

Righteous by Faith Alone

Text: Genesis 15; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23

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According to God's Word, what is it that circumcision signifies and seals? What is it that the Law and the prophets witness to? What is it that the gospel reveals? According to Scripture, what is it that the Messiah brought in? What is God's gift in Christ? According to the Bible, what is it that unbelieving Israel did not attain, but believing Gentiles *do* attain? And what is it that Paul sought to have above all? The answer to all seven questions is *the righteousness of God*—the everlasting righteousness of the gospel of Jesus that is received merely by believing. This is the heart of the gospel of grace: righteousness by faith alone. This is the subject of Lord's Day 23 of our *Heidelberg Catechism*:

Q. 59. But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?

A. That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir of eternal life.

Q. 50. How art thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ, so that, though my conscience accuse me that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; insomuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

Q. 61. Why sayest thou, that thou art righteous by faith only?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God; and that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only.

The Method of Teaching

The Bible's most *systematic* teaching on righteousness by faith alone is found in the early chapters of Romans. Paul declares, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Gentiles, without God's written word, and Jews, with it, are equally guilty. Paul concludes: "There is none righteous, no,

not one" (Rom. 3:10). But then he states in Romans 3:21-22: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe." Romans 5:18 explains: "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." Romans 10:4 says: "For Christ is the end [or goal] of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." And then the promise in verses 9-10: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

Then there is the *creedal* method. Question 59: "But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this? [that is, everything contained in the *Apostles' Creed* that has heretofore been explained and expounded]" The answer: "That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir of eternal life." Believing the *Apostles' Creed* means trusting in the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and in Jesus as the Saviour who suffered for our sins. The *Creed* confesses faith in forgiveness of sins, not by works, but by faith alone. Romans 4 adds that pardon of sin implies not just the removal of guilt but the imputation of positive righteousness. This is the Reformation gospel, rediscovered after being obscured in the Middle Ages. Those who believe the truths of the *Apostles' Creed* from the heart are justified by faith alone, not by mere recitation, nor by works added to Christ's.

The third method is *narrative*—in Genesis 15. Genesis 15:6 says: "And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness." This verse is central in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. It happened at night, under a clear sky in Hebron. God told Abraham, "Look now toward heaven, and tell [or count] the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be." Abraham believed God's promise. Though he had no child, he believed in a spiritual seed—believers from every nation. Abraham also believed the land promise, which Hebrews 11 says pointed to a heavenly country, the new heavens and new earth. The narrative of Abraham shows God's promise of seed, land, and blessing—all fulfilled in Christ, the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15). In Him, Satan is crushed and blessing comes upon God's people.

The Nature of Righteousness

What is this *righteousness* that is imputed to believers? First, what it is not. It is not any righteousness that we earn or produce. Romans 3 makes this clear:

“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.”
“There is none that doeth good, no, not one.”

And this is affirmed by Moses himself, the great lawgiver, who wrote Genesis and testified in 15:6, “And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” Mr. Law, with all the divinely given commands, teaches that righteousness comes by faith alone! This is echoed in the *Heidelberg Catechism*: “that, though my conscience accuse me that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.”

This is not mere forgiveness. It is as if we had never sinned and had kept God’s law perfectly. This righteousness is the result of Christ’s obedience and atonement—His life and death reckoned to us. This is the promise Abraham believed: innumerable seed, a heavenly inheritance, and divine blessing through the righteousness of another.

Genesis 15:6 says Abraham believed the promise. He believed the Promiser—*Jehovah*. Jeremiah 23:5 calls the Messiah “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” In Genesis 15, *the Word of the Lord* came to Abraham. Not merely speech, but the Word as a person—the preincarnate Christ. “In the beginning was the Word... and the Word was made flesh” (John 1:1,14). The Word promised Abraham an innumerable seed, which Christ alone could provide. Abraham believed, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.

Genesis 13:18 tells us Abraham built an altar at Mamre. He understood substitutionary sacrifice and looked beyond animal blood to the promised Messiah. John 8 says Abraham “saw Christ’s day and was glad.” He understood the righteousness he needed came from the Seed to come.

The Role of Faith

There are two views of faith’s role in justification. The wrong view is that faith itself is the righteousness, or that God counts faith as righteousness. This is the error of Judaism, Romanism, Arminianism, and Amyraldianism. This makes faith a work and leads to false assurance. But God cannot count anything as righteousness that is not. He cannot lie or treat something as what it is not.

Faith is not a work. It is the *means of receiving* Christ's righteousness. It is an eye looking away from self to Christ. It is a beggar's hand receiving the gift. Faith repudiates self-righteousness and trusts solely in the obedience and blood of Christ.

Abraham "believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness." Faith receives the work of another. Question 61 of the *Catechism* says: "Why sayest thou, that thou art righteous by faith only?" Answer: "Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ *is* my righteousness before God; and that I cannot *receive and apply* the same to myself any other way than *by faith only*."

Faith's role is to look to Christ alone. It is not worthy in itself. It is the channel or the conduit, by which Christ's righteousness is received. The call of the gospel is: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, trust in Him alone for righteousness. This is the way of salvation for the true children of Abraham, and this is the doctrine of Genesis 15, Romans, and the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

Our Father in heaven, we pray for that glorious gift of faith that receives, as truth, everything in Thy word and, centrally, Christ as the all sufficient Saviour. And we pray, Lord God, that we may continually continue to trust through all the trials and vicissitudes of this present evil world, and grow in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Amen.