

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 24: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM QA'S 62-64

Question 62: BUT WHY CANNOT OUR GOOD WORKS BE THE WHOLE OR PART OF OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD? **Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment seat of God must be perfect throughout and entirely conformable to the divine law, but even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.**

We have learned that, “to justify” means “to declare one righteous.” The key question is: on what basis does God declare the believer in Christ to be righteous?

For the Roman Catholic Church, God declares someone righteous only if they are *first* sanctified, that is, made *inwardly righteous* by an infusion of grace (which happens by baptism) and then they cooperate with infused grace by doing righteous things (good works). As long as they keep doing good works, God will keep declaring them righteous. Those who commit a mortal sin lose the grace of justification. But they can be restored to a state of justification through the sacrament of penance. Therefore, for Rome, we are justified on the basis of an imperfect righteousness done by us.

How does Rome interpret Paul’s statement in Romans 3:28: “a man is justified by faith *apart from the works of the law*”? They argue that “works of the law” refers only to the *ceremonies* of the law (e.g. circumcision, animal sacrifices, etc.), and not the moral law (i.e. the Ten Commandments). Therefore, they maintain that no one is justified by the ceremonial works of the law, but they are justified by doing the good works required in the NT. With this understanding, they appeal to James 2:24, “a man is justified by works [i.e. *good* works], and not by faith only.”

But Rome misinterprets both Paul and James. First of all, **nowhere** does Paul say a man is *not* justified by *ceremonial* works but he *is* justified by *good* works. Second, James uses the term *justify* differently than Paul. “To be justified” has another meaning besides “to be declared righteous before God.” It can also mean “*shown* to be righteousness before men” (e.g. Luke 7:35; Rom. 3:4). Therefore, Paul speaks “of that righteousness by which we are justified before God...but James speaks of that righteousness by which we are justified before men by our works” (Ursinus, 338). James is rebuking the person who *claims* to believe in Jesus, but does not have good works to show for it. “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone **says** he has faith but does not have works?” (James 2:14). True believers bear fruit out of thankfulness for salvation: “every good tree produces good fruit” (Matt. 7:17). Therefore, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (2:17). James challenges the *professing* believer without good works, to “**show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works**” (2:18). Thus, the correct way to understand James 2:24 is: “a man is justified [*shown* to be righteous] by works, and not by faith only.”

Rome’s fatal mistake is to refuse to accept the biblical truth that perfect righteousness is the requirement for eternal life (Gal. 3:21), which is precisely why we need Christ’s perfect righteousness imputed to us!

Thus, our “works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless, they are of no account towards our justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even *before* we do good works (*Belgic Confession*, Article 24).

Question 63: DO OUR GOOD WORKS *MERIT* [*DESERVE*] NOTHING, EVEN THOUGH IT IS GOD’S WILL TO REWARD THEM IN THIS LIFE AND IN THAT WHICH IS TO COME? **The reward comes not of merit, but of grace.**

The Bible says that God will reward our good works, both in this life and in that which is to come (Psalm 18:20; 19:10-11; **Mark 10:28-29**; Matt. 5:11-12; 6:6; Heb. 6:10; 11:6; Rev. 22:12). The rewards include peace, joy, and spiritual prosperity (Deut. 12:28; Psalm 1:1-3; Psalm 119:165; Prov. 3:13-17; John 10:10; 14:21).

But this does not mean our good works *deserve* to be rewarded. Only *perfect* righteousness *deserves* to be rewarded. “Therefore, we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who *works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure* [Phil. 2:13]. Let us therefore attend to what is written: *When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, we are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do* [Luke 17:10]. In the meantime, we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts” (*Belgic Confession*, article 24).

Question 64: BUT DOES NOT THIS DOCTRINE MAKE MEN CARELESS AND PROFANE? **No, for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.**

The Roman Catholics slander the reformed doctrine of justification by saying that it makes men careless and profane. They maintain that if you teach people to believe they are justified by faith in Christ even before they do good works, then that will make them care less about doing good works and encourage them to live in sin.

But the easy reply is that being set free from eternal condemnation makes us *thankful*, not profane! For when we are united to Christ by true faith we receive **both justification and sanctification** (1 Cor. 6:11; see again Question 43). God first justifies us by declaring us perfectly righteous in Christ, and then by His *Holy Spirit* He begins the *process* of sanctification which restores God’s *holy* image in us, purifying us from the inward corruption of sin, and making us inwardly righteous and holy, so that we hate sin and do good works out of thankfulness for salvation (Eph. 4:24-25; Tit. 2:14; 1 John 2:4; 3:10). True believers are “those who hear the word, accept it, and **bear fruit**: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some hundred” (Mark 4:20). “For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Good works are the *fruit* of justification – which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23); “the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth” (Eph. 5:9). Since the Holy Spirit is producing good fruit in our lives (He “*makes* me heartily willing and ready to live unto Him,” Question 1), it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness (Jer. 32:40; Ezek. 36:27).

“He, therefore, who boasts of having applied to himself by faith the death of Christ, and yet has no desire to live a holy and godly life... gives conclusive evidence that the truth is not in him; for all those who are justified are willing and ready to do those things which are pleasing to God” (Ursinus, 227).

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