

Discussion Starter #1: What do we mean by the term the “righteousness of Christ”?

Key Passage: “Stand, therefore...having put on the breastplate of righteousness...” (Eph.6:14b)

TEACHING POINT

#1

The breastplate of righteousness refers to the righteousness purchased for us by Jesus at the cross.

Hooked into a Roman soldier’s belt was a breastplate, which protected his most vital organ: his heart. An arrow or sword in the heart meant certain death.

When Paul told us to put on the breastplate of righteousness, he was saying, “Protect your heart.” The heart, of course, referred to the core of our spiritual life. In the heart resides the conscience, the internal standard of right and wrong.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” At salvation, a “breastplate” is issued to each repentant sinner. Our own righteous acts are no match for Satan’s attacks, so the breastplate of righteousness is designed by God to protect our heart and soul from evil and deception.

As a reminder from our previous lesson on “the belt of truth,” we must have the belt of truth firmly in place before we can put on the breastplate of righteousness. This is because without truth, our righteousness will be based upon our own inadequate attempts to impress God. Instead, we choose to see ourselves as “in Christ”—His righteousness has been credited to our account.

When we put on and wear the breastplate of righteousness, we begin to develop a lifestyle of putting what we believe in our hearts into practice. And as we become more and more conformed to the image of Christ (Rom.8:29), our choices become more righteous, and these godly choices also protect us from further temptation and deception (Prov.8:20). God and His ways become our dwelling place (Ps.91:1). We grow in our love for His commands and in our desire for His ways to become our ways (Ps.37:4). And when God reveals an area of our lives that need changed, we obey and allow Him to work in us. Saying no to God opens cracks in the armor where Satan’s arrows can get through (Eph.6:16), but rejecting false ideas, idolatry, and the “*counsel of the ungodly*” (Psalm 1:1) keeps our breastplate securely fastened.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- Why do you think the Christian’s heart is a prime target for Satan?
- What is the relationship between the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness?

TEACHING POINT

#2

The breastplate of righteousness—Christ’s righteousness—must be imputed to us; we cannot earn or obtain it on our own.

An honest person will acknowledge that no one is perfect, including himself or herself. The fact that we fall short of God’s standard for us is easily seen in Jesus’ summary of the Law of God: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself (Mat.22:37–40). The standard requires that everything we do, say, and think has to be done, said, and thought from love for God and love for neighbor. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we have never achieved this level of spirituality. Nobody has ever loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, or his neighbor as himself.

Falling short of God’s standard is called sin. We are born with it, and we cannot overcome the effects of it on our own. Sin radically affects us to our core, tainting everything about us—all that we think, say, and do. So, no matter how good we try to be, we will never meet God’s standard of perfection. The Bible even says that all of our righteous deeds are like a “filthy rags” (Is.64:6). Our own righteousness is not good enough and never will be, no matter how hard we try.

That’s why Jesus lived a perfect life in full obedience to the law of God in every way possible—in thought, word, and action. Jesus’ mission wasn’t simply to die on the cross for our sins but also to live a life of perfect righteousness. This is referred to as the “active and passive obedience of Christ.” Active obedience refers to Christ’s life of sinless perfection. Everything He did was absolutely perfect. Passive obedience refers to Christ’s submission to the crucifixion. He went willingly to the cross and allowed Himself to be crucified without resisting (Is.53:7). His passive obedience pays our sin debt before God, and His active obedience gives us the perfection God requires.

Through our faith in Christ, the righteousness of God is passed to us. This is called “imputed” righteousness. To impute something is to credit something to someone. When we place our faith in Christ, God credits the perfect righteousness of Christ to our account so that we become perfect in His sight. *“For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Cor.5:21).

Not only is Christ’s righteousness imputed to us through faith, but our sin is imputed to Christ. That is how Christ paid our sin debt to God. He had no sin in Himself, but our sin is imputed to Him. As He suffered on the cross, He suffered the just penalty that our sin deserves (Gal.2:20). So, it is Christ’s righteousness imputed unto us that God sees when He brings us into fellowship with Himself. We are still sinners in practice, but the grace of God has declared us to have righteous standing before God and His law.

TALK ABOUT IT:

- Explain the difference between Christ’s active and passive obedience.
- How does the idea that the “breastplate of righteousness” is imputed unto us by Christ give a sense of security against Satan that our own righteousness could not give?

TEACHING POINT

#3

After we have received the imputed righteousness of Christ through faith in Him, wearing the breastplate of righteousness also involves our obeying God as we walk with Him daily.

The Christian soldier has two kinds of righteousness:

- **Imputed Righteousness** is the righteousness of Christ credited to our account when we first trusted Him as Savior (Rom.4:13-23; 2 Cor.5:21).
- **Imparted Righteousness** refers to our efforts to follow Christ after we have become Christians. This can change daily as we walk with the Lord and obey Him.

Proverbs 15:9 says, *“The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but he loves him who pursues righteousness.”* To pursue righteousness after we have already received the imputed righteousness of Christ means we pursue the character of Christ and desire holiness more than sinful indulgence.

When we walk closely with the Lord, we become more aware of our own sin and shortcomings. A piece of lint on a dark suit may not show up in the dark, but when we step out into the sunlight, we notice it clearly. When the light of God’s truth shines in our hearts, we clearly see our shortcoming. So, we humble ourselves, confess our sins, and receive God’s forgiveness, cleansing and restoration (1 Jn.1:9). Pride and self-righteousness cannot remain in the presence of a holy God. Pursuing righteousness begins with a humble heart seeking the continual presence of God (Jms.4:10; 1 Pet.5:6). The humble, believing heart leads to a lifestyle of righteous action acceptable to God (Ps.51:10).

TALK ABOUT IT:

- Explain the difference between Imputed Righteousness and Imparted Righteousness.
- What do you find easy about pursuing righteousness?
- What do you find difficult about pursuing righteousness?
- Pursuing righteousness is an aspect of putting on the breastplate of righteousness. How can pursuing righteousness protect our heart?
- What is something helpful that you’ve learned in this lesson about the breastplate of righteousness?