



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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Lord's Day 23 - June 8, 2008

59 **Q.** *What good does it do you, however, to believe all this?*

A. In Christ I am right with God and heir to life everlasting.

60 **Q.** *How are you right with God?*

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

61 **Q.** *Why do you say that by faith alone you are right with God?*

A. It is not because of any value my faith has that God is pleased with me. Only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make me right with God. And I can receive this righteousness and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

From Lord's Day 7-22, we've been looking at what we need to believe as Christians. Phrase by phrase, we've worked our way through the Apostles' Creed. After 14 weeks of doctrinal explanation, Question 59 presents a fair, but startling question: "So what?" Ok, so we get the Apostles' Creed, unpack it all and commit it to memory. Whoopdeedoo. What good is it to believe all this?

That's the way a lot of people feel. Confessions are impractical. Catechisms are irrelevant. Statements of faith are hopelessly modern. Doctrine is dry and dusty. Propositions are impersonal. Theology is for brainiacs. The only orthodoxy is orthopraxy. What we need are deeds, not creeds.

Of course, it's true that there is such a thing as dead orthodoxy, but that's because people kill it, not because it isn't living. Dead orthodoxy is no more the fault of orthodoxy than being a dead dog means the dog is to blame. A century ago, G.K Chesterton remarked, "People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It was sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad." Orthodoxy, Chesterton said elsewhere, are the walls of a playground. They hem us in so that in safety we might be able to dance and play around in its truth. And the most freeing truth of all is that in Christ we are right with God and heirs to life everlasting.

"But how are we right with God?" asks Question 60. The answer: "only by true faith in Jesus Christ." This sounds simple enough, at least to Protestant ears, but the explanation that follows in Answers 60 and 61 is more involved than meets the eye. Without using the word, Lord's Day 23 is all about justification, and whenever the 16th century reformers talked about justification they did so very carefully. They understood that Catholic doctrine taught salvation by grace and the necessity of saving faith. But the operation of this grace and the role of faith in salvation were in serious dispute. Hence, Ursinus and the rest of the Heidelberg divines were at pains to clearly delineate their position from the Roman Catholic Church, and in so doing, to safeguard the gospel of God's free grace.

Let me highlight five key concepts in the reformation understanding of justification.

First, the Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*. This is Martin Luther's famous Latin phrase which means "At the same time, justified and a sinner." The Catechism powerfully reminds us that even though we are right with God, we still violate his commands, feel the sting of conscience, and battle against indwelling sin. On this side of the consummation, we will always be sinning saints, righteous wretches, and on occasion even justified jerks.

We often hear that the church is full of hypocrites. And while we certainly don't want to excuse carnal "Christianity", shouldn't we expect at least some inconsistency between our profession and our practice so long as the church is a full of folks *simul iustus et peccator*? We will continue to make a hash of things, and we will often feel condemned for our disobedience. But here is where we must remember that there is not and never was any deserving on our part, and there never was nor ever will be any place for merit in the Christian view of salvation. God does not acquit us of our guilt based upon our works, but because we trust "him who justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5).

Second, our right standing with God is based on an alien righteousness. I don't mean we have E.T. spirituality. I mean we are justified because of a righteousness that is not our own. I am not right with God because of my righteousness, but because "the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ" has been credited to me. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die" wrote August Toplady in the old hymn. We contribute nothing to our salvation. The name by which every Christian must be called is "The Lord is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6).

On a related note, the doctrine of alien righteousness can help ward off all the silly nonsense on our TVs and in our bookstores about finding the god within us. There is much rubbish out there about your inner self or your divine self or your spiritual self and all the powers at your disposal if only you channel it from deep within you. Chesterton said it best: "Of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within you... Let Jones worship the sun or moon, anything rather than the Inner Light; let Jones worship cats or crocodiles, if he can find any in his street, but not the god within, Christianity came into the world firstly in order to assert with violence that a man had not only to look inwards, but to look outwards, to behold with astonishment and enthusiasm a divine company and a divine captain. The only fun of being a Christian was that a man was not left alone with the Inner Light, but definitely recognized an outer light, fair as the sun, clear as the moon, terrible as an army with banners." If you can ignore the occasional anti-Calvinist remarks, Chesterton really is a fabulous read.

Third, the righteousness of Christ is ours by imputation, not by impartation. That is to say, we are not *made* holy, or *infused* with goodness as if we possessed it in ourselves, but rather Christ's righteousness is *credited* to our account (see Lord's Day 21).

Fourth, we are justified by faith alone. The word "alone" is very important. The Catholic Church acknowledges that we are saved by faith; it's the alone part they won't allow. In fact, the Council of Trent from the 16th century Catholic counter-reformation declared anathema those who believe in either justification by imputation or justification by faith alone. But evangelical faith has always held that "all I need to do is accept the gift of God with a believing heart." True, justifying faith must show itself in good works. That's what James 2 is all about. But these works serve as corroborating evidence, not as the ground of our justification. We are justified by faith without deeds of the law (Rom. 3:28; Titus 3:5). The gospel is "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:30-31), not "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and cooperate with transforming grace and you shall be saved." There is nothing we contribute to our salvation but our sin, no merit we bring but Christ's, and nothing necessary for justification except for faith alone.

Finally, with all this talk about the necessity of faith, the Catechism explains that faith is only an *instrumental* cause in our salvation. In other words, faith is not what God finds acceptable in us. In fact, strictly speaking, faith itself does not justify. Faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, have communion with him, and share in all his benefits (Belgic Confession Art. 22). It is the object of our faith that matters. If you venture out on to a frozen pond, it isn't your faith that keeps you from crashing into the water. True, it takes faith to step onto the pond, but it is the object of your faith, the twelve inches of ice, that keeps you safe. Believe in Christ with all your heart, but don't put your faith in your faith. Your experience of trusting Christ will ebb and flow. So be sure to rest in Jesus Christ and not your faith in him. He alone is the one who died for our sakes and was raised for our justification. Believe this, and you too will be saved.