

Romans 6:19 (William (Bill) Prost) 168387

The Christian Shepherd: 1999, Righteousness and Holiness

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Question: In Romans 6:19 Christians are to “yield” their bodies as “servants to righteousness unto holiness.” What is the difference between righteousness and holiness, especially as regards our practical walk as believers in this world?

Answer: In considering this question, it is important first to understand the fundamental scriptural difference between righteousness and holiness.

Holiness

Holiness is the expression of a nature and supposes the knowledge of both good and evil, but with abhorrence of evil and delight in the good. Scripture tells us that God is light and that He is holy. Light is one of God’s moral attributes, and when evil is brought in, He is holy in His estimation of it and in dealing with it. The natural man is never said to be holy. Before the fall man was innocent, but the lack of the knowledge of good and evil is not holiness.

Righteousness

Righteousness also supposes the knowledge of good and evil, but it brings in a relationship to another and the maintenance of what is due in that relationship—as between God Himself and the creature. God is righteous, for He views in perfection every relationship and judges in moral purity the responsibility that is due in that relationship.

Man in his natural state, whether before or after the fall, is never spoken of as being righteous. He acquired the knowledge of good and evil in the fall and thus received a conscience, but his fallen nature is not righteous, nor does it practice righteousness.

God’s Holy Nature Satisfied

The work of Christ on the cross fully met the issue of sin, and He, as the Holy One, was made sin for us. This is what made the three hours of darkness so terrible for Him: He who was holy must be made sin in order to bear our iniquities. Now the claims of God’s holy nature have been fully satisfied, and God offers sinners salvation through the blood of Christ.

Is God righteous in doing this? Yes indeed, for Christ has met and satisfied all God’s claims as to sin, and God has raised Him from the dead. Another has said, “The highest manifestation of righteousness, the absolute manifestation of it in perfection, was His receiving Christ to Himself.”

God Is Righteous in All His Ways

Thus God was righteous in raising His Son from the dead, first of all, and in the highest way, because He had fully glorified God as to the question of sin. Secondly, through the finished work of Christ we are made “the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). God was righteous in forgiving us our sins, and we now have a new life in Christ. We are told that we were “sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord” (Eph. 5:8).

The Believer Made Holy

The adjective “holy” is thus applied to the believer, for that holiness of nature that belongs to God is made ours in the new life He has given us. “Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling” (Heb. 3:1).

The Practical Difference

What then is the difference between righteousness and holiness in a practical sense, in view of the expression in our verse, “Yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness”? When we are made “the righteousness of God in Him,” we stand before God in all the perfection of Christ Himself. It is not merely that God’s righteousness is imputed to us, but rather that we are in that perfect standing before God. This is important, for before we can advance in practical holiness, we must be clear as to our perfect acceptance before God.

Dear believers are sometimes hindered in practical development, either by not seeing that they are “the righteousness of God in Him,” or by preferring their own righteousness. As a result, instead of advancing in holiness, there are continual questions as to one’s acceptance. But once we are clear as to our perfect righteousness in Christ, then we realize that it is not a question of progress in righteousness or in the new life that is ours, for we are already in that perfect standing in Christ. “Every one that doeth righteousness is born of Him” (1 John 2:29). Rather, it is a question of being servants to righteousness, unto holiness.

The Capacity for Holiness

Because of the new life that is in us, we have the capacity before God to form proper moral judgments in every relationship in which we stand, whether between God and ourselves or with fellow creatures. Holiness, while made ours in the new man, is developed practically in us as we allow that new life to express itself and as we allow it to form right moral judgments in every relationship in which we find ourselves.

While in one sense we are holy by virtue of the new life we have been given, holiness in Scripture is practically connected with our walk. Once we have seen our perfect acceptance before God and that we are in the light as He is, then sin is abhorred not merely the act, but the sinful self that is the source of it all.

There is progress in this as we go on in the Christian life, for the more we walk with the Lord, the more the new life will be manifested in us practically and the old man kept in the place of death. In being "servants to righteousness" we progress in practical holiness.

Progress in Holiness

Two other things should be mentioned in connection with this. First of all, any progress in holiness can be only with a sense of grace in our souls, for grace is the power of holiness. "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1). We cannot do it in our own strength, nor can we do it in a spirit of pride. A true sense of grace will give me the strength to allow the new life to manifest itself, for it will be in His strength. Pride will be judged, whether in a positive or negative sense. That is, a sense of grace will keep me humble, but it will also give me the strength to go on even after failure, for His grace picked me up in spite of it.

Also, righteousness in the believer will always manifest itself in keeping with the character of God who is the Source of it. We are apt to interpret righteousness in a legal way and to seek to enforce it in the energy of the flesh. While in no way setting aside or weakening any of God's claims, divine righteousness will not manifest itself in a spirit of harshness or bitterness, for these are just as much sin as the things that one might presume to judge. May "grace reign through righteousness" (Rom. 5:21) in our lives!

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