their hands upon these believers, and they received the Holy Spirit.

18 When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power. 19 “Let me have this power, too,” he exclaimed, “so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!”

20 But Peter replied, “May your money be destroyed with you for thinking God’s gift can be bought! 21 You can have no part in this, for your heart is not right with God. 22 Repent of your wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive your evil thoughts, 23 for I can see that you are full of bitter jealousy and are held captive by sin.”

People who profess Jesus as Lord and do all kinds of (seemingly spiritual things) but don’t believe and live in the light of the gospel. (Matthew 7)

21 “Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. 22 On judgment day many will say to me, ‘Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.’ 23 But I will reply, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws.’

People who want to perform works to get the crowd’s praise. (John 6:22-29)

22 The next day the crowd that had stayed on the far shore saw that the disciples had taken the only boat, and they realized Jesus had not gone with them. 23 Several boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the Lord had blessed the bread and the people had eaten. 24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went across to Capernaum to look for him. 25 They found him on the other side of the lake and asked, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

26 Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. 27 But don’t be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man[f] can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of his approval.”

28 They replied, “We want to perform God’s works, too. What should we do?”

29 Jesus told them, “This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.”

These are the kinds of attitudes that Paul is speaking to in 1 Corinthians when he says:

2 It is this Good News that saves you if you continue to believe the message I told you—unless, of course, you believed something that was never true in the first place.

These are some of the things about being saved that were never true in the first place.

These are some of the other gospels that Paul is talking about when he wrote to the Galatians:

8 Let God’s curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. 9 I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed.

What is the work that God desires? In Jesus’ own words:

“This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.”

That is why belief (or trust) in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is the only way to be saved. This is why the scriptures say:

8 God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. 9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

Protestant Christians believe in salvation by God’s grace through faith in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

So does this mean that works have nothing to do with being a Christian?

Absolutely not. That is why the apostle James wrote:

14 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? 15 Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, 16 and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

17 So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

18 Now someone may argue, “Some people have faith; others have good deeds.” But I say, “How can you show me your faith if you don’t have good deeds? I will show you my faith by my good deeds.”

19 You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror. 20 How foolish! Can’t you see that faith without good deeds is useless?

21 Don’t you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete. 23 And so it happened just as the Scriptures say: “Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.” He was even called the friend of God.[h] 24 So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

25 Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. 26 Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

So let me summarize…

People are saved by God’s grace through their trust in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

But…

Faith without works is dead. (James)

Works that are meant to prove your faith to God or yourself (isn’t faith)

Works that are a result of faith (demonstrate saving faith to others around you) (James)

Works that are used to demonstrate your self-health to yourself and others are evil boastings of a completely different religious system.

Any person who has truly been saved by grace through faith will never be able to prove themselves well by their works. Instead they will live with an ever present reminder that only God is good and that any evidence of their goodness and health is because of their faith in Jesus’ sacrificial life, death, and resurrection.

The Good News leaves absolutely no room for boasting in works. Instead, it frees the broken and unhealthy to live as redeemed penitent debtors who owe everything to their risen Lord.

To say it one more way. People who have believed in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection know that they are not righteous, instead they trust that God has declared them righteous because of their faith in Jesus.

As the scriptures I have read today demonstrate, those who believe themselves to be righteous have a tendency to view the unrighteous as scum.

People, who are declared righteous, view unrighteous people as those who need Jesus just like they themselves need Him.

We are saved by grace through faith alone and it WILL produce fruit, but any fruit that we are patting ourselves on the back for is rotten fruit.