



## Articles and Sermons :: Pathway to Righteousness By Malcolm Smith

### Pathway to Righteousness By Malcolm Smith, on: 2005/8/20 5:30

Robert was a singer in a well-known evangelical singing group back in the mid 70's. He had been born again while working in nightclubs on the West Coast. Someone had left him a tract as they left the bar where he was performing. It told him of a new life in Christ, and he was ready to receive it. He wanted the joy, peace and power in life that the booklet offered. In his hotel room in the early hours of the morning, he prayed the prayer indicated at the end of the booklet.

He was born again and God blessed him in his new life. He joined a Gospel quartet after he married a beautiful born again girl from Bakersfield. For two years he sang to enthused crowds and sometimes gave his testimony on a nightly basis.

But then the group had financial problems and broke up. Before they did he had gone without pay for a month, enough time to plunge him deeper into debt. Arguments with his wife became violent, and he began to wonder where the peace and joy of his early Christian life had gone.

After the break-up he accepted the position of minister of music in a large church in southern California. Everything went well during the first nine months, but soon arguments at home and pressures in the church found him without answers to life. He began drinking heavily to forget pressures he could not handle and questions he could not answer.

One November afternoon he came home from the church after a confrontation with the senior pastor who had told him to get the music program together or resign. Within half an hour of being home, a violent argument erupted between him and his wife. He walked out into the cool evening, slamming the door behind him.

He headed for the bar on the other side of the city and drank until he was hardly aware of the people around him. He remembered the girl who helped him out of the bar, and he remembered being with her in a room. As the sun shone through the broken shutters, he gradually became conscious of a massive headache and later found he had been relieved of his billfold.

When he found his way home, it was three o'clock in the afternoon. There was no use trying to hide anything. He confessed to his wife and asked her forgiveness. She said she forgave him and he believed she meant it. They knelt and prayed. He asked God's forgiveness and tried to believe it was given.

He resigned from the position of music director and found a job as a salesman in a nearby city. He did well and within six months he was promoted to be the area manager in Virginia.

During the months of success Robert never found peace. He had sinned against God and man and stood condemned before the bar of his own conscience. In quiet moments he felt like a loathsome leper. He plunged into more work to try to find peace.

They had joined a church and Robert looked for answers to his problems. What could be done to assure him of righteousness before God? How could he stand before God and man with a clear conscience, without pangs of guilt rising within him?

He began to wonder if the months of failure were bothering him so much because he had never resolved his past lifestyle of sin or any of his failures before God.

The pastor of the church they had joined did not help. He preached that man should be perfect before God and condemnation for all who fall short. Every time he left church on Sunday, Robert felt spiritually beaten up. He went back each week because he felt he deserved to get a thrashing. He did not dare share his problems with the members of the church. He knew they would treat him as a leper. Of course, this did not help. When everyone you respect as God's children make it known that your sin is unforgivable, it is hard to imagine that God would forgive you.

There was an old lady who stomped into church with her cane every Sunday morning at 10:59 and sat in a large chair in front. She was the matriarch of the church, having been there from its foundation in 1915. She was revered as a saint, and it was apparent that the pastor bowed to her desires and decisions.

Robert decided to go and see her. He did not tell her the details of his past, but focused his conversation on guilt in general and the question on how a man can be righteous before God— knowing acceptance by Him.

Her words summed up the understanding of the Gospel that the church had. “I am as right with God as I am devoted and dedicated to Him,” she rasped. If I am not wholly dedicated, then I cannot expect to be accepted. A thorough dedication every week keeps me right with God.”

Robert left the interview excited. If she had accomplished acceptance with God through a life dedicated to Jesus, why shouldn't he? Of course, all his problems sprang from a lack of discipline. If he could produce a better lifestyle, then he could be assured of God's forgiveness.

The church was very supportive of this way of salvation. They not only insisted on living the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the exhortation of the epistles, but they also added their own list of rules covering dress, hobbies and social life.

After his decision to be better there followed a regime of Bible reading and prayer before work every morning. Robert was involved in every activity of the church, and each Sunday he could be found praying the prayer of rededication before the altar.

After three months of trying, with every nerve in his body strained to please God, he faced the sickening truth that nothing had happened. In fact, he felt more unrighteous and unclean before God than he ever had before. In seeking to keep the rules, he found that he had failed most of the time. Even when he kept the rules outwardly, he realized that he chafed and fought them in his desires, longing to break them.

Each Sunday he went through the motions of asking forgiveness and rededication, but by this time he did not believe it was possible for a failure like him to receive forgiveness. If God had not given him assurance of forgiveness for the sins of the past, why should he expect any pardon for his current sins?

One lunch hour while he was sitting miserably in a restaurant, he heard laughter from a side room and then heard hearty clapping accompanied by shouts of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!”

He listened as a group of men testified to joy, peace and power to live in Jesus Christ. He remembered the first days in southern California and left his table to join their meeting.

He returned to their meetings week after week, and they heartily accepted him. He enjoyed being accepted as a brother in such a free atmosphere, but his joy was soured by the thought, “They don't know what I'm really like. If they did, they'd throw me out.”

After a couple of months, he decided to open up to the leaders. They listened in silence. After he finished the president said, “He needs the baptism.” All promptly laid hands on him and began to pray in loud voices. The president had his hands on Robert's head and was shaking it violently. All that Robert could think of was the people eating lunch in the restaurant.

They stopped praying as abruptly as they had begun. The president said, “You must accept the baptism by faith, brother.” Another said, “God has forgiven you, so you must now forgive yourself. Who are you to condemn yourself when God says you are righteous?” The third was putting on his coat and said, “Keep your confession positive! Wake up every morning and say, ‘I am the righteousness of God in Christ!’”

The men shook his hand warmly. He was so embarrassed, he went out by the service entrance. Once in his car he slumped into the seat and put his forehead on the steering wheel. He was further from the sense of being right with God than he had ever been. He was bitterly angry with the three men. They had not cared for him— they only put him through an assembly line.

He thought, “They say God has forgiven me, but why should he?” He said the words over and over again and tears welled in his eyes.

“Why should God forgive? I have sinned, not only once, but all my life. No one can say that it is suddenly gone. Someo

ne has to pay, and the cost is beyond me.”

He drove out of the parking lot and headed toward the office. He was shocked when he found himself thinking, “I am not fit to live. I can’t produce one week of dedicated living to God. I can’t even love the God I want forgiveness from!” For one fleeting moment he wanted to drive the car over the divider and end such a wretched life. With great control he pulled to the slow lane and drove carefully to his office.

I suppose it would be true to say that it was at that time Robert met me. He locked the door of his office and dropped into his chair. He reached out and switched on the radio. It was tuned to a news station, so he began turning the dial for music. Once he found some music he left his desk to lie on the couch. His mind was spinning. The music stopped and the announcer introduced “The Radio Bible School” with Malcolm Smith. He was too weary to get up and look for music, so he let the program continue.

I certainly do not remember what I spoke about that day, and it is even vague in Robert’s mind. What he did hear was an announcement of God’s love grace and forgiveness through Christ that he never recollected hearing before. By the end of the program he was on his feet scribbling down our address.

We became aware of Robert when he applied for one of our spring retreats. I met him as the buds were bursting in northern Pennsylvania last year.

On Saturday afternoon we sat in the cafeteria. Before he began his story, he begged me not to give him cliches. “I would rather you say nothing at all,” he said.

I listened through his story from the nightclubs to the Christian businessmen in Virginia. I heard it so many times before in varying degrees. It was the plight of a Christian who sees his utter unworthiness to stand before God in the context of a church that knows only the letter of the Law. The church members, subconsciously realizing their inability to live up to the standards of the Law, react with violent anger and condemnation toward those who let their failures be known.

Robert and the church he attended are to be found in the New Testament. Paul wrote a letter to these people who lived in Galatia. They were those who had been born again through faith in Jesus, but tried to maintain their righteousness through their own efforts and dedications. They focused all their will power to keep the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, live the example of Jesus and keep the rules they had added to the ones given by God. Their present standing with God had been summed up by the old matriarch. Their right standing with God was understood in terms of today’s level of dedication. This is a precarious situation in which one never knows if he is right or not.

The pathway of being right with God by trying to do good is doomed to despair. It is a simple fact that the more a person tries to be acceptable to God, the greater his failure and despair. He discovers that he cannot keep the Law, or live by the example of Jesus.

How much is enough love for God? When has a man loved his neighbor enough? The work that will achieve righteousness before God is always a dancing mirage on the horizon, awaiting the perfect dedication to make it real.

Paul spoke of the days when as a Pharisee he tried to please God. In Philippians 3:7 he spoke of the ways in which he had sought acceptance and righteousness. He described the list as “the things he counted gain.” This is a phrase in the Greek language that describes a miser counting out his wealth, drooling over it. Paul is saying that he counted out what he looked upon as his spiritual wealth, drooling over how he was more righteous than his peers. He sincerely believed his good works were the currency that assured him a place in God’s favor.

What Paul came to see was the shocking revelation that although his keeping of the Law and his struggles to achieve righteousness served him well before his fellow men, it was useless before God. In actual fact, his trying to be right with God worked against him. He was so proud of his achievements that he did not see the need of receiving God’s righteousness as a free gift.

In certain parts of Africa rice is used as currency. A good preacher will be paid a cup of rice for his sermon. A rich man had many suitcases of rice. A native evangelist from that region had been invited to the United States for a preaching tour and was asking me what he needed to bring for his trip. One of his questions was, “How much rice will I need?” I patiently explained to him that rice was not a currency in the United States, only the dollar. A suitcase of rice would buy much in the bush, but here it could not even purchase a hamburger at McDonald’s.

As we talked I thought about the righteousness a man gains by doing his best to keep laws. Before man it counts a lot! It is spiritual wealth that gives a man respect; he is known for his piety and good works. After a while men might even call him a saint; but before God, man's best is as useless as a bag of rice in McDonald's.

The fact is that the Gospel declared that man stands before God, not based on what he has done for God, but on the foundation of what God has done for him. Romans 3:31 calls this gift from God a "righteousness that is apart from the Law."

The Gospel is the announcement that Someone has paid! God's justice demands payment, and my conscience bears witness. The Holy Spirit turns our attention to Jesus, who takes our place and fully pays the price. We can now legally receive the wiping out of our past record of sin.

That statement sets Christianity aside from every other religion in the world. Being righteous before God has nothing to do with keeping a lot of rules – God's rules or anyone else's! All the rules have done is to show the futility of trying to keep them! They prepare the way, reducing man to helplessness and despair, so that he is in the place where he is ready to receive God's free gift of righteousness.

God condemns all of man's efforts and gives His righteousness that has nothing to do with our efforts to please Him. The New Testament calls this being justified.

The word justified comes from the courts of law. If an innocent man is declared not guilty by the judge and is acquitted, he has been justified, i.e. a declaration that he is innocent.

It is amazing that this word is used to describe what God does to the sinner. Man stands before the righteous Judge, and he is truly guilty. If we receive what we deserve, all is lost. The Good News is that God justifies us! He pardons us and declares us not guilty of all charges.

How can God justify guilty man? It is because Jesus Christ has taken our place, assumed our guilt and paid the penalty in full. Our sin was placed to His account so that we can be received by the Father as not guilty. The Scripture states, "He is the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:26)

It should be noted that justification is God's declaration concerning us. He does not make us sinlessly perfect people, but declares us innocent as if we had. The world says to God, "I will change my ways so you can accept me." God says, "I will accept you and then change your ways."

Justification is ours because of God's work in Christ and His declaration. We have no part in it except to receive. It means that we cannot grow into it. If it was based on our works, we would gradually move toward it as we improved our life. But God gives it, and it is ours the instant we believe upon Jesus.

By the same token, we cannot grow within justification. The righteousness expressed by the old matriarch was based on this error. She had a concept of righteousness somewhat similar to a reservoir. If there has been plenty of rain, the waters are high; if there has been a drought, the waters are low and muddy. If she was wholly dedicated today, her righteousness was high. If she felt spiritually lethargic, then her right standing before God was seen as almost non-existent. The poor lady had not seen that justification is God's gift, and we cannot be more acceptable to God than he is now, not even in heaven.

The letter Paul wrote to Philemon is a perfect illustration of justification. Philemon's slave, Onesimus, stole money from his master and ran away. In the providence of God he arrives in Rome and meets with Paul who apparently leads him to Christ. The apostle insists that the runaway slave return to his rightful owner. But what about the stolen money long since spent?

Paul wrote his letter to Philemon and in it stated that all the money Onesimus owed to Philemon was placed to his account. Whatever the amount, Paul promised to pay in full. This meant that Philemon could forgive Onesimus, receiving him as if he had not stolen the money. Paul goes so far as to say that Philemon should receive Onesimus as if he, Paul, were coming to him. In the same way, Jesus Christ has taken our debt and the Father is now able to declare us righteous and accept us as if we were Jesus!

Another word that Paul used to describe this act of God is "reckon" (Romans 4:4). In the days of Paul the word "reckon" was used to describe the wages paid into a worker's account at the end of the month for work accomplished. By using the word to describe what God does, Paul lights us this doctrine of justification. If God pays man the wages he deserves, he is doomed. Instead, God pays righteousness into our account, not based on our works but on the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not an empty philosophy, but the dynamic heart of the believer's life. It means that the believer has the right and the responsibility to see himself as God does—righteous. He knows that he could not be more righteous before God than he is now! It means that he is worthy to pray, fellowship with God and receive all that the promises offer.

Without this understanding we are spiritual cripples, condemned by past sins and today's failures. Knowing that the work of Christ has covered all (past, present and future) and that God fully accepts us, we do not contradict Him by placing ourselves under condemnation. We rejoice in such a salvation. We walk out into life, knowing that the books of our life are eternally balanced through Christ.

I shared these truths with Robert throughout Saturday afternoon. We prayed together, using the words of Ephesians 1:17-19, for one can have all the intellectual understanding of justification but unless the Holy Spirit makes it alive, it is dead works.

Later he wrote to me saying, "Since that afternoon at the retreat, my Christian life really began. Before that I had no peace with God. I cringed before Him, always feeling the guilt of my past. Now I know, through the finished work of Christ, that I have peace with God—and I love it! I no longer call myself unworthy, for I have been made worthy through Jesus. I am learning to walk boldly before God, knowing there is no condemnation. Hallelujah!"