

Truths of the Reformation

(6) Justification by Faith Alone

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Our subject this morning is justification by faith alone. This is the last of the five *solas* of the Reformation. The 5 *solas* are five slogans which appeared downstream of the Reformation in the Reformed tradition to summarize some of the key truths of the Reformation. In each case they refer to the biblical teaching over against the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. So far, we have looked at Scripture Alone, to the glory of God alone, by grace alone, and Christ alone. This morning its justification by faith alone.

The word “alone” in justification by faith alone excludes works. Justification by faith alone makes the point that our works do not contribute to our justification at all – not even a little bit. The Reformers were not saying that works were not necessary for salvation. A person who does no works is not saved according to Reformed teaching as we will see. The great difference with the Roman Catholic Church has to do with where good works fit in one’s whole understanding of salvation. And the Reformed teaching is that our obedience or good works play no role in justification. I will explain in more detail that this all means as we go along.

Now it is interesting to read some of the Roman Catholic writing on this subject. It is more subtle than you might think. Roman Catholics can use language that sounds very biblical and orthodox from a Reformed perspective. You have to look at the fine print to get at the differences. The following sentences are from a Catholic website. “The Catholic Church does not now, nor has it ever, taught a doctrine of salvation by works ... that we can “work” our way to Heaven. Additionally, nowhere in the Bible does it say that we are saved by “faith alone.... The Bible says very clearly that we are not saved by faith alone. Works do have something to do with our salvation.”

The difference between Reformation teaching and Roman Catholic teaching has to do with the role of works in salvation. Roman Catholics do not teach salvation by works. They will talk about salvation by grace and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. What they will not do is use the word “alone” when they talk about the role of faith in justification. As I have just quoted from a Roman Catholic website, “Works have something to do with our salvation.” We insist that there is no salvation without works, but that it is very important where works fit in our understanding of salvation.

Now you might be tempted to wonder at the importance of such subtle distinctions. Let me tell you why this is important for every one of us. It is because this all has to do with being right with God. How can a man or a woman be right with God? One of the great differences between our time and the time of the Reformation is that in our society the issue of being right with God is no longer a burning issue. A lot of people do not believe that God exists. Many other people feel that God is pleased with them as long as they are half-way decent people. There are very few people who are afraid because God is angry with them because of their sin and who therefore fear that they will go to hell when they die. During the time of the Reformation, the need to be delivered from the wrath of God was a much more pressing issue for a lot more people.

The background to the biblical teaching about justification by faith alone is the wrath of God against all of us because of our sin. Romans 1:18 says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...” And those who die with the wrath of God still upon them go to hell forever and ever. What we are talking about when we are speaking about justification by faith alone is how we can become right with God and thus live with our sins forgiven and with the hope of eternal life.

This is real. It may not seem real when we go about our daily activities. It may not seem real when we listen to the news. There is great concern about forest fires burning out of control or the threat of war with North Korea or the vagaries of the economy. The question of how can I be right with God is not a burning question for most people. But the wrath of God against sinners is real. And the destiny of hell for unsaved people

is real. And so, there is no question more important than the question of how I can be right with God.

It was while struggling with this question that Martin Luther rediscovered the doctrine of justification by faith alone and for him it was the difference between a life of fear and dread and a life of peace and joy. Before God led him to the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the Bible, Martin Luther was overwhelmed with the guilt of his sins and his whole life was directed at finding peace with God.

According to what he had been taught that involved confessing your sins to a priest and doing some kind of penance that was thought to secure peace with God. But Luther's conscience told him that no matter what he did, it was never enough. And so, he struggled with guilt and fear and so, he engaged in all kinds of self-abuse to try to achieve peace of conscience. But it never worked. By God's grace, he sensed that all of the penance in which he engaged could not take away the guilt of his sin.

Now Martin Luther was an extreme case. But something was very real to him that is not very real for most people today and that is the guilt of sin and the terrible danger we are all in because of our sin. The message of the Bible is that apart from salvation, we are all hell-bound. We are guilty of sinning against God and the penalty for sin is experiencing the wrath of God for eternity. This is the great issue of life. There are only two destinations for people after death – heaven or hell. Only those who are saved by faith in Jesus Christ will go to heaven. All others will go to hell. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is a key part of the biblical teaching concerning how to get right with God - how to be saved – how to end up in heaven rather than hell.

The good news is that we can be justified through faith in Jesus Christ. The word "justify" is a theological word, but that should not put us off, because it is a word that if rightly applied to us, means we are right with God – our sins are forgiven and even more than that all the obedience that we owe to God has been paid for us. If we are justified, God looks upon us as people who have never sinned and as people who have lived a perfect life of obedience. If we are justified, God says of us exactly what he said about Jesus, "With you I am well pleased." If we are

justified, it is impossible for us to enhance our standing with God. As far as our standing before God is concerned we are perfect.

And that is true even though we still sin and even though we are far from perfect. This is a glorious truth. When Luther first understood it, he said “I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened.” Understanding this truth transformed Luther from a fearful and guilt-ridden monk, to a man who lived in the confidence of the favour of God – one who knew that his sins were forgiven and that as far as his record before God was concerned he was perfect.

So, this is what we are talking about when we talk about justification. It’s a word that the Bible uses to describe a key part of salvation. Here is one example. Romans 3:28, ²⁸“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

Now it is important to understand that the idea of justification comes from the law court. God, in the Bible, uses all kinds of imagery to help us to understand our relationship to him. In connection with this aspect of salvation God uses the imagery of a court of law. God has given us his law in the Ten Commandments and in many other places in the Bible. And God is the judge over all. Psalm 7:11 says, “God is a righteous judge.” Genesis 18:25 refers to God as the “Judge of all the earth.”

Now in our legal system we have juries that weigh the evidence and bring the verdict of guilty or not guilty. There are no juries in God’s legal system, because God is perfectly just and knows all things and so his judgment is always right and according to the truth. There are no miscarriages of justice in the supreme court of the world where God is the judge.

So, we have laws and we have God as judge and we have us – people whom God has made and who are subject to God’s law. This is all legal language. It is language that the Bible uses to describe one aspect our relationship with God. The Bible also teaches that we have all broken God’s law and that the penalty for breaking God’s law is death which eventually means eternal death or hell. In Romans 2:8, the Bible says, “[F]or those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.” So, we have a Judge. We

have a law. We have lawbreakers – us. And we have a penalty for lawbreaking – the wrath and fury of God forever.

Now that might seem to be rather extreme. Why is the penalty so severe? Why not just a fine or some time in prison? The reason is that every sin is rebellion against God. Every time we sin we are refusing God's rule over us. Every time we sin we are putting ourselves on the throne rather than God. And God made it very clear right from the beginning that he would not tolerate rebellion against his authority. In the Garden of Eden already, he gave Adam and Eve one rule – just one law. It told them that they were not allowed to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They were allowed to eat from every other tree. They were living in plenty and without any unmet needs or wants. And God says, do not eat of this one tree. And he says further that if they did, they would die. The penalty for rebellion against God is death and as the Word of God unfolds it becomes clear that the ultimate penalty is eternal death – suffering in hell forever.

So, there we are. We stand before the Judge of all the earth. And we are guilty of breaking his laws. We have not loved God with all our hearts. We have mostly considered him to be a bore and irrelevant to our lives. We have mostly been concerned about ourselves and not so much about other people. We have done many things that violate God's laws. We have dishonored our parents. We have not been perfectly honest with others. We have not been sexually pure. We have been mean to other people. We have been rather reluctant about worshipping God. We have been greedy and covetous. We have broken God's laws in all kinds of ways. We have broken God's laws every day of our lives. And so, the list of our transgressions is a very long list. And the one who keeps the list is God himself and so it is a comprehensive list. Every sin we have ever committed is on that list. Even if it is a sin that no one else has seen, it is on that list. If it is a sin that we did not ever realize was a sin, it is on that list. If it is a sin that we have long forgotten about it is on that list.

This is one of the ways God in the Bible describes our relationship with him. Romans 14:10 & 12 says, "For we will all stand before the

judgment seat of God ... So, then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

Now picture yourself standing there before God and tell me that you are not interested in the word “justification.” If we understand our situation before the judge of all the earth, the idea that there is a way to be justified is the most precious idea imaginable. No wonder that Luther said, “I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened.” The message of the Bible is that there is a way to be justified in the judgment of God.

Now justification means two things. It means forgiveness for all of our sins. But it means more than forgiveness. It means that we are declared righteous. This is how the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it. “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight.” So, there are two aspects to being right with God: the forgiveness of sins and being accepted as righteous in God’s sight.

This second aspect is perhaps not as familiar, but it is very precious. You see God requires righteousness of us. In Deuteronomy 6:2, Moses says this: “And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.” God expects us to live righteous lives by keeping all his commands. If God only forgives our sins, we still owe him a righteous life. It is not enough to be forgiven. That is precious, but it is not enough. God requires a life of obedience from us. And we are not able to live a life of obedience because we are sinners.

Think of what would happen if God came to us and said, “I forgive all your sins up till now. But from now on you must keep my commands perfectly and I will welcome you into heaven.” We would be no further ahead because in the next five seconds we would sin and we would be guilty before God’s law. That is why the catechism says that in justification God pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight. Not only is justification the forgiveness of sins, it is also being counted as righteous before God. So, if we are justified, we stand before the same Judge with all our sins forgiven and as if we had lived a

perfectly holy life. We stand before God as if we were Jesus – as someone who kept God’s law perfectly for his whole life.

This is the meaning of the word “justified” in the Bible in contexts where it is speaking about justification by faith. Romans 3:28 again, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” The word “justified” here means that believers are declared righteous. We stand before God and it is as if Jesus were standing there. It is as if we had never sinned and as if we had served God faithfully every second of our lives. God could not be more pleased with us than he is because we have been declared righteous.

It is important that we see that this is a legal declaration. We have not become righteous in ourselves. We are still sinful. We have not lived a perfect life. We have lived a sinful life. But we are declared righteous. As far as our standing before God the judge is concerned we are righteous. We are counted as righteous. That is the kind of language that the Bible uses. Romans 4:3 says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” This is a legal declaration on the part of the Judge of all the earth. God says, “As far as your relationship to my law is concerned, you are no longer guilty, but you are righteous.”

How can God do that? How can God count us righteous if we are not righteous? He can do it because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. Jesus has lived a perfect life. Jesus died on the cross in our place. And since Jesus completely paid the penalty for sin, he rose from the dead. Jesus did that all on behalf of his people. God laid our sins on Jesus and God gives Jesus’ righteousness to us. Romans 3:24 says that believers “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.” The word propitiation means that Jesus appeased the wrath of God against the sins of his people. Jesus died for our sins. But Jesus’ perfect life is also placed on our account. When Jesus was baptized he said that it was his task to “fulfill all righteousness.” Romans 5:10 says that we are not only saved by Jesus’ death, we are also saved by his life. Jesus died for us. Jesus also lived a perfect life for us. And all of that is placed on our account when we are justified. His perfect righteousness becomes ours.

That is why I say that when a justified sinner stands before God it is as if Jesus were standing there because Jesus' righteousness becomes ours. Our legal standing before the law of God is the same as Jesus' legal standing before the law. When God says that he is well pleased with Jesus that applies to us as well because Jesus legal status is transferred to us in justification.

Now the Bible makes a great deal of the fact that we receive this justification by faith and not by works. Listen again to Romans 3:28, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." The point of this is that we do not earn justification. It is a gift. Romans 3:23-24, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift." That means that we do not do anything to earn justification.

This was a problem among the Jewish people in NT times. They thought that if you tried really hard to keep God's law then God would accept you. They thought that you had to earn your way into God's favor. What they did not understand is that no one can do this – no one can even come close to doing this – that no one can even contribute to this. That is why Paul insists as he does in Romans 3:20 "For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...." We can never be good enough to pay for the sins that we have committed. We can never be good enough to be acceptable to God on the basis of our own obedience. We can never even come close.

That is why justification must be given to us as a gift of free grace. And that is what happens when we come to God trusting in Jesus. His righteousness becomes ours. We are made right with God on the basis of what Jesus has done. And the way that we receive this wonderful gift is by faith.

What is faith? It begins with believing "that." It begins with believing that the Bible is true. That is necessary but it is not enough. Saving faith is believing "in" – believing in Jesus and believing in God and believing the promises of the gospel. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The Westminster Shorter Catechism has a good definition of faith. It says that, "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we

receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel” (86). Faith is accepting the offer. Faith is trusting in the one who makes the offer. The Lord’s Supper gives a great picture of faith. In the Lord’s Supper Jesus offers himself in the tokens of the bread and the wine and the sinner receives them by faith. There are the ideas of receiving and accepting and trusting in the one who makes the promise.

Now the biblical teaching is that it is faith alone by which justification is received. Works have nothing to do with it at this point. We come to Christ as we are – sinners who are hopeless and helpless in ourselves. And we receive justification through Christ. It is a gift. We do nothing to earn it. What a glorious truth this is! Simply by receiving the offer and trusting in Christ our status before God changes from sinner to righteous. We are reconciled to God. We are acceptable in his sight. We are adopted as his children. God is pleased with us for Jesus sake.

Now what about works? The great difference between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church had to do with the role of works in salvation. We saw at the beginning that the Roman Catholic Church does not teach salvation by works. They agree with us that salvation is by grace through Christ. But as we also saw they believe that our works play a role. The Roman Catholic teaching is that when a person is baptized, they are justified. But for them justification means something quite different than it means for Protestants. I made a point of stressing that in the Bible justification is a declaration. It is a legal declaration of our status before God. For Roman Catholics it is not a legal declaration. According to them in justification a person is forgiven, but he is also given the grace to live a holy life and in the end, he will enter heaven at least partly based on his works. In Roman Catholic thinking justification is a process and at the end of the day a person is accepted by God both on the basis of what Christ has done and upon the works they have done after baptism. That is why there is a purgatory in Roman Catholic thinking. If you are not holy enough when you die, then you suffer in purgatory until you are purified enough to enter into heaven.

In Reformed and biblical thinking, works are not part of justification at all. They follow from justification. Those who are justified will do good works because of their relationship with Christ and out of thankfulness.

We are called to repent of our sins. We are called to holy living. We are called to keep God's law. But the wonderful thing about the biblical gospel is that our good works do not contribute at all to our justification. They follow from our justification.

And that way as we seek to please God by loving him and keeping his commands, we do so as those who are already right with God because God views us in Christ. Christ's perfect righteousness is ours. Our legal status before God is righteous in Christ. And as perfectly righteous people, Jesus works in us through his Spirit to make us more and more holy. Works are important and necessary. But we must understand them in the right way according to the Word of God.

I will close with one of the most beautiful definitions of justification ever. Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 60:

Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.¹ Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments, of never having kept any of them,² and of still being inclined toward all evil,³ nevertheless, without any merit of my own,⁴ out of sheer grace,⁵ God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,⁶ as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, and as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.⁷ All I need to do is accept this gift with a believing heart.⁸

When Luther understood this he said, "I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened." May that be our experience as well.