

LIVING FAITH (1)
Habakkuk 2:4b; Romans 1:17
May 18, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

One of the first rules that one is taught in any decent biblical interpretation class is to consider the context of a verse or verses. The primary interpretation and application must always be concerned with what the author meant to relate to those whom he spoke or wrote. The primary application was for them. That is what we considered last Sunday evening as we looked at the key words of the book of Habakkuk, “But the righteous will live by his faith” (2:4b) in context. Immediately with the word “but” we are faced with a contrast, a contrast between the ways of the wicked or unrighteous or unjust and the ways of the faithful or righteous or just. If you were not present last week, I encourage you to look at the sermon online as we considered “A Contrast in Lifestyles.”

Tonight, we take that wonderful little phrase “the righteous will live by his faith” and dig a bit more deeply. Another of the rules of biblical interpretation is to interpret the Old Testament through the lens of the New. Whenever or wherever a New Testament writer quotes Old Testament Scripture it provides an interpretive tool for us. We have seen that clearly in the book of Hebrews where the writer makes generous use of the Old Testament. When a New Testament writer quotes the Old Testament it provides an interpretation for us. That certainly is the case with our verse this evening where we find it quoted three different times in the New Testament, twice by Paul and once by the author of Hebrews. Each of these uses provides an expansive commentary on each of the three Hebrew words used in Habakkuk. James Montgomery Boice drew the following conclusion:

In the original language, Hebrew, the important part of the verse has only three words: “the justified man” (Who is he? What is justification?), “by his faith” (What is faith? How does it function?), and “will live” (What is the Christian life? How does one live before God?). Romans is our commentary on the justified man. Hebrews is our commentary on faith. Galatians is our commentary on the Christian life.¹

For our benefit, I will stick to the English translation of these words as we look at what these writers provided for us in interpreting “the righteous will live by his faith.” What I propose to do is look at the first of these texts tonight dealing with the subject of justification, Romans 1:17. Next time we will look at the second of these texts, “shall live” in Galatians 3:11. The third of these texts, Hebrews 10:38 and “by faith” will be dealt with next week in Sunday School. Tonight we look at Paul’s first use of the phrase, “The righteous will live by his faith” in Romans and show how Paul explodes the topic of justification throughout the book of Romans.

1. “The righteous man” (Romans 1:17)

The first use of this phrase is by Paul in Romans 1:17. To provide the context, I will read verses 14-17:

Romans 1:14-17 – ¹⁴ I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. ¹⁵ So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it *the*

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, “Micah-Malachi,” 409.

righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”

In the verses that follow, Paul describes the unrighteous man in 1:18-3:20. Needless to say, it is not a very pretty picture. Then, in 3:21-5:21, Paul presents what biblical justification entails (3:21-31), an illustration of justification from the Old Testament and Abraham (4:1-25), the results or fruit of justification (5:1-11) and the grounds of justification in Christ alone (5:12-21). In those texts, Paul sets forth the understanding that justification is a gift from God through faith alone in Christ alone. It is a forensic or legal term which designates one’s standing as justified. It means *to be declared righteous*. This declaration comes from God Himself as Judge of all men. A fuller definition is given by Thomas Watson in his *A Body of Divinity*:

Justification is an act of God’s free grace, whereby he pardons all our sins, and accepts us righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone.²

James Petigru Boyce (not to be confused with James Montgomery Boice), the founder of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, incorporates all of what justification entails in his definition of justification in his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*:

Justification is a judicial act of God, by which, on account of the meritorious work of Christ, imputed to a sinner and received by him through that faith which vitally unites him to his substitute and Saviour, God declares that sinner to be free from the demands of the law, and entitled to the rewards due to the obedience of that substitute.³

Boyce sets forth six principles of justification taken directly from Scripture. First, the *declarer* of justification is God, the rightful Judge. Paul demonstrates this truth in Romans 8:28-33:

Romans 8:28-33 – ²⁸ And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ³³ Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? *God is the one who justifies.*

Second, we see the need for a man to be justified by God. All men are sinners. Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” According to Paul, there are none who have kept the righteous demands of the Law except Jesus Christ as we will see in a moment. What is the result of this sin in all men? Paul quotes the Old Testament in Romans 3:10-18:

Romans 3:10-18 – “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; ¹¹THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ¹²ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS

² Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 226.

³ James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 395.

NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”¹³”THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,” “THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS”;¹⁴”WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS”;¹⁵”THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,¹⁶DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,¹⁷AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.”¹⁸”THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.”

What is the penalty of this sin in all men? Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death.” Herein lies man’s great dilemma – he is an unrighteous sinner. Only one plea will satisfy the demands of the Law, and that plea is *righteousness*. Righteousness can only be obtained by *perfect obedience* to the entirety of the Divine Law. *Partial obedience is total disobedience. Imperfect righteousness is a contradiction in terms.*

In order to be declared right with God (justified), one must stand in perfect righteousness before the Judge and His judgment bar. The only way for perfect righteousness is a perfect obedience to the requirements of the moral law, whose substance we find in the Ten Commandments. As one writer put it, “The whole requirement of the Law is comprehended in one short sentence: ‘Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’”⁴ [Norvell Robertson, *Church-Members’ Handbook of Theology*, 114]

So we see our need to be justified. We are not holy. We are unholy. We are not righteous. We are unrighteous. We are not justified. We are condemned. We are sinners, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” If we had only one sin, that one sin makes us as unrighteous and as unholy as ten-thousand. And, as we have seen, the nature of God demands that each sin and each sinner be dealt with *legally*. The law of God that is a reflection of His nature requires that each sin be penalized accordingly. The nature of our offense against the righteous standard of God deserves nothing less than God’s eternal wrath. We are Law-breakers at enmity with God. Because we have not kept the Law perfectly, we have no righteousness by which we can stand before God. We stand condemned, and the penalty for our guilt is death and eternal damnation under the wrath of God. So we see our case is desperate. It is impossible for us to attain to the righteous requirements of God’s Law, for in breaking one law, we have broken the whole law (James 2:10).

So it should seem a matter of utmost importance to us that we who are totally unable to do anything for ourselves before the judgment throne of God might inquire as to whether there is any other way we might obtain that righteousness which alone will satisfy God’s justice, both to the demands of His Law and to the penalty for breaking that Law. In other words, is there any way apart from ourselves and our sinful works that we might be declared right with God? The answer is a resounding, “YES!” according to Paul.

The third part of justification according to Boyce is the *grounds* for justification, Jesus Christ and His meritorious work as our substitute.

a. Incarnation

John 1:14 – And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

⁴ Norvell Robertson, *Church-Members’ Handbook of Theology*, 114.

Galatians 4:4-5 – But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

These verses are important because in them we see that Jesus Christ was born under the same Law as the rest of mankind. The demands of the Law were put on Him just as everyone else. This was what was at stake in Matthew 4 in the desert when Jesus was tempted by Satan. Had Jesus succumbed to the wiles of the devil, He would have been a Law-breaker like every other man and justification would not have been possible. But the Scriptures proclaim His

b. Perfect Obedience

Romans 5:19 – For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

(1) *Active Obedience* – keeping God's law perfectly, without sin (demands of the Law satisfied)

2 Corinthians 5:21 – He made Him *who knew no sin* to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Hebrews 4:15 – For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, *yet without sin*.

(2) *Passive obedience* – death on the cross (penalty for breaking the Law satisfied)

Philippians 2:8 – Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, *even death on a cross*.

Romans 5:6, 8 – ⁶For while we were still helpless, at the right time *Christ died for the ungodly*. ⁸But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us.

More specifically, 1 Corinthians 15:3, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures.” The benefits of Christ's death are set forth in Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, *having become a curse for us* – for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE.’” Therefore,

Romans 10:4 – For *Christ is the end of the law for righteousness* to everyone who believes.

(NOTE: This concludes the first part of a two-part message on Habakkuk 2:4b and Romans 1:17. Second part conclusion on June 1, 2008)