
Righteousness and Relationship

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

*(an excerpt from Sam Candler's sermon of 9 February, 2014,
[Salt, Light, and Righteousness](#) and Leonard Cohen! preached at Trinity Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio)*

, One of the tasks I have taken on, in my teaching and preaching, is the rescue and salvaging of several classical Christian words. I am trying to save some of our Christian vocabulary, words with old meanings that seem irrelevant to many in our world today. The word "salvation" is itself actually one of them. So is "creed." Even "sin," I think, needs to be re-defined.

Today, the one I want to mention is "righteousness." The word "righteous," needs to be rescued. For so many people, it means following and obeying every religious law that was ever devised—probably not a pleasant task, and certainly impossible.

A few years ago, the word was almost rescued, when it was hip to call someone "righteous." "Wow, that's righteous, dude!"

I have come to believe that, usually, when the Bible uses the word "righteousness," in both the Old and New Testaments, the Bible is really talking about "relationship" and "right relationship." People who are described as righteous are in relationship. The verse from Genesis gets repeated often: "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

How did belief make Abraham righteous? By simply putting him in relationship with God. It's as simple as that. Faith puts people in relationship, and relationships save us. Relationships save us. Community saves us!

So, I have taken on a new practice. Whenever I read the word "righteous" in scripture, I substitute the word "relationship." "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as relationship." Or, from Habakkuk 2:4, "Those in relationship live by faith."

But the substitution really works in today's verse from Matthew. Jesus talks about what it means to fulfill the law and the prophets. "Don't think that I have come to abolish them," he says; they will be fulfilled! But they will be fulfilled by living in relationship with God.

Read Matthew 5:20 this way: "Unless your 'relationship' exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That's because the kingdom of heaven—the community of heaven—is about relationship, right relationship!

The best poets and preachers among us today are those who tell us something about relationship. Good relationships save us. Godly relationships give us life. They give us love.

That's why I like Leonard Cohen dancing me to the end of love. A dance is a relationship, with give and take, grace and movement. Constant adjustment. Being unafraid of cracks and imperfections. Letting another person see your wounds and taste your salt. Belonging to church, that community which is a laboratory for brokenness. Daring to sing a broken Hallelujah.

Your broken life is how the light gets in. Our broken life together, in relationship, is the community of heaven.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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