

Imputed Righteousness

Edward Irving

From *Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (1831), *Epistle to the Church of Sardis*.

Revelation 3

⁴ You have a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments...

The white raiment is the righteousness of saints; a true, not a fictitious righteousness; a real substantial purification of soul and body, notwithstanding the law of the flesh, but not self-originated, not self-supplied, derived all from Christ, by Him wrought out, and out of Him derived to us: for,

1 Corinthians 1

³⁰ He is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

A Distortion of Truth

Like all other precious truths, Satan has converted this also to his own false and unholy uses. He makes men believe that because imputed righteousness is derived from Christ, and by Him sustained, it is therefore not really a righteousness wrought in us, but only a garment covering us; and that therefore we continue under the cloak to be the same filthy creatures as before, whom God, for Christ's sake, (as they, with seeming piety, express a most impious sentiment) is pleased to look upon as righteous.

If this be what they mean by the doctrine of imputed righteousness, and it is what they commonly express, then is it the vilest of all vile doctrines; comforting and encouraging a sinner in his wickedness, under the false notion that faith entirely covers and protects sin from the judgment of God.

The Truth of the Term

The Church, by this term "imputed righteousness," means to express the great truth that the righteousness which we have in God's sight is altogether derived from another, and becomes ours,

not for any worthiness or desert on our part, but wholly from an act of God's grace making it ours.

The Church has been careful to hold two things with respect to righteousness:

1. That it is nowhere to be found in any creature save in the creature part of Christ, and from no other quarter whatever to be derived;
2. That being there in abundance sufficient for the whole world, it is not conveyed to any sinner, otherwise than by an act of God's grace moving him so to do.

The latter secures to God the right of dispensing it. The former, to Christ the honor of being the thing dispensed. He is made of God unto us righteousness and sanctification.

I stay not to argue whether the word "imputed" be the best that could be chosen, for it is not with words but truths that I am occupied. And I clearly perceive that these two are the truths which that word was intended by the Church to contain.

She never meant to assert, that because it was of Christ's working out for us, and of God's serving out to us, it was not therefore true righteousness, heart righteousness, righteousness in the inward parts, and in the outward also; holiness of body, and holiness of soul; obedience of every member to the law of the Spirit, and to the service of righteousness unto holiness.

The Church never meant to convey, by the word *imputed*, that the righteousness was only skin-deep, or, if we may so speak, only cloak-deep, while all beneath was foul as ever; or that it was a *supposed* righteousness, and not real and substantial; or that it was only a transfer done over from Christ's folio, in the great book of accounts, to ours; or that it was only an insufficient and still impure righteousness, which God ekes out from Christ's inexhaustible store.

All these are most unholy and blasphemous insinuations of the devil, under the disguise of that word "imputation." This word,

when interpreted truly, means God's conveying to us a righteousness which is Christ's property, made ours by an act of God's grace. But because it is Christ's it is perfect; and being made ours, it loses nothing of its perfectness.

Perfect Holiness is the Standard

God will accept nothing less than perfect holiness; and anyone who thinks He will, must be undeceived before He can be saved. What is in Christ for me is perfect righteousness; and if my faith be eating Christ's flesh and drinking His blood, I receive a perfect righteousness, in thought, in word, and in deed; in body, in soul, and in spirit.

Faith embodies Christ in the believer; and Christ is in the believer a body of holiness, a complete man of holiness; an inward and an outward man as well as a garment.

A Dialogue

Does anyone say,

"What hard doctrine! And must I leave off every sin?"

"Yes verily."

"And must I be always and altogether holy?"

"Even so."

"And is there no salvation for me on other terms?"

"None."

"What a fearful doctrine!"

"Oh then, you love sin, brother, do you?"

"No!"

"Why then should it be fearful to tell you to get rid of it altogether? You would have reserves, would you?"

“No!”

“Why then hesitate at a doctrine which asks you to give your unreserved self to God? If I asked you to work out this perfect righteousness for yourself, you might complain. But when I tell you that it is in Christ for you at any time, and at all times to possess yourself of, why do you complain? If God draw upon you large bills, is not Christ ready with the supplies? And are you honored or dishonored by the Holy Ghost in being made the agent through whom Christ’s fullness might meet His Father’s demands? The Father asks perfect holiness: Christ has wrought out perfect holiness for you: why do you murmur?”

“I murmur because I am conscious of past sin.”

“There is forgiveness for it in Christ.”

“But my conscience is defiled by it.”

“There is cleanness of conscience for you in Christ, and peace with God, and enjoyment of His sweet and gracious face. That is what forgiveness means. Do you believe this word? Then has this word made you clean. Why do you still murmur?”

“Because I am conscious of present sins.”

“Do you love them, or do you love them not?”

“I love them not.”

“Then you should be glad to get rid of them: I have told you how you may completely get rid of them, by relying on Christ for a perfect righteousness. And yet you murmur to be informed how you may be delivered from that which you do not love. Ah, brother! There is a love of that state of sinning and repenting; you love to have room to come and go with God: you crave for license; you are in love with imperfection, and while you are so, you cannot be in love with God who is perfect; nor be living in charity, which is the bond of perfectness.”

The Garment Undefined

“The garment undefiled,” therefore, is not a complete outward seemliness without a corresponding inward saintliness. This was the evil case, not of those few approved ones, but of the many whom He rebukes in the Church of Sardis.

Nor is it a complete knowledge or faith in the finished work of Christ, without any finished and perfected work in us corresponding thereto; but it is Christ formed within us by the Spirit, and subduing us wholly unto God, and making us to become perfect and complete in Him; so that we sin not, but walk in his footsteps always.

But where is the person to whom this did or could apply? And if it does not apply to any, how should the Lord find even a few in the Church of Sardis to whom it was applicable?

Whether these were perfect, even in those times, or whether there be any now, or whether it be possible that there should be any, is a question, not needing to be settled, in order to understand the case of those whom the Lord commends.

It is only necessary to perceive that they were believing on Christ for a perfect righteousness; holding Him up as pledged to work this in His members, and in that faith honestly setting about the work of perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

They might, and I have no doubt did, come short of, and transgress against, the law of the Spirit of Life. But they confessed and grieved over it, and came to Christ not only for purification from the stain, but likewise for redemption from the power of their sin. And receiving it, they went forward.

The man that is keeping his garments undefiled, and hating even the garment which is spotted by the flesh, is one who rests on Christ for perfect righteousness, not only for, but in, the believer. In that faith he holds on his course; and if he stumble, confesses his heedlessness, and laments his declension from God;

then rises again, and “presses towards the mark, for the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus.”

It does not require perfection to have been attained, not to have been for a while enjoyed without interruption; but it requires perfection to be believed to be ours in Christ, and to be unceasingly ensued in our life; and every shortcoming or deviation to be confessed over the Lamb slain, and its guilt purged with His blood; and so forgotten and forgiven, no longer to impede our growth towards the stature of perfect men in Christ Jesus.

The doctrine which I have maintained is as much for the publicans and sinners when they first hear it, as it is for the most advanced saint, who hears it with gladness: and none but the hypocrite and the Pharisee will cavil with it when he has rightly understood it.