

## LUTHER AND JUSTIFICATION

### Romans 3: 21 – 4: 35

What does it mean to have a clear conscience & how achieved? What preparations have I made for death & after death? Who/what am I? What is the meaning of life? Corruption of human nature & pollution of our moral character is clearly revealed in our thinking, behaviour & media. We are faced with our guilt and liability of punishment for not fulfilling the expectations of a holy God. How can we become righteous? The answer is that the Biblical doctrine of justification is God's action in pronouncing sinners righteous in His sight. This was the issue that faced Martin Luther whose struggle and revelation from God of justification by faith became a key in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant reformation.

Religious behaviour and questions in the period leading to the Reformation of 1517 reveal a worrying sense of terror regarding death, terrors of purgatory, fear of universal judgment on the Last Day, anxious concern about personal salvation. The church taught that eternal destiny would be determined by effective appropriation of sacraments (some seven plus) that resulted in meritorious works. Questions of doubt resulted; do my works please God? Have I done enough to be certain of divine acceptance? Why is the sacrament of penance more oppressive than liberating? How come promised spiritual benefits offered by the church were so often tied up with money and politics? Where is there relief from ecclesiastical abuses? Where can I find salvation?

During this period, **Martin Luther** (1483-1546), one of eight children of a copper miner in Saxony, & former law student, joined Augustinian friars against fierce parental anger. The death of a school friend and escape from lightning bolt faced him with religion and his need for salvation. Progressed to ordination as a priest in 1507, continued theological studies; Masters & Doctorate (1512), Lecturer in Biblical Studies at University of Wittenberg.

**Renaissance:** cultural rebirth from 1300s recapturing spirit of Greek & Roman cultures, artistic, literary & philosophy, plus moveable type for printing. **Desiderius Erasmus** humanist scholar, Greek NT in 1516. Luther's thinking progressed but he believed that as long as he did his best, God would give him grace to become better. For years he had been plagued by despair, sensing Christ as judge demanding an impossible state of inner purity. Maybe he wasn't chosen but rather destined to be damned to eternal suffering. Later he regarded these as God Himself assaulting and subjecting him to terrifying ordeals. Late-medieval pastoral practice was intended to deal with this through sacrament of penance; a cyclical process of restoration to a state of grace, through pilgrimage, set prayers, acts of contrition; but at war within himself.

April 1517; 97 thesis against scholastic theology [Aristotle, neo-Pelagianism]; which called for return to theology of Augustine; no effect. On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517 Luther attached his 95 thesis against the sale of indulgences on the Castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany, for an academic disputation. An indulgence was a certificate of pardon from papacy; merits of saints in heaven transferred to sinner, giving release from sin's penalties and these could be extended by pope to souls in purgatory to fast-track their trip to heaven. To raise cash to build St Peter's in Rome, Dominican friar Johann Tetzel, used emotional manipulation to get souls from purgatory to heaven by buying indulgences on behalf of dead relatives. "As soon as the coin in the money-box rings, the soul from purgatory springs." **Romans 1: 16 & 17**

## **Justification by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone.**

Justification is totally separate from any works of the law; there is nothing we contribute to justification, ie. to be made right with a Holy God. In the NT, justification is the action of God by which He pronounces believers to have fulfilled all the requirements of the law and this is based on the sufficiency of the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Justification is a forensic, a legal, act imputing the righteousness of Christ to the believer, declaring us righteous as does a judge in acquitting the accused. It does not mean making us righteous or altering our spiritual condition; but legally declaring us righteous.

What does this mean? God declares us righteous by crediting, or imputing, the righteousness of Christ to us. Not imparting or giving like a divine Santa Claus; but ascribing or crediting. When people marry or two firms merge into one, their separate assets are brought into the union and treated as mutual possessions. When God looks at us He sees us in the righteousness of His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ and the believer have been brought into union as a result of the Cross and Resurrection and His spiritual assets and our spiritual liabilities are merged resulting in our liabilities removed by his assets. God does not see us separate from Christ but in Him, one with him. Two scriptures help us understand this truth; **Romans 6: 23** and **Ephesians 2: 8 & 9**. What is our contribution? Nothing for our righteousness is filthy rags: **Isaiah 64: 6**. Justification is completely undeserved and is obtained not attained.

At the end of Romans two, Paul teaches that the true Jew is not one who conforms to outward regulations like the law, but one who is changed within by the Spirit; **Romans 2: 28 & 29**. Our danger is we hear that and apply it to other people. Our religion and church practices or standard of living are constant attempts to justify ourselves in our own opinion. Such opinion and action can never rescue us from sin. But we still try to impress ourselves and others before a Holy God by religious ‘circumcision’ practices: **Galatians 5: 1-7**. [KB] ‘Human righteousness is ... in itself an illusion: there is in this world no observable righteousness’.

**Romans 3: 10 – 12**, no amount of works or church performance can initiate justification; v **21 – 26** shows we *are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*. In **Romans 4: 1- 8** Paul gives clear OT illustrations to support his argument. The OT points forward to what God would do in Christ and here Paul demonstrates the truth of justification from Abraham. Abraham’s works, behaviour and character, displayed in his words and actions are clearly those of a righteous man. He towers above the surrounding paganism and shows heroic faith. He has a righteousness of which he might boast, but not before God. Like us, Abraham was saved by grace not works, nor a mixture of the two. Abraham is critical for our understanding of grace and forgiveness for if he had been accepted by God on the basis of works: Paul’s statement that God had always acted in grace would not stand.

We are all sinners before a Holy God and sin brings pollution, lawlessness, guilt and God’s wrath. Our conscience accuses us and we try in vain to silence it. How do we attempt to silence our conscience? More good works, church involvement, longer prayers, religious busyness, sacrifice, and re-dedication: and nothing works. In fact our conscience accuses us even more; so what is the answer? **Genesis 15: 1 – 6**; the grace of God is always active and comes to Abraham and he is enabled to respond to God by trusting Him who is faithful. Abraham’s righteousness before God was due to faith and not one segment of it to works. **Our sin is credited to Him, His righteousness is credited to us.**