Meditations on a Slippery Citation:
Paul’s Use of Psalm 112:9
in 2 Corinthians 9:9

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Abstract — A topic of scholarly debate in recent decades among interpreters of Paul’s letters has been the degree of interpretive competence and effort that Paul expected of his readers in understanding his letters and (in particular) the meaning of his scriptural citations and allusions.

In this article, I begin with some brief reflections on 2 Cor 1:13–14 as an indication of Paul’s communicative intentions and expectations in the letter and on the kind of exegesis required for theological interpretation that accords with those intentions and expectations. I then examine Paul’s citation of Ps 112:9 in 2 Cor 9:9 as a case study in the possibilities for theological interpretation of an exegesis that reads Paul’s letters as communications intended for patient, communal, and intertextual interpretation. The focus of my inquiry is the ambiguous reference of the “he” in the scriptural citation and its rhetorical function within 2 Cor 8–9 and the larger context of canonical 2 Corinthians. I conclude that the surface ambiguity of Paul’s language functions within an attentive reading community to provoke an enriched understanding of the relationship between divine and human grace and righteousness, which arises out of the social and intertextual process of resolving the ambiguity. The implications of this reading for theological interpretation of 2 Corinthians include a strengthening of the argument that Paul’s description in 2 Cor 5:21 of believers “becom[ing] the righteousness of God” has in view not merely a transformation of status but a transformation of character and conduct.

Key Words — interpretation, ambiguity, 2 Corinthians, Psalms, grace, righteousness, divine, human, intertextuality

The Hope of Understanding

The opening paragraphs of 2 Corinthians contain a claim and an expression of hope that, taken together, offer an important window into
Paul’s communicative intentions in his dealings with the Corinthians.¹ The claim comes in 1:13a, following Paul’s “boast” in the preceding verse that his dealings with the Corinthians have been conducted “with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God.”² In support of that boast, Paul follows it with the claim that his aim in this letter (and, if the present tense of γράφομεν is read gnomically, in all his communication with the Corinthians) has been not to deceive or equivocate but to make himself understood: “For we write you nothing other than what you can read [ἀναγινώσκετε] and also understand [ἐπιγινώσκετε].”

Everything about the context of the letter suggests that Paul’s claim be understood as an earnest and emphatic one. The broader cultural situation was one in which serious thinkers regarded ambiguity as a vice of style to be avoided and deplored intentional ambiguity as a sophistic deception; trustworthy speakers and writers cultivated the grammatical and rhetorical virtue of clarity.³ The more immediate context of Paul’s dealings with the Corinthians was one in which Paul was responding to criticisms of obscurity and insincerity in his communications, and asserting a sharp contrast between the transparency of his own dealings and the fleshly sophistry (σοφία σαρκική) of his opponents. Paul’s claim in v. 13a is hardly an incidental, off-handed, or formulaic assertion.

But the goal of mutual understanding is not always one that is easily or instantaneously accomplished, and the burden of attaining it does not rest on the shoulders of the writer or speaker alone.⁴ Paul’s painful awareness

¹. For the purposes of this article I will be assuming the unity of the letter in its canonical, 13-chapter form. For a defense of this view, see the arguments in Paul Barnett, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 15–25; David R. Hall, The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence (JSNTSup 251; London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 95–112; Murray J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 8–53; Frank J. Matera, II Corinthians: A Commentary (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 24–32; Troels Engberg-Pedersen, “The Unity of 2 Corinthians as Reflected in the Account of Paul’s and Titus’ Travels between Ephesus, Macedonia and Corinth” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, November 2011; available on-line: https://perswww.kuleuven.be/-u0007546/sbl/).

². Biblical quotations, except where otherwise indicated, are from the NRSV. In this instance, my translation departs from the NRSV to read “holiness” [ἁγιότητι] rather than “frankness” [ἅπλότητι] as original (cf. the text-critical arguments in Harris, Second Corinthians, 183, in favor of this reading). If ἅπλότητι is judged to be original the substance of my argument is not affected.


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that this is the case is poignantly evidenced in the hope that he expresses immediately after the claim of v. 13a: “I hope you will understand in full [ἔως τέλους]—as you have already understood us in part [ἀπὸ μέρους]—that on the day of the Lord Jesus we are your boast even as you are our boast.”

Paul’s expression of optimism should not be read as a flat, rhetorically inert statement of fact; as Ivar Vegge has argued, it functions (at least in part) as an appeal to the Corinthians to act in such a way as to realize his hopes. He is confident that they already understand ἀπὸ μέρους, but eager that they receive this letter with the openness and attentiveness that is required if they are to understand both his letter and himself ἔως τέλους. Paul writes his letter with the explicit intention that it be understood, but makes it clear at the outset that the full accomplishment of that goal will require some time, effort, and willingness on the part of the Corinthians—doubly so in a context within which the meanings of words and actions have become the subject of an interpretive contest between Paul and “those who boast in outward appearance” (5:12).

Just how much effort Paul expected of his readers is a moot point among interpreters, and a particular focus of scholarly debate in recent decades has been the degree of interpretive competence and effort that Paul expected of his readers in understanding the meaning of his scriptural citations and allusions. While many contributors to the discussion proceed on the basis of the tacit assumption that Paul’s letters were written to be received as disposable resources for one-off rhetorical performance, some have pointed out the likelihood that Paul expected more than this: “The interpretation of 2 Cor 1:13 is somewhat less pessimistic than Mitchell’s, in which v. 13a is read as “an ironic authorial exclamation of exhaustion at the complexities of the hermeneutical tasks via a claim that is both naïve and emphatically disproved in the texts themselves” (p. 53).”

5. My translation, altering the nRSV’s “until the end” to “in full” to reflect the contrast between understanding ἔως τέλους and understanding ἀπὸ μέρους.


8. It is worth noting in this context that, in the judgment of Aristotle at least, there was a legitimate role for intentional ambiguity “in competitive argument and in meeting ambiguity”—in other words, in situations not unlike the one Paul faces in his dealings with the Corinthians, in which the relationships between words and their meanings have already been clouded by the sophistic rhetoric of opponents (On Sophistical Refutations, 176a.24, cited in Mark D. Given, *Paul’s True Rhetoric: Ambiguity, Cunning, and Deception in Greece and Rome* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001], 25). In the case study below (Paul’s use of the citation from Ps 112:9 in 2 Cor 9:9), my argument will not be that Paul’s rhetoric trades on a hidden ambiguity intended to be left unrecognized and unresolved but that his rhetoric employs a surface ambiguity that takes some time and effort for the listeners to resolve.

first recipients of a Pauline letter were probably no better able than we to digest it at one reading and would have wished to retain it for subsequent consideration. Paul himself may well have hoped or expected that his letters would not only be heard but also studied.10 If this is the case (and the hypothesis is supported both by the internal evidence of Paul’s letters and by their early reception-history)11 then there are obvious implications for interpretation. As Ross Wagner concludes, writing in relation to Paul’s letter to the Romans, “to confine one’s interpretive interests to what listeners might have picked up on the first hearing of Romans is to seriously underestimate the actual impact of this letter on a community that took its message seriously.”12

The reference to a “community” of readers is not incidental or insignificant. Paul is writing to a community whose main experience of his letter would have been an oral one (as evidenced indirectly, even within these verses, by his use of ἀναγινώσκω, a verb most commonly used to refer to public reading, out loud). For most of Paul’s readers, access to the LXX original of any scriptural citations and allusions would have been made possible principally through the collective reading, discussion, and liturgical use of manuscripts of Scripture or Scripture-anthologies that were owned collectively or by a wealthy few.13 It is reasonable to assume that the process of “read[ing] and understand[ing]” that Paul speaks of in 1:13 would have involved the collaboration and conversation (including, at times, vigorous debate) of a whole community of readers.

Theological interpretation of Paul’s letters that accords with the communicative intentions of the apostle thus requires a particular kind of exegesis—the kind of exegesis that reads Paul’s letters patiently, communally, and intertextually.14 Exegesis of this sort pays attention not only to the

12. Ibid., 39.
14. This list is not, of course, intended as an exhaustive list of the qualities that Paul implies he is looking for in a reading of his letters. It could also be argued, for example (on the basis of these verses and a string of others within the letter), that Paul is hoping for a reading that is simultaneously contextual and theological. A reading of this sort would take care to locate the letters within a historical context, not divorcing the literary task of understanding Paul’s letters from the historical task of understanding Paul himself and the circumstances within which he writes. At the same time, it would also take seriously Paul’s claim to speak and write within that context as one “established” and “commissioned” by God (1:21–22) and his desire that his letters and his life be interpreted as an expression “not [of] earthly wisdom but [of] the grace of God” (1:12). Similarly—to name another constellation of readerly virtues relevant
meaning that can be grabbed at first reading from the surface of the text, but also to the meaning that emerges over time out of communal reflection on the text, read within the intertextual matrix which Paul evokes in his scriptural citations and allusions.

A SLIPPERY CITATION: PSALM 112:9 IN 2 CORINTHIANS 9:9

An intriguing case study in the interpretive possibilities of such an approach to Paul’s use of Scripture can be found in his citation of Ps 112:9 [LXX 111:9] in 2 Cor 9:9.

In the context of Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians for the fulfillment of their earlier promises to participate in the collection that he is organizing for the saints in Jerusalem, Paul reminds the Corinthians (in 9:8) that “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work,” a reminder that is followed immediately by a citation from Ps 112:9: “As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’”

Several aspects of the way Paul uses the citation are obvious and unproblematic. The wording, for example, corresponds exactly with extant LXX versions of the verse. Unlike the more subtle scriptural echoes and allusions in the surrounding verses (LXX Prov 22:8 in v. 7; Isa 55:10 in v. 10a; LXX Hos 10:12 in v. 10b), this citation is preceded by an introductory formula (“as it is written. . .”) that marks it out as an explicit scriptural quotation intended to be immediately registered as such by all Paul’s listeners, and points to its function in offering support of some kind to the claim that Paul has made in the previous verse. But the exact nature of the support that the citation in v. 9 is intended to offer to the claim in v. 8, and the identity of the “he” in the verse that Paul cites from the psalm, are not so immediately obvious. 15

The fact that God is the subject of the sentences in the immediately preceding and following verses, the close parallel between the actions described in v. 9a (“he scatters abroad, he gives to the poor”) and the actions of God described in v. 10a (“He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food”), and the ease with which the words of v. 10b (“his righteousness...

endures forever”) could be said of God (and are, in fact, in Ps 111:3 [LXX 110:3]), all combine to convey the impression at first reading that the intended referent of the “he” in the citation in v. 9 is God.

This reading of the verse is argued for by Paul Barnett and assumed as almost self-evident by Hans Dieter Betz. 16 It is also proposed by Christopher Stanley as the most likely sense in which the “minimal audience” (who knew very little of the OT Scriptures) and the “competent audience” (who had a basic knowledge of the Scriptures but no immediate access to the original context of the citation) would have understood Paul’s words. Most commentators, however, point to the fact that the “he” in the original context of the psalm is not God but the generous-handed Israelite introduced in the psalm’s opening verse, 17 and argue for a reading of v. 9 in which Paul preserves the original sense of the citation and applies its description of the ideal Israelite to “the representative Corinthian contributor.” 18

The argument in favor of this reading does not rest entirely on the assumption that Paul expected his readers to take into account the original context of the psalm in interpreting the citation. Within the immediate context of the citation in 2 Cor 9:6–10, Harris points out: (1) the fact that the subject of the immediately preceding clause (v. 8b) is “you [Corinthians]”—a second personal plural that provides an obvious antecedent for the individualizing third person singulars of v. 9; (2) the similarity between the “scatter[ing]” depicted in v. 9 and the generous “sow[ing]” urged in v. 6; and (3) the fact that the recipients of the generous giving depicted in v. 9 are not “the generous” but “the poor”—in context, a description more obviously applicable to the Jerusalem Christians (as the beneficiaries of the Corinthians’ generosity) than to the Corinthians (as the beneficiaries of the generosity of God). 19

17. Though note the (somewhat strained) argument in David E. Garland, 2 Corinthians (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 410, that in both the psalm and Paul’s citation of it the “righteousness” that endures forever is God’s righteousness.
19. Harris, Second Corinthians, 640.
Although the arguments in favor of the second reading are, to my mind, decisive, the fact remains that it is by no means the obvious interpretation at first reading. If this was the intended meaning in Paul’s mind as he wrote the letter, it is unlikely to have been the meaning that was immediately grasped by all of the members of the Corinthian church as they heard the letter read in the assembly.

What are we to make of the surface ambiguity of the verse? It is possible, of course, that Paul had not noticed the difficulty that his use of the citation would pose for his readers, and that he gave little thought to the question of whether the Corinthians would be able to access its meaning at first reading. But if we assume that Paul was aware of the potential surface ambiguity of his words, what might have been his rhetorical purpose in leaving it to be resolved by the hearers of the letter? Several clues in the original context of the citation and its new context within 2 Cor 8–9 combine to suggest one possible rhetorical function of the citation’s slipperiness and the social process that is required to grasp it.

**Twin Psalms**

The ambiguity of the language of the citation of the psalm is not generated solely by its relocation to a new context; it is also, to no small extent, a reflection of the dynamics of its original function in the psalm from which it was taken. Commentators on Ps 112 agree that it is not intended to be read as a stand-alone text; the close parallels of form and content between Ps 111 and Ps 112 demand that the two be read together—the former as a depiction of the praiseworthy works of the Lord, which are to be “studied by all who delight in them” (111:2), and the latter as a parallel depiction of the blessed generosity of those who “fear the Lord and greatly delights in his commandments” (112:1).²⁰

When the affirmation of Ps 111:3 (“His [i.e., the Lord’s] righteousness endures forever”) recurs twice in the following psalm (Ps 112:3, 9), with the referent of “his” transferred from the Lord to the person who fears him, it is obvious that a point is being made. Artur Weiser comments: “The fact that words similar to what has been asserted of God in Psalm 111.3 are said of the godly man in v. 3 indicates that his blessedness in the last analysis

²⁰ The two psalms are given the parallel titles “God at work” and “Godliness at work” (respectively) in both Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC 21; Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 88–98; and Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III, IV and V of the Psalms* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1975), 396–400. Strictly, as John Goldingay argues (*Psalms*, vol. 3: *Psalms 90–150* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 308–14), Ps 112 is not so much the “twin” of Ps 111 as its nephew or niece, written by a different author but with conscious dependence on the earlier psalm as a literary model and a thematic source.
means that he partakes of the nature of God.” 21 Leslie Allen expresses a similar thought and develops it in the light of the further similarities between the language of Ps 111:4 (“the Lord is gracious and merciful [ἐλεήμων καὶ οἰκτίρμων]”) and Ps 112:4 (“they are gracious, merciful and righteous”), and between Ps 111:5 (“he provides food for those who fear him”) and Ps 112:5 (“it is well with those who deal generously”): “The credal statement of 111:4, so prized especially in post-exilic times, must find a moral echo in the life of the Yahwist . . . The God who gives (111:5) expects the recipient to be godlike in his giving.” 22

GRACE, DIVINE AND HUMAN

Within 2 Cor 8–9 a similar phenomenon can be found in the interplay between the different senses and referents of χάρις, a word that is thematic for the whole section (note the inclusio created by its use in 8:1 and 9:14–15) and used variously to refer to God’s gift in “granting the Macedonian believers the desire and ability to contribute worthily to the collection” (8:1), 23 the “privilege” of participation (8:4), the “generous undertaking” of the Corinthians’ gift (8:6–7, 19), the “generous act” of the Lord Jesus in impoverishing himself for the enrichment of his people (8:9), the “every blessing” that God is able to provide in abundance to enable the generosity of the Corinthians (9:8), and the “thanks” that is offered to God for the various ways in which all of these things testify to his overflowing kindness (8:16; 9:15). 24 Much of this semantic slipperiness can of course be explained by the variety of interconnected ways in which the language of χάρις is used in the transactions of Greco-Roman patronage and reciprocity. But Paul’s usage does not simply replicate the patterns of Greco-Roman conventions unaltered. James Harrison’s observations are worth quoting at length:

What would readers of the honorific inscriptions have made of Paul’s use of χάρις (and cognates) in 2 Cor 8–9? I suspect that initially they would have been surprised by the profuse occurrence of χάρις in Paul’s epistles and by the apostle’s consistent use of the singular . . . Moreover, Paul employs the language of abundance in conjunction with χάρις over and against the inscriptive language of commensu-

22. Allen, Psalms 101–150, 97. The idea that the character of Israel’s God is to be reflected in the life of his people is, of course, not confined to Pss 111–12, but is a pervasive OT motif. See especially Christopher J. H. Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God (2nd ed.; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 36–42.
23. Harris, Second Corinthians, 560.
rability. . . Also surprising is the “three dimensional’ understanding of grace sponsored by Paul. Whereas the honorific inscriptions, like Paul, register the disposal and return of χάριτες by benefactors and the beneficiaries, the transaction is an entirely civic affair and is very seldom related to the divine realm. Furthermore, on these rare occasions, the gods are invariably placed under counter-obligation by the cultic piety of the benefactor or community. The Pauline understanding of a unilateral display of divine grace that motivates and empowers human beneficence—along with its corresponding return of gratitude—is conspicuously absent from the inscriptions and represents something novel in the Graeco-Roman context. 25

Within the context of that striking reframing of the interrelationship between divine and human χάρις, the citation from Ps 112:9 in 2 Cor 9:9 provides an occasion for communal reflection on the correspondences and connections between the extravagant, unilateral divine kindness that is praised in Ps. 111 and the abundant human generosity that is commended in Ps. 112. Such reflection would provide a powerful scriptural reinforcement for Paul’s urgings to the Corinthians to display a kind of “grace” that is not merely a contribution to the tit-for-tat of reciprocal human gifts and honors, but a participation in and experience of the overflowing generosity of God. 26

The Corinthians are being invited not just to imitate God’s dynamic of grace toward the world but to embody it, to continue and extend it in their own giving to meet the needs of others. Indeed, so deeply entwined is their giving with the divine gift that the recipients will recognize within it “the surpassing grace of God that he has given you” (9:14) and will thus direct their thanks (εὐχαριστία; not accidentally a cognate term) not to the Corinthian donors but to God (9:11–13). 27

Righteousness, Divine and Human

The theme of the citation’s immediate context in 2 Cor 8–9 is grace—the divine generosity that calls for, enables, and is manifest in the generosity Paul is asking for from the Corinthians. But the discussion of grace within these chapters should not be read in isolation from the themes and concerns of the letter as a whole. The language of δικαιοσύνη in the second line of the verse Paul cites from the psalm is a reminder of the related theme of righteousness, which is particularly important in the larger context of

the whole canonical letter and in relation to the polemical, apologetic, and conciliatory concerns that are most evident in chs. 1–7 and chs. 10–13.

A key element of the polemical and apologetic context of 2 Corinthians is a contest between two competing ministries—that of Paul and his co-workers and that of the “false apostles” who have become influential in Corinth—each of which claims to be a “ministry of righteousness.” According to Paul, the new covenant ministry for which he has been made competent by God is a διακονία τῆς δικαιοσύνης (3:9), and his opponents are ministers of Satan who disguise themselves as διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης (11:15).

The presence of the language of δικαιοσύνη in these polemical contexts does not demand the conclusion that Paul’s opponents are “judaising Jews” or that Paul’s contest with them is, in essence, a dispute over whose gospel gives the better account of how a person attains the verdict of divine justification. Paul’s language in 11:4 is strikingly similar to his language in the opening paragraphs of Galatians—clearly, in his mind, the Corinthians’ attachment to the message of the super-apostles involves a flirtation with “another Jesus . . . a different spirit . . . a different gospel.” But his criticism of the super-apostles and their gospel is not confined to the question of whether it does the job of justifying those who believe it; in 12:19–21, when he reaches the end of his argument with the super-apostles and insists that his aim in the exercise was not merely to defend himself but to build up the Corinthians, the urgent motive that he identifies as the driver of this polemic-for-upbuilding’s-sake is not his concern for the Corinthians’ assurance of divine justification, but his fear that old sins of “quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder” will have continued unchecked under the super-apostles’ influence. If there is a “righteousness” that is in view here as having been undermined by the ministry of the super-apostles, it would appear from the evidence

28. A conclusion along these lines was famously asserted in C. K. Barrett, “Paul’s Opponents in II Corinthians,” NTS 17 (1971): 233–54 (see p. 251).

29. The contrast in 3:9 between the ministry of the old covenant as ἡ διακονία τῆς κατακρίσεως and the ministry of the new covenant as ἡ διακονία τῆς δικαιοσύνης offers some support to the decision of the nrsv translators to render the latter as “the ministry of justification,” but the fact that the verb δικαιόω is nowhere to be found within 2 Corinthians, whereas the noun δικαιοσύνη occurs seven times, suggests that other possible meanings should at least be considered. Most English translations (including the esv, rsv, kJV, and nIV) translate δικαιοσύνη in 3:9 as “righteousness” and leave open the question of the sense in which Paul is using the word in that verse—a better decision in my view. Furthermore, the emphasis on the transformative work of the Spirit in the preceding and following context within ch. 3 suggests that even if “justification” is the sense intended in 3:9, it is a justification that is to be understood in close connection with the lived righteousness that is enabled by the Spirit’s work. (Compare Rom 8:1–4, where the forensic verdict implied by οὐδὲν . . . κατάκριμα in v. 1, made possible by the condemnation of sin in the death of Christ [vv. 2–3], is directed toward the purpose that the δικαίωμα of the law be fulfilled in the transformed life of those who walk by the Spirit.)
of these verses to be one that consists in (or at least includes) the present transformation of their ethical conduct by the work of the Spirit.\(^{30}\)

In the case of 2 Cor 9:9–10, the δικαιοσύνη spoken of is most unlikely to be the verdict of justification, the status of having been justified or the imputed righteousness that provides the basis for that verdict. If (as I have argued above) the intended referent of the “righteousness” in v. 9 is a righteousness that belongs to the Corinthians, then the context would suggest that its meaning (like the meaning of “your righteousness” in the following verse) has to do with their generous participation in the collection Paul has organized. The shape of the argument in vv. 9–15 suggests that what Paul has in mind here by the “righteousness” of the Corinthians can be roughly identified with what he describes in v. 11 as “your great generosity” and in v. 13 as “your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and . . . the generosity of your sharing with [the saints].” The claim in v. 9 that this righteousness “endures forever” is most likely—in the light of the emphatic πᾶσαν χάριν ... ἐν παντὶ πάντοτε πᾶσαν αὐταρκείαν ἐχοντες ... πᾶν ἔργον ἄγαθον of v. 8 (“every blessing . . . by always having enough of everything . . . every good work”)—intended as an assurance that the generosity of the righteous person depicted in the psalm “will remain a way of life, not an isolated or irregular action, because God constantly supplies him with the resources to give.”\(^{31}\) Like the righteous person of the psalm, the Corinthian giver “will never be moved” (Ps 112:6).\(^{32}\)

This much is relatively obvious and uncontroversial. What is intriguing is the way in which this active, philanthropic righteousness of the Corinthians is spoken of by Paul (as I have argued above) in language that could so easily be mistaken for a statement about the righteousness of God. By indirectly drawing attention to the identical statements that are made in two adjacent psalms concerning, respectively, the righteousness of Israel’s God and the righteousness of the one who fears him, Paul provides a vital clue to how divine and human righteousness are related to one another within his thinking (and how he wishes them to be related to one another within the thinking of his readers).

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30. This is, of course, also in view in Galatians—Paul is certainly alarmed at the implications that the Galatians’ quest for justification by the law have for their standing in Christ (e.g., 5:4), but this concern is not disconnected from the worries that he has about the potential of a false gospel to impede the ongoing work of the Spirit in reshaping their character and conduct—because of the incursion of the agitators, Paul is “again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (4:19), and alarmed lest the Galatians succumb to the desires of the flesh and “become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another” (5:26).


32. The emphasis in vv. 11–12 on thanksgiving and doxology as the consequence of the Corinthians’ anticipated generosity may also suggest an additional sense in which their righteousness will “endure forever,” similar to the promise of the psalm that the righteous will be “remembered” forever (Ps 112:6) and that “their horn will be exalted in honor” (Ps 112:9).
If we are to ask the question “How does the righteousness of God become the righteousness of the believer?” the answer that 2 Cor 9:9–10 (read in intertextual relationship with Pss 111–112) would seem to imply is: “By imitation and participation.” Those who fear the Lord, delighting in his works and in his commandments, experience the righteousness of God as its beneficiaries and participate in its overflow to others as they emulate and enact it in their own conduct.33 This may not be the only way in which Paul would have answered the question, or the total answer that it should be given in Christian theological formulations, but it is an important and imaginatively powerful contribution that these verses (along with the twin psalms that they pull into the conversation) make to the answering of it.

This is surely one of the best clues that we have in attempting to understand what Paul has in mind in the much-discussed and frequently debated reference in 5:21 to believers “becom[ing] the righteousness of God” in Christ. Those who argue that Paul is speaking here of a forensic righteousness granted to believers by imputation or incorporation have in their favor the image of “the judgment seat of Christ” (5:10) that has already been evoked earlier in the chapter, the language of “not counting” (μὴ λογιζόμενος) in v. 19, and the fact that the divine purpose expressed in v. 21b (“so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”) is one that requires the sin-bearing death spoken of in v. 21a (“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin”) for it to be accomplished. The idea of righteousness being “reckoned” to a person as a gift is certainly a Pauline idea (cf. Rom 4:6, 11), as is the idea that a person can possess a righteousness that is not his or her own, but comes from God (cf. Rom 10:3–4; Phil 3:9). As others have pointed out, however,34 there is something about the lan-

33. This sort of understanding of divine and human righteousness, associated with practices of generous benefaction and images of the harvest and distribution of grain, would have found reinforcement from a very different quarter for early readers of 2 Corinthians. As Frank Thielman has recently pointed out (in a paper focusing on Paul’s reference to the δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in Rom 1:17), Alexandrian coinage minted in A.D. 56–57, within a year or two of 2 Corinthians, depicts the traditional figure of personified Aequitas, with the outstretched balance familiar from the representations of Aequitas on Roman coinage, labeled in Greek as ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ. “In light of the association of this coinage with the Egyptian grain supply, it seems likely that Nero wanted these coins to communicate to his subjects that he would distribute grain from Alexandria with equity” (“God’s Righteousness as God’s Fairness in Romans 1:17: An Ancient Perspective on a Significant Phrase,” JETS 54 [2011]: 35–48 [quoting p. 42]). This iconic representation of δικαιοσύνη (especially for those who connected it with the image of the cornucopia traditionally placed in Aequitas’s other hand in the Roman coinage) would have increased the likelihood that early readers of 2 Corinthians would have associated the δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ not only with the iustitia of an upright judge, but also with the even-handed generosity of a benefactor.

guage of “becoming” the divine righteousness that seems to hint at more
than that, especially when it is read in connection with the other ἵνα
clause a few verses earlier (v. 15b), in which the purpose of Christ’s death for “those
who live” is said to be not merely the transformation of their status but the
transformation of their lives—“that those who live might no longer live for
themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.” “If anyone is in
Christ,” Paul declares in 5:17 (alluding to the vision in Isa 65 of a reordered
world in which Jerusalem can become a dwelling-place of righteousness),
“there is a new creation.” In the immediately preceding chapters, too, there
are powerful and evocative references to believers “seeing the glory of the
Lord as though reflected in a mirror” and thus “being transformed into the
same image” (3:18), and to the apostles “being given up to death for Jesus’
sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (4:11),
which offer encouragement to this line of thought.

A strong argument can be made for the case that, although Paul’s un-
derstanding of what is involved in believers “becoming the righteousness of
God” may presuppose a crediting of an alien righteousness to them on the
basis of the obedience of Christ, his focus here is on the lived righteous-
ness that participates in and extends the generous, just, salvation-creating
activity of God in the world. Those interpreters who have argued for this
understanding of what is meant in 5:21 have made surprisingly little use
of 2 Cor 9:9 in supporting their argument.35 But if my argument above is
correct, then what Paul does in 9:9, although by no means identical with

“‘So That in Him We Might Become the Righteousness of God’ (2 Cor 5:21): Some Theo-
logical Reflections on the Church Becoming Justice,” Ex Auditu 22 (2006): 58–80; Edith M.
Humphrey, “Manifest in the Body: Deeds, Sin, Righteousness and Glory” (paper presented
at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Francisco, November 2011;

35. Taking the four recent contributions to the discussion cited above as a representative
sample, Hooker makes a fleeting reference to 2 Cor 9:9–10 but assumes that the righteousness
referred to in v. 9 is unambiguously “God’s righteousness,” significantly understating “the link
between God’s righteousness and that of Christians” that she finds in the verses (“Righteous-
ness of God,” 374); Grieb, similarly, devotes a paragraph to 2 Cor 9:9, but assumes that the
righteousness in view in both Ps 112:9 and 2 Cor 9:9 is God’s righteousness (“Righteous-
ness of God,” 70); Humphrey, because her focus is explicitly on 2 Cor 3:1–7:4, does not refer to
9:9–10 at all (“Manifest in the Body”); and Gorman offers the brief observation that “Paul
wants the Corinthians . . . [to share in] the righteousness of God, summarized in 9:9–10. Paul
wants . . . their justification to be expressed in a ‘harvest of [their] justice’ (9:10)—which is
ultimately the justice of God (9:9)” (“Justification and Justice,” 38). N.T. Wright too (in his
frequently-cited essay on 2 Cor 5:21, which argues that the “we” in v. 21b—and by implication
the “our” in v. 21a—does not expand its scope to embrace all believers in Christ, but maintains
the narrower reference that it has had to Paul and his fellow-apostles in the preceding verses,
and that the “righteousness of God,” which they become, is his covenant-faithfulness), makes
no reference at all to 2 Cor 9:9–10 (“On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians
5:21,” in Pauline Theology, vol. 2: 1 and 2 Corinthians [ed. David M. Hay; Minneapolis: Augsburg
Fortress, 1993], 200–208).
what he is doing in 5:21 (on any interpretation of that verse), is certainly consistent with an interpretation that reads 5:21 as intending a reference to believers' imitative participation in God's active righteousness, and offers one of the strongest supports for it.

The Long Way Around

In a communication designed for immediate comprehension by a single reader at first reading, the best route to understanding is the shortest one. But if the kind of reading desired and anticipated is the patient, communal, and inter-textual reading that (as I have argued above) Paul hoped his letters to the Corinthians would receive, then the route to understanding may be a more indirect one, and the twists and turns of the journey an enrichment rather than an obstacle to the success of the communication. Paul's slippery citation of Scripture in 2 Cor 9:9 is a revealing example of how this can be the case. By making the citation's meaning elusive at first reading, while at the same time singling it out among the echoes and modified citations that surround it as a direct quotation from Scripture, Paul achieves the effect of drawing an attentive reading community into a transformative intertextual meditation on themes that are at the heart of the letter. Readers who misinterpret the citation of the psalm at first reading, or are puzzled by its ambiguity, and come to Paul's desired understanding the long way round (via the discovery that what is said of the Lord in Ps 111 can be said of the one who fears him in Ps 112) have not only been reassured that God will provide for the enduring generosity of his people; they have also been provoked to discuss and ponder the relationship between divine and human grace and righteousness, and encouraged to reframe their understandings of benefaction and righteousness within the larger vision offered by those two psalms, viewed from the vantage point of their fulfillment in Christ.

The yield of these verses for theological interpretation is a rich contribution to our understanding of the grace and righteousness of God, and their implications for the shape of Christian existence. Although these verses in themselves are hardly a systematic formulation of the doctrines of grace and righteousness, those who construct such formulations would do well to read and ponder them.

The wider implications of this case study for the task of theological interpretation of Scripture are also worth underlining. Those (myself included) who speak about the “clarity” of Scripture as a vehicle for divine communication are reminded by texts such as this one that the kind of clarity Scripture exhibits is not the clarity of total, invisible transparency. Against the docetic expectation that every text of Scripture ought to act like a pane of invisible, colorless glass through which the divinely intended
meaning can be effortlessly and immediately perceived by the rightly disposed reader, such texts offer an implicit reminder of the humanity—the plural humanity—of Scripture’s authorship. When the plural humanity of Scripture’s authorship is understood not as an inconvenience or an embarrassment but as an integral dimension of the divine economy, the elusive reference and complex intertextuality of a text like 2 Cor 9:9 can be welcomed as vital dimensions of the text’s communicative power. Just as the grace and righteousness of God (according to Paul’s claim within 2 Cor 8–9) manifest themselves on earth within the interactions of human persons and communities, so the word of God reverberates on earth through the polyphonic music of multiple human authors and speakers, and is best heard within the context of a patient, mutually attentive, interpretive community.  

36. In line with that claim, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the conversations and collaborations that stand behind this article, as concrete and local instances of the kind of “interpretive community” I have in mind. Three particular contributions stand out in my memory: the first, a passing comment made by my friend and pastor, Tim Blencowe, in a sermon on 2 Cor 9 that first drew my attention to the complex intertextuality of v. 9 and its implications for our understanding of Christian generosity; the second, the interest and input of the students in my 2011 MA class on 2 Corinthians, to whom I presented an early version of this article; and the third, the gracious encouragement and constructive critique of my colleague, Andrew Sloane, who read his way through two successive drafts and offered incisive comments on both.