

# The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness to Believers:

*What God Requires, Christ Provides*

---

By John Piper with Justin Taylor January 1, 2004

---

*The gospel that Paul defended in Galatians is under serious attack today, in part by some who insist that they are evangelical Protestants. In the September/October issue of Modern Reformation magazine (which we encourage you to buy and read), Piper spells out more fully exactly what God's good news in Christ is. He argues that what God requires regarding human law-keeping, Christ provides, through becoming our substitute in two senses.*

If justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Gal. 2:21)

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. (Gal. 3:10, 13)

Historically, Protestants have believed that the Bible teaches that our salvation depends on what Christ has accomplished for our pardon and our perfection. **We accept by faith his substitution for us in two senses: in his final suffering and death, he was condemned and cursed so that we may be pardoned (see Gal. 3:13; Rom. 8:3); and in his whole life of righteousness culminating in his death, he learned obedience so that we may be saved (see Heb. 5:8-9). His death crowns his atoning sufferings that propitiate God's wrath against us (see Rom. 3:24-25; 5:6-9), but it also crowns his life of perfect righteousness—God's righteousness—that is then imputed to us who believe (see 2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:21-22; 4:6, 11; 5:18-19).**

God provided in Christ what God demanded from us in the law. But today this good news that Christ is not only our pardon but also our perfection is under serious attack. Here I hope to show not only that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness is biblical but why we should defend it.

## The Problem of the Law

Three times in Galatians 2:16, Paul tells us that no one can be justified—no one can be made right with God—by "works of the law." In context, this phrase refers most naturally to deeds done to obey Moses' law. (Note the parallels between "the Book of the Law" and "works of the law" in Gal. 3:10, and between "the law" in Rom. 3:19, 20 and "works of the law" in Rom. 3:20. In both Gal. 3:10 and Rom. 3:19-20, the term "law" refers to the Mosaic law; so the phrase "works of the law" naturally picks up that meaning.)

In its narrow, short-term design, the law that God gave to the Israelites through Moses demanded perfect obedience of the Pentateuch's more than 600 commandments in order for the Israelites to receive eternal life (see Lev. 18:5; Deut. 32:45-47; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:10, 12). In this way, it upheld an absolute standard of childlike, humble, God-reliant, God-exalting perfect obedience that is in fact due from all of us—and thus provided the moral backdrop without which the Pentateuch's sin-atonement provisions (and ultimately Christ's sacrifice) would be unintelligible.

Yet the Israelites were uniformly sinful and hostile to God (see Exod. 33:1-3; Acts 7:51). They did not—and indeed could not (see Rom. 8:7)—submit to him. Consequently, the law's effect on sinful Israel, when she was confronted with its hundreds of commandments, was awareness of latent sin (see Rom. 7:7), increased sin through deliberate violation of God's holy, righteous, and good commandment (see Rom. 7:12-13), and the multiplication of transgressions (see Rom. 5:20; 4:15). All of this was part of God's design for the law: "[The law] was added for the sake of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19); "The law came in so that the transgression would increase" (Rom. 5:20). The law cannot give life (see Gal. 3:21); rather it kills by multiplying sin (see Rom. 7:5, 8-13).

The law's deadly design and effects are sufficient to warrant Paul's statement in Galatians 3:12—"The law is not of faith"—especially in view of what he says eleven verses later: "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law . . . . But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian" (vv. 23, 25). This does not mean that there was no faith before Christ (see Rom. 4) but, rather, that there was no faith explicitly in Christ before Christ came. The law's function, in the long view, is to prepare God's people for Christ's work, even as its short-term function is to imprison its recipients in sin (see Gal. 3:22-23). The narrow, short-term aim of the law is to kill those who come in contact with it because it is primarily "commandments" (see Rom. 13:8-9; Eph. 2:15) that require perfect

obedience but that cannot themselves produce this obedience independently of the Spirit who "gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

### What God Requires, Christ Provides

Justification cannot come through the law (see Gal. 2:21; Acts 13:38-39). Each of us—every single human being (see Rom. 3:10-12, 19-20)—has failed to do what God's law requires of us (Gal. 3:10; 6:13; cf. James 2:10). *But to understand what God requires, we must see what Christ provides.* In his mercy, God has provided his Son as a twofold substitute for us. Both facets of Christ's substitution are crucial for our becoming right with God. These facets are grounded in the twin facts that (1) we have failed to keep God's law perfectly, and so we should die; but (2) Jesus did not fail—he alone has kept God's law perfectly (see Heb. 4:15)—and so he should not have died. Yet in his mercy God has provided in Christ a great substitution—a "blessed exchange"—according to which Jesus can stand in for us with God, offering his perfect righteousness in place of our failure and his own life's blood in place of ours. When we receive the mercy God offers us in Christ by faith (see Acts 16:31; 1 Tim. 1:15-16; 1 Pet. 1:8-9), **his perfection is imputed—or credited or reckoned—to us and our sinful failure is imputed—or credited or reckoned—to him. And thus Jesus' undeserved death pays for our sin (see Mark 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Rev. 5:9); and God's demand for us to be perfectly righteous is satisfied by the imputation or crediting of Christ's perfect righteousness to us.** "If justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal. 2:21). But "God has done what the law ... could not do" (Rom. 8:3).

2 Corinthians 5:21 is one of Scripture's most powerful affirmations of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the account of those who believe in him: "For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." There is a great deal that can be said about this verse but, when all is said and done, perhaps Charles Hodge has summed up its import best:

There is probably no passage in the Scriptures in which the doctrine of justification is more concisely or clearly stated than [this]. Our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us. He bore our sins; we are clothed in his righteousness... **Christ bearing our sins did not make him morally a sinner... nor does Christ's righteousness become subjectively ours, it is not the moral quality of our souls... Our sins were the judicial ground of the sufferings of Christ, so that they were a satisfaction of justice; and his righteousness is the judicial ground of our acceptance with God.**

All of this then means, as Hodge goes on to say, that "our pardon is an act of justice"—an act based on Jesus having borne our sins (see 1 Pet. 2:24)—and yet it "is not mere pardon, but justification alone"—that is, our forevermore standing as righteous before God because we are clothed with Christ's perfection—"that gives us peace with God."

### This Doctrine Is Under Attack

Today, this precious doctrine that Christ's perfect keeping of the law is imputed to those who have faith in him is under attack in unexpected places. I have recently written a book, entitled, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness?*, that attempts to explain and defend it exegetically. But why would a pressured pastor with a family to care for, a flock to shepherd, weekly messages to prepare, a love for biblical counseling, a burden for racial justice, a commitment to see abortion become unthinkable, a zeal for world evangelization, a focus on local church planting, and a life goal of spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ, devote time and energy to the controversy over the imputation of Christ's righteousness? And why should you—pastor, elder, schoolteacher, engineer, accountant, firefighter, computer programmer, and homemaker—take the time to work through an issue like this? **In the rest of this article, I will explain why I have taken up this issue.** My reasons are personal, but in fact they apply to all who wish to glorify Christ, contend for the faith, and edify the saints.

### For the Sake of My Family: Marriage

I have a family to care for. My marriage must survive and thrive for the good of our children and the glory of Christ. God designed marriage to display the holy mercy of Christ and the happy submission of his church (see Eph. 5:21-25). Here the doctrine of justification by faith and the imputed righteousness of Christ can be a great marriage saver and sweetener.

Marriage seems almost impossible at times because both partners feel so self-justified in their expectations that are not being fulfilled. There is a horrible emotional dead end in the words, "But it's just plain wrong for you to act that way," followed by "That's your perfectionistic perspective" or "Do you think you do everything right?" or by hopeless, resigned silence. The cycle of self-justified self-pity and anger can seem unbreakable.

But what if one or both partners becomes overwhelmed with the truth of justification by faith alone—and especially with the truth that in Christ

Jesus God credits me, for Christ's sake, as fulfilling all of his expectations? What happens if this doctrine so masters our souls that we begin to bend it from the vertical to the horizontal and apply it to our marriages? In our own imperfect efforts in this regard, there have been breakthroughs that seemed at times impossible. It is possible, for Christ's sake, simply to say, "I will no longer think merely in terms of whether my expectations are met in practice. I will, for Christ's sake, regard you the way God regards me—complete and accepted in Christ—and thus to be helped and blessed and nurtured and cherished, even if, in practice, you fail." I know my wife treats me this way. And surely this is part of what Paul calls for when he says that we should forgive "one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). There is more healing for marriage in the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness than many of us have begun to discover.

#### For the Sake of My Family: Children

Then there are our children. Four sons are grown and out of our house but not out of our lives. Every week there are major personal, relational, vocational, and theological issues to deal with. In every case, the fundamental question is, What are the great biblical truths that can give stability and guidance here? Listening and loving are crucial. But if they lack biblical *substance*, my counsel is hollow. Touchy-feely affirmation will not cut it. Too much is at stake. These young men want rock under their feet.

My daughter Talitha is six years old. Recently she decided that we as a family would read through Romans together. She is just learning to read and I was putting my finger on each word. At the beginning of chapter five she stopped me in mid-sentence and asked, "What does 'justified' mean?" What do you say to a six year old? Do you say, "There are more important things to think about so just trust Jesus and be a good girl?" Or do you say that it is very complex, and even adults are not able to understand it fully, so wait to deal with it when you are older? Or do you say that it simply means that Jesus died in our place so that all our sins might be forgiven? What I did was to tell a story, made up on the spot, about two accused criminals, one who actually did the bad thing, and the other who did not. The one who didn't do anything bad is shown, by all those who saw the crime, to be innocent. So the judge "justifies" him—he tells him he is a law-abiding person and so can go free. But the other accused criminal, who really did a bad thing, is shown to be guilty, because all the people who saw the crime saw him do it. But, then, guess what? The judge "justifies" him, too! He says, "I regard you as a law-abiding citizen with full rights in

our country" (and not just as a forgiven criminal who may not be trusted or fully free in the country). Here Talitha looked at me, puzzled.

She couldn't put her finger on the problem, but she sensed that something was wrong. So I said, "That's a problem isn't it? How can a person who really did break the law and do something bad be told by the judge that he is a law keeper, a righteous person, with full rights to the freedoms of the country and that he doesn't have to go to jail or be punished?" She shook her head. Then I went back to Romans 4:5 and showed her that God "justifies the ungodly." Her brow furrowed. I told her that she has sinned and I have sinned and we are all like this second criminal. And when God "justifies" us he knows we are sinners who are ungodly and law breakers. And I asked her, "What did God do so that it's right for him say to us sinners: you are not guilty; you are law keepers in my eyes; you are righteous; and you are free to enjoy all that this country has to offer?"

She knew it had something to do with Jesus and his coming and dying in our place. That much she has learned. But what more did I—or would you—tell her now? How we answer that question depends on whether we believe in the imputation of Christ's righteousness. If we do, then we will tell her that Jesus was the perfect law keeper and never sinned, but did everything the judge and his country expected of him. We will tell her that when Jesus lived and died, he was not only a punishment bearer but also a law keeper. We will say that, if she will trust Jesus, then God the Judge will let Jesus' punishment and Jesus' righteousness count for hers—Jesus will have been punished for her and he will have obeyed the law for her. So when God "justifies" her—says that she is forgiven and righteous, even though she was not punished and did not keep the law—he does it because of Jesus. Jesus is her righteousness and Jesus is her punishment. Trusting Jesus makes Jesus so much her Lord and Savior that he is her perfection as well as her pardon.

Thousands of Christian families never have conversations like this. Not at six or sixteen. We do not have to look far, then, to explain the church's weakness and the fun-oriented superficiality of many youth ministries and the stunning drop-out rate after high school. But how will parents teach their children if the weekly message they get from the pulpit is that doctrine is unimportant? So, yes, I have a family to care for. And because I do, I must understand the central doctrines of my faith—and understand them so well that they can be translated to fit children of any age. As G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "It ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people."

## And There Are Weekly Messages to Prepare

This also explains why this issue matters to me when I have weekly messages to prepare and a flock to shepherd. My messages need to be saturated with biblical truth—brimming with radical relevance for the hard things in life—and they must help my people to be able to preach the gospel to themselves and their children day and night—the full, rich, biblical gospel, as it unfolds in the New Testament, and not as it is quickly and simply summed up in a pamphlet. My people need to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (see 2 Pet. 3:18) so that they have strong roots for radical living, sweet comfort in troubled times, and serious answers for their children.

## Justification and Biblical Counseling

I love biblical counseling. There is so much brokenness and so much sin that seems intransigently woven together with forms of failing family life and distorted personal perspectives. This does not yield to quick remedies. After several decades of watching the mental health care system at work, I am less hopeful about the effectiveness of even Christian psychotherapy than I used to be. No one strategy of helping people possesses a corner on all wisdom. But more than ever I believe that the essential foundation of all healing and all Christ-exalting wholeness is a soul-penetrating grasp of the glorious truth of justification by faith, distinct from and yet grounding the battle for healthy, loving relationships. Good counseling patiently builds the "whole counsel" of God (Acts 20:27) into the heads and hearts of sinful and wounded people. At its center is Christ our righteousness.

## Justification and a Passion for Evangelism

Why devote time to defending the imputation of Christ's righteousness when there are so many unreached groups and millions of individuals who have never heard the gospel? I mention two things.

First, over the past twenty years of leading a missions-mobilizing church it has become increasingly clear that "teacher-based" church planting and not just "friendship-based" church planting is crucial among people with no Christian history. In other words, doctrinal instruction is utterly crucial in planting the church.

This is unsurprising, since embedded in the Great Commission is the command to *teach* new disciples to observe all that Christ has commanded us (see Matt. 28:20), and since Paul planted the church in Ephesus by *reasoning daily* for two years in the hall of Tyrannus, "so that all the

residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Doing missions without deep doctrinal transfer through patient teaching will not only wreck on the vast reefs of ignorance, but will, at best, produce weak and ever-dependent churches. Therefore, pastors who care about building, sending, and going churches must give themselves to building sending bases that breed doctrinally deep people who are not emotionally dependent on fads but who know how to feed themselves on Christ-centered truth.

Second, Paul develops the doctrine of justification in Galatians and Romans in ways that show its absolutely universal relevance. It crosses every culture. It is not a tribal concept. In Galatians he writes, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal. 3:13-14). Christ's obedience is universal in its scope and significance. It is not just for Abraham's posterity but also for Adam's posterity—in other words, for everyone. This is also the point of comparing Adam to Christ in Romans 5:12-19.

### Truth-Treasuring Church Planting

If I want to see local churches planted from our church and others, why invest so much time and energy in defending and explaining this doctrine? Because there are enough churches being planted by means of music, drama, creative scheduling, sprightly narrative, and marketing savvy. And there are too few that are God-centered, truth-treasuring, Bible-saturated, Christ-exalting, cross-focused, Spirit-dependent, prayer-soaked, soul-winning, and justice-pursuing, that have a wartime mindset that makes them ready to lay down their lives for the salvation of nations and neighborhoods. A blood-earnest joy sustains churches like these—and it comes only by embracing Christ crucified as our righteousness. As William Wilberforce said, "If we would... rejoice in [Christ] as triumphantly as the first Christians did, we must learn like them to repose our entire trust in him and to adopt the language of the apostle, 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ' (Gal. 6:14), 'who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.'" (1 Cor. 1:30)

### The Truth That Makes the Church Sing

Of course, the question of whether we should believe in the doctrine of Christ's imputed righteousness must finally be answered exegetically from biblical texts and not because of its practical value or historical precedent. That is what the major part of Counted Righteous in Christ



attempts. But we would be myopic not to notice that abandoning this doctrine would massively revise Protestant theology and Christian worship. It would eliminate a great theme from our worship of Christ in song. Recognizing this at least clarifies the issue and shows its magnitude, even if it cannot settle it.

The imputed righteousness of Christ has inspired much joyful worship over the centuries and informed many hymns and worship songs. It has cut across Calvinist/Arminian, Lutheran/Reformed, and Baptist/Presbyterian divides. For example,

"And Can It Be" (Charles Wesley)  
No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living head,  
*And clothed in righteousness divine,*  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown through Christ my own.

"The Solid Rock" (Edward Mote)  
When he shall come with trumpet sound,  
O may I then in him be found,  
*Dressed in his righteousness alone,*  
Faultless to stand before the throne.

"We Trust in You, Our Shield" (Edith Cherry)  
We trust in you, O Captain--  
In your dear name, all other names above:  
*Jesus our righteousness, our sure foundation,*  
Our prince of glory and our king of love.

"O Mystery of Love Divine" (Thomas Gill)  
Our load of sin and misery  
Didst thou, the Sinless, bear?  
*Thy spotless robe of purity*  
*Do we the sinners wear?*

"Thy Works Not Mine O Christ" (Isaac Watts)  
*Thy righteousness, O Christ,*  
*Alone can cover me:*

No righteousness avails  
Save that which is of thee.  
Let Christ Receive All His Glory!

My overarching life goal is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. More specifically, the older I get the more I want my life to count in the long term for the glory of Christ. In America, there is an almost universal bondage to the mindset that we can only feel loved when we are made much of. Yet the truth is that we are loved most deeply when we are helped to be free of that bondage so that we find our joy in treasuring Christ and making much of him. I long to see our joy—and the joy of the nations —rooted in God's wonderful work of freeing us to make much of Christ forever. This was Paul's passion: "It is my eager expectation and hope that... now as always Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20).

This is my passion, and I pray it will be my passion until I die, which means that I am jealous for Christ to get all the glory he deserves in the work of justification. I am consequently concerned that recent challenges to this doctrine rob him of a great part of his glory by denying that he has become for us not only our pardon but our perfection, that he is not only our redemption from sin but our righteousness, and that he not only bears the punishment for our disobedience but also performs and provides our perfect obedience. Current challenges to justification obscure (not to put it too harshly) half of Christ's glory in the work of justification by denying the imputation of Christ's righteousness and claiming that the Bible does not teach this great doctrine. Recognizing this, Francis Turretin wrote that imputation "tends to the greater glory of Christ and to our richer consolation, which they obscure and lessen not a little who detract from the price of our salvation a part of his most perfect righteousness and obedience and thus rend his seamless tunic." Jonathan Edwards echoed this: "To suppose that all Christ does is only to make atonement for us by suffering, is to make him our Savior but in part. It is to rob him of half his glory as Savior."

I do not believe for a moment that any of those who represent the challenge I am opposing aim to dishonor Christ. I believe they love him and want to honor him and his Word. But I believe the mistake they are making will have the opposite effect. The doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ bestows on Jesus Christ the fullest honor that he deserves. He should be honored not only as the one who died to pardon us, and not only as the one who sovereignly works faith and obedience in us, but as the one

who provided a perfect righteousness for us as the ground of our full acceptance and endorsement by God. I pray that these "newer" ways of understanding justification that deny the reality of the imputation of divine righteousness to sinners by faith alone will not flourish and thus that the fullest glory of Christ and the fullest pastoral helps for our souls will not be dimmed.

-----John Piper (D. Theol., University of Munich) is the Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis. Justin Taylor (M.A.R. cand., Reformed Theological Seminary) Director of Theology and Executive Editor at *Desiring God*, condensed this material from Piper's book *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) and from his other unpublished writings.

Piper's quotation of Charles Hodge comes from Hodge's commentary on 2 Corinthians (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.), pp. 150-151. His quotation from William Wilberforce is from Wilberforce's *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), p. 66. His quotation from Francis Turretin is found in *Turretin's Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1993), Vol. 2, p. 452; and the quotation from Jonathan Edwards is found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), Vol. 1, p. 683.

By permission of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 1716 Spruce Street, Philadelphia PA 19103. We encourage our readers to visit the website for [Modern Reformation](#).