

## **“JUSTIFICATION REVISITED.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Sermon Texts: Romans 5:1-2, 6-11**

**Belgic Confession Article 23**

### **Introduction.**

When we left the Belgic Confession in early December we were on Article 23 about justification. I said then our Belgic Confession is right to devote two long articles to this one topic “How can man be justified before a holy and righteous God?” That’s the central question, that’s the heart of the Gospel.

In my last sermon I said there are two aspects of justification, the forgiveness of our sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (what He gives to us in place of our sins).

These are called the negative aspect of justification and the positive aspect of justification.

The negative is the forgiveness of our sins, the taking away of our sins.

The positive is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, the giving to us of His righteousness.

Jesus doesn’t just remove all our filthy rags and leave us naked. He doesn’t just clean out all the junk from our house and leave it clean but empty. He doesn’t just bulldoze the rotten structure and leave the lot bare.

He doesn’t just take away. He also gives us something new, He replaces the old with something new. God in Christ takes away our filthy clothes of sin and unrighteousness and gives us the white robes of Christ’s righteousness.

This is why Paul can say:

**Romans 8:1-2** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

**II Corinthians 5:21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

It’s all grace. All we bring to the transaction is our sin, our rebellion, our debts, our iniquities, our immorality and depravity.

**My hope is built on nothing less**

Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly trust in Jesus' Name.

Dressed in His righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before the throne.

August Toplady wrote in his old hymn, *Rock of Ages*: "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace." We contribute nothing to our salvation. As Scripture says, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Psalm 3:8) and "The Lord is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6).

God accepts us based on Christ and because of Christ and for the sake of Christ. All who are in Christ, are righteous because of Christ's righteousness.

Protestant Reformers like to sum our view of justification as "by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Christ's blood and righteousness alone, for the glory of God alone, as taught with final authority in Scripture alone" (John Piper, *God is the Gospel*, p. 44).

### **Justification Revisited.**

I want to revisit this doctrine for a couple of reasons. First, because it has been a long time since we did and it's so important that it merits further attention. And because I want us to have this in mind as we turn next week to the doctrine that immediately follows which is sanctification. But there is another reason.

Pastor John Piper wrote a very fine book some years ago, *God is the Gospel*, in which he takes the discussion of justification a step further. He agrees that justification is good news and that's what Gospel means, good news.

But Piper asks why is this news good news? Why is it good news that our sins are forgiven and we are counted righteous before a holy God?

We could probably come up with several reasons why justification is good news. Some would answer it's good news because I don't have to go to hell for my sin. Another would say it's good news because all my guilt and shame are gone and I don't have a guilty conscience anymore. Yet another might answer it's good news because I can now go spend eternity in heaven.

Those are all well and good but they aren't good enough answers. A way of getting at what's wrong with these answers is illustrated by this question Piper asks. "Would you be happy in heaven if God wasn't there?"

If we like all the things justification does for us and consider that the good news, then we have missed the point. ***The point is being reconciled with God.*** The point is peace with God. The Gospel is not about getting to heaven per se, the Gospel is about getting to God. If we don't want God more than anything else then we don't want the Gospel.

Yes, justification is about removing the wrath of God and forgiving our sins and clothing us in Christ's righteousness. But that's not the end. The point is being reconciled with God.

**Romans 5:1-2, 6-11** Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, ***we have peace with God*** through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and ***we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*** 11 More than that, ***we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ,*** through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The Gospel isn't about us and what we gain. The Gospel is about God and the glory of God.

Piper gives an excellent ***illustration*** of what we are trying to understand:

“Suppose I get up in the morning and as I am walking to the bathroom I trip over some of my wife's laundry that she left lying on the hall floor. Instead of simply moving the laundry myself and assuming the best in her, I react in a way that is all out of proportion to the situation and say something very harsh to my wife as she is waking up. She gets up, puts the laundry away, and walks downstairs ahead of me. I can tell by the silence and from my own conscience that our relationship is in serious trouble.

As I go downstairs my conscience is condemning me. Yes, the laundry should not have been there. Yes, I might have broken my neck. But those thoughts are mainly the self-defending flesh talking. The truth is that my words were way out of line. Not only was the emotional harshness way out of proportion to the fault, “Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Cor. 6:7).

So as I enter the kitchen there is ice in the air, and her back is blatantly toward me as she works at the kitchen counter. What needs to happen here? The answer is plain: I need to apologize and ask her forgiveness. That would be the right thing to do. But here's the analogy: Why do I want her forgiveness? So that she will make me my favorite breakfast? So that my guilt feelings will go away and I will be able to concentrate at work today? So there will be good sex tonight? So the kids won't see us at odds? So that she will finally admit that the laundry shouldn't have been there?

It may be that every one of those desires will come true. But they are all defective motives for wanting forgiveness. What's missing is this: I want to be forgiven so that I can have the sweet fellowship of my wife back. She is the reason I want to be forgiven. I want the relationship restored. Forgiveness is simply a way of getting obstacles out of

the way so that we can look at each other again with joy” (John Piper, *God Is the Gospel*, p. 44).

That’s the goal of the Gospel, to restore our fellowship with God, to be reconciled with God and to be at peace with God. The Gospel is all about my relationship with God Himself and not what else I might get out of it.

Listen to the heart of the Psalmist who gets the Gospel:

**Psalm 42:1-2** As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.  
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
When shall I come and appear before God?

**Psalm 63:1-3** O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.  
3 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

**Psalm 84:1-2** How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!  
2 My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.

**Psalm 27:4** One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after:  
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

This is the difference between unbelievers and believers, between those who are justified and those who are not. Concerning unbelievers:

**II Corinthians 4:4** In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Concerning believers:

**II Corinthians 4:6** For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Unless you are born again you cannot and will not see the glory of Jesus. It can only be seen by grace through faith. Satan’s goal is to blind the eyes of all people from ever seeing the Gospel and from ever seeing God. And their blindness is an exceedingly great blindness, a blindness worse than not being able to see the noonday sun.

It's the worst possible blindness because seeing the glory of God is the greatest thing imaginable in the entire universe.

Remember what Jesus said when Peter saw.

**Matthew 16:16-17** Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

The beauty of the Gospel is seeing the beauty and glory of God in Christ. The point of the Gospel is to see and savor and delight in and enjoy the supreme glory and beauty of God. It is to say with the prophet, "Behold your God."

The goal of preaching Christ is to open our hearts to the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ. The goal of coming to hear the word preached is "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." And the goal of the word preached is, "Behold your God."

Every time the true Gospel is preached God is saying again, "Let there be light."

Paul's prayer should be our prayer for ourselves and each other.

**Ephesians 1:16-19** I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 *having the eyes of your hearts enlightened*, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe,

The point of Paul's prayer is that there is a kind of spiritual seeing that sees these things we are talking about. Not a vision or a dream, but a seeing in our hearts, having a sense of the true beauty and gloriousness of God and His grace, and feeling a deep sense of delight and pleasure over it. It is treasuring God in the deepest way, a way beyond words.

### **The joy of justification.**

One fruit of justification is joy, it is cause for rejoicing, it is cause for worship to God.

**Romans 5:11** More than that, we also *rejoice* in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The Ethiopian eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

The Philippian Jailer and all his house believed and rejoiced.

Zacchaeus rejoiced in his new found freedom in Christ and his release from the bondage of sin and greed.

Jesus points the disciples to this after their successful preaching and healing mission:

**Luke 10:20** “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Rejoice in your reconciliation, rejoice in your peace, rejoice in your victory, rejoice in your Savior, rejoice that we can behold our God face to face.

### **Application and conclusion.**

Our sin excludes us from fellowship with God. Our sin separates us from ever being in the presence of God. But thanks be to God that He bridged the gap and came to us and reconciled Himself to us and us to Himself.

Justification makes us right with God forever. We don't have to live for others approval or acceptance. We already have God's acceptance and approval through Jesus.

The Reformation did away with merit-based religion. It put an end to our own good works as the way of gaining God's acceptance and favor.

Our acceptance as children of God does not depend on us in even the slightest measure. We are adopted and like adopted children, we don't boast in anything we have done. It's all grace.

Justification by grace through faith is the most liberating doctrine in Scripture. We are set free from what people think of us and are shown what God thinks of us.

**Prayer:** Father, this is too much for us to fully understand. You take the bankruptcy of our sin and pay it off with Christ's death on the cross, and then you credit to our account His righteousness, His perfect obedience. How can we respond but to ask you to receive our wonder, awe and adoration; receive our love and joy; and receive the offering of our lives to you to do with as you please for your glory. You have bought us, we are yours, no more will we live for ourselves. Make us Christ-loving, joy-filled believers, and may His righteousness be reflected in all we say and do.