

“Righteousness”
Philippians 3:8-9
May 3, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue our series this morning in Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

We’ve been working our way through chapter three. And you’ve got the chapter so far in the bulletin.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul lists his own earthly achievements. Then, in verses 7 and 8, Paul contrasts his own earthly achievements with the blessing of knowing Christ. This week, we move on to verse 9, and we see how Paul also contrasts his own achievements with receiving a righteousness that comes from Christ.

Our focus will be on verse 9. But for context we’ll start in verse 7, as we turn to Philippians 3:7-9.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul, after listing his own achievements writes:

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, how can we keep our way pure?
By guarding it according to your Word.
Help us now to seek you with our whole hearts.
Keep us from wandering from your commandments.
Let us store up your word in our hearts,

so that we might not turn from you.
In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:9-11]

Introduction

In our text this morning, Paul expresses his goal, his desire, that he would be found in Christ, “not,” he says “having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”

Paul had been listing accomplishments by which his opponents had hoped to achieve righteousness. But then here, in verse 9, Paul contrasts that righteousness, which we try to accomplish ourselves, with a righteousness that comes to us from God, through faith in Jesus Christ.

At the center of all this is the idea of righteousness.

And what we see when we consider this verse in context, is that: We all long for righteousness, and we all need righteousness, but since our own righteousness is insufficient, Christ offers us his righteousness in the gospel.

Let me say that again: We all long for righteousness, and we all need righteousness, but since our own righteousness is insufficient, Christ offers us his righteousness in the gospel.

We're going to take that one piece at a time.

What is Righteousness?

But before we do that, we need to ask: What is righteousness?

It's not a word that we use positively very often in everyday speech.

Most often it's thought of with the prefix of “self-” – as in “self-righteous.” There it's rightly seen as someone who is arrogant, usually hypocritical, who thinks they are better than others, and who probably emphasizes ethical minutia to make that point. And that's a good way to think of someone being self-righteous. The problem is that in our culture we often take the feel of “self-righteous” and we let it bleed into our understanding of the word “righteous” as well.

And so, when used about people the word has kind of an icky feel. It doesn't feel like a compliment. It feels like a veiled critique.

But the word “righteous” or “righteousness” in the Bible does not have that sense. Instead, in the Bible, the word “righteous” generally means that a person is in the right. More specifically the term was used to describe a person who is proved right before a trial judge. [Bavinck, 2.221] The

word is meant to describe someone’s right standing or right behavior. [Wright, 591] More specifically, it’s a declaration that someone has conformed to a required standard – that they have followed a good and right law. [Berkhoff, 74-75] In a law court in the ancient world, the word essentially meant to be declared “Not guilty.” The innocent party in a court case, was declared to be “righteous” in the matter – they were declared to be in the “right.”

And this is the idea of “righteousness” that lies behind our text this morning.

In the Bible, righteousness is about being who God made us to be. God created us. He calls us to be a certain kind of people. More specifically, he calls us to love him just as he has loved us, and then also to love the people he has placed all around us. To help us better understand what it looks like for us to love him and to love others, God gave us his law – summarized in the Ten Commandments, but explained throughout the Scriptures. The law of God helps us better understand who and what God wants us to be. Then, to help us even further, God has also written that same law on the heart of every person. And if we keep God’s law – if we love him and love others rightly, we will be the kind of people God intends us to be and calls us to be, and we will therefore be righteous – we will be “right” before God.

So “righteousness” is a verdict – a determination – from God, that someone is right before him – right in his sight – because they’ve been who he’s called them to be, by obeying his commands. That is essentially what “righteousness” means here.

We All Long for Righteousness

And the first Paul wants us to see is that we all long for righteousness.

In fact, it’s a striking and widely observable reality across human beings, that we long for righteousness.

Now, we might redefine the details of how someone is declared righteous ... but we all want to be declared in the “right.” We all want to be vindicated. We all want to be one of the “good guys”. We all want to prove that we have been what we should be.

Sometimes we do this in the traditional, moral way. We look, ourselves, to the good things we’ve done ... maybe we make little efforts to point those things out to other people, and we tell ourselves and we tell others that we’re one of the good guys – we are good, we are right ... we are righteous.

Other times, we may look more to our accomplishments – the things we’ve achieved in the world. And we look at them. And we tell ourselves: look what we’ve done, look what we’ve made happen, surely we are one of the good guys – surely we are righteous.

And we want others to agree. In our close relationships we want those near to us not just to love us and care for us, but to believe that we are good, to believe that we are worthy of their love – to believe that we are righteous.

And not just those closest to us, but others too – at church and at work and at school and in our communities – we want people to see us as good – to see that we are on the right side of things, we are with the good guys, we are good and righteous people in this world and in our community.

Even things like social media debates and online arguments, so often, at root, whatever the topic might be, are people shouting in front of a social media audience: “Can’t you see that I am right? Can’t you see that I am one of the good guys? Don’t you see – and don’t you agree – that I am righteous?”

Just like Paul’s readers, just like Paul’s opponents, we all long for righteousness.

We All Need Righteousness

But we don’t just long for righteousness. We also need it. We all need righteousness.

And we know that in part because Paul here, after describing how his opponents long for righteousness through the law, he doesn’t then tell them that that longing itself is a mistake. He doesn’t say “Don’t worry so much about righteousness – it’s not that important.” Instead, he advises them about how and where to look for righteousness.

Because Paul knows his Bible. And he knows that we need righteousness.

Because we are creatures. And we need to be right with our Creator.

God has so lovingly made us. And all he’s really asked is that we be faithful creatures in his world: loving him and loving others. All he’s asked is that we be good citizens in his kingdom, following his good laws.

And God is just. And so, if we do not do what we were made to do and called to do – if we are not righteous – then we will eventually face God’s judgment. The day will come when God will call all people before him. And he will judge all people. And the righteous will be rewarded with an eternal place in his kingdom. And the unrighteous will be cast out of his kingdom, into the darkness. Paul knows that on that day, if we want to be in the kingdom of light – if we want to be with God forever, then we need to be counted as righteous by God. We need righteousness in order to flourish both now and into eternity.

Righteousness – being right with our Maker – is important. Which is why we all long for righteousness, and we all need righteousness.

Our Own Righteousness Is Insufficient

But the next thing we see, over and over again in the Bible, is that our own righteousness is insufficient.

And Paul makes that point again here. Paul lists out his own record of achievements in verses 5 and 6. And it would be impressive in the ancient world. But even so, he says here, his achievements are not enough to earn him the verdict of “righteous.”

If we look at the Bible, and we look honestly at what God has called us to, we know that we have broken God’s laws. We have not loved him rightly. We have often failed to love the people around us. And we have broken God’s laws of love in all kinds of specific ways that the Bible spells out for us in more detail.

And we know this is true, even if we’ve never read the Bible ourselves. Because God’s law is written on our hearts. And we readily apply it to others. But even so, we still fail to live up to it ourselves.

Drawing from the Apostle Paul’s teaching on this in Romans 2, Francis Schaeffer put it like this – he basically said that it’s kind of like if every human being had an invisible audio recorder placed around their neck at birth. And this audio recorder was programmed so that it only recorded the moral judgments which you made about other people. Every time you said “Hey, you shouldn’t do X.” or “You really *should* do Y.” or “I think it’s terrible that Frank did Z” – every time you made a statement of what someone should or should not do, regarding their conduct, it would record that sentence. And you wear it your whole life. And then you die. And you stand before God. And Schaeffer writes “Suppose, then, God simply touched the tape recorder button and each man heard played out in his own words all those statements by which he had bound other men in moral judgment. He could hear it going on for years – thousands and thousands of moral judgments. Then God would simply say to the man, though he had never heard the Bible, now where do you stand in the light of your own moral judgments?” [Schaeffer, 41-42]

And the truth is, we all fall short. Whether it’s God’s law, written in the Scripture, or God’s law written on our hearts, we all know what we should do ... we often apply it to others ... but we fall short of doing it ourselves.

Now ... at this point some people want to argue a bit. They want to say: “Ok ... I don’t do what I should do all the time. But I do do the right thing some of the time ... maybe even a lot of the time. Isn’t that enough for me to be declared “good” – for me to be declared “righteous”?”

The problem with this kind of response is that it treats God’s law like it’s a school exam ... and not like it’s a law. We want 51% goodness to be good enough ... or maybe 65% ... or maybe even 90% – “Surely 90% obedience should be enough” we want to argue. That might be how tests work. But that’s not how laws work. And God’s commandments are laws.

Think of it like this. Imagine a financial executive is on trial for ripping off a bunch of senior citizens. And he turns to the judge and he says: “Your honor, there are hundreds of financial regulations on the books in our country. And I faithfully followed 90% of them. Surely that’s good enough for you to declare me innocent.” That would, of course, be absurd.

Or imagine a violent criminal was on trial here in our city. And he said to the judge: “Your honor, it’s true that I beat the snot out of 25 people with my baseball bat. But there are over 232,000 people living in Tacoma. That means I have perfectly followed the law with regards to over 99.999% of my neighbors! That’s amazing! Surely that makes me one of the good guys!”

Or imagine a husband says to his wife: “Honey, there are over 4 billion other women in the world. And I only had an affair with one of them. That means I’ve been faithful to you in regards to over 99.9999999% percent of women. That’s amazing. I’m a fantastic husband!”

Such arguments don’t cut it.

And yet these are the kinds of arguments we often try to make when we break God’s laws ... when we are unfaithful to him.

If we break one of God’s laws, we are not righteous. If we are unfaithful to him in one matter, we have broken our relationship with him. And, of course, if we know ourselves, then we know we have broken God’s laws in many ways. We have been unfaithful in many ways. We have, on many occasions, been selfish, when we should have been loving towards God or towards others.

Our own righteousness is insufficient.

And we all know this.

But once that hits us ... some of us try to then to change the rules, by redefining righteousness.

We know that obedience to God’s law hasn’t made us righteous ... so we try to prove our rightness and our goodness in some other way.

“Ok,” we say, “I may not be perfect ... but ...”

“I may not be perfect ... but look how successful I am in my work.” “I may not be perfect ... but look at what a good family I’ve raised.” “I may not be perfect ... but look at my grades.” “I may not be perfect, but look at my finances.” “I may not be perfect, but look at how good looking I am, look at how well kept my house is, look at how smart I am, look at how powerful I am ...” and the list goes on.

God tells us what he requires of us, to be righteous before him. And when we see we don’t measure up, often we try to change the rules.

Can you see ways that you do that?

It makes me think of, when you watch a sporting event, and they interview the losing team ... and the team lost ... but they try to turn it around, like they actually did something good.

They’ll say something like “Well, I know we lost tonight ... but I thought we put together a lot of good at bats.” “Yeah, they beat us, but I was really happy with how many passes we completed.”

“Sure, we lost, but our free-through percentage was great tonight.” They look to some other stat or some other measure, and they focus on that.

In any sport there are a lot of interesting stats – and they all have significance ... but here’s the thing ... the only stat that matters to determine who actually won is the score. Having the highest score – that’s the definition of success in a game. And if you fail to do that, you can’t just redefine success by treating some other metric as if that’s what really matters.

But that’s what we so often try to do with our lives. We know what God requires of us – we know it even if we think we don’t know it, because it’s written on our hearts. And we fail at it – we fall terribly short. And rather than face that – rather than deal with that – we try to redefine success.

Sure ... we don’t do a very good job of loving God, and we often fail to love our neighbor ... but look how successful we’ve been in our career ... look at how wise we’ve been with our money, look at how perfect our family looks to the outside world, and so on. We basically start talking about pass completions, or time of possession, or on base percentage – and those things may matter in some ways, but none of them are the most important thing – none of them determines the ultimate outcome of our lives. What determines the ultimate outcome for us is our righteousness, as God has defined it.

And in that framework, our righteousness falls short. It’s not good enough.

No matter what our third-down conversion rate looks like, if we look at the scoreboard of our lives, we’ve lost. By a lot. Because we are not very good at loving God or loving the people around us. For every time we do what we should do, there are so many times when we don’t.

We all long for righteousness. We all need righteousness. But our own righteousness is insufficient.

Christ Offers Us His Righteousness in the Gospel

But the Bible doesn’t stop there.

Because the final thing we see – the thing that’s at the center of verse 9 – is that Christ offers us his righteousness in the gospel.

Christ offers us his righteousness in the gospel.

This is what Paul is referring to in verse nine. We cannot achieve righteousness on our own, by our own actions, by the law. We have failed. We have fallen short. Left to ourselves, God’s verdict on our lives would be that we are unrighteous.

But God has not left us in our unrighteousness. He has not left us to perish under this verdict.

He has sent his Son, Jesus Christ. And Christ has lived righteously. Christ lived the life we should have lived – the righteous life we were called to live. And then Christ died the death we deserved to die. And God raised him from the dead, as a public vindication that Jesus was in fact righteous.

In everything Jesus said, and did, and thought, he perfectly loved God the Father, and the people around him. Jesus is righteous. And God has declared him to be righteous.

And having received that verdict, Jesus now offers for us to be united to him by faith. Jesus tells us that when we place our trust in him, when we receive him and rest in him for our salvation – when we give to Jesus our deepest allegiance – then we will be united with him by faith. We will be bound to him by the Holy Spirit. We will be in him, and he will be in us – we will be his, and he will be ours.

And as we are united to Jesus by faith, we will share in all that belongs to Jesus ... including Jesus's righteousness ... including God's verdict over Jesus – God's declaration that Jesus is righteous. We too will receive that verdict of righteous. Not by our own merit, but because we will share – we will receive, the righteousness of Jesus, through our union with him, by faith.

As Paul puts it in verse nine, we will receive a righteousness “which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

That is what we need. That is what we long for. And that is what God offers to us in the gospel.

Where our own personal righteousness is insufficient, Jesus's righteousness is sufficient. And he has offered it to us, if we would be united to him.

And that might sound strange. But it's not as odd as it might at first seem.

If you'll allow me another sports illustration ... we can see this same dynamic at work in the stories of two very different baseball players: Aaron Judge and Connor Brogdon.

Aaron Judge is a New York Yankee. He is a seven-time MLB All-Star, a three-time American League MVP, he holds the AL single-season homerun record. He was a rookie of the year, he's won the silver slugger award five times, the Hank Aaron award three times, the list goes on. He's considered by some to be among the best power hitters of all time.

Aaron Judge has a lot of awards. But he hasn't won the thing he most wants to win. He's never won a World Series. He has no World Series ring. And if he took all the awards he's accomplished, and he went to the commissioner of baseball, and he tried to trade all his awards in for a World Series ring, it wouldn't be enough. The commissioner would say no. To get a World Series ring, your team needs to win the World Series. No collection of other awards can equal that. And so, in the end, Aaron Judge falls short in what's most important in baseball.

In a similar way, our own earthly accomplishments – whatever they may be – will not add up to what matters most – they will not make us righteous before our Maker.

But now let's talk about Connor Brogdon. Brogdon is a pitcher. After being drafted in the 10th round he made his MLB debut in 2020. The first pitch he threw in the majors was hit by the opposing batter for a homerun. He ended up giving up three homeruns in that first inning he pitched in the majors. Now, in his defense, Brogdon improved as time went on. But he was never a star. Eventually, in 2024, the Phillies designated him for assignment – which kind of means that they said that if any other team wants him, they can have him.

Interestingly the Los Angeles Dodgers took him on. Connor Brogdon became a Dodger. He ended up pitching in one game for the Dodgers that year. And in that game he only pitched for one inning. And it wasn't a good inning. He gave up 2 homeruns ... in just one inning. And right after that, he went in the "injured list" with a foot injury. He sat out the rest of the season. He never pitched for the Dodgers again.

But here's the thing. That year, the Dodgers went on to beat Aaron Judge and the New York Yankees in the World Series. The Dodgers were World Series Champions.

Now, Brogdon contributed nothing to that win. He wasn't even in the Dodger's dugout by the time they reached the playoffs. All he did to "help" was give up two home runs, and then take up space on their injured list. Connor was more of a liability to the Dodgers than a help.

But he was still a Dodger that season. And so when the Dodgers won the World Series, Connor Brogdon received a World Series ring. Brogdon has what Aaron Judge can only long for right now. And it's not because of anything that Brogdon himself accomplished. It's because of who Brogdon belonged to.

Brogdon belonged to the Dodgers. He was in the Dodgers organization. He served them – he served them badly, but he served them nonetheless – he bore their name, literally, he belonged to the team. And so their victory was his victory. Their accomplishment became his accomplishment. Their glory was rightly imputed to him, whether he personally helped make it happen or not.

And friends, when it comes to the righteousness that most matters – the righteousness we need before God – we are all Connor Brogdons. We are all liabilities, rather than stars. We are not good. We are not righteous.

But if we belong to Jesus, if we are in him, if we serve him – even if our service is feeble – if we bear Christ's name in baptism, and our hearts trust in his name by faith, then in a very real sense, what Jesus accomplished, is counted as ours – what Jesus achieved is imputed to us. The verdict of "righteous" which Jesus has earned ... it's shared with us. Because we are in him.

We all long for righteousness, and we all need righteousness, and our own righteousness is insufficient.

But Christ offers us his righteousness in the gospel, as we are found in him.

And so, friends, stop looking to your own achievements. Stop trusting in what you can do in and of yourself. Stop trusting in your deeds and your attributes to make you righteous.

And instead look to Jesus, the righteous one. And place your trust in him. Give yourself to him. So that you are his.

Because if you are found in him, united to him by faith, then when you stand before God, and he judges you, you will have before him a righteousness that is not your own ... a righteousness that cannot be taken from you ... a righteousness from God himself.

That is our hope in the gospel. Not that we are good enough. But that Jesus is good enough ... and we are in him ... and in him we are right with God.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us receive God’s gracious gift to us in Christ.

Let us delight in his righteousness.

And let us then rest in Christ, knowing that in him, we are right with God, both now, and for eternity.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2-4. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004-2008.
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- Käsemann, W. “Righteousness” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983.
- Schaeffer, Francis. *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Christian Worldview, Volume Four, A Christian View of the Church*. Second Edition. Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982.
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Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.