

Sabbath School Today **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

Redemption in Romans **Lesson 5: “Justification and the Law”**

The gospel of “all you have to do is believe” and God will adjust your accounts in heaven is “cheap grace” which voids God’s law. The gospel of “trust and obey” is “legalism” and it abolishes God’s law too. The Apostle Paul is dead set against the abolition of God’s law. He writes: “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31). So how are we to understand the relationship between faith and the law?

Through the centuries Christians have wrestled with salvation by law-keeping or by believing. The historic Roman Catholic idea was that salvation is by grace which is received by the communicant through the sacraments of the Church which in turn enable one to render acceptable works to God in order for sins to be forgiven. The law of God and the Sabbath in particular were of little importance. Luther’s breakthrough of justification by faith was the beginning of a restoration of God’s love for sinners by forgiving their record of sins. Distinct from justification by faith was the pursuit of living for God, but the Sabbath truth and God’s law were of secondary importance.

What Ellen White heard in the 1888 message was the perfect marriage of justification by faith and the law of God. [1] In other words, justification by faith is the experience of seeing the uplifted Saviour and appreciating the fact that “if one died for all, then were all dead” (2 Cor. 5:14); i.e., all would be dead if One had not died for all. This effective gift of God’s amazing forgiveness in Christ is given to the sinner and it reconciles an enemy’s heart to God so that the soul receives the atonement.

It follows that one cannot be reconciled to God and not be reconciled to His holy law. “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid; yea, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31). Therefore, if we are reconciled to God we shall gladly obey all ten of His commandments, including the fourth. Yes, we shall obey the seventh, too; justification by faith heals wounded, alienated hearts in marriage.

Paul provides two illustrations of justification by faith from the Old Testament. “Abraham our father” was a heathen when God proclaimed the cross to him (Gal. 3:8). God’s self-giving, self-denying love won his heart and “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). He who seeks to be “justified by works” supplies the righteousness in which he glories, but all such self-motivated works are nothing “before God.” It is faith which is activated by the creative *agape* of God that counts for righteousness, and there is no egocentrism involved in it.

When one is motivated by self-interest, he works for wages earned, but grace cannot be earned. Grace is God's gift to sinners. Genuine faith is centered on the cross where the sinner identifies with Christ. God actually makes the ungodly just from the inside out. This is what Paul means when he writes, "his faith is counted for righteousness" (vs. 5). [2]

Paul's second illustration of justification by faith is David. The "blessedness" of David is twofold: God's imputation of righteousness, and the forgiveness of sins (vss. 6, 7). David wrote of the blessed experience of God removing his sins (Psalm 32:1, 2). Equally important is the personal happiness of God making one righteous (vs. 8).

"A false view of righteousness by faith declares that genuine righteousness must always be imputed vicariously, that it can never be truly imparted. The difference? A lady wears a leopard-skin coat externally; it is never a part of her, it is vicarious, imputed. The leopard wears a leopard skin coat as a part of himself, it is imparted. The false view says that sin can never be eradicated until we see the Lord coming in the clouds of heaven and He zaps us. But the Bible teaches that vicarious imputed righteousness must and will also become imparted righteousness. [3]

Thus it is that *agape*-motivated faith establishes the law. "Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace" (Rom. 4:16). The gift of the cross is the ultimate meaning of the atonement which is perfect harmony with God's law.

Law divorced from grace provokes the natural-born enmity of the heart. Such enmity is lawlessness which seeks to do away with sin (3:15). Any concept of justification by faith which fails to deal with the heart-enmity is antinomianism. If justification by faith is a mental assent to a book transaction in heaven light-years away from the believer whereby God adjusts one's accounts in heaven, but there is no heart-reconciliation, it is a detour around the cross. If self-centeredness is not crucified with Christ, the law is made void.

God does not ask us to *do* His commandments in order to be saved. His love constrains us to *believe* His promises—the everlasting covenant. Paul's gospel forbids all possibility of "righteousness" "by the law" (Gal. 3:21). "The promises of God" were given to Abraham 430 years before his descendants were given the Ten Commandments written on tables of stone (vs. 17). God's purpose in giving the law was not that it might impart righteousness to sinners. It is given as a perfect description of righteousness. But those who are motivated by fear are "kept under the law," locked up by a correctional officer, that the law might drive them "unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed" (vs. 23).

Paul is not writing about the historical sequence of the Jews from Sinai to the cross, but of the law's function by virtue of the Holy Spirit convicting the heart "of sin and of righteousness" (John 16:8). "The scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Gal. 3:22).

The “faith of Jesus” is the source of our faith in Him. It is the fact of His taking our “self” and denying it continually throughout His earthly life, climaxing in His cross. His ultimate act of faith was when hanging on the God-forsaken cross He bore our curse of the second death and yet proclaimed His faith, “Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit: and having said thus, He gave up the ghost” (Luke 23:46). His faith bridged the gulf of sin to the Father and that was the atonement.

We appreciate the “faith of Jesus” and “believe” in Him. We experience a reconciliation of heart to God which is in perfect harmony with His law of love manifested in obedience to all His commandments.

—Paul E. Penno

Endnotes:

[1] “The Lord in His great mercy sent a most precious message to His people through Elders Waggoner and Jones. This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God” (*Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 91, 92).

[2] “The last verse of the third chapter of Romans tells us that by faith we establish the law. Moreover, the very term ‘justification’ shows that faith performs the requirement of the law. Faith makes a man a doer of the law, for that is the meaning of the term ‘justification by faith’” (E. J. Waggoner, “Studies in Romans. The Blessing of Abraham,” *The Signs of the Times*, Feb. 13, 1896, p. 2).

[3] Robert J. Wieland, *Dial Daily Bread* (February 14, 1998).