

“Jesus Is our Righteousness”

Matthew 21:1-9; Jeremiah 23:5-6

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Our season of Advent begins with Jesus coming into Jerusalem. He arrived at Jerusalem in fulfillment of prophecy. Jeremiah says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jer. 23:5 ESV). So the crowd that day shouted out “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Mat. 21:9 ESV) as Jesus was entering Jerusalem. There is also what the LORD said through Zechariah the prophet, part of which is quoted by Matthew: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey.” (Zech. 9:9 ESV). And Malachi, the last OT prophet, says, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” We know that messenger as John the Baptizer.” And then Malachi says: “And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple;” (Mal. 3:1 ESV).

And so He came to Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The Gospel brings Jesus’s arrival into view for us today, in fulfillment of God’s promises.

But why was He promised, and why did He finally arrive? The answer centers around the word “righteousness.” Jeremiah and Zechariah both speak of it. Jeremiah calls the Son of David the righteous Branch. He then goes on to say that David’s Son will execute justice and righteousness in the land. Then Jeremiah says this supremely important thing about this Son of David, Jesus our Lord: “This is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6 ESV). Jesus Himself is our righteousness with God.

Zechariah also talks about righteousness. He says that the King that is coming riding on a donkey is “righteous.” He also has salvation. Actually, He Himself is the one who saves. As the righteous One, He is humble and riding on a donkey. He is not mounted on a grand stallion of a war horse.

Wait a second? How can He execute righteousness and justice without being mounted on a war horse wielding sword and spear? Shouldn’t one who executes justice and righteousness use violence to slay the wicked? Yet, Jesus executed justice and righteousness with respect to His mission as the One who saves. He did this when He forgave the woman that the Pharisees condemned as a sinner, who was sorry for her sins and seeking Jesus’s forgiveness. He did this when He cast out demons, healed the sick, gave the blind their sight, and brought some who had died back to life. He did this when He chastised those who thought they were righteous, chastising them for their hypocrisy and lawlessness, which made the tax collectors and sinners rejoice.

Hum! We might think that we have righteousness all figured out. But it is actually a challenging and tricky subject. For example, I heard a song by Luke Bryan the other day: “I believe most people are good.” Then the song says: “I believe this world ain’t half as bad as it looks.” I wonder what world he is living in. It looks like he is trying to affirm that human nature is essentially good, let’s say, righteous. But then the song says: “I believe you love who you love, Ain’t nothing you should ever be ashamed of.”

Really. Sounds like he is saying, whoever your heart desires, let us say, romantically, under any circumstances, wherever, however, man or woman, whether it is a man or woman having the desire for a man or woman, doesn't matter. Married? Doesn't matter. Young? Doesn't matter. You just love who you love, and that is okay. Nothing to be ashamed of. If that is what the song is supposed to mean, then in the same refrain, there is an affirmation that human nature is essentially good, and an affirmation of lawlessness in the name of some sort of "love."

One of the reasons why the subject of righteousness can be so challenging and tricky is because we can think we have it all figured out: human beings are essentially good, but then lawlessness is affirmed. And there can be so much righteousness. It seems to me that we are actually being smothered in righteousness in our world today. Righteous causes *ad nauseam*. Taking offense at being injured. Taking offense at being offended. But then there is also so much lawlessness and injustice that goes along with such taking offense and being injured. So often, people do their worst when they think they are justified, and so often they think they are most justified when they have been offended. Could this be because most people think of themselves like Luke Bryan; good?

I was watching the Ohio State and Michigan football game yesterday. A little fight broke out in the third quarter. It was otherwise a good football game, if you like football, and full of drama in terms of what that game means in college football. But there was this little fight. A wide receiver for Michigan wouldn't let go of the legs of the defender for Ohio State after the play was over. So the defender for Ohio State got angry and ripped the helmet off the head of the receiver for Michigan, and threw it down the field. "He wouldn't let go of my legs!" And then, of course, some linemen for Michigan came over to the defender from Ohio State to say, "Hi how are ya." And then some other Ohio State players came over to those linemen to return the greeting. And some punches were thrown into face masks, which is just kind of funny. Flags were thrown. One penalty was assessed, which is also just kind of funny.

Then there were comments by commentators about this great rivalry where there is all this hatred and animosity—you hear that kind of talk a lot in sports. Isn't it great, hatred and animosity. Well, no not really, I mean not *really*. But both sides feel justified, righteous in their hatred and animosity for the other. The defender for Ohio State felt justified in ripping the helmet off the head of the Michigan player. And yet, ripping off that other player's helmet was an act of violence and lawlessness, though I suppose we don't take it that way in the context of a football game.

But what about in the context of politics and relations among nations? Do we think Adolf Hitler, for example, just set about to start WWII and order the atrocities he did just because he wanted to do evil? Is that what he thought he was doing? Did he just wake up one day and think to himself: "I really want to do evil things today, so I think I'll start a war and order my army to suspend the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th commandments in relation to conquered civilians. I just really want to do really bad things." I don't think so.

Rather, his rhetoric tells us that he thought he was doing what he was doing for the glory and well-being of the German people. He was getting back at the allies after WWI who had humiliated Germany: rubbed Germany's nose it, so to speak. He invaded the Soviet union because the German people needed living space and resources. He felt justified in a righteous cause for his people.

We could provide that kind of an analysis of Soviet Russia and Stalin. We could provide that sort of analysis to what people are willing to do today in the name of a supremely righteous cause that will save humanity. Some of the worst monsters and worst atrocities and horrors,

some of the most thoroughgoing tyranny and oppression, is committed by people when they feel fully justified; righteous in their cause. So if evils are committed in the name of righteousness, then righteousness is not as straightforward as we might think.

“I believe most people are good.” Well, that song has to say *most* people, because while he tries to affirm the goodness of human nature, Luke Bryan must somehow try to account for evil in the world, so that becomes “those really bad people.” Most people are good. But then there are those really bad people. And, of course, I am not one of those. But there is an utter failure to recognize that good people sin and do harmful things to others. And people can be at their worst when they think they are fully justified in their righteousness and have been injured.

What does God think? “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5 ESV). “There is no one who does good, not even one” (Psalm 14:3 ESV). “All we like sheep have gone astray” (Isaiah 53:6 ESV). “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9 ESV). “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20 ESV).

Yikes. These declarations from God in His word are like howitzer blasts against the contention that most people are good. It teaches that human nature is essentially corrupt, corrupted by selfishness, and self-interest. One of the worst manifestations of such selfish corruption is when one thinks that they have suffered a grave injustice and so are in pursuit of the righteous cause and justified in violating God’s commandments in harming others. Righteousness can be a very tricky business, indeed.

The problem comes down to this: true righteousness involves a righteous heart, not a selfish one. Fallen human nature is essentially selfish, not righteous at heart. As a result, in terms of the kingdom of God, we need a righteousness that redeems and saves in true love and righteousness as a gift given.

So we get back to our question: why did Jesus arrive at Jerusalem? He arrived at Jerusalem as the righteous One humble, and riding on a donkey, because we need the kind of righteousness He is. We need Him to be for us “The LORD is our righteousness.” We need His righteousness to cover our unrighteousness so we can have a way to stand before God and live in His life.

And so righteous is a gift to us received in a much different view of ourselves than Luke Bryan’s song. It is a gift given in Jesus, whose brand of righteousness is to make atoning sacrifice as Love in human flesh appearing. It is a gift received by us in the forgiveness of sins. And to the extent we can speak of being righteous in the sense of what we do, it is worked through us by the Holy Spirit through faith, who brings true Christian love into our hearts in Christ, though we never rely on what we do as our righteousness before God.

Jesus arrived that day in Jerusalem as the Gift. He is here giving Himself to you in the Word and the Spirit as the Gift. As you say yes to this gift, God regards you as righteous. That is God’s amazing grace. Thanks be to God for Jesus’s arrival. Amen.