

“None Is Righteous, No, Not One.” Really?

In the first two chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul gave a bleak assessment of the standing of both the Jews and other nations. Jews might agree readily that Gentiles were of the basest sort of ungodly sinners, but Paul shocked them by including Jews in the same category, declaring, “None is righteous, no, not one.” In a classic example of “proof-texting,” he pulled and pieced together snippets from eight OT references to emphasize his point.

Audacious as I am, I am not accusing Paul of misapplying and manipulating scripture, but I am struggling to explain his use of all those quotations. In sharing my inquiry here, it is hoped that it will offer some clarification rather than adding to confusion.

His sweeping, inclusive indictment in Romans 3:10-18 (RSV) is copied below with the sources of his quotations inserted in parentheses:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong: no one does good, not even one” (Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Ecc. 7:20). *“Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive”* (Ps. 5:9). *“The venom of asps is under their lips”* (Ps. 140:3). *“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness”* (Ps. 10:7). *“Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know”* (Isa. 59:7-8). *“There is no fear of God before their eyes”* (Ps. 36:1).

Paul, do you mean there is not one conscientious, God-respecting person on earth? Does no one seek God? Does everyone curse and deceive? Is each person eager to murder? Can we find no one who fears God? Is your indictment universal with no exceptions, as you state so definitely and emphatically?

In the first psalm quoted by Paul, David assured, “God is with the generation of the righteous” (14:5). Psalm 53 is almost identical to Psalm 14. In his previous psalm (52:6) David also mentions the righteous. So the contexts of those denunciations speak of righteous people. Since David was aware of the existence of just and righteous worshippers of God, we must first determine the limitation of his seemingly universal assessment. (We are assuming that all these psalms were written by David.)

By considering the context of the quotations of David, we can see that he was denouncing his enemies and those nations who opposed God’s righteous people. His deep emotions allowed him to express his feelings about them in hyperbole -- evident exaggerations for the sake of emphasis. The literary device of hyperbole, if interpreted literally, would be a stretching of truth. It is used to impress a point. For examples, when we are chilled, we may say, “I’m freezing to death!” or we may speak of a frugal person still holding on to the first dollar he ever earned. In view of these considerations we can be sure David did not intend his declarations to be all-inclusive, universal denunciations as is so commonly quoted and applied today.

The puzzling thing now concerns Paul's use of David's statements. Paul seems to have made universal application of them so that Bible students today interpret them with no exceptions. Surely, Paul must have recognized David's denouncement of his enemies in exaggerated language. Paul must have known that Abel had been righteous (Heb. 11:4; 1 John 3:12). Noah was also described as a righteous man (Gen. 6:9; 7:1). Even Lot, whom we usually do not paint too brightly, was a righteous man (2 Pet. 2:8). Your concordance points to others who were considered righteous and who did works of righteousness in both OT and NT history.

Since Paul was an educated Jew, we can be confident that he was aware of these things. Did he not also accept the hyperbolic meanings and use them to impress his points about the universal need for subjection to God's will? Another example of his use of hyperbole is his quoting a Cretan prophet who said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." (Titus 1:12). Who would argue that there could be no exceptions to such an inclusive declaration? Again, in evident overstatement, Paul wrote, "I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you" (2 Cor. 11:8).

It seems that we must choose between two conclusions: We must admit that Paul misapplied his quotations from David, or we must concede that we have misapplied what Paul was teaching about the possibility of a person being righteous. Wisdom will choose the latter rather than the former though pride and confusion may stand in the way.

Once in a class, I stated that unbelievers can do good works. It was immediately and vigorously denied by an elder. Can an unbeliever be good, honest, just, and upright in his dealings with his fellow man? Can a believer be good, honest, just, and upright in his dealings with his fellow man? Can each of these men not live by choices of the inner man, the spirit, rather than just following fleshly inclinations?

In order to understand this point, it is imperative that we determine what it means to be righteous. Actually, that is a sort of obsolete word except among religionists who have equated it with perfection of conduct, with justification, and with being in a saved state.

Our English dictionary tells us that "righteous" means acting rightly or according to what is right. Vine defines it as that which is in accordance with rule, right, and justice. It becomes a synonym with "just". A just person is without prejudice or partiality. Can an unbeliever make just and right choices while a believer is prevented from making bad and unjust choices?

Righteousness is the character or quality of being right or just, but that is a matter of degree. When one is said to be righteous, it is understood that he is not perfected in his judgment and conduct. He is recognized as a person who seeks to be ethical in all his conduct. Thus, in a general sense, describing a person as being ethical or righteous refers to his moral character rather than his salvation or rightness with God.

You may describe yourself as being a healthy person blessed with good health. You would not mean that you had never been sick or that you never have an occasional cold or headache. The positive nature is not totally negated by minor lapses.

In relation to God, no one can claim perfect rightness through his own effort. He cannot rectify a single lapse. However, in view of his faith, God, through Christ, graciously accepts him as though his conduct were perfect. Though he is a sinner, God accepts him as a righteous person.

This point is made by Vine (Expository Dictionary of NT Words; p. 299):

“Righteousness is not said to be imputed to the believer save in the sense that faith is imputed (‘reckoned’ is the better word) for righteousness. It is clear that in Rom. 4:6, 11, ‘righteousness reckoned’ must be understood in the light of the context, ‘faith reckoned for righteousness,’ vv. 3, 5, 9, 22. ‘For’ in these places is “eis”, which does not mean ‘instead of,’ but ‘with a view to.’ The faith thus exercised brings the soul into vital union with God in Christ, and inevitably produces righteousness of life, that is, conformity to the will of God.”

This is in harmony with what Paul was teaching (Eph. 2:8-10) in stating that faith rather than our righteous works accessed the grace of God but that there was expectancy of our good (righteous) works thereafter. If those good works do not follow, then we are not being saved by our faith.

To further establish the point that we can do works of righteousness, one reference out of the many available will be noted. In the judgment scene depicted by Jesus (Matt. 25:31-46) there was a welcome extended to those who had ministered to the needs of Jesus. “*Then the RIGHTEOUS will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, etc.?’*” You are familiar with the answer. The concluding line is that the righteous (those who had done those works of righteousness) went away into eternal life. And we must note that it was those who had done DEEDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS rather than those RECKONED AS RIGHTEOUS based upon faith alone.

Just as a disciple of Jesus does not negate his discipleship by inadequacies and stumblings, those deficiencies do not make him an unrighteous person. In our efforts to emphasize our total dependence upon grace, it is unbecoming to demean those who are good, honest, just, and productive. Some dramatic speakers almost boast of how sinful they are. They sin every day and every hour. They can do no good thing. But God’s grace is more abundant because of their sinful helplessness. “There is none righteous, no not one!” they boldly emphasize.

Really? Does that describe you? If you are so sinful, why don’t you repent? Do you say you don’t even recognize what your sins are? Then how do you know you are sinning? If the person who claims to be so sinful is accused of a specific sin, expect him to become very defensive in denying it!

I have known many saintly, dedicated people who were good, just, honest, peaceable, productive, and well-intentioned. They avoided rule of the fleshly appetites and lived by the rule of the inner person, the spirit. They were God’s righteous people fully realizing their dependency upon the grace of God for salvation. Their number is increasing! []

(Cecil Hook; October 2002)

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