



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 19.9 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

Again – The Main Thing

From the first promise spoken by God in Genesis 3 to the last pages of Revelation the whole Bible teaches justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. The apostle Peter said to Cornelius and his household: **"To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins"** (Acts 10:43). Justification by faith in Christ is thus the theme of the entire Bible. It is the main teaching of the Bible. That is why the apostle Paul stressed this teaching in his mission sermons. On his first mission trip with Barnabas to modern-day Turkey, he told the people of Antioch in Pisidia: **"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses"** (Acts 13:38-39). They could not be justified by the law of Moses, and neither can we. It is only Jesus who has won forgiveness and justification for the world, and it is only by faith in Jesus that we can receive this forgiveness and justification. Everyone who believes in Jesus is justified (declared righteous) in the sight of God. Our Lutheran fathers claimed that this teaching of justification by faith in Christ is the main teaching of the entire Bible.

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, is a teaching that shows that Christianity is different from all other religions. All other religions are religions of laws and works, of merits and rewards, or they are religions for this world only and promise no eternal future. They can provide no assurance of salvation because they are based on what we do or do not do. But Christianity is based on what God has already done in His love for us through Jesus Christ, and therefore those who trust in Jesus can be absolutely sure of their salvation. When Peter was on trial before the Jewish authorities, he proclaimed the saving power of Jesus: **"Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12). God has provided only one Savior for all, and that one Savior is His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only Savior for the whole world; there is no other Savior. If we are going to be saved, it must be through Jesus. God has no second plan for those who reject Jesus.

What does God say to those who reject Jesus and attempt to save themselves by their own efforts? This is His answer, given by His apostle Paul: **"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith"** (Galatians 5:4-5). If we depend on our own efforts to keep God's law, even in part, we have lost the only real Savior, Christ Jesus, and we have put ourselves back under God's curse that condemns all sinners. Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: *"All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites ... cannot be confident of His love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ"* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 440).

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith gives certain comfort to troubled sinners. King David was such a troubled sinner after he became aware of his great sins of adultery and murder, even after the Lord had given him such great blessings. But when he knew that there was forgiveness for Him from God because of God's promise of salvation through the coming Messiah, he wrote: **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity"** (Psalm 32:1-2). In these words **"David ... describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works"** (Romans 4:6).

This is the meaning of justification for us sinners. God counts us as righteous in His sight because of the Savior in whom we trust. God counts Christ's righteousness as ours; He imputes Christ's righteousness to us sinners. **"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Romans 5:1). **"We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation"** (Romans 5:11). **"It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"** (Romans 8:33-35). The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* says: *"This faith alone receives the forgiveness of sins, makes us acceptable to God, and brings peace and tranquility to the conscience"* (*Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert edition, p. 139). We can be sure our sins are forgiven, because this forgiveness relies on what God has done, not on what we have done.

The teaching of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, gives all glory to God. God's law knocks all of us down; the law declares all of us to be sinners who deserve eternal punishment. There is no one who is better than anyone else. Therefore no one of us can boast that we are somehow more worthy of eternal life than the next person. Since we ourselves can contribute nothing to our own salvation, all the glory of our salvation must go to God. He deserves praise for having saved us; we deserve no credit at all for our salvation. All glory goes to God.

At one time in his life the apostle Paul, as a typical Pharisee, boasted about his own accomplishments in keeping God's law. He certainly felt superior to other Jews and much superior to the heathen Gentiles. But after he came to know Jesus Christ and the teaching of salvation by grace, he made it a point to take away from us any reason for boasting. He says: **"What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin"** (Romans 3:9). Again he asks: **"Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith"** (Romans 3:27). In other words, if we were able to save ourselves by our works, or even contribute even the smallest thing to our salvation, we would have something to boast about. But the fact that we are saved by grace means that all the glory must go to God, who saved us.

"For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all" (Romans 11:32). **"For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen"** (Romans 11:36). Our salvation is all God's doing, **"that no flesh should glory in His presence"** (1 Corinthians 1:29). **"He who glories, let him glory in the Lord"** (1 Corinthians 1:31). **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast"** (Ephesians 2:8-9). **"To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen"** (Revelation 1:5-6).

Therefore we confess in the *Brief Statement* of 1932: *"Through this doctrine alone Christ is given the honor due Him, namely, that through His holy life and innocent suffering and death He is our Savior"* (#18).

By His life, death, and resurrection Jesus Christ won the forgiveness of sins for all sinners and established justification for all sinners. But the only way by which we sinners can receive the benefits of Christ's work for all is by faith, that is, by trusting in what Jesus has done for us all. Even Abraham in Old Testament times received Christ's benefits by faith in Him, for his faith in God's promise of the Savior was counted to Abraham for righteousness. He was **"fully convinced that what He (God) had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'it was accounted to him for righteousness.'** Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:21-25).

Questions:

1. What teaching does the Bible emphasize from Genesis to Revelation?
2. Why can no one be justified by the law of Moses?
3. In what way is Christianity different from all other religions?
4. Prove from Scripture that there is no Savior for the world except Jesus.
5. What does it mean to fall from grace?
6. Why can we not be truly comforted by a religion of works?
7. What gives us absolute assurance that our sins are forgiven?
8. Which kind of person did King David say was a blessed person?
9. What does it mean to impute iniquity to someone?
10. Why is it that Christians should not boast about their salvation?
11. What kind of boasting is proper for Christians?
12. How does the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ give all glory to God?
13. How was Abraham counted righteous in God's sight?