

The Ungodly Justified – LD 23

Heidelberg Catechism

By Rev. David Overway

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Hope Protestant Reformed Church

1580 Ferndale Ave. SW
Grand Rapids, MI 49534

Website: www.hopeprchurch.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/hopeprc

Let's read together from Romans chapters 4 and 5. We begin our reading in chapter 4, verse 1, and we'll read through chapter 5, verse 11.

1 What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? 2 For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.

Reading but not to glorify God then for his salvation.

3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. 4 Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. 5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. 6 Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, 7 Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. 9 Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: 12 And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. 13 For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect: 15 Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression. 16 Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not

to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, 17 (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. 18 Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. 19 And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: 20 He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; 21 And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. 22 And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. 23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; 24 But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; 25 Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: 2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; 4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope: 5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. 6 For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. 10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. 11 And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

Thus far we read in God's holy word.

Consider together the teaching of God's word as we find it in Lord's Day 23.

Q. 59. But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?

A. That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir of eternal life.

Q. 60. How art thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God,

and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

Q. 61. Why sayest thou that thou art righteous by faith only?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God, on account of the worthiness of my faith; but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, is my righteousness before God; and that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only.

We come to the end, beloved people of God, of our dealing with the Apostles' Creed as led by the Catechism. The Apostles' Creed which is and the Catechism treats it this way, which is the confession of our faith. Remember back in Lord's Day 7, we came across the question, "What is true faith?" And the Answer was given there by the Catechism as well, knowledge and confidence. But then also the question, "What do we believe with this true faith? What do we believe?" And there we found the Apostles' Creed listed and recited. Lord's Day 8 went on to speak of the division of the Apostles' Creed and how it's divided according to the three persons of the Trinity. And Lord's Day 9 then, promptly began to explain what these articles mean for us and what they mean as believed by faith.

Now, after Lord's Days 9 through 22 have taken us through the Apostles' Creed, now we have the question, "What doth it profit thee that thou believest all this?" And with this Question we are reminded again of the interest of the Catechism, the way in which the Catechism instructs us and teaches us. "What doth it profit thee, what advantage is it that you believe all this?" It's not simply to be believed for its own sake, but there is an advantage to you to believing all of this.

And again, emphasizing another word in that question, the word "thee, what doth it profit thee if thou believest all this?" It reminds us the Catechism's interest and emphasis is on personal assurance, our own experience as the children of God. "What doth it profit thee?"

And then, "What doth it profit thee that thou believest all this?" The Answer leads us into an understanding and an explaining of the doctrine of justification, especially justification by faith alone. "What doth it profit thee that thou believest all of this," the question is, which indicates to us that the heart of everything in the Apostles' Creed, the heart of it all and that which is woven throughout all of these various articles in the Apostles' Creed is the doctrine of justification. The heart of it all is that we are justified. That's already been touched on in Lord's Day 21 but rather Question and Answer 21, some time ago way at the beginning of all of this. "What is true faith?" The Answers talks about knowledge and assured confidence and then says, "which the Holy Ghost works by the Gospel in my heart, that not only to others but to me also remission of sin, everlasting righteousness,

and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits." There is already the doctrine of justification, already in Lord's Day 7.

And again, notably spoken of, not ignored throughout the rest of these Articles, but especially spoken of very plainly in Lord's Day 21, Question and Answer 56. "What believest thou concerning the forgiveness of sins?" And that Answer, "That God, for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, neither my corrupt nature, against which I have to struggle all my life long; but will graciously impute to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never be condemned before the tribunal of God." Again, the treatment of justification.

Now that doctrine will be focused upon in Lord's Day 23 and developed more carefully and more in depth. The Lord's Day will do so as the first question indicates, will explain this doctrine to us so that it is something personal, so that we recognize the tremendous personal advantage of justification in as the heart of everything that we believe, the center of all of our faith.

We consider the text of the Lord's Day under the theme "The Ungodly Justified," and that theme based on Romans 4:5, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." The ungodly justified then, first of all, by Christ alone; secondly, by faith alone; and thirdly, by grace alone.

That I am righteous in Christ. So begins Answer 59, "That I am righteous in Christ." Justification has to do with righteousness. Righteousness means to be in harmony with God, to be in accord with God, to be lined up with God by being lined up with God's word, being in harmony with God's law, with all of his commandments. One who is righteous matches the law. He lines up with the law perfectly. Whatever the law requires, you find that requirement found in the one who is righteous.

We must be righteous before God. We must be righteous before God. We must be righteous to escape punishment. One who is unrighteous is inevitably and always punished by God with extreme, which is to say, everlasting punishment.

We must be righteous before God in order to stand approved before God. One who is righteous meets with God's approval. God says, "He is righteous, therefore, I approve of him as he is righteous before me."

One must be righteous in order to have the favor of God, in order to enjoy and know the grace of God, to have that grace of God as his own. He must be righteous.

How can we be righteous? The first possibility which we rule out and Scripture rules out, but the first possibility is that one is righteous by keeping the law. But then if one is going to become righteous by keeping the law, if he's going to be in harmony with God, he must be in perfect harmony with that law. He must keep the law of God absolutely perfectly without any failure at any point. In fact, if he were to keep the law perfectly all of his life-long but only once when he was very young, he sinned on a little, in one

thought, he's unrighteous. He's not in harmony with the law of God. Or if all of his life-long he perfectly kept the law of God but at the very end of his life on his deathbed one fleeting thought for but a moment went through his mind that was of a sinful character, he would not be righteous, he is not righteous, he would be unrighteous and must be punished everlastingly for that one sin because sin is so egregious, so awful over against the infinitely holy and perfect God.

Beside, one who is to be righteous must also atone at least for his sinful nature, he must atone for all of his sins, but using the hypothetical and impossible situation that we just spoke of, a man who is able to keep the law perfectly all of his life-long, he still has the situation of his old sinful nature which he's inherited from Adam and he must somehow unrid himself of that. He must somehow change that unrighteous nature into something that's righteous. So he has to pay for the sinfulness of that sinful nature. How will he stone for his sinful nature? How will he endure the wrath of God against him, infinite wrath of God, everlasting wrath of God against him for sin against the infinite holiness of God? How will he endure that as a finite creature? Impossible. Utterly impossible that anyone becomes righteous, any normal and only human being, to become righteous before God by keeping the law.

We are guilty. That's the opposite of righteous. Guilty. Guilty in ourselves and unrighteous in ourselves. The only way, then, to become righteous before God is by a representative keeping the law for us. A representative must stand in our place and keep the law for us. In order to remove our sin, in order to take our guilt upon himself, in order to take our sinful nature and the guilt on account of our sinful nature upon himself, in order to turn our guilt into innocence, to restore us to righteousness, God has appointed such a representative for us, such a mediator for us. He has taken our sins upon himself, all the sins that we have committed throughout our life, all of our transgressions of the law of God, those times when we knew the law of God and we deliberately contradicted the law of God, or those times when we were walking in godliness but with some pride mixed in so that that good work itself became polluted and corrupted. He took those sins upon himself. He took our sinful nature upon himself. He suffered the penalty, he atoned, he satisfied the wrath of God against us for all those sins. He obeyed. He obeyed the law of God while walking as our suffering representative. While dying for us, he obeyed God perfectly. He was mindful of every detail of the law of God as well as mindful of the heart of that law of God to love the Lord his God with all of his heart and soul and mind and strength. He kept that law righteously as our representative in our place. That's the only way that one can become righteous before God.

For whom, then, is this gift of righteousness, for whom did this representative, Jesus Christ, suffer and die and earn this righteousness? The answer simply put and most directly stated is: for God's elect people. Those are the ones for whom Christ was appointed to be the representative. We were chosen in Christ in eternity, beloved. God looked at us in his electing decree only in Christ and only as joined with Christ and only as represented by Christ. God appointed our Lord Jesus Christ to represent us. We were elected, then, unto Christ's atonement and satisfaction for all of our sins. We were elected unto his righteousness to have that righteousness imputed to us as our own. God elected

us unto that in his unchangeable decree. No one adds himself to that list by good works or by faith. No one takes himself off from that list by a wickedly depraved life. God elected his people. God composed the list in eternity of those who would have as their own the righteousness of Christ.

So that then, viewing the work of Christ, God made a declaration about all of those elect people. That's what justification ultimately is, it's a statement from God. It's a declaration from God. A declaration which changes one's standing before God, legal standing. Changes one's legal standing with regard to the law. God looked upon Christ, his atonement, his work, his righteousness and God said, "I state, I declare about all of those who are in Christ, elected by me in Christ in eternity, I state on the basis of what Christ has done, that those people as pertains to my law, are righteous. I view them as having kept the law. They're legally righteous before me."

So that justification is a forensic or legal, those words means the same, a legal declaration of God. Justification is not a making me righteous so that I start to live and walk in righteousness. That's part of God's work too. I don't do that. That's God's work. That's an important part of God's work, but that's not justification. Justification has to do with my state, my legal state, my legal standing before God and with reference to his law. It doesn't have to do with my condition, how things actually are with me here in this world as I live in the midst of this world. Justification, to put it another way, has to do with imputation, not impartation. It has to do with God's imputing to my account the legal righteousness of Christ so that God looks at me through that righteousness and sees me in that righteousness as myself righteous with Christ's own righteousness. Justification doesn't have to do with God's imparting some righteousness, some real living righteousness in my heart so that I begin to walk and to live righteously. Again, that's part of God's work too, an important part, but it's not justification. Justification is a legal declaration, changing my state before God, a pertaining to my state and having to do with the imputation of Christ's righteousness to my account.

Why has God done this for you? For me? I know the ultimate answer we already gave: because we're elect. Because we're elect, but then the question could be asked: why did God elect us? Why does God do this? Why to this person and not to that person is this declaration of justification rendered by our righteous and gracious God? And the answer, we answer again negatively first: not because we were godly. God did not look upon us and say, "My, what a godly person that one is. I'm going to, because they are so good, I'm going to declare them righteous. Maybe they've done a bit of righteousness in their life and I'm going to declare the rest of their life righteous through Christ. I'm going to add up, add to what they have done, add the righteousness of Christ so that I can declare them godly and righteous." Nor does God, as the Arminians like to teach, nor does God look into the future and see who will believe so that God says, "Whoever will believe in my Son and in his righteousness, those are the ones that I'll declare to be righteous." We are not declared righteous in Jesus Christ, beloved, because we are godly or after we have done something. In fact, we are sinners and God hasn't sent Jesus Christ for us because we were good and Christ hasn't died for us and Christ hasn't atoned for us because of our godliness but as Romans puts it, "while we were still without strength," chapter 5, verse

6, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Verse 8 makes it even more plain, "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Christ didn't die for the righteous, he died for sinners, to declare them righteous by God's own work and God's own grace.

Why are we righteous, then, before God? The answer plainly: by Christ. Christ alone. Only by Jesus Christ alone and that is emphasized too in this Lord's Day, emphasized already in Question and Answer 56 of Lord's Day 21 which also talks about the forgiveness of sins, that God for the sake of Christ's satisfaction, is how the answer begins, Christ's satisfaction. Only Christ's satisfaction. Then 59, "But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this? That I am righteous in Christ." In Christ. And again, Answer 60, "as if I had fully accomplished all the obedience which Christ has accomplished for me." He has done it. And again, Question 61, "But because only, only the satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God." Not Christ's satisfaction and some of mine. Not Christ's holiness and a little of mine. Not Christ's righteousness and but one work of mine. Only the righteousness of Christ is my righteousness before God.

How do we come to know all of this? How do we come to enjoy all of this? How do we come to embrace this in our own hearts so that this is of real advantage to us personally? How do I hear this declaration, this heavenly declaration of God, how do I hear that in my own consciousness? The answer: by faith and by faith alone. Question and Answer 60, "How art thou righteous before God? Only be a true faith in Jesus Christ." Again, the Catechism doesn't leave Christ out of the picture. How could it? It's the righteousness of Christ, after all, that faith embraces and believes in, but it's only by a true faith in Jesus Christ that one in his own consciousness knows and becomes and enjoys the righteousness of Christ.

Now, recognize that does not mean that faith is meritorious. Again, that's how the Arminian posits it. He will say to you, "You must believe and by your believing," whether he states it this forthrightly or not, what he means is by your believing, your faith earns a little with God for you. Your faith has a little bit of merit in it so that God would love to give you the righteousness of Christ as your own and impute that unto you, but you must believe and when you do, God recognizes the meritorious value of your faith and then God will grant you that righteousness. That's not the meaning of the Catechism and that's plain in Question and Answer 61. "Why sayest thou that thou art righteous by faith only? Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith." On account of means as a basis. Faith is not the basis. The righteousness of Christ which he earned for me, that's the basis, not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith.

The same thing is brought out in the Belgic Confession, Article 22. However to speak more clearly after just having said we justly say with Paul that we are justified by faith alone or by faith without works, is added, "However to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us," and by that the Belgic Confession means we do not mean to say that faith itself is some meritorious act which is added to the righteousness of

Christ which together with the righteousness of Christ justifies us, or on its own justifies us. We do not mean that faith itself justifies us, but rather that by faith and by faith only, Answer 61, by faith and by faith only we receive and apply the same to myself. And there is no other way to receive and apply that righteousness of Jesus Christ to myself than by faith only.

The picture of the Creeds is that of a hand. Faith is like a hand. We sit down at a meal, shortly, in a few moments we'll sit down at a Sunday dinner and there will be food set before us and we'll use our hands and we'll pick up that food and we'll take that food and we'll eat that food and we will not give credit to the hand for the strength and the sustenance. We would say that belongs to the food, the food is that which gave me the strength and the sustenance to go on in this day. The food is that which relieved the pains of hunger within me, not the hand. But the hand, at the same time, was not unimportant. It was the hand which was the instrument, the tool, the means whereby I received and applied that food unto myself. That's the idea of faith. Faith is the hand of the soul. Faith is the hand whereby we take hold of that righteousness of Christ so that that righteousness of Christ is known and enjoyed by us personally in our hearts.

Another picture used by the Reformers and others throughout history is that of a ring. Faith is like a ring and the righteousness of Christ is the jewel set in that ring. How would one wear a jewel on his finger if you didn't have the ring? But at the same time, the ring and the setting is not the main thing but it's that jewel. That's the reason that the ring is there, to display that jewel so that one can see and enjoy the jewel. That's the idea of faith, an instrument, a vitally important one, but an instrument and a tool whereby we come to know and receive unto ourselves the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

What else could be my righteousness before God? What else could make me righteous before God? Not my works. Not my works of merit. Not my works which are truly good works, the works of faith. But only the righteousness of Christ alone received and applied to myself by faith only. And that too is the meaning of Romans 4:5, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." God justifies the ungodly. "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." It's by faith, then, that one comes to know the righteousness of Christ so that that righteousness looks away from self, looks unto Christ, sees all the righteousness of Christ which is appropriated by faith.

The works excluded, then, the works excluded are not only circumcision as some modern theologians would posit today, not that the Apostle Paul was saying, "We're going to set circumcision aside." Faith and then your good works, both of those are your righteousness before God, both of those are the way in which you receive and apply. Understand how good works could possibly be an instrument anyway, but so it is said. Not the ceremonial works, works of the law of the Old Testament. Not works done to merit. Not works done out of faith would we say, "I'm going to place that before God. That's going to be my righteousness before God." None of those things are added to the righteousness of Christ. None of those things are placed before God as my righteousness

but Christ alone and that's why I don't by faith believe on the goodness of my works together with the righteousness of Christ to be my righteousness before God, but I believe on the righteousness of Christ alone. He's the only that can make me be declared righteous before God. Justified by Christ alone, received and applied by faith alone so that in my consciousness, I'm justified by faith alone, and all of that by grace.

By grace alone. That's the teaching of Romans 4 as well. It's implied in the verse just before the one we just looked at, verse 5, just before that verse, verse 4, "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt." One that earns and works and by his good works imagines that he makes himself righteous before God, that's not of grace. That's not a salvation by grace, that's a righteousness which he has earned and which God owes him. God owes him the debt of giving him righteousness, declaring him righteous because of what he's done, his good works.

That negatively but then positively, verse 16, "Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace." That it might be by grace. Do you see how all of those go together? If it's Christ alone and we know that and receive that by faith alone, then it's of grace alone. And if any of those are changed, moved around, changed to something other than alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, then all of them are changed together. It's by grace alone.

The Catechism mentions it too: only of mere grace. Only of mere grace that God grants and imputs to me the righteousness of Christ because it's impossible to be justified any other way. By works which must merit, the only way to be justified is by free, undeserved, unmerited favor of God, which is to say, grace and grace only, and that too because it's entirely undeserved. We feel that, we sense that, we know that this morning, don't we? Even as we hear this explanation of justification, every one of us, every one of God's people must say in his heart, "I don't deserve that. I don't deserve that."

And that's what the Catechism speaks of too. They have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God. My conscience accused me that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God. The conscience says, "You've grossly transgressed all the commandments of God," the conscience doesn't lie, it speaks the truth and every one of us knows it. And when I've done that, I've forfeited any right to be declared justified before God.

And then, again, not only that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, have kept none of them. The Catechism seems to contradict itself because later on it will tell us that we have a beginning of keeping not only some but all the commandments of God. That's a beginning. The Catechism here means to say, "I have kept none of them perfectly. I have kept none of them to the degree that I must in order to be declared righteous. I have kept none of them, broken them all." And then again, "And am still inclined to all evil." That I find in myself too, don't you? Still inclined to all evil so that there is not one sin I would say, "I'm not worried about that one. Better keep an eye on these because I could fall into those and I'd better continue to be busy in the word of God and prayer and living by faith so that I don't fall into those sins and walk in those sins, but these over here, I'm not concerned about them." I know I'm inclined to all evil because I

find that sinful nature in myself and therefore, too, I recognize I don't deserve the righteousness of Christ to be granted and imputed to me.

But it's of grace and that's the reassuring word we must hear today. It's of grace. It's not for those who deserve it. It's not for those who are law-keepers. It's not for those who are godly in themselves, who are holy in their own power. It's for those who are ungodly like us because it's all of grace that God has given us a Savior and imputed to us his righteousness so that then, too, take that and apply that too, to your own lives and within your own souls as I will as well. The point in the Catechism in mentioning that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God and still inclined to all evil is to say that my conscience comes up within me and says to me, "You don't deserve that righteousness of Christ and it cannot be yours. It can't be. Look at yourself. You've still grossly transgressed all the commandments of God. You've kept none of them. You're still inclined to all evil. Look at the sin that you're engaged with all the time every day. Look at how it sneaks up on you when you're not even paying attention and suddenly you find yourself thinking these thoughts are talking in that way, or admiring this or that worldly thing rather than the things of God. Look at yourself."

Then we must answer our conscience, "I know. I know. I'm not careless, I'm not cavalier about that sin. It causes me great shame and I'm sorry for it too. But at the same time, I know that sin and those sins, all of them together, cannot keep me from being declared righteous in Jesus Christ. He has died for me already and in his atonement God has already viewed me and declared me as righteous in him and I believe in that. It's not on account of my works that I'm righteous, it's on account of the righteousness of Christ that I'm righteous before my God." That's my comfort and that's my joy and that's, beloved, the heart of everything we believe. Amen.