

Lesson 74: Chapter 11: Paragraphs 3-4: Justification: Part 2

OUTLINE

The how
The why
The when

INTRODUCTION

Luther was terrified of the judgement of God. John Staupitz, the vicar-general of the monastery gave Luther the job of lecturing the Bible as a way to find peace. However, Luther's study of the psalms and Romans only made matters worse. He kept coming across this phrase and idea of the righteousness of God. It was his enemy for he was so sinful. Then Luther had his 'tower' experience.

"I had greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression 'the righteousness of God', because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous...Night and day I pondered until...I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, He justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole Scripture took on a new meaning, whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven."¹

Luther's understanding of a gift, of an alien righteousness, from God, by faith, is the teaching that shaped the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. This is the great doctrine that sets the sinner free. There is no greater joy and peace and hope that we can have than when we truly understand that we are saved not by our good works, but by His; not by our obedience but by His; not by us earning righteousness but by Him freely giving it to us; not by us working for it but by receiving faith. Every day we feel our sins so deeply; we feel our inability to stop sinning, to render even one good deed, that our every best deed is tainted and falls short of the glory of God, and that we can not remove the guilt for even one sin; and then we here the good news that God justifies the ungodly, by faith and not by works, because of what He has done and not because of what we do. This is the great doctrine that we have been exploring in the 1689 chapter 11. we have covered paragraphs 1 and 2 where we looked at the nature, the ground and the instrument of justification. We continue today with paragraphs 3 and 4 and here we will be looking at the how, the why and the when of justification.

The how

'Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are justified; and did, by the sacrifice of himself in the blood of his cross,

¹ John Stott, The Message of Romans, (BST), (Leicester, England, IVP:1994), p21

undergoing in their stead the penalty due unto them, make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in their behalf.' How is a sinner justified? The confession points us to the Bible's answer—the work of Christ. In particular it points to two aspects of Christ's work, His obedience and His death. The obedience of Christ is spoken of in verses like Rom. 5:19, 'For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.' Because God has made Christ to be a legal/federal/covenant head who is a representative who acts on our behalf, His actions directly impact upon those whom He represents, namely His elect. The confession spells out the two aspects of Christ's representative obedience, His active and passive obedience in those two words; 'obedience' representing his active obedience; and 'death' representing His passive obedience. You will remember that being under a CoW Christ as the Second Adam fulfilled all the positive requirements of God's law offering a perfect loving obedience to all of God's law on our behalf; and secondly, because we have incurred a sin debt we cannot pay, His death pays for the wages of our sin.

The confession uses the word 'debt' to describe our lack before God's law. We lacked a positive righteousness. It is right that we be holy as God is holy and that we, who are made in His image walk in His ways—but we lacked this positive righteousness. And, we had incurred an unrepayable debt by the countless sins we committed against God's law. We fell short of God's glory and incurred a debt by our lack of goodness and fullness of sins. But Christ, by His active and passive obedience fully satisfied our debt.

In particular the confession opens up Christ's passive obedience using key ideas. Christ was a sacrifice in the blood of the cross; that He was punished in our stead; and that He made a complete satisfaction. How does a criminal before God have their sins paid for? Here is how Christ has done it. Here we have the doctrine of penal referring to legal; substitutionary referring to Christ standing in our stead; atonement referring to the complete satisfaction that results in our reconciliation with God. There are 3 basic theories of the atonement of Christ. There is what is called the Christus Victor model, at its worst this has been represented by the ransom theory where Jesus is paid as a ransom to the devil to pay for our sin; or is the bait on a hook that the devil takes through deceit and is overcome. The Bible clearly teaches that the work of Christ results in a victory over Satan and the principalities, but the main focus of the cross is on our sin problem before a holy God. Secondly there is the moral government theory, at its worst the cross is seen as a mere deterrent to warn of the consequences of sin, at its best the cross is a sacrifice to pay for sin but lacks being seen as specifically paying for the sins of the elect. The third view and the view of the confession is penal substitutionary atonement. This view sees Christ in a covenantal role representing a specific people; and in a legal role as He dies to make payment for our sins against God's law putting in the foreground God's justice and the need for sins to be paid for in order to be forgiven. Today many reject penal substitutionary atonement because the idea that God is a judge, that sin must be paid for, and the necessity of viewing Christ's death as a payment for sin violates modern sensibilities. Some have tried to frame this view as a cosmic child abuse where an angry father punishes a loving son, but this is a clear denial of what the Bible teaches and a willing misrepresentation of the facts. The OT sacrificial system which prepares the way for Christ shows that through the shedding of blood and the taking of the innocent sacrifices life the sinner is saved. On top of that God prophesied that Christ would be a substitute

who would bear our guilt and die our death, Is. 53:5-6, 'But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' This is confirmed in the NT, Rom. 3:25, 'whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.' We should not draw back from this difficult idea that someone has to pay with death. We take sins too lightly and think that these measures are overkill. We have been influenced by the spirit of this age that makes sin nothing, but sin is against God, a hell worthy violation, and the payment is extreme because sin is extreme.

But we must not miss the comforting words the confession puts forward. Christ makes 'a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in their behalf.' 'Proper' is the old way of saying exact, meaning that there is no sin unpaid. 'real' means genuine. And 'full' refers to a complete satisfaction. This is real comfort for the believer. Christ is enough, we do not need to add to His work, we cannot. It is not the treasury of merit of the saints that we need; the fires of purgatory are not needed to deal with our sin; our own good deeds cannot add to our righteousness, and our own suffering cannot pay for one sin, but Christ is enough. The proof text offered is Heb. 10:14, 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' This is one of the great 'simil iustus et peccator' verses. Can you see it? On the one hand we are perfected by the single offering of Christ, there it is, we are righteous in His sight, holy as He is holy, perfectly sinless. But we are also being sanctified, we are still sinful, we are still a work in progress. This double truth is not a contradiction but a glorious gospel reality. This has been compared to a tapestry. The top of the tapestry is a perfect and beautiful picture, that is our legal standing through the finished work of Christ, we are justified, we are unblemished, we are covered in the garment of His own perfect righteousness. But on the underside of the tapestry are all the loose hanging bits, a negative of the picture on the other side, not for display. God accepts us for salvation on the basis of what we are through Christ's finished work, not on the basis of what we do in our sanctification. This is great comfort. There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. The verdict that God gives on judgement day is already given, there is no missed data, no unconsidered sin, all is covered by the death of Christ.

Boice tells the story '...of a young man who was the son of a friend of Czar Nicholas the First of Russia. He had been given the job of exchequer of a border fortress of the Russian army, a responsible position in which he was to manage the czar's money and dispense wages to the troops. But the young man fell into gambling and began to cover his losses by borrowing little by little from the army treasury. One day he received notice that a government auditor was arriving to examine the books, so he sat down and added up what had been taken. It was a huge amount. He emptied out his own meagre resources, subtracted that from what should have been in the government account and noted the great discrepancy. He then wrote under the amount due: 'A great debt; who can pay?' The young man knew it was impossible for him to make up the amount, and he did not know anyone who could be counted on to help him. So, rather than await arrest, trial, and disgrace, he drew his revolver and determined that he would kill

himself upon the stroke of midnight. As he waited for the clock to strike, reflecting on how he had wasted his great opportunity, he became drowsy and drifted off to sleep.

It so happened that on that very night Czar Nicholas, dressed like a common soldier, entered the fortress to make an inspection of the battlements. According to regulations every light should have been out. But when he passed the office of the exchequer, where the son of his friend was dozing, he noticed that the light was on and went in. There were the sleeping young man, the revolver, the open books and the total that was missing, and the cryptic note. It was all quite clear. The young officer had betrayed his trust. He had been stealing systematically for months.

At first the czar thought to awaken him and place him under arrest. But he felt sorry for the young man, and he remembered the father, his friend, and how brokenhearted he would be if his son were to be arrested. So, instead of proceeding harshly, he stooped over and wrote something below the young man's pathetic summation and went out.

The soldier slept for hours when suddenly, awakened by some noise, he sprang to his feet. It was long past midnight. He grabbed the revolver, pointed it to his head, and was about to pull the trigger when his eyes glanced down at the papers before him and he saw what had been written. Beneath his question, 'A great debt; who can pay?' there was a single word: 'Nicholas.' Could it be? Had the czar been present? He sprang to some files where there were documents containing the czar's signature and made a careful comparison. The signature was authentic. 'The czar has been here,' he said to himself. 'He has seen the papers; he knows what I have done; he knows my guilt, but he has undertaken to pay the debt himself.' So instead of taking his life the young soldier waited for morning when, as he anticipated, a sack of gold coins arrived from Nicholas. We were condemned, we were the ones in debt, but God paid for our sin debt that there might be no more condemnation for us.

The why

'yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for anything in them, their justification is only of free grace, that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.' Having established that we are justified by Christ's obedience and death as a sufficient satisfaction the confession goes on to state the motivation of God in justifying us through this giving of Christ. We see a threefold motive. Firstly, Christ is given by the Father. Technically the will of the Trinity is one, but the Scripture often foregrounds deeds in the economic Trinity in keeping with the distinct personal properties of the Trinity. In this case the Father as the source of salvation is foregrounded highlighting God's love towards sinners as a driving motive in salvation. John 3:16, "'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' It is vital as we talk about these judicial aspects of God's saving plan that we highlight His love towards sinners. Secondly, we see that both aspects of the work of Christ, his obedience and satisfaction are provided from a motive of free grace. Why did God save us? It was not because He was under obligation; it was not because there was some good in us to merit it; it was not because He looked into the future and saw that we would fulfil certain criteria; it was not because we did what was in us and God made up for the rest it was all of grace. The confession follows Paul's doubling up of free and grace, Rom. 3:24, 'and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.' If grace has to be

earned in any way it is not grace. The third motive we see is for the glorifying of God's rich grace and perfect justice. Here the confession is alluding to Paul's statements in Rom. 3:25-26, 'whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' How can God be just and the justifier, how can He both punish sin which is just and forgive sin which is gracious? Feel the wonder of this for a moment. Consider Proverbs 17:15, 'He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.' Isn't this exactly what God does when He saves us? Does He not justify someone who is ungodly, who is wicked, who is deserving of punishment? Did not God condemn the righteous when Jesus came under our condemnation upon the cross? God has shown throughout the history of redemption that an innocent substitute can take the place and die the death of the guilty so that justice can be satisfied and the guilty live. It is only in this manner that sin can be seen to be what it is; that God's perfect justice is put on display in the punishment of sin; and God's immeasurable grace can all be seen. This is the wisdom of God in the gospel.

The when

When is a sinner justified? This is the question paragraph 4 answers. 'God did from all eternity decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did in the fullness of time die for their sins, and rise again for their justification; nevertheless, they are not justified personally, until the Holy Spirit doth in due time actually apply Christ unto them.' At the time of the writing of the confession there was an error called eternal justification. This view taught that God elects His people to be justified, and therefore they are justified upon their election. The outworking of this was that the elect are born justified, and so salvation is not a case of an unjustified person becoming justified, but rather an elect person coming to know of their election. You can imagine how this would lead to a number of difficulties. Some would struggle with assurance, because instead of believing the promises which say that all those who believe can know they have eternal life, the believer has to try and penetrate the hidden counsel of God and try to learn if they are elect. Also clear calls to conversion to believe in order to be saved would be muddled. This paragraph is saying that although someone is elect, they are still under the wrath of God, in other words they are under condemnation and not justified until they exercise faith in Christ. Justification can be viewed from four perspectives. There is justification in the mind of God as He decrees to predestine us to election, Rom. 8:30. Then there is the work of Christ in history where He does all that is necessary to pay for our sins and secure our salvation, Rom. 4:25. Then there is the moment when redemption is applied to us and we are actually called and justified when we believe, Rom. 5:1. And then finally on judgement day that verdict spoken over us when we are justified by faith is spoken openly over us in the judgement. All of this means that you must believe upon Christ and trust in His finished work to become justified. Those who have not believed are not justified. But this is the good news, that when we do believe, justification is not the reward for perfect faith, or someone who tries hard enough, it is the free gift bestowed upon those who see their need for a Saviour and look to Christ for what He alone can give.

