

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2013-2014

What Difference Does it Make ...

if justification by grace through faith alone is not taught as a daily reality for the believer in his or her life of sanctification?

January 2014

TOPIC What difference would it make ... *to be completely justified? ... but always in need of more?*

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

1. FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

Do you know the paradox about the beloved who has the complete love of her lover? She has it all, but she always needs more. She is always in need of his love, and not just reminders. So as he continually tells her, *I love you*, he gives her more. These words are no mere reminders. What she hears is what she gets . . . more of what she already has. It is the same with the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The Gospel reveals and proclaims an already existing complete justification of the sinner for the sake of Christ's atonement on the cross. It is a done deal, and by faith we have it all. Nevertheless, while we live with God's justification as total and complete realities, we are always in need of more.

For many Christians, justification is understood as a singular pronouncement that happens when you *get saved* at the beginning of your life in Christ. The dominate focus of Christian life then turns to sanctification. The astonishing reality that Christ pardons wretched sinners fades into the background of daily Christian concern as attention turns to greater obedience to the Law and gaining a victory over sinful habits of life. For many, this understanding and program have produced spiritual burnout and a horrible sense of failure. Our people need to be taught otherwise about God's justification of sinners and how he sanctifies believers. Faith is to be anchored completely in the external Word of promise, not in anything that we may experience in our life in Christ. We are justified by grace through faith alone, *apart from our experience*. Our experience in this life continues to be punctuated by sinful wretchedness from within and without. For this reason, while we are completely justified in our Baptism, we continually are in need of God's justification for our sanctification - that our faith and life in Christ may not die, but grow and mature. Indeed, it is the saving Word of justification that continually sanctifies the Christian as a life-long renewing work.

2. SCRIPTURAL AND DOCTRINAL WITNESSES

A. SCRIPTURAL WITNESSES

Some additional biblical terms that Luther and the Lutheran fathers understood as virtual synonyms of justification would include the forgiveness of sins, the righteousness of God (also righteousness of Christ and righteousness of faith), the favor of God, and reconciliation. Our study here is particularly interested in clarifying important aspects of justification and how they relate to our sanctification. The study will explore the biblical answer to these questions: How was this saving work accomplished and its gifts appropriated by God? Where are these gifts revealed and bestowed on individual sinners? And how does the individual sinner receive, live, and grow with them?

Read Romans 5:18, II Corinthians 5:19, and John 1:29

- What is the *one act of righteousness*?

- Note how the non-imputation of sin (judicial focus) is connected with God's reconciliation (a relational focus).
- What are the terms that Paul equates with justification in the Corinthian passage and how does each passage clarify those for whom Christ has already justified? Notice the parallel in John 1:29 expressing *the sins of the world*.

Read Romans 1:16-17 and 3: 21-26

- Where does Paul indicate *the righteousness of God* is made known?
- Note how Paul interrelates the righteousness of God, the propitiation of sin by Christ, and justification. How would you explain the relationship of these terms on your teaching?

Read Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:8

- How would you explain the role of faith in God's justification of the sinner?
- How should the prepositions *by* and *through* [faith] be described when explaining the relationship between the saving grace of God's justification of the sinner and faith?

Read II Corinthians 5:17-18, Romans 6: 11, 18, 22

- How does the apostle Paul describe what it means to be a *new creation* in Christ?
- How did this come about?

Read Ephesians 4: 13-15, Ephesians 2:10. John 15: 5

- What are the two things that God would produce in us as we have become a new creation in Christ?
- Why is it important to distinguish these three: 1.) sanctification; 2.) the cause of sanctification; and 3.) the effects of sanctification.
- Evaluate the following: *As a new creation in Christ, we become and do more and more as we already are.*

B. DOCTRINAL WITNESSES

The law would seem to be harmful since it has made all men sinners, but when the Lord came he forgave all men the sin that none could escape and by shedding his blood canceled the bond that stood against us (Col. 2:14). . . . For after the whole world was subjected, he took away the sin of the whole world, as John testified when he said (John 1:29), "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Tappert, Apology IV: 103)

- How does the reality *he forgave all men* affect how the Gospel is to be rightly taught and applied to people in your congregation?
- For those who may express alarm that they do not feel that God has actually forgiven them some particular vexing sins, how does continual teaching about this understanding of justification provide comfort and assurance?

. . . it is the obedience of the entire person, therefore it is a perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race, since it satisfied the eternal and immutable righteousness of God revealed in the law. This obedience is our righteousness which avails before God and is revealed in the Gospel upon which faith depends before God and which God reckons to faith (Tappert, FCSD III, 57)

Faith alone justifies because we receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit by faith alone. The reconciled are accounted righteous and children of God not on account of their own purity but by mercy on account of Christ, if they grasp this mercy by faith. We shall therefore add clear testimonies stating that faith is the very righteousness by which we are accounted righteous before God. This is not because it is a work worthy in itself, but because it receives God's promise that for Christ's sake he wishes to be propitious to believers in Christ and because it believes that "God made Christ our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (I Cor. 1:30)." (Tappert, Apology IV 86)

- In light of the justification of all sinners in the cross of Christ, what kind of language can best clarify the role of faith so that it is not seen either as a work or a condition for forgiveness?
- How would you explain the differences of these: justification *by* faith, justification *on account of* faith, and justification *in view of* faith.
- What are the implications of universal atonement and the objective aspect of justification for how those in hell are understood?

3. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE HEARERS IF UNCLEAR/INCONSISTENT

- Reflect on the consequences to the un-baptized and the baptized if preaching and teaching about justification gives the impression that only those whom Jesus chooses to save are justified and that Jesus only died for the elect.
 - In what ways can a clear distinction between the *appropriation* of justification (cross of Christ), its *revelation* (Gospel), and the *receiving and living of* justification (saving faith), avoid confusion about the assurance that God has reckoned the hearer to be righteous for the sake of Christ?
 - How can we make these distinctions while helping our hearers understand there is only ONE justification?
- Reflect on the consequences to the baptized and the un-baptized if our preaching and teaching presents justification as something yet to be attained or as a conditional first step in our sanctification?
- Reflect on the consequences to the baptized if preaching and teaching about sanctification does not distinguish between its *cause* and its *effects*.

4. COMFORT AND CONSOLATION FOR THE HEARERS

- THE BIBLICAL WITNESS** is that God in Christ Jesus had been reconciled to all sinners and has declared them righteous, forgiving all their sins. The Gospel proclaims this reality to sinners.

Read again II Corinthians 5:19 and Acts 16:30-31, Ephesians 2:8-10

- What are common ways these are proclaimed and taught that do NOT console or comfort sinners but may often alarm them?
 - What key words and terms in these texts that ought be faithfully echoed in our preaching and teaching of justification to best bring comfort and consolation to our hearers?
- THE DOCTRINAL WITNESS:** There is comfort and consolation for the baptized and the un-baptized only in the Gospel that proclaims the unconditional justification of the sinner for the sake of the crucified Christ. It is not dependent on any of our decisions, commitments, prayers, or feelings.

Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God's grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian Church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin. (Tappert, Large Catechism, Creed, 54)

- How would you explain to your hearers (baptized and unbaptized) that they have been already completely justified in the Cross of Christ, through the Gospel, by faith . . . but are always in need of more?
- React to this teaching of Luther's: the Devil is always at work seeking to get sinners to believe either that they do not qualify for God's justification in Christ, or they do not need it any longer.

5. POINTS TO PONDER

The Gospel proclaims the justification of all sinners as a past event, revealed as a present reality, and bestowed unconditionally again and again. Interjecting the word, *if*, makes everything conditional; and the word, *when*, can imply it does not exist already.

We need to preach and teach that God justifies sinners *unto* faith by the work of the Holy Spirit, not *in view of* faith or *because of* faith. We need also to teach justification by faith apart from works, yet also apart from experience. The fallen world around us and the blade of the law will color much of our experience of our life in Christ before the Better Day. Our comfort is in the saving Word given to faith, not our experience of faith.

God's Word of Pardon is powerful, its impact creates, sustains, and matures faith and life in Christ. It empowers all works that serve Christ in and through our vocations. God's justification sanctifies the believer - all part and parcel of God's monergistic salvation of the sinner. Exhorting good works does not produce or increase them. They are empowered and increased only by the continual impact of the Gospel as we live and grow in Christ.

Justification and sanctification are articles of faith. They are God's secrets held in Heaven, but revealed and bestowed again and again in the Divine Service of our Lord as he nurtures us with his Gospel and Sacraments. All comfort and consolation come to us from our Lord through these mysteries that have been entrusted to Servants of His Word in His Christ. The baptized have it all, but they always need more. They will only move on from justification when they enter Glory.

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