AN UNSURPASSED GIFT

Course 2, *In the Beginning*, Lesson 9

The Problem: Scripture leaves no ambiguity: only the righteous will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Jesus taught plainly that *"the wicked will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life"* (Matthew 25:46). Revelation affirms that *"nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life"* (Revelation 21:27). Sin is utterly foreign to heaven. For those who cling to it, heaven would be unbearable—like a fish gasping for breath in a world it was never meant to inhabit. Those who cherish sin would find no joy in heaven's purity.

Hebrews reminds us that *"without holiness no one will see the Lord"* (Hebrews 12:14). Holiness—righteousness—is purity of heart and conduct. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus raised the standard:

- It's not enough to avoid murder; we must not harbor anger or contempt (Matthew 5:21–22).
- It's not enough to abstain from adultery; even lustful thoughts are sinful (Matthew 5:28).

True righteousness is a pure heart and mind that overflow into godly actions. Paul urged, *"Awake to righteousness, and sin not"* (1 Corinthians 15:34). Since *"sin is the transgression of the law"* (1 John 3:4), righteousness is faithful obedience to God's law—fulfilled in us through Christ's sacrifice (Romans 8:3–4).

Peter asked, *"If the righteous are scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"* (1 Peter 4:18). The Greek emphasizes the difficulty: *"If the righteous are saved with difficulty…"* How can anyone attain such a high calling in a world so deeply marred by sin? This question leads us to the heart of the Gospel*:* only Christ's righteousness can bridge the gap between God's perfect standard and our broken condition.

The Bible reveals that *"the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel"* (Romans 1:16–17). But knowing that God is righteous doesn't save us—*even the demons believe that, and tremble* (James 2:19). The Psalmist cried, *"Deliver me in Your righteousness"* (Psalm 71:2). But how can God's righteousness deliver us when He is holy and we are not?

Here lies the unsurpassed gift: *God offers His righteousness to us—freely, by faith***.**

- When we believe, as Abraham did, *"it is counted to us as righteousness"* (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).
- This righteousness is not earned—it is *imputed*.
- Through faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit pours God's righteousness into our hearts (Romans 5:5; Titus 3:5–7).

This is justification by faith. It is not merely a legal pardon—it is a transformation. We are made right with God, not by our merit, but by His mercy.

Objectives:

I. Explore the meaning and significance of the Gospel message.
II. Examine how Scripture shows God's righteousness being made known through the Gospel.
III. Consider whether those who trust in Christ are truly righteous in God's sight.
IV. Study how God bestows His righteousness upon believers through faith.
V. Understand the dual nature of the Christian life. Investigate the tension between the believer's spiritual transformation and their ongoing struggle with human nature.

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

I. WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

The word "Gospel" comes from the Greek word *euaggelion*, meaning "good news." In the New Testament, the Gospel encompasses a wide range of profound truths, offering hope and salvation to all who receive it. This good news is both rich and comprehensive, revealing God's grace, love, and plan for redemption. Our focus is to explore those passages that illuminate the very core of the Gospel message. What are the essential truths of the Gospel that hold the most significance for someone seeking salvation?

The Word:

1. What did Paul regard as of first importance in the Gospel? 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:8

2. What was the Gospel that Paul preached among the Gentiles? Galatians 2:2, 16

3. What kind of power did Paul find in the Gospel? Romans 1:16-17

Explanation: The heart of the Gospel message is this: Christ died for our sins and rose again to be our living Savior. Yet these historical facts alone do not bring salvation—they must be embraced through faith. It is not enough to simply believe in Jesus as one might believe in other historical figures. Faith, as described in the New Testament, is far deeper. Paul explains that "justification"—being made right with God—is possible only through faith. This faith is not mere intellectual agreement but total surrender and commitment to Christ. It is the kind of faith that allows you to echo Paul's words: "*I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord*" Philippians 3:8. When you approach Christ with this wholehearted faith, the Gospel becomes a transformative power in your life, and you experience the blessings of salvation.

The Gospel is also the source of the power to live righteously. As Paul affirms, the Gospel is "*the power of God unto salvation*" (*Romans 1:16*). When you receive this power, you are justified and saved. The Greek term "to justify" (*dikaioo*), used in Galatians 2:16, corresponds to the noun "righteousness" (*dikaiosune*) and the adjective "righteous" (*dikaios*). To better understand this relationship, consider the English words "to beautify" (verb), "beauty" (noun), and "beautiful" (adjective). When you beautify a garden, you make it beautiful by giving it beauty. In the same way, when God justifies us, He imparts His righteousness to us, making us righteous. This gift enables us to experience salvation here and now. Isn't that wonderful news?

Relevance: Justification is not something we can earn through effort, discipline, or merit. It is a divine gift—freely offered by Jesus and received by faith. We do not climb our way to righteousness; we open our hearts to it. All that's required is trust: to believe that Christ's sacrifice was personally meant for you, and to accept His gift of righteousness and salvation. This is the beauty of grace—it meets us where we are, not where we wish we could be. And once received, it begins to transform us from the inside out.

II. HOW IS THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD REVEALED IN THE GOSPEL?

Before we can grasp the power of the Gospel, we must understand what it reveals. Scripture tells us that in the Gospel, *"the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith"* (Romans 1:17, NRSV). But what does that mean? Is this righteousness simply a divine attribute we admire—or is it something more? This section explores how God's righteousness is not only displayed in the message of salvation, but actively imparted to those who believe. It is a revelation that moves from divine initiative to human transformation, unfolding through faith and for a life of faith.

The Word:

4. How did Paul explain that divine knowledge is "revealed" to us? 1 Corinthians 2:9-16

5. According to Jesus, how can humble people have wisdom exceeding that of the world's great minds? Matthew 11: 25-27

6. Who was revealed in Paul's life so that he had the grace or power to preach the Gospel? Galatians 1:15-16

7. What (Who) was "revealed," making justification possible? Galatians 3:23-24

8. Who reveals the mystery of salvation through Christ? What did this revelation do for Paul? What does it do for us? Ephesians 3:1-.

Explanation: Romans 1:16–17 declares that the Gospel is *"the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,"* and that *"in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith."* The Greek verb *apokalyptō—to reveal*—means to uncover, disclose, or bring to light. In the New Testament, it often refers to divine truth made known by the Holy Spirit—not merely as information, but as illumination that transforms the heart. This revealed righteousness is not a distant attribute of God—it is a gift imparted to the believer. It is not something we merely admire; it is something we receive and embody. The Gospel reveals God's righteousness *through faith*—as we trust in Christ—and *for faith*—as we continue to live by that trust. Faith is both the doorway and the path. The believer is not only justified by faith but sustained by it, growing in grace and holiness.

Recent theological reflection highlights that *"through faith for faith"* may also point to the dynamic relationship between *God's faithfulness* and *our response of faith.* The righteousness revealed in the Gospel is rooted in God's covenantal loyalty, and it calls forth a life of faithful trust in return. This echoes Habakkuk 2:4, which Paul quotes: *"The one who is righteous will live by faith."* Thus, the Gospel is the power of God because it does more than inform—it transforms. The believer doesn't merely acknowledge that God is righteous; they experience His righteousness as a living force within. It reshapes the heart, renews the mind, and empowers a life of obedience.

When Paul wrote that the Gospel is the power of God *because in it the righteousness of God is revealed*, he emphasized that this righteousness is *bestowed upon us* when we accept Christ. Jesus doesn't ask us to admire His perfection from afar—He invites us to receive His righteousness into our hearts. This divine gift transforms us from habitual sinners into committed servants of Christ. It is this transformative power that qualifies us for the kingdom of heaven.

The Bible reminds us, *"All our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth"* (Isaiah 64:6, NRSV), but Christ's righteousness is flawless and complete: *"The Lord is righteous in all His ways"* (Psalm 145:17). This is why Jeremiah declared Him to be *"The Lord is our righteousness"* (Jeremiah 23:6). Paul, too, longed to *"be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith"* (Philippians 3:9).

Relevance: When you surrender your heart fully to Christ, His righteousness is not merely credited to you—it becomes a living power within you. This is not a distant promise or symbolic gesture; it is a divine reality that qualifies you for eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Through faith, you receive what you could never earn: the purity, holiness, and standing that only Christ possesses. And this gift is not given reluctantly—it is offered freely, joyfully, and completely. What could be more astonishing than that?

III. IS THE BELIEVER IN CHRIST RIGHTEOUS?

This question hinges on how we define righteousness and its source. If by "righteous" we mean that a believer is independently capable of living a victorious life—free from sin and spiritual failure—apart from Christ's continual presence and power, the answer is an emphatic *no*. Our righteousness is never self-sustained or self-generated. Even after receiving Christ, we remain fully dependent on His grace, His Spirit, and His transforming presence to walk faithfully with God.

However, if we mean: *Is the believer righteous because of Christ's righteousness—graciously and continually imparted as they abide in Him?* Then the answer is a resounding *yes*. The believer's righteousness comes from Christ alone. It is not earned, but received. It is not achieved, but bestowed. This righteousness qualifies us for eternal life and empowers us to live in obedience, humility, and joy.

The Word:

9. What did Paul call the person who lives by faith? Romans 1:17 (last phrase.

10. Who has the ability to do righteousness? 1 John 2:29

11. In what sense is the person righteous who does righteousness? 1 John 3:7; Galatians 2:20

12. Of what is the Christian believer a servant (or slave)? Romans 6:17-23

Explanation: The Greek of Romans 1:17 translates literally: *"The righteous person shall live by faith."* This profound statement reveals that righteousness is not a static label—it is a dynamic life, sustained by trust in Christ. When Christ dwells in the believer's heart, His righteousness becomes a living force—empowering us to do what pleases God. Paul captured this mystery when he wrote, *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"* (Galatians 2:20). Righteousness does not originate from within us. It flows from Christ's indwelling presence. He is righteous—and His life in us makes us righteous. Through faith and union with Him, His righteousness becomes ours—not by merit, but by grace.

Relevance: You are righteous in God's sight only when Christ lives through you—empowering you with His flawless righteousness and transforming your life from the inside out. This is not a borrowed identity; it is a new creation. His righteousness is your strength, your standing, and your song.

IV. HOW IS THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD BESTOWED UPON US?

Given what we've already discussed, we might reframe the question like this: How does Jesus give Himself to us? This is one of the most awe-inspiring and transformative experiences in the Christian life. God doesn't simply pour an abstract or intangible quality into our hearts. Instead, He provides something far greater and deeply personal. What exactly does He do? We will let Him speak for Himself through the Word.

The Word:

13. What did Jesus say He would do after He had returned to heaven? John 14:16-18, 23

14. How does Jesus save (or justify) us? Titus 3:5-7

15. Who and what does the Holy Spirit bring to our hearts? Romans 8:9-10

Explanation: Here is the unparalleled gift of the Gospel: Jesus offers not merely forgiveness, but Himself. Through the Holy Spirit, He comes to dwell within the believer—not as a distant figure to admire, but as a living presence to transform. When Christ lives in us, His righteousness is not simply credited to our account—it becomes the very life we live. This is not a theological abstraction; it is a spiritual reality that reshapes our desires, our conduct, and our identity (Revelation 3:20).

Sigve Tonstad, an Adventist theologian and physician, describes this beautifully: God's righteousness is revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, and that revelation empowers our own faithfulness. Righteousness, then, is not just a legal status—it is a way of being, formed by Christ's ongoing presence in our lives. W. W. Prescott, an early Adventist educator and devotional writer, expressed this mystery with poetic clarity in *Victory in Christ*: *"He Himself becomes my righteousness… The righteousness of Jesus is not a theological creed, but a living experience… It purifies the current of my life, and sweetens my thinking, my speaking, and my doing."* Prescott reminds us that Christ's righteousness is inseparable from His life. When He dwells in us, we are made new—not by effort, but by grace.

This is justification not as a ledger entry, but as a union. Christ saves us by pouring His presence into our lives, and in doing so, He bestows His righteousness—qualifying us to live for Him now and to dwell with Him forever.

Relevance: True and lasting joy is found in inviting Jesus to dwell within your heart. When He lives in you, He becomes your *"wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption"* (1 Corinthians 1:30). His life becomes your life. His righteousness becomes your strength. And His presence becomes your peace.

V. THE DUAL NATURE OF THE BELIEVING CHRISTIAN

What kind of people are we after having received Christ's gift of His righteousness by the Holy Spirit?

The Word:

16. What constant struggle did Paul have after Christ came into his life? 1 Corinthians 9:27; Galatians 5:16-18

17. Even though we are still fallen, what constant experience is ours because we are living the life of faith? Romans 10:6-10 (compare Deuteronomy 30:11-14); 2 Corinthians 5:17, 21; (compare Romans 8:3-4)

Explanation: When Christ dwells in a believer through the Holy Spirit, that person remains fully human—still subject to weakness, temptation, and the inherited and cultivated tendencies of a fallen nature. Yet something profound has changed: sin no longer reigns. Though the believer may still feel the pull of temptation, those struggles no longer dominate. As long as Christ reigns within, sin cannot take control (Romans 6:11–12; 1 John 3:9).

Paul's own testimony reflects this tension. In Galatians 5:17, he describes the daily conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. But this struggle need not end in defeat. When we "*walk in the Spirit*," we are promised that we "*shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh*" (Galatians 5:16). The life of faith is not a life free from battle—it is a life empowered for victory. We are no longer slaves to sin, but servants of righteousness (Romans 6:18). God's law is written on our hearts, and we believe "*unto righteousness*" (Romans 10:10). Though we remain in mortal bodies, we are made new in Christ. As Paul declares, *"Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). And because Christ bore our sin, we are now made "the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is the dual nature of the believing Christian: still human, still vulnerable—yet indwelt by Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and called to live a life of righteousness through faith.

Relevance: Will you invite Jesus into your heart today—through the Holy Spirit—to be your indwelling righteousness and your strength for victorious living? His presence does not remove the struggle, but it transforms the outcome. In Him, you are no longer defined by your weakness, but by His strength.

Review Questions

1. True or False
    a. The Gospel is only a matter of history.
    b. God reveals His righteousness by bestowing it upon us by the Holy Spirit.
    c. The believer is righteous in and of himself apart from any divine indwelling.
    d. While a believer in Christ receives a new spiritual nature, they may still struggle with the influence of their old sinful tendencies. However, these habits no longer rule over them, as God empowers them to overcome sin and grow in holiness.

2. Discuss: When the thief on the cross accepted Jesus as Savior, did he receive the gift of righteousness? Was he, at that moment, fully qualified for heaven—even though he had no opportunity to demonstrate a changed life?