



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 7.2.7 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification by Works in the Sight of Man

In a few cases the term “justification” is not used to refer to God’s declaration that a person righteous for Christ’s sake, but refers to man’s declaration that another person is righteousness. In this case, one person declares another person righteous on the basis of that person’s works, that is, on the basis of their deeds and their actions. In other words, the faith in a person’s heart is shown by what that person does, and on this basis, they are declared righteous by those who see what that person is doing. Jesus’ brother James, in particular, uses this language when he says that **“faith without works is dead”** (James 2:20) and is no faith at all.

James was concerned with his readers who claimed to have faith but did not give evidence of this faith in their actions. So he asked: **“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?”** (James 2:14). **“Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead”** (James 2:17). In other words, true faith always brings forth fruit; if there is no fruit, there is no faith. It is in this context that James makes the statement: **“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? ... You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only”** (James 2:21-24). Abraham’s actions demonstrated the that he had faith in his heart.

This statement of James seems to be contrary to what Paul wrote. But there is no conflict when we realize that James was concerned about us giving evidence of faith in the sight of others. The apostle Paul agreed that faith without works is dead, for he wrote about **“faith working through love”** (Galatians 5:6). Someone has formulated this slogan: “We are saved by faith alone, but true faith is never alone.” The branches that are attached by faith to Christ, the Vine, will invariably bring forth fruit. Jesus said: **“A tree is known by its fruit”** (Matthew 12:33). **“By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”** (Matthew 12:37). On the Last Day it will become evident to all that Jesus’ sheep (those who trust in Him) have brought forth good fruit in their attitudes and actions. Jesus said: **“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:35). Love is the evidence and proof of faith.

In his first letter the apostle John shows how one can use his own actions to prove to himself that his faith is genuine: **“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:6-7). Walking in the darkness of sin and shame is sure proof that we do not have faith in Christ, even though we say we have fellowship with Him. But walking in the light is evidence that our faith is genuine, and we can be sure that we have cleansing from sin. John’s first letter contains many such self-tests that show the genuineness of faith. See 1 John 2:3-6, 9-11 and 1 John 3:10-15, 18-21. **“My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth”** (1 John 3:18).

Nevertheless, we need to be very careful in judging our faith by our own actions. For there are also hypocrites who seem to be able to imitate the actions of true Christians without being believers in Christ. Also, a genuine Christian may look at their own actions and give up hope that they are really a Christian. In the case of doubt, one must be persuaded to look away from one’s own actions and concentrate on Christ and His love as demonstrated on the cross.

The Christian congregation cannot see into the hearts of its members to determine whether they are genuine believers in Christ. The congregation must use the actions it sees to judge the faith of its members. Our faith in Christ is like an internal light that shines into the world by its good works and thus brings glory to our God (Matthew 5:14-16). Congregational discipline is possible only on the basis of actions that can be observed, not on the basis of faith within the heart. This does not mean we condemn others for not doing a certain amount of good works, but rather we confront those who demonstrate a lack of faith by sinful actions and lack of repentance. The congregation in Corinth was instructed by Paul to put out of their fellowship one man who was openly guilty of the sin of adultery. He was judged to be an unbeliever on the basis of his sinful actions (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

In summary, we can conclude that justification before God is by grace alone, but works, as the fruits of faith, show this justification before men. For example, the woman who washed Jesus' feet in Simon's house showed her faith in Christ's forgiveness by showering Him with her love (Luke 7:36-50).

One of our Lutheran fathers, George Stoeckhardt, summed up the doctrine of justification by writing: "The only way we men since Adam's fall can stand before God and be saved is that we who are destitute of and free from all righteousness, who have as our sole possession transgression and sin, clothe ourselves with a foreign righteousness, with Christ's blood and righteousness." By "foreign" righteousness he meant we are saved by the righteousness of someone else – a righteousness that is not our own. This "someone else" is Jesus Christ.

Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession* says: "Furthermore, it is taught (among us) that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in His sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5)" (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 38-40).

Article IV is a short article, but it is the key article that separated Martin Luther and his associates from the Roman Catholic teaching of his time. This article still separates genuine Lutherans from the adherents of the papacy. The Biblical basis for Article IV is presented at great length in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article IV (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 120-173).

Questions

1. How does a person show that he has faith in Christ?
2. What concern did James, the brother of our Lord, have with his readers?
3. What was the evidence of Abraham's faith that showed him to be righteous before men?
4. What is true of every branch that is attached to the true Vine, Christ?
5. How are people able to tell which persons are Jesus' disciples?
6. How can Christians look at their own actions to assure themselves that they are believers in Christ?
7. Why must we be very careful in judging ourselves in this way?
8. On what basis do Christian congregations make judgments concerning their members?
9. What is the main point and purpose of Article IV of the *Augsburg Confession*, quoted above?