

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration

Lesson 10: The Triumph of the Gospel

Statement 12. We affirm that the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us, whereby our sins are fully forgiven and we are fully accepted, is essential to the biblical Gospel (2 Cor. 5:19-21). We deny that we are justified by the righteousness of Christ infused into us or by any righteousness that is thought to inhere within us.

Statement 13. We affirm that the righteousness of Christ by which we are justified is properly his own, which he achieved apart from us, in and by his perfect obedience. This righteousness is counted, reckoned, or imputed to us by the forensic (that is, legal) declaration of God, as the sole ground of our justification. We deny that any works we perform at any stage of our existence add to the merit of Christ or earn for us any merit that contributes in any way to the ground of our justification (Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8,9; Titus 3:5).

I. Review from Previous Lesson

A. The Fact of Our Justification

1. Justification is that event whereby God declares us righteous, forgives all our sin, and accepts Christ's life and death in our stead. This is our permanent legal standing before God (Rom. 8:1-4).
2. Justification does not mean God *makes* us righteous, but *declares* us righteous. Because of God's declaration there is no longer any accusation brought against us that has eternal consequences (Rom. 8:33-34).
3. To be justified is to be foreknown, predestined, called, and ultimately glorified by God (Rom. 8:29-30). Despite our unworthiness, we have the richest heritage in the entire universe!
4. The sole ground of our justification is the life and death of Jesus Christ. Our sinfulness is covered by Christ's sinlessness. In His life He perfectly obeyed the Law and in His death He paid its penalty. In justification God credits to our account all the merits of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21).
5. As lawbreakers we are freed from the curse and consequent penalty of God's Law. In grace and mercy God bestows on us His favor and the status of being in right relation to Him (Gal. 3:13-14; cf., Gen. 15:6).

B. The Means of Our Justification

1. Christ's Obedient Life and Death: The Material Cause
2. God's Gift of Faith: The Instrumental Cause

II. The Source and Application of Our Righteousness: Alternative Interpretations

A. Inherent Righteousness: Pelagius and Liberals

1. On Humanity:
 - a) Theoretically, all humans are capable of realizing their own justification. There is no original sin. This view is overly optimistic about human nature.
 - b) Everyone is responsible for their own moral improvement since moral qualities are non-transferable.
 - c) Sin is reduced to bad habits learned from bad examples.
2. On Jesus:
 - a) "Righteous" is how Jesus behaved, not an attribute He possesses.
 - b) God sent Christ to inspire us as a moral example and show he is a God of love
3. On Justification:
 - a) The major obstacle to our justification is a false view of God as holy and righteous.
 - b) God rewards each individual based upon the work they have performed.
 - c) Moral improvement comes by breaking with bad habits and following Jesus' example.
 - d) God finds those who improve themselves to be worthy of His fellowship.
 - e) Justification, therefore, is a change wrought by us, not by God.
4. Unitarians, Congregationalists, and extreme liberals hold to some form of this doctrine.

B. Infused Righteousness: Traditional Roman Catholicism

1. On Humanity:
 - a) All humans are in need of God's grace and infused righteousness.
 - b) Some exceptional humans ("saints") can earn a surplus of merits before God and transfer them to others.
 - c) Catholics find it inconceivable that a holy God would accept sinners.
2. On Justification:
 - a) God infuses righteousness into us in order to prepare us to receive his grace administered through the Church. This infusion is like a seed planted in the soul that must be cultivated by human merit, sacraments of the Church, and tradition. Following Augustine, Catholicism insists that the righteousness of God is *infused* or *merged into* our nature at baptism.
 - b) Righteousness, therefore, increase/decreases relative to a person's cooperation with God's infused grace.
 - c) Assurance of justification cannot be guaranteed and infused righteousness can be forfeited by mortal sin and restored only by the sacrament of penance.
 - d) Complete justification is both an event and a process. Justification is both the instantaneous event by which we begin the Christian life (usually at infant baptism or the "baptism of desire") and the process by which it is developed in conjunction with our cooperation.
 - e) If final justification does not result in this life, purgatory must be endured. Time in purgatory can be shortened by the prayers, masses, and the surplus merit communicated by "saints."

C. Imputed Righteousness

1. Luther's Enlightenment:
 - a) Luther was keenly aware of his own sinfulness and the impossible burden of meeting the conditions set forth by the Church for complete justification.
 - b) Luther understood the "righteousness of God" solely in terms of judgment and wrath against sinners. He had not thought of God's righteousness in terms of a gift to sinners, until intense reflection upon Rom. 1:17 "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith.""
 - c) The key insight of Martin Luther: Justification entails a basic change in our *status* before God rather than in our *nature*. Although righteous by faith alone, we remain sinners.
 - d) The realization that God was merciful and gracious in offering His righteousness in exchange for our sinfulness was "Good News" and spawned the Reformation of the 16th Century.
2. On Justification:
 - a) Whereas with *infusion* God implants the possibility of righteousness in the soul, *imputation* involves a crediting of God's righteousness to us. Justification does not affect our *condition* so much as our *state* before God.
 - b) Imputation is a two-part event: (1) Our sin is imputed to Christ and (2) His righteousness is imputed to us (Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:19-21). The perfect obedience of Christ in life and death *is treated as if it were ours*; hence, it is credited to our account.
 - c) Although the crediting of God's righteousness happens *outside* of us, the effects of this great exchange occur *inside* of us. The former is the act of justification and the latter is the process of sanctification.
 - d) Sanctification is to justification as effect is to cause. Sanctification is the *result of* justification and must be kept distinct from God's declaring us righteous by faith alone in Christ alone.
 - e) Justification takes place once-for-all; it is neither repeated nor a process. It does not come in degrees; one is neither more nor less "justified."
 - f) Because we are sinners by nature and by choice, we are neither capable of nor qualified for the righteousness of God (Ps. 14:3; Is. 64:6; Rom. 1:18ff; 3:23; 5:12, 18-19; 7:18; Eph. 2:3c).

3. The Impact of Luther's Enlightenment:

- a) Since justification does not depend upon any human effort but upon God alone, the believer can rest secure in their standing before God. Justified by faith apart from all human endeavors is the foundation for assurance of salvation.
- b) Faith is never mentioned in Scripture as the ground or basis of our justification. We're not just *because* we believe. If this were so, faith would be a meritorious work. Faith is always "faith in" or "faith that;" it is the object of our faith (viz., Christ) that provides the basis for our righteous standing before God. Arminians posit that believers are justified on account of their faith, whereas Calvinists insist that we are justified on account of Christ.
- c) Because *infusion* involves the beginning of a process whereby we are made righteous, the distinctions between justification and sanctification were blurred beyond recognition.
- d) *Imputation*, on the other hand, involves a specific point in time when God *pronounces* us justified. Moreover, "because it is God who supplies both the righteousness on the basis of which we are justified and the faith through which it is imputed to us, we may rest assured that all that needs to be done for our justification has been done" (McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, p. 60).

III. Discussion Questions

A. Given the reformed position of imputed righteousness, how do we avoid moral laxity?

1. Rome says the Protestant notion of being declared eternally righteous results in indifference. Hence, faith plus works (merit) are necessary for salvation.
2. Protestants claim to rest secure in salvation. Hence, faith apart from works is all that is necessary and sufficient for entrance into God's kingdom.
3. But, isn't being declared righteous just a cloak for living in sinful pride?

B. Does God's offer of salvation to some amount to favoritism?

1. In order for God to remain impartial, he must set the same criteria for everyone to enter heaven.
2. Everyone must meet the same criteria; otherwise God is partial and unjust in saving some.
3. Shouldn't we all get what we deserve *and* what we have rightfully earned?