

Lesson 23

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Compiled by Darrell Crow based upon personal studies, notes and prayer.

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RIGHTEOUSNESS

The first mention of the word righteousness is found in Genesis 15:6, which is part of a passage of an interaction between Abram, later known as Abraham, and God:

*1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir * of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:1-6*

Dictionaries define *righteousness* as "behavior that is morally justifiable or right." Such behavior is characterized by accepted standards of morality, justice, virtue, or uprightness. The Bible's standard of human righteousness is God's own perfection in every attribute, every attitude, every action. Thus, God's laws, as given in the Bible, both describe His own character and constitute the standard by which He measures human

The Greek New Testament primarily describes righteousness, in legal matters, especially with regards to God. It is contrasted to the one who, out of reverence for God nor

reveres God nor respects man. Webster's definition of following religious or moral laws is "morally good; morally right or fair" [1].

When you consider what is fair in most people's opinion today, this definition leaves wide room for just about anything to be declared righteous. If you look at the Webster's 1828 Dictionary listing for the word righteousness you see a more detailed listing [2]:

- Purity of heart and rectitude of life; conformity of heart and life to the divine law. Righteousness as used in Scripture and theology, in which it is chiefly used, is nearly equivalent to holiness, comprehending holy principles and affections of heart, and conformity of life to the divine law. It includes all we call justice, honesty and virtue, with holy affections; in short, it is true religion.
- Applied to God, the perfection or holiness of his nature; exact rectitude; faithfulness.
- The active and passive obedience of Christ, by which the law of God is fulfilled. Daniel 9:7.
- Justice; equity between man and man. Luke 1:75.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Bible teaches that righteousness is based on what God says about **what makes us right in His eyes.**

What makes us right or righteous in God's eyes is not anything that we have done. It is our response to His grace by believing through faith that what God has told us about salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ is true.

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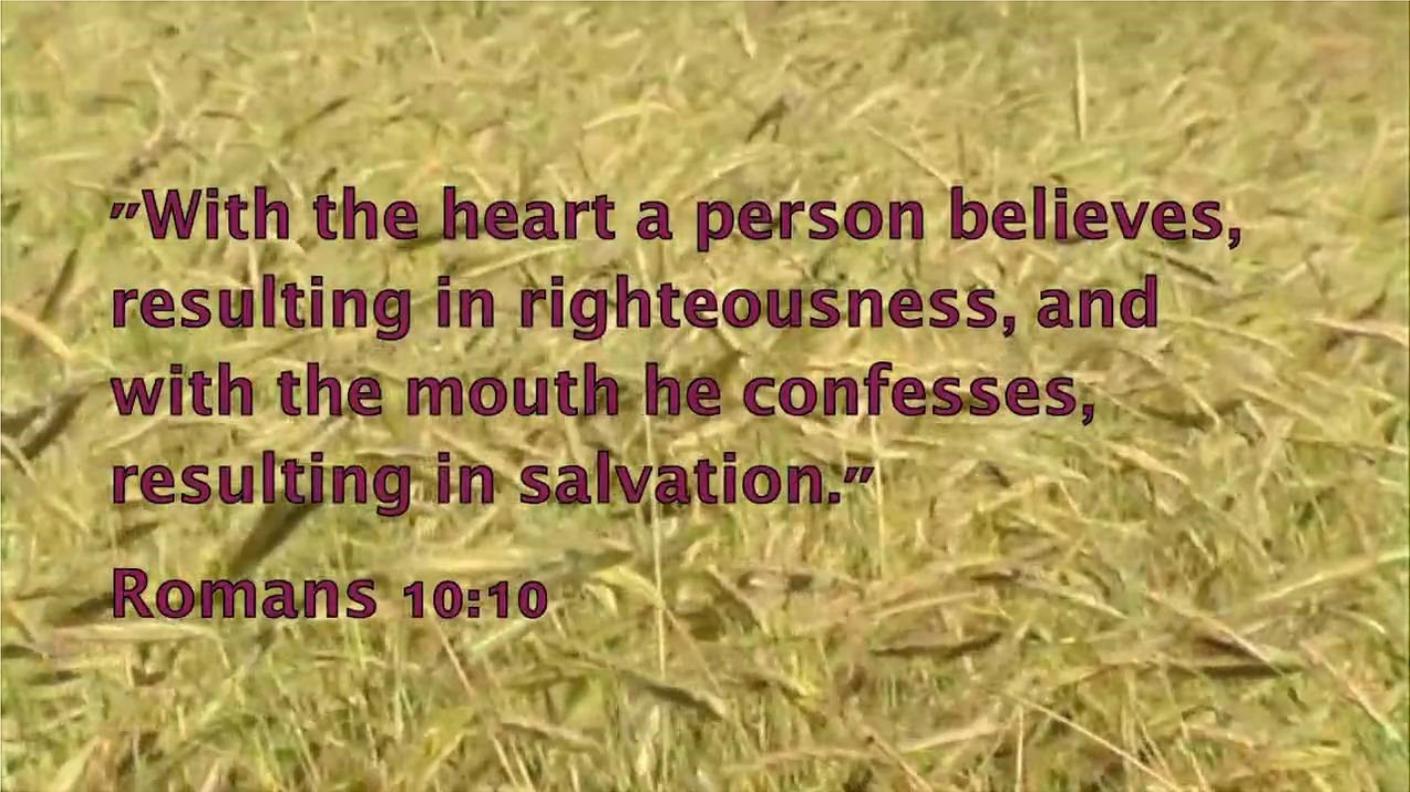
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- The cause of our justification. The Lord our righteousness Jeremiah 23:6.

We can see that in the Webster's 1828 definition, that there is an emphasis on holiness in principles and affections of the heart through conformity to divine law. ***Despite some listed Bible verses, what is missing is how one attains righteousness?***

The Bible describes the righteous person as just or right, holding to God and trusting in Him (Psalm 33:18–22).



**“With the heart a person believes,
resulting in righteousness, and
with the mouth he confesses,
resulting in salvation.”**

Romans 10:10

The bad news is that true and perfect righteousness is not possible for man to attain on his own; the standard is simply too high.

The good news is that true righteousness is possible for mankind, but only through the cleansing of sin by Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We have no ability to achieve righteousness in and of ourselves. But Christians possess the righteousness of Christ, because “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is an amazing truth. On the cross, Jesus exchanged our sin for His perfect righteousness so that we can one day stand before God and He will see not our sin, but the holy righteousness of the Lord Jesus.

When a person receives Jesus Christ by faith, he also receives the gift of God's righteousness. *Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those [a]who believe; for there is no distinction; Romans 3:22)*

God's laws both describe His own character and constitute the standard by which He measures human righteousness.

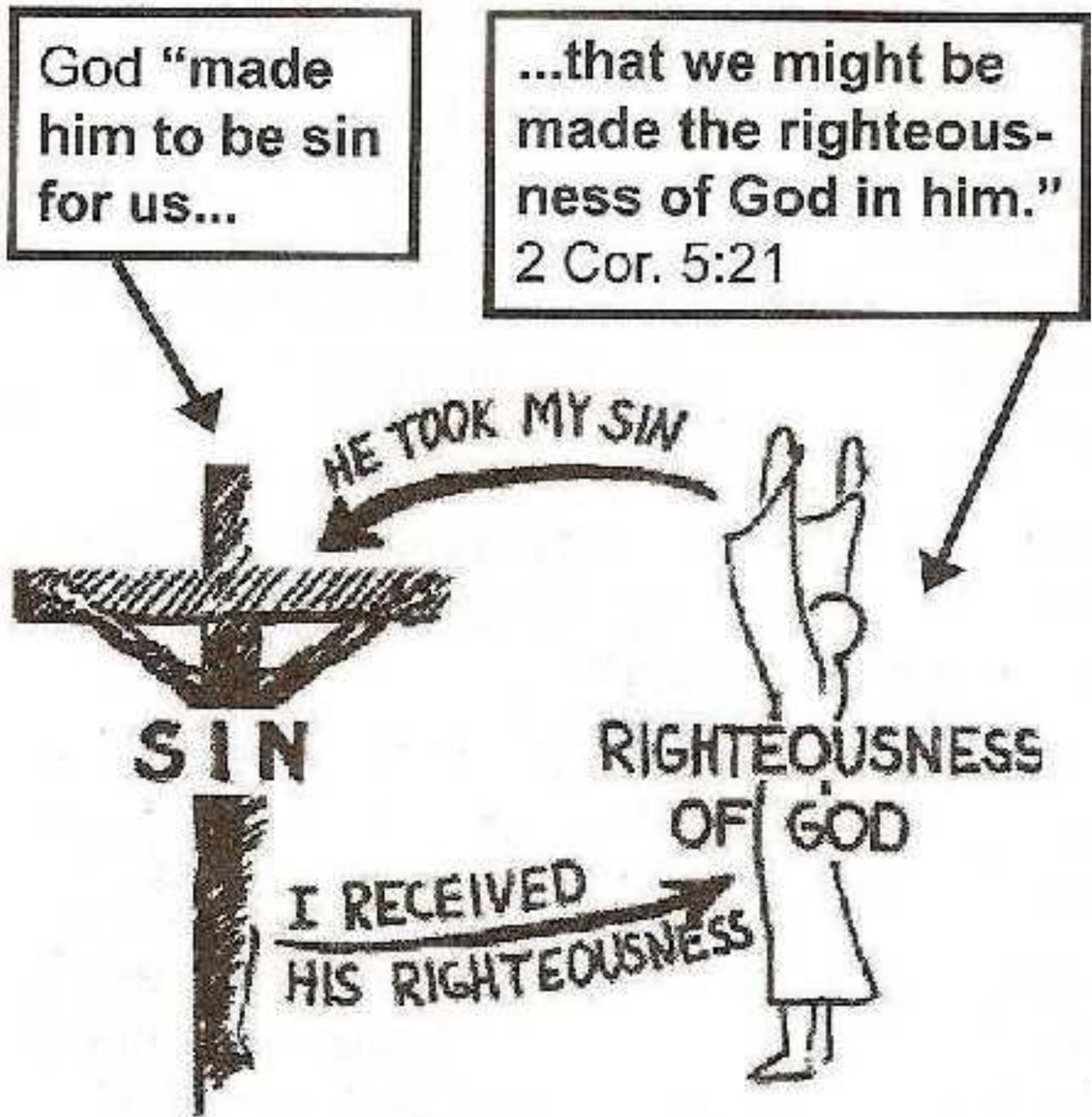
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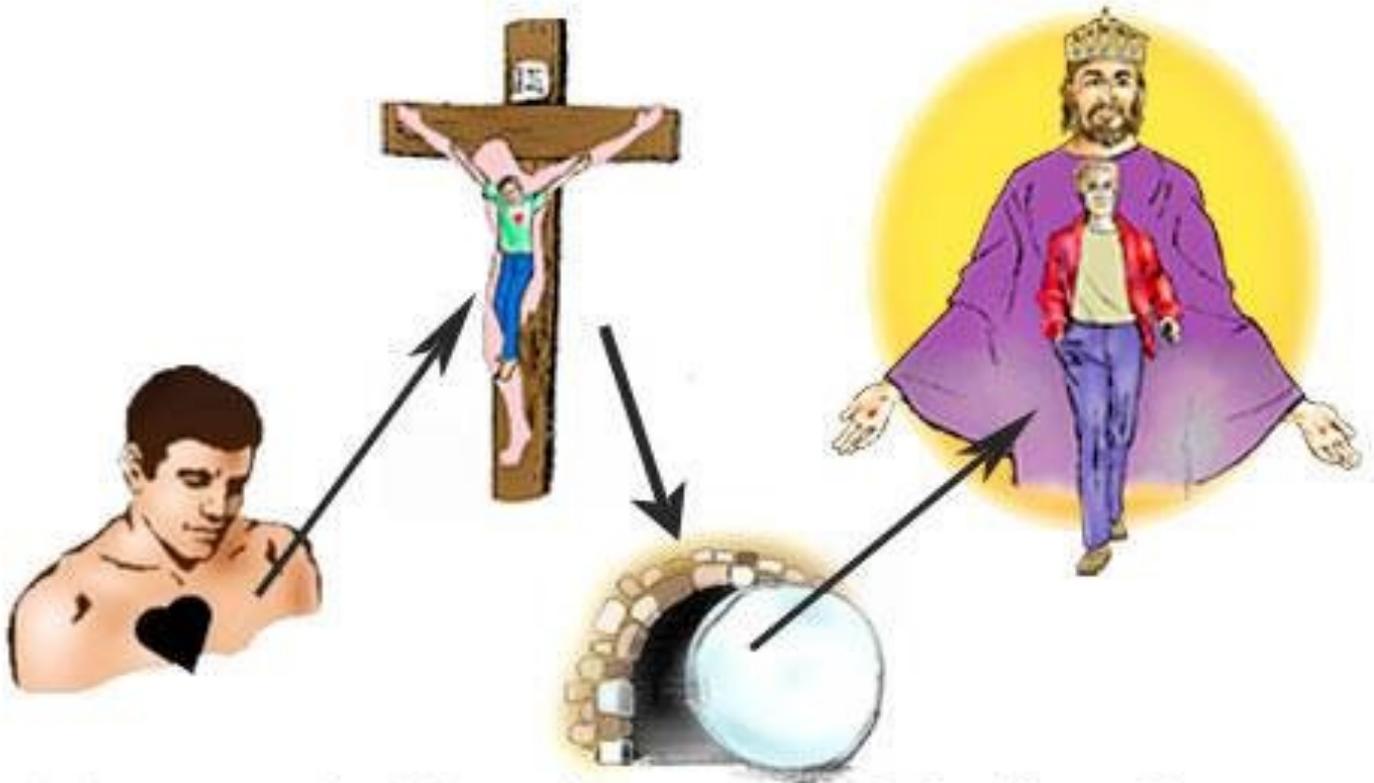
The believer is made righteous by God.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "³⁰ But ^[a]by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, ^[b]and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, " Paul wanted to be (Phil 3:9) "found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.

Just as Jesus Christ, who neither knew nor did any sin, was made sin on the cross of Calvary for us, so we, who neither knew nor did any righteousness, were made righteous at the moment of faith (2 Corinthians 5:21 ²¹ He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.) We have no righteousness of our own (Romans 3:10); but through Christ we are not only given God's righteousness, but we are made righteousness.



In position and standing, we are just as righteous as Christ. In practice we are not as righteous or holy as we should be. Compare this truth with what Christ did on the cross. In practice, He never sinned, but positionally, He became just as sinful as we are when the wrath of God came upon Him and when He was forsaken of the Father during those last three hours of darkness. That event cannot be reversed or repeated. Christ can never return to a position He held before Calvary (to an unslain Lamb position); nor does He have to die again. So it is with the child of God. The event of the imputation of righteousness to him cannot be reversed or repeated.



We are made “the righteousness of God” in Christ.

Let’s go back to Abraham in Genesis 15:1-6. What is important to note about this passage was that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. God said these things to Abram before Abram had done any of the things that he was famous for doing. This was before Abram was circumcised (Genesis 17:4-14); before his encounter with the angels that go on to destroy Sodom; and even before he has Isaac and takes him to Mount Moriah to be sacrificed (Genesis 22). This is later reinforced and explained theologically in Romans 4 as follows:

4 What then shall we say that Abraham, [a]our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified [b]by works, he has something to boast about, but not [c]before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7 “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. 8 “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”(Romans 4:1-8)

We see that Abraham found righteousness, not by his works, but by faith in what God had said to him as referenced by the words, “Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” It goes on to explain that Abraham did the works he did, not to merit God’s grace, but because of God’s grace. Abraham did them out of a debt to God for what God did in giving Abraham grace. Abraham did them out of love of God, because God loved him first (1 John 4:19).

Finally, we see that through Abraham's belief, God justified him and counted Abraham's faith for righteousness. Simply stated, Abraham's righteousness had nothing to do with his works. It goes on to quote David's mention of how a man is blessed when God imputes, or credits to his account, righteousness without work. This results in a man's iniquities being forgiven and his sins covered. God does not impute, or account, man's sin to him. When his sins are not imputed to him, then man is not subject to the wages of sin, which are death. By God's grace are we saved, through faith, not of our works, which leaves us no claim on having any righteousness from our own merits (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9; James 1:13-18).

This means that we are made righteous in the sight of God; that is, that we are accepted as righteous and treated as righteous by God on account of what the Lord Jesus has done. He was made sin; we are made righteousness.

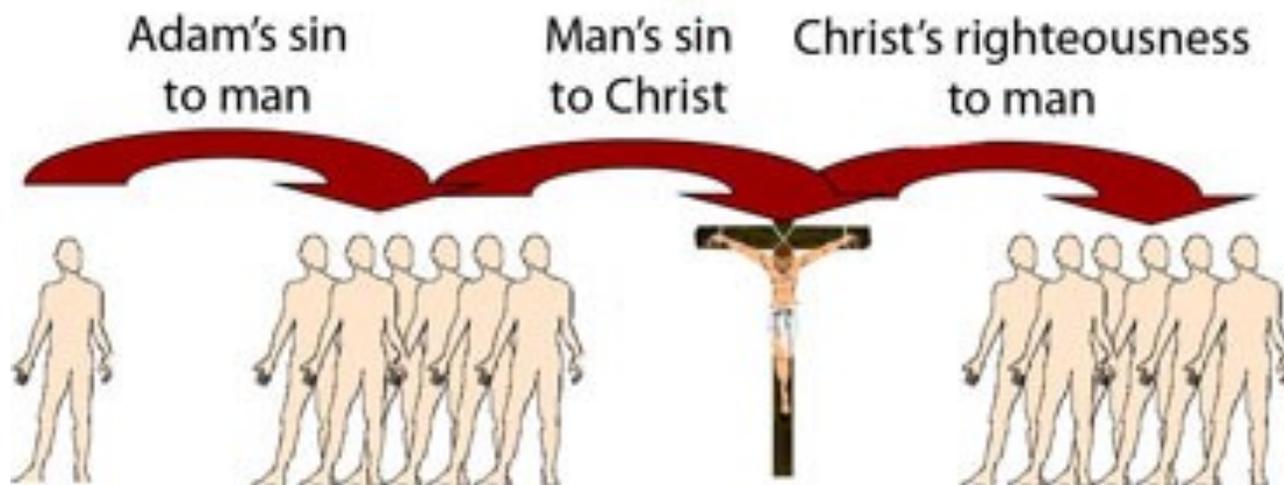
On the cross, Jesus was treated *as if* He were a sinner, though He was perfectly holy and pure, and we are treated *as if* we were righteous, though we are defiled and depraved.

On account of what the Lord Jesus has endured on our behalf, we are treated as if we had entirely fulfilled the Law of God and had never become exposed to its penalty.

We received this precious gift of righteousness from the God of all mercy and grace. To Him be the glory!

Ephesians 6:11 exhorts believers to "put on the whole armor of God" in order to stand firm against the attacks

Three Imputations



of our enemy, Satan (2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:12). Verses 14 through 17 say, "*Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*"

The imagery is of an armed Roman or Israelite soldier, prepared for battle. A typical armed soldier wore a breastplate made of bronze or chain mail. It covered the vital organs, namely, the heart, and was fitted with loops or buckles that attached it to a thick belt. If the belt was loosened, the breastplate slipped right off.

When Paul compares the armor of God with military gear, each piece represents a part of God's strength that He extends to us when we become His children.

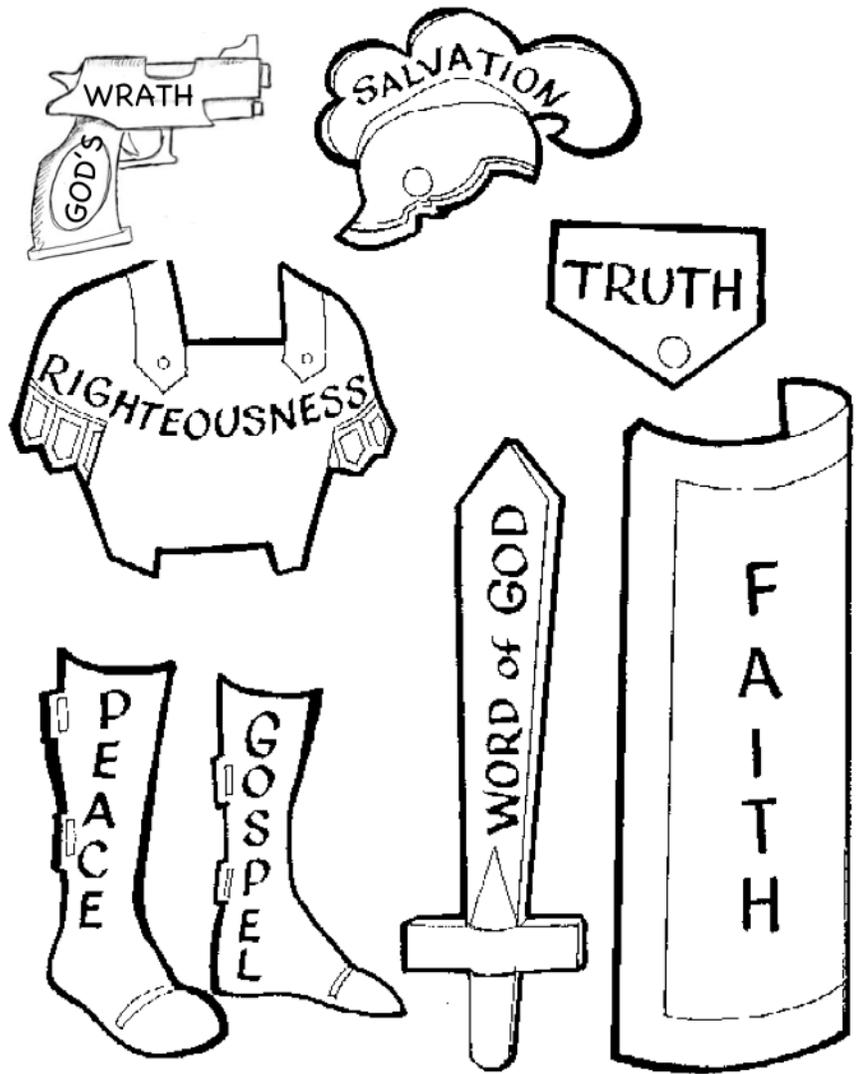
The breastplate of righteousness refers to the righteousness purchased for us by Jesus at the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21).

At salvation, a "breastplate" is issued to each repentant sinner. It is specially designed by God to protect our heart and soul from evil and deception. Our own righteous acts are no match for Satan's attacks (Isaiah 64:6). The breastplate of righteousness has Christ's name stamped on it, as though He said, "Your righteousness isn't sufficient to protect you. Wear mine."

We are instructed to "put on" this armor, which implies that we do not automatically wear it all the time.

Putting on the armor of God requires a decision on our part.

- To put on the breastplate of righteousness, we must first have the belt of truth firmly in place.
- Without truth, our righteousness will be based upon our own attempts to impress God. This leads to legalism or self-condemnation (Romans 8:1).
- We choose instead to acknowledge that, apart from Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).
- We see ourselves as "in Christ" and that, regardless of our failures, His righteousness has been credited to our account.
- We "put it on" by seeking God and His righteousness above everything else (Matthew 6:33).
- We make Him and His ways our dwelling place (Psalm 91:1).
- We delight in His commands and desire for His ways to become our ways (Psalm 37:4; 119:24, 111; Isaiah 61:10).
- When God reveals an area of change to us, we obey and allow Him to work in us.
- At the point where we say "no" to God, we open a little crack in the armor where Satan's arrows can get through (Ephesians 6:16).
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- As we wear Christ’s breastplate of righteousness, we begin to develop a purity of heart that translates into actions. Wearing this breastplate creates a lifestyle of putting into practice what we believe in our hearts.
- As our lives become conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), our choices become more righteous, and these godly choices also protect us from further temptation and deception (Proverbs 8:20; Psalm 23:3).

When armor is abused or worn incorrectly, it can malfunction. Likewise, there are several factors that can interfere with the effectiveness of our spiritual breastplate.

- Carelessness (1 Peter 5:8),
- Unbelief (Hebrews 3:12),
- Abusing grace (Romans 6:1–2),
- Disobedience (1 John 3:4; Hebrews 4:6) can hinder our ability to stand firm and defeat the enemy in our lives.
- When we tolerate sin,
- Refuse to forgive (2 Corinthians 2:10–11),
- Rely on personal righteousness (Titus 3:5),
- Allow earthly concerns to crowd out time for an intimate relationship with God, we, in effect, take off the breastplate of righteousness, minimizing its power to protect us.

We need our breastplate of righteousness in place in order to gain the victory specified in 2 Corinthians 10:15: *“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”* When we quickly reject heretical ideas, idolatry, and the *“counsel of the ungodly”* (Psalm 1:1) and instead *“keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith”* (Hebrews 12:2), we keep our breastplate securely fastened.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uttered these words: *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48). This comes at the end of the section of the sermon where Jesus corrects His listeners’ misunderstanding of the Law. In Matthew 5:20, Jesus says that, if His hearers want to enter into the kingdom of heaven, their righteousness must *exceed* that of the Pharisees, who were the experts in the Law



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“Have you seen my breastplate of righteousness anywhere?”

Then, in Matthew 5:21–48, He proceeds to radically redefine the law from mere outward conformity, which characterized the “righteousness” of the Pharisees, to an obedience of both outward and inward conformity. He says, “*You have heard it said, but I say unto you*” to differentiate between the way people heard the law taught from how Jesus is reinterpreting it. Obeying the law is more than simply abstaining from killing, committing adultery, and breaking oaths. It’s also not getting angry with your brother, not lusting in your heart, and not making insincere oaths. At the end of all this, we learn that we must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, and that comes from being perfect.

At this point, the natural response is “But I can’t be perfect,” which is absolutely true. In another place in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus summarizes the Law of God with two commandments: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself* (Matthew 22:37–40). This is certainly an admirable goal, but has anyone *ever* loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength and his neighbor as himself? Everything we do, say, and think has to be done, said, and thought from love for God and love for neighbor. If we are completely honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we have never achieved this level of spirituality.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

2 Corinthians 5:21

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“get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

James 1:21-22

The truth of the matter is that, on our own and by our own efforts, we can't possibly be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We don't love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We don't love our neighbors as ourselves. We have a problem, and it's called *sin*. We are born with it, and we cannot overcome the effects of it on our own. Sin radically affects us to our core. Sin affects what we do, say, and think. In other words, it taints everything about us. Therefore, no matter how good we try to be, we will never meet God's standard of perfection. The Bible says that all of our righteous deeds are like a "*polluted garment*" (*Isaiah 64:6*). Our own righteousness is simply not good enough and never will be, no matter how hard we try.

That's why Jesus lived a perfect life in full obedience to the law of God in thought, word, and deed. Jesus' **mission wasn't simply to die on the cross for our sins but also to live a life of perfect righteousness.** Theologians refer to this as the "active and passive obedience of Christ." Active obedience refers to Christ's life of sinless perfection. Everything He did was perfect. Passive obedience refers to Christ's submission to the crucifixion. He went willingly to the cross and allowed Himself to be crucified without resisting (*Isaiah 53:7*).

The apostle Paul writes, "*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although*

Jesus' passive obedience pays our sin debt before God,
but it is His active obedience that gives us the
perfection God requires.

the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (*Romans 3:21–22*). Through our faith in Christ, the righteousness of God is given to us. This is called "imputed" righteousness. To impute something is to ascribe, assign or attribute something to someone. When we place our faith in Christ, God ascribes the perfect righteousness of Christ to our account so that we become perfect in His sight. "***For our sake He made Him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God***" (*2 Corinthians 5:21*).

Not only is Christ's righteousness imputed to us through faith, but our sin is imputed to Christ. That is how Christ paid our sin debt to God. He had no sin in Himself, but our sin is imputed to Him so, as He suffers on the cross, He is suffering the just penalty that our sin deserves. That is why Paul can say, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*" (*Galatians 2:20*).

By having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, we can be seen as sinless, as Jesus is sinless. It is not, therefore, our perfection, but His. When God looks at the Christian, ***He sees the holiness, perfection, and righteousness of Christ. Therefore, we can say with confidence, "I am sinless, as Jesus is sinless."***

Whereas, the term righteous is commonly referred to as something that you believe is morally right or fair. Given man's varying opinion about what is morally right or fair, righteousness can have a wide range of definitions.

The Bible teaches that righteousness is based on what God says about what makes us right in His eyes.

What makes us right or righteous in God's eyes is not anything that we have done. It is our response to His grace by believing through faith that what God has told us about salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ is true.