

LESSONS ON PREDESTINATION #45
"The Active and Passive Obedience of Christ"
(Scriptures from NKJV)

Romans 5:1, 2; 6-10:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

INTRODUCTION: In the two previous lessons, we examined the eternal "Covenant of Redemption" in which the Triune God arranged the means by which the salvation of the elect sinners could come about. This necessitated that the Son acquire a human body and soul. This was for two reasons:

One: He must live a life of perfect obedience to the law of God in order to purchase eternal life to be bestowed upon His elect. Just as God had demanded a life of perfection from the first Adam, likewise, He required the same perfection from the Second Adam. Fallen man needs not only a debt to be paid for his sins, he needs a sinless life to be imputed to his account.

Two: He must suffer and die in the place of the sinner in order to render satisfaction to God in paying the sinners' debt. Only the God-man could provide such satisfaction. As God, His sacrifice of Himself was of infinite value, and only as a man could He die in a body. All of this was laid out in the eternal Covenant of Redemption. Thus, the whole life and death of Christ was the result of the predetermined plan or purpose of God.

In today's lesson, we come to examine the saving work of Christ as it relates to His active and passive works of obedience. I am indebted to the works of Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, John Gill and Curt Daniel on this topic. This subject has produced a disagreement among Christians. The disagreement is over how the work of Christ justifies us. All Evangelicals agree that we are justified on the basis of Christ's work alone, but there is disagreement over exactly what that work contained.

There are two positions involved. They are:

One: Both the active and passive obedience of Christ are the basis for our justification.

Two: Only the passive obedience of Christ saves or justifies us.

Position number one is held by nearly all Reformed believers consisting of Calvinists and Lutherans. Position number two is held by all others. While position number two is the majority view, I will be advocating position number one.

In order to be clear about the issue, we need to define our terms. The active obedience position refers to Christ's complete life of obedience to the Father. The passive obedience position refers to Jesus' death on the cross alone. All Evangelical believers hold that we are saved (justified) by the work of Jesus on the cross. However, does it not require that we are also saved by Christ's obedient life before He died? Position one says yes, while position number two says no. A related question is, "at what point in His life did Jesus start to represent His people in securing their salvation?" To state the question once again: "Did Jesus merit salvation for us in His death alone, or in both His life and death?"

A. RELATED CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE QUESTION

1. The parallel in the two natures of Christ.

a. Question: Did Christ save us in His divine nature, or His human nature?

We have touched on this in the introduction, but the answer is "both." In His divine Person and nature, He had to be born and acquire a human nature in order to be the perfect Mediator. If He had been God, but not man, then He could not identify with us, nor die for us since Deity is immortal and cannot die. On the other hand, if He had been man, but not God, then He could not complete the relationship connecting us to God. Since He is both, He is the complete Savior.

b. The same is true with His work. He had to both obey for us in His life and obey for us in His death. If He had done only one or the other, then our redemption would have been incomplete.

c. NOTE: While the two are not to be viewed as separate, there is, however, a chronological order between the two. Just as Christ was first God and then became the God-man, so He first obeyed and then died.

2. The sinlessness of Jesus.

a. In order to be our Savior, Jesus not only had to be born sinless, He had to live a life of sinless perfection right up to His death on the cross. This perfection began

with His Virgin Birth. This insured that He was both God and Man. If Joseph had been His father, then Jesus would have been only a man. If Jesus had not had a mother, then He would have been God, but not a man. Likewise, if Joseph had been His father, then Jesus would have inherited Adam's sin, and that original sin would have produced actual sin resulting in Jesus becoming an actual sinner just like Adam.

b. In Romans 5:18,19, Paul draws a parallel between Adam and Christ.

"Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous."

Adam was a representative for all of his race or people. When he fell, all fell in him. This explains why all men are born in sin and under the condemnation of God. This condemnation of men involves two stages. First, they are condemned because of what happened then in the Garden of Eden. This is called original sin. Second, they are condemned because of what actually happens in their lives.

In parallel with Adam, Christ is also the representative head of a people. But there is not only a parallel, but a contrast. While Adam disobeyed and brought condemnation upon all whom he represented, Christ obeyed and brought justification upon all those He represented. This too has two stages. First, Christ obeyed for us then in time in His life and death. Second, Christ now justifies us in time and saves us by His perfect work.

NOTE: the phrase in verse 19, ***"one Man's obedience."*** This is the point of dispute. Is this referring to His obedient life or His obedient death? I say, both! Commentators differ over the nature of the obedience. The mainstream Reformed view is that it includes both the active and passive obedience of Christ. Others limit it to His passive obedience taking place in His death on the cross.

c. Hebrews 5:8,9 sheds light on the question. ***"Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him."*** Here we are told ***"in the days of His flesh"*** (v. 7), He had to learn obedience by the ***"things"*** He suffered. In His humanity, Christ grew by stages in His learning. In His Deity, He was omniscient, but in His humanity, He ***"increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."*** (Luke 2:52). The ***"things"*** (plural) He suffered occurred throughout His life, and not simply in His death. He suffered misunderstandings, ridicule, rejection, and He learned through it all. Jesus never sinned in thought, word, or deed, and it all culminated in His death on the cross. It is said of Christ that He redeemed us with His precious blood ***"as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."*** (I Peter 1:19). His

sinless life was as necessary to our salvation as was His sacrificial death. It is not "either-or" but "both-and."

B. THE ACTIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST

1. In relation to our subject, we have looked at the parallel between the natures of Christ. We also considered the necessity of Christ living a life free of sin.

2. Now we wish to show that the active obedience of Christ was more than merely living a life without sin. In addition to that, His sinless life was meriting a reward for both Himself and the people whom He represented. A question now emerges, "What did Christ obey?" The answer is that He obeyed a couple of things. First, He obeyed the requirements set forth in the Covenant of Redemption. This included the will of the Father in becoming a man, living a sinless life, and dying a substitutionary death on the cross. Second, he obeyed the Law. Galatians 4:4,5 says, ***"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."*** The Lawgiver became a Man and obeyed His own law. This would include the Ten commandments and all of the moral laws related to man's moral conduct. It would also include the ceremonial law which involved circumcision, temple worship, keeping the feast days, etc. And He also kept the civil law such as paying taxes to whom taxes were due.

3. Position number two agrees that Christ merited our salvation, but only in His death, not in His life. But this position fails to see a very important point. It overlooks the covenant arrangement imposed upon Adam. Adam was given life, but not eternal life. He was put on a probationary period in which he was to obey the command of God in order to maintain his relationship or life with God. This law which he was under, promised a reward for obedience, and a penalty for disobedience. A probationary period is a temporary period. It is a moral trial during which a moral being has the opportunity to prove its faithfulness to the task to which it is assigned. This being the case, then, if Adam had remained faithful, he would have been rewarded to an advanced state in which he would have been confirmed in eternal life which could not be broken. But Adam failed. He broke the law, and so forfeited its rewards for himself and those whom he represented. In so doing, he forfeited eternal life and merited eternal death for himself and his descendants. In Reformed theology, this covenant is called the Covenant of Works. I prefer to call it a Covenant of Obedience.

4. Throughout His earthly life, Christ lived under a covenant of obedience or works, not only for Himself, but for those He represented, namely, the elect. In so doing, He bore

the penalty incurred by His people, which was death. He died, not for any personal sin, but for the sins of His elect that were imputed or charged to His account. But there is more to be done if Adam's descendants are to be rewarded with eternal or confirmed life. He must actually earn the reward promised by obedience to the law. That reward is eternal life, or as it is sometimes described, as Heaven itself and all that Heaven involves.

a. William G. T. Shedd explains it in this manner:

The chief function of Christ's obedience of the moral law is, to earn a title for the believer to the reward of heaven. This part of Christ's agency is necessary; because to atone for past transgression, would not be a complete salvation. It would, indeed save man from hell, but it would not introduce him into heaven. He would be delivered from the Law's punishment, but would not be entitled to the Law's reward. (Quoted by Curt Daniel in *The History and Theology of Calvinism*).

b. Adam forfeited eternal life because He failed to provide God with a life record of perfect obedience to the law of God. Christ provides a record of sinless obedience which is charged to the believer's account when he places his faith in Christ as His representative before the throne of God. Those who hold that Christ's death alone is that which restores us to God's favor, fall short in setting forth a complete salvation.

c. Curt Daniel makes this observation:

Christ could have suddenly appeared on earth as an adult and then died for us. Had He done that, He would have removed the curse of Adam, but He would only have put us back where Adam was in Eden. Therefore, it was necessary for Christ to grow through stages of life perfectly and without sin in order to justify us perfectly. His death removes our sins, but His life provides something in place of our sins - His very own righteousness. (Daniel, *Ibid.*).

d. What does this mean? It means that Jesus kept the precepts which the law demanded as well as bearing the penalties which the law required. The 17th Century Reformed theologian, Johannes Wollebius wrote:

Those who wish only Christ's passive obedience to have the nature of merit, claim that Christ's obedience extended only to the special mandate of the Father that He should die for us. This would not be a special, but a partial, mandate: Christ's obedience extends just as widely as the law extends. Since therefore the Law binds us both to punishment and to obedience, He satisfied both its requirements. (Daniel, *Ibid.*).

e. This statement affirms that both aspects of Christ's obedience are inseparable John Calvin saw this and made this short concise observation:

In short, from the time when He took on the form of a servant, He began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us. (Daniel, *Ibid.*).

C. THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE OBEDIENCE AS IT RELATES TO OUR JUSTIFICATION

1. Passive obedience defined:

a. Negatively - It does not mean that Jesus ceased to obey.

b. Positively - Passive means "unresisting submission." As it relates to Christ, it means He surrendered to death. This is set forth in John 10:17,18 where Jesus says, **"Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."** While Jesus' death was an act of obedience to His Father, it was a passive action of submission to death. This stands in contrast to His active obedience which He conducted in His life prior to His death on the cross.

2. There is a relationship between Christ's work and our justification. If Christ both obeyed and died for us, how is this reflected in our justification? The Reformed position is that, just as there are two aspects of His obedience, so there are two aspects of justification. Justification includes both the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The one is negative - forgiveness removes the sin debt. The other is positive - it puts righteousness in the place of sin. Thus, these two aspects of justification match the two aspects of His obedience.

Obviously, we are forgiven because of His passive obedience on the cross. I John 1:7 says, **"the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."** But we need more than the forgiveness of sin. We need a life of perfect righteousness imputed to our account in order to receive the law's reward. In His active obedience, Christ merited and purchased the gift of perfect righteousness to replace our perfect unrighteousness.

3. There are several passages which teach the negative and positive aspects of our justification.

a. II Corinthians 5:21 says, **"For He made Him who knew no sin (sinlessness of Christ) to be sin for us (sin debt imputed to Christ) that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"** (perfect life of obedience imputed to the believer).

b. Acts 26:18 sets forth the same thing. In speaking of Christ, Paul says, **"that they may receive forgiveness of sin (negative part of justification) and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me"** (positive aspect of

justification).

c. In Galatians 3:13,14, the two aspects of our justification is described, **"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (sins forgiven) (for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree), that the blessing of Abraham (righteousness imputed) might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."**

d. We refer again to Galatians 4:4,5 which reads, **"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law (sins forgiven), that we might receive the adoption of sons"** (Righteousness imputed).

e. One final scripture should be sufficient. In Romans 5:10 we read, **"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."** This life covers His entire life, including His resurrection from the dead. He now ever lives to make intercession for His people. Because He lives, we live also because we have a Mediator to represent us before the throne of God forever and forever.

D. SUMMARY

1. I close with the words of the Heidelberg Catechism:

That all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end of His life, He bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race.

2. Curt Daniel sums up the matter in this manner:

Every moment of His life was spent in vicariously obeying and suffering for us. He grew by stages in this, culminating in His perfect work at the cross. When did He suffer for us? Throughout His entire life, more especially in Gethsemane, most especially on the cross, and particularly during the final three hours, and ultimately in that culminating act of voluntary death in a moment. (Daniel, *Ibid.*)

3. For me He lived, for me He died, and I am satisfied! Why? Because God is satisfied with His Son and I am in Christ!