

Theme: Righteousness from outside of ourselves

Text: LD 23

The theme for the sermon this afternoon is combined from two different sources. In the church forms that we use for occasions like baptism and Lord's Supper we find the phrase 'outside of ourselves.' The Form for baptism states that baptism 'signifies the impurity of our souls, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves.' The Form for Lord's Supper uses this phrase too when it states that 'we do not come to this supper to declare that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves. On the contrary we seek our life outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ.' This afternoon we want to combine this phrase 'outside of ourselves' with what the apostle Paul says in Romans 3 about our righteousness. 'Righteousness' is an important theological and spiritual concept with huge ramifications for our salvation from sin – we will speak more about this concept in a moment. The important thing for us to learn in Romans 3 is that our righteousness is not from ourselves; it is 'from God.' After coming to the conclusion, on the basis of several OT Scriptures that 'no one is righteous,' Paul writes in Romans 3:21ff about a 'righteousness of God'. 'Of God' means in this case 'from God.' Paul is not speaking about a 'righteous God' but rather a God who makes other people righteous. Paul's point is to show that since we human beings have no righteousness in ourselves, we have to find this righteousness outside of ourselves in God through Jesus Christ. Hence our theme: righteousness from outside of ourselves.

Righteousness from outside ourselves is what LD 23 is talking about under the heading 'Our Justification'. Justification is a theological term that Christians nowadays do not always really understand. The lack of understanding about justification marks a major shift from the days of the Great Reformation when all the talk was about 'justification'. As much as people today talk about sports and about the latest celebrity gossip, that's how much people in the days of Martin Luther talked about justification. Everyone knew what it was, and everyone had an opinion about it. People wrote about justification in the new pamphlets and publications made possible by the invention of the printing press. They talked about it when they met for a beer at the tavern after working in the fields.

The debates about justification come down to this simple question: is righteousness something we can find in ourselves, or is it something we have to find outside of ourselves. Every other religion in the world answers this question by saying that we human beings have to find the answer in some fashion in ourselves. In the Great Reformation, the Christian church split right down the middle between those who agreed with all the other religions of the Bible and those who agreed with the apostle Paul, who said that righteousness is not from ourselves but from God through Jesus Christ. The catechism clearly takes the position that righteousness is from God, not from us. When we speak of 'our justification' we are not saying that we justify ourselves but rather that we believe that we are justified by a merciful act of God who chooses to make us righteous.

The catechism comes to its discussion of our justification as a follow-up to its careful outline and interpretation of the Apostle's Creed. The question is asked how it helps us to give our attention to the articles of the Creed and to believe them. The answer to this question is that by believing these things

we are righteous before God and heir to life everlasting. The point the catechism is making is that justification is the goal of faith and that faith is the means by which we are justified. These two things - faith and justification - are inseparably connected. The exact manner of this connection is carefully spelled out by the catechism. It is not a 'cause-and-effect' connection, where our faith is the reason we are justified, or where our faith is the condition of our justification. We want to avoid the error of turning faith into a virtue that makes us acceptable to God and that separates us from others who do not make themselves acceptable to God. Faith does not earn us anything. We don't receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ because we have faith or because of our faith. Faith is a gift of God, whereby he allows us to have an attitude of dependence, trust and confidence in Jesus Christ rather than ourselves. By means of this faith, God gives us righteousness and makes us righteous in his sight. He gives us a righteousness that comes from outside of ourselves.

Before we go further, we said that we would discuss the meaning of the term 'righteousness'. Righteousness is described in the Bible in a text like Psalm 15. The Psalm does not use the term 'righteousness' but it does ask the question 'who can live with God?' The answer to this question is the person who walks blamelessly and does what is right and who speaks truth in his heart and does not slander or do evil to his neighbour. This adds up to righteousness. A righteous person is someone who keeps the commandments of God and who avoids the ways of sin and who resists temptation and does not give the devil a foothold in his life.

For our purposes this afternoon, it is important to remember two very important features of this righteousness before we turn our attention back to LD 23. First, righteousness leads to blessing. This is the message, for example, of Psalm 1, where the Psalm opens with the statement, 'blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners.' The Psalm comes to the conclusion that the Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish.' This message is repeated in many other Psalms, including Psalm 111, 112 and 119. God blesses the righteous person, but he does not have a blessing for the person who lacks righteousness. Righteousness is a requirement for blessing. This is why Q/A 59 states that by faith we are righteous before God and heir to life everlasting. The order of that answer is important. First we become righteous; then we are declared eligible for life everlasting.

The second feature of righteousness that we ought to remember is the most curious fact that people who clearly lack righteousness can be called righteous. The most obvious example of this that comes to mind is Abraham's nephew Lot. The story of Lot in Genesis does not hesitate to expose Lot's flaws and failings. Lot allowed himself to be enticed by the riches of the notoriously corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. This led him directly into the pathway of God's impending wrath, which he only escaped by the skin of his teeth. Lot did not nearly possess the faith and obedience of his uncle Abraham. Yet, this very same Lot is described by Peter as 'righteous Lot' whom God rescued and who was greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah. It seems a stretch to call Lot righteous on the basis of what we know from Genesis. But then it seems a stretch to list Jephthah in the heroes of faith on the basis of what we read about him in the book of Judges; yet there he is, as many of you reminded me after I preached on Jephthah some weeks ago. How do we solve this mystery? How can people who are not righteous possess righteousness?

This, of course, is what justification is all about. LD 23 has the title 'Our Justification'. The point of this LD is to explain how through faith we who have no innate righteousness to lay claim to can nevertheless become righteous by the gracious act of a saving God.

Before explaining how exactly we become righteous people, LD 23 reinforces the fact that we need to become righteous. Our starting point is, as Paul states so baldly in Romans 3, is that we lack righteousness altogether. 'No one is righteous, not even one.' Combining Paul's words in Romans 3 with what Scripture says elsewhere, the catechism arrives at a 3-fold indictment of the human race, including you and me. First, we are guilty of breaking all of God's commandments. Second, we have failed to keep any of the commandments, by which the catechism means to say that we have not broken the commandments once or twice but each and every time. Third, we are inclined to all evil. If we put these three convictions in other words, we could say that we **didn't, can't** and **won't** do the righteousness that God requires. This is the conviction of God's Word, supported by the internal witness of our own conscience. We have no righteousness to bring before God for his approval. We undoubtedly need righteousness from outside of ourselves.

Does such a righteousness exist? Yes, it does. Luther was fond of the phrase 'alien righteousness' to describe the existence of a righteousness that is given to us from a source outside of ourselves. This wasn't just wishful thinking on Luther's part; he was basing himself on what we at the beginning of this sermon noted in Paul's words in Romans 3. There is a righteousness that is 'from God', which is a free gift to us in Jesus Christ. We see this giving in action in people like Lot and Jephthah. But it isn't just these weaker people who needed God to make them righteous. The most often used example of someone being made righteous by God in the Bible is Abraham. Both Paul in Romans 4 and James in James 2 emphasize that Abraham had an 'alien righteousness'. Abraham believed God, and this was credited to him as righteousness.

The word that the catechism uses is **imputed**. 'Imputed' means that something is credited to the account of another person. God in his grace imputes righteousness to believers. LD 23 states that God, with no merit of our own, out of mere grace, imputes to us the satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ. In our catechism classes this past week, we noted how these three things are God's answer to the three convictions that we listed earlier. We have broken all the commandments of God; we didn't do the righteousness God requires of us. Christ's **satisfaction** pays the damages for our sin, so that we can stand before God with a clean slate and a purged record. In addition, we have failed to keep any of God's commandments; we can't do the righteousness God requires of us. Christ's **righteousness** is that he kept all the commandments that we didn't. Thirdly, we are inclined to all evil; we won't do the righteousness that God wants us to do. Christ's **holiness** is attributed to us, so that we are viewed in God's eyes as people who love righteousness and seek it.

One of the great joys of reading the Gospel accounts of the ministry of the Lord Jesus is seeing this in action, seeing Jesus Christ accomplishing and demonstrating the righteousness that we lack. In our catechism classes we did an exercise that was a summary of a sermon series that I did once, which I would like to repeat here someday, where we looked at Christ's life and ministry through the window of the ten commandments. Did the Lord Jesus keep the ten commandments? The first commandment is

to have no other gods before the Lord. When Jesus was lured by Satan to bow down before Satan, he refused and quoted a verse which says that we ought to worship God only. Did he keep the second commandment about worship? He was so zealous for worship that he marched into the temple and drove out those who were turning the temple into a market place for buying and selling. Did he keep the fifth commandment? He obeyed his parents, who were sinners, and submitted to them even when they didn't have a clue about his ministry and his calling to obey the Father in heaven. We could, likewise, see that Christ kept all the commandments of God. When he did this, he did this for you and I. He was keeping the commandments for us, so that we could benefit from his 'alien righteousness' through faith in him. During the 30 years that he lived on earth, Jesus accomplished the perfect righteousness that would be shared with every believer from every age. This, along with a few other things, is what made those 30 years the most important 30 years in history. This is why we insist that the ministry of Christ wasn't limited to the events that happened at the end of his life, with the cross and the resurrection. Jesus had a 30 year ministry, in which he accomplished the righteousness that we would need.

Christ's righteousness is why Jephthah can be listed among the faithful. Christ's righteousness is why Peter can speak of 'righteous Lot.' Christ's righteousness is why you can consider yourself righteous in God's eyes, even though you are guilty of many sins.

Is this righteousness for everyone? Is it for you and me? The question was asked in LD 7 whether we can expect all people to be saved. The answer then was 'no.' The same question can be asked in a different form in connection with LD 23. Will the righteousness of Christ be given to everyone? The answer again is 'no'. In LD 7, salvation was only for people who are grafted into Jesus Christ by a true faith. Once again in LD 23, faith is the key to receiving Christ's 'alien righteousness.' This righteousness is only for those who believe.

This is why Abraham is the example that the Bible repeatedly references. Abraham is called the 'father of believers.' He is the one whom God used to set the pattern of faith. Abraham received promises and commands which he had to accept on faith. He left his home country and travelled to a new country which God promised to his descendants. He had to take God's promise on faith because he had no son and a wife who could not have children. This was the pattern that God expected all other believers to follow after Abraham. Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Likewise, every other believer will be made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ.

The point of all this is to be encouraged to remain people of faith. Faith never comes easy. Sometimes faith requires an effort of learning and knowledge, and we struggle against the temptation to be lazy. Other times faith requires patience and trust when we see bad things happen to good people, or when we don't understand the unfolding of God's plan, or the long time that it takes for God's promises to be fulfilled. Other times, faith requires humility that is undermined by our own sense of being good people who deserve God's favor rather than being undeserving recipients of God's grace.

Our faith is constantly under attack and under pressure. Like our father Abraham we have moments when our faith wavers. Abraham experienced famine in the promised land and decided to move to

Egypt. He grew impatient waiting for the promised son, so he took matters into his own hands and tried to make a son for himself through his own clever plans. In those moments he lacked faith, and he needed God to get him back on track with a revived and renewed faith. You and I have these moments as well, when our faith grows less. We have moments when we forget to live by faith, and we start living by sight, or we start living in our own strength and wisdom rather than God's strength and God's wisdom.

But Christ's righteousness is too valuable and precious for us to risk losing our faith. We have no righteousness in ourselves. We need to remind ourselves of that fact this afternoon. Get off your high horse of self-righteousness. Stop congratulating yourself for being so smart and wise and good and faithful. Stop looking down at others around you who aren't as obedient and Reformed as you are. You have no righteousness in yourself. You need a righteousness that can only come from outside of yourself.

On the other hand, there is also no need to despair of your sins either. For every one of us who thinks too much of himself, there is another person who thinks too little of God. Christ's righteousness is for every person who believes, no matter how wicked or sinful they have been. LD 23 comes to a beautiful, encouraging and simply spoken truth that is able to lift up even the most broken heart. It is as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if only I accept this gift with a believing heart. Christ's 'alien righteousness' is real righteousness. It is from outside of you, but it is given to you and is yours. By God's gracious permission, you are allowed to have this righteousness through the simple means of faith.

So let us be people of faith and seek to grow in faith, and let us encourage each other in faith. Faith is an effort and a struggle for weak people such as ourselves. We lack perseverance and patience and trust and humility more often than not. But the Spirit works in us to use the means of preaching and sacraments to build us up in our faith so that we can fight the good fight of faith. By faith we who have no righteousness can be describe as righteous people. By faith we can believe that the words of Psalm 118:20 apply to us – 'this is the gate of the Lord, through which the **righteous** may enter.'