

Calvin's Institutes, Book Three, *The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ* [cont'd]

CHAPTER XI: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: ITS DEFINITION AND SUBSTANCE, PART 3

Statement of Calvin's Definition of "Justification by Faith."

Calvin on justification by faith:

On the contrary, justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.

This process is described as imputing, or reckoning, the righteousness of Christ to the man's account. And, being "clothed" in this righteousness and appearing in God's sight as righteous, he is justified by the judge, that is, confirmed, vindicated, and declared to be in the right.

From this follows Calvin's definition of Justification by Faith:

Therefore, we explain justification [by faith] simply as:
the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men.

And we say that it consists in

1. The remission (= cancellation) of sins, and
2. The imputation (= reckoning, crediting) of Christ's righteousness [to the sinner].

The picture is that the demerit of our sins is taken away and we are accounted to have Christ's righteousness in its place. On this basis, we are justified.

What Calvin means by this is that we are not reckoned righteous by the righteousness induced in us by the ministry of the Spirit, but that we are reckoned to be righteous before God because of our identification with the righteous Christ through our union with him.

Section 16. Contemplating our justification

Having spoken in preceding sections against the teaching that justification is the product of faith and spiritual works, Calvin continues, explaining why we must turn away from the contemplation of our own works when seeking rest in Christ:

But, Scripture, when it speaks of faith righteousness, leads us to something far different: namely, to turn aside from the contemplation of our own works and look solely upon God's mercy and Christ's perfection. Indeed, it presents this order of justification: to begin with, God deigns to embrace the sinner with his pure and freely given goodness, finding nothing in him except his miserable condition to prompt Him to mercy,¹ since he sees man utterly void and bare of good works; and so he seeks in himself the reason to benefit man. Then God touches the sinner with a sense of his goodness in order that he, despairing of his own works, may ground the whole of

¹ Calvin is attaching no "conditions" to God's willingness to show mercy to a man.

his salvation in God's mercy. This is the experience of faith through which the sinner comes into possession of his salvation when from the teaching of the gospel he acknowledges that he has been reconciled to God: that with Christ's righteousness interceding, and forgiveness of sins accomplished, he is justified. And although regenerated by the Spirit of God,² he ponders the everlasting righteousness laid up for him not in the good works to which he inclines, but in the sole righteousness of Christ. ...

Calvin is saying that one consequence (and purpose) of justification by faith alone is to remove any dependence on ourselves, and to place all dependence on the mercy of God. It is Scriptural to despair of ourselves and ground all our salvation in God's mercy, not in some mixture of mercy and our own efforts, however "spiritual."

It is also more respectful of the glory of God, as being the eternal giver of all good to poor and needy sinners. Not only is our spiritual rest found in contemplating the gift of righteousness we have now, and in the expectation of its full manifestation in the future, but we also give maximum glory to God when we contemplate how this righteousness is solely the righteousness of Christ, which is not only put to our account now, but which we will ultimately enjoy to its fullness in his presence.

Section 17. Faith righteousness and law righteousness according to Paul

Calvin:

Here we should recall to mind the relation that we have previously established between faith and the gospel.³

In Chapter II, Section 29 (most recently discussed in Class #15, notes p. 6), Calvin has taught:

We make the freely given promise of God the foundation of faith because upon it faith properly rests. ... Faith is certain that God is true in all things whether he command or forbid, whether he promise or threaten; and it also obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it. For in God faith seeks life: a life that is not found in commandments or declarations of penalties, but in the promise of mercy, and only in a freely given promise. For a conditional promise that sends us back to our own works does not promise life unless we discern its presence in ourselves. Therefore, if we would not have our faith tremble and waver, we must buttress it with the promise of salvation, which is willingly and freely offered to us by the Lord in consideration of our misery rather than our deserts.

² That is, although able to (imperfectly) do the good works which are the fruit of the Spirit within him ...

³ What Calvin is referring to is his teaching that not everything in Scripture is the proper object of faith, that is, the object which faith grasps for salvation. There are curses and threats in Scripture, too, which we believe and apply to their proper circumstances, but the curses and threats apply in situations of unbelief.

Calvin certainly means to apply these observations not only to those just coming to faith, but to the believers in general.⁴ Returning to Calvin in the current section on justification:

For faith is said to justify because it receives and embraces the righteousness offered in the gospel. Moreover, because righteousness is said to be offered through the gospel, all consideration of works is excluded. Paul often shows this elsewhere but most clearly in two passages. For in comparing the law and the gospel⁵ in the letter to the Romans he says: "the righteousness that is of the law" is such that "the man who practices these things will live by them" [Rom 10:5]⁶. But the "righteousness that is of faith" [Rom 10:6]⁷ announces salvation "if you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and that the Father raised him from the dead" [Rom 10:9].

Do you see how he makes this the distinction between law and gospel: that the former attributes righteousness to works, the latter bestows free righteousness apart from the help of works? This is an important passage, and one that can extricate us from many difficulties if we understand that that righteousness which is given us through the gospel has been freed of all conditions of the law. Here is the reason why he so often opposes the promise to the law, as things mutually contradictory: "If the inheritance is by the law, it is no longer by promise" [Gal 3:18]⁸; and passages in the same chapter that express this idea.

Now, to be sure, the law itself has its own promises. Therefore, in the promises of the gospel there must be something distinct and different [from the law] unless we would admit that the comparison is inept.⁹ But what sort of difference will this be, other than that the gospel promises are free and dependent solely upon God's mercy, while the promises of the law depend upon the condition of works?

⁴ It's worth noting at this point that the type of "covenant theology" that makes "covenant keeping" into a contract is against Calvin's concept of our relationship with God. Salvation – and participation in God's Covenant – is a real gift, and not just a hypothetical "gift" that still turns out to depend on what we do. Rather, it causes what we do.

⁵ It must be noted at this point that Calvin is a believer in the single "Covenant of Grace" which embraces the saving work of God (through Christ) in the time of the Law as well as in the time of the Gospel. Yet, Calvin also maintains a stringent distinction between Law and Gospel. For Calvin, Law and Gospel are both part of the Covenant of Grace in all ages, though the Law is more prominent before the Advent, as preparation for the Gospel, which is fully revealed in all its glory under the New Covenant. For Calvin, the term "gospel" is especially a New Covenant term, denoting how the demeanor of the teaching of the New Covenant is different from the Old. Calvin strictly correlates the gospel with faith.

⁶ **Romans 10:5** ⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them."

⁷ **Romans 10:6-9** ⁶ But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down *from above*) ⁷ or, " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): ⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

⁸ **Galatians 3:16-19** ¹⁶ Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ. ¹⁷ And this I say, *that* the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave *it* to Abraham by promise. ¹⁹ What purpose then *does* the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made;

⁹ What Calvin means here is this: Why would Paul make a distinction between the things promised to obedience (the law), and the things promised to faith only, unless there were a real distinction. If there is no distinction, then Paul's distinction between law and gospel is "inept."

And let no one here snarl at me that it is the righteousness which men, of their own strength and free will, would obtrude upon God that is rejected – inasmuch as Paul unequivocally teaches that the law, in commanding, profits nothing [Rom 8:3]¹⁰. For there is no one, not only of the common folk, but of the most perfect persons, who can fulfill it. To be sure, love is the capstone of the law. When the Spirit of God forms us to such love,¹¹ why is it not for us a cause of righteousness, except that even in the saints it is imperfect, and for that reason merits no reward of itself?

In brief, Calvin is saying that his “snarling” objectors say this: By rejecting the way of the Law, Paul is only saying that the self-righteous works of natural men and hypocrites cannot contribute to their justification. He is not denying the contribution of spiritual works of those born again. But, Calvin is pointing out that those spiritual works are themselves sinful, if judged by the perfect standard of the Law, and therefore our lives must be rewarded on the basis of the promise of free grace, and not the promise of acceptance if we meet a legal standard.

18. Justification not the wages of works, but a free gift

Calvin brings forward yet another passage:

“It is evident that no man is justified before God by the law. For the righteous shall live by faith [Hab 2:4]. But the law is not of faith; rather, the man who **does** these things shall live in them” [Gal 3:11-12]¹². How would this argument be maintained otherwise than by agreeing that works do not enter the account of faith but must be utterly separated? The law, he says, is different from faith. Why? Because works are required for law righteousness. Therefore it follows that they are not required for faith righteousness. From this relation it is clear that those who are justified by faith are justified apart from the merit of works – in fact, without the merit of works.¹³ For faith receives that righteousness which the gospel bestows. Now the gospel differs from the law in that it does not link righteousness to works but lodges it solely in God’s mercy. Paul’s contention in Romans is similar to this: that Abraham had no occasion to boast, for faith was reckoned as righteousness for him [Rom 4:2-3]¹⁴; and he adds as confirmation that the righteousness of faith has a place in circumstances where there are no works for which a reward is due. “Where,” he says, “there are works, wages are paid as a debt; what is given to faith is

¹⁰ **Romans 8:3** ³ For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh ...

¹¹ And, he **does** begin to conform us to that love.

¹² **Galatians 3:10-14** ¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” ¹¹ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” ¹² Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), ¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

¹³ In other words, spiritual works do not just occupy a subordinate place when it comes to justification, but justification is accomplished entirely apart from spiritual works. Even though the works are there, they do not contribute to justification.

¹⁴ **Romans 4:2-5** ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” ⁴ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. ⁵ But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, ...

free.” ... And in another passage he teaches ... that “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although it is attested by the Law and the Prophets” [Rom 3:21]. For, excluding the law, he denies that we are aided by works and that we attain righteousness by working; instead, we come empty to receive it.

Excerpts from following sections of Chapter XI.

Sec 20.

Calvin:

[The objectors to justification by faith alone] pointlessly strive after the foolish subtlety that we are justified by faith alone, which acts through love, so that righteousness depends on love [works]. Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies “but faith working through love” [Gal 5:6]. But it does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ.

and

... there is no righteousness of faith except where there are no works for which a reward is due [earned].

... faith is reckoned as righteousness only where righteousness is bestowed through a grace not owed.

Sec 21.

Calvin argues that remission of sins (which everyone believes in on all sides of the justification issue) leaves a person righteous, not just in a neutral state, to which he must add righteousness through his spiritual works.

Thus, him whom he [God] receives into union with himself the Lord is said to justify, because he cannot receive him into grace nor join him to himself unless he turns him from a sinner into a righteous man. We add that this is done through forgiveness of sins; for if those whom the Lord has reconciled to himself be judged by works, they will indeed still be found sinners, though they ought, nevertheless, to be freed and cleansed from sin. It is obvious, therefore, that those whom God embraces are made righteous solely by the fact that they are purified when their spots are washed away by forgiveness of sins. ...

We know from Calvin’s earliest teaching in this chapter that the forgiveness of sins, which makes us positive righteous (not just morally neutral), is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.