

# Justified by Faith alone

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Ps. 66: 1, 2

Ps. 112: 1

Ps. 103: 1, 4

Ps. 32: 1, 2, 5

Ps. 65: 2, 3

Scripture reading: Rom. 2: 1 - 3: 31

Text: Rom. 3: 19 - 24

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

On the day of Christ's judgment - with what righteousness will you appear before Him?

Soon Christ will return on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory. The graves will open and the dead will rise. It will be a day of salvation and of judgment. Eternal life for those who have done good; eternal punishment for those who have done evil (John 5:29).

But, with what righteousness will you appear before Christ?

We deserve God's wrath just as much as our unbelieving neighbours. How then will we appear before the judgement seat? On which grounds do you expect to enter the kingdom of God's glory?

When you ask this question to church members whether they are sure of their salvation, it is sometimes shocking to hear the answers. Some say yes, they know that they will go to heaven because they were baptised. Others say yes, I know I am a child of God because I go to church and read my Bible and I do my prayers.

They hope to receive eternal life because they were church members all their life, and they lived decent lives.

Dear brother, sister, let me assure you that if this is your assurance, you will not be able to stand in the judgment of God. Neither your church membership, nor your Bible reading, nor all your religion will be able to pardon you on that day.

Christ will judge you according to God's perfect law. He will require of you *perfect* righteousness, and nothing less. How then shall any man be saved? How then shall we appear before the judgment seat of God?

I proclaim the gospel to you with the theme...

## We are justified by faith alone

We will note...

1. The **damnable** state of all men
2. That **Christ** is our only righteousness
3. That this righteousness is received through **faith** alone

In the first place we note...

## The damnable state of all men

It is easy to create a righteousness that will impress men. But, when we appear before the throne of God, the blinding light of His holiness exposes us. We stand naked and filthy before Him. He sees everything and knows us inside out. There is nothing that we can hide from Him. The law of God exposes our sin and declares us guilty before God, yet we are slack to acknowledge this to ourselves. We rather compare ourselves to our neighbour and are quickly satisfied with ourselves, thinking that we excel others.

But after we have fooled ourselves in this way, how will we appear before the judgment seat of God? With what righteousness?

Do not say that you are a covenant child and that you are therefore distinguished from other men, for we deserve exactly the same wrath and condemnation as our

unbelieving neighbours. On the day of God's judgement our own righteousness will not cover us any better than theirs.

God will not count anything righteous which is not perfect. If you are a sinner, then you are without righteousness. If you trespass the law in any way, then you are not righteous in God's sight. There is no in-between righteousness that can stand in the judgment of God. There exists no righteousness which is only half righteous. The only righteousness that God will accept is *perfect* obedience to His law.

In chapter 1 the apostle Paul proved the condemnation of all men, but then, because he knew how proud the Jews were, thinking that they should not be counted with other men, he continues in chapter 2 and 3 to prove that also God's covenant people deserve the same condemnation. We have no righteousness in ourselves to stand before God.

"There is none righteous, no, not one..." The apostle exposes our sin to us. He shows that those within the covenant deserve the same condemnation as other men. And now our text for this morning starts with these words:

"...we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (3: 19, 20).

He speaks to the Jews, calling them "those who are under the law". That they are under the law simply means, in this context, that the law has been given to them. As God's covenant people they are under the law. The law was given to them and they know the law, and thus the law applies in the first place to them. They were, for this reason, even more than other men responsible to answer to it. Thus the apostle now directs his words especially to the Jews.

But he had a hard time to convince them of their own unworthiness. They boasted of being covenant children. They thought that they possessed a sufficient holiness by their separation from the world.

Whenever Scripture rebuked man in his depravity, they thought that God was speaking to other men. Yes, they thought that they were indeed in themselves holier than other men.

And so the apostle Paul had a hard time subduing the covenant people. He had a hard time convincing them that they deserve the same condemnation as their heathen neighbours. And thus he directs the arrows of God's judgment towards them, showing them that they deserve the same frightful condemnation as the rest of mankind.

Dear congregation, let us benefit from this instruction. Let us acknowledge that we too deserve nothing but condemnation.

We know the law and its perfect demands. We know its immeasurable height. We tasted something of its infinite extend, and we find ourselves naked in the light of God's righteousness. Let us not try to cover our inward depravity with a veil of outward holiness. No traditions of men and no religious activity can cover our filthiness before God.

Our mouths will be stopped by the law, either now or on the judgement day. By the law every mouth will be stopped. That means that the law exposes the sin of each man in such a way that no one will be able to say a word in self-defence. The whole world, all men, yes, all flesh, those outside and those inside the covenant, all stand guilty before God.

Each man's deeds testify against him, and the law pronounces the curse.

When the apostle says in verse 20 that no man will be justified by the deeds of the law, "the deeds of the law" refer to the keeping of the law. No fallen man can attain righteousness by his own keeping of the law. Instead, by breaking the law all are condemned by it.

We have to stop here for a moment and consider why it was necessary for the apostle to say this? Was there maybe anything in the law that could make us think that our obedience deserve a reward? Yes, it is not only implied, but clearly stated!

"You shall...keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them..." - Lev. 18: 5.

If someone obeys the law he shall live. The reward of obeying the law is life in communion with God. And that promise is still valid. Yet, because of our depravity we are not able to gain that reward; instead, our deeds deserve nothing but curse.

We also have to consider something else. Even if we could do good works which are perfect and without stain, even then they would - of themselves - not deserve anything. Good works deserve a reward from God, not because they compel God to give a reward, but because God Himself has given a promise of reward for those who obey. Thus a reward is indeed attached to the doing of good works, but it is attached only because of the covenant, and not because good works has anything in itself to make God our debtor. It is in the covenant that God promises a reward to good works, that is: a reward for works done according to His law. Now, that is the reason why the apostle speaks in our text not merely of "works" but of "the works of the law", because a promise of reward is attached to it.

The works of the law are the obligations of the covenant; a covenant that promise reward to those who obey.

Yet, the apostle states that we will by no means reach that reward by our keeping of the law since our obedience fall far short from the righteousness that God requires. In fact, we have *no* righteousness in ourselves. Because of our depravity the reward promised by the law cannot be gained by our own obedience. The only reward that our deeds deserve is death. The law exposes our transgressions, and by exposing our sin, it condemns us.

Either we have a perfect righteousness before God, or else we have no righteousness. If there is any sin in us - and surely there is - then we are not righteous but damnable.

Dear congregation, it is in this context of condemnation that the apostle now returns to the main theme: justification by faith!

The purpose of exposing our sin is that we may flee to Christ. And indeed it is Christ that is now set before us as our *only* righteousness. We note that in the second place, that...

## Christ is our only righteousness

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...” - verses 21 - 24.

From chapter 3:21 up to the end of chapter 5 the apostle now deals with the doctrine of justification. It is indeed the heart of the gospel. To be justified is to be declared just. To be justified is to be declared righteous before God. And now the apostle says that we are declared righteous without our keeping of the law. We are justified by the righteousness of Christ. It is freely given to us by grace alone.

To understand this is to understand the gospel. The glory of God’s grace is nowhere in Scripture as clearly portrayed as in these verses.

To understand this doctrine of justification is to receive the full assurance of faith. When anyone grasps this doctrine and makes it his own, he enters the kingdom of heaven. To meditate on this doctrine is to be filled with heavenly joy. And so we turn to these verses with eager expectation as the gospel of our Lord Jesus is spelled out to us.

**God's** righteousness is revealed. It is called the righteousness of God because it comes from Him, and also because it is the only righteousness that can stand before Him. This righteousness, which is the only righteousness acceptable to God and which proceeds from Him alone, has been revealed. He says it has been revealed "apart from the law". It means that this righteousness is not revealed by our obedience to the law.

At the same time this righteousness is according to the law and proclaimed by the law. He does not say that this righteousness is apart from *the teaching* of the law; on the contrary, he immediately adds that this is the same righteousness which is spoken of by the Law and the Prophets.

Saying that this righteousness is revealed apart from the law simply means that this righteousness excludes any merits of our obedience to the law. Our keeping of the law cannot add anything to this righteousness. *Apart* from man's righteousness **God's** righteousness has been revealed.

It is a righteousness apart from our obedience, excluding any righteousness of man. He does not blend our works with the mercy of God. After crushing and destroying all confidence that we foolishly may have of our own righteousness, he now puts forward mercy alone: a perfect righteousness which God provides for us.

He immediately adds that the Law and the Prophets testify of it.

Now, if even the law testify that our righteousness is to be found outside of ourselves in the righteousness which God would provide, then it should be clear to us that the law was never given to Israel as a means to save themselves. The Old Testament clearly taught that the forgiveness of sins was necessary, and that the atonement would be accomplished by God Himself.

It is true that in the New Testament this has been revealed even more clearly and in its fullness, but the doctrine of justification by faith was certainly not absent from the Old Testament. Instead, the apostles used the Old Testament to confirm this doctrine. In the next chapter, chapter 4, Paul takes Abraham as an example to illustrate this doctrine, and he also quotes from the Psalms, saying that David spoke of this righteousness apart from works.

It is a righteousness apart from our keeping of the law, apart from our merits; but it is not a righteousness apart from the teaching of the law.

Having said all this, he now comes to the essence of this doctrine and he calls it, verse 22, a "righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe...".

These are powerful words. He states that justification is found in Christ and received by faith. He also makes clear that God Himself is the author of this

righteousness, as he calls it the righteousness of God. **God** provides us with His righteousness in Christ, and we receive it through faith in Him.

Let us carefully consider these words. It is said in a context of God's judgment on all men. God in His judgement declares us just because of the righteousness that He provides. He does not do this by lowering the standards of His righteousness. He does not save us by removing the law, or by changing the law. He does not save us by abolishing the law, or by minimising the law. No, He saves us by providing to us in Christ that perfect righteousness which the law requires of us. For, it is the righteousness of God that is revealed in this gospel, and He will count nothing righteous except that which is perfect and absolute obedience to His law.

Now, since there is not one of us who attains to such perfect holiness, it follows that all of us are without righteousness. We have no righteousness in ourselves - nothing that can stand the test of God's judgement.

But what did God do? He provides us with a Mediator who is fully just. He transfers the righteousness of Christ to our account. Through faith in Christ we receive *His* perfect righteousness as our own.

We are justified by faith, not because our faith deserves anything, but faith is the instrument by which we receive Christ, and in Christ we are justified. Through faith we are joined to *Him* so that *His* righteousness is counted as our own.

Once we are grafted into Christ through faith, once we partake of Him, not only we ourselves are counted righteous, but also our works. Our works done through faith in Christ are counted just before God, because - whatever imperfections there may be in them - they are covered by the blood of Christ. Thus we receive the fulfilment of the covenant promises in Christ, and God rewards our works as perfect.

In ourselves we are unrighteous and our works are unrighteous, but Christ takes our place before the judgment seat of God representing us. He is our righteousness before God. And in Him alone do we receive the reward of the righteous: eternal life and glory in the presence of God.

But how do we receive Christ as our own? We note that in the second place, that...

## **We receive Christ's righteousness through faith alone**

The apostle says, verse 22, that the righteousness of God is revealed through faith in Jesus Christ "to all and on all who believe". The words "to all" who believe and "on all" who believe, says the same thing twice. By repeating the same thing

in two different ways he emphasises that faith alone is required. And then he applies this doctrine to both Jew and Gentile. It applies to those with whom the covenant was made and to those outside the covenant - all men. And he says that in this regard there is no difference or distinction between men. Whether you are a covenant child or not, you are justified by faith alone.

There is no difference. With these words he stresses the need for all men, without exception, to seek their righteousness in Christ. There is no other way of attaining righteousness. There is not one way for the Jews and another way for someone else. There is not one way for a church member and another way for the one outside the church. All men are in themselves sinners and deserves the same condemnation of God. No one has anything to boast of before God. All are in need of this righteousness which is to be found in Christ alone, through faith alone:

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” - verse 23.

He takes away all the boasting of man by placing us before the judgement seat of God. There, in His presence, all the applause of men vanishes so that we stand naked before Him. There is no applause from God’s side. We are without any glory.

With these words he makes clear that there is no such thing as partial righteousness, as if one part of the righteousness is by our merits and another part by grace. He strips us of all righteousness so that we stand before God without any glory. No righteousness means no glory.

We are to acknowledge our total depravity and the full weight of our guilt before God. In this way the apostle now places the mercy of God over against our damnable state. He says, verse 24, that we are...

“...justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...”

“Justified freely” means: justified without deserving anything.

And immediately he adds: “by His grace”. It is freely given, it is grace, he says. In this way, saying the same thing in two different ways, he again emphasise that we receive this righteousness of God without any merits of our works. We cannot add anything to that which is freely given by grace alone.

Christ by His obedience satisfied the Father’s justice. A righteousness which is not our own is accounted to us, even the perfect righteousness of Christ.

This, the apostle Paul says, is freely given to us by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus - a redemption accomplished by Christ Jesus. And he calls Christ a

propitiation; that is: a reconciliation. By His blood, that is by His death on the cross, He reconciled us to God by paying for our guilt, and by clothing us with His perfect righteousness.

Yes, Christ Himself is our righteousness.

Now we have to give careful attention. To be justified does not mean that we are made righteous in ourselves. In ourselves we will remain unjust until that day when God will change us in a moment. We are not declared just because of something in us, or because of something that will happen with us. No, we are declared just and righteous only because of Christ's perfect righteousness. When God declares us righteous He makes a pronouncement which rests not on anything in us, but a pronouncement that rests on the merits of Christ alone.

Justification is different from sanctification. Sanctification is a work of cleansing which God also continues in us. But justification happens outside of us.

Justification happens in heaven, not *in* us. Justification is a declaration that proceeds from the throne of God, and not a change in us. Yes, we are also changed, but that is sanctification, the result of justification. We may never separate the two. Whoever is justified is also sanctified. But we do have to discern between justification and sanctification.

Why is it so important to understand this? That you may have the full assurance of faith! As long as you think that there must be something good in yourself to be righteous before God, you are without Christ and without hope. It is only when you realise that Christ is your *only* righteousness before God, that you find salvation and assurance and rest. He is our salvation, our assurance and our peace.

We also have to note that justification is *more* than forgiveness. The forgiveness of sins deals with the negative side of the gospel: our guilt that has to be removed. But justification includes also the positive side: to be clothed with perfect righteousness. We are clothed with the bright white clothes of Christ's perfect obedience. In Him we are counted perfect and without blame. The Righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, that means "put on our account". In Christ we are more than acceptable to God. In Christ He calls us His beloved children.

Dear congregation, we see then that Christ alone is the cause of our justification. When we are joined to Him through faith, God declares us just - perfectly just - on the grounds of Christ's righteousness. *He* obeyed the law on our behalf. *He* was a righteous man for our sake. He stands in *our* place before the Father, **representing** us.

**God's** righteousness is freely given to us in Christ.

If you believe in Him, there is no reason to doubt your eternal salvation, for it depends not on anything in you. It is given you freely by the grace of God. He declares you righteous, not because you are righteous in yourself, but: in Christ!

This is the gospel. This is our assurance. Or to put it in the words of chapter 5:1:

“...having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...”

We are no longer afraid, running away from God. We are no longer naked and condemned. We are justified. We are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Therefore we have peace with God.

When we meditate on this teaching of Scripture our hearts are inflamed with hope and joy. Our salvation is sure, for it is not a work that we can do or achieve; it is by grace alone in Christ alone. And we receive it by faith alone.

Brothers and sisters, this gospel is preached to us with the call to repent and believe. If you truly acknowledge your damnable state before God - repent and confess your sins before God. But do not look at your own depravity only. Turn your eyes to the throne in heaven where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, the Judge who will come to judge the living and the dead; and know that *He* is your righteousness. In Him the law can no longer condemn us, for in Him we are perfect and blameless.

The Roman Catholics teaches that no one can reach full assurance of faith in this life. They say that it would be dangerous if we would have full assurance, for it will make us indifferent. But far from making us careless, this doctrine inflames us with hope and joy and thankfulness. It causes a new life of thankfulness; a new life of obedience. This gospel is a power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. By this gospel we are raised from our spiritual death, and by this gospel we continue to live. Far from making us careless this gospel inflames us with a zeal to live from now on to the glory of God alone.

It was the rediscovery of this doctrine that caused the great reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is the heart of the gospel.

Let us cherish it as our greatest treasure. Christ is our righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, when we eat at the Lord's table, we do self examination. Now, when we think of selfexamination we often think only of our sins. But the selfexamination consists of three parts: sin, redemption and thankfulness. We examine ourselves whether we are repenting of our sins, but we also examine ourselves whether we believe the sure promise of God that all our sins are forgiven us for the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ *and: that the perfect righteousness of Christ is freely given us as our own as if we ourselves have*

**fulfilled all righteousness.** Without this assurance of faith, without this trust in Christ alone, we eat and drink a judgement on ourselves.

Faith is to receive Christ as your own.

I will not doubt my salvation, for His righteousness is mine.

I am not afraid to appear before the judgement seat of God, for I will appear before Him with the perfect righteousness of Christ. *That* is our assurance and our glory!

Dear congregation, let us see our sin and condemnation, and flee to Christ. We have no righteousness in ourselves. It is only in Him.

Through *Him* we stand before God, justified, clothed with the fine linen of **His** righteousness clean and bright.

It is freely given to us by grace alone. It is given in Christ alone. And we receive it by faith alone.

Amen.