

# Growth Groups Study Guide – Week of April 23<sup>rd</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>

## Opening Discussion/Thought Questions

1. Think of the worst thing you have ever done in your life. Were you caught? Did you have to pay for that sinful action?
2. How does it make you feel to know that Christ has fully paid for your sin – past, present and future?

## Getting Started

Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. In this study we're going to focus on 2 biblical subjects found in this verse: righteousness and imputation.

1. Group Discussion: Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. What does it mean to be righteous? \_\_\_\_\_

Righteousness is the perfect holiness of Christ. It is an essential attribute to the character of God; quite literally meaning "One who is right". Think of it as the polar opposite of sin. To commit sin is to go against God's design for our lives, therefore righteousness is the only living standard that is acceptable for us to stand before the Father. The wages of sin is death, but "*in the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. (Proverbs 12:28).*

Can we produce righteousness? All of us are born into complete bondage to sin, unable to produce any sort of righteousness on our own (Romans 3:9-12). As a matter of fact, Isaiah says that our attempts to produce righteousness on our own are disgusting in the eyes of God. *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Isaiah 64:6)*

Where does my righteousness come from? The Bible clearly defines righteousness as something His people should pursue (2 Tim 2:22), yet we are unable to produce it. So where do we get it? Our righteousness is imputed from Jesus through the atoning work that He accomplished on the cross (Philippians 1:11) We couldn't produce it, Christ produced it for us. Only the perfection of Christ could have accomplished this work. Only Jesus could have lived a perfect, obedient, and sinless life. Only Jesus could have atoned for the sins of His people. Only the righteousness of Christ will enter His Kingdom (Matthew 5:20)

What is the purpose of the Cross? When God sees His people, He doesn't see our sin. Instead, He sees us clothed in the righteousness of Christ. He sees us instantly and completely justified through that righteousness. This was the purpose of the cross. We were unable to obey the law and live in righteousness, so Christ came and lived in perfection in our place. He took our disobedience, nailed it to the cross, and gave us His righteousness. *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)* This is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus. We don't have to work and try and produce our own righteousness, Christ has robed us in His. His entire Earthly mission was to reconcile the church, making her in righteous standing with God.

How do I pursue righteousness? To pursue righteousness means to turn away from your natural, sinful desires, and turn to Christ and His perfect and righteous ways. Through obedience to this command, God is preparing us for eternal life with Him—aligning us with our righteousness through Christ. *He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3)*

2. Read the article below highlighting key points and discuss as a group, then close in prayer.

# The Doctrine of Imputation

## DEFINITION

The doctrine of imputation teaches that while Adam's sin is imputed to us because he is our natural federal head, God imputes or accredits the righteousness and suffering of Jesus to those who are in him and, conversely, imputes the sins of those redeemed to Christ.

## SUMMARY

Imputation is based on Old Testament sacrificial structures seen in places such as the Day of Atonement, where the sins of the people are transferred to a scapegoat. The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah provide even clearer foundations for the doctrine, upon which the NT authors build. The apostle Paul provides the bulk of the NT teaching on imputation, clarifying three ways in which imputation functions: (1) Adam's sin imputed to all of humanity; (2) the Christian's sin imputed to Christ; and (3) Christ's righteousness imputed to Christians. The latter two of these imputations Martin Luther famously called the "glorious exchange," our sin for Christ's righteousness. Such truth is a balm to the Christian who fears standing in the presence of a holy God wearing nothing but sin-stained garments.

The doctrine of imputation teaches that in the doctrine of justification, God imputes or accredits the righteousness and suffering of Jesus to those who are in him and, conversely, imputes the sins of those redeemed to Christ. The 16th century Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, called this double imputation the "glorious exchange." What is ours becomes Christ's and what is Christ's becomes ours. This doctrine has roots in the Old Testament and fully flowers in the New, especially in the letters of the apostle Paul.

## Old Testament Teaching

The Old Testament provides several important passages that constitute the foundation of the doctrine. One of the most important is [Leviticus 16](#) and the Day of Atonement. On this day of days, the high priest was supposed to offer a sacrificial bull on his own behalf, to ensure that he was ceremonially pure and free from defilement so that he could enter the Holy of Holies and offer the necessary sacrifices on behalf of the nation ([Lev. 16:6](#)). In addition to the sacrificial bull, the high priest took two goats: he sacrificed one and then performed a hand-laying ceremony on the other: "And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness" ([Lev. 16:21–22](#)). In this hand-laying ceremony three things stand out: (1) Aaron lays his hands on the head of the goat, which signified the transfer of something (cf. [Num. 27:18](#); [Deut. 34:9](#); [1 Tim. 4:14](#)); (2) in this case, the high priest transferred the sins of the nation to the scapegoat, evident by the fact that he confessed Israel's sins as he laid his hands on the goat; and (3) the goat bore the sins of the people and carried them outside the camp.

The protocols of the Day of Atonement hint at the sacrifice of the coming Messiah and the manner by which he would redeem his people. The more the Old Testament progresses, the more the shadows give way to the dawning light of the Messiah. The prophecy of the Suffering Servant is one place where the darkness gives way to greater light. Language evocative of the Day of the Atonement marks Isaiah's prophecy: the Messiah "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" ([Isa. 53:4](#)). "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" ([Isa. 53:5](#)). These two statements echo the language of [Leviticus 16:21–22](#), particularly, the fact that the scapegoat bore Israel's sins, and in similar fashion the Suffering Servant carried the griefs, sorrows, sins, and punishment that would bring Israel peace. These general statements find greater clarity in [Isaiah 53:11–12](#), which states: "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make

many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” Isaiah highlights the fact that the Suffering Servant would “make many to be accounted righteous,” and conversely, he would “bear their iniquities” and be “numbered with the transgressors.” The Suffering Servant was not himself sinful but would nevertheless be counted among sinners. Yet, stunningly, the sinners would be “accounted righteous;” that is, the law would have no claim on them because the Suffering Servant would give to them his perfect law-keeping status (cf. [Deut. 6:25](#); [Lev. 18:5](#)). The Suffering Servant is not inherently sinful and the sinners are not inherently righteous, yet by God’s grace the Servant bears the sin of sinners and accounts them righteous. Isaiah clearly propounds the doctrine of imputation—the glorious exchange.

One of the more powerfully vivid pictures of imputation appears in the Zechariah when the prophet has a vision of Joshua the high priest standing in the presence of God wearing excrement-stained priestly garments ([Zech. 3:1](#); cf. [Deut. 23:13–14](#); [Isa. 28:8, 36:12](#); [Ezek. 4:12](#)). Joshua’s filthy garments were the polar opposite of what he was supposed to wear ([Lev. 16:4](#)). God had every reason to condemn him and, yet, in a striking reversal, he showered Joshua in his mercy and grace. He directed the angels to remove his soiled garments and to give him “pure vestments” ([Zech. 3:4](#)). Within the vision Zechariah explains that the soiled garments represented Joshua’s sin and their removal signaled God’s forgiveness: “Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you” ([Zech. 3:4](#)). If the removal of the soiled garments results in the forgiveness of sins, then the investiture in pure garments signifies the imputation of righteousness. What Zechariah implicitly sees in his vision Isaiah makes explicit: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” ([Isa. 61:10](#)). Zechariah’s new righteous status was not native to him but alien—it came from God, not by his own efforts.

## New Testament Teaching

These Old Testament images, shadows, and statements all point to Jesus in the New Testament and the glorious exchange that we receive through the redemption that comes through him. When the apostle Paul explains the nature of salvation, he tells the church in Corinth that he and the other apostles are ambassadors for Christ through whom God makes his appeal. The message of reconciliation that he and the apostles herald is: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)). God makes Christ sin in the same manner that we become the righteousness of God, namely, through imputation. Paul’s formulaic statement arguably rests on the bedrock of [Isaiah 53](#), which has its foundation in the protocols of the Day of Atonement in [Leviticus 16](#). Christ bears our sin and we receive Christ’s righteousness, his perfect law-keeping accredited to us. The apostle uses this same language in his discussion of the doctrine of justification in [Romans 4](#) when he quotes [Genesis 15:6](#), “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” ([Rom. 4:3](#)). Paul explains imputation in the following manner: “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” ([Rom. 4:4–5](#)). Abraham’s righteousness was not native to him; in fact, Paul says he was “ungodly.” So how did God consider him righteous? Because Abraham laid hold of Christ’s righteousness by faith. God therefore imputed Christ’s righteousness to Abraham. Paul further explains the nature of imputation by appealing to David: “David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin’” ([Rom. 4:6–7](#)). Again, God “counts” righteousness to the ungodly sinner who looks to Christ by faith apart from works and conversely does not count his sin against him.

Paul also expounds the glorious exchange between Christ and believers in [Romans 5:12–21](#), but he adds another imputation, namely, Adam’s imputed guilt. Paul explains that sin came into the world through one man and that death spread to all people because all sinned ([Rom. 5:12](#)). But how, precisely, can Paul say that all people sinned

because of Adam's one sin? Adam and Christ serve as representative, or federal, heads for those who are in them: Adam represents all humanity and Christ represents only those who are in him (cf. [1 Cor. 15:20–28](#)). Each federal head acts, disobediently in the case of Adam and obediently in the case of the last Adam (cf. [1 Cor. 15:45](#)): “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were constituted sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be constituted righteous” ([Rom. 5:19](#), translation mine). Because of the respective (dis)obedience of Adam and Christ, God *constitutes* or *appoints* people into each category. Paul does not say that God considers people sinful because they sin; he does not say that people imitate Adam's sin and therefore God classifies them as sinners; he does not say that people receive their sinful status by virtue of being born as sinners. Rather, God *appoints* or *constitutes* (*katestathēsan*) them as sinners and as righteous based on their relationship to their respective federal heads.

## Conclusion

This exegetical survey of the Old and New Testaments leads to the theological conclusion that the Bible teaches a threefold imputation: God imputes Adam's sin to all people, the sins of the redeemed to Christ, and Christ's righteousness to the redeemed, to those who are in Christ. The implications of this threefold imputation are profound. The doctrines of imputation and justification are inextricably linked. God does not justify, or declare righteous, sinners on the basis of their own good works ([Eph. 2:8–9](#)), but on the basis of the obedience and suffering of Christ received through imputation and grasped by faith alone. This scriptural teaching stands in stark contrast to the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that God justifies sinners on the basis of inherent, rather than imputed, righteousness. In other words, a person must actually be holy in order to receive the verdict of righteous before the divine bar. Yet, such an opinion conflicts with Paul's testimony that God justifies the “ungodly” ([Rom. 4:5](#)). The ungodly person can only receive the verdict of righteous by a gracious imputation. Question 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks, “How are you righteous before God?” It then responds: “Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments, of never having kept any of them and of still being inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without any merit of my own, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me. All I need to do is accept this gift with a believing heart.” Such truth is a balm to the trembling soul who fears standing the presence of a holy God wearing nothing but sin-stained garments. By God's grace he freely gives us Christ's robe of righteousness so that we stand holy in his sight.

**Information by J. V. Fesko and Topher Haddox (The Gospel Coalition)**