

Martin Luther's preface to Galatians

(Abridged and paraphrased)

1. The most important thing in the world

The one doctrine which I have supremely in my heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth, day and night. This rock, which we call the doctrine of justification through faith, was shaken by Satan in paradise when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God. Every since then the whole world has invented innumerable religions and ways through which, without the aid of Christ, use their works to redeem themselves from evil and sins.

When Paul discusses the biblical doctrine of justification by faith he explains that there are several kinds of "righteousness." First, there is political or civil righteousness—the nation's public laws — which magistrates and lawyers may defend and teach. Second, there is cultural righteousness—the standards of our family and social grouping or class — which parents and schools may teach. Third, there is ethical righteousness—the Ten Commandments and law of God — which the church may teach but only in light of Christian righteousness. So all these may be received without danger, as long as we attribute to them no power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace... These kinds of righteousness are gifts of God, like all good things we enjoy...

Yet there is another righteousness, far above the others, which Paul calls "the righteousness of faith" — Christian righteousness. God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is passive righteousness, as the others are active. For we do nothing for it, and we give nothing for it. We only receive it.

2. The need for Christian righteousness

This "passive" righteousness is a mystery that the world cannot understand. Indeed, Christians never completely understand it themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.

For human beings by nature, when they get near either danger or death itself, will of necessity examine their own worthiness. We defend ourselves before all threats by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But then the remembrance of sins and flaws inevitably comes to mind, and this tears us apart, and we think, "How many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! Please God, let me live so I can fix and amend them." We become obsessed with our active righteousness and are terrified by its imperfections. But the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see what Christ has done for us... So the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness... If I tried to fulfill the law myself, I could not trust in what I had accomplished, neither could it stand up to the judgment of God. So...*I rest only upon the righteousness of Christ... which I do not produce but receive, God the Father freely giving it to us through Jesus Christ.*

3. Law and grace

It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world, to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no law or wrath or punishment. In a sense, they do not exist any longer for the Christian, but only total grace and mercy for Christ's sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. In fact, to those outside of Christian righteousness, the law needs to be expounded in all its force. Why? So that people who think they have power to be righteous before God will be humbled by the law and understand they are sinners.

Therefore we must be careful to use the law appropriately. If we used the law in order to be accepted by God through obedience, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with earned/moral righteousness in our minds. If we try to earn our righteousness by doing many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness nor do we honor the purpose for which the law was given. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all! For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become for us our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don't despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.

4. Living the gospel

While we live here on earth, we will be accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, and bruised by the law with its demands of active righteousness. Because of this, Paul sets out in this letter of Galatians to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness. For if the truth of being justified by Christ alone (not by our works) is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work. On this truth and only on this truth the church is built and has its being.

This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So I challenge you to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer, so that in the time of trial you will be able to both inform and comfort both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, from active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ's righteousness. In times of struggle, the devil will seek to terrify us by using against us our past record and the wrath and law of God. So if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of

righteousness, and if we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting at the right hand of God (Heb.7:25) and pleading our case as sinners to the Father, then we are under the law, not under grace. Christ is no savior, but a lawgiver, and no longer our salvation, but an eternal despair.

So learn to “speak the gospel” to one’s heart. For example, when the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician —learn to use arguments of the gospel against it. Say:

O law! You would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and condemn me for sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without hope. You have overstepped your bounds. Know your place! You are a guide for my behavior, but you are not Savior and Lord of my heart. For I am baptized, and through the gospel am called to receive righteousness and eternal life... So trouble me not! For I will not allow you, so intolerable a tyrant and tormentor, to reign in my heart and conscience — for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the gospel, through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness.

When we are assured of this righteousness, we not only cheerfully work well in our vocations, but we submit to all manner of burdens and dangers in this present life, because we know that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him. This then is the argument of this Epistle, which Paul expounds against the false teachers who had darkened the Galatians’ understanding of this righteousness by faith.