Q: What does “righteousness” mean?

A: Righteousness is first and foremost the character of God. All through the Scriptures righteousness is given as an attribute of God. Like God IS love, God IS righteous. “LORD, the God of Israel, you are righteous!” (Ezra 9:15). “For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face.” (Psalm 11:17). God is the author of all things. As humans, even Adam and Eve before the fall, we do not know what righteousness is without it being revealed by He who is righteous. Adam and Eve were righteous because they were made in the image of God.

In today’s English world when we think righteous, we think of moral character and inward virtue. This is not what the Bible means by righteous. Righteousness in the Bible is intimately connected with justice. “For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; the upright will see his face.” (Psalm 11:17) “He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” Righteousness in the Bible refers to a right standing of one person before another and not necessarily in virtue (righteous behavior can only be had as a result of righteousness in standing and relationship with God - James 2). Both in the Hebrew and the Greek language, righteousness has forensic overtones and is associated with the outcome of lawsuits and rulings. To put the distinction in modern terms, if a person that is high in character, virtue and honor is driving over the speed limit (even accidentally), they will get a ticket and now stand as unrighteous before the laws of the courts. Vouching for one’s character does not nullify the infraction. Once the price for the ticket is paid, righteousness is attained again.

So righteousness with God is based on His Law and covenants, but not in those Laws making us better people. Going back to the garden of Eden, even the Devil knew that a fall from righteousness was not getting Eve to say a bad word or even eat the fruit in and of itself. No, it was in breaking the faithfulness toward God and upholding of God’s Laws and commands because God was worshiped. To truly disrupt righteousness the devil convinced Eve that “you will be like God”, thus throwing the right standing between creature and Creator out of line. This is why the Devil’s first attack was “did God really say?” followed with “you will not surely die.” Satan called into question the integrity of God as God, Adam and Eve’s faithfulness to the Law Giver and did not attack nor call into question the character “righteousness” of Eve or Adam.

This is why Paul says in Romans 3 regarding righteousness as standing and faithfulness, “no one is righteous”. “3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? 4 Not at all!” Paul did not list infractions and misbehavior, but rather an issue of faithfulness to God in righteous relationship and
standing. This passage also reiterates again that faithfulness and righteousness are God’s alone.

Paul continues in Romans 3 and makes unmistakable that righteousness is a matter of standing in relation to God - being acceptable to God on the basis of faith and receiving an “innocent” verdict regarding the breaking of His law through Christ’s substitute. “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

Again we see righteousness is God’s and is given to us and not earned. What is that righteousness? It is faith in Jesus Christ as the one who paid the penalty for our breaking of faith, trust and the Law. In receiving an innocent verdict we receive the gift of faith. Jesus did not come to make bad people good, but unrighteous people righteous...to make dead people alive and able to stand in the confidence of Christ before the Throne of God.

This is also what is meant when John says that Jesus was our propitiation for sins. It was a payment, an appeasement, an expiation. It was such because Jesus’ life upheld the Law and the Prophets perfectly as we did not and He lived the life we were supposed to live before God and toward God. His death as a sinless man atoned for our rebellion and sins against God, not our character flaws.

That righteousness of Christ, through faith, is now imputed onto to us. We are given God’s righteousness in standing. This is why even still as sinners we are perfect in standing before God.

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