

Scripture Reading:

Acts 24:23 “So [Governor Felix] commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him. ²⁴ And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. ²⁵ Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you."

²⁶ Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him. ²⁷ But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.

'Paul Speaks of Righteousness'

I made mention last week of the fact that I planned to take three weeks, Lord willing, to have a closer look at what Luke says about how the Apostle Paul reasoned with Governor Felix and his wife Drusilla.

- Luke tells us that they heard Paul concerning the faith in Christ, and that he reasoned with them about “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come”

Now I have often given some of the commentators a hard time when they avoid certain verses or highlight the wrong details in other places. However, I would be remiss to not give them much credit for the help they have provided during this series on the Book of Acts. *[thank Dale!]*

The reason for giving three sermons that are more topical from today’s text comes from the devotional commentary written by Charles Vaughan in the 1800’s. Although Luke does not give us any details about what the Apostle said regarding these three important subjects before the governor and his wife, it is significant that Luke mentions them and it was Mr. Vaughan who highlighted the importance of each and made me realize that they were worthy of more attention. Dr. Cyril Barber was pleased to write the preface to the modern re-printing because he was fearful that many were losing the sense of the contemporary importance for the Book of Acts, something we focused on last week.

Dr. Barber feared that many modern writers and preachers looked at Acts as nothing more than the history of the early church and as such not directly relevant for our day.

- This is the same problem that many in the modern church have with ALL of the Old Testament which we have often pointed out and must avoid.

With that said, as I prepared to give this sermon I struggled for much of the week wondering how I was going to cover this first subject: Righteousness!

In recent months I have managed to preach a single sermon that covered Romans chapters nine to eleven and another that covered most of the Book of Deuteronomy: So you would think that one covering a single word should not require much heavy lifting!

- Mike knows from his study in the Book of Romans of what I speak! [Roger’s questions]

Here is part of the problem:

If you do a word search of the Bible for ‘righteousness’ you will find almost three hundred verses using that word. If you include the related term righteous you have another two-hundred and fifty or so verses to add. I would not want to begin to try and ascertain how many books have been written on the subject nor gather all the comments made on those more than five-hundred verses!

As with many terms used in the Bible, we also need to realize that they can have differing meanings and different contexts...

- **Obviously the righteousness of Christ is very different from the righteousness of the Pharisees.**

In the New Testament Scriptures, we are told we can practice righteousness, walk in righteousness, we can know the way of righteousness, and John tells us that righteousness dwells in the new heavens and the new earth. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Saints of old worked righteousness: James says righteousness was accounted to Abraham because he believed and Peter tells us that we may suffer for righteousness sake. Paul tells Timothy to pursue righteousness, and that the Scriptures will instruct him in righteousness, Paul warns Titus to avoid ‘works of righteousness that [men] have done,’ Paul tells the Galatians to wait for the hope of righteousness, and he tells the Church at Ephesus that we are new men created in true righteousness, we have a breastplate of righteousness & that righteousness is a fruit of the Spirit! Paul told the Romans much about righteousness: He said we were to be slaves of righteousness, that we have life because of righteousness, that righteousness is imputed to us, that righteousness is a gift...

- **Paul also said we are instruments of righteousness and that our obedience leads to righteousness.**

Jesus in His sermon on the mount said, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, that we would be persecuted for righteousness sake, and that our righteousness needed to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees!

- **And finally, Jesus said, “ seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”**
- **So I hope you can begin to see why I became overwhelmed!**
- **And remember, over two-thirds of the references to righteousness are found in the Old Testament, which I have not even mentioned!**

The Apostle Paul would have been very familiar with ALL of these Old Testament Scriptures as well as the righteousness of the Pharisees that Jesus condemned...

- **So yes he would have had much to say to this Roman Governor and his Jewish wife about righteousness!**

So what would you say if someone asked you to define righteousness? Dictionaries define “righteousness” as behavior that is morally justifiable or right characterized by accepted standards of morality, justice, virtue, or uprightness. *[no surprise that it is a bit man centered!]*

- **The Bible’s standard for righteousness is God’s own perfection in every attribute, every attitude, every behavior, and every word.**

Thus, God’s laws, as given in the Bible, both describe His own character, and constitute the plumb line by which He measures human righteousness. Here is the bottom-line for today:

When we think of righteousness, think of Jesus...

- **ALL of Jesus!**
- **Righteousness is both His character AND His actions.**
- **Righteousness is both His nature AND His life!**

When we see something called righteousness that does not conform to Jesus: Either in terms of His nature or His life...

- It is a false righteousness, like that of the Pharisees or the Judaizers or modern legalists.

To better understand how the Apostle Paul would have related righteousness to the Governor and his Jewish wife, I want to again turn to his letter to the Romans which Paul wrote just before leaving Asia minor to visit Jerusalem. Paul's introduction points to the resurrection of Jesus just as he shared with the crowd at the Temple & both of his trials in Jerusalem & Caesarea:

Romans 1:1 "Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God 2 which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, 4 and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."

Paul goes on to describe his desire to come to Rome so he can preach the Gospel, saying in verse 16 ...

Romans 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."

- Paul then gives what most consider to be the summary of all of the Book of Romans and a definition of the Gospel that is appropriate for today's message:

17 "For in it [the Gospel of Christ] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

The Apostle Paul then reminds the Saints in Rome that they can witness to even the most hardened pagan knowing that God has revealed Himself to them in creation and their own conscience...

Romans 1:18, "18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened."

Paul was demonstrating that he understood this truth by witnessing to Governor Felix and his wife Drusilla. We will learn a bit more about them next week, but suffice it to say this morning that you had on the one hand a hardened Roman official and the other a hypocritical Jewish woman. Neither would have been open to the Gospel, but the fact that they were troubled by what Paul said confirms the truth of what Paul told the Church in Rome!

Why was this powerful Roman governor, who could have easily disposed of Paul, fearful?

- Because what Paul shared troubled his conscience!

Paul did not practice 'seeker-friendly' evangelism... He was patient and long-suffering and always ready to share the truth...

- But he did not pull any punches or worry about making his hearers uncomfortable!
- Such is the nature of Biblical evangelism because a person cannot be saved until they realize what they must be saved from!

This is where Paul spends the next two chapters of Romans: Making the case that ALL are under the condemnation of sin, concluding in Romans 3:20 "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

- In other words, NONE of us measure up to the righteousness of God!

We must come to understand that true evangelism reminds the person we are witnessing to that they are living over a very dangerous precipice:

- We all deserve the fires of hell.

But as Paul later explains in detail in chapter ten, we are not to leave them there...

- We are to be the beautiful feet that preach the Gospel of peace!

Paul explains why the Gospel is a Gospel of peace back in chapter three after convicting everyone under sin!

- Here we clearly see why Paul would have talked of righteousness before the Governor and his wife:

3:21 “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.”

- Paul is telling those who are lost that there is a way for them to be righteous even though they are dead in sin and full of trespasses!
- Not a superficial change or covering up of the problems that we have, but a whole new nature and a new way of living...
- Something that since Adam we all have needed because we are born dead in our trespasses and sins.

“For there is no difference; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, 26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

- We can be freely justified, or made righteous because of what Jesus did in living a perfect life and offering that life as a sacrifice for our sins!
- That is the Good News, the Gospel, and it means that God can make us righteous in the way that Jesus is righteous without violating His own righteousness.
- God is still just even though He is the justifier of those who sinned.
- As a result we now have both the nature and the life of Jesus, we have both his character and his actions.
- This is what it means to be in Christ *[importance of absolution & ascension in the worship service]*

Our salvation is a gift of God from the beginning to the end as Paul declares in verse 27”

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. 29 Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, 30 since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. 31 Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.”

- Why does Paul say that the righteousness that is now found in Jesus establishes the Law?

Because we receive not just a judicial proclamation that we are justified but as His Saints we are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit: Now able to live new lives reflecting the nature & character of Jesus. Jesus said, if you love me keep my commandments and that simply means that we desire to live righteous lives because we have been made righteous. This is why Jesus and Paul had such strong condemnation for the Pharisees and Judaizers: They argued that they would be declared righteous because of their OWN acts of righteousness!

This is a total denial of what Jesus did on the cross where Paul tells the church at Corinth in second letter:

5:21 “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

I will leave you this morning, after what I fear is a very inadequate discussion of one of the most important subjects we can find in the Scriptures, with two passages to encourage our further study and meditation...

- One a timely & sobering warning
- And the other is one that brings much hope...

Jesus warned His followers about the righteousness of the Pharisees and Paul condemned those who looked to their own righteousness in his day as well: We must remember that we still have such false teachers among us today and as the Republican Party appears ready to nominate a Mormon as their candidate for President it is something we will have to deal with throughout this year.

- For example, Governor Romney has now been invited to speak at Liberty University...

As this and other events are being discussed, there will be questions raised about what Mormons believe and whether Mormons are Christians. Obviously the Mormons will argue that they are Christians!

The strongest proof offered by them is the fact that they have Jesus right there in the name of their church: "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints." You see such posts showing up on almost every discussion even now. I think we find Paul's answer to such deception in II Corinthians 11:13:

"For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works."

- This is going to be a very challenging year for Bible-believing Christians and we must remember our call to be salt and light...
- And also that we function as ministers of reconciliation as we deal with those who may not agree with our stand.

On the other hand, we have great hope in the Gospel as Paul told the Saints at Philippi:

Philippians 3:8 "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,

11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Yes, Paul spoke to the Governor and his wife about righteousness and he will go on to tell them of self-control and the judgment to come. We will learn more of this in the weeks ahead, but for today...

- May we press on toward the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus knowing that it will not only change us but all the world as promised in Psalm 110 which we will heartily sing as our hymn of response!

Communion Meditation: Psalm 81 "Sing aloud to God our strength; Make a joyful shout to the God of Jacob... 10 I am Jehovah your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt; Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it. 11 "But My people would not heed My voice, And Israel would have none of Me. 12 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, To walk in their own counsels. 13 "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways! 14 I would soon subdue their enemies, And turn My hand against their adversaries. 15 The haters of Jehovah would pretend submission to Him, but their fate would endure forever. 16 He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you."

- May we be those who 'open wide' and receive the gifts that God offers!