

Lesson 1: Gospel and Heart

Key concept
Christian
righteousness

INTRODUCTION TO PHASE 3 - GROWING UP IN JESUS GOSPEL & HEART

In Phase 1, we learned the fundamentals of what is involved in beginning to follow Jesus. In Phase 2, we looked at how to lead others to Jesus. In Phase 3, we are going to look at what is involved in growing up in Jesus. This is all about maturity in Christ, which means, in essence, understanding who you *really* are in Christ and rooting yourself in your true identity. Another way to say this is that this involves applying the gospel to your heart. To help do so, over the next 5 weeks, we will work through material written by Tim Keller that we at Bridge refer to as “Gospel and Heart.” This material has helped create a gospel ethos at Bridge and I hope that it will function as a catalyst for our growth in Christ at Bridge.

LESSON 1: MARTIN LUTHER'S PREFACE TO THE GALATIANS

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Key Concept: Christian righteousness

Objectives

- 1. Distinguish Christian righteousness from all other types of righteousness**
- 2. Give you tools to “keep the law within its bounds” that promote freedom in Christ**

Introduction

Martin Luther is a famous German pastor and theologian who lived from 1483-1546. He is most famously associated with his role in the Protestant Reformation, which resulted in the 16th century schism of the Western Church. People now distinguish between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Christianity. Many of Luther’s writings and ideas continue to have a profound impact on Christians to this day. Luther’s teaching on the doctrine of Justification is one of his great contributions to Christianity and is explained powerfully in his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. At the heart of both the doctrine of justification and Galatians is the truth that a person is made right with God by faith in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection alone, and not on any outward obedience to laws, traditions, or ceremonies. This article is an abridgment and paraphrase of the preface to Luther’s commentary on Galatians.

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The most important thing in the world

Luther knew that the foundational truth of Justification by faith in Christ alone is constantly being threatened and must be at the center of all Christian teaching and practice. In this section, we read Luther's commitment to keeping this doctrine central.

- a. *The one doctrine which I have supremely at heart, is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom, and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth day and night. This rock...which we call the doctrine of justification...was shaken by Satan in paradise, when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God... Thereafter the whole world acted like a madman against this faith, inventing innumerable idols and religions with which everyone went his own way, hoping to placate a god or goddess, by his own works; that is, hoping without the aid of Christ and by his own works to redeem himself from evils and sins. All this is sufficiently seen in the practices and records of every culture and nation...*
- b. *The devil, our adversary, who continually rages about seeking to devour us, is not dead. Likewise our flesh and old man is yet alive. Besides this, all kinds of temptations vex and oppress us on every side, so that this doctrine can never be taught, urged, and repeated enough. If this doctrine is lost, then is also the whole knowledge of truth, life and salvation lost; if this doctrine flourishes, then all good things flourish...*

Kinds of righteousness

Central to Justification is the issue of righteousness. God requires that we be righteous. The discussion of righteousness is a major theme in the book of Galatians (and the Bible as a whole). Here Luther introduces two types of righteousness that are very important to understand when seeking to grasp the doctrine of Justification.

- a. *Paul expounds upon the Biblical doctrine of Justification with the goal of demonstrating beyond doubt the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness, for there are many kinds. First, there is political or civil righteousness, the nation's public laws, which magistrates and lawyers may defend and teach. Second, there is cultural righteousness, the standards of our family and social grouping or class, which parents and schools may teach. Third, there is ethical righteousness, the Ten Commandments and law of God, which the church may teach (but only in light of Christian righteousness). [Now, it is right to be a good citizen, to be loved and respected by your social group, and to be a morally upright person. So, all these may be received without danger], if we attribute to them no power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace. These kinds of righteousness are gifts of God, like all good things we enjoy.*

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- b. Yet there is another, far above the others, which the apostle, Paul, calls "the righteousness of faith," or Christian righteousness. God imputes it to us apart from our works; in other words, it is **passive** righteousness as the others are **active**. For we do nothing for it, and we give nothing for it; we only receive and allow another to work, which is God.

The need for Christian righteousness

When Christians think about their own righteousness they tend to shrink back in their minds and hearts. Luther points out that the reason for this is because we have a difficult time embracing the "mystery" of Christian Justification. He expounds the difference between both passive righteousness and active righteousness of Christ. Often times, Christians stress Christ's passive obedience, although not often calling it by that name. The result is that many Christians readily acknowledge that Christ suffered and died for them, but seem to be unaware of the fact that the holy, sinless life, which Jesus lived, is also counted or reckoned to them (active righteousness).

- a. This "passive" righteousness is a mystery that the world cannot understand. Indeed, Christians never completely understand it themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So, we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. For anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience, will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.
- b. Human beings by nature, when they get near either danger or death itself, will out of necessity view their own worthiness. We defend ourselves before all threats by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But, then the remembrance of sins and flaws inevitably comes to mind, and this tears us apart, and we think: "How many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! Please God, let me live, so I can fix and amend things." We become obsessed with our active righteousness and are terrified by its imperfections. But, the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see that Christ has done for us. So, the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness. If I tried to fulfill the law myself, I could not trust in what I had accomplished, neither could it stand up to the judgment of God. So, I rest only upon the righteousness of Christ...which I do not produce but receive: God the Father freely giving it to us through Jesus Christ."

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Law and grace

When people talk about righteousness, they are comparing certain actions to a certain standard. In the Bible, the standard is God's Law. In Christianity, the relationship between God's grace and His law is fundamentally unique compared to any other religion. In Christianity, a Christian's performance is in no way connected to God's acceptance of them. The moment a person places his faith in Christ, for his right standing before God, he is perfectly loved and accepted by God. When this happens, a Christian's relationship and interaction to God's law or commands is turned on its head. However, those who are not Christians do in fact have an obligation to God's law for righteousness. In the excerpts below, Luther introduces the function and role of God's law as it is related to grace.

- a. It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world, to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no Law or Wrath or Punishment. In a sense, they do not exist anymore for the Christian, but only total grace and mercy for Christ's sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. In fact, to those outside of Christian righteousness, the law needs to be expounded upon in all its force. Why? So, that people who think they have power to be righteous before God will be humbled.*
- b. Therefore, the communicator of the Word of God must be careful when dispensing the knowledge of both law and grace. We must keep the law within his bounds! If you teach that we can be accepted by God through obedience, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with earned/moral righteousness in the people's minds. Such a teacher is an ill logician, failing to "rightly divide". On the other hand, if you teach to persons outside of Christ about God's acceptance and love, with no mention of repentance and the cross of Christ, you also confuse and fail to "rightly divide." Rather, he that applies the law and works to the flesh or the old man [the unconverted], and who applies forgiveness of sins and God's mercy to the spirit or the new man [the awakened by the Spirit] does well.*

For example, when I see a man that is bruised, oppressed with the law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for comfort, it is time to remove out of his sight the law and active righteousness, and that I should set before him by the Gospel the Christian and passive righteousness. Then the man is raised up and realizes the hope of being under grace, not under the law (Rom. 6:14)... But upon the man without Christ there must be laid the obligation of works and the law, we do have to fulfill the law. This burden must press him down until he put on the new man, by faith in Christ, then he may enjoy the freedom of the spirit of grace. (Nevertheless, no one fully does this in this life!)

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- c. Therefore, no one should think we reject the importance of good works or of obeying the Law. When we receive the Christian righteousness, we consequently can live a good life, naturally, out of gratitude. If we try to earn our righteousness by doing many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness nor do we honor the purpose for which the law was given. But, if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for His honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

- d. So, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all! For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only, that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become for us, our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now, God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness, sin has no place. So, now we may certainly think: "Although I still sin, I don't despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life." In that righteousness, I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life or mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.

Living the gospel

In the Christian life, even after we 'know' that we are justified by Christ's works and not by our own, there is an ongoing and constant battle in our hearts to rest on this truth. The Christian must continually learn to speak the truth of justification to their struggling conscious and heart. In this section, Luther develops this important battle with the dangerous alternative of losing sight of this battle, as well as offering strategies to wage this battle of the heart.

- a. Now, both these things continue while we live here. We are accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, and bruised by the law with its demands of active righteousness. These attacks fall upon our "flesh" [the part of our heart that still seeks to earn our salvation]. Because of this, Paul sets out in this letter of Galatians to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness. For if the truth of being justified by Christ alone (not by our works) is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness, but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work. On this truth and only on this truth, the church is built and has its being.

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- b. *This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So, you who would be teachers and counselors of others, I admonish to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer - that in the time of trial, you will be able to both inform and comfort both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, for active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ's righteousness. For in times of struggle, the devil will seek to terrify us by using against us our past record, the wrath, and law of God. So, if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness, and if we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting at the right hand of God (Hebrews 7:25) who pleads our case, sinners that we are, to the Father, then we are under the Law, not under grace, and Christ is no Savior, but a Lawgiver, and is no longer our salvation, but an eternal despair.*
- c. *So, learn to speak to one's Heart and to the Law. When the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician, and learn to use arguments of the gospel against it. Say: "O law! You would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and condemn me for sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without hope. You have over-stepped your bounds. Know your place! You are a guide for my behavior, but you are not Savior and Lord of my heart. For I am baptized, and through the Gospel am called to receive righteousness and eternal life. So, trouble me not! For I will not allow you, so intolerable a tyrant and tormentor, to reign in my heart and conscience, for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the Gospel through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness."*
- d. *When I have this Christian righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven as the rain making fruitful the earth. That is to say... I do good works, how and when so ever occasion is offered. Whoever he be that is assuredly persuaded that Christ is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation, but submits to all manner of burdens and dangers in his present life, because he knows that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him. This then is the argument of this Epistle, which Paul expounds against the false teachers who had darkened the Galatians' understanding of this righteousness by faith.*

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Discussion Questions

LOOKING BACK

1. Discuss how you did on your goals from last week.
2. Discuss any progress you made in loving your neighbors on your 3x5 card.

LOOKING UP

1. What is the key difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds?
2. What do we mean by passive righteousness?
3. Why must we “constantly teach it (passive righteousness), repeat it, and work it out in practice?”
4. How do we “keep the law within its bounds?”
5. Why is the difference between passive righteousness and active righteousness so important?
6. What do you notice about how Luther speaks to his heart and to the law?
7. What is the result when Christian righteousness reigns in our heart?
8. Identify a quote that is especially helpful to you. What raised questions?

LOOKING FORWARD

1. List one goal that you have for next week related to applying lesson 1.
2. List one goal that you have to love one or more of your neighbors on your 3x5 card.
3. How do you need prayer this week?