

The Lord Our Righteousness

Text:

Jer 33:14-17

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.' "For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel. (ESV)

Romans 3:19-31

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God *which is* by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 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; To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. *Is he* the God of the Jews only? *is he* not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: Seeing *it is* one God, which shall justify the circumcision

by faith, and uncircumcision through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

Introduction:

What we have to say today is a continuation of what we said last time. We have taken the same text from the Old Testament, and from the New Testament we have taken another text from Paul's Epistle to the Romans that contains the same expression, "the righteousness of God", as the text we took last week. The word "righteousness" is what links the two texts and we will explore this more fully in a moment, but first let me remind you of where we have already been.

Last week we saw that our confidence is in God. Our hope of salvation lies in the fact that God is righteous. He has promised, and he will keep his word. We focused on the opening line of the text: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." We saw that the Gospel, the good news of salvation by Jesus Christ is a revelation of God's righteousness." We said that the thing that keeps us waiting is our confidence, based on past performance, that God will keep his promises. We tried to answer the question: "Why should we keep waiting?" Today we are looking at the same text, but asking another question. The question today is: "What are we waiting for?"

We are in Advent. Advent is a time of waiting. This attitude of waiting defines Christian existence. We are a waiting people. We are a waiting people because we acknowledge that all good things come from God. We are waiting for and praying for the coming of his Kingdom, because only his kingdom will be a truly righteous kingdom; hence a truly peaceable kingdom. What we long for is a kingdom of peace, of *shalom*, as Isaiah says: "and the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places" (Isaiah 33: 17-18).

There may be a time in the life of an individual when he or she believes that humans are capable of creating a righteous, hence a peaceable kingdom, but the perceptive person comes to realize with time and experience that all human activity is tainted by sin and ultimately doomed to failure. We come to confess with Jeremiah that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 11:9). When we come to this realization we either despair, or we learn to wait. Paul says this ability to wait for God’s righteousness is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5:5 he writes: “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.” He says this in the context of those who have slipped back into trying to establish their own righteousness by keeping the rites of Judaism, but as he says later in the chapter this always leads, not to a peaceable kingdom of love and service, but to biting and devouring one another. So we long for God’s *shalom*, but at the same time we acknowledge that his peace can only follow his righteousness for there is “no peace for the wicked”. It is, in fact, impossible for peace and unrighteousness to co-exist, and it impossible for us to make ourselves righteous. Since we are reading from Jeremiah, I will again quote him. He asks the question: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23). The point he is making becomes evident in his next statement when he says: “Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil”. So if we have any hope of righteousness that will lead to salvation and peace, it must come from outside of ourselves.

This is what we are waiting for. We are not seeking to establish our own righteousness because that is impossible. We must, in fact, resist every impulse towards every sort of self-righteousness. This brings us back to our text from Jeremiah. Jeremiah spoke these words at a low point in Judah’s history. “The last king of Judah, Zedekiah (*Sidqi-yahu*) had proved untrue to the meaning of his name, “Yahweh’s righteousness”; but now Jeremiah prophesies that another would rise who would rightly bear the name *Yahweh-sidqenu* (“The Lord Our Righteousness”, Jeremiah 23:5), so that eventually the inhabitants of Jerusalem itself could also bear that name. So last week we looked at the righteous Lord as the source of our hope, today we are looking at the righteousness of the Lord as the end of our hope.

I. The Righteousness of the Lord

We have already quoted texts from Jeremiah that indicate the impossibility of humans establishing their own righteousness, and as we have seen without righteousness all attempts at salvation and peace fall short. This text reflects the failure of the monarchies of Israel and Judah. As we have been exploring on Sunday evenings, God had established kings over his people. These kings were to be judged on the basis of one thing: whether or not they walked in the ways of the Lord. This is the reason that as we read through the history of the monarchies judgment is passed on each king, and each one is graded on how he followed God's commands, nothing else. There is far more failure than success. The fair hope of a righteous kingdom where God's *shalom* reigned become more and more remote as new kings were added to the ever-increasing list. Finally, as we have already seen Zedekiah utterly fails to live up to his name, Judah utterly fails to fulfill its mission, and all hope seems to be forever crushed under the cruel feet of Nebuchadnezzar's army. The fair capital, Jerusalem, is in ruins; no king sits on David's throne, and it seems that the descendants of Abraham, the possessors of the covenants and promises of God are about to become a little-noticed footnote in the history of the nations.

It is into this bleak world that Jeremiah speaks this prophecy, predicting, like Isaiah before him, that even though the tree of the Davidic dynasty had been cut down, a shoot would one day spring from its roots. Unlike those who had sat on the throne previously, however, this righteous branch would "execute justice and righteousness in the land." In the time of his coming salvation would come to Judah and they would be known by the name "the Lord is our Righteousness."

Even Jeremiah could not understand the full meaning of his prophecy. He was thinking, no doubt, of the time of the restoration under Zerubbabel, a descendant of David. His prophecy for us, however, takes on far greater meaning in light of the accomplishments to the true Righteous Branch who springs up out of David. Let's go back to Paul and his Epistle to the Romans now. Before going to the passage we have read let me remind you that the book begins with these words:

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Notice how he points out that on his human side Jesus Christ was a descendant of David. This is a theme we find all through the New Testament. There is no question that the Apostles identify the Righteous Shoot of David with Jesus Christ. In fact, when you consider the Old Testament prophecies that speak of this “Son of David”, only one person in history even comes close to fulfilling what was prophesied about him.

I remind you now of the question we are trying to answer: “What are we waiting for?” The answer simply put is “the righteousness of the Lord”. We cannot make ourselves righteous. We always fail, always fall short. Our best attempts leave much to be desired. Is righteousness possible? Let’s look now at Paul’s answer to that question in Romans 3. The entire Epistle develops a single idea, and the passage we are looking at is the heart of its argument. First, this passage concludes an argument that begins in 1:18 where he proves the point I have been insisting on. We are all sinners and as such we are incapable of saving ourselves, of creating any real salvation or peace. In the concluding statement of his condemnation of all humanity he has quoted a litany of Old Testament passages to prove the point. Among them is Isaiah 59:8: “The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace.” He has made his case. The whole world is guilty before God, incapable of righteousness, thus without hope of salvation. Is there a way out? Two of the most important words in the Bible are the “But now” at the beginning of verse 21 as Paul transitions from universal condemnation to universal hope of salvation. “But now”, he says, the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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; To declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:21-26).

Yes there is a hope of righteousness and salvation, but it does not come through our own efforts, it is not the result of keeping any law; it is Paul says without or apart from law. It is a gift from God given to all who believe in Jesus Christ who made it possible through his death on our behalf. This is the reason God can at the same time justify or, declare righteous the sinner, and maintain his own righteousness by keeping his promise to save.