

1 Peter 3:10-15

10 For, 'Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.

11 They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it.

12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?

14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.'

15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect

Matthew 5:13-16

13 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.

15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Word for the world: righteousness 1 Pet 3:12-15 Mt 5:13-16

I was thinking about the word righteousness and it's not really used in conversation. Although interestingly 'self-righteous' is much more common. And so how do you explain it beyond just saying 'goodness'? The oldest scripture we have says this *Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness*. Not an overdraft, a credit. Just for believing! Part of basic new testament teaching is that **no one** is good. What is righteousness, and why is it a word for the world? A rich man once asked Jesus 'good teacher, how do I get eternal life? Jesus said 'why do you call me good? Only God is good', then suggested he sold everything, gave it to the poor and followed him. But he just couldn't make that sacrifice.

No one is good enough. This is the New Testament teaching. **Nothing** we do can reconcile us to God, so if I try and say, in contrast to the people who, to me, are obviously bad, that I'm actually not that bad really. Or at the very least if I say I'm better than any criminal you might mention, I'm contradicting Jesus. Nobody qualifies for eternal life on the basis of their good deeds. Being a 'decent human being' doesn't really help. But still people of faith are accused of being self-righteous. That's quite a common phrase. People get all apologetic to me about their bad language when they discover I'm *married* to a vicar!

Because maybe they assume I'm going to judge them as inferior. And they think I'm good, and therefore assume I don't swear! Or they think that *I think* I'm good.

The followers of Jesus in the first century were outsiders, they were rebels who were persecuted and often died for their faith, like Jesus did, and this is who Peter's talking to in our first reading. Let's face it, if you *really* want to make Jesus your role model you aren't going to be popular with the establishment.

In 337AD the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christ on his deathbed, and Christianity was later adopted as the official religion of the Empire, and for many centuries it became accepted as the norm that people believed in God. Most art and music was inspired by faith. That was what was known as 'Christendom', a universal culture centred on Christ. It's been described as "the union between Christianity and secular power".

But the world has changed dramatically in the last 100 years. 'Christendom' has now ceased to exist, and followers of Jesus in the West have rapidly begun to return to the outsider status of the early believers, and will very likely begin to be persecuted as many of our brothers and sisters around the world already are. There is very little nominal religion any more, people have no reason to attend church, because they no longer feel duty bound to worship a God they don't believe in. The christian religion as it's perceived has been rejected by most people and generations have grown up who barely know who Jesus was.

There is some consensus that there probably is a God, but not on what God is like. Truth is what you personally believe. That's the main reason for the decline in church numbers. 'Sin' is not acknowledged. The word sin not relevant to most. People in public life deny everything and don't resign. Major heads of state lie and break the law quite openly without any comeback, and people are still keen to vote for them. There is a spiritual and moral vacuum in places of power and influence. So now, when we speak of righteousness we have to be clear what it means. For the church it means that we are **made right in the sight of God**, we are reconciled to Him by our faith in Jesus, and by our faith alone. Even though we have *all* in some way abandoned him by our actions. So the good news:
Rom 3:21-22 the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Goodness)
Paul is saying nothing we ever do will save us, it's purely by faith in Jesus that we're given the gift of eternal life. So we have to hold two seemingly opposing things in our heads at once
1. That good deeds don't make us right with God.
2. That God gives us the desire and the ability to *do good deeds in response to the fact* that he has reconciled us to Him and made us right with him through faith.
That changes things.

*Paul says: Rom 5 :5 ... God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been **given** to us.*

This is an open offer to the world to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's very presence within us. To accept that God is the source of all that is good, and the source of all love.

If you can grasp this fact then you can be reconciled to God (or made righteous, or whole, or complete) without having to *earn* salvation by joining a church and trying to be good. This is where sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses go so wrong, because they haven't understood the New Testament and still believe they have to knock on enough doors to get eternal life.

Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

That far back, we were told, all you have to do is just believe!

We don't *have* to go to church, but we do go, to thank God for his love and express our worship, and for no other reason.

Hopefully....

Jesus put it in a soundbite when he said:

I am the way, the truth and the life.

So He is the sole source of hope, because He is the Truth.

In the passage from the sermon on the mount, which we heard earlier, we are told by Jesus that we are to be, if we believe in Him, salt and light for the world.

Most simply, that we make a difference, that we are visible.

That we bring a different approach to everything.

One of sacrifice and unconditional love and support for others
One which prioritises peace and unity, not division and chaos.

We are salt for the earth not for ourselves

We are light for the world, not for ourselves.

We live by faith

We hold on to the hope of the whole world being made right with God not through their own effort, (because that's religion) but through faith in Jesus, so that each of us can say, why do you call me good? Only God is good.

Amen