

5. Justification and the Law (3Q 2010—Redemption in Romans)

Biblical material: *Romans 4*; Gen. 15:6; 2 Samuel 11, 12; Rom. 3:20–23, 31; 4:1–17; Gal. 3:19; 1 John 3:4.

Quotes

- I fought the law, and the law won. *Sonny Curtis*
- There is only one justification for having sinned, and that is to be glad of it. *Henry Louis Mencken*
- God’s designs may be frequent justification for our actions, but it is we, the self-made men, who take the credit. *Arthur Erickson*
- Lutherans, whose arguments and mistakes will not be difficult to contest or discover, do not want to attribute any value to works, and they do not understand enough the scope of the justification. *Michael Servetus*
- Since we have placed justification in the revelation of Jesus Christ formed and brought forth in the heart, there working his works of righteousness and bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit. *Robert Barclay*
- The man of science has learned to believe in justification, not by faith, but by verification. *Thomas Huxley*

Questions

How does the law fit into how we’re made right with God? What does the example of Abraham’s experience tell us? What is the role of trust in all of this? How does the law help us then? Why did God give us the law in the first place? How did God help Abraham develop his trust? Is trust “blind faith”? How are we made right?

Bible discussion

Abraham is chosen as an example of someone who God makes right through his trust. There is no qualification in terms of work-requirements—simply that Abraham trusts God (4:1-3). This is the same for us, and Paul quotes David about how God takes care of our sinful lawlessness (4:4-8). Next comes the question of whether God’s special people (the Jews) get a special benefit. This passage makes it clear once again that belonging to any group does not guarantee that God makes you right. In fact Paul points out that Abraham was blessed even before he was circumcised—the sign of belonging to God’s people (4:9-12).

What God promised Abraham was not “performance-related.” In other words, he was made right by trusting God, not because of his observance of the law—for this would invalidate the basis of the promise (4:13-15). In the same way God’s promise to us is based on our trusting God. Just as Abraham trusted God and he was considered right, so too us. In fact the whole experience of Abraham was recorded so we could see this—it wasn’t just for Abraham (4:16-23). “It was for us too, we who are to be accepted as right, since we trust in God who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. Jesus was betrayed because of our sins, and was raised to life to make us right.” (4:24, 25 FBV). Here is the primary concept for us as Christians—that through the power of the resurrection we can be made right with God as we trust in him.

Comment

The key verse here is, “Whoever works gets paid, not as a gift, but what they’re owed.” (4:4 FBV). In other words, it’s a whole different system. The law-observance system is a contractual one—you get paid for work. The trouble is that the system actually *doesn’t* work because of who we are.

God’s way of making us right is through what he does for us as a free gift. Yet we still keep on wanting to get paid—or even worse, want to pay for the free gift! But by looking at Abraham as an example, we understand that he was made right by God as he trusted in his heavenly Father. His response to God in leaving his homeland and following God’s leading reveals his trust, a trust that God could respond to by re-making Abraham. It was when Abraham failed to trust (like in identifying his wife as his sister, twice, or in agreeing to Sarah’s idea to take Hagar as a second “wife” to have children) that he was not right with God. As a result of his failure to trust, God had to bring Abraham back to trust so that he could continue to work with him. One prime example is when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac—as a way to help Abraham to have total trust in God, even coming to the point of trusting God that he would raise Isaac from the dead if necessary.

The main point is that when we go our own way things go wrong. Trying to make ourselves right by legalistic observance is doomed to failure, as this passage makes clear. We’ve already agreed that the law is important—but only in helping us understand our fatal situation, not in saving or healing us. In fact, trying to beat ourselves into shape using the law rejects God’s free gift and denies us the promise (4:14). The promise is based on trusting God (4:16), one that in Abraham’s life had dramatic fulfillment since Abraham was convinced (in the end) that God had the power to do exactly what he said (4:21).

We too trust in God, and we have more to base our trust on—the resurrection of Jesus (4:24). Note carefully what verse 25 really says: It was *because of* (Gk: “*dia*”) our sins that Jesus was betrayed (handed over) to die. Our sins were the cause of his betrayal and death, not that he died on behalf of them as some translations state (e.g. “put to death for our trespasses” RSV). In fact here in Romans it’s made clear that the way God makes us right is through Jesus’ resurrection (4:25).

Ellen White Comments

A little girl once asked me, “Are you going to speak this afternoon?” “No, not this afternoon,” I replied. “I am very sorry,” she said. “I thought you were going to speak, and I asked several of my companions to come. Will you please ask the minister to speak easy words, that we can understand. Please tell him that we do not understand big words, like ‘justification’ and ‘sanctification.’ We do not know what they mean.”

The little girl’s complaint contains a lesson worthy of consideration by teachers and ministers. Are there not many who would do well to heed the request, “Speak easy words, that we may know what you mean”? {RH, September 9, 1902}

When you turn away from the broken cisterns that can hold no water, and in the name of Jesus your Advocate come directly to God, asking for the things you need, the righteousness of Christ will be revealed as your righteousness, the virtue of Christ as your virtue. You will then understand that justification will come alone through faith in Christ; for in Jesus is revealed the perfection of the character of God... {ISM 330}

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