

The Two Kinds of Righteousness: What's a Preacher to Do?¹

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Preaching and the Righteousness of Faith

How do you make someone into a *tsaddik* (a righteous man)? This was a question Reb Saunders needed to answer. Reb Saunders was the spiritual leader of the Russian Hasidic Jewish community in Chaim Potok's bestseller, *The Chosen*.² He was a man of wisdom and compassion who had endured unimaginable suffering for his people during World War I. When the war ended, the rabbi had moved his family and the Hasidic community to America. Here he had a son, whom he named Daniel. As Reb Saunders's firstborn son, everyone in the community expected Daniel to succeed his father as leader of the community. He was "the chosen one."

One day, when Daniel was just four years old, he picked up a book and read it. Then he repeated it from memory, word for word, back to his father. On that day, Reb Saunders realized that God had given Daniel a brilliant mind, "a mind like a jewel." Daniel started devouring books like they were food and water. But as proud as Reb Saunders was, he soon realized something else about Daniel as well. He realized that even though Daniel had been blessed with a great mind, God had not given him a *heart*. And a heart was the most important thing for a *tsaddik*. Daniel had a magnificent mind, but he did not have the heart of a *tsaddik*. What would the father do? How could he raise Daniel to be a *tsaddik*? How could he give Daniel a heart?

The father wrestled with the problem and finally came to a decision: he would raise his son *in silence*. In other words, the father stopped talking to Daniel and rarely even looked directly at him. From age four until Daniel graduated from college, the father never again had a normal conversation with his son. Through most of his youth, Daniel carried this awful burden of a silent father.

What kind of way is that to raise a son? Near the end of the story, Reb Saunders tries to explain it to Reuven Malter, Daniel's closest friend. But as Reb Saunders talks, Reuven realizes that he was not talking only to him, but *through him* to his son, Daniel. At one point, Reb Saunders, full

¹ The author would like to thank colleague Joel Biermann for his helpful critique of this paper.

² Potok, Chaim, *The Chosen* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967).

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of emotion, says, "One learns the pain of others by suffering one's own pain.... And it is important to know of pain.... It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others. It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend upon the Master of the Universe."

The Father's Problem

How do you make someone a tsaddik (a righteous person)? For the Christian, a *tsaddik* is someone who is "right" with God, that is, someone who is in a right relationship with Him. A *tsaddik* is also someone who fulfills God's plan for human life—someone who lives in the relationship that God intended not only with the Creator Himself but also with His creation.³ *How do you make someone a tsaddik?* That is the problem for our heavenly Father as well. And our heavenly Father, for now, has chosen silence as His way too. In an insightful observation, Reuven's father says to his son, "It is, perhaps, the only way to raise a *tsaddik*."

And so we suffer the silence of the almighty God every day of our lives. In our world it is evil that does all the talking. Disease and poverty and violence and disaster bluster away. But God remains silent. He is supposed to be in control, but He lets it all go by without a word. What are we to think? One minute God plays the world's tyrant, and the next minute its benevolent king. He is kind to some and cruel to others. *What are we to think?* God does not answer for any of it.

At critical moments in our lives—moments of anguish or grief—God's silence gets personal and painful. God keeps terribly silent when *I* want answers!

"Why?" I wonder. What's the point? Does this God even exist? And what does He think about *me*? What is in His heart when He looks at me? When I die, then what? Sooner or later I might meet up with this God. What is He going to say? What if He knows my thoughts?

God's silence becomes painful when it gets personal because *unavoidably* we interpret His silence in the face of our suffering as disapproval of us—and agreement with the punishment. We all know that in the face of an atrocity, if someone with the power to stop the insanity keeps silent, such silence signals assent. If a *king* stands silent while soldiers beat his servant, the king is an accomplice. Does God's silence in the face of suffering signal His assent to it? Does it signal His wrath against our sin and His immanent judgment? Moses had such fears, and so should we:

³ Kolb, Robert, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 450-452, 455-456; Charles Arand, "Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 420-421.

For all our days pass away under your wrath;
We bring our years to an end like a sigh.
Who considers the power of your anger,
And your wrath according to the fear of you? (Ps. 90:9, 11)

What can you do about a God who doesn't speak? Job asked that question as well (Job 23).

But at those times when the silence is most deafening, that is when we must realize that the silence is not total. God is not *completely* silent. Neither was Reb Saunders. Near the end of the book, in a startling revelation to Reuven, the great rabbi thanked him for the blessing he had been to his son, Daniel. Then he said, "The Master of the Universe sent you to my son. He sent you when my son was ready to rebel. He sent you to listen to my son's words. *He sent you to be my closed eyes and my sealed ears* (italics added)."

In other words, Reb Saunders saw Reuven as an extension of himself. He carried on the relationship that the father could not. And indeed, throughout the book we learn how Reuven functioned as Daniel's friend against the background of that awful silence. He brought joy and hope to Daniel, and so *in concert with the silence of the father* Reuven had a big hand in giving Daniel the heart of a *tsaddik*.

But in a much more profound way (and here the analogy that I have been making fails to fully capture the nature of the reality) God has sent us a Friend, a final Word on the subject, "begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Lights, Very God of Very God...who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven".... *A Word from God against the background of that awful silence*. It is in Christ alone that God Himself speaks to us (John 1:1-14; Heb. 1:1). In Christ we see what is in God's heart and what his intentions are towards us: "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18).

This Word is a gift from God to us across the silence. It is the gift of *righteousness*. Jeremiah says it well: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch.... In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:5-6). In Christ, God speaks the word of reconciliation. He shows us His favor and restores the relationship with Him that He intended us to have. God solves the problem of our righteousness by giving us the righteousness He wants us to have.⁴ In the person and work of Christ He has restored our

⁴ This is the "righteousness of faith" of which Melancthon, for example, writes: "Since we receive the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation on account of Christ by faith alone, faith alone justifies. This is because those who are reconciled are regarded as righteous and children of God, not on account of their own purity, but through mercy on account of Christ, as long as they take hold of this mercy by faith" (Ap IV, 86). All quota-

identity as His children and given us peace with Him. This means that in Christ we are the righteousness of God.⁵

The Preacher's Task

The preacher is honored to serve Christ and His gift of righteousness to the people who come to hear him. People who are having identity crises come to hear the preacher. They may not be sure who they are anymore or to whom they belong. They may have forgotten, or they may never have known. They may be crushed by God's silence towards the facts of their lives, or they may be ready to rebel against it. In these cases, the silence has done its work. People feel frail and tiny and are looking for a voice, a word of hope, a Light in the darkness!

Others come feeling pretty self-confident. They have done well. They live well. They are not particularly compassionate or interested in the plight of others. They are not worried about themselves. And they are not at all worried about God. So the preacher reminds them. He interprets the silence and brings it to the forefront of their lives so that they begin to think about God like Moses did—and Job and St. Paul and Martin Luther. *What is the preaching of the Law but a proper interpretation of the silent God?*

It confirms our suspicions that God is angry over our sin, that we do not and cannot measure up, and that there is no escape from His clutches. What does the Holy Spirit do as His alien work through the preaching of the Law but terrify the heart so that it feels frail and tiny and dependent? *"God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble"* (Ps. 138:6; Is. 66:2; James 5:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). Only then, because God wills it, can a person become a *tsaddik*.

A *tsaddik*! A righteous person! A person who is right with God and whose relationship with the Creator is as the Creator intended. This is what the preacher aims at. He is not so interested in *talking about* Christ

tions from the Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000).

⁵ Already here, then, the two dimensions of the Christian life are implied. First, the righteousness of faith gives us our identity as God's children. But also, if in Christ we really are the *righteousness of God* as Jeremiah suggests, it is also our mission to embody and manifest that righteousness in our lives—in the way that we serve those around us. In a parallel way, Christ calls Himself the "light of the world" in fulfillment of the Servant described in Isaiah 49:6. But Paul also asserts that he and fellow Christians fulfill that role as they bring the Gospel to the nations (Acts 13:47; cf. Acts 1:8). In Christ we are "the servant" who is the light to the nations. In Christ we are "the righteousness of God" who reflect Christ's righteousness in the world. So the Lord also says to us, "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Is. 42:6-7).

or explaining “how things work,” but in *giving the blessing of Christ*, the good Word of their righteousness, to people who feel the burden of a silent Father. That is, in proclaiming the blessings of Christ, the preacher acts on God’s behalf to bring His Word to people, giving them a new identity, a new name: “the Lord is our Righteousness.”

Through the preacher’s proclamation of forgiveness, people are actually killed and raised up. The old is stripped away to make place for the new. Hearts are strengthened and renewed! And the Word served by the pastor does that killing and raising over and over again in the Christian life, in the Absolution and in the Sacraments. Preaching the Word is a joyous occasion like the birth of a baby, like a resurrection, because Christ brings life in the midst of death. If preaching brings the resurrection of dead hearts, how can you have too much resurrection going on? Against the crushing silence of God, which screams anger and death, the preacher brings a Word from the heart of God, which announces righteousness and life to sinners living in God’s silence.

Because of this understanding about the function of the preached Word, Luther describes preaching in sacramental terms. To preach the Word is to do the same thing as the Sacraments—to give Christ and all His blessings.⁶ Luther had in mind that a sermon was “a manifestation of the incarnate Word from the written Word by the spoken word.”⁷ The preacher bears witness to the Word as flesh in the word as written by the word as spoken. Preaching is the Word of God in the same way as the word spoken at creation.⁸

Preaching and the Righteousness of Works

From Identity to Practice

But this is not where all talk about being a *tsaddik* ends for a Christian! Christians are not invited to sit back and wait passively for the parousia. Reb Saunders was not interested in that either. When Daniel finally told his father that he was not going to take his father’s place as the leader of the Hasidic community, Reb Saunders let him go. He knew that Daniel had the heart of a *tsaddik*. It was his identity. But he still wondered if Daniel would *live as a tsaddik*. Would his activities show others what he was at heart? Daniel told his father that he would live as a *tsaddik*. And Daniel knew how to do that because throughout his life his father had instructed him in the teachings of the rabbis. In fact, the only time he *did*

⁶ G. Forde, “Preaching the Sacraments,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 64 (1984): 3-4.

⁷ A quote by Bernard Lord Manning cited by David Steinmetz, “Luther, the Reformers, and the Bible,” in *Living Traditions of the Bible*, ed. James E. Bowley (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

talk to Daniel was when they were studying the Talmud together, when the father was teaching the son what it meant to live as a *tsaddik*.

As Christians—people who have been given righteous hearts—we also live out our lives in this world, not separate from it. Christians fill various roles in society, and we use our God-given reason, gifts, and abilities like everyone else. In carrying out our tasks as human beings, are we going to live as the righteous people we are? That is, are our works going to reflect our identity? In the joy that Christians have over the gift of righteousness that is ours in Christ, we do not forget about the other side of being a *tsaddik* in this world—the life of righteousness lived for our neighbors and the rest of humanity. The first kind of righteousness—the passive righteousness that is a free gift—does not abolish the second kind of righteousness—the good works we pursue in our daily lives.⁹

The two dimensions of righteousness are, of course, connected. They together make up what it means to be a human creature as the Creator intended. Robert Kolb well describes the Christian life in its two dimensions:

Human life is cruciform—eyes lifted to focus on God, feet firmly planted on his earth, arms stretched out in mutual support of those God has placed around us. Having the focus of our lives directed toward Christ inevitably extends our arms to our neighbors. Human beings are truly human, that is, right or functioning properly (according to the design for human righteousness that God made) when their identity does express itself in the activities that flow from that identity.¹⁰

As Luther described it, this active righteousness is the fruit and consequence of the first type (Gal. 5:16-26).¹¹ God gives us a new name and reconciles us to Himself. We actively respond to His gift of righteousness by putting away the works of the flesh and actively producing the fruit of the Spirit: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit,” Paul writes (Gal. 5:25).

The Preacher's Task

Faith sends Christians back out into the world to serve their neighbors. The apostle James stresses that this is an important aspect of our Christian life:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can such faith save him? If a brother or sister is

⁹ Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 433.

¹⁰ Kolb, “Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 455-456.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 458.

poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

Christians are responsible to live a life that reflects God's love to other humans and also to the rest of God's creation. God also assumes that Christians are to serve God according to His will and not their own. Therefore, Lutherans teach good works and how they are to be done. That means that part of the preacher's job is to *instruct* his people as to what the life of a Christian *tsaddik* "looks like" and to *exhort* them to live as the righteous people God has called them to be.

This task is as important as it has ever been because the culture in which we live is also forming our thinking about morality and the lifestyle choices that we make. What do our children learn everyday? The culture instructs them at every turn that moral principle, the difference between right and wrong, is not a given. It makes one lesson particularly clear: we are all free to "make up our own minds" as we go along and as our feelings dictate.

As Lesslie Newbigin explains, in our modern culture the world of beliefs and values, the world of "right and wrong" is a private world, a world of personal choice. When it comes to morality—questions of right and wrong—our culture teaches that we are free to follow our own preference. Personal conduct and lifestyle, as long as we are not hurting anyone else, ought not to be judged. There are no "right" or "wrong" styles of life.¹²

Because Christians still have sinful hearts, those who come to hear a word from the preacher come, to one degree or another, with these assumptions in mind. They may be confused or unclear about certain issues. They may be facing certain decisions and are relying only on their feelings to guide them. They may have problems in their relationships but do not know what they ought to do. They may have no clue about how to live as a Christian, a *tsaddik*, in the morally ambiguous world. *There is one thing the preacher knows: his people are being shaped every day in ways that negate the "way of the Lord," that is, in ways that deny what it means to be human as God intended.*

The Christian faith has a very different view of what it means to be truly human: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). At creation, God designed us with our nature to do the works that He foreordained for us to do. He "hard-wired" us to know the difference between right and wrong. He gave His human creatures a "moral compass" to guide them in their behavior and in the treatment of their

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 19.

fellow humans. This is part of what it means to be a human being, to live as a *tsaddik* in God's creation.

Our sin, of course, has clouded our judgment and dulled our conscience. Even though Christ has delivered us from sin and death, sin remains in us, which keeps tempting us to think that we are our own gods and can make our own lifestyle decisions as we see fit. In effect, our sinful nature is always tempting us to deny our status as human creatures created by God. As a result, we often do what we know we should not, what we know is wrong (Rom. 7:7-25).¹³ To get rid of the guilt that comes from going against what we are and what we know, we try denial or self-justification or rationalization. Ultimately, every strategy fails.

Only the gift of the righteousness of Christ can take that guilt away. Through that Word, the Holy Spirit comes to us and dwells in us. He assures us that through Christ we are forgiven (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 5:18; John 14:17). Because of Him we are new creatures—a new creation. Old guilt is gone; new freedom has come!

But as Paul says, we are created in Christ Jesus *for good works!* That means that in Christ, God (re)creates us to be the creatures He originally intended, and that is how He wants us to live in this world. We have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him who created Him (Col. 3:10).

This new reality, the reality of the Holy Spirit and Christ in us (Gal. 2:20), means that in our heart of hearts, as forgiven sinners, we also love the will of God for our lives. Now the “real I” wants to obey God's will even while the sinful flesh wars against it and works disobedience (Rom. 7:7-25). God's will for human life, the good works that He foreordained for us, and the sense of morality which He built into us, are something that we want to follow because our mind and heart have been transformed. We have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). Therefore, while the Law continues to accuse and threaten us because of our sinful conscience, the Law does not *only* threaten and accuse our conscience. It is also a delight because it shows us what God wants us to do, and it echoes the delight of our new hearts!

The Law as we read it in the Bible is a reflection or elaboration of the will of God for His creatures. It is in our hearts because God created us that way and recreated us that way in Christ. In the Bible this includes the Ten Commandments, which are a summary of God's will for our lives, but it also includes such material as Proverbs, which has the Ten Commandments as its foundation and builds upon them so that we learn how to live wisely (as true *tsaddikim*). It also includes the paraenetic material in the Epistles where Paul gives instruction in many areas of human life on the basis of the moral teaching God has put in us all (Rom. 1-2, for example).

¹³ J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2003), 66-67. For a succinct treatment of natural law see also C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality* (New York: McMillan, 1947).

This is why the psalmist can say that God's people love the Law that God has given and meditate on it (Ps. 1). We meditate on it because we know that it is the *truth* (Ps. 119:151)! It is good and praised by God who promises certain blessings to those who keep it.¹⁴

Therefore, the preacher not only delivers to people the righteousness of Christ, so that by His Word they become *tsaddikim*, he also urges, beseeches, and instructs them in how to live as *tsaddikim* in this world.¹⁵ The preacher operates in both dimensions. People need and want to hear how Christians are supposed to live. And because their sinful flesh still wars inside of them, even though they have a new identity in Christ, they need both negative and positive exhortation to do so.¹⁶ It is so easy to forget, and people hear so much "advice" from other sources. They want help with difficult decisions. Now more than ever Christians need to hear what it means to have a Christian marriage, how a Christian husband and wife are supposed to treat each other, and how they are not. They need reminding of how Christians ought to conduct themselves in their places of work and in their relationships with their neighbors, reminding of what is actually "right and wrong," "good and bad," and the list goes on.

In this horizontal dimension—the righteousness of works—the pastor must be aware that he is operating mainly within the sphere of "Law." In his speaking within this dimension, the Law will function to accuse (*lex semper accusat*), but it will also instruct, urge, encourage, and so on, according to the condition of the hearer's heart and the Spirit's work. This is what the Law does. This dimension has its place in the formation of a *tsaddik* and in proper relationship to the vertical dimension. "[The two dimensions] come into conflict only when the righteousness of works becomes the basis for our righteousness before God or when the righteousness of faith is used to eliminate the need to do good works."¹⁷

¹⁴ "Moreover, we willingly give this righteousness of reason the praises it deserves, for our corrupt nature has no greater good than this, as Aristotle rightly said: 'Neither the evening star nor the morning star is more beautiful than righteousness.' God even honors it with temporal rewards. Still, it ought not be praised at Christ's expense" (Ap IV, 24).

¹⁵ P. Raabe and J. Voelz, "Why Exhort a Good Tree?: Anthropology and Paraenesis in Romans," *Concordia Journal* 22 (1996), 160, write about Paul's exhortation: "Fifth, it should be noted that Paul's intent in paraenesis is not to accuse the Romans as sinners. He does that in chapters 1-3, where the tone is notably different. Paraenesis uses the language of urging, appealing, and beseeching rather than that of harsh demanding and condemning. Can Christians as sinners still hear paraenesis as accusatory? No doubt they can. If the addressees were not paying taxes, presumably they would have felt accused by 13:6-7. But there were probably other hearers in the church in Rome who saw the rightness of Paul's appeal and gladly embraced it."

¹⁶ Many years ago, my father-in-law, who is a dedicated Christian businessman, lamented to me about the lack of this kind of speaking from the pulpit. He said, "Every once in a while I need to hear, 'Don't cheat on your taxes! That's wrong! Don't steal! Don't lie!'" and so on. Rightfully so, he sought that kind of guidance for daily living as a Christian.

¹⁷ Arand, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," 427.

When good works are kept in their proper relationship, a pastor will recognize that he is speaking to the conscience as well as the reason and intellect of his hearers to help them learn how God wants them to live. He wants to give appropriate direction for their footsteps in life's walk.

The pastor approaches this task, then, with the understanding that the written Law is a reflection of the natural law, which God put in the hearts of us all, and which is created anew in those in whom the Spirit lives. The pastor, then, in his preaching in this dimension, elaborates in various ways on the implications of God's instruction for the Christian life. He is interested in properly interpreting it and applying it in relevant and practical ways to a Christian's life. At times he will warn of the dangers of neglecting God's will for their lives. At other times he will positively encourage.¹⁸ He is interested in persuading his hearers to act in God-pleasing ways. For example, Paul talks about the roles of husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 (cf. Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7). Here he deals with family relationships, a topic that is the source of much confusion today, and also great relevance. What does Paul say about the relationship between husband and wife? As he reflects on the God-given institution of marriage, what guidance does he offer for families today? A pastor will seek out others who have thought through what Paul is saying and what other parts of Scripture say on this topic so that he can help his people to embody in their behavior what God intended for the male and female whom He created to be in partnership with each other in the first place. What does that "partnership" mean? What does it not mean? What should it look like? The material in Paul's epistle gives us the opportunity to approach this topic in a God-pleasing way.

In fact, the Epistles in general are the obvious texts for this kind of preaching. As others have pointed out, Paul bases his paraenesis on the Gospel promises. He grounds his exhortations on the work of Christ and on promises about the coming salvation that awaits God's people.¹⁹ At that time, the two kinds of righteousness will become "one" in our fully realized identity as God's creatures. In the meantime, it is clear that Paul is interested in both identity and performance.

Pastors might take advantage of this by leading their people through an Epistle as a sermon series. Following Paul's method, in this kind of expository preaching, he would be able to proclaim to people "the righteousness of faith" and give them the comfort of the Gospel. He could also speak of the implications of this for their lives, encouraging, warning, and instructing them to live as the people that they have been called out of darkness to be: God's *tsaddikim* in identity and practice.

¹⁸ Raabe, Voelz, "Why Exhort a Good Tree?," 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.