

# Righteousness Apart from Ourselves

*Heidelberg Catechism 5 - 2018*

By Rev. David Overway

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Isaiah 64  
**Preached on:** Sunday, December 16, 2018

## Hope Protestant Reformed Church

1580 Ferndale Ave. SW  
Grand Rapids, MI 49534

**Website:** [www.hopeprchurch.org](http://www.hopeprchurch.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/hopeprc](http://www.sermonaudio.com/hopeprc)

For our Scripture reading we turn to Isaiah 64.

1 Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence, 2 As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! 3 When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence. 4 For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. 5 Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. 6 But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. 7 And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. 8 But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. 9 Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people. 10 Thy holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. 11 Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste. 12 Wilt thou refrain thyself for these things, O LORD? wilt thou hold thy peace, and afflict us very sore?

Thus far we read.

Consider this morning the first Question & Answer 62 of Lord's Day 24.

Q. 62. But why cannot our good works be the whole, or part of our righteousness before God?

Because, that the righteousness, which can be approved of before the tribunal of God, must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law; and also, that our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Lord's Day 24, beloved, is closely connected to Lord's Day 23. Lord's Day 23, as we noticed last time, teaches us that we are justified by faith in Christ alone. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, is accounted as our righteousness. Christ's righteousness is our righteousness before God. We embrace and receive that righteousness and apply that righteousness to ourselves personally by faith, by that only appropriating instrument, faith.

Lord's Day 24 now builds on that truth. Lord's Day 24 further elaborates on justification but now Lord's Day 24 especially shows how our justification fits in with our sanctification. So too, interestingly, does our Belgic Confession in Articles 23 and 24, a good and helpful thing to be aware of, it helps us to remember where to find these doctrines in the creeds if we remember that Lord's Day 23 and Belgic Confession Article 23, both 23, speak of justification as well as Lord's Day 24 and Belgic Confession Article 24 really explore and examine the relationship between justification and sanctification.

What are the relationships, then, between justification and sanctification? This Lord's Day examines some of those. More come out in other Lord's Days, we'll leave that to then, but each of these Questions & Answers in this Lord's Day, Lord's Day 24, each Question & Answer examines a different relationship between justification and sanctification or examines that relationship between justification and sanctification from slightly different points of view.

We consider only this morning anyway, Lord willing we'll consider each of these Questions & Answers, but this morning we only consider the one brought out by Question & Answer 62 and we do so under the theme "Righteousness Apart from Ourselves." Righteousness apart from ourselves. The fact, first of all, the fact that our righteous is entirely apart from ourselves, apart from our own works; secondly, the reason why it is that our righteousness is apart from our own good works; and thirdly, the result. In order to understand the relationship between justification and sanctification that's brought out in this Question & Answer and to the others of Lord's Day 24, we need to have clearly in our mind what this relationship is, or at least what each is. What is justification and what is sanctification and how are they distinct? They are distinct one from another, how are they distinct from one another?

So we examine that, first of all. Justification on the one hand is a legal declaration. Justification is a legal declaration. Justification is about what God says, what God says about his elect child, the one to whom he has eternally chosen, God has something to say about each of those. What God says about them has to do with their legal standing. What God says about his children is that they are innocent. Their sins are taken away, are gone, and the righteousness of Jesus Christ, only the righteousness of Christ, is applied to them,

is imputed to them, is theirs freely as God's gift to them. So justification is a legal declaration. That legal declaration removes our guilt. It doesn't remove the sinfulness that abides within us in our old nature, it removes our guilt legally. So we speak of imputed righteousness, not righteousness that we receive internally and that begins to transform us. Not that. Imputed righteousness which God imputes to our account legally, the righteousness of Christ imputed to our account. That's justification.

Sanctification, on the other hand, is a working in us, not outside of us legally or even in our hearts by faith, but sanctification is a working in us by God to make us to be holy and righteous. In this life, that work of sanctification is only begun. Perfected in heaven, perfected in glory but only begun here in this life. Sanctification, then, is God making us to be holy and righteous. God works in us in such a way that we begin to do good works. That's sanctification. Sanctification is God's removing something of the pollution of sin within us. God breaks something of the dominion, the power of sin in us so that we can actually begin to live godly lives of righteousness.

When we speak of sanctification and we speak of righteousness in sanctification, then we refer to an imparted, not imputed. Imputed is a legal term, it has to do with our justification. We have Christ's righteousness legally imputed to our account in justification, in sanctification we have Christ's righteousness, Christ's righteousness, God's own righteousness through Christ imparted to us so that it comes out in our good thoughts and deeds and all the rest as good works, righteous good works.

To put the distinction between justification and sanctification in different terms we could say justification is believing in Christ's righteousness as our own. That's justification. We believe that Christ's righteousness is ours legally. Sanctification is doing righteous good deeds, doing that ourselves, of course, by the power of God, but we doing good works is sanctification. To put it another way, justification speaks of our state whereas sanctification speaks of our condition and by that we simply, again, mean to speak of that which is legally true with regard to us, that's our state, what's legally true with regard to us, and that corresponds to our justification. Justification has to do with our legal state, our legal standing, and sanctification has to do with our condition, our internal condition.

Often that distinction is made more clear by examples. We can think of these examples. A state is either innocent or guilty. From a legal point of view, we're either innocent or guilty. That's the state, the legal state. The condition of a person, we can think of that from a physical point of view, corresponds to the spiritual as well but just from a physical point of view, a person may be healthy, a healthy condition or sick, is a sick condition. Perhaps he's dead. That's his condition, not his legal state but his condition. Perhaps he's free or perhaps he's in prison. All of those describe his condition, how it is with him. So, too, with regard to justification and sanctification. Justification has to do with our state. We are not guilty, innocent, righteous legally. Sanctification has to do with our condition. When we are sanctified spiritually, we are healthy spiritually. We are not dead spiritually. We are free as God's sanctified people.

Both justification and sanctification, we can speak of the distinctions between them but we must recognize that both justification and sanctification are God's works. They are God's works. God justifies and God sanctifies. He does that mysteriously but God does those works, the works of salvation, after all, and if justification and sanctification are both parts of salvation then, of course, God must be the one doing that because God is the one who saves. God in Jesus Christ alone saves. Both justification and sanctification, then, are enjoyed by those who are saved. Justification is. It's not simply a state outside of us but it's a legal state that we come to know in our hearts by faith, by faith alone. Sanctification is something that's enjoyed by the child of God as well. He begins in this life, every child of God begins this life to live in good works.

Now Question 62 speaks of both, speaks of both sanctification and justification. The Question, "Why cannot our good works be the whole, or part of our righteousness before God?" When the Question speaks of good works, it's speaking of our sanctification. The good works of sanctification, why cannot those good works of sanctification be the whole or part of our justification? That's really what the Question is asking. When it refers to our righteousness before God, it means the righteousness which is imputed to our account according to which God declares us to be legally righteous before him.

"Why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our justification?" That's the Question. Now Question 62 does not deny that sanctification exists, Question 62 does not deny that sanctification exists in order to teach us about justification. It sets one entirely aside so as to teach us about the other. Question 62 does not deny that the works we do as sanctified are good, they are good, they are called good works here in the Question, that's made even more plain in Belgic Confession Article 24 and there we read, "These works," speaking of the works that we perform as sanctified, "These works as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God." They are good and acceptable in the sight of God, "forasmuch as they are all sanctified by his grace," and then this addition, "howbeit they are of no account towards our justification." Well put. Very plain. Very clear. The good works that the child of God performs in his life of sanctification are good and acceptable but they don't count toward his justification. Very good instruction.

They are righteous deeds, our good works are, they are righteous. That is, they're in accord with, in harmony, at least in some degree they're in accord with and in harmony with the law of God and they are sanctified as the Belgic Confession points out. They are sanctified, cleansed and purified by Jesus Christ so that they are good and acceptable before God. Scripture speaks of them, our good works, as righteous deeds. Remarkably, even Isaiah 64:6 speaks that way, "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Filthy but nevertheless still referred to as righteousnesses. They cannot, however, though counted good, though acceptable before God, though called righteousnesses, they cannot be our righteousness before God, meaning they cannot count toward our justification. The Belgic Confession says the same thing. Again we saw that just a moment ago. They are of no account toward our justification, that is, they do not merit with God, the good works of sanctification do not merit with God, they do not merit or earn for us a good and righteous legal standing in

God's sight. Our good works of sanctification cannot, do not come back around, as it were, and be applied to our account as meriting justification for us.

Our righteousness and justification is apart from ourselves. Without our works, without any of our works, we are justified. That's, again, brought out by the Belgic Confession. These works as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God for as much as they are all sanctified by his grace, however they are of no account towards our justification, brought out even more by Article 23 on justification, God declares this to be the happiness of man that God imputes righteousness to him without works, that is, without the sinner's works, without the believer's works. God imputes righteousness to him without works and then we read this, "The same apostle saith that we are justified freely by his grace." The Belgic Confession there alludes to the text that we considered as Scripture for a consideration of Lord's Day 23 last week. "The same apostle saith that we are justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ." Freely means unearned, unmerited. Grace, again, means undeserved favor freely given, unmerited, undeserved, unearned favor. God imputes righteousness to him without works, without anything that he has earned or merited.

So, then, our works as the Question puts it, our works of sanctification, our good works of sanctification are not the whole of our righteousness before God. Not at all, nor even are our good works of sanctification part of our righteousness before God. The Question implies that, understands that, assumes we understand that as well, but why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God? Our good works of sanctification cannot be held up alongside of the righteousness of Christ and added to the righteousness of Christ so as to form some sound basis for God's declaring us to be righteous, justified. Not part, not whole, not in any respect are our righteousnesses, our good works accounted toward our justification before God.

Our works, then, are not the basis. Our works are not the basis for our justification. They do not earn, they do not merit our righteousness before God. When we understand that, that our works do not form some kind of either whole or partial basis for our righteousness before God, basis for our standing legally righteous before God, our works are entirely excluded so that the basis of our righteousness before God is Christ's righteousness only, if we understand that then we can understand also Belgic Confession Article 23. It's a very important word that the Confession uses. It uses these kinds of words: to trust. We don't presume to trust in anything in ourselves or in any merit of ours. Then these two words: relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone which becomes ours when we believe in him. Then this word: confidence. Confidence. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in approaching to God, freeing the conscience of fear, terror and dread, etc. Then again the word: relying. And verily if we should appear before God relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little we should, alas, be consumed. Those are important words. Those can't be dismissed.

The point is all of those words refer to some basis, a basis that we trust in, a basis that we rely on, that we rest upon, that is, it forms a solid structure, a solid foundation that we can

rest upon, that we can rely upon, that we can trust in because it's firm and it's solid. That foundation, that basis gives us a confidence, then, in approaching to God. We rely upon it and the Belgic Confession is at peace here to teach us that which we rely upon, that basis, that foundation that we rest upon is not ourselves, is not our works, is not anything in us. It is only the righteousness of Jesus Christ our Savior. That's what we rely upon. That's the basis that we trust in. Anything else that might be said about the matter narrowly or broadly must understand that central truth. We need to be very very clear about that.

That's the basis, Christ's righteousness alone. That's the basis. That's what we rest on. That's what we trust in. That's what you've always believed, isn't it? How could it be otherwise? How could it ever be otherwise? That's the plain truth of God's word and that's the only thing that one can believe and God gives us that good gift of faith, the only thing that faith can rely upon, that faith can rest in as giving confidence in approaching to God is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The only thing.

That's the meaning, also, of Isaiah 64:6, "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." It means to say all of our righteousnesses, all of the good works of sanctification of the children of God whether they be many or little, whether they be not very good or whether they be our very best works, all of our righteousnesses, none accepted, all of the good works that the child of God performs as sanctified are from the point of view of his justification, nothing more than a filthy rag, defiled, impossible to stand as his foundation, as the basis of his righteousness before God.

We have, beloved, before we move on, we have to emphasize this point. I know we've made it repeatedly throughout the sermon and we're going to emphasize it now. We have a righteousness apart from ourselves. Apart from our good works. We saw that last time, too, as we looked at Lord's Day 23. Christ's righteousness is our righteousness in justification. It's important that we establish as we have and we trust clearly enough, that our own good works are not the basis for our righteousness before God. They are not. But now we emphasize Christ's righteousness is, it is our righteousness before God. It's a righteousness that was earned and that was merited for us. Every moment of his life as he lived here upon earth coming under the curse as our representative, standing in our place, every single thing he did, every thought of his heart, every attitude within him was perfectly in conformity with the law of God. All of his obedience was perfect obedience, an obedience which is of real value, not filthy rags but perfect, in all respects conformable to the divine law and God took that obedience of Jesus Christ and imputed it to us, accounted it as if it was ours, called it ours, declared us righteous in him and washed away all the guilt of our sin, removed all the guilt of our sin through the suffering and the death of our Savior. Not by our works but by our Lord Jesus Christ we are justified before God as his righteousness is imputed to us.

Then we also, though we have made the point last time and also throughout the sermon this morning, we also emphasize now again faith alone appropriates that righteousness of Jesus Christ. That righteousness which is imputed to us, freely accounted by God as our righteousness, faith, faith appropriates that righteousness so that the child of God hears

that declaration of God in his heart and knows that he's justified in his own heart and mind and soul. This is not true that faith merits some of our righteousness before God, that is, our believing is our good work and merits something with God so that God attributes some merit to us or some righteousness to us on the merit of our faith, and then we do some good works too alongside of faith and God takes faith and our good works, both of them meritorious works, and accounts that as our righteousness before God. Not at all. And not either is it this, that faith appropriates some of our righteousness and our good works merit the rest before God, merit some righteousness for us before God. But faith alone appropriates only the righteousness of Christ and says to the believer, faith does, declares in the heart of the believer, let's him hear the declaration of God in the heart of the believer that, "You're righteous only on the basis, the righteousness of Jesus Christ." Faith alone appropriates, receives and applies that righteousness of Christ as our righteousness before God.

The reason that we are justified by Christ's righteousness alone and at the same time our righteousness cannot be the whole or part of our righteousness before God, the Catechism spells out. In fact, it's the main goal and point of Question & Answer 62. "Why," the Questions asks, "Why cannot our good works be part of our righteousness before God?" And the answer is this, first of all, "Because, that the righteousness, which can be approved of before the tribunal of God, must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law." Again, remember the Catechism here is addressing justification. It is saying with regard to justification, your good works, your righteousness before God must be absolutely perfect and in all respects conformable to the divine law.

If there was to be a righteousness that came from us, a righteousness of our good works which could be our basis and our righteousness before God, then we must love God and we must love the neighbor. We must love God and we must love the neighbor with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and all of our mind, and all of our strength constantly, perfectly, with all of our being, loving God and the neighbor, not myself but I must love God. Christ's work is that. Christ's righteousness is a perfect righteousness, wholly and entirely conformable to the law of God and absolutely perfect. Christ's righteousness is, our works are not.

The Catechism goes on to speak of that, "our best works in this life," the Catechism doesn't even worry about our less than best works but our best works. Incidentally, notice too that the Catechism indicates that some works are better and some works not as good, the child of God does. All good works are not equal. Some are better than others. "Our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin." Again, Isaiah 64:6, our righteousnesses, all of them, are as filthy rags before God. We still have an old nature and that old nature corrupts those works as we think them, as we say them, as we do them. Our old nature brings out pride and introduces self-love and all kinds of warped thinking and destroys and defiles those good works so that they are not perfect and conformable to the law of God, cannot account before God as the basis of our righteousness before him, cannot be our righteousness before God of justification.

Belgic Confession Article 24 puts it even more plainly than does the Question & Answer of the Catechism that we're viewing. Moreover we do good works, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them. There is that idea of basis again. Found our salvation upon them. Why? Here's the reason the Belgic Confession gives, the same reason as the Catechism: for we do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, that is, polluted by our old nature. We do no work but what is polluted by our flesh and also punishable. Even our good works could be punished if God didn't view them in grace. They are punishable because they're not perfect. A work must be perfect if it's going to be a work which escapes bringing us into liability for punishment, and although we could perform such work, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. We cannot do even one perfectly good work which we could take though ever so small it might be and apply it as the last block of the foundation of our righteousness before God. All of the righteousness that is ours in justification must be every whit the righteousness apart from ourselves the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

What's even more and the Catechism doesn't go into this, the Belgic Confession does, the Catechism doesn't go into this but it's also true, even beyond the Answer that the Catechism gives us in Question & Answer 62, the fact is we cannot merit with God. We cannot. We are but creatures. God is the Creator. God is the glorious God. Even if every one of our works was perfect and we never sinned once in all of our life, all of our works were perfect and we did everything right in our life, we still could not say, "I have earned, I have merited, I deserve something from God." God would simply say to us, "You've only done what I've commanded you to do. You've only done what I've created you to do. You haven't gained anything. You haven't gone above the standard so that you could say I have something now that I can give to thee as payment. I have earned something, I have merited something with thee." Not at all. The whole concept of earning or meriting ought to be, and is, entirely excluded from the mind of one who is reformed. It doesn't even enter into his mind that I could merit with God. Of course not.

The Belgic Confession. "Therefore we do good works but not to merit by them, for what can we merit? Nay, we are beholding to God for the good works we do and not he to us, since it is he that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Let us therefore attend to what is written: when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do." That's as much as we could ever possibly do. We don't even measure up to that. We don't even come up to that. Unprofitable servants indeed.

All merit is excluded. Our righteousness is the righteousness apart from ourselves and then yet, too, one more Answer we can add. "Why is it that our righteousness cannot be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?" The believing child of God says, "How could it be? The account is full. All the righteousness that I've needed Christ has imputed to my account. There's nothing more I could add. There's nothing more I desire to add. His righteousness is perfect, conformable to the divine law of God. My account is full, paid in full with the perfect righteousness of Christ. I'm justified. I'm justified not by my good works but by the good and perfect work of my Savior. I'm justified, not by the



works of righteousness which I have done but by the works of righteousness which he has done and imputed to my account."

The result, the blessed result for the child of God is, then, that his mind is clear. His mind is clear of thinking at all about merit. His mind is clear of thinking at all of his own good works as he lives his life believing in the righteousness of Christ, he lives his life of sanctification, his mind is clear of thinking for a moment that any of his works contribute at all to his righteousness before God. But then even more and greater than that is the fact that the result of our knowing, understanding and believing with conviction that our righteous good works are not the whole or part of our righteousness before God, the result of that is that, then, we believe in the righteousness of Christ and it is righteousness only as our righteousness before God, or to put it in other words, we're justified by faith in Jesus Christ, and the blessed result of that is that we have peace with God. We stand before God knowing, "I'm innocent. He's declared me so. I'm righteous as God views me in Christ, legally I'm righteous. I couldn't be more righteous. I have the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to my account. I have peace, perfect peace with God."

I know that this Question & Answer doesn't speak of that directly but Lord's Day 23 does. Of this Question & Answer, we said, is a further explanation of Lord's Day 23, Lord's Day 23 says, "though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God," and we can carry on from there and say though my conscience accuse me, though my conscience torments me, yet I have peace, peace with God because I'm justified by the righteousness of Jesus Christ and that, too, Article 24 of the Belgic Confession ends with, "Thus then we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty," that is, if we relied upon our own righteousness, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, "and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior." To turn that beautiful statement around, as we rely on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior, our consciences before God are at peace and full of joy and full of thankfulness and full of love toward our God whose righteousness is ours as he imputes to us the very righteousness of his own Son, our Savior. Amen.

*Father, we thank thee for thy holy word. We thank thee for our Lord Jesus Christ, our righteousness. We thank thee that we have no other righteousness and we need not procure any other righteousness, being unable to anyway, we need not be troubled with seeking to find our own righteousness or make or merit or earn our own righteousness for thou hast given to us all the righteousness we need to be declared by thee legally righteous by thy judgment, by thy perfect unchanging judgment and justification. We thank thee, Father, we praise and glorify thee and we live in peace and in joy and in love toward thee. In Jesus' name we pray it. Amen.*