

## IMPUTED OR IMPARTED -- WHICH?

by Pastor Bill Parker

One of the greatest debates amongst those who claim to be "Christian," amongst various denominations, is this -- Are we saved based on an **imputed** righteousness, an **imparted** righteousness, or a combination of both? This issue can be easily settled if we rely upon and bow to God's Word. First, what is righteousness? Strictly speaking, when the Bible speaks in terms of the ground of salvation, justification before God, and when it speaks of fitness and entitlement to Heaven, righteousness refers to the perfect satisfaction to God's holy law and inflexible justice worked out and provided by God in the obedience and death of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (*Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26; 10:4*). Righteousness, in this sense, refers to the entire merit of Christ's work on behalf of God's elect, as their Mediator and Surety. God's Word tells us plainly that sinners can only be saved, justified before God, and made fit and entitled to all of Heaven based solely upon Christ's righteousness **imputed** to them (*Romans 5:18-21; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:7-10*). **Imputed** means that the merit of Christ's work of mediation is legally charged to their persons, to their accounts, so that they are saved, justified, made fit and entitled to all of salvation based on a righteousness they personally did not produce, the righteousness of Christ, their Substitute and Surety. This is salvation by grace!

The Bible knows no such term as **imparted righteousness**, however, when men refer to this, most mean the work of the Holy Spirit **in** a sinner to give that sinner spiritual life (a principle of life and godliness), faith, repentance, love, humility, and all the graces of the Spirit. These wonderful graces of the Spirit are **imparted**, infused and implanted, into the sinner by way of the heart (the mind, the affections, and the will). These things are not the merit of a work such as is the righteousness Christ produced. They are moral qualities of character freely given to God's elect by virtue of their oneness with Christ and as the fruit and result of His righteousness imputed to them (*Romans 8:32*). Therefore, these blessed and necessary graces of the Spirit cannot form any part of the ground of salvation, of justification before God, nor can they make us fit or entitled to any part of Heaven. They are all necessary in salvation, but not as the ground of salvation. They are all the fruit and effect of the work of Christ which is the only ground of salvation.

So it is true that in salvation there must be the merit of a work **imputed** and there must be moral qualities of character **imparted**. Christ's righteousness is imputed as the only ground of salvation, as the only merit that makes us fit and entitled to all of

Heaven, so that He might have the preeminence in all things. As a result, the work of the Holy Spirit is imparted to bring God's elect to a saving knowledge of Christ and His righteousness as the only ground. God the Holy Spirit points us to and glorifies God the Son incarnate (*John 16:13-14*). **Righteousness**, the merit of Christ's work for us, is **imputed**, as the only ground of salvation. **Spiritual life**, and all that it includes, is **imparted** to us by the Holy Spirit as the fruit and effect of Christ's work for us. To confuse this as if the work of the Holy Spirit in us forms some part of the ground of our salvation is to make salvation a matter of works, not grace.

Now, Christ's righteousness cannot be imparted to a sinner, because the merit of a work cannot be imparted or infused. It can only be imputed, or legally charged to the sinner. Spiritual life, saving faith, repentance, love, and humility cannot be imputed to a sinner because a moral quality of character cannot be imputed, or charged to their account. It can only be imparted. This is the only way it can be in order for God to be glorified, Christ to be exalted, and sinners be saved in a way that removes all boasting in themselves. God cannot save **sinners** based on any moral quality of character infused into them nor based on anything the Holy Spirit enables them to do. Why? It is because God is holy and just, and He cannot save sinners or entitle them to Heaven based on anything less than perfect satisfaction to His holy law and inflexible justice. This is why the term **imparted righteousness** is confusing. Many imply or derive from this that God the Holy Spirit enables a sinner to meet up to, or at least progressively grow toward, the perfect standard of God's holy law. They imagine, therefore, that God will save them, bless them, or entitle them to some part of salvation based on what they have been enabled to do, not based solely upon what Christ has done. This is works salvation!

All the graces of the Holy Spirit imparted to God's elect, though they are perfect as given by the Spirit, when imparted or infused into a sinner become tainted with sin (*Romans 7:14-24*). Our faith, though it lays hold of the perfect righteousness of Christ, is not yet itself perfect faith. Our love is not yet perfect love. Our obedience is not yet perfect obedience. And even though we should try to make great improvements in these areas, when we do, we cannot say that we are any holier, or any more righteous, than we are in Christ by virtue of His righteousness imputed. Therefore, we cannot expect God to save us or entitle us to any part of Heaven based on these things, or anything else that is imparted to us. Yes, we must have faith in order to be saved, but we must never believe that faith forms any part of the ground of our salvation or any part of our entitlement to Heaven. We must look to Christ's righteousness **imputed** alone for this! This glorifies God who justifies the ungodly based on the righteousness of His Son. This exalts Christ who obeyed, suffered, bled,

and died in order to establish a righteousness that would enable God to justify sinners and entitle them to all of Heaven. This removes all grounds of boasting in saved sinners and inspires them to love and obedience without legalism.

Salvation is based on the righteousness of Christ freely **imputed** and received by faith. Salvation is not based on any so-called **imparted** righteousness. Again, it is true that no sinner will be saved without the work of the Holy Spirit imparting spiritual life, saving faith, true repentance, Godly love, and humility, but all of these things point us to Christ and His righteousness alone as the only ground upon which God will save **sinners** and entitle them to Heaven. As John Bunyan wrote, "There is no other way for sinners to be justified from the curse of the law in the sight of God, than by the imputation of that righteousness long ago performed by, and still residing with, the Person of Jesus Christ."

What, then, does the Scriptures mean when they talk about **doing righteousness** (*ex. 1 John 2:29; 3:7*). As in every case of Scriptural interpretation, context determines the meaning. **Doing righteousness** does not mean that the Holy Spirit enables a believer to perfectly satisfy God's holy law and inflexible justice. That would be contrary to His main purpose -- to point us to Christ and cause us to rest in Him alone as the one who satisfied God's law and justice. **Doing righteousness** does not mean that the Holy Spirit imparts a principle in us that enables us to progressively meet up to God's perfect standard of holiness. We as believers are to aim for holiness in our character and conduct, but as we aim at this, we must keep two things in mind --

- (1) Although we are free from the guilt, condemnation, and defilement of sin as to our persons, in this life we will never be free from the power, influence, and presence of sin in our character and conduct. We will only be free from sin in this sense in the next life. Until then, we are sinners in our character and conduct, and as we grow in grace and in knowledge, we will realize more and more how sinful we are. We will realize more and more that our efforts to be holy cannot make us holy and cannot entitle us to any part of the inheritance of grace. This continually drives us to Christ for comfort and assurance. It continually causes us to plead His righteousness alone as our complete entitlement to all of Heaven.

- (2) Before we ever take the first step in seeking to be holy or in doing good works, we are already completely justified, sanctified, fit and entitled to all of Heaven based on the **imputed righteousness** of Christ. We are to run the Christian race, persevere in the faith, walk in the light, seek to bear fruit and bring forth good works, not in order to become saints, but we are to do all of this as having been made full-fledged saints by virtue of Christ and His righteousness alone.

**Doing righteousness**, then, is walking by a particular standard, and that standard is the Gospel -- God's promise to save us (and this includes the work of the Holy Spirit in us), bless us, keep us, and entitle us to all of Heaven based on the **imputed righteousness of Christ**. **Doing righteousness** is walking and living by faith in Christ, seeking to obey God, not in order to be entitled to any part of Heaven, but as we are already fully entitled to Heaven in Christ (*Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 1:3; Colossians 2:9-10*). **Doing righteousness** is walking by the rule of the Gospel -- *"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world"* (Galatians 6:14).

One last note on the issue of the term "**imparted righteousness**." Those who insist on using this term are usually very adamant against using the term "**progressive sanctification**." They say that "**progressive sanctification**" is not a Scriptural term, and it leads people to wrong thoughts about Biblical sanctification. I have heard people defend the use of this term by stating that they mean **growth in grace**. I agree that "**progressive sanctification**" is not a Scriptural term, and most who use it mean that believers become progressively holier by their efforts to obey God's commands. This is legalism and opposed to the Gospel. But I submit, in light of what has been written here, that the use of the term "**imparted righteousness**" is just as confusing and can be just as legal. Neither "**progressive sanctification**" nor "**imparted righteousness**" are Scriptural terms. This does not mean that we can only use words and phrases as quoted exactly from the Bible. If that were true, we would not use the term "**Trinity**" or the word "**sovereign**." However, we know these are Scriptural terms because they convey the right meaning of Scriptural truth. They do not confuse the issues of truth. Any words or phrases that confuse the issues of truth and life should be discarded. It is true that some people will twist and wrest any word or phrase. Peter spoke of those who would wrest the Scriptures *"unto their own destruction"* (2 Peter 3:16). We cannot stop this, but when words and phrases have historically and continually confused people and implied things contrary to the Scriptures, we need to discard them. Truth is more important than our own egos and reputations.