

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. In our session last week we discussed the fact that Jesus Christ has redeemed us from our bondage to sin. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want finish the topic of justification by making a few final observations and emphasizing a most important point.

Marc Roby: What point is that?

Dr. Spencer: That the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone is very often misinterpreted and the results can lead to eternal destruction, this is not a doctrine about which you want to be wrong. When Calvin started to address the doctrine of justification thoroughly in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he wrote, “The doctrine of Justification is now to be fully discussed, and discussed under the conviction, that as it is the principal ground on which religion must be supported, so it requires greater care and attention.”<sup>1</sup> A different translation of Calvin expresses part of that by saying that justification is “the main hinge on which religion turns”<sup>2</sup>.

Marc Roby: I remember that in one of our previous sessions you noted that the doctrine of justification answers what James Boice called “the most basic of all religious questions; How can a man or woman become right with God?”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Spencer: It is, without a doubt, the most important question of all, and Boice was making essentially the same point as Calvin. And when I said that this doctrine is very often misinterpreted, I was referring to the very common antinomian idea that a person can be saved without any real change being evident in the person’s life.

Marc Roby: We should probably remind our listeners that the word antinomian means against the law and refers to people who profess to be Christian but believe that a Christian is not bound to keep God’s law. They would usually say that Christ kept the law for them, so they are not bound to do so themselves.

Dr. Spencer: And, like all good lies, there is an element of truth in that statement. Which is precisely why the biblical doctrine of justification is so easily abused. We are justified based on the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to us because we are united to him by faith. Our own obedience plays no role whatsoever in our justification; that is the element of truth. But it absolutely does *not* follow that we can be saved without any change in our lives, in other words without any obedience, or good works.

We have argued in previous sessions that justification is forensic, in other words, it is a legal declaration of God. But it is not a legal *fiction*, it is based on truth.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, 3.11.1

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Westminster John Knox Press, 1960 (available as pdf at: [http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-7/library/calvin/cal\\_bat3.pdf](http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-7/library/calvin/cal_bat3.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 416

**Marc Roby:** We have made, I think, a solid case that when the Bible speaks about our being justified, it is referring to a legal declaration of God. But we have also argued that it is not because he actually makes us righteous and then declares that to be the case, so in what sense can you say that it is based on truth?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me quote again from John Murray's book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. He asks what it is that enables God to be just when he justifies sinners and he answers by saying, "It is here that the mere notion of declaring to be righteous is seen to be inadequate of itself to express the fulness of what is involved in God's justification of the ungodly. Much more is entailed than our English expression 'declare to be righteous' denotes."<sup>4</sup> And he goes on to say that "The peculiarity of God's action consists in this that he causes to be the righteous state or relation which is declared to be."<sup>5</sup> And he then quotes Romans 5:19, which says, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby:** And, of course, in Romans 5 the apostle Paul is speaking about Adam and Christ as the two representatives, or federal heads, of mankind. When he speaks about the disobedience of the one man, he is speaking about Adam's fall, and when he speaks about the obedience of the one man he is referring to Christ's perfect obedience.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And the point Murray is making here is subtle, but very important. There is solidarity between Adam and his descendants. He was our federal head, the man chosen by God to represent the entire human race. When he sinned, we all, in some sense, *truly* sinned in him. It isn't *just* that his sinful nature is handed down to us through normal procreation, although that is also true. When Paul wrote that through Adam's disobedience many were *made* sinners, the Greek word he used literally means to make it be so<sup>7</sup>. We truly became sinners the moment Adam sinned. This isn't just referring to the sins we then later commit because we inherit his sinful nature. There is a *real* connection to Adam as our federal head, which is why theologians say that his sin is imputed to us. It is like putting something into our bank account. If you transfer \$1,000 into my bank account, the money is truly mine even though it came from you.

**Marc Roby:** And I would have to say that would be very generous of me.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly would be generous of you.

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<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 122

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 123

<sup>6</sup> All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com) The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word is καθίστημι (*kathistēmi*) and in this context means to "make, cause (someone to become someth.)" according to Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 390

Marc Roby: I'm glad you recognize that.

But, getting back to the passage at hand, since Paul uses the same Greek word again when he says that through Christ's obedience the many will be *made* righteous, it must have the same deeper meaning; the many really *are* made righteous in some way.

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly right. When Paul says that through the obedience of Christ many will be made righteous, it is not *just* a legal declaration. Our union with Christ is a very real thing and it means that, in some sense, we are truly *made* righteous *in Christ*. The righteousness is the result of his obedience, not ours, but it truly belongs to us as a result of our union with Christ. His righteousness is placed into our account.

Marc Roby: And our union with Christ is brought about by faith.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Faith is the instrument God uses to unite us to Christ.

Marc Roby: I remember that in Session 177 you used the analogy of a husband and wife. When they get married, their individual financial obligations and assets are truly shared. They belong to the husband and wife together, not just as individuals.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the picture. It is not a legal fiction. If I go buy a new car, my wife is just as liable as I am for the loan payments.

We have spoken about our union with Christ before, most notably in Session 141 and 142. But I just want to emphasize here that our union with Christ is a real thing, just like a proper marriage is a real thing. God uses different metaphors to represent this union. He says that we are all parts of one body with Jesus Christ as the head<sup>8</sup>. He says that we are all stones being built together into a temple in which God lives by his Spirit<sup>9</sup>. He calls the church collectively the bride of Christ, which brings in the marriage metaphor<sup>10</sup>. And, most amazing of all, we read in Christ's high priestly prayer in John 17:21 that Christ prayed for all believers asking, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Marc Roby: That is amazing. And I remember that when you brought up that verse in Session 142 you warned people to not read too much into it. Christ wasn't saying that we will become God in any way.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's an important warning. Interested listeners can go back and listen to Session 142 again, but for now, as I said, I just want to emphasize that our union with Christ is very real. I *truly* possess the perfect righteousness of Christ. It is in my account. And his sacrifice *truly* paid the penalty due for all of my sins, past, present and future. And because of that union I have the two things I need to be saved; my sins are paid for, and I am righteous.

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<sup>8</sup> See Ephesians 4

<sup>9</sup> See Ephesians 2:19-22

<sup>10</sup> E.g., see Ephesians 5:22-27, Revelation 19:7-8, 21:2, 9-10, Mark 2:19-20,

**Marc Roby: We have noted before that in Romans 13:14 Paul commands us to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: Which is a marvelous description and also calls to mind a glorious verse in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 61:10 we read, “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

According to the great Old Testament scholar E.J. Young, in this verse, “it is the Church of God, the elect, the true Israel, that here rejoices in the God of its salvation.”<sup>11</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is wonderful.**

Dr. Spencer: And Young goes on to say that “The comparison with fine dress is carried out in the last clause, for the ornaments with which the *bride* adorns herself point to the pride that she has in her bridal dress. So does the Church boast of its garment, its heavenly robe of righteousness which its Lord has placed upon it.”<sup>12</sup>

**Marc Roby: And that reminds me of Ephesians Chapter Five, where the apostle Paul commands husbands, in Verses 25-27, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”**

Dr. Spencer: That passage uses the same metaphor. And we see it again in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 19:6-8 John tells us, “Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.’ (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)”

**Marc Roby: That’s a marvelous scene. The church, which is the bride of Christ, has made herself ready to spend eternity with Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: And we need to notice the complementary views presented in this passage. First, we read fine linen, bright and clean was *given* to the bride. This speaks about the fact that salvation is a gift. We don’t earn it. We are justified on the basis of the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. But then we are also told that the bride has made *herself* ready, and the parenthetical statement at the end tells us that fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. In other words, while our justification is based on the obedience of Christ alone, we do, nonetheless, have righteous acts of our own. We are to make *ourselves* ready. Our obedience is not the ground of our justification, but it is absolutely certain to be there *if* we are truly justified, which means that our obedience is necessary as *proof* that we are justified.

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<sup>11</sup> E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1972, Vol. 3, pg. 465

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 466

**Marc Roby: And, hence, we can say that our works are necessary for salvation and we can also say that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Both are true.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Both statements are true, we just have to understand in what way we mean that our works are necessary; they are necessary only as *proof* that we are being saved. Whereas, when we say that salvation, or justification, is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, we are referring to the *ground* or the *basis* of our justification, which can only be the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ.

**Marc Roby: Is there anything more you want to say about justification?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I want to close, as John Murray closes his chapter on justification in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by answering the question, "Why is justification by faith alone?"

**Marc Roby: I think a perfectly good answer would be that God has so ordained it.**

Dr. Spencer: And Murray agrees that that is a sufficient answer, but he also notes that we have "good warrant to say more. There are apparent reasons why justification is by faith and by faith alone. First, it is altogether consonant with the fact that it is by grace."<sup>13</sup> And he then quotes Romans 4:16, which says that "the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace". And, of course, grace is God's favor shown to those who deserve his wrath.

**Marc Roby: The fact that we are saved by grace alone certainly redounds to God's greater glory.**

Dr. Spencer: It does, yes. The second reason Murray gives is that "faith is entirely congruous with the fact that the ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ. The specific quality of faith is that it receives and rests upon another, in this case Christ and his righteousness."<sup>14</sup>

**Marc Roby: And, of course, it takes great humility to rest entirely on another. In our sinful pride we all want to have some active role in our being justified.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we do. But the righteousness that is required to be in God's presence is perfection as we have noted before. We can do absolutely nothing in this life that truly deserves God's commendation. Even our supposedly good works are tainted with sin and are only acceptable as good by God's grace because they come from a heart that desires to please him.

And, finally, Murray's third reason is that "justification by faith and faith alone exemplifies the freeness and richness of the gospel of grace. If we were to be justified by works, in any degree or to any extent, then there would be no gospel at all. For what works of righteousness can a condemned, guilty, and depraved sinner offer to God?"<sup>15</sup>

**Marc Roby: The only answer to that question is none. As you noted, even our so-called good works are tainted by sin. And, as Murray said, if we were saved by our works, even to some**

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<sup>13</sup> Murray, op. cit., pg. 130

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

degree, the gospel would be gone. We would, at least in some sense, be receiving what we deserve; it would no longer be the good news of salvation to unworthy sinners.

Dr. Spencer: It is a very serious error to think that we can earn even the smallest part of our salvation. Which is why Paul condemns that attitude so severely in his letter to the church in Galatia. We read in Galatians 5:4, “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

Marc Roby: And we certainly don't ever want to go there; to be alienated from the only Savior and Lord of the world.

Dr. Spencer: No, we don't. There can be no mixture of faith and works as the basis for our justification. It is by grace alone, through faith alone. But, as we have been endeavoring to make clear, that faith is never truly alone. In James 2:14 our Lord's brother asks the question, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” He then goes on to consider the question and, finally, draws the conclusion that we read in James 2:26, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Marc Roby: That's a frightening thought. It is possible to have a dead faith. And Jesus told us that many people will have such a dead faith. We read in Matthew 7:22-23 that Jesus said, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

Dr. Spencer: Those are frightening verses. We may think we are doing good works, but if we haven't been born again, we are not God's children and even our best works will never be accepted because, as I said, that also requires grace. Murray makes the following statement, “Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace.”<sup>16</sup>

Marc Roby: That's a great way of putting it. Are we finished with the topic of justification?

Dr. Spencer: We are for now. So we are ready to move on to the next item in the order of salvation, which is adoption.

Marc Roby: And that is a glorious topic to look forward to, but it will have to wait for next week. So, I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We'll do our best to answer you.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pg. 131