

The Law and Justification

The immediate focus of the *pseudadelphoi* had to be justification. Whatever else they understood by ‘salvation’, when they insisted that without circumcision there is no salvation, it is clear that whatever else is involved, justification is. Paul knew, therefore, that is where he needed to start: he had to demolish the Judaisers’ claim with regard to justification. In order to do this, he knew he had to assert and establish that the sinner’s justification before God is by faith in Christ alone by the grace of God of God alone, without any contribution from circumcision. He was going to get rid of any talk of ‘and’ when it came to justification: it was ‘by faith in Christ alone’, not ‘by faith in Christ and...’.

And he was not going to allow any talk along the lines: ‘Well, it’s only circumcision’. Whatever specious reasoning the *pseudadelphoi* might use, Paul was adamant: justification is by faith in Christ alone by the grace of God alone. Full stop! And the apostle’s point was blunt: ‘I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law’ (Gal. 5:3). So let’s have no more talk of ‘it’s only this or that’! As soon as any bit of the law is brought into the picture, it inevitably means the whole lot. Works of the law in any part, shape or form? Out of the question! Of course, Christ was born under the law and pleased his Father by obedience to the law as a faithful man of the old covenant (John 4:34; 5:30,36; 6:38; 17:4; 19:28,30; Gal. 4:4). Yes. Furthermore, it is when Christ’s righteousness and obedience under the law is imputed to the sinner that the sinner is justified. Yes.¹ But no observance of the law by the sinner gets a look in. As far as the sinner himself is concerned, the new covenant needs no contribution whatsoever from the old covenant in the matter of justification. Paul had zero tolerance

¹ See my *Imputed*.

The Law and Justification

for any talk of justification which involved the sinner's law-works.

Such is the explicit and repeated teaching of the apostle in response to the *pseudadelphoi*.

Hear him! Read the following aloud, and feel the passion throbbing through his veins:

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified (Gal. 2:16).

Is that not clear enough? Then the *pseudadelphoi* should get it into their heads – into their hearts – that to add anything to Christ – anything at all, including the law or any part of it – is to ruin all, and has only one end – a curse:

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them'. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith'. But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them'. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10-14).

Do not miss Paul's talk of 'Gentiles'. It had been the conversion of Gentiles which had sparked the *pseudadelphoi* into action in the first place!

Again:

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace (Gal. 5:2-4).

The Law and Justification

That was telling the Galatians: ‘You are severed from Christ... you have fallen away from grace!’ With regard to justification, it is Christ, not circumcision. It is Christ, not Christ and circumcision. And for ‘circumcision’, read ‘the old covenant’, ‘the Mosaic law’, in whole or in part.

Now for the Corinthians:

Christ Jesus... became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written: ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Christ is our righteousness. Christ alone is our righteousness. He needs no addition by any works, rites, ceremonies, observances that the sinner can undergo. The following may well be said of Christ:

This is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness’ (Jer. 23:6; see also Isa. 45:24; Jer. 33:16; Dan. 9:24; Rom. 3:22).

Paul had more to say to the Corinthians on this subject of justification. Of course, he had! Hear him:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

And what about the climax? I am speaking of The Great Exchange:

God... for our sake... made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

The Corinthians were left in no doubt.

And then the letter to the Romans:

The Law and Justification

By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:20-28).

To prove that justification needs no law works of our own, the apostle went back to the Old Testament and chose two leading exemplars:

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works... Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the

The Law and Justification

footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void... That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring – not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham... That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness’. But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:1-25).

There could be only one conclusion:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we [or, let us] rejoice [or, boast] in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-2).

The apostle powered on:

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free [that is, has freed you] from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of [that is, for] sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

As for the Jewish/Gentile aspect of all this:

Gentiles [that is, those outside the old covenant (Eph. 2:11-12)] who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel [that is, those in the old covenant] who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why?

The Law and Justification

Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame' (Rom. 9:30-33).

Paul had still more to say:

[The Jews] being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says...: 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says: 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame'. For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom. 10:3-13).

* * *

Surely this must be proof enough. The sinner's justification is by faith in Christ alone, by God's grace alone, with no contribution whatsoever from any observance or experience of the law. The new covenant, with regard to justification, is a stand-alone covenant. Any attempt to add any contribution from the law on the sinner's part spells ruin.

As Paul (with Barnabas) declared to the Jews in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia:

By [Christ] everyone who believes is freed [or justified] from everything from which you could not be freed [or justified] by the law of Moses (Acts 13:39).

As he told Titus:

The Law and Justification

[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Tit. 3:5-7).

And that's all there is to it! In short, there must be no compromise with the *pseudadelphoi* over justification. None whatsoever.