

Does “Imputed Righteousness” Mean God Views Us as Righteous Even If We Are Not?

Description

A study related to the SDA
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 2nd Quarter
The Promise: God’s Everlasting Covenant
Week 12
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This week’s lesson is entitled, “Covenant Faith,” and focuses on “imputed righteousness.” The lesson for Sabbath asks, “What does it mean that righteousness is ‘imputed,’ or ‘credited,’ to us?” Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, June 12, 2021

The Lesson goes on to give the author’s answer to this question in Tuesday’s lesson. It says,

“...the righteousness that saves us is a righteousness that is credited to us, a righteousness that is (to use a fancy theological term) imputed to us. This means that we are declared righteous in the sight of God, despite our faults; it means that the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not.” Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Tuesday, June 15, 2021

This is a common way to define “imputed righteousness.” But does this definition hold up to the test of investigation?

First of all, many are under the impression that it is impossible to overcome every cherished sin while in our mortal bodies. For this reason, people are unable to grasp what Ellen White and the scriptures say about “imputed righteousness.” This idea that we are unable to overcome sin while in our mortal bodies goes directly against positive statements that we need to overcome every cherished sin before Christ returns, while our probation is still open. For example, the Apostle Paul says,

Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey its lusts. Romans 6:12

Here is one of many positive statements in scriptures that say that we need to overcome sin in these mortal bodies. The condition of our body, whether corruptible or incorruptible, is irrelevant to our character. As we covered in a previous study, “Probation Closes for the SDA Church First!,” getting incorruptible bodies at the second coming of Christ will not affect our characters in the least.

Consider this statement by Ellen White. She said,

“If you have become estranged and have failed to be Bible Christians, be converted; for the character you bear in probationary time will be the character you will have at the coming of Christ. If you would be a saint in heaven, you must first be a saint on earth. The traits of character you cherish in life will not be changed by death or by the resurrection. You will come up from the grave with the same disposition you manifested in your home and in society. Jesus does not change the character at His coming. The work of transformation must be done now. Our daily lives are determining our destiny.” Ellen White, *Adventist Home*, p. 16

So here we have another positive statement concerning righteousness. That is, that we must actually be righteous to gain heaven. Therefore, as Ellen says, we must do the work of transformation of our characters and hearts here and now. Now is the time of salvation, not after Christ comes!

Many think that because Adam fell, we all are doomed to a life hopelessly infected by sin. But Genesis does not say anything of the sort. In the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, we see that Cain was upset that his offering to God was rejected. But God said to Cain,

Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door, and its desire is for you, ****but you should rule over it.**** Genesis 4:6-7

So you see, God wanted Cain to rule over sin while in his mortal body. This whole idea of it being impossible to overcome sin while in our mortal bodies did not come from Genesis.

Many also interpret Romans 5:12 as saying that it is impossible to overcome sin in our mortal bodies, but that interpretation would go against the positive statement to the contrary that Paul himself makes later in this very letter, as we read earlier. But let's look at Romans 5:12. It reads,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. Romans 5:12

Here we can see that Paul says that death spread to all men, not because of Adam's sin, but because all after him sinned. Adam may have been the first to sin, but sin continued because all after him chose to sin as well. Continuing in verse 19 we read,

“Through one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous...What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?...therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey its lusts.” Romans 5:19-6:12

By Adam's disobedience, many were made sinners because sin has such a detrimental effect on everything and everyone. People continued to sin, following Adam's example, rather than, as Ellen admonished, doing the work of transformation of our characters here and now, by choosing to overcome our inherited and cultivated tendencies by placing our will on the side of God and of truth. An inherited tendency does not doom us to sin. It is only a tendency. It must be and can be overcome by filling our minds with the truth and aligning our thoughts and actions with Jesus' thoughts and actions.

Paul says, “through one Man’s obedience, (speaking of Jesus’), we shall be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19) This transformation occurs by learning the lessons taught by Jesus’ life – including the last hours of His life. That is, that sin is not worth it, that sin leads to death, but righteousness, like Jesus’ righteousness that was exemplified for us, leads to life! By our sin, we killed an innocent loving man. This should wake us up to the truth concerning the horrifying effects of sin.

And if sin really destroys ourselves and others, even “righteous others” like Jesus, how could God allow unrighteousness in heaven? Or in the earth made new? To say that “imputed righteousness” is declared righteousness in the sight of God, despite our ongoing faults – that the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not – is to say something that scripture does not say. Nor does it even make any practical sense. By this definition, “imputed righteousness” would be nothing short of “fake righteousness,” because, in reality, it would not be credited righteousness due to actually receiving the righteousness of Christ; it would be allowed sinfulness.

Interestingly, Friday’s discussion question asks:

“How do you respond to the argument (which comes with a certain logical consistency) that if we are saved only by a credited righteousness, not a righteousness that exists within us, then it does not matter what we do or how we act?” Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Friday, June 18, 2021

Now let’s address the statement here that righteousness could “exists within us.” You see, neither sin nor righteousness can exist within us in the way that people sometimes imagine. Sin is an act of disobedience to the law, as we will evidence from scripture in a minute. By the same token, righteousness is obedience to the law, in thought, word and deed. Sin and righteousness are both actions of our mind and body. They do not have any “existence” as immaterial objects or substances in any immaterial way within us or without us. We are not “infected” with original sin, as we just showed, nor can we be “infected” with righteousness, making it impossible for us to ever sin. We overcome by knowing and gaining a love of the truth, and choosing to think and act according to it. (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12)

Here, the lesson’s discussion question highlights the problem with its definition of “imputed righteousness;” that is, if we take “imputed righteousness” to mean that the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not, then it IS logically consistent to conclude that it does not matter (to God) what we do or how we act. If “imputed righteousness” means this, then “imputed righteousness” means “fake righteousness,” as we just said. And if God is okay with – and even allows for – fake righteousness, then what is the point of real righteousness? And I hope we can all see that if we think God allows for fake righteousness, we will never see the urgency or necessity of becoming righteous while in our mortal bodies before our probation closes.

Obviously, there is a big problem with this definition of “imputed righteousness.” And the problem is with a lack of evidence for the premise that “the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not.”

There are many positive statements in the bible, and in Ellen White’s writings, saying that if we are sinning, we are considered as “not righteous” by God.

We’ll get to that in a minute, but first, what is righteousness?

1 John 5:17. It reads,

“All unrighteousness is sin...”

Conversely, righteousness is not sinning.

And Psalm 119:172 reads,

“...all your commandments are righteousness. “

And 1 John 3:4 reads,

“...sin is the transgression of the law.”

So, we can see that righteousness is the keeping of the law, the keeping of the commandments, it is not sinning.

This is why Paul says in Romans 6:20,

“For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.”

In other words, when you sin, you are not righteous.

And James 2:10 reads,

“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”

So we can see here that righteousness is an all or none thing. We either serve God or Satan. Many Christians think they have the righteousness of Christ while still falling into sin from time to time. But this is not the case. If we are sinning but sorry for our sin, we are still not servants of God, but are actually unwilling servants of Satan.

And Ellen White said,

“Righteousness is right doing, and it is by their deeds that all will be judged. Our characters are revealed by what we do. The works show whether the faith is genuine.” Ellen White, Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 312

We could go on and on, but this is enough to show that there is plenty of positive evidence – that is, evidence that directly states – that if you sin, you are unrighteous.

And Paul warns us about the deception that “the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not.” 1 Corinthians 6:9 reads,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived.
1 Corinthians 6:9

And Ellen White says something very similar. She said,

“The righteousness of Christ will not cover one cherished sin. A man may be a law-breaker in heart; yet if he commits no outward act of transgression, he may be regarded by the world as possessing great integrity. But God’s law looks into the secrets of the heart. Every act is judged by the motives that prompt it. Only that which is in accord with the principles of God’s law will stand in the judgment.” Ellen White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 316

Basically, there is no positive evidence in the bible or Ellen’s writings, to my knowledge, of any statement directly claiming that “the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not.”

And if there is no positive evidence that claims that “the God of heaven views us as righteous even if we are not,” then the Sabbath School lesson’s definition of “imputed righteousness” is baseless. This cannot, therefore, be the meaning of “imputed righteousness.”

Now, let’s read a quote from Ellen White given in Friday’s lesson regarding the truth of “righteousness through faith.” She said,

“The only way in which he [the sinner] can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account. Christ’s righteousness is accepted in place of man’s failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son. This is how faith is accounted righteousness; and the pardoned soul goes on from grace to grace, from light to greater light.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 367. (Also RH November 4, 1890, par. 7)

Unfortunately, the lesson is trying to use this statement in support of the unfounded idea that imputed righteousness is being considered by God to be righteous while we are still sinning. But this statement actually doesn’t say that at all. It actually states the truth concerning “imputed righteousness” or “credited righteousness.” She says that we will have Christ’s righteousness accepted in place of our failures ****when**** we repent.

Now many do not have a clear definition of repentance. Many think that repentance is simply being sorry for our sins. But being sorry is not repentance. Turning from sin is repentance. Ellen White said,

“True repentance is more than sorrow for sin. It is a resolute turning away from evil.” Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 557

So it just follows that if we have turned away from evil, we will no longer be sinning.

What makes it even more clear that the statement from Ellen quoted in Friday's lesson doesn't promote the popular misinterpretation of imputed righteousness, is reading it in context. A little earlier in the same Review and Herald article from which the statement was taken, she said,

"Repentance is associated with faith, and is urged in the gospel as essential to salvation. Paul preached repentance. He said, 'I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.' There is no salvation without repentance. No impenitent sinner can believe with his heart unto righteousness. Repentance is described by Paul as a godly sorrow for sin, that 'worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of.' This repentance has in it nothing of the nature of merit, but it prepares the heart for the acceptance of Christ as the only Saviour, the only hope of the lost sinner.

As the sinner looks to the law, his guilt is made plain to him, and pressed home to his conscience, and he is condemned. His only comfort and hope is found in looking to the cross of Calvary. As he ventures upon the promises, taking God at his word, relief and peace come to his soul. He cries, 'Lord, thou hast promised to save all who come unto thee in the name of thy Son. I am a lost, helpless, hopeless soul. Lord, save, or I perish.' His faith lays hold on Christ, and he is justified before God.

But while God can be just, and yet justify the sinner through the merits of Christ, no man can cover his soul with the garments of Christ's righteousness while practicing known sins, or neglecting known duties. God requires the entire surrender of the heart, before justification can take place; and in order for man to retain justification, there must be continual obedience, through active, living faith that works by love and purifies the soul.

James writes of Abraham and says, 'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.' In order for man to be justified by faith, faith must reach a point where it will control the affections and impulses of the heart; and it is by obedience that faith itself is made perfect." Ellen White, RH November 4, 1890, par. 2-5

And if it is the case that we truly have turned from our sin, we can be considered as safe for the society of heaven. Ellen White said,

"It is not safe to be occasional Christians. We must be Christlike in our actions all the time. Then, through grace, we are safe for time and for eternity." Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students, p. 487

Here we can see one aspect of grace. Although we have sinned in the past, (and all of us have), once we become Christlike in our actions “ALL THE TIME,” we will be considered at that point – from that time forward – to have the righteousness of Christ, and therefore safe for heaven. This is a very gracious act of God towards us, as you can see. It is by grace, the unmerited love of God, that we can have our record of sin wiped clean after we have truly repented and turned from sin. Only then can we be considered as righteous from that time forward, even though we have sinned in the past. But this is because God trusts that we will be righteous from that time forward. This is what it means to have righteousness “imputed” to us. It is closely related to atonement, or having our record of sin wiped away. But our record of sin is only wiped away once we have stopped sinning — once we have stopped acting like sinners.

After all, Ellen stated plainly that when Christians act like sinners, we are counted as sinners. Ellen said,

“Professing Christians who act like little children, speaking pettishly and showing hastiness of temper, offend God. He has paid a great price to redeem them from Satan’s power, that they might become sons and daughters of God. When they act like sinners, they are counted as sinners, and must repent and do their first works of love.” Ellen White, 1888 1791.1

Of course, it would be insane to reckon someone who is still harboring sin in their hearts as a person who is safe for heaven. Lucifer, for example, was expelled from heaven. He was still harboring sin in his heart after his fall and was therefore unsafe for the rest of the citizens of heaven. Jesus did not give even one of the covering cherubs, Lucifer, a pass on this, because God is no respecter of persons. Truth is truth. Either we are safe for heaven because of genuine inward righteousness or we are not. It does not matter who we are or what we profess to believe, if we are not righteous in our thoughts and actions, we are unfit for the kingdom and will not go in.

Ellen White said,

“Long was he [Satan] retained in heaven. Again and again was he offered pardon on condition of repentance and submission. Such efforts as God alone could make, were made to convince him of his error, and restore him to the path of rectitude. God would preserve the order of the heavens, and had Lucifer been willing to return to his allegiance, humble and obedient, he would have been re-established in his office as covering cherub. But as he stubbornly justified his course, and maintained that he had no need of repentance, it became necessary for the Lord of heaven to vindicate His justice and the honor of His throne; and Satan and all who sympathized with him were cast out.” Ellen White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 4, pp. 319, 320.

Here we see that Satan was cast out of heaven because he would not repent – turn from his sin. Satan too was offered grace, just like we are. But, there was no change of heart in Satan, and God had to preserve the order of heaven. He could not allow someone who harbors sin to be in heaven because it would destroy the order of heaven. This is because, as the scripture says, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

There was a time after Satan was shut out of heaven that he actually regretted what he had done, but the sin problem was not resolved in his heart. To this, Ellen writes,

“But no, heaven must not be placed in jeopardy. All heaven might be marred should he be taken back; for sin originated with him, and the seeds of rebellion were within him.” Ellen White, *Spiritual Gifts*, Vol. 1, p. 18

This is what the gospel is all about – resolving the sin problem in our hearts and minds, and overcoming the seeds of rebellion within us! And this is good news! What would you rather have, fake righteousness, which is no righteousness at all, or actual righteousness? Better yet, what society would you rather live in, one where people have fake righteousness or one where people are actually not sinning? The truth is that God can transform our minds – and this will enable us to be righteous all the time. To this truth, the Doxology in Jude, verses 24 and 25 reads,

Now unto him [Jesus] that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,
To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. Jude 1: 24-25

This doxology contains the great promise of the gospel – that Jesus can actually keep us from falling, and will present us as faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. This is no fake righteousness, this is the real thing.

For more on the truth of the gospel, see the study, “The Lost Gospel of Christ,” by Trent Wilde, and see our YouTube study entitled “Imparted & Imputed Righteousness” as well.