



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

## **A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)**

### **Lesson 19.8 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins**

#### **Justification By Faith**

The Good News of Christ, that is, the Gospel of Christ, is that there is forgiveness of sins available for all through the life and death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was punished for the sin of the world. This Gospel comes to us through the Word of the Gospel and through the Gospel sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But in order for us to receive the benefits of forgiveness for ourselves individually, God must work trust in our hearts so that we rely on what God is giving us in the Gospel for our salvation.

The forgiveness of sins has been won for all through the work of Christ. God declares the whole world justified (righteous) because of Christ. When God tells us in His Word that Christ has saved us from our sins and that we are righteous in Him, He works in our hearts so that we put our confidence in what He says. When we believe in Jesus as our Savior, we possess the full benefit of what is being offered to us and what has been won for us: forgiveness of sins, justification, and the promise of eternal life. This is what is meant by "justification by faith". It means we are persuaded that we cannot earn, merit, or deserve forgiveness by anything we can do or leave undone, but that we simply believe that Jesus Christ has taken away our sin and we are righteous in Him.

The apostle Paul emphasized that justification is received by us through faith (trust) in what Christ has done and what the Holy Spirit has brought to us through the Gospel. We read this especially in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. **"There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith"** (Romans 3:30). Whether we are circumcised Jews or uncircumcised non-Jews (Gentiles), the way to receive justification is exactly the same: through faith.

The patriarch Abraham gives us an example of such faith. Again and again God told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, and that he and his family would be a blessing for all nations and peoples of the world. By this God meant that Abraham would become the father of the people from whom God was going to send the Savior of the world: His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. On one such occasion **"He (God) brought him (Abraham) outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness"** (Genesis 15:5-6). Notice how this works. God came to Abraham with the promise. God's promise worked faith in Abraham's heart, so that he believed God's promise. By believing that promise he is counted as righteous in God's eyes. God counts Abraham's faith as righteousness. This is justification by faith.

Paul explains Abraham's case like this: **"For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness"** (Romans 4:3-5). Working our own way to heaven and believing (trusting) that God has given us heaven as a gift are two opposite things. God does not owe us heaven because of our working for it. God gives us forgiveness and eternal life because of what Christ did, and He creates the faith by which we accept the gift and enjoy it. It is all grace, all undeserved; it is not a matter of what God owes us as a debt. He owes us nothing but punishment because of our sins. But He gives us in Christ a perfect righteousness that is ours simply through faith, a faith that He himself creates in our hearts through the Gospel.

Paul says that David taught the same thing. After referring to Abraham's faith as the way by which he received the righteousness of God, he says: **"But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works"** (Romans 4:5-6). The only way by which we can receive God's gift of justification for ourselves individually is by faith in Jesus Christ.

Here are some more testimonies from the apostle Paul. **"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified"** (Galatians 2:16). **"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe"** (Romans 3:21-22). God did what He did **"to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"** (Romans 3:26). **"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law"** (Romans 3:28). **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ** (Romans 5:1). **"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes"** (Romans 10:4).

God wants us to think in this way:

- a. God has already justified the whole ungodly world because of Christ.
- b. I am part of this ungodly world.
- c. Therefore, I too have been justified and declared righteous in God's sight.

The only sin that condemns now is unbelief, because unbelief rejects or ignores God's gift of righteousness in Christ, which is the only way we can stand holy before God. When we believe in Jesus, then we have God's justification for ourselves. This is called individual justification or subjective justification. God no longer counts my sins against me, because He has already counted them against Christ, in whom I believe. God now counts Christ's righteousness as my righteousness. I am holy in the sight of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

Again we quote the *Augsburg Confession*, Article IV:

"We ... become righteous before God

- 1) OUT OF GRACE
- 2) FOR CHRIST'S SAKE,
- 3) THROUGH FAITH, ...

for God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in His sight" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Webert edition, pp. 38-40).

*The Formula of Concord*, another of our Lutheran confessions, says: *"Poor sinful people are justified before God ... on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit conveys these benefits to us in the promise of the holy Gospel. Faith is the only means through which we lay hold of them, apply them to ourselves, and appropriate them. Faith itself is a gift of God"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, pp. 563-564).

## Questions

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1. How many persons has God declared righteous because of Christ's work?
2. How does God bring the Good News of this righteousness to people?
3. What is the only way by which we can receive justification?
4. Prove that your answer to question 3 is correct based on the Bible.
5. What is the difference between Jew and Gentile regarding the way to be saved?
6. What is the difference between wages and debt, on the one hand, and grace and gift, on the other?
7. Which came first: Abraham's faith or God's promise?
8. What is wrong with saying we are justified by works of the law?
9. Which persons does David call blessed? What does this mean?
10. What does it mean to be justified by faith?
11. What is the difference between universal justification and individual justification?
12. What is the difference between objective justification and subjective justification?
13. Explain the three points emphasized by Augsburg Confession Article IV.