

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 30, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 5:11 and ROMANS 1:17

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have
peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“The righteous shall live by faith.”

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

In a very real sense God used these two verses of Scripture, especially the second one, to launch the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. The term “Protestant” is almost a dirty word in some quarters today because many people entirely misunderstand the true meaning and the historical significance of this great strong word.

When the Reformers of the sixteenth century were given the Latin nickname “Protestanti,” we must remember that the Latin verb “protesto” meant “to affirm solemnly and vigorously” -- “to protest for.” To “protest” today invariably means to protest against something, and so it is regarded as a negative word with overtones of bigotry and intolerance. But in the sixteenth century it had a very positive, dynamic meaning. “Protestants” were those within the Church who had rediscovered the evangelical faith of the New Testament, and who affirmed that faith in the most solemn, vigorous and uncompromising terms.

Protestantism, therefore, is not merely or even primarily a protest against certain abuses in mediaeval Roman Catholicism. If the Protestant Reformation had been nothing more than a dramatic movement for the correction of abuses, it would soon have been forgotten. But Protestantism’s increasing vitality is convincing proof that it must be understood, not basically as a protest which stimulated some needed reforms, but rather as one of the most positive, dynamic and, creative movements of the Spirit in human history.

To state the matter simply and, I think, not inaccurately, we might say that Protestantism is a series of at least five great positive affirmations of New Testament Christianity; and the affirmations are these:

1. **Justification by Faith** -- the basis of our salvation;
2. **The Priesthood of all Believers** -- the right of each individual person to come directly to God;
3. **The Primary Authority of the Bible** -- the Reformed view of Holy Scripture;
4. **The Right of Private Judgment** -- Christian liberty of conscience, in subjection to the authority of Scripture; and

5. **The Sacredness of every Vocation** -- how each Christian can serve God in his everyday life and work.

These might be called “The Pillars of Protestantism,” for the whole superstructure of Protestant thought, doctrine, action and ethics rests upon them. It is the first of them that I wish to consider and study with you this morning -- the one which we might truthfully designate “The Prime Pillar of Protestantism” or “The Keystone of the Reformation”

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Dr. Herman Bavinck, the distinguished Dutch theologian, once said, “This is the article of the creed by which the Church either stands or falls.” Now “justification” is a theological word, and in essence, justification is simply a declaration. It is God’s declaration that a particular person is not guilty in His sight, and therefore under no condemnation. That person is in a right relationship with God. But Scripture teaches, and we all know from personal experience, that each of us has broken his or her relationship with God by acts of sinful self-will. We have raised a puny fist and held it before God’s face, and we have said, “I am going to run my own life regardless of what You may say.”

Even Sigmund Freud, unbeliever that he was, in his psychoanalytic studies, probed deeply into that dark cavern of the human soul which he called the “id,” and he found lurking in all the crevices of that soul such foulness, such unbelievable hatreds, such lust and greed and pride, that he was shocked at what he discovered. In the words of the “General Confession,” we have “erred and strayed from God’s ways like lost sheep,” and we stand in dire need of being made right with God. And the intriguing question is -- How can a holy God declare a sinner to be righteous?

When this broken relationship is restored, we say that we stand “justified” before God. That is to say, we are treated by God as if we had not sinned, even though He knows, and we know, that we have sinned. God puts our sins behind His back, buries them in the depths of the sea, and remembers them against us no more forever. Someone has said that being “justified” means that God treats me “just as if I’d” never sinned! As Luther said, Christians are sinners and saints at the same time: sinners because of what we are in ourselves, and saints because God treats us as if we were not sinners!

In seeking to mend this broken relationship between the holy God and sinful man, people have tried to earn salvation by their upright conduct and good works. Human nature has an instinctive and obstinate tendency to believe that God is impressed with human merit. People have believed that by being virtuous, and by helping others, they can earn God’s favor and work their passage to heaven. In anticipation of the Judgment Day, many modern-day Protestants would say, “I live a good life, I provide for my family, I contribute to many philanthropies, I attend church unfailingly, and my word is my bond. Why should God shut heaven’s gate in my face?” Similarly, many Roman Catholics would say, “I too never miss the celebration of the Mass, I say my prayers, I attend novenas, I practice fasting, I make pilgrimages to shrines, and I contribute money generously to the Church for its work, or for the repose of the souls of the

departed. Surely God could not expect more?" So, these people, Protestant and Catholic alike, would say that while it is God Who eventually bestows His gift of salvation, nevertheless it is the individual who, by his good works, makes himself worthy to receive salvation.

Now the New Testament way of justification, of becoming right with God is just the opposite. The New Testament teaches that a person is justified before God not because of a multitude of good works he has performed. On the contrary, he is justified because he has faith that God, in Christ, by dying on the Cross, has fully atoned for his sin. Nothing more needs to be done, nor can be done. Those of you who have seen the film Martin Luther will remember that dramatic moment when, as Luther studies the 17th verse of the first chapter of Romans, suddenly the truth of the Gospel breaks in upon him, and he realizes for the first time in his life that "the righteous shall live by faith" -- by faith -- not by fasting, or by wearing rough clothing; not by vigils by night and work by day; not by mortification of the flesh or by all the other rigorous limitations imposed by cloistered living, but by faith. And in the film, you see Luther take up his quill pen, and dip it in the ink. He underlines the word "by faith" (it is two words in English but only one in the Latin) and then in the margin alongside he slowly and deliberately writes the Latin word "SOLA" - by faith ALONE!

To think that our good works need to be added to Christ's perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice of Himself for sin, is the final crushing insult both to the holiness and to the love of God. Christ has broken down every barrier that existed on God's side and on man's side and has therefore effected reconciliation between the holy God and sinful man. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). God, though He knows we are sinners, does not count our sins against us when we turn from them in sincere repentance and have faith that Christ bore our sins on the Cross. This is the essence of the New Testament teaching with regard to our salvation, and it is quite basic to our understanding of redemption. In Romans 3:28 Paul is very specific when he says, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." Paul was saying here, as clearly as he could say it, that a person cannot make himself acceptable to God by the most rigid adherence to the law of God, or by fulfilling every possible religious obligation. He can be made right with God only by having faith in God's unmerited grace as revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Testament Christian believes in good works, but in good works not as the means of effecting our salvation, but rather as the loving response of gratitude and devotion to the God Who in Christ has saved us. We are justified by faith alone. We do not need, in addition to repentance and faith, some measure of obedience to God's law in order to be justified. No matter how sinful a person has been, the moment he repents of his sin, and believes in Christ, he will be accounted righteous before God.

Against this teaching of Scripture, it has often been said that such an emphasis will only encourage people to live in sin, or at least regard sin very lightly. But the Bible teaches emphatically that once a man is justified, accounted righteous before God, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in his life, and then he will assuredly begin to practice "good works." These good works will be "the fruit of faith." They will come as the inevitable result of justification. It is for this reason that the Reformers always said that "we are justified by faith alone, but the faith that

justifies is never alone.” And the Apostle James puts it so dogmatically when he says (2:26), “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

Paul used several analogies to clarify what he meant by justification by faith. One analogy came from the law courts. Paul knew that all his efforts, however strenuous, to get right with God, were thwarted by the weakness of his sinful human nature. He had to admit that he was a hopeless bankrupt and throw himself upon the mercy of the court. But the moment he did that, a marvelous thing happened. God, the righteous Judge, in boundless compassion, paid the debt Himself, and then pronounced the verdict “Not Guilty.” Now that pronouncement, that declaration “Not Guilty” is what justification is all about. Not only does God acquit the repentant sinner who puts his trust in Christ, but God actually accepts him as a son and fellow heir with Christ! The sinner is acquitted, accepted and saved despite his former bankruptcy. God, for Christ’s sake, justifies us and sets us free.

Another of Paul’s analogies came from slavery. Paul said that God’s action toward us is like that of a master who sets his slave free, God deals with us like this, granting us complete freedom as if we had never been in bondage to sin.

Still another analogy came naturally to Paul out of the Jewish sacrificial practices. Paul recalled that on the Day of Atonement each year (Yom Kippur), the faithful and repentant Jews came into the temple in order that their sins might be forgiven. A lamb without blemish was brought before the High Priest who symbolically laid the sins of the nation upon the animal which was then slain. As its blood ran off the altar, so that blood carried away the sins of the people who had faith in God’s gracious provision. And Paul says that our Lord Jesus, by voluntarily shedding His blood on Calvary, accomplished once and forever the task of carrying away the sins of His people. Christ was the Lamb of God, slain for sinners, so that those very sinners might be declared righteous before God. “Behold the Lamb of God,” said John the Baptist, “Who bears away the sin of the world.” Justification is an unmerited gift of God -- a gift that cannot be earned; it can only be gratefully received.

Let me illustrate this great Gospel truth by referring to a common incident in family life -- one with which I am, unhappily, quite familiar! A boy breaks his next-door neighbor’s window. Having done so, there are several options open to him! He could lie about it and say he didn’t do it. But that would rule out all possibility of reconciliation. Or he could plead extenuating circumstances -- the knuckle ball slipped just as he threw it! But this would be an evasion. Or he might argue that the neighbor is wealthy and wouldn’t miss the cost of a new window anyway. But this would be to treat a wrong much too lightly. How then is the boy to be reconciled to his neighbor? Is it simply by admitting that he did it, and that he is sorry it happened, and by promising that he won’t throw any more knuckle balls in the direction of his neighbor’s house? But how is the broken window to be paid for? The boy himself cannot afford to replace it. So, his father agrees to pay for it. Therefore, the reconciliation between the boy and his neighbor is accomplished by two acts: first, the boy’s admission of guilt, and second, the father’s willingness to pay the price of his son’s misdeed.

So, it is in our relationship with God. We must humbly and sincerely confess our full responsibility for our sin. But more is needed than just that, and I thank God more is provided;

for Christ has atoned for, paid for our sin, and done for us on the Cross what we never could do for ourselves -- He has made it possible for God to pronounce us "Not Guilty."

This is the grandest, indeed the most daring doctrine of the faith. It is the doctrine by which New Testament Christianity is most clearly distinguished from all other religions. It challenges all human instincts and assumptions. It is a radical contradiction to a moralistic concept of salvation which affirms that a person can earn his salvation by his virtuous good works.

Notice, won't you, that faith does not save you, but you can't be saved without faith. When someone on the deck of a ship throws a life belt, attached to a rope, to a man who has fallen overboard, it is not the rope that saves the drowning man, it is the person on deck who holds the rope and pulls him to safety. Likewise, it is Christ Who saves us, not faith, and yet we cannot be saved apart from faith.

Upon what are you relying for your eternal salvation? In Matthew, chapter 22, verses 1-14 we have the Lord's parable of the wedding feast. At such a wedding, the bride's father gives each invited guest a white robe to wear -- it is called "the wedding garment." It is one's badge of admission to the wedding festivities. In our Lord's parable, a man had gate-crashed the party -- he came uninvited, wearing his own best clothing. But the host approached him and said, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?" And the man was speechless. And Jesus says that he was cast out into "the outer darkness."

To what are you clinging? In what are you trusting? - the white spotless robe of Christ's righteousness which He offers to you as a gift to be received by faith? Or -- what the Bible calls the "filthy rags" of your own righteousness?

Upon a life I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die;
Another's life, another's death
I stake my whole eternity.

That, nothing else, will bring you peace with God!

AMEN.