

14.

How We Are Justified By the Blood of Jesus

It is clear from Scripture that faith in Christ's finished work on the cross justifies us and reconciles us to God from the first moment of faith. This is how we can speak of having been redeemed in the past, and the reality of that redemption is celebrated in the present. This is clear from various Scripture passages:

"Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

"...it was to prove at the present time his righteousness and that he is righteous and is justifying him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

"You were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers...with the precious blood of Christ" (1Pet. 1:18-19).

When we refer to being justified by the blood of Christ, it is right and biblically beyond dispute to refer to our pardon being established by Jesus' finished work on the cross. Jesus takes our sins upon Himself and takes the Father's wrath against our sins and bears it so that we might be pardoned and escape wrath. This is what Paul refers to in Romans 5:9, "Therefore, being justified now by his blood..." The parallel to this statement is found in verse 10, "While being enemies we *were reconciled* to God by the death of his Son, much more, *while being reconciled*, shall we be saved by his life." The

cross of Jesus is the place of our pardon, where the guilt of our sins are atoned for. Christ's death and resurrection stand as a central moment of God's redemptive work in the New Covenant just as the Exodus was the central moment of God's redemptive work in the Old Covenant.

However, what we must also see is that Christ's death and resurrection is not ultimate in God's scheme of redemption. Jesus Christ's atoning work on the cross, while essential to our salvation, is not end of our redemption, just as the deliverance from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea was not the end of Israel's redemption. Christ's death and resurrection becomes the all-sufficient fountain from which our redemption springs; this is central to our faith. However, Christ's death and resurrection was, and is, the essential *means* by and through which God's *ends* for our redemption is accomplished. The end or the goal of Christ's death and resurrection is our future vindication or justification at the judgment seat of God.

It is striking to note that nowhere in Scripture is the final justification at the last judgment seen as accomplished by God's people "claiming the blood of Jesus." Nowhere in Scripture do you see the ground of a person's declaration of innocence at the judgment of God being a proper confession of Jesus' finished work on the cross, despite being a foundational assumption in contemporary evangelicalism. It is assumed that at the judgment, the only basis of being able to enter eternal life is a proper confession of Jesus' substitutionary atonement. The danger this presents to us is obvious. If popular evangelical preaching and teaching is misguided on this point, then thousands will be entering the tribunal of the Lord being profoundly ill- equipped for that great day. There will be thousands of confessions that are accurate enough concerning the central means by which God redeems the world, namely Christ's death and resurrection. But it is apparent from Scripture that God's judgment will *not* be according to a proper recitation of God's means. The fact to be evaluated on that great day will be whether the means of God's redemption, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus, will have found its constituted end, or goal in a person's life. It will be on that basis that justification at the judgment seat of God will occur.

I want to pause to acknowledge that many of my evangelical brethren will be catching their breath at this moment and assume that I have just blasphemed the glorious finished work of the cross of Christ. I would implore you to withhold judgment, because I believe the opposite to be true. The truth is, if we stop at Christ's work on the cross, and go no further to the goal of Christ's redemption, then the

glory of God through Christ cannot, and will not, be shown forth in the way that God has intended. But first we must take a closer look at the logic of God's covenantal Word in this regard. We must examine the grammar of Scripture that shows Christ's death and resurrection to be the means to God's glorious ends.

The most useful aspect of grammar that I was taught in Seminary, is how conjunctions that join sentences and phrases communicate the author's logic for a particular argument. For example, note the following:

"And he died for all, *in order that* the ones living should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again" (2 Co. 5:15).

"For our sake he him who had no sin to be sin for us, *in order that* we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co. 5:21).

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, *in order that* we might die to sin and live for righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24).

"...sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, *in order that* the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3b-4).

These verses reveal a logic of means and ends. The conjunction *in order that* reveals this logical relationship. The first half of the sentence is the "means." The second half indicates the "ends" for which the means occurs. In other words, the means occurs for the express purpose of accomplishing the ends. If I say, "I went to the store *in order that* I might buy some bread," then the purpose of going to the store was to buy bread. The act of going to the store is the means by which the end occurs. The point is the buying of the bread.

The same logic is used in our passages; Jesus' death is the means by which the people live for God. The end, or goal of Christ's death, is people living for God and dying to sin. The emphasis is the goal, which is living for God and not for sin. From the example, the *means* is going to the store. Bread is bought *by means of* going to the store. The goal is to buy the bread. The trip would not be seen as complete unless the purchase of bread had occurred. Only on the basis of bread being purchased would the trip to the store be viewed as

successful, because the trip to the store itself was not the goal. The trip to the store was simply the means (though no doubt absolutely necessary) by which the end of purchasing bread was accomplished.

According to Paul's reasoning, *only on the basis of a life lived for God and not for sin* would Christ's necessary sacrifice on the cross be seen as effective. A person, according to our example, would be judged as having a successful trip to the store on the basis of bread brought home. The ends had been accomplished. In the same way, only on the basis of a life lived for God in pursuit of righteousness and dying to sin would a person be judged as manifesting the ends for which is the purpose of Christ's death.

This is why the future vindication is not according to a proper recitation of God's means, but is a demonstration of the ends being accomplished:

"I say to you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words shall be your justification, and by your words shall be your condemnation" (Mt. 12:37).

"Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was a naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Mt. 25:34-36).

"For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Rom. 2:13).

"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas. 2:12,13)!

"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Co. 5:9,10).

"Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives here in reverent fear" (1 Pet. 1:17).

“Judge me O Lord, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High” (Ps. 7:8).

These passages refer to a future justification which will find its basis in our behavior. How do we reconcile such statements with the awesome and wonderful truth of Jesus’ death on the cross for our sake? How can we reconcile the fact that Scripture testifies to Christ’s justifying blood, and our justifying works? It is here that evangelicalism become fraught with confusion. Some evangelicals will say, “Oh, all the statements that speak about justifying works are part of the Old Testament way of doing things, that is how someone was saved in the Old Testament.” But what about all those New Testament statements about being justified by words and deeds?

Others will say, “These statements are hypothetical, that these passages only speak about what is theoretically possible in a sinless world, *not* what is really possible.” But do we dare to suppose this, when every indication is that Jesus and his apostles meant what they said, and were not speaking hypothetically? The danger in both of these solutions is that we end up believing we can ignore these passages because we know that Jesus “did it all” at the cross. When we come to the great day of judgment we “plead the blood of Jesus.” But how do we reconcile such an idea with the passages we have just read?

The reconciliation of Christ’s atoning death and our future justification by our behavior, is found in the Bible. It is found in placing Christ’s death and resurrection in their proper place in God’s redemptive purposes. Jesus’ death and resurrection is the means by which our Father accomplishes His ends. The goal or end of Jesus’ work on the cross is the creation of brothers and sisters who are just like Him. It is Christ’s death and resurrection that makes this possible. But, the goal of Christ’s death is our being raised to “newness of life.” It is from this “newness of life” that we will be declared to be God’s children. Now we can see how these passages can speak about being judged according to works *without* negating Jesus’ death for our sake. These passages are announcing the accomplished goal, or the end of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

From this logic, it become clear why future justification finds its basis in our works, and *not* in pleading Christ’s blood on our behalf. To plead Christ’s blood alone at the judgment will be like coming back from the store empty handed and saying, “No, I don’t have bread, but I went to the store!” The response would be, “That is not the point, the point of going to the store was to get bread!” To plead Christ’s blood

and not anything I have done at the judgment sounds humble enough, but it denies the express purpose of Christ's death - that is a life lived for God. If we deny the purpose of Christ's death, then we in effect deny Christ, and no amount of "pleading the blood" will suffice.