

Two Kinds of Righteousness

Martin Luther, 1519

Translated by Lowell J. Satre

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Introduction

Luther's sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness is included in this volume to illustrate how, early in his career as a reformer, he applied his evangelical theology to the lives of his parishioners. Doctrines which were evolved by contemplation, exegetical and historical study, and in conflicts with learned opponents were stated in simple and practical terms in a direct manner. Luther's knowledge of the Bible was so extensive and had become so much a part of his life and thought that Scripture passages and applications constitute a harmonious unity. There is no introduction of extraneous materials to interfere with the development of the main theme, which is based on Phil. 2:5–6. Luther applies his doctrine of justification by faith to everyday living by effectively differentiating between Christ's righteousness by means of which he justifies, sanctifies, and redeems, and the righteousness of a believing Christian which is made possible by the righteousness of Christ.

It is not certain whether this sermon was preached late in 1518 or early in 1519. The text suggests that it was preached on Palm Sunday. This leads the editor of the sermon in the WA to date it 1519. The following translation was made from the edition of this printing in WA 2, 145–152. Georg Spalatin's translation into German was used in St. L. 10, 1262–1277.

*An excellent account of Luther's preaching during his formative period is given by E. D. Kiessling in *The Early Sermons of Luther* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1935).*

Two Kinds of Righteousness

By

The Reverend Father

Martin Luther

Brethren, “have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” [Phil. 2:5–6].

There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds.

The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through

faith, as it is written in 1 Cor. 1[:30]: “Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” In John 11[:25–26], Christ himself states: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me ... shall never die.” Later he adds in John 14[:6], “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.” Just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride’s and she all that is his—for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh [Gen. 2:24]—so Christ and the church are one spirit [Eph. 5:29–32]. Thus the blessed God and Father of mercies has, according to Peter, granted to us very great and precious gifts in Christ [2 Pet. 1:4]. Paul writes in 2 Cor. 1[:3]: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”

This inexpressible grace and blessing was long ago promised to Abraham in Gen. 12[:3]: “And in thy seed (that is, in Christ) shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” Isaiah 9[:6] says: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” “To us,” it says, because he is entirely ours with all his benefits if we believe in him, as we read in Rom. 8[:32]: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?”

Therefore everything which Christ has is ours, graciously bestowed on us unworthy men out of God’s sheer mercy, although we have rather deserved wrath and condemnation, and hell also. Even Christ himself, therefore, who says he came to do the most sacred will of his Father [John 6:38], became obedient to him; and whatever he did, he did it for us and desired it to be ours, saying, “I am among you as one who serves” [Luke 22:27]. He also states, “This is my body, which is given for you” [Luke 22:19]. Isaiah 43[:24]

says, “You have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities.”

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours. Therefore the Apostle calls it “the righteousness of God” in Rom. 1[:17]: For in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed ...; as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by his faith.’ ” Finally, in the same epistle, chapter 3[:28], such a faith is called “the righteousness of God”: “We hold that a man is justified by faith.” This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. On the contrary, he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he. It is therefore impossible that sin should remain in him. This righteousness is primary; it is the basis, the cause, the source of all our own actual righteousness. For this is the righteousness given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam. It accomplishes the same as that original righteousness would have accomplished; rather, it accomplishes more.

It is in this sense that we are to understand the prayer in Psalm 30 [Ps. 31:1]: “In thee, O Lord, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame; in thy righteousness deliver me” It does not say “in my” but “in thy righteousness,” that is, in the righteousness of Christ my God which becomes ours through faith and by the grace and mercy of God. In many passages of the Psalter, faith is called “the work of the Lord,” “confession,” “power of God,” “mercy,” “truth,” “righteousness.” All these are names for faith in Christ, rather, for the righteousness which is in Christ. The Apostle therefore dares to say in Gal. 2[:20], “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” He further states in Eph. 3 [14–17]: “I bow my knees before the Father ... that ... he may grant ... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”

Therefore this alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone—while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ—is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death.

The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self, of which we read in Gal. 5[:24]: “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” In the second place, this righteousness consists in love to one’s neighbor, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God. The Apostle is full of references to these, as is all the rest of Scripture. He briefly summarizes everything, however, in Titus 2[:12]: “In this world let us live soberly (pertaining to crucifying one’s own flesh), justly (referring to one’s neighbor), and devoutly (relating to God).”

This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence, for we read in Gal. 5[:22]: “But the fruit of the spirit [i.e., of a spiritual man, whose very existence depends on faith in Christ] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” For because the works mentioned are works of men, it is obvious that in this passage a spiritual man is called “spirit.” In John 3[:6] we read: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This righteousness goes on to complete the first for it ever strives to do away with the old Adam and to destroy the body of sin.

Therefore it hates itself and loves its neighbor; it does not seek its own good, but that of another, and in this its whole way of living consists. For in that it hates itself and does not seek its own, it crucifies the flesh. Because it seeks the good of another, it works love. Thus in each sphere it does God's will, living soberly with self, justly with neighbor, devoutly toward God.

This righteousness follows the example of Christ in this respect [1 Pet. 2:21] and is transformed into his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). It is precisely this that Christ requires. Just as he himself did all things for us, not seeking his own good but ours only—and in this he was most obedient to God the Father—so he desires that we also should set the same example for our neighbors.

We read in Rom. 6[19] that this righteousness is set opposite our own actual sin: “For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.” Therefore through the first righteousness arises the voice of the bridegroom who says to the soul, “I am yours,” but through the second comes the voice of the bride who answers, “I am yours.” Then the marriage is consummated; it becomes strong and complete in accordance with the Song of Solomon [2:16]: “My beloved is mine and I am his.” Then the soul no longer seeks to be righteous in and for itself, but it has Christ as its righteousness and therefore seeks only the welfare of others. Therefore the Lord of the Synagogue threatens through the Prophet, “And I will make to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” [Jer. 7:34].

This is what the text we are now considering says: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” [Phil. 2:5]. This means you should be as inclined and disposed toward one another as you see Christ was disposed toward you. How? Thus, surely, that “though he was in the form of God, [he]

did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" [Phil. 2:6–7]. The term "form of God" here does not mean the "essence of God" because Christ never emptied himself of this. Neither can the phrase "form of a servant" be said to mean "human essence." But the "form of God" is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness—and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject. He was pre-eminent in such attributes as are particularly proper to the form of God. Yet he was not haughty in that form; he did not please himself (Rom. 15:3); nor did he disdain and despise those who were enslaved and subjected to various evils.

He was not like the Pharisee who said, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men" [Luke 18:11], for that man was delighted that others were wretched; at any rate he was unwilling that they should be like him. This is the type of robbery by which a man usurps things for himself—rather, he keeps what he has and does not clearly ascribe to God the things that are God's, nor does he serve others with them that he may become like other men. Men of this kind wish to be like God, sufficient in themselves, pleasing themselves, glorying in themselves, under obligation to no one, and so on. Not thus, however, did Christ think; not of this stamp was his wisdom. He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied himself, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils. And although he was free, as the Apostle says of himself also [1 Cor. 9:19], he made himself servant of all [Mark 9:35], living as if all the evils which were ours were actually his own.

Accordingly he took upon himself our sin and our punishment, and although it was for us that he was conquering those things, he acted as though he

were conquering them for himself. Although as far as his relationship to us was concerned, he had the power to be our God and Lord, yet he did not will it so, but rather desired to become our servant, as it is written in Rom. 15[:1, 3]: “We ... ought ... not to please ourselves ... For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell on me’ ” [Ps. 69:9]. The quotation from the Psalmist has the same meaning as the citation from Paul.

It follows that this passage, which many have understood affirmatively, ought to be understood negatively as follows: That Christ did not count himself equal to God means that he did not wish to be equal to him as those do who presumptuously grasp for equality and say to God, “If thou wilt not give me thy glory (as St. Bernard says), I shall seize it for myself” The passage is not to be understood affirmatively as follows: He did not think himself equal to God, that is, the fact that he is equal to God, this he did not consider robbery. For this interpretation is not based on a proper understanding since it speaks of Christ the man. The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in accordance with the example of Christ. If one has wisdom, righteousness, or power with which one can excel others and boast in the “form of God,” so to speak, one should not keep all this to himself, but surrender it to God and become altogether as if he did not possess it [2 Cor. 6:10], as one of those who lack it.

Paul’s meaning is that when each person has forgotten himself and emptied himself of God’s gifts, he should conduct himself as if his neighbor’s weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own. He should not boast or get puffed up. Nor should he despise or triumph over his neighbor as if he were his god or equal to God. Since God’s prerogatives ought to be left to God alone, it becomes robbery when a man in haughty foolhardiness ignores this fact. It is in this way, then, that one takes the form of a servant, and that

command of the Apostle in Gal. 5[:13] is fulfilled: “Through love be servants of one another.” Through the figure of the members of the body Paul teaches in Rom. 12[:4–5] and 1 Cor. 12[:12–27] how the strong, honorable, healthy members do not glory over those that are weak, less honorable, and sick as if they were their masters and gods; but on the contrary they serve them the more, forgetting their own honor, health, and power. For thus no member of the body serves itself; nor does it seek its own welfare but that of the other. And the weaker, the sicker, the less honorable a member is, the more the other members serve it “that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another,” to use Paul’s words [1 Cor. 12:25]. From this it is now evident how one must conduct himself with his neighbor in each situation.

And if we do not freely desire to put off that form of God and take on the form of a servant, let us be compelled to do so against our will. In this regard consider the story in Luke 7[:36–50], where Simon the leper, pretending to be in the form of God and perching on his own righteousness, was arrogantly judging and despising Mary Magdalene, seeing in her the form of a servant. But see how Christ immediately stripped him of that form of righteousness and then clothed him with the form of sin by saying: “You gave me no kiss.... You did not anoint my head.” How great were the sins that Simon did not see! Nor did he think himself disfigured by such a loathsome form as he had. His good works are not at all remembered.

Christ ignores the form of God in which Simon was superciliously pleasing himself; he does not recount that he was invited, dined, and honored by him. Simon the leper is now nothing but a sinner. He who seemed to himself so righteous sits divested of the glory of the form of God, humiliated in the form of a servant, willy-nilly. On the other hand, Christ honors Mary with the form of God and elevates her above Simon, saying: “She has anointed my feet and

kissed them. She has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.” How great were the merits which neither she nor Simon saw. Her faults are remembered no more. Christ ignored the form of servitude in her whom he has exalted with the form of sovereignty. Mary is nothing but righteous, elevated into the glory of the form of God, etc.

In like manner he will treat all of us whenever we, on the ground of our righteousness, wisdom, or power, are haughty or angry with those who are unrighteous, foolish, or less powerful than we. For when we act thus—and this is the greatest perversion—righteousness works against righteousness, wisdom against wisdom, power against power. For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish. For this is Christ’s example for us, as he says: “For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). He further says in Luke 9[:55–56]: “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of man came not to destroy men’s lives but to save them.”

But the carnal nature of man violently rebels, for it greatly delights in punishment, in boasting of its own righteousness, and in its neighbor’s shame and embarrassment at his unrighteousness. Therefore it pleads its own case, and it rejoices that this is better than its neighbor’s. But it opposes the case of its neighbor and wants it to appear mean. This perversity is wholly evil, contrary to love, which does not seek its own good, but that of another [1 Cor. 13:5; Phil. 2:4]. It ought to be distressed that the condition of its neighbor is not better than its own. It ought to wish that its neighbor’s

condition were better than its own, and if its neighbor's condition is the better, it ought to rejoice no less than it rejoices when its own is the better. "For this is the law and the prophets" [Matt. 7:12].

But you say, "Is it not permissible to chasten evil man? Is it not proper to punish sin? Who is not obliged to defend righteousness? To do otherwise would give occasion for lawlessness."

I answer: A single solution to this problem cannot be given. Therefore one must distinguish among men. For men can be classified either as public or private individuals.

The things which have been said do not pertain at all to public individuals, that is, to those who have been placed in a responsible office by God. It is their necessary function to punish and judge evil men, to vindicate and defend the oppressed, because it is not they but God who does this. They are his servants in this very matter, as the Apostle shows at some length in Rom. 13[:4]: "He does not bear the sword in vain, etc." But this must be understood as pertaining to the cases of other men, not to one's own. For no man acts in God's place for the sake of himself and his own things, but for the sake of others. If, however, a public official has a case of his own, let him ask for someone other than himself to be God's representative, for in that case he is not a judge, but one of the parties. But on these matters let others speak at other times, for it is too broad a subject to cover now.

Private individuals with their own cases are of three kinds. First, there are those who seek vengeance and judgment from the representatives of God, and of these there is now a very great number. Paul tolerates such people, but he does not approve of them when he says in 1 Cor. 6[:12], " 'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful." Rather he says in the same chapter, "To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you" [1 Cor.

6:7]. But yet to avoid a greater evil he tolerates this lesser one lest they should vindicate themselves and one should use force on the other, returning evil for evil, demanding their own advantages. Nevertheless such will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they have changed for the better by forsaking things that are merely lawful and pursuing those that are helpful. For that passion for one's own advantage must be destroyed.

In the second class are those who do not desire vengeance. On the other hand, in accordance with the Gospel [Matt. 5:40], to those who would take their coats, they are prepared to give their cloaks as well, and they do not resist any evil. These are sons of God, brothers of Christ, heirs of future blessings. In Scripture therefore they are called "fatherless," "widows," "desolate"; because they do not avenge themselves, God wishes to be called their "Father" and "Judge" [Ps. 68:5]. Far from avenging themselves, if those in authority should wish to seek revenge in their behalf, they either do not desire it or seek it, or they only permit it. Or, if they are among the most advanced, they forbid and prevent it, prepared rather to lose their other possessions also.

Suppose you say: "Such people are very rare, and who would be able to remain in this world were he to do this?" I answer: This is not a discovery of today, that few are saved and that the gate is narrow that leads to life and those who find it are few [Matt. 7:14]. But if none were doing this, how would the Scripture stand which calls the poor, the orphans, and the widows "the people of Christ?" Therefore those in this second class grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to evil-doers, prepared to

pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved [Matt. 5:44]. This is the gospel and the example of Christ [Luke 23:34].

In the third class are those who in persuasion are like the second type just mentioned, but are not like them in practice. They are the ones who demand back their own property or seek punishment to be meted out, not because they seek their own advantage, but through the punishment and restoration of their own things they seek the betterment of the one who has stolen or offended. They discern that the offender cannot be improved without punishment. These are called “zealots” and the Scriptures praise them. But no one ought to attempt this unless he is mature and highly experienced in the second class just mentioned, lest he mistake wrath for zeal and be convicted of doing from anger and impatience that which he believes he is doing from love of justice. For anger is like zeal, and impatience is like love of justice so that they cannot be sufficiently distinguished except by the most spiritual. Christ exhibited such zeal when he made a whip and cast out the sellers and buyers from the temple, as related in John 2[:14–17]. Paul did likewise when he said, “Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” [1 Cor. 4:21]. finis¹

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 293–306.