

15.

How We Are Sanctified by the Blood of Jesus

Our justification by the blood of Christ is accomplished in the first moment of faith, but only with an eye toward a lifetime of consequent acts of faith expressed in repentance and confession. Our life under the cross is itself transformative as we repent, that is, turn from sin to righteousness. In fact, we are cleansed not by an empty profession of sin, but in the context of our intention to turn from sin to obedience. This dynamic is reflected in Isaiah 55:6,7, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and our God will freely pardon.”

In this passage we can see that “turning to the Lord” is parallel with “forsaking evil ways and thoughts.” In other words, “forsaking evil ways and thoughts” is to “turn to the Lord.” Turning to the Lord cannot be reduced to confessing sin, but must also include an intention to do God’s will, the act of forsaking. The result of this “turning to the Lord” in order to do God’s will is that God will have mercy and “freely pardon” sins that have been committed. So the gift of God’s free pardon is given in the context of a sinner resolving to forsake his sin and do God’s will. This, for Isaiah, does not compromise the freeness of the pardon. In the context of repentance, which is a turning from sin to God, the Lord does not require payment for past sins, they are covered freely and mercy is received.

If the intention to turn from sin does not exist, then confession becomes reduced to a justification of sin rather than a justification of the sinner. Understanding that our justification depends on an on-going commitment to turn away from sin, opens us up to the possibility of a real and present knowledge, and an assurance of our justification. We are not left with a mere reflection about the validity of a transaction that

took place in the past, but can hear the very real word of pardon *today* (2 Co. 6:1). This blessing was understood by the puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards and needs to be re-emphasized in our day.

And then to suppose that no after acts of faith are concerned in the business of justification, and so that it is not proper for any ever to seek justification by such acts, would be forever to cut off those Christians that are doubtful concerning their first act of faith, from the joy and peace of believing. As the business of justifying faith is to obtain pardon and peace with God, by looking to God, and by trusting him for these blessings... The proper remedy (for those who doubt their first act of faith) is now by faith to look to God in Christ for these blessings.²⁶

As Edwards recognized, this biblical reality of a present justification as we live under the cross daily would not serve to undermine the joy and wonderful assurance of believing. Rather, we would be restored, in the present joy of our salvation, hearing God's word of pardon and life-giving command to pursue His ways, as the freeing word of the gospel (Ps. 51:12). In order to illustrate this point, I will use a pastoral counseling anecdote to put flesh and bones on this biblical perspective.²⁷

A young woman came into my office seeking counsel concerning anxiety she was feeling in regard to Jesus' acceptance of her. She related that she had a hard time knowing that she was truly forgiven. She prayed continually for God to help her and knew that Jesus had died for her sins, yet He seemed distant to her and she lacked assurance of her salvation. After asking many questions about her life, she revealed that she and her mother were having a difficult time. She felt as though her mother was not treating her fairly, and was even being somewhat abusive in her language. I inquired into how she responded to her mother's injustice, and she told me that they had shouting matches, and there were times when she slammed the door in her mother's face. This shed new and important light on her situation. I proceeded to define the distinction between her mother's behavior and her own. I did not want to justify her mother if she was indeed behaving the way that she was being portrayed. However, what this

26 Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, Banner of Truth, 1995, 643.

27 Details have changed in order to not compromise confidentiality.

young woman needed to know was that she was not responsible for her mother's sin, but that she was only responsible for her own.

The Bible is clear that we are to honor our parents, and there are no exceptions to this commandment. Jesus has given this woman a command to honor her mother. This command is not dependent on her mother acting in godly ways. Part of the Christian calling is to bear the sin of others patiently, and to not fight wrath with wrath, or evil with evil. In fact, this is the very definition of bearing our crosses (1 Pet. 4:12-19). The young woman was refusing to carry her cross, and rather than overcoming evil with good, she was being overcome with evil (Rom. 12:21). It became clear *why* she was wrestling with assurance of her salvation, even though she knew that Jesus died for her sins. She was wrestling with her assurance for very good reasons. Biblical assurance comes from obedience to Jesus' commands, *not only* a recitation of the facts of Jesus' death on the cross for our sake (1 Jn. 2:3; 3:18-20).

The outcome of the counseling was for her to ask two people for forgiveness. First, she must be reconciled to her mother by asking her for forgiveness for not honoring her the way a daughter should. She must pursue peace with her mother to the degree that the peaceful results would depend upon her (Rom. 5:18). Then, she must go to God and repent of her sin of rebellion against His commands (Mt. 5:23, 24; 7:12). Then, she was reassured that God will draw close to her with His sweet assurance as she walks in His ways in repentance (Jas. 4:7-10). She will know His forgiveness in her repentance and in her renewed resolve to honor her mother. I also sympathized with the difficulty of seeking forgiveness from those who had wronged her and not repented, but for her to remember that she was not responsible for the acts or omissions of others. Loving those who wrong us is probably the most difficult thing Jesus commands us to do. Yet, He is asking nothing of us that He has not already done for us at the cross, and this is the paradoxical path to experiencing profound joy and the sweet assurance of our faith (Ac. 5:41; Rom. 5:3; Jas. 1:2-4).

This, I believe, is the way to experience biblical assurance. Otherwise, if assurance is obtained just by a recitation of what Jesus did for me on the cross, without repentance, and without turning to righteousness, all that we have left is the justification of sin, and continuing a life of sin. Without repentance, we become hardened, deceived and in reality, unforgiven and condemned, because we are denying Jesus as our Lord and Savior. This is the very teaching that Jude warned us about. "They are godless men, who change the grace of

our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude v. 4b). The imperative of obeying the gospel must be pressed upon God’s people (1 Pet. 4:17; 2 Th. 1:8).

It is a deficient gospel that calls us to simply reflect on a past transaction, of a redemption accomplished “at the cross,” and to conjure up feelings of gratitude that are supposed to make us want to love our enemies, while at the same time being told our own forgiveness has nothing to do with the obedience of loving our enemies. We are told, “If we truly feel the forgiveness of Jesus that has been accomplished, then we will really want to go out today and love those who rub our faces in the dirt.” This is a weak message that only respects one part of God’s Word to us, and for us, and will by necessity produce weak and worldly Christians. The whole truth includes gratitude for sure, but it also connects our *present* forgiveness, our *present* reconciliation, our *present* salvation, and our *present* cleansing, with a resolve to forgive *now*, be reconciled to our brother *today*, and love our enemies *in the present*. In short, to obey Jesus Christ by taking up our own crosses *daily*. As we do so, we have the very real and present experience of assured peace with our Lord.

The practical reality of this distortion is that sins in the present become *justified* because of a perceived once for all transaction that has taken place. Our hearts become hard and our consciences become appeased with the false idea that “there is nothing more for us to do.” This is not a reflection of the covenantal life that God requires, but is a disastrous perversion of it. The fear of the Lord, which is biblically portrayed as a healthy and life-giving reality, becomes drained of its sanctifying and repentance producing force. “There is no fear of God” becomes a virtue of having a distorted doctrine of grace and faith alone.

Repentance and confession implies a turning away from sin, to righteousness. A life lived under the cross is not simply hearing a word of pardon; it is hearing a word of pardon in the context of a pursuit of holiness. This reality is reflected in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Lk. 11:4). The context in which sin is forgiven, is the one in which a resolution to follow Jesus in forgiving those who sin against me, exists. This is where we see the cross producing a righteous life, mercy is received only if mercy is given. James testifies in James 2:12,13, “mercy triumphs over judgment” only when we are merciful. To miss this is to miss something absolutely central to the Christian faith. The gift to us is *both* in the mercy received, *and* in our opportunity to bestow mercy. This is where a tragic division has occurred. The gift is not just the

reception of pardon and *not* the command to pardon others. For us to pardon others and to bestow mercy is a gracious call and a gift! It is a gracious call to be healed of a hellish, bitter and resentful disposition that destroys our souls. And it is only in the context of this repentance that we can turn to the righteousness in which we are cleansed from our sin. The cross produces a pardoned *and* righteous people; this is the gift of God (Rom. 6:19-23). This is how Peter, John and the writer of Hebrews can speak about being sprinkled by the blood of Jesus *after* obeying Him.

“To those who are elect exiles... for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet. 1:2).

“But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7).

“He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb. 4:8).

These passages are nonsense unless we are able to understand Christ’s cleansing blood as not just something that lies in the past, but also is a future reality to be obtained by the obedience of faith. This is also reflected by numerous passages that speak about a future salvation or justification. The covenant makes sense of this, as we, like the saints of old, are striving to be God’s “treasured possession.” In the following chapter, I will present a person who was striving for that prized declaration of sonship. That person will be the Apostle Paul himself.

