

The Sun of Righteousness Is Risen

Malachi 4:1–2a

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

PRAY

Last week we looked at how Christ, who is the Light of the world, overcame the darkness of sin and all that substitutionary sacrifice means. For those who turn from sin and self and trust him, he made peace with God by his atoning work on the cross. Hence,

Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace!

He **ended** the divine hostility when he **bore** the divine wrath.

When we looked at Genesis 3 last week we focused on the fall into sin and corruption, zeroing in on that first telling of the Gospel in Genesis 3:15. But we assumed some things before that. We assumed that prior to Genesis 3 everything was right between Adam and Eve and their God. It’s a correct assumption, but let’s examine the basis of the communion they enjoyed with God.

There was no sin before Genesis 3 — that’s true. So was it just the absence of sin that granted them communion and right relationship with God? No. Adam and Eve enjoyed the blessing and near-ness of God because they actively obeyed God right up to Genesis 3. They did what God told them to do. They were doing the works of God. They didn’t merely avoid certain things. Communion was premised on active, positive, perfect obedience. God’s requirement of positive righteousness — actually flawlessly doing God’s righteous works — has never changed.

There are actually two ways to get into heaven. Now before you tear your clothes and run out screaming “Unclean!” hear me out. Heaven is a place where no sin is, and perfect righteousness continually being performed so that all of God’s commands are perfectly executed. So if you meet that standard — no sin committed at any time in word, or thought, or deed, or attitude, or affection... and no righteousness omitted — you’ve never failed to do perfectly and precisely what God’s holy

2

law requires with no delays, no bobbles, always with pure motives... Why, that person is in! They are innocent! But that sounds silly, doesn't it? No one would make a serious argument that they are sinless and have perfectly obeyed all of God's law with perfect motive and affection. And if anyone was to try, even a child would discern that such a person is utterly blind to their own moral reality, or they are simply insane.

There is none righteous; no not one. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We can't even pay off the negative death penalty of sin to get out of the red in order to get back to sinless zero, much less then start from sinless innocence and righteously perform all the requirements of law from the time of conception. If we are to be in fellowship with God, we must show perfect obedience to all the Law of God with no misdeeds, no willful disobedience, no passive misses, no "Oops I accidentally did that," or "Yikes, I forgot I was supposed to do that," or "I just ran out of energy and didn't do that."

So I guess that takes the first option of getting into heaven off the table. Pastor, you did

mention there were two ways... What's the other? Hold that thought... We're gonna get there... because that's the central element of why Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, to quote the Apostle's Creed. And to quote Linus, "that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." But stay with me for a few minutes first and let's drink deeply of the love and beauty of the baby in a manger, the Lord Jesus. We will only fully appreciate the Good News in light of the bad. We've already had a small dose of the bad, but I'm going to push further.

God's requirement to perfectly keep his righteous law has not been abated. His law is eternal.

- In **Genesis 17**, God commanded Abraham to walk before him and be blameless. In other words, not only be innocent of sin, but be perfect in doing righteousness. Every jot and tittle that God has commanded, every must be perfectly kept. Every act and motive must perfectly reflect God's holy character. He required that of Abraham, the lying coward. That was the command to father of all who believe, and he clearly didn't meet the standard. What about you? Are you walking before the very face of God blameless in thought, deed, and love?
- In **Deuteronomy 30:8**, God spoke through Moses, And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord and keep all his commandments that I command you today. Then further down in the chapter, in **vvs. 15-18a** — ¹⁵ "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes

3

and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish.” Based on what you know about Israel, did they keep God’s commands perfectly, and so merit life and blessing? The whole of the Old Testament is a record of their departure and disobedience and then God pursuing them in love to return. Even Moses, who met God on Mount Sinai and received the Law of God carved by the finger of God... did he keep the law he received perfectly and thus gain communion with God through his righteous life? Moses’ anger and arrogance cost him the very thing he had spent his life to do: lead God’s people into the land of promise. If Moses, who spoke with God face to face as a friend did not positively subdue and mortify his pride, anger and unbridled temper — and it cost him his life... How is it with your pride and anger and temper? Will you fair better than Moses?

- Under the kings what is the standard? In **Psalm 24** David asked rhetorically, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.” Did David achieve the righteous standard he accurately penned? Ask Bathsheba about the purity of David’s heart. Is your heart in better shape than his?
- Perhaps the prophets can give us some hope. They are righteous people. What do they say? **Isaiah**, in **Isaiah 33:14** — “Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?” ¹⁵ **He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly ...**” Also Isaiah, in **Isaiah 6** — Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips. If the lips the righteous prince of prophets reveal his death-producing unrighteous heart, how are yours? Do your lips reveal righteousness and holiness of life?
- The religious leaders and experts in the Law — those who study and memorize and know and massage the Law of God, attempting to work up their own righteousness. How did they do? **Luke 18:9–14a** — Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.
- And just a bit further down the chapter beginning in **v. 18**, a ruler asks him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said, ²⁰ “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit

4

adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.”²¹ And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” **He did not do the do not do’s!** At least he didn’t think he did. He was actually just blind to his condition... but let’s play his game with him for just a minute. He thought he had no sin in his life, and therefore nothing to be found guilty of. What does Jesus say? There is positive righteousness you don’t have, even if you could somehow be sinless. **v. 22** —²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” Jesus just showed the young man his heart. He thought he got all the Law perfectly when he hadn’t kept a single one and just deceived himself. Jesus exposed his condition through his lack of righteousness. And he walks away sorrowful.

So that’s the best of the best at keeping the law — or fooling themselves and others into thinking they kept it. They didn’t because they couldn’t do it. And there’s a message for us: Whatever perfection they thought had achieved, Jesus said **your** righteousness must **exceed** theirs. (Matthew 5:20)

His standard remains perfect, positive righteousness. Those we just considered were the best, but did not pass the bar. So we circle round to where we started: There is none righteous; no not one. ***Pastor, you said there were two ways. I already know I’m disqualified from perfection. You didn’t need to go through that long recitation of failure from all those guys for me to know I fall short of the righteous standard of God and the glory of God. I have no righteousness. I know it. I feel it. I live it. I hate it. Help me.***

I suspect all of us already diagnosed ourselves as being positive for sin, and negative for righteousness. Few if any of us needed the test of God’s word performed on our hearts again to remind of us our terminal condition. We know we are under a death sentence. That is, we are under a death sentence **unless** there is some way that we can have our sin paid for, as Jesus did for those who believe — **and** we can somehow have righteousness credited to us. My account of righteousness is at absolute zero, and it needs to be full of 100 percent right living from the first day of my existence. If am to live with God... If I am to be fitted for heaven, where holiness and perfect righteousness are the standard, I need something I don’t have, something that is apart from me. This is hope of Jesus’ birth!

5

Malachi promises... he prophesies that righteousness is coming! He proclaims what we are desperate to hear after this litany of sinful failure: **Malachi 4:2** — But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing, says the prophet. He speaks in the future tense. The blazing sun of the promised Messiah consumes the arrogant and evil — those who are confident in their own righteousness. But to those who fear the Lord, healing from the righteous Messiah. He doesn't say how it happens, just that it will!

We get much closer to understanding how righteousness comes as Zechariah worships, now in the present tense, while Mary carries the unborn Jesus in her womb: **Luke 1, beginning in v. 68...** — ⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people ⁶⁹and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, [now skipping to v. 74] ⁷⁴that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness ... Serving God without fear, serving him in requisite holiness and righteousness is possible, and Zechariah ties it to Jesus' incarnation — the Messiah has come in the flesh.

Now, the big reveal, the certain hope of righteousness that God has always required from Adam, through Abraham, Moses, the kings, the prophets... How is our negative righteousness overcome? Through Jesus! **Matthew 5:17**, Jesus says — Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. He fulfills the Law! For the first time since Genesis 2, righteousness is accomplished on the earth by the son of Man, Jesus, the Messiah. This was necessary. Without it there is no salvation. Have you considered that God could have simply sent Jesus on Good Friday to die for the sins of the world? Why was the virgin birth and the first 30 years of life necessary? It was necessary for all righteousness to be fulfilled, and so he did!

So we have hope! As Jesus lived, he fulfilled God's commands perfectly! The Savior lived a sinless life in all aspects. This newborn King did what you cannot! He completes all aspects of God's law in his active obedience to the Father. This is massive! This is the crux and hope of the Gospel! All the law. All the prophets. He became for us righteousness, according to **1 Corinthians 1:30** — Jesus ... became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Well, how does Jesus' righteousness help me out? That is exactly the right question. When we look at the atoning work of Christ on the cross, we can grasp that he is bearing our sin. The record of

6

my sin debt and the penalty of death is taken off of me — it is removed from my account — and it is placed on Jesus. My sin is **imputed** to him. He takes and pays the full price for the sin I have committed and I no longer owe the debt. But there is another part of that transaction that we may overlook. It is the transfer, or **imputation** of his perfect righteousness to me and my account. When each person stands before God — and we will — when we give an account the records will be open and God will require perfect obedience. For those in Christ, he finds transferred, imputed, to my account the perfect righteousness of Jesus. If that transfer is not made, if I have not received the righteousness of Christ, then I have not met, and cannot meet the standard perfect obedience.

The most obvious question at this point is this: How can I have the perfect righteousness of Jesus credited to my account. How do receive this transfer of righteousness? By faith! Paul writes in **Romans 1:16–17** — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who **believes**, — [who believes] — to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” Abraham, the lying coward, the sinful man with negative righteousness believed God and it was counted to him — it was imputed, or transferred to him — as righteousness. To receive the righteousness God requires you must look away from yourself and your unrighteousness to Christ. Surely you have been convinced by the metanarrative of Scripture this morning, starting back with Adam and going through the Patriarchs, the kings, the prophets, and coming right to your heart today that you have not, and cannot keep the Law of God and achieve perfect righteousness. There can be no doubt that your account is terminally and irreconcilably deficient in righteousness, but full of sin. Today is the day of salvation as we read in the Call to Worship. The transaction of your sin to Christ and his righteousness is described in **2 Corinthians 5:21** — God made him to be sin who knew no sin — [that is my sin transferred to Christ] — so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That is his righteousness transferred to me. I am called to receive his gift of faith and believe in Jesus — both his death for my sin, and his righteousness for my unrighteousness.

The entirety of our salvation hangs on this truth. Several polls over the last 10+ years have asked some form of the question, “Did Jesus live a sinless life?” An increasing number of people who identify themselves as Christian deny that Jesus lived a sinless life and that he kept all the Law of God perfectly. Beloved if Jesus did not perfectly keep the Law of God he has not fulfilled all righteousness, and there is no hope of salvation and we remain in a terminal state of lack of

7

righteousness. But now the sun of righteousness, prophesied by Malachi, has risen with healing in his wings. The child Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 9 has been given...

and his name is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts has done this in the birth and righteous life of Christ!

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace; Hail the sun of righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory, born that man no more may die,

Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

PRAY

After communion, before benediction: Love offering for Chad