

Pilgrim's Progress Sermon 2

Ignorance and Free Justification

Romans 3:24

A. Introduction.

This morning we considered a most vital, though often neglected aspect of Christian living, that is the sanctifying effect of the gospel. In other words, those saved the gospel are kept by the gospel. But this raises the question of the equally neglected truth concerning what essentially is the gospel.

Let me illustrate what is at stake here. Years ago, I arrived at my church study in Portland, Oregon, early in the morning. Nicki unexpectedly met me there, and he was obviously distressed. He had been attending church for six months, and on visiting his family, he indicated that he was a Christian. But now, in my study, he burst into tears and told me that the police would probably be coming for him that very day, and he asked if I would go with him since he felt he should give himself up. Nicki knew that he had been molesting high school girls for some time, and now it had caught up with him. He asked if he could first go home to his wife. However, the police came early that day and took Nicki away. He was tried on charges relating to three adjoining counties. At his first trial he was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. When visiting in gaol, I asked Nicki why he had ever thought he was a Christian. He replied that he had responded to an invitation at a Youth for Christ rally. I asked why he had gone forward. Nicki replied that it was to help himself and his family. I then began to explain the biblical gospel to him, and recommended his reading of a book by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. At the next visit, when I asked about his reading of what I had recommended, he quickly wept explaining that this was not what he had earlier understood concerning what it was to be a Christian. If only Nicki had heard the true gospel to begin with, that Jesus Christ has come into the world to save sinners!

B. Romans 3:24.

If Romans 3:21-26 presents the most concise and yet comprehensive declaration of the gospel in all of Scripture, then it is in v. 24 that we come to the most important verse in this section. "Being justified as a gift [freely]

by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” In Romans 3:1-20 Paul has surgically laid bare the real nature of sin, including its extremity, including both Jew and Gentile, and intensity, reaching to every part of the human being. Now he sums up the only remedy.

1. The believing sinner is “justified freely.”

Salvation is “free,” δωρεάν, *dōrean*, unmerited, unprompted, unsought. Compare John 15:25 where this same word is used; they hated Christ “without a cause,” that is “freely,” that is without any reason found in Christ himself. Likewise, there was no reason within the sinner why God should justify him. Such a reason resides externally and alone within God’s gracious heart. Salvation is an individual Divine donation and grant.

The thought here is not to be likened to a free sample, which in commercial terms often includes subtle tones of obligation. Rather the meaning is free blessing to those deserving of cursing, a full and free payment that cancels a crushing debt, liberty without price to the incarcerated, free entry for the disqualified entrant.

- a. It is free to man, but costly to God.

Many children have, later in life, freely received a rich inheritance from their parents, without cost to themselves. However, this same inheritance cost their parents much sacrifice and effort. So the believing sinner’s justification, although free, has yet been at great cost to the God who gratuitously justifies, even though the necessity be the death of His Son, 8:32.

- b. It is free in God.

John Murray makes the point well: “No element in Paul’s doctrine of justification is more central than this - God’s justifying act is not constrained to any extent or degree by anything that we are or do which could be esteemed as predisposing God to this act. And not only is it the case that nothing in us or by us constrains to this act but all that is ours compels the opposite judgment - the whole world is brought in guilty before God (cf. vs. 9, 19). This action on God’s part derives its whole motivation, explanation, and determination from what God himself is and does in the exercise of

free and sovereign grace. Merit of any kind on the part of man, when brought into relation to justification, contradicts the first article of the Pauline doctrine and therefore of his gospel. It is the glory of the gospel of Christ that it is one of free grace.”¹

2. The believing sinner is consequently “redeemed through grace.”

If the work of the gospel is wholly of God outside of man, then it is of grace alone. But if the gospel is understood as a work within man that involves his cooperation, then grace is sullied and it ceases to be grace, but rather assistance. But the sinner needs more than a helping hand; he needs redemption, deliverance from bondage to a decadent nature.

C. Hopeful and his gospel.

John Bunyan well understood the difference between trusting in Jesus Christ outside of us and trusting in Jesus Christ within us. In the longest discourse section in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the first part involves Hopeful's testimony of his conversion which resulted from the witness of Faithful in the Town of Vanity.

Hopeful's indifference turns to concern for his soul, then great disturbance. In desperation he seeks Faithful for advice who told him, “Unless he could obtain the righteousness of a man who had never sinned, then neither his own or all of the righteousness of the world could save him.” Then Faithful explained that the only man of this qualification was “the Lord Jesus Christ who dwells at the right hand of the Most High.” Then Hopeful eventually confesses, “I came to understand that I must look for righteousness in his person, and for satisfaction for my sins through his blood; . . . As a consequence, my heart now became full of joy while my eyes flooded with tears; now my affections overflowed with love for the name, people, and ways of Jesus Christ.”

D. Ignorance and his gospel.

By way of stark contrast, in the second part of the discourse on the Enchanted Ground there is an intense encounter between Christian and Ignorance, “a very brisk [lively, confident] lad,” who is so-called principally because he is ignorant of the true gospel, notwithstanding his doctrinal

¹ Murray, *Romans*, I, p. 115.

comprehension. The gospel that Ignorance confesses stands out in radical contrast with that which Hopeful testified about.

1. The gospel according to Ignorance.

To Christian he confesses to having good spiritual intentions, heartfelt hope of entering heaven. His heart is not perfect, but not as bad as Christian would suggest in quoting Romans 3:10-12. Nevertheless he declares: “Do you believe that I hope to come to God for acceptance offering only the best of my performances? . . . I must believe in Jesus Christ for justification.”

When asked by Christian to further explain, Ignorance responds: “I believe that Jesus Christ died for sinners, and that I shall be justified before God from the curse [of the law] through his gracious acceptance of my obedience to his law. Or to put it another way, Christ makes my religious duties acceptable to his Father by virtue of his merits, and for this reason I shall be justified.”

2. The gospel according to Christian.

To this Christian responds with great animation: “You believe with a fantastical faith, for such a faith is nowhere described in the Word of God. . . . [Your] faith takes away the personal righteousness of Christ for justification and replaces it with your own.”

3. The essential distinguishing truth.

To this Ignorance responds with the revealing comment: “What are you saying? Would you have us trust in what Christ in his own person has done without [outside] of us? This conceit would certainly encourage the loosening of the restraints that restrict our lusts, and allow us to live as we are inclined. For what does it matter how we live when we may be justified from all our sin by Christ’s personal righteousness, that is when all that we have to do is simply believe?”

E. Jesus Christ and His gospel.

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus Christ makes the same distinction with regard to the heart of the gospel in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican/tax/collector (Luke 18:9-14).

1. The gospel hope of the Pharisee declared, v. 11, “*God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. . . . I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.*” This man boasted in his cooperation with grace and his righteousnesses. Particularly note how he declares, “I thank God.” He does *not* deny the operation of grace; rather he believes in its necessary assistance; thus he believes that man’s condition is not so serious as to necessitate thorough renovation; he just needs some aid. Salvation is a cooperative work, a joint project, a collaboration. However, this common understanding of what it is to become a Christian, Jesus Christ utterly rejects!

2. The gospel hope of the publican/tax collector declared, v. 13, “[U]nwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, . . . [he] was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner.’” This man makes no pretension concerning even a modest amount of indwelling grace. He well knew that all of his “righteousnesses were filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). But he does not really believe he has even any of these. All he has are “unrighteousnesses,” and these only add to his condemnation. His head is bowed to the dust as he confesses.

Just and holy is Thy name,
 I am all unrighteousness;
 False and full of sin I am,
 Thou art full of truth and grace.

3. However, the astonishing verdict of Jesus Christ concerning the true gospel is that the tax collector alone receives full pardoning grace, v. 14, “I tell you, this man [this tax collector, wholly trusting in the mercy of God] went to his house justified rather than the other [the Pharisee].” It is enough to make him lift up his head and sing.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
 Grace to cover all my sin;
 Let the healing streams abound,
 Make and keep me pure within:
 Thou of life the fountain art,
 Freely let me take of Thee;
 Spring Thou up within my heart,
 Rise to all eternity.