

Examining the Concept of Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew

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Abstract: Matthew, the first gospel account recorded in the Bible is embedded with several terms and concepts; notable among which is ‘righteousness.’ The concept arguably forms the central significant theme of Matthew’s gospel. Though, righteousness here is seen in the ethical sense; Matthew refers to the proper behavioral norms and attitudes for his community, which connotes the quality of being morally correct and justifiable; therefore, Matthew made use of the term in a vital and significant manner understandable to his readers. On this note, Matthew’s style of presentation and expression of righteousness as a central significant theme of his account is examined and this in turn forms the theoretical framework of this paper.

Keywords: righteousness / *δικαιοσύνη*, Christ, Gospel, Matthew

INTRODUCTION

The gospel of Matthew presents a detailed synopsis of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In fact, Matthew largely recorded several teachings of Jesus (5:1-7:29; 10:5-42; 13:1-52; 18:1-35; 24:3-25:46) and often portrayed Him as the great teacher (8:19,; 17:24, 26:25, 10:24-25; 23:8; 26:18).

Righteousness – the Greek *δικαιοσύνη* – as a word is often seen in Jesus speech in contrary to the understanding of the Jewish leaders (Matt 5:6, 10; 6:1, 33). It is observed that the mention of *δικαιοσύνη* Matthew is affiliated to the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matt 5: 3-27). This premise delineates the fact that the term ‘righteousness’ though common is explicitly use in another dimension in Matthew. Consequently, this paper explores the concept of righteousness as used in the first gospel account with the aim of revealing a clear identity of “righteousness” as Matthew actually meant.

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THE CONTEXT OF MATTHEW

The author of Matthew is arguably Apostle Matthew (Lenski 1943); this explains his Judaism background in understanding the Christianity as deeply attached to Jewish tradition – Matt 1:2– 16, 1:18–19; 22–23; 2:6, 15, 17–18 (Toussaint 1980). Matthew views the Mosaic Law as that which expresses the divine will for human life; it is the pathway to *δικαιοσύνη* / righteousness. Thus, Matthew’s dimension and presentation of righteousness lurks in the background of this gospel. Though, there are arguments on the recipients of this account, the fact remains that there are quite much numbers of Jews as recipients of this gospel (Nickle 1993).

Although, the Greek culture is the first source for the consideration of Matthean structure; its plot logically unites action, thought and characters. Matthew is demonstrated to have been familiar with the geography of Israel (Matt 2:1, 23; 3:1, 4:14–1, 8:5); the location of Jesus’ teaching ‘the sermon on the mount’ is said to be a mountainside in Galilee (Matt 4:12-14; 23-25; 5:1), of which the identity of the ‘crowds’ can easily be assumed to be Jews, including his disciples. As a result, the research notes that the immediate context of the concerned texts in Matthew (3:15 and 5-7) reveals that the characters involved are Jews, (John the Baptist) including the chief priests, Pharisees and elders (Matt 21:23; 45).

Furthermore, the research notes that the scope of this discourse centers on the ‘sermon on the mount,’ since majority of the references to the word *δικαιοσύνη* is within its sphere; though there few others. In view of this, the research presents a clear detailed outline showing the portions in Matthew where the word is used. It is important to note that this outline is the bed-rock for the research analytical discourse which comes up in the succeeding part of the work.

THE STRUCTURAL OUTLINE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS IN MATTHEW

(Matt 3:13-17) *The Baptism of Jesus*; (Matt 5:6, 10, 12, 20; 6:1, 33) *The Sermon on the Mount*; (Matt 21:32) *The Authority of Jesus Questioned*

Righteousness / *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew is presented above more than in any other New Testament writings (Talbert 1992). Although, the settings and occasions with which Jesus uttered the word (*δικαιοσύνη*) seems different, the researcher sees the need to analyze the usage of the word side by side. The researcher also notes that the explanation of

δικαιοσύνη in just of one of the settings might affect the interpretation of the word in its central message of the account in question. Also, the neglect of any occurrence of the word in the account will betray the aim and purpose of this research.

In view of this, the outline emphasizes the systematic arrangement in a descending order; signifying the progression of the account of Matthew and the occurrence of *δικαιοσύνη* in its verses. The usage of *δικαιοσύνη* by Jesus in Matthew is not only in his teaching to the crowds and his disciples (although it is the majority); it occurs even with John the Baptist (Matt 3:13-17), the chief priests and the elders (Matt 21:23). It is noteworthy that the latter characters here are men of significance with high intellect and knowledge of the law in the Jewish setting.

RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

From the background check on the immediate contexts (which includes the characters and location) of the occasions with which the word *δικαιοσύνη* is mentioned; the researcher observes the need to explore the concept of righteousness in the Old Testament; since the listeners or hearers of Jesus' words are familiar with this term from the Jewish tradition.

The research observed that righteousness is not a strange terminology in the Jewish tradition. It is seen as an immutable path of life and the essence of ethics and faith in the Bible (Ishmi 1998). According to Bultmann, righteousness is the prerequisite for obtaining salvation from God. The Old Testament exhibits the terminologies of righteousness, such as *Tsedeq* (קִדְשׁ), *Tsedaqah* (הַקְדִּישׁ) and *Misphat* (משפט) (Brown 1952). In view of this, Winfield explains that the root קדש - “ts-d-q” connects with the concept of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘normativity’ throughout the northwest Semitic language group (Winfield 1995, 25). In the Hebrew Bible the word *Tsedaqah* - הַקְדִּישׁ - occurs several times (Ps. 9:8-9; 89:15; 97:2; Isa 16:5; 32:1). “Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness (הַקְדִּישׁ) and justice (משפט) are the foundation of his throne” (Ps 97:2).

As a result, קִדְשׁ refers to the principle of righteousness that presents the holy standard of providence towards humanity and the universe. God's governing actions over the universe coincide with the divine righteousness ((Davidson 1904).

Significantly, the divine righteousness – קִדְשׁ - equates to His holiness; meanwhile, Jer (31:23) identifies the habitation of

righteousness (*Tsedeq*)' with the mountain of holiness (*qodesh*) - שִׁטְרָה. God dwells in unapproachable holiness (1 Tim 6:6) and His own being is Holiness itself beyond comparison - Isa 40:25 (Brown et.al. 1952). In view of this, the researcher notes that righteousness in the Old Testament is not an abstract notion but rather consist the constant doing of what is just and right in all relationships.

ANALYSIS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IN MATTHEAN GOSPEL

The discoveries in the preceding section of the work affirms that the concept of *δικαιοσύνη* cannot be strange to Jesus' audience; thus, the research properly examine the usage of the words in each setting bearing in mind the stated structural outline of this research.

The Baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13-17)

The first place where the word *δικαιοσύνη* (a derivate of *δικαιος* – meaning “right” or “just”) appears is in the baptism of Jesus before the commencement of his earthly ministry (Pryzybylski 1980). The immediate context here reveals Jesus' introduction into the way of public life by emerging from John's ministry – “the forerunner” (Luz 2007). The crowds and the religious group would represent common Judaism, the pre-rabbinic legalism, and the religious political elements of the society. This social mix provides a cross section of Matthew's Judaism, the primary audience for both John and Jesus. This in turns forms the historic-perspective of the text (Hagner 1993).

Although, the parallels of this account in other gospels did not record Jesus' statement where *δικαιοσύνη* sets in unlike Matthew (Mk 1:9-11, Lk 3:21-22, and Jhn 1:31-34); the research argues that this does not discredit Matthew's account but provides the reader with additional explanation of what John meant in the other gospel accounts (Mk 1:7-8, Lk 3:16-17, Jhn 1:24-26); the research notes that usage of *τότε* in the text controls the proximity of Mathew to other parallel accounts.

Some scholars view the baptism of Jesus as a part of the process of taking up the sinful burdens of humanity (Clarke 2003). Baptism was a common rite among Jews of the first and second century. If someone from a Gentile background were to become a full child of Israel, he had to accomplish three tasks: (a) circumcision, if male, (b) self-baptism by immersion, in the presence of three witnesses, (c) sacrifice in the Temple However, to mainline Judaism, John's baptism of repentance would have been humiliating for a natural child of Abraham to undergo a Gentile ritual (Exod. 19:10; Lev. 15; Isa. 1:16).

It should be noted that all other baptisms in first century Jewish culture were self-administered. Only John's called for him to administer this rite. ἄφες ἄρτι, οὕτως γὰρ πρέπον ἐστὶν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην. τότε ἀφίησιν αὐτόν. Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do so too fulfill all righteousness.' then John consented.

Here, δικαιοσύνη / righteousness is a direct object of πληρόω – fulfillment (Munari 75). This in turn gives the context to the affirmation in vs. 17 – βασιλεία. In the same vein, the response of John - τότε ἀφίησιν αὐτόν is noteworthy. If baptism is the center of this pericope; then, how does the physical action of baptism fulfill righteousness? On this note, Davies and Allison (1988) list what they consider to be the seven most plausible answers regarding how Jesus' baptism fulfills all righteousness:

1. It was the Messiah's task to bring the total will of God.
2. Jesus' baptism illustrated Jesus' death.
3. It was an example to Christians.
4. All divine ordinances, of which baptism is one, must be fulfilled.
5. Jesus validated John's ministry.
6. It was a right action intended to remove offense.
7. Jesus was fulfilling prophecy.

The research views Davies and Allison's opinion to be viable and logical since they fall in the established analytical historic-perspective premise of the text; though the focus of the text is on Jesus; John the Baptist is significant in this fulfillment of what is legitimate. Above all, the research explicitly agrees with Connor's opinion that the concepts of righteousness and fulfillment as seen in Matt 3:15 though complicated but, in reality, the simple understanding is to do the will of God as demonstrated in Christ's obedience (Connors 2010). The meaning of δικαιοσύνη in the text analyzed here has a direct bearing on Matt 5:17-18 which is inherent in the next discourse.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:6, 10, 12, 20; 6:1, 33)

The Sermon on the Mount forms one of the five teaching blocks in the Gospel (Mt 5-7; 10, 13, 18; 24-25), each closed by a similar refrain 'and when Jesus had finished'. In these teachings, Jesus instructs his disciples about attitudes and practices that distinguish them from other people and exhorts them to persevere faithfully (Carter 2000). The Sermon on the Mount shapes and strengthens the community's identity and lifestyle, which differs from the dominant society. The community

is reminded of the importance of their interaction with God, one another and the surrounding society (Green 2001).

Some scholars suggest that the Sermon on the Mount be analyzed in terms of the parts of classical rhetorical speech as Matt 5:3–16, 5:17–20, 5:21–7:21, 7:13–27 (Mack 1990; Kennedy 1980). In view of this, the research observes that *δικαιοσύνη* appears at important and strategic positions in the account. Often times, scholars have misconceived the usage of *δικαιοσύνη* here; the research argues it is connecting and indicating of one another (Green 2001). The research notes that the beatitudes sketch the attitudes that the Matthean Christians should manifest and allude to the suffering that they endured.

“...hunger and thirst for *δικαιοσύνη*” (Matt 5:6). The disappearance of “*καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην*” – “thirst after righteousness” (in Luke 6:21a) has brought up arguments on the redaction claims against Matthew. Never the less, in Jewish literature the combination between ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ is quite often used in a metaphorical sense (Ps. 42:2); the argument notes the flair of awkwardness of the Greek grammatical construction and the break in the concurrent alliteration flow. The *καὶ διψῶντες* breaks the *π*-alliteration in the first four beatitudes: *πτωχοὶ, πενθοῦντες, πραεῖς* and *πεινῶντες* (Davies and Allison 2004); the research notes that this premise is not enough to disintegrate thirst from the text.

Here, Jesus speaks of an intense longing for righteousness in terms of hunger - *πεινῶντες* and thirst - *διψῶντες*; these participles imply depicts *δικαιοσύνη* as something that is continually desired. *χορτασθήσονται* is God’s act while *πεινῶντες* and *διψῶντες* are the responsibilities of men; their *δικαιοσύνη* is not independent. The research argues that this gives a clear picture of Matthew’s community as that which is in an expectant state of God’s final vindication while living a righteous life in his current transforming reign (Davies and Allison 451).

“...Persecuted for the sake of *δικαιοσύνη* (Mt 5:10). There is no parallel account in the synoptic unlike the previous text; the research notes its connection with 1st Pet 3:14. (Hagner 1993). Here, *διώκω* – ‘persecution’, which precede *δικαιοσύνη* - is a familiar term (Mt 5:10, 11, 12, 44, Mt 10:23; 23:34), all referring to the persecution of Jesus’ followers. The verb *διώκω* is also mostly used in the New Testament for the infliction of suffering on people who believe and act in a manner that the establishment finds strange. Here, *ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ* is

significant because it informs the disciples and readers of the fact that Jewish is more than an ordinary Jewish teacher who will instructs their students to suffer for God not for them like Jesus stated here (Carter 2000, 136).

In addition, *διώκω* is just a retaliation of the wicked and unrighteous people to *δικαιοσύνη*. In view of this, *δικαιοσύνη* in this text is the ‘just way of living’ that challenges unjust society and brings *διώκω* as consequence. The research notes a new understanding of *δικαιοσύνη* in the introduction of *διώκω*; the righteous living of Jesus’ disciples will always be incongruent with the unjust norms of the society. Matthew explains to his community why they suffer persecution; He affirms that their beliefs are correct and encourages their loyalty to Jesus even among the Jewish oppressors.

Matthew 5:20 - *ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἢ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν* - ‘for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven’ - *οὐρανῶν*. *τῶν οὐρανῶν* a genitive masculine plural noun which signifies the possession of the word by the subject of the text. In the context of Jesus’ statement, the research argues that ‘the kingdom of God’ - *βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν* – here is understood as an abode; the hope of those who live a life of *δικαιοσύνην*. *πανὰ* plus the dative and the present tense *ἔπεθε* shows Matthew’s conception of the heavens as a place where wages for good deeds are stored up and kept “with” the Father to be repaid at the *parousia* (16:27).

This statement is indicative of the previous observation of Jesus’ status quo above a mere Jewish teacher. In Matt 5:20, Jesus explains *δικαιοσύνη* as the outcome of living according to the meaning and intention of the Law; thus; the Jewish officials will be if they actually live in view of this. Meanwhile, their obvious present state with the law is worth portraying a contrast of what Jesus is teaching his audience; then, He used them as an example. Matt 6:1 speaks in details.

Furthermore, the research argued that Jesus continued the discourse he began in 5:20 explaining that the acts of *δικαιοσύνη* - not to be seen by people. Notably, Jesus stated emphatically the reward for *δικαιοσύνη* as entrance into the kingdom of heaven - *βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν*. Thus, Matthew refers to the righteousness in verse 5:20 warning against the pitfall of insincere righteousness.

Subsequent to Jesus' explanation in 6:1 is the emphasis on specific activities by which *δικαιοσύνη* is described in doing charity (*ὅταν οὖν ποιῆς ἐλεημοσύνην*, Mt 6:2–4), praying (*καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε*, 6:5–15) and fasting (*ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε*, 6:16–18). These three themes under the discourse of *δικαιοσύνην* are said to be central themes of the Jewish piety in the Second Temple (Morris 1992). In the Jewish setting, arguably everybody would have accepted that it was a religious duty to help the poor (Deut 15:7), but Jesus points out that it can be done in an objectionable manner unlike hypocrites; making everyone see what they have done.

Matthew's Jesus warns against the public pretence of hypocrites when praying. Righteous praying should be done in private and not for public show. Seeking public approval for praying implies that prayer ceases to express love for God but serves the one praying (Matt 6:5-14). The word used - *βατταλογέω* means 'blabbing'. The hypocritical manner of the Pharisees on fasting is also addressed. The research notes that a man becomes a hypocrite when he uses these for personal gain and reputation. In view of this, the research affirms that *δικαιοσύνη* of deeds in Matt 6:1 does not lie only in what is done but in how it is done.

In Matt 6:33, the disciples are taught to "seek" - *ζητεῖτε* the kingdom and its *δικαιοσύνην*. "ζητεῖτε, a present indicative verb connotes an explicit continuous act. Therefore, *δικαιοσύνην* should be sought continuously. The research notes that Jesus' statement here recapitulates the teachings in 'Sermon on the Mount.' In contrast to Matt 5:7, several scholars argue that the usage of *βασιλείαν* in this text depicts 'rule' rather than 'realm.' However, the research notes that though there seems to be a distinction in the usage of *βασιλείαν* in the two contexts (with the absence of *οὐρανῶν* in 6:33); 'rule' and 'realm' as *βασιλείαν* depicts is congruent and synthetically explainable. This is from the fact that the "rule" and "realm" (*βασιλείαν*) of God's *δικαιοσύνην*. The implication of *ζητετε βασιλείαν καὶ δικαιοσύνην* is that justice is served and God's rule is manifested.

The researcher notes that this is the last occurrence of the word in the Sermon on the Mount. The statement of Jesus here is preceded with the discourse on selfish quest for material goods (vs. 19-31). In view of this, the disciples should share the means of living and trust God to provide in their needs and in anticipation of His final rule, continually strive to establish God's rule in the society.

The Authority of Jesus Questioned (Matt 21:32)

This text reveals Jesus (like other analyzed texts) as the subject of the text; speaking to the people, the chief priest and elders (Matt 21:23). Christ began with the word ‘ἀμῆν’ – ‘truly’ meaning the “truth”. Obviously, Jesus unambiguously assert the rejection of the hypocritical Jewish leaders and welcome sinners and the common people (by implication the Gentiles) with the emphasis on the word “believe” – faith in Christ. This text reveals sharply Jesus as the *δικαιοσύνη* of the father. In the same vein, the research notes that Jesus used such a startling statement to the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day (Matt. 5:20; 8:11-12; 19:24-25, 30; 20:16) and they know are aware.

“...for John came to you in the way of righteousness...” – this phrase reveals that Jesus and John represented two distinct-connected approaches. John came in the tradition of the elders and was rejected (Matt. 21:24-26), Jesus came as a friend of sinners and was accused of being a wine-bibber (Matt. 11:19; Lk 7:34). The logical and valid similarity is that both of them were rejected (Utley 1977). In this text, Jesus simultaneously stated the two approaches emphasizing the supremacy of the latter to the former. The research notes that the term “way” mentioned in this text was an Old Testament idiom of a lifestyle of faith (i.e., Exod. 32:8; Deut. 8:6; 10:12; 11:22, 28). It was the first title of the church, “The Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22). In the light of this, *δικαιοσύνη* in this text refers to a right way shown by John the Baptist and affirmed by Christ. The research notes that Christ answered the question of the Pharisees by authenticating “the way” John proclaimed as truth and foundational to His ministry.

CONCLUSION

Righteousness is a common concept that permeates the whole account of Matthew more than other synoptics. From the analysis of the *δικαιοσύνη* in Matthew; the researcher discovers true *δικαιοσύνη* as qualitative rather than quantitative. Also, it is contrasted with the elaborate and superficial type of righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 6:1). In addition, the research observes that each of the analyzed texts is obviously intended to illustrate what exceeding righteousness means in practice, with emphasis not only the “actions performed” but “how the actions are done.” In fact, the research discovers righteousness to be a continuous practical side of one’s religion. All examined text in Matthew as seen in this research deals

with examples of conflict and broken relationships and instructions of its restoration.

In view of this, the research concludes that righteousness / *δικαιοσύνη* in Matt 3:15 (which is the first appearance of the word) refers to Jesus as unique to fulfill what have been prophesized. Thus, *δικαιοσύνη* connotes a concrete act of doing the will of God, which is right and legitimate; this should characterize the Christian community. Matt 5:20 and 7:21 reveals that the greater righteousness required to enter the kingdom of heaven corresponds with the will of the heavenly father revealed in the teachings of Christ (5:20). The understanding of righteousness as the will of God connects the parallel texts in Matthew. In view of this, righteousness to be sought is both divine and human because it comes from God but must be in men.

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