

The Essence Of Christianity

James W. Knox

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By James W. Knox

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Our text for this study is 2 Peter 1:1-4, which reads: *Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*

Notice in the text that there is something to be *obtained*. This epistle is written *to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*. The grand object obtained by faith is God's righteousness. That is to be as right as God is right; to be as pure as God is pure; to be as holy as God is holy; to be as free from sin as God is free from sin.

Verse 3 says, *According as his divine power hath given unto us all things...* And verse 4 adds, *Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises.*

Now let me contrast for you Biblical Christianity with every religion or non-religion on the face of the earth. You can put them all together because they are all the same. Biblical

Christianity says that no one is good enough to earn heaven on their merits. Every other faith or non-faith believes that eternal life is earned by good works. Everyone who is not a true Christian (as defined by the Bible, not by men) believes the same thing – “If I am good enough long enough, I will earn the favor of God and be granted eternal life.”

I spoke with a drunken young man late Friday night and with a sincere religious man on Wednesday morning. They belonged to very different religions, held very different views of God, had very different backgrounds and training, yet they both believed the same thing. Each believed he was not good enough at the moment to make it to heaven, but that he was making progress toward that end.

Good enough will vary depending upon the particular variety of religion. Long enough will vary depending upon the sincerity of the one seeking everlasting life. But whatever religion you want to investigate, it will teach that if you are good enough long enough God will give you a passing grade (as opposed to a failing grade) and you will have earned a place in heaven.

Biblical Christianity states that you must possess the absolute righteousness of God Himself, or you do not pass. You must have the absolute holiness of God Himself, or you cannot get in. You must have the unblemished purity of God Himself, or there is no eternal life for you.

So our text says there are those who have multiplied peace (v. 2) because of something that was given to them. There are those who have escaped corruption (v. 4) because of something that was given to them. There are those who have the promise of everlasting life (v. 3) because of something that was given to them. What an amazing thing! The passage we read said that what was given to these believers was God’s own righteousness (v. 1). By grace they were given God’s own purity, God’s own perfection, God’s own goodness.

The first verse tells us how they obtained this incredible gift. *Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith.*

Religion says, "believe in yourself and you will get to God." You can argue with me and claim that religions demand ceremony, or sacrifice, or money, or a series of deeds. That is correct, but at the end of day, whom are you left to trust? Not God but yourself!

I asked the young soldier Friday night the same question I asked the senior citizen on Wednesday afternoon, "How do you hope to get to heaven?" The answer that each of them gave was a testimony to their trust in themselves and their confidence in their good works. "I have done this, so I believe that God will accept me... I have not done that, so I believe that God will not reject me..."

The bottom line is that every religion, every non-religion, every philosophy, and every system of rituals leaves you to trust yourself. This is why no moral person or religious person or sincere person can ever say with certainty they are going to heaven when they die. Their standard of righteousness is a non-standard. It does not exist, so they can never know if they have measured up.

If I ask you today, "Are you saved? Do you know for sure that you are going to heaven?" many would say, "I think I'm going to heaven," or "I hope I'm going to heaven," or "I want to go to heaven." All religious and non-religious persons who answered honestly would have to say, "I am not sure I'm going to heaven."

If I asked, "Why are you not sure when you can be?" the answer would be, "I don't believe anybody can know for sure."

This is because if you are trusting yourself, you cannot be sure! You might not have done enough. You might not keep doing enough. You might not have met the right set of requirements. So you can never know for sure.

On the other hand, the man, woman, boy, or girl who has not put their faith in themselves but in God, who boast not of their own righteousness but depend fully upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who have hope not in their merits but in the merits of Jesus Christ as imparted to them – such a one is reckoned as righteous by the Lord. Below we will explain how this can be.

What is so difficult about ministering the gospel in this day and age is that much of what is called Christianity is actually in opposition to the teaching of the Bible. If you turn on the religious television you are told, "Believe in yourself." If you go to the religious bookstore you find self-help books. If you go to church the minister is socially pressured into speaking about how wonderful *you* are and how happy God is to finally have *you*. What is now called Christianity is just one more appeal to self-confidence, just one more appeal to believe in yourself, just one more appeal to do the best that you can – and God will have to let you into heaven. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Holy Bible says we can have the precious promises of peace and life as God's gift if we will exercise proper faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now when you say that, fundamental Christianity oftentimes becomes as confusing as ritualistic Christianity or no Christianity at all. You see, faith in Jesus sounds good. *But what Jesus?*

Many people believe in the little baby Jesus in a manger, dependent upon Mary and held in her arms. Many people believe in the miracle-working Jesus. Others give a nod to the great teacher who set a noble example for mankind. Many people believe in the Jesus who died that awful cruel bloody death on a cross, falsely accused and misunderstood. Some even go so far as to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and returned to heaven in triumph.

All that is well and good. Jesus is the virgin-born Son of God, the babe in the manger. Jesus is the sinless miracle worker who spake as never a man spake. Jesus is the offering who died upon the cross to pay for our sin. Jesus is the resurrection, having risen from the dead. Jesus is the life who is seated at the right hand of the Father. But these are all intellectual facts! While you *must* have the correct facts about Jesus Christ, an intellectual understanding of who Jesus is and what He did is a far cry from faith in the righteousness of God – given by and through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Think with me. If Satan were here and had to tell the truth, he would say that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin in a manger at Bethlehem. He knows that. He is not saved. If you asked him

if Jesus Christ always spoke the truth, if Jesus Christ worked miracles, if He walked on water, healed the sick and raised the dead, Satan would say, "Of course He did!" He cannot deny these facts. Jesus Christ died upon the cross and rose from the dead! Satan *knows* that! The devil knows that Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father, enthroned as the resurrection and the life.

So I say that it is a good thing for you to believe the right and proper truths about Jesus Christ, but that gets you no closer to heaven than the devil himself. If you have the correct intellectual facts but have not yet put your faith in Jesus Christ the Lord you do not have eternal life. You have the necessary facts but not the necessary righteousness.

The Bible says in Romans 3:20-28, *Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight...* It does not matter that you see yourself as better than your relatives. It does not matter that your neighbors see you as better than the other neighbors. It does not matter that your cellmate thinks you are the best prisoner in the whole lock-up. In God's sight, nobody is good enough!

But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare HIS righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time HIS righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

Did you read that very carefully? The Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is one hundred percent righteous. He has never sinned. He will never sin. He is pure holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners (Hebrews 7:26). Compared to Him is

everybody else. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.

The word of the Lord says that God's Son was born of a virgin (intellectual), He lived a sinless life (intellectual), He died on the cross and rose from the dead (intellectual), He is seated in heaven as the Saviour (intellectual). Now, **knowing** all of that and **believing** all of that, do you understand that His righteousness is the only way that anyone is going to get to heaven? If you will put your faith and trust in **Him**, He will give you **His** righteousness.

When you put your faith completely in Him, the righteousness of Jesus Christ will be reckoned by God as yours. So we read in Romans 3 that when God looks upon the believer He sees him as righteous. It is not the believer's own righteousness but the very righteousness of God! Thus, when someone asks, "Are you going to heaven?" you say, "Yes!" because you are not trusting yourself but you are trusting Jesus Christ.

I know I have eternal life because I have been given the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which is the only righteousness sufficient to get someone into heaven. That is what I am depending on. My faith is not in anything I have done, anything I have not done, anything I will do, anything I won't do. My faith is that Jesus Christ, the righteous Son of God, died for me and rose again for me. He is my only hope of heaven.

This is why we preach repentance. Until a man repents, he never owns that there is no other way to heaven but Jesus Christ. Until a man abandons his self-confidence and his self-hope and his trust in his religion, he will never be saved. As unpopular as it is, we preach against religions and denominations as strongly as we do because so many are trusting their good deeds and not the Savior. Until that false trust is stripped away, there will be no genuine, saving trust in Jesus Christ who is the only way to heaven.

When a man says that there are many ways to heaven what he is saying is that a man can save himself by his good works. Whether a man is a fundamentalist or a politician or a member of

a sacramental church or a compromising imam, he is stating his belief that man may earn eternal life by his merits.

When a man says the only way to heaven is Jesus Christ he is considered hateful and accused of condemning other people's religion. In fact, by agreeing with the word of God, he is condemning himself along with everyone else. He is saying there is no hope of gaining heaven apart from the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is what the Bible teaches. That is why people who say they are Christians, and who also say that people of other faiths can go to heaven, are testifying to the fact that they are not Christians! They may participate in some system of works labeled Christian, but they do not understand the righteousness and the salvation that is in Christ Jesus.

Look with me in Romans chapter 10. Watch how the intellect must give way to genuine faith. Romans 10:1-2 says, ***Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God.*** Look carefully. They believe in God. They believe God gave the scriptures. They offer sacrifices to God. They go to the temple they built for God and worship Him there. They believe there are no other gods. They are zealous! So what did they miss?

Verse 3 says, ***For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.*** This truth must be comprehended. Behold Jesus Christ. He is God's righteousness! He is the only one who is fully righteous. Behold the entire human race. They have sinned and come short of the glory of God. They are not righteous.

So I say, "Sir, are you going to heaven?"

"I hope so."

"What is your hope?"

"I've been baptized."

He has not submitted to the righteousness of God. He is boasting of his own righteousness.

"Ma'am, are you going to heaven?"

"I hope so."

“What is your hope?”

“I’ve been a good mother, a good wife and a good person.”

She has not submitted herself to the righteousness of God.

“Tell me, are you going to heaven?”

“Sure, I think so.”

“On what basis?”

“I belong to such and such a church. I practice such and such a religion.”

Do you not see that each of these replies is a statement of self confidence and that none of them is a declaration of faith in the Lord Jesus?

It is the work of the Holy Spirit of God in the human heart to show a man that he is unrighteous, that he has sinned, that he has failed to measure up to the glory God requires for entrance into heaven. If the Holy Spirit can ever convince that man that he will never be good enough to make heaven on his merits, that man will be left with but two options. One, he can reject the truth of the Bible and trust himself or his religion. Two, he can humbly own his unworthiness and submit to the righteousness of God.

The man who comes to God owning himself a sinner and trusting the merits of the sinless Son of God will be pardoned by God and given eternal life, for the Lord will reckon (account) faith in Jesus Christ for absolute righteousness. The man who continues to trust in himself will die in his sins and awaken in hell.

This is why the greatest danger to the souls of men does not lie in vice or immorality, but in religion. The most damning of all religions is one mixed with humanistic self love. Anything that reinforces man’s false belief that he is good enough to earn eternal life pushes that man closer to damnation. Anything that convinces man of his weakness, sinfulness and lack of perfect righteousness draws him closer to calling out to Jesus for pardon and mercy.

Returning to our passage in Romans 10 we see that one must move from a mere intellectual understanding of who Jesus was to a spiritual understanding of who He is. He is the righteousness of God and there is no way into heaven without Him. So verse 4

says, *For Christ is the end of the law FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS to every one that believeth.*

The day a man believes he will never be good enough to meet God's standard and owns that he must trust Jesus Christ is the day he can be saved.

Has anyone ever purchased something for you? If they purchased it and gave it to you then it is paid for. Jesus Christ has purchased eternal life for you. It is paid for!

Why would you scrape for coins or beg outside the door or wash dishes to pay for a meal that has been paid for? You would not. Why are you jumping through hoops and crawling through this and offering up that and hoping for the other in an attempt to buy eternal life when it has already been paid for? Jesus Christ wants to give you sufficient righteousness to get into heaven.

If you will humble yourself and put all your faith in Jesus, you will receive eternal life. If you do not take this righteousness from Him, by faith, you will never get it.

I understand how a lifetime of television influence, federal school indoctrination, and religious distraction has made it so difficult for people to get saved. When I say there is no one good enough to go to heaven, the self-loving American says, "That's negative." When I say you must repent, the self-loving American says, "That's offensive." When I say none of your religion is good enough and that you will die in your sin if you do not trust Jesus Christ, the self-loving American says, "How dare you be so hateful."

At the same time I am saying these things that offend you, you are offered:

- a full and free pardon of all your sins,
- the righteousness of God freely given,
- eternal life in heaven just for your faith in Christ.

But because this results in God getting all the glory and man having nothing to brag about, it goes unheeded. When you tell a man he has to trust the Lord and not himself, that is considered a negative message – even though it carries with it the offer of eternal life. What a tragedy!

What could be a more positive, uplifting, hopeful message to any man, woman, boy or girl than the good news that God Almighty will forgive all your sins and give you everlasting life if you will stop trusting yourself and trust Jesus Christ! But a self-loving individual misses eternal life trying to prove that he is good enough to get to heaven without God's righteousness. The Bible says that Christ will supply the necessary and only acceptable righteousness to everyone that believes.

Watch this great transaction as it is spelled out in 2 Corinthians 5:20-21. ***Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.*** As an ambassador for one nation speaks on behalf of his nation to members of another nation; so the Christian minister speaks on God's behalf to others. Neither ambassador delivers their own words but those of the power they represent. Here is God's message to mankind.

For he (God) hath made him (Jesus Christ) to be sin for us (all of us – He took our place in death on the cross) that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. How about that! Jesus takes your sin and gives you God's righteousness. One would be a fool to reject such an offer.

Suppose a few years ago you took out a mortgage on a \$400,000 house hoping against hope you could make the payments. You were then injured in such a way that you would never again be able to earn sufficient funds to make those payments. You now realize you cannot meet your obligations, and the person who owns the house is about to put you out on the curb.

Suppose somebody came along and said, "I have \$400,000 that I will give you. I will pay all that debt and the house will be yours. Or you can keep trying to pay for it in the vain hope that somehow, someday your fortunes are going to turn around, and you are going to be able to pay for that house yourself."

We would have to search long and hard to find anyone who would turn down that \$400,000 which would enable them to have that home free and clear. Your debt is fully paid, and you reap the benefit. Wonderful.

So why is it that when Almighty God offers to take the sin debt that will drag one's soul to hell, so many refuse His gracious offer? Men and women who know they cannot stop sinning spurn the offer of forgiveness. Men and women who know they lack perfect righteousness continue to delude themselves with thoughts that they are good enough.

God offers to take all your sin debt and give you His righteousness so that you can have eternal life. Why do so many refuse such a marvelous offer?

Your sin for His righteousness. That is what God is offering. Any takers?

You must have faith that Jesus was born of a virgin, but that is not enough. You must have faith that He died and was buried and rose again, but that is not enough. You must believe that this virgin-born, sinless Savior who died for you and rose again for you *is your only hope of heaven.*

In Philippians 3:4-9 we have the testimony of Paul. He says, *Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more...* His claim is that if anyone could make heaven on their merits, he would be at the front of the line. He goes on to show that he was born as one of God's chosen people (the Hebrews), observed the most fundamental tenants of their God-given religion, and excelled all other practitioners of that way.

Then he gives this testimony, *But what things WERE gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, BUT that which is through the faith of Christ, THE RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH IS OF GOD by faith:*

God wants you to understand that you can never be sufficiently righteous to get to heaven, for He demands sinless perfection from the cradle to the grave. Jesus Christ has sufficient righteousness to get to heaven. The Lord requires us to stop trusting anything we have ever done or anything we will do tomorrow or the next day. He demands that we put every ounce

of faith and confidence we have in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is the essence of Christianity.

God wants to save you. He longs to forgive you. But you must trust and hope and glory in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This righteousness is freely given anyone who will put 100% of their faith in the Saviour and 0% of their faith in their own good deeds.

Let us finish with Jesus' commentary on two men of faith. In Luke 18:10-14 we read, *And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.* Notice that both men believe in God, both men are in a place of worship, and both men are praying.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. One man's prayer is a recitation of his good deeds. The list is an impressive one. He does not commit adultery. Very good. He treats men with justice. Excellent. He does not use his power to steal from others. Wonderful. He gives the required legal offering to the work of God. Fine.

He is a good man. He has a belief in God. But his confidence as he stands before the Lord is obviously in his good deeds.

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. Let us not read anything into this prayer. There is nothing to suggest he lacks the good works of which the first man boasted. There is no ground to denounce this man as immoral or debased. What we see is a mortal who is humble in the presence of a holy God. This man knows that however he might excel his fellow man, he has no merit before the Lord of glory.

The first man seeks reward because of his good works. The second man seeks mercy because he knows he has sinned.

And Jesus said, *I tell you, this man* (the second) *went down to his house justified rather than the other:* (Justify is a legal term meaning to declare righteous.) *for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*

So we see that this man who claims to be unrighteous puts his hope in the mercy of God, owning himself to be an unworthy sinner, and God gives to the account of this man a righteousness he could never attain by his works. It is a righteousness freely given by the grace of God to all who will humbly trust HIM and not themselves.

You can be saved today if you will put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house (Acts 16:31).

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23).

For spiritual help please write to us
The BBC
872 Glenwood Road
DeLand FL 32720 USA

or visit us at
www.jamesknox.com

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