

“GOSPEL” MEANS “GOOD NEWS”
A Four-Part Seminar on Reformed Theology

SESSION 1: JUSTIFICATION

How Can a Sinner Be Made Right with God?

I. Understanding the Question

- A. The question “How can a sinner be made right with God?” has to do with how a sinful creature can be counted as righteous by a holy and just God (the doctrine of justification)
- B. Related questions:
 - 1. How does God respond to my sin?
 - 2. How does God view my good deeds and good intentions?
 - 3. Why should God let me into heaven?
- C. Two ways of answering the question
 - 1. God evaluates me on the basis of *my performance* of what he requires in his law
 - 2. God evaluates me on the basis of *his provision* for mercy in the gospel
- D. Illustrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector

Luke 18:9-14 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts

himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

1. The Pharisee trusted in his performance, even though he gave God the credit for it ("God, I thank you that I am not like other men")
2. The tax collector acknowledged his unworthiness and his need for God to provide mercy ("God, be merciful to me, a sinner!")
3. This parable highlights the crucial distinction between the law and the gospel

II. The Law Tells Us What God Requires of Us

- A. The law is God's holy standard

Romans 7:12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

- B. The law is summed up in the two great commandments

Matthew 22:36-40 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

- C. While we can do deeds that are good from a human perspective, even our best works are tainted by sin and are thus not able to earn any favor with God

Isaiah 64:6 We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

- D. The law functions as God's hammer, destroying our self-confidence

Jeremiah 23:29 Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

Luke 18:18-27 And a ruler asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these I have kept from my youth." When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But he said, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

- E. We cannot be made right with God by works of the law

Romans 3:19-20 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

- F. "For sin pays but one wage: death (Rom. 6:23a). And sin is an honest employer. It never cheats its servants. It always gives just compensation to those in its employ. The law... cannot liberate us or give us life. It can only evaluate. It can only judge. Its sentencing procedure is not complicated. Its judgment is either

guilty in even the tiniest degree or not guilty. Only to those who have died to sin does God give the gift of life (Rom. 6:23b)."¹

III. The Gospel Tells Us What God Has Done for Us

- A. The gospel is different than the law
1. "The law says, 'do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done."²
 2. The gospel declares that salvation can only be received as a freely given gift, not as wages we have earned
 3. In the ancient world, the term "gospel" was used to refer to heralds announcing good news about a military victory
 4. In the Bible, the gospel is "the announcement that Christ has conquered sin and death"³
- B. The gospel is the glorious announcement of a righteousness that comes from God

Romans 3:21-28 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law?

¹ Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 153.

² Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 26.

³ Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 89.

By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

1. Righteousness comes through faith in Christ
2. God declares us righteous on the basis of Christ's righteous life and atoning death
3. God's justice is upheld because Christ died as our substitute
4. Because it is apart from works of the law, there is no room for boasting on our part; in other words, we can't take any of the credit for our salvation

IV. Key Elements of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone

- A. Justification is a *legal declaration* in which God counts as righteous those who place their trust in Christ for salvation

Romans 4:1-5 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness

- B. *Faith alone*, apart from our works, is the instrument by which we are declared righteous by God

Galatians 2:15-16 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

- C. Christ's righteousness is *imputed* to those who trust in him

Isaiah 53:11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- D. The righteousness by which we gain acceptance before God is *not a righteousness that is inherent in us*

Isaiah 46:12-13 Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from righteousness: I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory.

Philippians 3:8-9 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith

V. The Gospel Is Not a License to Sin

- A. The gospel sets us free from both the dreadful penalty of sin and the tyrannical power of sin

Romans 6:14-18 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were

committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

- B. Christians follow God's law out of gratitude for his grace
- C. True faith in Christ produces the fruit of good works

VI. Conclusion

- A. There are really only two ways of pursuing salvation (or whatever a person values as the supreme good):
 - 1. Salvation based on our performance
 - 2. Salvation based on God's gracious provision
- B. "Salvation, from start to finish, is God's work for us, not a matter of saving ourselves or even of cooperating with him. It is a divine rescue operation... There are really only two religions in the world: a religion of human striving to ascend to God through pious works, feelings, attitudes, and experiences; and the Good News of God's merciful descent to us in His Son. The religions, philosophies, ideologies, and spiritualities of the world only differ on the details. Whether we are talking about the Dalai Lama or Dr. Phil, Islam or Oprah, liberals or conservatives, the most intuitive conviction is that we are good people who need good advice, not helpless sinners who need the Good News... The gospel is a surprising announcement that none of us had a right to expect. As such, it has to be told -- again and again."⁴

⁴ Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity*, pgs. 128, 131.