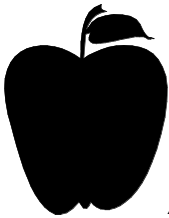


Sermon Manuscript



Apples of Gold:

Ancient Words, Timeless Meanings
A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver (Prov. 25:11).

Cornerstone Bible Church • May 10, 1998 • Dr. Doug McIntosh, Senior Pastor

I want to welcome all of you today, but especially those of you who are mothers. You may not know that Mother's Day is the third most celebrated holiday in the world. Only Christmas and Easter are more popular. Also, most people don't know why it is that Mother's Day is celebrated on the second Sunday in May.

This idea started in the heart of a woman named Anna Jarvis back near the turn of the century. Anna was one of 12 children and one of only four of them who lived to adulthood. After her mother's death in 1905, Miss Jarvis dedicated the rest of her life to carrying out her mother's wishes that a special day be established to honor all mothers. Anna Jarvis made speeches, wrote thousands of letters, traveled countless miles, and spent a fortune on the Mother's Day idea. Not too surprisingly, she found that the people who were most receptive were Christian believers.

Exactly ninety years ago, on May 10, 1908, she organized the first Mother's Day celebration at the Andrews Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia. The service included a statement of the fourfold purpose of Mother's Day: 1) to honor our mothers; 2) to bring families together; 3) to make us better children; and 4) to brighten the lives of good mothers. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the second Sunday in May (the Sunday closest to Miss Jarvis' mother's death) should be celebrated as Mother's Day.

On this second Sunday in May, we are currently engaged in a study of critical words of the Old Testament, and today we come to one that is directly related to the business of parenthood. The word for today is *heshbon*, the Hebrew word for "imputation." That's

not amputation, but imputation. We're going to read the passage where the word first occurs in Scripture (in its verb form), a place having a great deal to do with children.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 15:1-6

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

² But Abram said, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

³ Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." ⁵ Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

Today's Golden Apple: Heshbon ("Imputation")

The word that we are interested in is found in the last verse. It is translated "accounted." God imputed or accounted righteousness to Abram for one simple reason. Abram took Him at His word, and God accounted righteousness to him. That gets us quickly to the heart of...

The root idea of *heshbon*

Heshbon is an accounting term. It carries the idea of putting something on someone's account. It gives us a picture of God behaving as an accountant, putting information into His account-books. And exactly what kinds of things are entered on God's accounts? Does he keep track of stocks and bonds and mutual funds? No, his books reflect transcendent, eternally valuable things like righteousness.

We can certainly understand that. This passage assumes something which ought not to be overlooked; and that is that God keeps books on human beings. He not only knows what we do and how we act and think, he keeps a permanent record of it, and of His evaluation of it.

So how do we get righteousness entered on the books with our name on them? The same way Abraham did. We simply take God at His word. You might say that God spends a lot of time looking around at the world trying to find somebody who will believe Him when He speaks.

This notion becomes clearer as we consider...

The flavor of *heshbon*

Imputation is a wonderful notion, because it originates in the thinking of God. The word is very heavily flavored as a mental term, and with God the mind is much more than a place where things are sorted through. The mind of God is the place where all the greatest transformations take place. Before the world even existed, it existed in the mind of God. The Psalmist said, "He spoke, and it was done." Creation was merely the outworking of His thought.

Now when you and I think about something, it often has to do with solving a problem. We think, and we plan, and then, after we have decided what to do, we set out to put our plans in motion. But when we have what we think is a great idea, we are still often a long way from getting anything done. The reason, of course, is that so much of the time we lack the power to carry out our intentions.

One of the great reasons to have a Mother's Day is exemplified in a present I received from my mom several years ago at Christmas. She sent me a book entitled "Games for the Super-Intelligent." Only a mom would do something like that. Of course, I read through it and found I wasn't quite superintelligent enough to play the games that were described there, and now my mother's superintelligent son can't remember where he put the book!

Moms have great intentions, but a limited amount of power. With God that is never a problem. He never lacks the power. So, when He thinks of a plan and decides on a course of action, it is as good as done.

When it comes to imputation, God thought through the plan of salvation before He carried it out. That is why, in Revelation, Jesus Christ is pictured as the Lamb of God, "slain from before the foundation of the world." Did you ever stop to think what that means? You actually can time the death of Christ pretty closely according to history. The best evidence available at the moment says that it took place at 3:00 on the afternoon of April 3 in the year 33. But even though that was the time that He said, "It is finished," it was just as real in God's mind on the day the earth was created. Anything that is in the mind of God as a done deal is a done deal.

How Imputation Works

The problems it deals with

Imputation deals with two great barriers. The first is the kind of people we are by nature. We are flawed. Now we aren't that way because God made us that way, but because our first parents chose to become rebels. As a result, they passed on to us their own inclinations. That's one problem.

The second is the kind of people we are by choice. We are not only flawed people, we enjoy our flawedness. We persist in flawed behavior not just by nature, but because it suits our own preferences.

A teacher was drilling his young students on the Westminster Confession of Faith. The first question in the catechism is "What is the chief end of man?" The answer that goes with it is, "To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." One youngster seemed quite sure of himself as he anxiously waved his hand for recognition. When the teacher called his name he proudly blurted out, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and annoy Him forever!" He was closer to the truth than we care to admit.

But if a person ever sees that these problems are true, and recognizes himself to be a sinner, and simply puts his confidence in the finished work of Christ, God imputes righteousness to him, and then begins to help him overcome those flaws. But it all starts with hearing what God has to say in His Word and deciding to believe Him.

Now as it happened with Abraham, God spoke to him “in a vision.” He doesn’t speak to us in visions—at least he never has to me—today, but He still speaks through His written word. And God is still looking for people who will believe what He says.

The most important thing He has to say concerns His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom He sent into the world to die for the sins of the world. God said by that act: “Here is how much I hate sin, that I would subject My Son to a horrible death; and here is how much I love you, that I only ask that you believe what He did is enough to save you from your sins.” Abraham simply believed God, and it was imputed to Him for righteousness.

People struggle with this idea that believing God is all He asks for to impute righteousness. But if you will think about it, you will see why it’s so important. When you believe the word of someone, you express the strongest possible opinion about his character. This is illustrated in an episode from the life of David Livingstone.

Livingstone was one of the most famous men in the world in the nineteenth century. He had gone into central Africa with a threefold mission: he was to bring the gospel of Christ to the people there, he was to explore unmapped regions and find the sources of the Nile, and he was to advise the British government in their efforts to eradicate the slave trade. He accomplished all these things in some measure, and reports began to drift back home about all he had done; and those reports made him famous, even though his location in Africa kept his fame from his knowledge.

After he had been in Africa about 12 years, he had reason to travel from where he was, on the east side of Africa, over to the west coast through a part of that continent that no European had ever seen. There was no way he could do it on his own, so he went to a local chief and asked for a couple of dozen men of the tribe to go with him.

The chief was more than a little bit suspicious. The trip was dangerous and he’d learned about white men that they were not entirely trustworthy. Livingstone, sensing some of that feeling, made him a promise. “If you give me your sons, I promise to return with them, and to deliver them to their homes and their families. My life will be a pledge.”

Well, the chief agreed on that basis, and Livingstone set out. The journey was every bit as dangerous as he had anticipated. There was incredibly difficult terrain, there were hostile tribes, there were all kinds of predatory animals, and there was sickness. But finally, they made it to the west coast, and they stumbled into the port of Luanda, which had been their objective, only to be amazed to see a British warship anchored there. The ship had been sent for the specific purpose of finding Livingstone and bringing him back to England, on the orders of Queen Victoria.

The captain came to him and said, “Sir, Queen Victoria has sent me to urge you to return. All England is waiting to honor you.”

It must have been very tempting. And, when the Queen invites, that is a command in most cases. Then there was the thought of going home, and the thought of being honored, but Livingstone had made a promise. “Well,” they assured him, “the promise of a white man to an African doesn’t matter. And the Queen is more important than a chief.”

But Livingston was a person of character, and despite all the urgings of the naval officers who were there, he turned away from the port and headed back into the jungle. The round trip ended 2 1/2 years after he started, with him delivering all those people back. To honor a promise.

That was one reason why, when Livingston died, the Africans quickly returned his body for interment in Westminster Abbey, but they buried his heart in Africa. They were more than willing to listen to a man whose word was something they could trust.

When you believe somebody, you make a statement about his character. His character may be even better than you think; but at least you can take him to be a person of His Word. Faith is the most basic act of worship you can make.

But people have a tendency to argue the point. They aren't sure they like the idea that God imputes righteousness in response to believing Him. They want to write their own rules. They want to earn their way. They want to impress God; so they say, "I'd rather do it my way." That is not believing God, and He will not impute righteousness to people who refuse to believe Him.

On the other hand, He freely imputes righteousness to the one that simply hears what He says and then rests in it, assuming it to be true because of the character of the one who uttered it.

God in His goodness built a parallel situation into all of life, in that we grow up learning what it means to trust in the word of somebody right in our homes. In particular, we learn at our mother's knees what it means to believe that somebody loves us. So we are already familiar with the idea of trusting a worthy authority before we even reach the age of accountability.

So, when Scripture talks about Abram believing God, it isn't discussing something that we have absolutely no familiarity with.

But imputation has more than accounting in it, it also has love embedded in the idea. The reason God imputes righteousness is that it is the only way we will ever have it, because of our problems. And imputation is merely the beginning.

In effect, God determines early on that He is going to make something great out of those who will believe Him. He does this in spite of the fact that He knows our hearts don't contain very much that can be commended. I ran across this week something that might be called "The Creed of the Toddler" that explains what I mean. When we're toddlers, we may be cute—I know I was; my mother told me so—but to people around us our problems are pretty obvious. These are the nine points in the creed of the toddler:

1. If it's in my hand, it's mine.
2. If I can take it from you, it's mine.
3. If I had it a little while ago, it's mine.
4. If it's mine, it must never appear to be yours in any way.
5. If I'm doing or building something, all the pieces are mine.

6. If it looks just like mine, it's mine.
7. If I saw it first, it's mine.
8. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.
9. If it's broken, it's yours.

No one who has been a toddler or raised one will have any trouble recognizing the reality of that creed. Yet God gets beyond our incredible self-centeredness and waits for us to believe Him, and when we accept the fact that Christ died for us personally, He attributes righteousness to our account.

At first it would seem that merely attributing righteousness to us wouldn't do anything for us beyond changing the books of heaven, but it does. Imputation is not only important because it deals with fundamental problems, but also for...

The solutions it offers

The idea of seeing what somebody can become rather than what somebody is lies at the root of imputation. God looks at us for what we can be, and in that very act we find that we begin to change. Every human being needs two basic things: we need someone to believe in, and we need someone to believe in us.

That is why He established the home. That's where we get both. When we believe in our parents, we begin to change. But it also works the other way: when our parents believe in us, we begin to change. When teachers believe in us, we change.

Before you're tempted to say, "Not true," let me tell you about a classic study done by Harvard psychologist Robert Rosenthal. All the children in one San Francisco elementary school were given a standard I.Q. test at the beginning of the school year. The teachers were then told by the researchers that the test could predict which students could be expected to have a spurt of academic and intellectual improvement in the coming year.

By the way, none of it was true. The researchers had no basis whatsoever for thinking that. They told the teachers that, however, as part of the experiment.

Actually, the researchers had drawn names out of a hat and told the teachers that the names drawn were the names of children who had displayed a high potential for improvement this year. Some of them had been pretty ordinary up to now, the teachers were told, but great things were likely to happen this year. Naturally, the teachers thought they had been selected because of their test performance and began treating these children as special children.

And the most amazing thing happened—the spurters spurted! Overall, the "late blooming" kids averaged four more I.Q. points on the second test than the other group of students. However, the gains were most dramatic in the lowest grades. First graders whose teachers expected them to advance intellectually jumped 27 points, and the second grade spurters increased on the average 16 points more than their peers. One little Latin-American child who had been classified as mentally retarded with an I.Q. of 61,

scored 106 after his selection as a late bloomer. The fact that their teachers expected good from them led them to behave and perform that way.

Isn't that impressive! It reminds me of what Eliza Doolittle says in *My Fair Lady*, "The difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she is treated."

With us, it all starts with God's Word. It tells us that God loves us, and that He proved it by sending Christ to die for us. God wants us to believe that. It is His basic message to the world. He waits to impute righteousness to everyone who does believe it, because it is His Word, the Word of Someone who can be trusted. It is His supernatural Word, which transforms things because it is supernatural. It has a power all its own.

Few more dramatic examples of transforming power exist than an episode from the English revival. George Whitefield was the human instrument at the center of that eighteenth century awakening. Generally excluded from preaching in churches, he took to open fields and village commons, speaking in his colorful style to crowds often as large as twenty or thirty thousand people. His success in bringing the gospel to English towns and countryside provoked both envy from the clergy and hostility from many others.

One young group of detractors styled themselves the "Hell-Fire Club" and made it their business to ridicule Whitefield by holding their own "gospel meetings." On one occasion, a club member named Thorpe was giving his public imitation of Whitefield, complete with a gospel invitation as he had heard the great evangelist present it. In the middle of his oration Thorpe stopped, pierced to the heart with what he had been saying, and was converted on the spot.¹

It is His powerful Word. When we believe it, God imputes righteousness to us, and begins the wonderful process of spiritual transformation.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, General Editor, Moody Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 94-95.

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