

“WORKS OR FAITH? BY FAITH ALONE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Romans 3:20-28

What must I do to be saved?

The question before us this morning is the greatest of all questions. It's the Philippian Jailer question. "What must I do to be saved?"

Paul and Silas gave the simple answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31).

Many people today take offense at that answer. Sophisticated people, intellectual people, proud people, politically correct people, take offense at this simple message to trust and obey Jesus. They want something more complicated, something more mysterious, or more philosophically profound, or more difficult, or something that requires some great effort, perhaps something more severe requiring "asceticism and severity to the body" (Colossians 2:23).

Self-made men prefer self-made religion, religion after their own making, where their gods ends up being made in their own image.

What must I do to be saved? How can a sinful person stand in the presence of a holy God? How is that person justified, on what grounds? That's the central question.

What must man do to escape the wrath of God and be justified, saved, accepted and reconciled to God?

The answer of the liberal, humanist, the universalist/Unitarian, the one who is indifferent.

God is a loving God, quick to forgive, quick to show mercy. A loving God would not be a God of wrath, He would not condemn anyone to eternal hell. He knows we are weak, and He will have mercy of us and save us without requiring anything be satisfied or done.

"A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross." (H. Richard Niebuhr's description of Protestant liberalism).

The answer of the legalist.

We are justified and saved on account of our own righteousness and works, by our own obedience to the moral standards of God. We work to satisfy His sense of justice and gain His acceptance and approval. We just have to be better and do better than most others.

The answer of the Roman Catholic Church and many Protestants today.

It's a variation of the legalist answer. We work to add to what Christ did to gain our salvation. This is the "Jesus plus" view of justification.

For Roman Catholics justification begins with baptism, is added to by good works and penance, and then what is lacking in this life is made up in purgatory.

Martin Luther used to hate the righteousness of God because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't measure up. He despaired of ever getting God's acceptance. He couldn't run fast enough, jump high enough or swim far enough.

And many Protestants are just as guilty of trying to add to what Christ has done in order to gain or secure their acceptance with God. If we can just get our act together God will like us more. We Protestants have a performance mentality, he are on a treadmill working to earn credit or merit or points.

It's as if to say, Christ undergoes the agonies of the cross so that we can add to His work and partially justify ourselves and receive some of the glory.

None of these answers satisfies because God is holy and just and we are unholy and unjust, all our works are stained and polluted by sin. We are still left with the question, what must man do to escape the wrath of God and be justified and saved and reconciled to God?

The doctrine of justification by faith teaches us how the righteousness of God becomes our righteousness so that we can be set free from the judgment and penalty of our sin.

The double cure.

Let me start with an illustration.

Suppose that I am a court judge and today I am hearing two murder trials. In two separate, unrelated trials these two men are each accused of a terrible murder. You are the witnesses.

In the first trial it is proven in court that this man did not commit the crime he is accused of. You witnesses saw the crime and you all know that this man did not do it. He is

innocent. So as the judge I declare that not only did this man not do the crime, not only did he not break the law, but he also has kept the law and is a law-abiding citizen. I declare that he is justified; meaning, he has not done what is wrong and he has done what is right and he is free to go and to enjoy all the benefits of his freedom.

In the second trial it is proven in court that this man is guilty of the crime he is accused of. You witnesses saw the crime and you all saw him do it. We have the murder weapon with his fingerprints and we have a motive. He committed the murder, he is guilty as charged.

But as the judge I decide to declare him justified, meaning, “I say that you are regarded by this court as a law-abiding citizen with the full rights, benefits and freedoms of this country. I don’t just mean that you are pardoned or forgiven. Then you would still be guilty, just free. No, I mean that you are regarded as innocent, not guilty” [Adapted from Piper illustration].

What would you witnesses of the murder say if I did that as a judge?

Any seven year old would know there was something terribly wrong with the story. This isn’t right. Why? Because even at the age of seven we know in our knowers that there is such a thing as justice and rightness and wrongness. It’s in our nature, in our conscience, in our culture, in our humanity that justice must be served. From earliest civilization there are laws and courts and justice and punishment and consequences.

So when we read in Romans 4:5 that God justifies the ungodly, the unjust, how is this possible? How is this not a miscarriage of justice? Why should God not be impeached for gross injustice?

The answer is given in Romans 3:21-28.

Romans 3:21-28.

This text is the great divide in the great book of Romans.

From Romans 1:18 to 3:20 Paul has described the great dilemma, our utter depravity and our just condemnation. But in Romans 3:21 and following we read of the miracle of redemptive righteousness. The great preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse called these verses the most important in all the Bible (Kent Hughes, *Romans*, p. 82).

Calvin said everything in our religion hinges on these verses. This issue more than any other fueled the Reformation.

Here is the answer to how we are saved. There has been revealed a righteousness that is apart from the law and works, that comes from the work of Christ and is imputed to us as our righteousness by faith.

Up to now we have been doomed. Up until now the only righteousness was according to the Law and since all have sinned and fallen short, all are judged unrighteous according to the Law. So as long as the Law was our only standard or measure or hope, we had no hope.

But now God has revealed in the Scriptures and in Christ that there is a special righteousness that exists separate from the Law, a righteousness apart from our works, a righteousness that comes from somewhere else outside of us, a foreign or alien righteousness.

What would you say if I said I believe we are saved by good works? It's absolutely true and taught in Scripture. We are saved by good works. The all-important question is by whose good works are we saved? Ours? No way. By Christ's? Absolutely.

There are two aspects to Christ's work. On the cross, He secured our redemption by sacrificing His blood as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He appeased and satisfied the just wrath of God for our sin. Since the righteousness demands of God are fully met, He is free to receive us and be reconciled to us and to give us His grace and mercy.

People sometimes ask, what about the sins of those before the time of Christ and Paul gives the answer. God was patient and merciful with all the sins of His people before the time of Jesus, knowing that the time was coming when His righteous wrath against sin would be dealt with.

Christ's work was effective both backwards as well as forwards. The whole sacrificial system was an interim way of taking sin seriously and atoning for sin until the time for the full atonement to be accomplished.

Christ's work enabled God to keep His moral integrity and not compromise His holy character. He could forgive us and justify us without condoning our sin in any way, and without being impeached.

Without this miracle of redemptive righteousness there would be no other way for us to be saved. Never has a God loved like this. Never have a people received so much mercy and grace.

The other aspect of Christ's work is that He perfectly kept all the righteous requirements of the Law. He was the perfect law-keeper.

Romans 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.”

There are two things going on here, a double cure. There is a subtraction and an addition. Our sins are subtracted, they are forgiven. But we are not just forgiven. A pardoned criminal doesn't have to bear the penalty, but he is still guilty, he still has the stigma of his offense.

We receive much more than just forgiveness. A justified sinner not only faces no penalty, he is made righteous. This is the addition. The perfection of Christ has been imputed to him. God looks at us through Christ-colored glasses.

Let me put it as plainly and boldly as I can, those who by faith believe in Jesus and trust Him alone for their salvation are as righteous before God as Christ is. Nothing we do adds to or takes away from what Christ did.

Christ not only became our curse and condemnation under the law but Christ also fully and perfectly kept the law and He becomes the law-keeper for us. So not only is our law-breaking imputed to Christ but His law-keeping is imputed to us.

Think about it. Every thought Jesus ever had is holy, every word Jesus ever spoke is good, every deed Jesus has ever done is perfect. Not just for His three years of ministry on earth or even for His thirty three years of life on earth, but forever. Every single moment of Christ's existence is one of perfect obedience. He loves the Father perfectly with all His heart, soul, mind and strength and every neighbor as Himself.

All of Christ's perfect obedience is imputed to us. Christ's merit is infinite so before God we are holy, obedient, righteous and good. God accepts us based only on Jesus' performance.

This is why Paul can say:

Romans 8:1-2 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is the wonder of the glorious doctrine of justification where our sins are exchanged for Christ's obedience and righteousness.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin *the double cure*; save from wrath and make me pure.

The means by which we receive this gift is faith. Faith is the empty hand that receives and takes hold of the gift. But this faith doesn't remain empty handed.

There is work to be done but the reason for doing it has changed. It is not to earn acceptance but to show our acceptance. There is the work of sanctification rooting out the remaining sin in our own hearts and the work of loving our neighbor and doing good.

Faith alone is never a lonely faith.

People collect all kinds of things. I have a habit of collecting great quotes. And the great thing about my collection is that I can give it away without ever losing it. So let me share from my collection of quotes about faith and works and about how faith alone is never a lonely faith.

Naked faith is no faith. - Thomas Adams

We are not saved by them, but we show we are not saved if we don't have them. Faith from which no good works flow is a counterfeit faith.

“We are justified by faith alone – but the faith that justifies is never alone.” -John Calvin

We are not saved by good works, but we are saved to do good works.

“Although obedience does not make us His children, since the gift of adoption is gratuitous (by grace), yet obedience distinguishes us from foreigners.” –Calvin, I Peter 1

Saving faith continues to be loving and obeying faith.

“Good works make not a good man, but a good man does good works.” –Patrick Hamilton

We must first be made good before we can do good. - Hugh Latimer

“The justified man has received the Spirit and where the Spirit has been given, the fruits of the Spirit must appear.” –B.H. Throckmorton, Jr., IDB Vol. 1, p. 144

As the apple is not the cause of the apple tree, but a fruit of it, so good works are not the cause of our salvation, but a sign and a fruit of the same. - Daniel Cawdray

James 2:14, 17 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 17 ... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

Our Savior Jesus Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).

If justification by faith alone is the hinge that changes everything, then it should change everything in our lives and relationships. If God doesn't hold us to some impossible expectation to gain His love and acceptance, we don't have to do that with each other, our spouses and children and friends.

Implications and application.

When we stand before God on the judgment day, whose works do you want to set before Him? Your works or Christ's works? Which works do you want to rely on? Whose righteousness do you want to trust or lift up? Yours or Christ's?

Why would anyone want to stand before God naked, when he could stand before God clothed in the perfect righteousness and obedience of Christ?

There is nothing in us or nothing we can do that makes us *acceptable* to God. The ground of our justification is in Christ alone, by God's grace alone through the instrument of faith alone.

There is nothing more that must be done to make you acceptable to God. He accepts you solely on the merits of Jesus' saving work on the cross.

On that day that we wake up in heaven it will be clear that the only reason we are there is because of Christ.

Every single person in heaven will be on equal footing. Every single one will be there because of the saving grace of Christ's work and imputed righteousness. We will all have received the same amount of grace. We will all have contributed zero to our salvation and Christ will have contributed 100% of our salvation, and 100% of the glory will be His.

Leave here this morning in confident assurance and absolute faith and full awareness of God's supreme love for all you who love and believe in His Son for their salvation.

Prayer: Holy Father, greater love has no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends. Greater love has no God than this that you should send your Son to die for us. Thank you for the perfect and complete atonement Christ made for us on the cross and for His blood shed for our sins. You thought of everything, you appeased your just and righteous wrath, you satisfying your need for justice, paid the full debt owed, you received from Christ sufficient blood to cover all the sins of all the elect, you counted us righteous by the imputed righteousness of Christ and you declared us obedient to the law because of the perfect obedience of Jesus.

Receive our imperfect, and unworthy love and gratitude for your perfect and unfailing love and kindness shown to us in Christ Jesus our Savior and Lord. Amen.