

Romans study week 2 - Righteousness

What do you understand by righteousness? What words do you associate with it?

What do you understand by justice? What words do you associate with it?

Will Rogers(?) commented about a man that he was so righteous he was no damned good! Righteousness and righteous occur hundreds of times in the Bible. God is described as righteous and passionate about righteousness. The words are also used of people for example Jesus commanded his followers to be more righteous than the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20).

Righteous is a positive word in the Bible, it is associated with 'doing what is right.' So its meaning is social and political not just individual. Righteousness and justice are very closely related in the Bible.

Verses to look at Amos 5:21-24 (Notice the parallelism where the second line repeats in slightly different language what the first line says).

Isaiah 5:7

However Justice has also changed its meaning. Today we most think of justice in terms of criminal justice – so retribution or punitive justice. When the Bible speaks of God's passion for justice it does not mean God's primary passion is the punishment of wrong doers. Some passages do threaten wrongdoers with judgement and condemnation; but very often justice and righteousness are about the way the world should be. God's passion is for a different kind of world and the sort of justice he is looking for is not so much punitive as distributive; i.e. about how things should be shared out.

'The indictment of injustice continues in the New Testament. Jesus and Paul and other figures important in early Christianity stood against the Roman Empire because of its injustice and violence. Many of them were killed by the authorities – not because they advocated charity and taught individual righteousness and the way to heaven. People do not get martyred for that.

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Why would the authorities care? Rather they were killed because those in power perceived their message and passion to be a threat to 'the way things were' – that is, to the way the wealthy and powerful had structured the world to garner most of society's resources for themselves.¹

A little Greek ... Read Romans 1:16-17

The Greek word for righteousness is dikaiosyne and it can also be translated justice. Read the passage above again and this time where we had righteousness now put justice. But justice does not mean punitive justice – how would that be good news? Only if justice means distributive justice can the gospel be good news. For then it would be saying that God offers grace to everyone, equally: to both Jews and Gentiles.

'Thus righteousness as justice tells us not only what we should seek, but also reveals the character and passion of God. Is God's character primarily punitive, and God's passion punishment of wrongdoing? Or is God's character primarily gracious and compassionate, and God's passion that the world be fair? Is it the righteous – those who are morally correct – who live by faith? Or is it the just who live by faith?' ².

There is also a translation difficulty. English has 2 main parents – Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, this gives us a rich language. The peasants tended the swine in the fields; the Normans ate pork at table. Today the Germans eat schweinfleisch – which still seems rather crude to us.

The best translation of Paul's word dikaiosyne is the Anglo-Saxon righteousness, not the French 'justification' as this often carries the sense of defensiveness or legal excuse, which was not Paul's meaning. However we cannot say 'to righteous' because 'rihtwisian' was lost long ago, we only have the French 'justify'. So when we want to use the verb which means 'to righteous', we have to say: 'to justify'. So we have to say 'God justifies', when the Greek says: 'God righteouses'.

God's own character of distributive justice is available for anyone to accept without any prior consideration.

Questions:

How can we struggle for justice in our day?

C S Lewis in 'The Screwtape Letters' wrote of the way language has been corrupted, so that meaning has been hidden and the good has been made to

¹ Borg 'Speaking Christian' p139

² Borg 'Speaking Christian' p141

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look less attractive. How has language changed? Think about words like: good, wicked, sin, righteous.

What words today might we use to translate dikaiosyne? Is fairness any good?

Has our picture of God been too punitive?

Do we come across as people who care deeply about fairness?

What would you say these words mean?

What words do you associate with them?

Are there other associations non-Christians might have?

