

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 4

### 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.

## CHAPTER XII: JUSTIFICATION AND THE JUDGMENT SEAT

Sections 1-2, 4-8 of this chapter are read to the class. [Listen to the audio file].

The point of Calvin's teaching in this chapter is that any doctrine of justification which permits acceptance at the judgment by any righteousness short of God's own – given as a gift – is a teaching which does not take the final judgment seriously. Those who take the judgment seriously, and who take (their own) sin seriously, are driven, says Calvin, to receive this doctrine of justification by faith alone. Otherwise, there can be no quiet for the soul – no certain assurance of salvation.

But, it is a fact of history that "lower" doctrines of justification that mix faith and works for final acceptance are common in the history of the professing church. This happens, I believe, because it is against human nature to think that the "high" doctrine of justification by faith alone really works. Most people feel that unless there is a legal demand that works be present, no one will cul-

tivate holiness (“do this and live”). And, it is also a fact that nominal Christians (“in name only”) often do disrespect the need for repentance, as a lifestyle, and may even be thinking that “I’m justified by faith, therefore I don’t need to seriously repent.”

But, what we are interested in is the true doctrine of free grace, even though it does not suit the judgment of carnal nature. And, we are interested in seeing the accomplishment of the salvation of God’s elect, who have to hear this doctrine of grace, no matter how many nominal Christians sadly refuse, and abuse, this call to forgiveness, free regeneration and spiritual new life which is offered to all in the gospel.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is only truly safe, and understood, in the hands of those who feel their sins, and bow with gratitude to the Scripture teaching that salvation is a gift. All other doctrines of justification besides justification-as-gift end up by making God’s covenant of grace into a contract, a list of stipulations which must be obeyed in order to be justified. Even if this list is called a “covenant,” and even if the first item stipulated in the contract is to “believe,” faith is only one of the stipulations that will be seen on the list. Teachings like this are only put forward by people who think they can obey those rules. This is always done by lowering the standard of holiness which is required by God’s Law.

**[The class ran out of time at this point in the notes.]**

## CHAPTER XIII: TWO THINGS TO BE NOTED IN FREE JUSTIFICATION

### Section 4: Attention to one’s own righteousness also nullifies the promises

... Let us conclude briefly as follows: Scripture shows that God’s promises are not established unless they are grasped with the full assurance of conscience. Wherever there is doubt or uncertainty, it pronounces them void.<sup>1</sup> Again, it declares that these promises do nothing but vacillate and waver if they rest upon our own works. Therefore, righteousness must either depart from us or works must not be brought into account, but faith alone must have place, whose nature it is to prick up the ears and close the eyes – that is, to be intent upon the promise alone and to turn thought away from all worth or merit of man. ... If we ask the means, we must come to the sacrifice by which God has been appeased. For anyone unconvinced that God is appeased by that one atonement in which Christ endured his wrath will never cease to tremble. In short, we must seek peace for ourselves solely in the anguish of Christ our Redeemer.<sup>2</sup>

### Section 5: Faith in God’s free grace alone gives us peace of conscience and gladness in prayer

But why do I use a rather obscure testimony? Paul consistently denies that peace or quiet joy are retained in consciences unless we are convinced that we are “justified by faith” [Rom 5:1<sup>3</sup>].

<sup>1</sup> Calvin has already spent substantial time discussing uncertainty in our faith. See class #15, notes p. 1-5. By certainty of faith he means that the uncertainties of faith never drown real certainty, which is always more profound than unbelief within the heart of the believer. This passage must be interpreted in the light of that one.

<sup>2</sup> See the material for classes 8-10, where Calvin teaches the penal substitutionary atonement – that is that Christ, when he died for our sins, died receiving the punishment of them, from which punishment we who believe are now spared.

<sup>3</sup> **Romans 5:1** Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

At the same time he declares the source of this assurance: it is when "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" [Rom 5:5]. It is as if he had said that our souls cannot be quieted unless we are surely persuaded that we are pleasing to God. Hence also in another passage he exclaims on behalf of all the godly, "Who will separate us from the love of God which is in Christ? [Rom 8:35, 39]. For we shall tremble at the slightest breath until we arrive at that haven, but we shall be secure even in the darkness of death so long as the Lord shows himself our shepherd [Ps 23:1,4]. Therefore, those who babble that we are justified by faith because, being reborn, we are righteous by living spiritually have never tasted the sweetness of grace, so as to consider that God will be favorable to them. Hence, it also follows that they no more know the right way to pray than do the Turks<sup>4</sup> and other profane nations. For, as Paul attests, faith is not true unless it asserts and brings to mind that sweetest name of Father – nay, unless it opens our mouth freely to cry, "Abba, Father" [Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15].<sup>5</sup> He expresses this more clearly elsewhere: "In Christ we have boldness and access with confidence through ... faith in him" [Eph 3:12]. This surely does not take place through the gift of regeneration [sanctification], which, as it is always imperfect in this flesh, so contains in itself manifold grounds for doubt. Therefore, we must come to this remedy: that believers should be convinced that their only ground of hope for the inheritance of a Heavenly Kingdom lies in the fact that, being engrafted in the body of Christ, they are freely accounted righteous. For, as regards justification, faith is something merely passive,<sup>6</sup> bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God's favor but receiving from Christ that which we lack.

## CHAPTER XV: BOASTING ABOUT THE MERITS OF WORKS DESTROYS OUR PRAISE OF GOD FOR HAVING BESTOWED RIGHTEOUSNESS, AS WELL AS OUR ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

### 3. The whole value of good works comes from God's grace

... Yet those good works which he has bestowed upon us the Lord calls "ours," and testifies they not only are acceptable to him but also will have their reward. It is our duty in return to be aroused by so great a promise, to take courage not to weary in well-doing [Gal 6:9; 2 Thess 3:13], and to receive God's great kindness with true gratefulness. There is no doubt that whatever is praiseworthy in works is God's grace; there is not a drop that we ought by rights to ascribe to ourselves. If we truly and earnestly recognize this, not only will all confidence in merit vanish, but the very notion. We are not dividing the credit for good works between God and man ... but we are preserving it whole, complete, and unimpaired for the Lord. ...

<sup>4</sup> "Turks" is usually a reference to the religion of the Turks, that is, Islam. It was well known in the West how much the Islamics prayed, and how zealous they professed to be toward God.

<sup>5</sup> **Galatians 4:6** <sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" **Romans 8:15-16** <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." <sup>16</sup> The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God ...

<sup>6</sup> The "passivity" of faith, by which Calvin means the way faith is receptive of God's grace, is a favorite theme of Luther. Faith is not a work. The activity of faith (faith working through love) is the fruit of the passive reception of God's grace by faith only. So, the power to act "Christianly" comes by hearing and believing the Word of Grace, preached and felt through the sacraments.

4.

... To restrain and check the insolence of our pride it ought to be quite enough that we attribute no importance to works beyond the measure of Scripture. Now it is the teaching of Scripture that our good works are always spattered with much uncleanness, by which God is rightly offended and is angry against us. So far are they from being able to appease him or arouse his kindness toward us!

Yet because he examines our works according to his tenderness, not his supreme right, he therefore accepts them as if they were perfectly pure; and for that reason, although unmerited, they are rewarded with infinite benefits, both of the present life and also of the life to come.

Whereas none of our best works are ever acceptable, according to the strict standard of the Law of God, now that we are in Christ our works are treated as completely pure, leading to rewards in the present life and in the life to come. Whereas, in Adam, we could do nothing right! Now, in Christ, we can do nothing wrong! Well, of course we can. But, our sins are forgiven, we are disciplined and pruned, as a living member of Christ so that we bear more fruit, and all our fruit is rewarded in time and eternity.

Our works, therefore, come under the same judgment as our persons: Our persons are accepted in Christ, through faith, totally as a gift. So are our works. The rewards given out to our persons and to our works live forever!

8. Admonition and comfort

... Take note that we do not justify man by works before God, but all who are of God we speak of as being “reborn” [1 Pet 1:3], and as becoming “a new creation” [2 Cor 5:17], so that they pass from the realm of sin into the realm of righteousness; and we say that by this testimony they confirm their calling [2 Pet 1:10], and, like trees, are judged by their fruits [Matt 7:20; 12:33; Luke 6:44].

## XVI. REFUTATION OF THE FALSE ACCUSATIONS ...

1. Does the doctrine of justification do away with good works?

... For we dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them. This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together, we still lodge justification in faith, not in works. ...

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ’s righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God. Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also. For he “is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption” [1 Cor 1:30]. Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies.

But, since the question concerns only righteousness and sanctification, let us dwell upon these. Although we may distinguish them, Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you

wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces [1 Cor 1:13]. Since, therefore, it is solely by expending himself that the Lord gives us these benefits to enjoy, he bestows both of them at the same time, the one never without the other. Thus it is clear how true it is that we are justified not without works yet not through works,<sup>7</sup> since in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. God's honor and God's mercy as motives for action

... All the apostles are full of exhortations, urgings, and reproofs with which to instruct the man of God in every good work [2 Tim 3:16-17], and that without mention of merit. Rather, they derive their most powerful exhortations from the thought that our salvation stands upon no merit of ours but solely upon God's mercy. Accordingly, Paul, when he devoted an entire letter to showing that we have no hope of life save in Christ's righteousness, when he gets down to exhortations, implores us by that mercy of God which He has deigned to give us [Rom 12:1<sup>9</sup>]. ...

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<sup>7</sup> This accounts for the Reformation sentiment that we are justified by faith alone, but not by the faith that is alone, that is, which shows no love.

<sup>8</sup> By "righteousness" in this passage, he means the imputed righteousness of Christ, since we are in him, that is, justification.

<sup>9</sup> **Romans 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service*. <sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove [test; approve] what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.