

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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How Can a Just God Forgive a Sinful Man?

Edited by John W. Robbins

On what basis does God accept a man? This is the most fundamental of all questions concerning salvation. Several answers have been given:

1. A life of complete obedience to the Law
2. Faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ
3. Some other way

Many people in the churches give the wrong answer. In seminaries many professors give the wrong answer.

This question demands a clear answer. And in order to give such an answer, we must be clear in our own minds about this important matter. This was the great issue of the Reformation. Some feel that times have changed and therefore old questions are irrelevant. But we believe the question is as relevant today as it was in the days of Paul or Luther. It is the most fundamental question that plagues the human heart. It is at the root of all problems in society.

The correct answer is Number 1: The only basis upon which any person is accepted by God is *a life of obedience to the Law*.

The Answer of Legalism

Most people choose Number 2 rather than Number 1 because they do not want to appear to be legalists. Most people choose faith in the Gospel of Christ

because they think it is against legalism. But answer Number 2 is actually the legalistic answer.

What is the basis, foundation, or ground on which a man is acceptable to God? None of the Reformers and no Bible scholar worthy of the Reformation tradition has ever said that faith is the basis or ground of acceptance with God. Of all attributes that God implants in the human heart, faith stands right at the top. It is the gift of God and the root of all virtues. It is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. But irrespective of the princely nature of faith, it never is the basis, foundation, or ground of salvation. One of the perils of the modern religious scene is the idea that it is *because* of my faith, *because* I am born again, or *because* I trust in Jesus that God accepts me.

To say that faith is the basis of acceptance with God is legalistic, because it offers to God something that is within me as the basis of acceptance with God. (That God gives faith makes no difference to the principle. Faith is still a quality within me.) If you take the time to look at the decrees of the Council of Trent on justification, you will see that Number 2 is the classic Roman Catholic answer. The Reformers and the Bible stood against that position. In this century of theological decline, however, the Biblical and Reformation doctrine was eclipsed by the Arminian and Roman doctrines, which hold that faith is the basis of our acceptance with God—that faith is a work that we do, a quality that we have, that makes us acceptable to a holy God.

The Answer of Faith

Now let us look at *Romans* 2: 12, 13:

For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; for not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.

The Bible is unequivocal. None but the doers of the Law is accepted by God. That is an eternal principle. God will not turn from it. He has never changed his mind. A life of perfect obedience—that is to say, a life of righteousness—is the only possible basis of acceptance with the holy and righteous God.

The trouble with so much evangelism today is that the Gospel is presented as a smart way of skirting the Law. It has come to mean a smart trick whereby we can jump over the claims of the Law straight into the presence of God. We think that the Gospel means that God is less demanding than he used to be.

God demands a life of perfect obedience to his Law. No lame, imperfect, halfway, partial obedience will satisfy his holiness: "the doers of the Law shall be justified." James says that if we offend in only one point, we are lawbreakers. This fundamental basis of Biblical Christianity has been overlooked in the twentieth century. There is little true preaching of the Law or the Gospel today. We have neglected to preach the holiness and majesty of God. God is presented as an easygoing benevolence who frantically runs around Heaven seeking how he may please insatiably worldly people. No wonder we're in such a religious quagmire. We need the Law. We need to know the holy requirement of God. We need to know the standard of God. We need to preach the standard of God in such a way that people will cry out, "How then can I be saved?"

When Paul contrasts the way of faith and the way of works in *Romans* and *Galatians*, he is not contrasting faith and works as such, but faith and our weak, puny, defective works. We must not get the idea that faith is against the Law. In *Romans*

3:31 Paul argues that the way of faith is not against the Law. Faith establishes the Law. Faith is not the negation of the Law of God. Faith honors the Law. Faith acknowledges that it is only on the basis of answer Number 1—a life of complete obedience to the Law—that God will ever accept a man.

Man's Predicament

In the early chapters of *Romans* Paul shows the perilous predicament of man: Neither Gentile nor Jew is able to meet the holy standard of God that is demanded in the Law of God. It is to rectify this situation that Paul talks—as he does in *Romans* 3:21-26—about Jesus Christ and the righteousness of God. But we often jump into *Romans* 3:21-26 without giving due attention to the force of the preceding argument. Let us remember that in *Romans* 1:13 to 3:20 Paul seeks to hammer home with unsurpassed clarity and inspired force the message that the whole human race is in a terrible predicament because man has not been able to give God what is God's due—and that is nothing less than perfect conformity to God's Law. The Christian Gospel honors the Law of God. Faith honors the Law of God. Since faith always depends on and takes its value from its object, faith will always answer: "The only basis by which a man is accepted by God is a life of complete obedience to the Law."

The Righteousness of God

"But now *the righteousness of God*. . . ." God intervenes into our terrible predicament. It was this "righteousness of God" around which and out of which the Reformation exploded. What is meant by the "righteousness of God"? *The righteousness of God is that which is measured by the character of God himself*. It is that which is commensurate with the holiness of God. It has God as its measure. It is his holy, spotless, divine character. *This righteousness of God is the demand of God*. His justice demands it of every man, woman, and child. This is what he has always demanded, and this is what he will always demand of us, because he could never demand anything less than his own perfect being.

This is the matter over which Martin Luther wrestled. He almost despaired when he saw this aspect of "the righteousness of God." He struggled with all his power and ascetic principles to give to God what God required. Yet his conscience gave him no rest. "Have I done enough? Have I done it well enough? How can I be sure?" It is because we today are not wrestling with these same convictions that the Gospel is virtually unknown. The Gospel only makes sense against the backdrop of God's radical and uncompromising demand for complete and total righteousness. When men and women understand that a life of perfect conformity to the Law is the only basis of acceptance with God, and when they are distressed as to how they can meet that demand, then, and only then, will the Gospel make any sense.

What is so wrong with much of our religiosity today is that we are not asking theological questions. We rather want to know, "How can God please me? How can he raise my self-esteem? How can God make me happy and successful?" But the fundamental question of the Bible and the fundamental question that gave birth to the Reformation was, "How can I please God?" Only when this question is an urgent necessity will the righteousness of God make any sense.

The righteousness of God is that which God himself provides. When Luther discovered this, the Reformation was born. That is the good news. That is the Gospel. The righteousness of Jesus Christ is both the demand of God and God's provision for his people. If you want to see what God demands of you and me, look at the perfect life of Jesus Christ. He was truly man as man was meant to be. Jesus is the righteousness of God in that he is the provision of God. When he was born into this world, it was a birth such as had not been since Adam fell. He came to Earth to live a life that no one had lived since Adam fell. If you look at the whole stream of human history from the Fall to the end of the world, you will see only thirty-three years that God accepts. Jesus came to give the perfect sacrifice, the substitutionary ransom for the failure of men and women to live righteously before God. He rose from the tomb and ascended to the right hand of

God, so that right now he is in God's presence as a perfect Man on behalf of all those who trust him.

Jesus came and lived a life of perfect obedience to the Law of God. His life matched the holiness of God at every point. What the holiness of God demanded, Jesus provided. Have you ever read *Concerning the Incarnation of the Word of God*, by Athanasius, or *Cur Deus Homo? (Why Did God Become Man?)* by Anselm? We ought to read these classics instead of the pious pap that dominates the shelves of our religious bookstores. These men grappled with the question of the Incarnation. God the Son had to become and did become man in order to provide for us what God the Father's holy self-consistency demanded.

The Action of Faith

Jesus provided the righteousness that God requires, but we are still obligated to agree with God in order to be justified. Christ's obedience to the law will not help you unless you agree to the transaction. How does that come about? It comes about *through* (not because of) faith. Faith is assent to the solution that God has provided in Christ Jesus.

When we come before God in repentance, we say, "Lord, I have not kept your holy law. I have not done what your holiness requires. You have done it for me in Jesus Christ. Mine are Jesus' birth, his sinless life, his death, resurrection and ascension." That is the language of faith. Faith accepts the utter sinfulness of self and the utter righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. *The righteousness of God, therefore, is my righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.* Sometimes charismatics ask, "Brother, have you made the exciting discovery of the Spirit-filled life?" The tragedy is that, when thus confronted, many Christians feel spiritually nude and embarrassed. The only answer of a man or woman of faith is, "Yes, what a life! I was born perfectly, I have lived commensurately with the holiness of God himself in my Substitute, Jesus Christ." When we boast about that Spirit-filled life of Christ (which is ours by faith alone), it makes every other so-called Spirit-filled life look insignificant and sinful by comparison. We have not outbragged the

charismatics, who boast of their own lives, by boasting about the life of Christ.

The righteousness of God, which is mine, through faith, is in Jesus Christ. It not a quality in my heart. This is the emphasis of *Romans 3:21-26*—"in Christ Jesus." This righteousness is found *alone* in Jesus at God's right hand. Paul tells the Colossians:

If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the Earth. For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory (*Colossians 3:1-4*).

So don't set your affection on the wrong life. Your life of sanctification, which of necessity follows justification, is a shadow of the Christian's true life at God's right hand. Our life is hid with Christ in God.

Conclusion

A life of obedience to the law—that which God demands—has been performed by the doing and the dying of Jesus Christ—his sinless life and his obedient death. I am able to present it to God by faith. This is not presenting the righteousness that I have within, but it is presenting the righteousness that is in Jesus Christ. It is, as Luther said, the alien righteousness of Christ. It is reserved in Heaven as a great treasure for people who live among thieves. Heaven is a safe place for it to be. Thus, God accepts us only on the basis of a perfect righteousness. He saves us justly. This means that our salvation is grounded on the justice of God. That is good news. We sometimes wonder if the mercy of God will run out. The pastor might tell us that God is merciful. Yet we may say, "But he doesn't know my heart. Is God that merciful?" But have you thought it possible that God would cease to be just? No! That is why we think his mercy may run out—because we know how just he is.

Here is the glorious message of *Romans 3:25, 26*, which is not taught today: The Gospel is a

declaration of God's justice *and* his mercy. God has saved us in a way that affirms that he is just. He has not skirted the Law. He has not been inconsistent. He has not repealed the Law. Before God could reject a man who trusts in Jesus Christ, he would first have to become unjust. "To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus" (*Romans 3:26*). So our security is grounded firmly in God's justice.

God has never changed his mind. He has always required perfect obedience to his law. And when he looked out at an utterly desperate world, he came himself—God the Son in a donkey's feedbox; God the Son allowing the Palestinian dust to sift through his toes as he fulfilled his own Law on our behalf. Faith acknowledges the Law because Jesus acknowledged the Law. Faith always chooses the perfect, law-conforming life of Jesus as the only basis for acceptance with God.

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