

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

One Additional Tether The Law and the Gospel...

What we've been looking at the past eleven weeks is the ongoing struggle of the church to maintain the two great tethers of orthodoxy. We've seen how the church battled repeatedly over the questions:

- (1) Who was Christ?
- (2) What did He accomplish on behalf of his people.

As we wrap up this study, my prayer is that you will have gained a sense of connection with the past, a sense of God's providential kindness in maintaining the purity of the gospel. I also pray that you have become able to articulate the gospel as proclaimed by Christ and the Apostles. May I take a moment and remind you of the content of the gospel.

The gospel is properly the story of Christ. It is the life, death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It is wondrously good news, the best news that ever was.

But in this study it is the application of the gospel with which we have concerned ourselves. Thus, we have focused on the doctrine of justification through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

The doctrine of justification has two elements to it. Both elements involve the idea of imputation. First, our sin was imputed to Christ on the cross. He bore, in our place, the righteous judgment of God. The punishment for all of our lawbreaking, for all of our sin was put on His account. It was crucial that our sin be dealt with; it was vital that God's justice be satisfied. Christ satisfied the demands of a holy, righteous God. This was the principal point Anselm made in his prominent work, Why the God Man? In modern America today, there is a growing concern with the injustice we see. We see it in the failure of the courts to uphold the law of the land, and we see it in the failure of the courts to exact retributive justice at the expense of criminals. But God is not like our courts, He will have justice and every person who ever lived will find himself cowering before a vengeful God in eternity or resting in the imputed righteousness of Christ.

It was crucial that our substitute be one of our kind, thus it was crucial that Christ have a human nature, but Christ was the God-man and as a result His sacrifice had eternal implications. This was the principal point Athanasius made in his work On the Incarnation. Christ had to be both God and man, as the Scriptures affirm or else we are dead in our sins.

So on the one hand our sin was imputed to Christ, and God's justice was upheld. One had only to look at the terror of the cross to get a sense of the dreadful

nature of our sin. But God did not leave us naked. Christ's righteousness was imputed to all of us who have placed our faith in Him. We are clothed with the righteousness He displayed in living under the law of God. He kept the law of God perfectly, even in its most profound application and God reckons His righteousness as our own. This was the principal concern as we have seen of both Luther and Calvin. We have the alien righteousness of Christ put to our account, so in a real sense the doctrine of justification has two parts: (1) our sin to Christ, and (2) His righteousness to us.

But as we have seen over the last eleven weeks, it is just at this point that the church has had its greatest struggles. It is as if there is a proclivity, a tendency to want to present our own righteousness before God. Like Cain before us, we want to present the works of our hands as a sacrifice of appeasement to God. As a result there has been an ongoing tendency to promote man's ability. This was the contribution of both Pelagius and Finney. At times, there has been the denial of original sin. At other times, men have set forth the atonement of Christ as really nothing more than an example to be emulated.

We have watched with wary eyes the impact such theology has had. We have seen how practices were altered or created that more perfectly reflected the pride and arrogance of self-sufficient men and, as a result, we have been forced to begin to think about our own generation. Never in the history of man has there been a more pragmatically oriented generation than ours. Our generation wants a theology that works, that produces happier lives and smarter children. What they have gotten instead is a religion stripped of the central tenets of Christianity. Gone are the historic elements of sin, guilt, sacrifice, atonement and

reconciliation. The modern church has forgotten the Law, the judicial wrath of God. We no longer teach the demands of the Law, the impossible standard that the Law holds us to. Instead, we are relevant, not realizing that God has ordained only Law and Gospel to advance His kingdom. Today, it is as H. Richard Niebuhr described years ago when he accused the liberal church of his generation for proclaiming,

A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.

But in spite of the direction our culture has gone, God has been gracious to us. It is true that we are somewhat single-minded. We are like people that have been cured of the worst form of cancer, who invariably turn every conversation back to the miracle of our own cure. We do see our sin, and that is precisely the point. We want to focus on the forgiveness we enjoy, the alien righteousness that has been applied to our account. Do not tell us that the justification of sinners is not practical. We are sinners and we are eternally aware of the practical aspects of standing before a holy God in something other than our own unrighteousness. We hear admonitions to get on with the whole counsel of God, but for us this doctrine, the doctrine of justification through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, *is* the whole counsel of God. In that sense, we are like J. Gresham Machen who earlier this century was quoted as saying:

What good does it do to me to tell me that the type of religion presented in the Bible is a very fine type of religion and that the thing for me to do is just to start practicing that type of religion now?...I will tell you, my friend. It does me not one tiniest little bit of good...What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your

exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?

We have heard the good news and we have believed the Lord's report. We did not believe because we were better than others, far from it. We believed because the Spirit of God regenerated us and shed the love of Christ abroad in our hearts. It is because of His kindness that we have been saved. We have been saved, isn't that a marvelous thought. We have been redeemed from our sin, purchased with the blood of Christ and because of that redemption we are not our own. As a result of that redemption, we want to hold on to the truth. We want to cling to the two tethers of who Christ was, and what He accomplished on our behalf. But we have seen that the attacks on these two tethers have been subtle. Often as not, the message has been sublimated to the success of the messenger. If someone has success, we overlook his message. But such things ought not to be. One famous evangelist earlier this century said,

It makes no difference how you get a man to Christ so long as you get him there.

Now in spite of this man's success, I don't believe for a moment that that statement is true. Does it mean that we lie and offer health and wealth where none has been promised? Does it mean that we can soft-soap the truth about men's utter sinfulness and inability before God? Does it mean that we can alter the message of Christ's atoning work on or behalf, simply because people don't like the idea of a wrathful God? It does make a difference on how men are brought to God, it must be with the gospel that God has revealed, otherwise we have not gotten men to God at all. We have, instead, given them false hope in a

false gospel. We have promised beautiful jewelry and given them paste pearls instead.

So we cling to the two tethers of who Christ was and what He accomplished on our behalf. But how can we be sure that we are, in fact, hanging on to these two tethers? What I want to discuss with you in the remaining few moments that we have is a particular method of interpreting the Bible that the Reformers used to make sure they stayed on track. It is called a “law-gospel hermeneutic”. Don’t let that big word scare you. “Hermeneutic” simply means method of interpretation. The Reformers believed that the whole Bible was about Christ’s work of redemption. As a result they saw either law or gospel throughout the Bible. They believed this distinction between law and gospel was pivotal to understanding the Bible. Let me give you a few quotes that reflect their thinking:

This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should be able to state this difference. If this ability is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a heathen or a Jew; of such supreme importance is this differentiation. This is why St. Paul so strongly insists on a clean-cut and proper differentiating of these two doctrines. **(Martin Luther)**

We divide this Word into two principal parts or kinds: the one is called the Law, the other the Gospel. For all the rest can be gathered under the one or other of these two headings. The Law is written by nature in our hearts, while what we call the Gospel (Good News) is a doctrine which is not at all in us by nature, but which is revealed from Heaven (Mt. 16:17; John 1:13). The Law leads us to Christ in the Gospel by condemning us and causing us to despair of our own righteousness. Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel, is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity. **(Theodore Beza)**

Clearly to understand the distinction, connection, and harmony between the law and the Gospel, and the mutual subserviency to illustrate and establish each other, is a singular privilege, and a happy means of preserving the soul from being entangled by errors on the right hand or the left (**John Newton, Works, 1 pg. 350**).

There is no point on which men make greater mistakes than on the relation which exists between the law and the gospel. Some men put the law instead of the gospel; others put gospel instead of the law. A certain class maintains that the law and the gospel are mixed...These men understand not the truth and are false teachers. (**Charles Spurgeon**)

The distinction between the Law and the Gospel, which is so clearly taught in Holy Scripture, the Christian must conscientiously observe. (He) must neither weaken the condemning force of the Law nor diminish the saving comfort of the Gospel. Unless the Law and the Gospel are thus preached ... the Christian religion is deprived of its distinct content, is paganized by the introduction of works-righteousness as the cause of salvation, and is therefore rendered incapable of saving sinners. (**J.T. Mueller**)

The law included any command that condemned men in their disobedience. Sometimes the command might be obvious like the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother". At other times it might be couched in a story like the story of Absalom who suffered the consequences of his own rebellion against his father, David. In either case, the law still condemns. It displays a command from God and as a result demands perfect obedience. When we examine ourselves in light of God's law or commands, we see that we come up short of obedience. Listen to how Luther puts it:.

The law is the Word in which God teaches and tells us what we are to do and not to do, as in the Ten commandments. Now wherever human nature is alone, without the grace of God, the Law cannot be kept, because since Adam's fall in paradise man is corrupt and has nothing but a wicked desire to sin and in his

heart cannot be favorably disposed toward the Law, as we know by our own experience...And this difficulty or this unwillingness to do what is good prevents us from keeping God's Law; for what is kept with dislike, difficulty, and unwillingness, rates before God as not having been kept at all. And so the Law of God convinces us by our experience that we are naturally wicked, disobedient, lovers of sin, and enemies of God's commandments.

And on the same topic, Calvin says:

So soon as he begins to compare his works with the requirements of the Law, he has something to tame his presumption. How ever high his opinion of his own powers may be, he immediately feels that they pant under the heavy load, then totter and stumble, and finally fall and give way. He, then, who is schooled by the Law, lays aside the arrogance which formerly blinded him. In like manner must he be cured of pride, the other disease under which we have said that he labors. So long as he is permitted to appeal to his own judgment, he substitutes a hypocritical for a real righteousness...But after he is forced to weigh his conduct in the balance of the Law, he sees that he is at an infinite distance from holiness, and, on the other hand, that he teems with innumerable vices of which he formerly seemed free. Thus the Law is a kind of mirror.. As in a mirror we discover any stains upon our face, so in the Law we behold, first, our impotence ; then, in consequence of it, our iniquity; and, finally, the curse, as the consequence of both.

The gospel on the other hand makes no demands at all. It is pure offer. It is the promise of Christ's righteousness applied to our account through faith. Listen to the way Luther describes it:

The other word of God is not Law or commandment, nor does it require anything of us; but after the first Word, that of the Law, has done this work and distressful misery an poverty have been produced in the heart, God comes and offers his lovely, living Word, and promises, pledges, and obligates himself to

give grace and help, that we may get out of this misery and that all sins not only be forgiven but also blotted out and that love and delight to fulfill the law may be given besides. See, this divine promise of his grace and of the forgiveness of His is properly called Gospel. And I say again and yet again that you should never understand Gospel to mean anything but the divine promise of his grace and of the forgiveness of sin. For this is why hitherto St. Paul's epistles were not understood and cannot be understood by our adversaries even now; they do not know what Law and Gospel really are. For they consider Christ a Legislator and the Gospel nothing but the teaching of new laws. This is nothing else but locking up the gospel and obscuring everything...Therefore works do not belong to the gospel; for it is not laws but faith alone, because it is nothing whatever but the promise and offer of divine grace. He, then, who believes the Gospel received grace and the Holy Spirit. Thereby the heart becomes glad and joyful in God and then keeps the Law gladly and freely, without the fear of punishment and without the expectation of reward; for it is sated and satisfied with that grace of God by which the law has been satisfied.

So, what I am saying is that the key to staying attached to these two important tethers, (1) Who was Christ?, and (2) What did He accomplish on behalf of His people?, is to put into practice the Reformer's method of interpreting the Bible. That is, we should learn to understand the Scripture in terms of law and gospel. That is where the Scripture makes commands, we should evaluate our behavior in light of those commands. We should meditate on the perfection that God demands, the righteous behavior that He deserves. Considering biblical commands in this way will keep us from pride, and from sloth. We will see our failure to do all that God has commanded and doing so will drive us to Christ.

Stripped of our own self-righteousness we will seek the comfort and consolation that Christ alone can give. We will see His work afresh and new every time we contemplate our own sinfulness. And this is not a process that ends with our justification. Even Christians, I should say especially Christians, need to be reminded over and over of Christ's saving work on their behalf. But this saving

work loses its meaning unless we continually contemplate our own condition. As believers, we should look at the law and strive to obey it in all of its rigor. But as we evaluate our obedience, we will become discouraged and flee to the only place where there is consolation, Christ Himself. This is true because even the most mature believer never succeeds in keeping God's law perfectly. Reading the Bible as law and gospel will encourage us to obey because of what Christ has done on our behalf. Failure to obey perfectly will drive us to Christ anew and the reconsideration of the great love with which He has loved us. This process will be repeated over and over again as long as we live because we know with Calvin that:

We are all partly unbelievers throughout our lives.

You can see how this use of the law and the gospel can help keep us attached to the two tethers. Because of our failure, we are forced to flee continuously to Christ and His cross. Fleeing to His cross causes us to reconsider (1) Who He was?, and (2) What He accomplished on our behalf?

Lastly, you may be asking, "How do I do it?" Let me suggest a couple of, and I really hesitate to use this word, "practical" ways. First, let me recommend that you memorize the Ten Commandments. Repeat them to yourself and to the Lord in prayer. Think about each one, that is, meditate upon it. Consider it in all its fullest dimensions. Ask yourself not how have I obeyed this command, but how have I failed to keep this command?

Luther was often accused by the Catholics of being against the law. I think Luther's response to such charges help provide valuable insight into his view of the law.

It is most surprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches ... Furthermore, the commandments are sung in two versions, as well as painted, printed, carved, and recited by the children morning, noon, and night. I know of no manner in which we do not use them unless it be that we unfortunately do not practice and paint them with our deeds and our life as we should. I myself, as old and as learned as I am, recite the commandments daily word for word like a child.

Now its interesting that the man God used to restore the gospel to the church kept the law of God on his heart and mind daily. What we see is that that reflection on the commandments of God, help to clarify our reflection of the gospel. Once you come to see your failure to keep God's law, ask yourself, "How did Christ obey this law on my behalf?" The implications of such a question has its own rewards, because it forces us back to the two tethers. Lastly, begin to apply this idea of law and gospel to other passages as you read the Bible. Let me supply just one example.

^{NAS} **Luke 18:18**...And a certain ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰ "You know the commandments,

‘DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.’ [21] And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth." ²² And when Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." ²³ But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich. ²⁴ And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!

One popular evangelist recently preached a sermon on this passage called "No One Who Drives a Cadillac Will Make It to Heaven." But is that the content of what Jesus is preaching? Notice the one commandment of the second table that he leaves out. What is it? It is covetousness. What Jesus is doing is cutting through the man's pretenses and try to get him to examine his own failure to keep the law. The man was unwilling because of his covetousness to follow Christ. It was not that the man had actually obeyed all the other commands, but Jesus focused on the one command that He knew would cut to the heart of the matter.

Reading this passage we should ask ourselves whether covetousness has gotten in the way of our devotion to God. We should ask ourselves whether there are material possessions or physical relationships that are more important to us than our service to Christ. What one thing usurps His rightful place. Then lastly, we should note how Christ obeyed this element of the law on our behalf? What did Christ hold back? Was there anything more important to Him than obedience to His Father? The answer is He held nothing back, He left the worship of legions of

angels to assume humanity, and a that humanity was of the most modest kind. He was the rightful King of Israel and yet He was poor. He gave up His rightful place in heaven only to be rebuffed and abused by the very men He came to save. Think of the marvel of it all.

When we consider the passage in this manner, we see our need and His gift and we will begin to grasp more firmly the idea of law and gospel and as a consequence grasp more tightly the two tethers that hold us to the biblical doctrine of justification. When we do, we will be able to pray with Calvin:

*Grant, Almighty God,
that as You have made known to us Your Law,
and have also added Your Gospel,
in which You called us to Your service,
and also invited us with all kindness, to partake of Your grace, --
O grant, that we may not be deaf,
either to Your command or to the promises of Your mercy,
but render ourselves in both instances submissive to You,
and so learn to devote all our faculties to You,
that we may in truth avow that a rule of a holy and religious life
has been delivered to us in Your law,
and that we may also firmly adhere to Your promises,
lest through any of the allurements of the world,
or through the flatteries and crafts of Satan,
You should suffer our minds to be drawn away from that love
which You have once manifested to us in Your only-begotten Son,
and in which You daily confirm us
by the teaching of the Gospel,
until we at length shall come to the full enjoyment
of this love in that celestial inheritance,
which has been purchased for us by the blood of Your only Son.
Amen.*