Laying the Foundation

Lesson 9

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH

Catechism Two, Lesson 9

Reading: Romans 4:1–8, 13–25

1. Does Keeping The Law Make Men Righteous?

The righteousness God demands from man is spelled out in the law. If man could keep the entire law without one slip, he would be righteous, or in right standing with God. The problem is that man is unable to keep the law. When we say that man is totally depraved, we are saying that by his own unaided efforts he cannot fulfill all of God’s commands. The law is a totality. If the entire law is not kept, none of it is kept. God considers righteousness by keeping the law as a whole—it is either all or nothing.

A. If we break any of the law, we have broken the whole law.

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all (James 2:10).

B. The law was given to cause us to see our own inability and need of a Savior.

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet (Rom. 7:7).

C. Man possesses nothing good within himself.

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not (Rom. 7:18).

D. God has found no one righteous, but all equally in need of the gift of righteousness.

… for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one (Rom. 3:9–12).

E. The law makes us aware of our sin and declares our guilt as legal fact.

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:19, 20).

2. How Does God Restore Man To Right Standing?

We are only reconciled or restored to right standing through the work of Christ, as by faith we identify ourselves with Him. This faith is based on a thorough turning from self-reliance and dead works to a complete trust in the work of another. We only have faith toward God to accept Christ’s work for us, to the extent that we have repented of dead works. Instead of working to merit righteousness, we agree with God that this is impossible. Then we accept His alternative which is to credit us with the righteousness of Christ. We see this kind of faith exemplified in Abraham, the father of the faithful.

For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness (Rom. 4:3).

All through the Old Testament, God prepared His people for His provision of Christ for justification. Each time men sinned, they were to bring a sacrifice; usually a bull, a sheep or lamb, or a goat. The blood of the animal was shed and sin was covered. But since sin was only covered, not taken away, these sacrifices were often repeated and did not grant complete access into God’s presence. Not until Christ became Himself the perfect Lamb of God did He remove sin forever and make possible not only access but union with God by faith. Nevertheless, the same principle has held true throughout God’s dealing with man: sin requires the shedding of blood, either the death of the sinner himself or of a substitute.

And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission (Heb. 9:22).

3. How Can God Be Just And Justify Sinners?

An important part of God’s own righteousness is His consistency in dealing with His creatures. He does not show partiality or respect any man’s person. He does not set aside His law capriciously. His law is the expression of His own personal character—the revelation of His perfect holiness. He is not somehow above and outside the law, for the law is simply the judicial or legal manifestation of what He is. God can never change or deny Himself.

A. The law demands the shedding of blood (death) in payment for sin.

Behold, all souls are mine … the soul that sinneth, it shall die (Ezek. 18:4).

God’s wrath is the expression of His holiness and righteousness. He must react against sin by demanding penalty and payment in full—expiation. God decreed that since the life is in the blood (Lev. 17:11), payment for sin would be the shedding of blood. Either the person who sinned must die or he could present a substitute. Christ came to earth to die as our substitute (or “vicar”). His death completely satisfied God’s penalty and payment for sin. Since He paid in our place, we call Him our vicarious substitute. Vicarious means in the stead of another.

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18).

B. Peace with God is only possible when His personal wrath is appeased.

Sin is not simply a legal matter, it is a personal insult to God. Expiation dealt with the legal satisfaction or payment for sin. The debt has been paid. Propitiation deals with restoring personal relationship, with restoring God’s favor. The suffering of Christ, our substitute, placates God’s wrath, giving Him a way to release us from punishment through granting pardon or forgiveness. The propitiation of Christ is pictured by the Old Testament Mercy Seat on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. God considered the Mercy Seat His place of meeting with His people. Underneath was the broken law, but it was covered over by the sprinkled blood of sacrifice.

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus (Rom. 3:24–26).

C. Justification means that we are legally declared in right standing with God.

Justification is God’s legal action to reconcile sinners to Himself. It does not set aside the law or violate His holy character in any way. He simply declares that since Christ has fully satisfied the law’s demands, God is now free to restore man to right standing on the basis of what Christ has done in his stead. Instead of holding us accountable for our sins, God deliberately charged all sin to Christ’s account, leaving us free from both guilt and penalty. All that is required of us to receive credit for Christ’s righteousness, and to transfer our guilt to Him, is our repentance and faith. Together these make possible the application of justification to us.

(1) We are restored to friendship with God.

And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God (James 2:23).

(2) We stand legally declared righteous.

Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness (Gal. 3:6).

4. What Is Imputation Of Righteousness?

Imputation refers to a system of divine bookkeeping by which sin or righteousness may be transferred from one person’s account to another’s. This principle is behind the whole idea of vicarious sacrifice and justification by faith. When God justifies us through our faith in Christ, He does not impute or account or reckon our sins to us any longer, but transfers this to Christ’s account. This word, imputation, comes from the Latin imputare which means “to consider, to reckon, to think, to account.”

Imputation is a legal decree or transaction. It becomes fact because God declares it to be His decision.

Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (Rom. 5:18, 19).

5. What Is The Righteousness Of God?

The righteousness of God is first of all His own character: it includes both His internal consistency and His fairness or justice in all His dealings. Secondly, this righteousness is applied to man as “right standing” with God in terms of covenant relationship. There is no understanding of righteousness apart from understanding covenant. The Old Testament teaches that righteousness on the part of either God or man consists in fulfilling the promises contained in the covenant or agreement between them. Righteousness is a gift of God to man received by faith; it clothes him like a garment making him acceptable in God’s sight, while God works on the inside by the Holy Spirit to change his character until he too is right and fair in all his dealings.

A. God Himself becomes our righteousness.

In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (Jer. 23:6).

B. The gift of righteousness is the gift of Christ Himself to us.

There are no degrees of righteousness in redemption because God has reduced us all to the same level: we are all sinners apart from the gift of Christ. The reason for this legal declaration is to eliminate the boasting natural to man.

That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written. He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:29–31).

C. The righteousness of God describes our change of position in relation to God.

We have right standing with God on one basis only: we are “in Christ.” We are no longer approaching Him on our own merits, which are totally repugnant to God, but our acceptance is in His beloved Son alone. We receive this new position of right standing by faith when we agree with God that even our best is worthless and rest our entire weight upon Christ.

But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ. And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith (Phil. 3:7–9).

D. Righteousness is imputed to us by justification, imparted in sanctification.

Laying the foundation stone of faith toward God means accepting the imputed righteousness of God. By faith we agree with God’s decree that we are in right standing with Him on the basis of Christ’s work on our behalf. This allows God to work a total change of character in us. He must first apply the blood to us before He can move in to remake us by the Holy Spirit. This gradual process of conforming us to His likeness in character is called sanctification. It is done as we cooperate in a continuing faith. Little by little God gives Himself to us as practical righteousness. All this is only possible because of the initial act of declared righteousness, or justification.

For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

Home Study: Lesson 9

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1. How is righteousness related to the law?

2. Why does the law not make men righteous?

3. What is the difference between expiation and propitiation?

4. Explain briefly how a substitutionary sacrifice could satisfy God’s requirements for righteousness.

5. What is imputation?

FAITH THAT