

As Bible students, we oftentimes come across the word 'righteousness and seldom give it much thought since, in our mind, we generally have an idea of what it means! Whatever you understand it to mean generally depends on the belief system under which you were raised or have been a part of for several years.

To most Christians, the word implies 'morally justifiable behavior'. According to 'Got Questions.org'<sup>1</sup> –

Dictionaries define *righteousness* as "behavior that is morally justifiable or right". Such behavior is characterized by accepted standards of morality, justice, virtue, or uprightness. The Bible's standard of human righteousness is God's own perfection in every attribute, every attitude, every behavior, and every word. Thus, God's laws, as given in the Bible, both describe His own character and constitute the plumb line by which He measures human righteousness.

I agree with much of what 'Got Questions' said, and I would assume that many 'Christians' would as well – that is as long as the term 'God's laws' is defined as those that were not 'done away with'.

Regardless of a believer's understanding of the meaning of the term, it is widely understood that as 'believers', we should all strive to maintain a certain level of righteousness in order to remain a part of God's people. The question is "what is that level"? And if there is a prescribed level, "how will I know when I've attained it"?

That is a big question! It is sort of like being told by your father that he will take you to a big baseball game 'if you have good grades'. Well – how 'good' do my grades have to be? Will a 'B' average be good enough, or do I have to have straight 'A's'?

Thankfully, God has not left us with that dilemma. He is somewhat clearer about His expectations than most humans, but in order to know those expectations, we have to study more deeply into his word than what we've been led to believe.

In this study, I want to help us understand what God expects from us in regard to 'righteousness'. To do so, we're going to answer these five questions:

- What does the word 'righteousness' mean?
- How do we obtain righteousness?
- Are there Levels of righteousness?
- What is Justification?
- Why should we be righteous?

Then in a later teaching – we'll discuss the problems Paul and the other apostles were having in regards to helping the new believers understand what righteousness was all about.

We will start by defining 'righteousness' as well as a few related words.

## What is Righteousness?

The Hebrew word 'righteousness' is the noun 'tsedaqah' (צְדָקָה – Strong's 6666), and like many Hebrew words, it seems to lack a 'concrete' definition. It is like the words 'love', 'hope', and 'peace' – you sort of know what it means, but it's hard to define. Oftentimes, the first occurrence of the word helps define it, and in the case of 'tsedaqah', the first place is in the story of Abraham –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Genesis 15:6** And he (Abraham) believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/righteousness.html>



This is the place where God told Abraham that his servant – Eliazar – would not be his heir, but that his heir would come from his own loins. That is also where Abraham realized that from that child, his descendants would be as many as the stars in heaven.

Because Abraham believed God, He considered that belief to be 'righteousness'. Therefore, we could make a connection between the word 'righteousness' and 'belief'; but if we look beyond just the belief, we can also assume that God was pleased that Abraham believed.

To add to that, we can go to the root word of 'tsedaqah' which is 'tsadaq' (צַדִּיק – Strong's 6663). Like most Hebrew root words, 'tsadaq' is a verb – an action. Unfortunately, 'tsadaq' also lacks a concrete meaning, but we can again try to gain more understanding by seeing how it is first used in the scripture. In this case, it is in the story of Judah and Tamar.

This story is about a man who had three sons, and the oldest was married to a woman named 'Tamar'. That son died leaving Tamar childless, and apparently because of the tradition of the people at that time, Judah was to give his next oldest son to her so she could have a male child so that she would have an inheritance. Judah did so, but that son died also. Judah should have then given his youngest son, Shelah to Tamar, but because that son was too young, he told Tamar to wait till Shelah was grown and she could have him then, but apparently, in the back of his mind, Judah was hoping she would marry again and have children by her new husband. But Tamar did not re-marry, and even continued to dress as a widow.

After the years passed since Shelah matured, Tamar came to realize that Judah had reneged on his word. He had failed to follow the custom. Tamar, though, taking advantage of a chance sitting of Judah in her country, trapped Judah by dressing like a prostitute and subsequently had a child by him. When Judah realized what happened, he acknowledged that -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Gen 38:26** "She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son."

Why did Judah say "more righteous"? Because he only maintained the tradition up to a point. Tamar was more righteous because she held more strongly to the tradition and because she believed Judah's word as shown by remaining a widow.

So in this case, being righteous not only included 'belief', it also included maintaining a tradition or a law. It's interesting to note that being "more righteous" indicates that there are indeed 'levels' of righteousness; and in fact, we see that in the first place we find the adjective form of 'tsadaq' is found -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Gen 6:9** This is the genealogy of Noah. Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.

In this verse, the word 'just' is translated from the Hebrew word 'tsaddiyq' (צַדִּיק - Strong's 6662). It has been interpreted a number of ways, sometimes to mean that he was without sin, and at other times to indicated that he had a pure heritage. But we get a another understanding when we read it from the Complete Jewish Bible –

<sup>CJB</sup> **Genesis 6:9** "Here is the history of Noah. In his generation, Noah was a man righteous and wholehearted; Noah walked with God."

According to this translation, it appears that in comparison to those who were a part of his 'pre-flood' generation, Noah was a sound, wholesome<sup>2</sup> individual.

<sup>2</sup> From the word 'tamiym' (תָּמִים - 8549) – complete, perfect, whole, sound



Adding that to our definition, we now find that righteousness includes:

- belief,
- maintaining a tradition or law, and also
- being 'wholesome'

– but we're still not there, because all these words are still 'abstract' in thought. So how can we get to the 'nuts and bolts' of finding the meaning of this abstract word?

According to Jeff Benner, founder of the 'Ancient Hebrew Resource Center'<sup>3</sup>, when facing this dilemma, a solution is to use the poetic Hebrew writing style called "parallelism" where the writer says something, then repeats himself using different words. Jeff uses a passage from the Psalms to illustrate that point.

NKJ **Psalm 32:11** Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all *you* upright in heart!

In this verse the Hebrew word translated 'upright' is 'yashar' (יָשָׁר – 3477) which means 'strait, level, right, correct'. These too are abstract words, but we can find a more concrete meaning by going to a passage where 'yashar' is used –

NKJ **Jeremiah 31:9** They shall come with weeping, And with supplications I will lead them. I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters, in a **straight way** in which they shall not stumble; For I am a Father to Israel, And Ephraim *is* My firstborn.

Here, the word 'strait' is from the Hebrew word 'yashar' and the word 'way' is from the Hebrew word 'derek' (דֶּרֶךְ – 1870) which means 'a road, a journey, and 'a path'. So 'righteousness also implies a strait path. Let's see a number of verses that illustrate that thought –

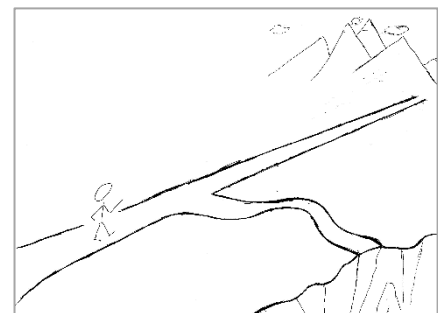
NKJ **Psalm 5:8** Lead me, O LORD, in Your righteousness (tsedaqah) because of my enemies; Make Your way (derek) straight (yashar) before my face.

NKJ **Deuteronomy 32:4** He (YHVH) is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways (derek) are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous (tsaddiyq) and upright (yashar) is He.

NKJ **1 Kings 11:38** `Then it shall be, if you heed all that I command you, walk in My ways (derek), and do *what is* right (yashar) in My sight, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as My servant David did, then I will be with you and build for you an enduring house ....

KJV **Hosea 14:9** Who *is* wise, and he shall understand these *things*? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways (derek) of the LORD *are* right (yashar), and the just (righteous) shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein.

In addition to what we've already discovered, 'righteousness' can be likened to walking on a strait path - the path that leads to godliness. I like to illustrate it like this - a person walking down a strait road that leads to the Mountain of God. The other path is a crooked path that leads to a pit. Should you choose to follow the crooked path, but find that it's not the way to go, you simply turn around and get on the strait path. Getting back on the strait path is called 'repentance'.



When you combine all these concepts together, we find that righteousness involves belief and the willingness to walk in God's 'way' which includes His statutes and His commandments. As Moses said to Israel –

<sup>3</sup> AHRC - <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/definition/righteous.htm>



NKJ **Deu 6:24-25** <sup>24</sup> `And the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as *it is* this day. <sup>25</sup> `Then **it will be righteousness for us**, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as He has commanded us.'

This leads us to the next point -

### Building Righteousness

Individual acts of kindness to our neighbor also build righteousness. For instance – returning a much-needed garment to a person in need, even though it was given as collateral for a loan -

NKJ **Deu 24:10-13** <sup>10</sup> "When you lend your brother anything, you shall not go into his house to get his pledge. <sup>11</sup> "You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you lend shall bring the pledge out to you. <sup>12</sup> "And if the man *is* poor, you shall not keep his pledge overnight. <sup>13</sup> "You shall in any case return the pledge to him again when the sun goes down, that he may sleep in his own garment and bless you; and **it shall be righteousness to you** before the LORD your God.

### Levels of Righteousness

I mentioned that Judah had compared himself to his daughter-in-law Tamar and concluded that she had been more righteous than he. But God shows that there are others who have a level of righteousness that exceeds another's righteousness. Here are a couple of examples of corporate righteousness –

NKJ **Jer 3:8-11** "Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. ...<sup>11</sup> Then the LORD said to me, "Backsliding Israel has shown herself **more righteous** than treacherous Judah.

NKJ **Eze 16:51-52** "Samaria did not commit half of your (Judah's) sins; but you have multiplied your abominations more than they, and have **justified** your sisters by all the abominations which you have done. <sup>52</sup> ... the sins which you committed were more abominable than theirs; they are **more righteous** than you. Yes, be disgraced also, and bear your own shame, because you **justified** your sisters.

I'm not sure how one person or people being more righteous than another plays a role in how God looks upon us in regards to salvation, but it may have been the reason God has for the past 2000 years been using Ephraim (Israel) to do His work more so than Judah.

Notice that in the above Ezekiel passage, God said that Samaria (Israel) is 'justified' by Judah's abominations. The word 'justified' is translated from 'tsadaq', so let's take a look at that.

### Justification

A few years after Judah's encounter with Tamar, he found himself in another situation – this time not of his own doing. After Joseph had been taken to Egypt as a slave, he eventually became second in command of the entire nation and placed in charge of distributing food during a famine. Eventually his brothers came from Canaan to buy food and Joseph put them through several compromising situations so as to test them. One of those was when he put his cup in Benjamin's sack, which was later found by Joseph's steward. Knowing they were in trouble, Judah said Joseph –

NKJ **Genesis 44:16** ... "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we **clear** (tsadaq) ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; here we are, my lord's slaves, both we and *he* also with whom the cup was found."

In that passage, the Hebrew word for 'clear' is 'tsadaq' – the root word for righteousness. In other words, Judah was asking Joseph "how can we again make ourselves righteous in your eyes"? Unfortunately,



there was no way since they could not prove that they 'did not' take the cup. Fortunately, Joseph himself stepped in and cleared them.

Thus – another aspect of righteousness is 'justification'. Whenever we get off God's path – *and we have all been off the path* - we need 'justification' in order to once again become righteous. Justification is like appearing before a judge and being acquitted from a charge that has been laid against us. God speaks of it in the Torah -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Deuteronomy 25:1-2** "If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that *the judges* may judge them, and they justify (tsadaq') the righteous and condemn the wicked, <sup>2</sup>then it shall be ..."

Though this is speaking of a civil case, our need for justification would come because of sins against God; and since we have all sinned, we are all in need of justification. It is like David said -

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Psalms 143:-2** Hear my prayer, O LORD, Give ear to my supplications! In Your faithfulness answer me, *And* in Your righteousness. <sup>2</sup> Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous.

So according to David, we are all in the same situation. We all lack righteousness in the eyes of God, unless like Judah – we find a way to become 'tsadaq' (righteous) again. We'll talk more about that in the next session, but for now, let's recap what we've seen so far.

### What is Righteousness?

- It is belief that YHVH will do as He said He would do.
- It is the willingness to maintain a given code of conduct, be it in our community or in God's Kingdom, i.e. – the Torah
  - The 'strait' path that leads to God's Kingdom
- It is doing good deeds – helping those who ask for help,
- It is Justification - searching for a way to restore our righteousness.

### Why Be Righteous?

We are to be righteous so that we can be an example to the nations of God's way of life.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Isa 62:1-3** For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, And for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, **Until her righteousness goes forth as brightness**, And her salvation as a lamp *that* burns. <sup>2</sup> **The Gentiles shall see your righteousness**, And all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the LORD will name. <sup>3</sup> You shall also be a crown of glory In the hand of the LORD, And a royal diadem In the hand of your God.

We are to be righteous as an example to our family, our friends, and others who we might encounter. In doing so – we display the Righteousness of God. It is part of our calling!

So this is a synopsis of what righteousness is all about. You probably noticed that I did not mention any passages from the Writings of the Apostles (the New Testament). That is because I wanted to show that the foundation of righteousness is established in the Tnakh (Old Testament). Next time, we will see that the 'cure' for unrighteousness is also found in the Tnakh. We will then look at how Yeshua and the apostles tried to explain righteousness to the Jews and the non-Jews who were coming into the 'messianic' synagogues.

Shalom Aleichem