

I. THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

A. The question we need to ask is *how* do we come to possess the righteousness of Jesus Christ?

1. Let me begin with an illustration

- a. Before the judge stands Mr. A. He is a criminal, a lawbreaker, a man who has never obeyed any laws, has broken every law and now stands before the judge to be sentenced. The judge to be just *must* declare Mr. A guilty and punish him accordingly.
- b. In the next courtroom stands Mr. B. He is a law abiding citizen. He has never committed any crime, has never had so much as a parking ticket; and he has performed many virtuous deeds all recognized by the judge. He has been wrongly arrested. The judge must declare Mr. B innocent and in perfect harmony with the Law.
- c. But in justification God takes the sinner's record of crime, and replaces it with the record of innocence and virtue performed by another. *Mr. B's record becomes Mr. A's record.*

2. The act of God making the record of one the record of another is *imputation*.

- a. To impute is to place on the account or record of another; to count as legally belonging to someone; to reckon to the account of someone (Philemon 18).
- b. For justification to take place there must be a double imputation: our sins to Christ, His righteousness (obedience) to us.
- c. God imputed our sins to Christ. That is what the cross was all about. II Cor. 5:21, "He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin ..." God "made" Christ sin, not by infusing sin into Him and making Him morally impure, depraved and defiled, but by imputing the guilt of our sins to Him so that Christ became legally guilty of our sins (while Christ remained personally holy).
- d. God could only do that because Christ, the Second Person, willingly undertook to do that: Christ willingly assumed legal responsibility for our sins, willingly assumed our obligations and willingly took our punishment. *Based on that God imputes to us everything that Christ did for us.*

B. Notice, on what righteous basis God justifies ("that God might be just & the justifier" [Rom. 3:26]).

1. Negatively

- a. God does not justify us on the basis of our personal moral character. We are sinners!
- b. God does not justify us on the basis of imperfect obedience to the Law. He demands perfection.
- c. God does not justify us on the basis of the work of the Holy Spirit in us, because that is never perfect or complete in this life.
- d. God does not first infuse goodness into us to make us inwardly holy and then on *that* basis justify us. God justifies the ungodly not those He has made godly.

2. Positively

- a. God justifies us on the basis of what Christ has done living *for* us (active obedience) and dying *for* us (passive obedience). That is "the righteousness of God which is unto all and upon all them that believe" (Rom. 3:22).
- b. In justification we remain personally sinful but we are declared legally righteous, in harmony with the law, because everything Christ did is legally ours by imputation.
- c. Everything Christ did is reckoned to be ours, laid to our account (II Cor. 5:21b).

II. THE MEANS (OR INSTRUMENT) OF OUR JUSTIFICATION

A. Faith alone is the means or instrument, but not the ground or basis, of justification.

1. Faith is *not* the ground of justification.

- a. God can only justify us on the basis of perfect righteousness. Our faith or even our faithfulness is not perfect righteousness. Arminianism taught that God accepted "faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, *as* the perfect obedience of the law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace" (Canons II, B, 4).

- b. Arminianism argues that God has lowered His standards & accepts imperfection in the place of perfection. He does this, they say, to accommodate Himself to our inability so that He accepts faith or a life lived in faith as righteousness. But God will not & cannot do that. He is just.
- c. Besides, our faith is a very poor foundation on which to base salvation and justification. Our faith is weak, imperfect, changeable, unstable and faltering.
- d. Thus the Bible teaches that we are justified “*through*,” “*by*” or “*out of*” faith, but never “*on account of*” or “*because of*” faith.

2. Faith alone is the instrument of justification.

- a. By faith alone the righteousness of Christ becomes legally ours, it is imputed or reckoned to us, so that God blesses us on account of that righteousness.
- b. By faith alone we lay hold of the righteousness of Christ, and it becomes ours in our experience.
- c. By faith alone we know ourselves to be justified, we know peace and joy which come from justification (Rom. 5:1; Luke 18:14). Remember that faith is God’s gift, not our contribution.

3. Arminianism appeals to Gen. 15:6, and to Rom. 4:3, 5 and Gal. 3:6 (which quote Gen. 15:6).

- a. These texts say that “his faith is counted for righteousness.” Does that mean his faith is counted instead of perfect righteousness, or his faith is counted as if it were righteousness?
- b. This does not mean that Abraham’s act of faith was Abraham’s righteousness before God. Abraham’s faith was weak and faltering as is our faith.
- c. Throughout Romans 4 Paul emphasizes the non-imputation of sin (v. 8) and the imputation of righteousness (not faith) (vv. 6, 11).
- d. Faith here stands for the *object* of faith – Jesus Christ and His righteousness which He would perform and which Abraham believed. God reckoned to Abraham not his faith (as if that were something meritorious) but that which Abraham embraced by faith (Jesus Christ and His righteousness). See Heid. Cat. LD 23, Q&A 61; BC 22 (“However to speak more clearly ...”).

B. Since faith alone is the instrument of justification all works of man are excluded (Rom. 3:28).

1. Justification excludes all our works, and is only by the works of another, namely Jesus Christ.

- a. Justification is not by any work of man, not by the deeds of obedience to the Law.
- b. Justification is not even by any work of man performed by the power of grace, worked in man by the HS or worked by the power of faith.
- c. No work of man – no matter how small – contributes to the justification of a sinner before God.

2. Against this all proponents of justification by faith and works appeal to James 2 (esp. v. 24).

- a. Those who appeal to James assume that James must be used to interpret Paul and not vice versa. In fact, Paul must interpret James. Or, to be precise, infallible Scripture must interpret itself according to proper interpretative rules.
- b. Paul is the theologian, the penman of the HS, who systematically deals with the subject of justification in the epistles to the Romans, Galatians and elsewhere. James mentions justification once in one place in an entirely different context. Rom. 3:20 (“by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified”); Rom. 3:24 (“being justified freely by his grace”); Rom. 3:28 (“a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law”).
- c. James is addressing the subject not of a legal declaration of God but of the demonstration of justification to one another in the church. He addresses those who “say” they have faith but who “show” no evidence (James 2:14, 17, 18).
- d. James concludes that Abraham and Rahab demonstrated their faith by their works, and that a “faith” which produces no works as evidence is dead, non saving faith (vv. 14, 17).

3. Thus we can see the relationship between faith and works

- a. In Paul, justification is before God; in James, it is before other men (who cannot see faith).
- b. Justification is God’s gracious act, based only on the righteousness of Christ, declaring a sinner to be righteous, received by the instrument of faith alone. But that faith always produces fruit of good works. The Reformers often said: *We are justified by faith alone but that faith is never alone!* (see Heid. Cat. LD 24, Q&A 64;). That is sanctification, the next step in the Ordo Salutis.