

What must I do to be saved?

Lesson 4

Other religions are on being saved through giving to God righteousness. Christianity is about being saved through receiving from God's righteousness. As clear and as straight forward as this truth seems to be, many struggle hard and long to come into the freedom and release of the Gospel. Martin Luther was one of these. He wrote, "I labored diligently and anxiously as to how to understand Paul's word in Romans 1:17...Then I grasped that the righteousness of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise...When I saw the difference, that law is one thing and gospel another, I broke through. And as I had formerly hated the expression 'the righteousness of God,' I now began to regard it as my dearest and most comforting word. So this expression of Paul's became to me in very truth a gate to paradise."

In this lesson, we want to learn from the insights of Martin Luther. His introduction in the letter to the Galatians is a remarkable summary of the gospel. My prayer is that the glorious truth of our righteousness in Christ will penetrate your heart and mind as you read and meditate.

Studying

During the remainder of our studies, we will be centering on Paul's teaching to the Galatians church. In this lesson, however, we want to sit as it were, at Luther's feet and learn from him. Read Luther's introduction to his Galatians commentary abridged and paraphrased below, and answer on a separate sheet of paper the following questions.

1. What is the key difference between Christian righteousness and other kinds?
2. What do we mean by "passive righteousness?"
3. Why must we "constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice?"
4. Why is the difference between passive righteousness and active righteousness so important?
5. Share the single best things you learned from Luther and how it would make you a different person if you really understood and applied it?

Reading

Read the following article from Luther's introduction in the Galatians letter with the above questions in mind.

The Gospel

Preface to the Galatians

By Martin Luther (abridged and paraphrased)

Paul sets down the Biblical teachings so that we can know, without a doubt, the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.

1. There is a political civil righteousness. This is what world leaders, diplomats, civic leaders and lawyers must teach.
2. There is a social righteousness, which is acting, speaking, dressing, and carrying oneself correctly according to the traditions and mores of a particular culture or vocation or field. This is what parents, families and schools teach.
3. There is moral righteousness, “the righteousness of the law,” that comes from obeying the Ten Commandments. This is what the church teaches (but only in light of the Christian righteousness discussed below).
4. Another type of righteousness comes from relationships—becoming attractive and loved by people of both sexes.
5. Another type of righteousness may come from career achievement—becoming successful, respected or rich through your talent and work.

There is another, a far better righteousness, which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith” – a Christian righteousness. This one we must distinguish from the rest because it works in a completely different way from the others. The other kinds of righteousness we can work at ourselves, by our own strength. But this Christian righteousness is the greatest of all. God puts it on us without our lifting a finger. It has nothing to do with our obeying God’s law; it has nothing to do with what we do or how hard we work, but it is given to us and we do nothing for it. It is a passive righteousness, while the others we have to work for. It is perfect righteousness, because it is the perfect record of all Christ did in living and dying, while the other kinds are partial and imperfect. And it is free righteousness, for we don’t do anything or give anything to God to get righteousness, but we receive it because someone else has done all the work for it in our place. Therefore it is passive righteousness.

This passive righteousness is a mystery that someone who doesn’t know Jesus can’t understand. As a matter of fact, Christians never completely understand it themselves and do not take advantage of it when they are tried and tempted. So we have to teach it constantly to others over and over and we must repeat it to ourselves. For anyone who does not understand this righteousness and fails to cherish it, he will continually have fears and depression buffeted in his heart. Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.

For human beings by nature, when they get near danger or death, do not see anything but what they have done to be righteous, how worthy we have made ourselves. We defend ourselves by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But then the remembrance of our sins and flaws 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 things.” But the real evil here is that we are obsessed with our own power to be righteous, and we do not lift up our eyes to see what

Christ has done for us, to prepare a righteousness to be received. So the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, or passive righteousness.

When a person finally realizes this, there is peace and he says, “Even if I could work 10 times better at righteousness starting today, it could not atone for my past wrongs nor could it make me perfect before the Judge. So I cast away, not my efforts to be good, but my trust in those efforts before the Father and before my conscience. Instead, I trust in the righteousness of Christ only to please the Father, the Law, and the conscience. The earth does not produce rain nor is it able by its own power or work to get it. The earth simply receives the rain as a gift of God from above. It is the same with Christian righteousness. God, without our deserving it or working for it, gives it to us.

This is an absolutely strange and unique teaching—unknown to the world—to teach people through Christ to live as if there were no law or wrath or punishment, but only total grace and mercy for Christ’s sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life. It shows you how God wants you to live. But until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is show you how sinful you are. When you really see what the law teaches, you will only be terrified, seeing that you could never satisfy it. It reveals your pride, self-centeredness, selfishness and lack of self-control.

Therefore, a faithful communicator of God’s Word will give out the law so it is kept in perspective. If the law is pressed on people’s consciences, giving them the impression that they must obey it to win God’s favor, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with the earned, moral righteousness in people’s minds. Instead the law must be taught clearly so people can see the futility of satisfying it, the impossibility of meriting God’s favor and love through it.

No one should think we reject the importance of good works and obeying the law. Returning to an earlier illustration; just as the earth does not bear fruit until it receives the rain from heaven as a gift, so when we receive the Christian righteousness we consequently can live a good life, naturally, out of gratitude. 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, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all! For Christian righteousness comes when we know and believe this only: that Christ is gone to the Father and sits at his right hand, not to become our judge, but He has now become for us, our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation. God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think that although I still sin, I don’t despair because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life. In this righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life, 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.

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the reading and interact with the following questions.

1. Take the five questions at the beginning of the study and discuss them together as a group.
 2. Luther said (see introduction to the lesson), “When I saw the difference, that law is one thing and Gospel another, I broke through.”
 - Have you, like Luther, “broken through” into an entirely new transformed life, a new approach to looking at God and yourself? Or is there something “blocking” your approach to God?
 - Talk frankly as a group about the possibilities. Some ideas:
 - Intellectual blocks:*
 - Not believing the gospel “news” of what Jesus did in history.
 - Not believing the gospel analysis of how both religious and irreligious people are lost.
 - Not believing that righteousness is a gift, feeling that it is too easy and can be abused.
 - Personal blocks*
 - Not wanting to commit to the unconditional, personal allegiance the gospel requires
 - Not feeling worthy of this righteousness
 - Simply not seeing the wonder of the gospel.
 3. Whatever the block or problem, are you willing to labor as Luther did until you break through? Take time to pray for one another.
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Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

Preaching the gospel to yourself project

Project No. 4

The project this week is to help you begin a practice, I trust, you will carry all through your Christian life. It's learning to preach the gospel to your own self. In Luther's Preface to Galatians, he has a paragraph where he does just that. That paragraph was omitted from your reading, but now I include it here. Near the end of the preface he writes,

“So learn to speak to one's heart and to the Law. When the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician—learn to use the 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 over-stepped 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.”

Luther was trying to save himself through being extremely good and moral. That is why he begins this sermon to himself by addressing his own personal issue: “O law!” He is talking to the thing that would be as his savior and take the place that only Jesus should have in his heart. Of course, many people don't have the moral law as their pseudo-savior. Some people look to their career, love, performance or beauty as their saviors. Therefore, when writing a sermon to yourself you may not need to address the law. Instead of “O law” you may need to say, “O career,” “O you of the opposite sex,” “O money” or “O husband” and so on.

This week begin to think about the places you go to find “salvation”. Think of a problem or situation that gets you unduly discouraged, afraid or angry. Ask why does that problem have such a grip on me? Could it be that you are looking to that thing or person or activity as your “righteousness?”

Write a self-sermon like Luther does. Bring it to the group and share your sermon with the others. Talk about situations where you need to learn to preach the gospel to yourself.