

LESSON 13

Belgic Confession Articles 22 and 23 Justification by Faith

General:

In this lesson, we examine the Doctrine of Justification and the manner in which the work of Christ is imparted to us.

1. Justification

Justification means: to declare just = innocent, free of the guilt of sin and thus acquitted before the judgment seat of God. The confession says (Article 23) that "our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake"

Justification is a judicial (= legal) concept, denoting a legal position before God in the Covenant (as opposed to *condemnation* because of sin).

The heart of the matter is that our justification lies in *Christ*, who in our place on the cross bore the penalty for sin, and has earned for us the status of "righteous before God."

Isaiah 53:11b, "By His knowledge, shall the Righteous One, My Servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities."

We receive this righteousness of Christ out of *grace* (= freely, by God's mercy, without our effort), yet this righteousness itself is based on Christ's fulfillment of the demand of the Law.

Isaiah 1:27, "Zion shall be redeemed by *justice*, and those in her who repent by righteousness."

The Confession again stresses that our *complete* justification lies *only* in Christ and not in any other source. Christ alone paid for our sins, fulfilling the demand of the Law on our behalf, thus being our *full* justification before God.

2. Justification by Faith

A very important question is: How is this righteousness of Christ imparted to us, or how do we *receive* it? The answer is: *by faith alone*. "The Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith. This faith embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, makes Him our own, and does not seek anything besides Him."

Romans 1:17, "As it is written: he who *through faith* is righteous, shall live."

The Scriptures emphasize that justification is by faith alone, "*apart from (our) works*," Romans 3:28. It is true that faith must be manifest in *works* (James 2:18-26), but these works themselves are never ground for our justification. The *ground* is always: Christ's one sacrifice on the cross.

This was the great issue during the time of the Reformation, and is echoed throughout our Creeds and Liturgical Forms ("apart from ourselves in Jesus Christ"). The confession calls this a "foundation" (Article 23), as it were, the *heart* of the Reformed Faith. Here the very basis and depth of the Gospel is at stake.

The following objections have been brought in against the doctrine of justification by faith alone:

a) it negates the importance and redeeming merit of good works. This objection is not valid. Our works are a *result* of faith, fruits of gratitude, and are rewarded only of grace, for Christ's sake. Besides, our good works are not so much the result of *our* effort, but the effect of Christ's renewing power by the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 2:10, "For we are *His* workmanship, created in Jesus Christ *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

b) it renders men careless and wicked (See also Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 24). This objection, too, is not valid. The Holy Spirit incites us to a life of service and diligence.

John 15:8, "By this My Father is glorified that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples."

The Scriptures warn us clearly that we should not become "careless and profane" and thus despise the grace of God in our lives. Since God works *in* us, we must work *out* our salvation with fear and trembling. Philippians 2:12,13.

Throughout time, men have unsuccessfully tried to promote some ground for *self*-justification (Pelagianism, Arminianism). This has been the cause of much conflict and schism in the Church of Christ.

3. Faith only an Instrument

Our confession stresses that "faith" is not a *ground* for justification. "Strictly speaking, we do not mean that faith as such justifies us," but it is simply a *means* to justification. It is called "only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness." Faith is, as it were, the arm or the hand by which we reach out to Christ and embrace Him as our Saviour. It is the connection between Christ and us. Justification is therefore always *through* or *by* faith, but never *because* of faith.

We cannot earn salvation on the basis of our faith, because:

a) it is essentially a gift of God, and not a work of our own, see: Ephesians 2:8

b) with us it is never a perfect faith because of our sinfulness and weakness (see also: *form* for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, "We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires.").

When we speak of faith as a condition for justification (see: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 23, Answer 60, "If only I accept this gift with a believing heart"), we do not mean a *preceding* condition (Arminianism) but an *accompanying* condition.

Not: first faith, then righteousness;

But: righteousness always and only through faith; the two go *together*.

4. The Origin of Faith

The following questions now become important:

1. what is true faith? (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7).
2. where does this faith come from? (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25).

True faith is both a "sure knowledge" and a "firm confidence," which directs itself to the complete revelation of God and trusts in the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake alone (see: Hebrews 11:1; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7). Faith is not merely an acknowledging of certain facts (e.g. the birth and death of Christ) but an *application* of these facts to one's own life; "He died, for me," The Confession (Article 22) therefore speaks of faith in terms of "communion." This communion is with:

- a) God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit
- b) one another in the one bond of faith.

We can distinguish between:

- a) the *activity* of faith: a personal embracing of Christ and all His benefits; John 3:16
- b) the *contents* of faith: the full revelation of God as contained in the Holy Scriptures; Jude verse 3, "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

Faith is a gift of God, worked by the Holy Spirit in this *manner*: (Romans 10:14-17)

- a) God sends faithful preachers of the Gospel (*mission*)
- b) these preachers faithfully proclaim the Word of God (*preaching*)
- c) men attend to this preaching (*hearing*)
- d) through this hearing men come to the faith (*faith*)
- e) by this faith, men come to serve God (*worship*).

Romans 10:17, "So faith comes by what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ."

So it is evident that the Holy Spirit does not work faith except by the Word of God, and the two may never be separated (see also: Lord's Day 25, Heidelberg Catechism).

This faith is a decisive means and manner in receiving the benefits and merits of Christ,

Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him
...."

QUESTIONS (Lesson 13):

1. What is the meaning of the term "justification"?
2. In whom alone lies this justification and how did He realize it?
3. How do we receive this justification?
4. Explain how this doctrine is the "heart" of the Reformed doctrine?
5. Which objections have been brought in against the doctrine of justification by faith, and why are these invalid?
6. Which major heresies conflict with this confession?
7. Why can faith itself never be the *ground* for our salvation?
8. What do we mean when we say that faith is a *condition* for justification?
9. What is true faith?
10. How is faith worked in our hearts?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers, 21, 22, 59, 60, 61, 63, and 64.

ARTICLE 24

MAN'S SANCTIFICATION AND GOOD WORKS

We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God's Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man. It makes him live a new life and frees him from the slavery of sin. Therefore it is not true that this justifying faith makes man indifferent to living a good and holy life. On the contrary, without it no one would ever do anything out of love for God, but only out of self-love or fear of being condemned. It is therefore impossible for this holy faith to be inactive in man, for we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls *faith working through love*. This faith induces man to apply himself to those works which God has commanded in His Word. These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless, they do not count toward our justification. For through faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do any good works. Otherwise they could not be good any more than the fruit of a tree can be good unless the tree itself is good.

Therefore we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do, since it is He *who is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*. Let us keep in mind what is written: *So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."* Meanwhile we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is by His grace that He crowns His gifts.

Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them. We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment. Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it. We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour.

ARTICLE 25

CHRIST, THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled.

In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God's will and to His glory.