

The Covenant of Works vs. The Covenant of Grace

Luke 18:18-23

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There are two different covenants by which people seek to be righteous before God.

First, people seek to be righteous before God on the basis of the **Covenant of Works**, which states that man can be righteous before God on the basis of his own obedience (not that the grace of God or faith in Christ is explicitly denied—but rather what is added to God’s grace and what is added to faith in Christ is something performed by us or worked within us as the cause or ground upon which God justifies us). This is the view of the Church of Rome.

With justification, **faith, hope, and charity** are poured into our hearts, and **obedience** to the divine will is granted us (*Catechism Of The Catholic Church*, Paragraph 1991, emphases added).

And even when the Church of Rome speaks of justification by faith, it does not teach justification by faith ALONE, but adds to faith other acts of obedience on the part of one who is justified.

The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us “the righteousness of God **through** faith in Jesus Christ” and **through** Baptism (*Catechism Of The Catholic Church*, Paragraph 1987, emphases added).

In fact, to profess and believe the Biblical and Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone is to incur the curse and damnation of Rome.

If any one saith, **that by faith alone the impious is justified**, in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification . . . let him be anathema (*The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Canon IX “On Justification”, emphases added).

Dear ones, though it was possible for Adam (as he was originally created

in righteousness) to perfectly obey the Lord and to keep the Covenant of Works (and thus to have become eternally confirmed in righteousness and life), since the fall of man, it is no longer possible for one to be righteous before God on the basis of something he/she does or on the basis of something within him/her (“All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” before an absolutely Holy God according to Isaiah 64:6; cp. Paul’s struggle with the flesh in his converted state, Romans 7). Thus, to seek to be righteous before God on the basis of the Covenant of Works now spells destruction and damnation.

But the second way one may seek to be righteous before a Holy God is on the basis of the **Covenant of Grace**, which states that man can be righteous before God only on the basis of the obedience of Christ, who lived a sinless life of obedience in fulfilling all of God’s Moral Law for believing sinners and in offering His life as payment for all who will trust in Him. In the Covenant of Grace, God does not justify us by infusing us with faith, love, hope, or obedience (for even after God graciously works faith, love, hope, and obedience within us, we are not perfectly righteous as Paul clearly teaches in Romans 7 in regard to the ongoing struggle and battle with the corruption of sin within the believing Christian). In the Covenant of Grace, our unalterable standing of righteousness before an infinitely Holy God is not found within us or performed by us, but is seated at God’s right hand in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. And that perfect righteousness is imputed and credited to us, so that we are accounted to be as righteous as Christ Himself. Only there is found a righteousness that God will receive as sufficient now and for all eternity. This is the teaching of Scripture (in places like Romans 4:5-6) and of faithful Reformed Catechisms (like the *Westminster Larger Catechism*).

Question 70: What is justification?

Answer: Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but

only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

Dear ones, God does not forgive our sin or declare us righteous in His sight on the basis of that which we do by His grace or on the basis of that which He works within us by His grace—whether our faith, repentance, love, hope, or obedience. This is a perversion of the truth (for as already noted, even after receiving these inwards graces, we are far from perfect in righteousness; and perfect righteousness alone is the only kind of righteousness that an absolutely righteous Judge can accept as sufficient to justify us and declare us righteous in His sight). God justifies the ungodly, not the righteous (according Romans 4:5), and does so on the basis of Christ's obedience alone (Romans 4:6). Even faith itself is not the cause of our justification. As important as saving faith is, it is only the instrumental means by which we receive with confidence the righteousness of Christ (Galatians 2:16). If man looks to any work he has performed (or even any supposed grace which God has worked within man) as the ground or cause upon which God pardons man's sin, or declares man righteous in His sight, let him be anathema (Galatians 1:6-9). It is Christ's obedience plus nothing that is the ground and cause of our justification before God. It is by means of faith alone plus nothing that is the instrument of our justification before God.

Dear ones, these life and death (heaven and hell) issues will be further elaborated from our text this Lord's Day in Luke 18:18-23 as we consider the following main points from our text: (1) The Works Of The Law Cannot Justify Anyone (Luke 18:18-20); (2) The Depravity Of Man Blinds Him To His Own Sin (Luke 18:21); (3) The Sin of Covetousness Turns One Away From Christ (Luke 18:22-23).

I. The Works Of The Law Cannot Justify Anyone (Luke 18:18-20).

A. As our text opens, Christ is headed for His final visit to Jerusalem where He will be crucified. As the Lord presses on and moves toward the cross upon which He will secure atonement for His people, He is met by a certain man who submits to Him a question upon which hangs heaven or hell: “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”

B. What do we know about this man from the Scriptures?

1. **He was a young man** (according to Matthew 19:20). It is certainly commendable that a young man would have such an interest in questions that relate to his eternal soul (“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth” Ecclesiastes 12:1). All too often, the young view themselves as having too much of this life to live to consider matters that relate to their eternal soul. Dear children and young people, do not fall into the trap of thinking that you must first enjoy yourself like the prodigal son, and then after you have done all that you want to do, then you will devote yourself to Christ. How many have cast themselves headlong into hell having taken that course of action. Presuming upon God’s mercy that He would awaken them from their sin before they die, they perished without Christ and without eternal life. How tragic this would be especially for any of you, dear children, who have the privilege of having Christian parents and of hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ offered to you week after week. Come to Christ while you are yet in your youth. Embrace Christ as your only hope of eternal salvation while you are yet young, and find in Him a joy, peace, and contentment that the world cannot take away.

2. **This young man was a ruler among the Jews** (Luke 18:18). Here was one who being yet a young man had distinguished himself by his learning, wisdom, justice, and mercy to be a ruler among men like Nicodemus (John 3:1). But all his learning had not brought him to understand the Gospel (John 3:15).

3. Notice, thirdly, that **this young ruler was very wealthy**

(Luke 18:23—“very rich”). But all his riches did not bring to him that peace of conscience which he sought. He apparently believed there must yet be something he must do in order to inherit eternal life. If we seek peace of mind in anything of this life, we will end up like this rich young ruler. Was that not the message of Solomon (“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” Ecclesiastes 1:2).

4. Furthermore, **this rich young ruler was so interested in the matter of eternal life that he ran along the way to ask Christ this question and knelt before Christ** (Mark 10:17). Although being wealthy and exalted in position, he had certain questions about his soul which weighed more heavily upon him at that point than what others might think about his inappropriate behavior as a wealthy ruler in running to Christ. One of great wealth and position might even be expected to invite Christ to come to him at his bidding rather than running to meet Christ. Here it would seem was a sincere man, not like the Pharisees who came asking questions in order to tempt Christ or entrap Christ (as in Mark 10:2). However, as we shall see, here was a man who was sincerely wrong as to what was needed in order to inherit eternal life.

5. Finally, **this rich young ruler was even respectful of Christ**, for he refers to Christ as “good Master” (Luke 18:18). Here it would seem is one who was ripe to be truly saved and to receive pardon for all his sins. From the perspective of natural man, here would be one who would meet all of the qualifications to be saved. But as we shall see, he shows himself disqualified to be saved by looking to his own obedience as the cause of salvation.

C. Let us now consider more closely his question and Christ’s response to his question.

1. In the question posed by this rich young ruler (in Luke 18:18), the omniscient Christ surely saw that which was inferred in the question: “Good master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” This

man's whole understanding of salvation revolved around something he must do in order to gain eternal life from God. He did not understand eternal life to be a free gift received by faith alone in Christ's obedience and righteousness.

2. In the response of Christ, the Lord infers two truths.

a. First, Christ infers that He Himself is God, and that He is good (Luke 18:19). Therefore, Jesus Christ, God in flesh, must be the object of man's faith. The Lord would teach this man that He was not merely a teacher or prophet of God, but that He was Himself the living and true God. In effect, the Lord responds, "You merely consider me to be a good man. But do you not understand that there is no mere man who is truly and absolutely good. Therefore, don't give me this Divine attribute of God (namely, goodness) if you are not willing to own me as God." From the Lord's response we must understand that saving faith looks to Christ not as a mere man (nor as a good man or as a good teacher, as do so many), but looks to Christ as the everlasting God incarnate, who in His very nature is good. One cannot be saved if He does not understand the goodness of God in demonstrating His redeeming love to rescue ungodly enemies from His just wrath and condemnation through the obedience and work of Jesus Christ. If one looks by faith to his own goodness in keeping the commandments of God, or looks to his own faith, repentance, or love as the ground of his salvation, he cannot be saved. The alone object of our faith is Christ and His righteousness (Philippians 3:9).

b. The second truth inferred from Christ's response in Luke 18:20 to the question of the rich, young ruler is that the works of the law cannot justify him. In Matthew's account (Matthew 19:17), the Lord adds the following words, "if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Rather than explicitly stating that the works of the law cannot justify one, the Lord seems to be saying that the works of the can justify one.

(1) What is going on here? The Lord, knowing by His omniscience the disposition of this man toward keeping the law in order to inherit eternal life, takes him back to what the law absolutely requires if one would be righteous before God on the basis of the law or on the basis of one's keeping the commandments of God.

(2) The law of God requires absolute perfect obedience, and because no mere man is able to attain to this degree of obedience, every man stands under the just curse and condemnation of God (Galatians 3:10).

(3) Thus, the Lord is not in any way taking this man back to the law of God in order to look by faith to it or to his keeping of it in order to inherit eternal life, but Christ is taking the rich, young ruler back to the law in order to demonstrate to him the utter futility and impossibility of being saved on the basis of obedience to it.

(4) The Lord sends him to the Second Table of God's Commandments, not because he was not guilty of breaking the first four of God's Commandments as well, but because the Lord would point out one commandment in particular that would evidence his violation of God's law: namely, covetousness (which is the only one Christ purposely excludes in Luke 18:20, but reveals in Luke 18:22).

(5) Before passing on to the final two points, I should note that it is not because God's Moral Law is not holy, just, good, or spiritual that it is unfit as the basis for man's salvation. To the contrary, the Moral Law partakes of all of those Divine characteristics (Romans 7:12,14). The weakness lies not in God's Moral Law, but in man, who due to his sin and corruption is not able to keep the law in absolute perfection if he would be just before an absolutely holy, just, good, and spiritual God. For, dear ones, Christ came as the second Adam in the Covenant of Grace to absolutely and perfectly keep God's Law, so that the righteousness of the Moral Law is fulfilled in the perfect obedience of Christ. And we are once and for all declared righteous before God when

we by look by faith to Christ as our righteousness. Thus, we find in the New Testament the Law (as a Covenant of Works) condemned as the formal cause of our justification before God or even sanctification for that matter (Galatians 2:16). However, the Moral Law of God is never condemned as a rule of life for the Christian, but is rather commended as such in the hands of our Mediator (1 Corinthians 9:21; 1 John 5:3). In fact, love for God and love for one's neighbor fulfils (makes full and complete) the law of Christ, but does not bring the law of Christ to an end (Galatians 6:2). Dear ones, antinomianism (being against God's Moral Law) is not the answer to legalism (being justified on the basis of keeping God's Moral Law). The answer to legalism is being justified on the basis of Christ's keeping God's Moral Law. The Moral Law of God must be kept in order to be justified. The question is by whom? Christ or man?

II. The Depravity Of Man Blinds Him To His Own Sin (Luke 18:21).

A. Here it is evident that this rich, young ruler is blinded in ignorance to his own sinful violation of God's commandments. He takes what Christ says and rather justifies himself rather than condemning himself. He can only see his own law-keeping in terms of mere outward obedience to the letter of the law. He has not shown outward contempt or disrespect for his parents. He has not outwardly murdered another man. He has not outwardly committed adultery with another man's wife. He has not outwardly robbed another man. He has not outwardly lied to another man or borne false testimony against another man. However, his eyes are blinded to the innumerable ways he has violated God's Moral Law in his thoughts, intentions, motives, desires, and affections. He does not understand that the law addresses not only man's outward conformity to God's righteous standards, but also addresses man's inward conformity as well.

B. In Matthew's account (Matthew 19:20), this young man asks in desperation, "All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?" In other words, "I have done all that I know to do in order to be saved, I have kept all of God's commandments, what am I still lacking? I still do not have peace of conscience. I feel I must do more." This is ultimately the problem with looking to yourself for the qualifications needed to be right before God. Where do you draw the line? When is enough, enough? If salvation depends upon certain works or graces in me or in you, then there can always be more that we might do to be right before God. Only when we stop looking for qualifications worked by us or worked within us, and rather look by faith to Christ alone will we be able to truly rest upon the faithfulness of God's promise: Isaiah 55:1. Dear ones, are you like Abraham fully persuaded, that what God has promised in the Gospel (namely, forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life through Jesus Christ) He is able to perform? This is the essence of saving faith—looking with trust outside of yourself to a good and faithful Savior who will keep His promise to save you. Just as the eye does not eye itself, so faith does not look to faith, but to Christ and His righteousness.

III. The Sin of Covetousness Turns One Away From Christ (Luke 18:22-23).

A. The Lord next puts His Divine finger upon that particular sin which this rich young ruler did not see, nor for which did he desire forgiveness: covetousness. Christ gives him a unique command (much like the command God gave to Abraham to test him). He was to go and sell everything he owned, and give to the poor what he had sold, and then he was to come and follow Christ as His disciple. Here is revealed what this rich, young ruler was trusting in: his wealth. His faith in his wealth prevented him from trusting in Christ. His covetousness (in spite

of his attempt to keep God's commandments) was his god to which he clung.

B. I wonder if the Lord were to put a similar command to any of us, if we would like this man walk away from Christ filled with great sorrow. Would we likewise manifest covetousness in turning away from Christ, if by God's providence everything we own was taken away from us: our home, our cars, our jobs, our health, our family, our freedom, our life? For wherever we would draw the line and say, "God, I am willing to part with this, but not with this", we manifest the same sin of covetousness that turned this man away from Christ. The only possession we ought ever to be unwilling to part with in this life is Jesus Christ. The rich young ruler was trusting in his good works and in his riches, but neither of these could save him. Dear ones, it's time to search your own heart today. In whom or in what are you truly trusting? For the object of your trust will manifest itself in what you are unwilling to give up in this life. Why settle for the treasures of this life when you might enjoy the treasures of heaven for all eternity. Turn to Christ alone as worthy of your trust today. Look not to yourself or to others, but to Christ as the most precious and valuable possession you have now and for all eternity.

The issue of saving faith and looking outside oneself to Christ and His perfect work is so graphically portrayed in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

He [i.e. Christian—GLP] ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden [i.e. his burden of sin—GLP] loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death." Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, **that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden.** He looked therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks.

Then Christian gave three leaps for joy, and went on singing--

"Thus far I did come laden with my sin;
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in
Till I came hither: What a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest cross! blest sepulchre! blest rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me!"

Dear ones, in the Covenant of Grace, God does not have an angry frown upon His face toward you who are trusting in Christ and His righteousness alone for your acceptance before God. No, in the Covenant of Grace, the anger of the righteous Judge has become the smile of a gracious and loving Father. How often do we walk in our Christian life under the angry frown and righteous vengeance of God as Judge, rather than under the loving countenance of a God who loved us so much that He withheld not His only begotten Son in order to make us His own beloved children? Is that not a walking under the dark shadow of the Covenant of Works, rather than under the brightness of the glory of the Covenant of Grace? Is that not yet acting as though God justifies and accepts you on the basis of your works? God, as a loving Father chastens us for our rebellion and stubbornness in sin and transgression of His Holy Law, but He always chastens us in everlasting love, not to condemn us, but to sanctify us and to conform us to the image of His Son. Dear ones, we will not see growth and maturity in our lives if we do not move out from beneath the dark foreboding shadow of the Covenant of Works, in which God's love and acceptance is based upon our obedience rather than upon the obedience of Christ. God help us, for this is to show contempt for the immeasurable love of God for us in Christ Jesus, our righteousness.

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