

Lord's Day 24

April 22, 2018

Willoughby Heights CanRC

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Read: Matthew 19:16-30

Psalm 24:2,3

Text: Lord's Day 24

Amen-song: Psalm 119:39, 42

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, Lord's Day 23 discusses one of the most pressing issues when it comes to religion today: of what benefit is it to us that we believe the teachings of the Bible. What does faith get us? The answer is: justification and sanctification. Through faith we are righteous before God, we receive forgiveness of sins, we are justified, and so come to live a holy life.

Lord's Day 24 continues with this topic. For this is an issue which, throughout the history of the church, has been the source of much confusion. Also today. One of the most divisive issues within Christianity today is how do justification and sanctification relate to each other and to man's faith. We find this issue already debated in the apostolic church: the letters Paul wrote to the Romans and the Galatians are on this. It was one of the issues with respect to which Martin Luther broke with the Roman Church, and was thus an issue during the time of the Great Reformation. It was an issue just under a century later, during the doctrinal struggle between the Remonstrants or Arminians and the Contra-Remonstrants or Calvinists. It remains an issue today: for Romanists and Protestants still have their debates, as do Arminians and Calvinists. Even debates within Calvinist circles, such as the one on Federal Vision, touch this matter. Justification and sanctification, how do those two relate to each other and to man's faith?

There are two Lord's Days in our Catechism that deal with this. Lord's Days 24 and 32. Lord's Day 24 has the negative approach, it deals with what good works don't do. Lord's Day 32 has the positive approach, it deals with what good works do do. From a pedagogical perspective, a teaching perspective, that may not be helpful: first teach what something does *not* do and then teach what it *does* do. But there is a logic to the approach of the Heidelberg Catechism. Logically speaking, justification precedes sanctification. Forgiveness precedes renewal. The Lord Jesus Christ bearing our guilt precedes the Holy Spirit removing sin from our lives. The order for dealing with issues in the Catechism is determined by the so-called order of salvation, also known as the chain of salvation. While it is true that Lord's Days 24 and 32 both deal with good works, their actual topics are justification and sanctification, and how good works relate to these. And as we're in the context of justification, of forgiveness of sins, we'll be taking that negative approach: what good works do *not* do. As to what good works *do* do, you'll have to wait until we get to Lord's Day 32 for that one. Although the close of Lord's Day 24 does hint at this.

It might be helpful to briefly define and describe what justification and sanctification are about. That will help us understand the responses we find in Lord's Day 24 to objections raised against the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Justification is the process in which God declares man not guilty of sin and grants him access to eternal life. Reformed theologians refer to it as being *forensic*. Forensic means "with respect to the law." When it comes to the divine law, those who are in Christ do not have to bear their guilt. They are not guilty. Lord's Day 23 uses the phrase "as if" a number of times. "As if I had never had nor committed any sin and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience Christ has rendered for me." "As if": it's not real, it's only with respect to the law, it's forensic. Justification is about forgiveness: God does not hold us accountable for our sins.

Sanctification is the process in which God makes man free from sin and grants him eternal life. Reformed theologians refer to this as being real. Real: it's not an "as if" but a reality. Those who are in Christ receive the Holy Spirit who works in them faith and the obedience that attends faith, good works.

God does not want to spend eternity forgiving us our sins. He wants to spend eternity rejoicing in our perfect love and loyalty. Sanctification is about holiness: God removing sin from our lives and placing good works in our lives.

So justification is forensic, sanctification is real. Justification is about God acting as if I have no sinful nature, as if I commit no sin, and as if everything I do is perfectly righteous, and He does so because Christ has rendered these services in my stead. Sanctification is about God having the Holy Spirit make me do good works, fight against sin, and have me be reborn so as to be without a sinful nature. In short, justification is about forgiving the *lack* of good works, sanctification is about creating an *abundance* of good works.

Putting it that way makes clear why Lord's Day 24 deals with good works in a negative sense. There's a common tendency with people to connect doing good works, not just to sanctification, but also to justification. Or, to say it more accurately, there's a tendency within Christianity to confuse justification and sanctification.

It can be confusing. Just think, how would you answer the question: being set free from sin, is that a matter of justification or of sanctification? Being set free from sin, is that a matter of justification or of sanctification? That's a tricky question, for the answer is "both".

We listen to God's Word with this theme: Justification is a gift of grace. We'll pay attention to the three objections found in Lord's Day 24: (1) But what about our good works? (2) But what about God's reward? (3) But what about our lifestyle?

(1) But what about our good works?

It's in the sinful nature of man to want to be in control of his own destiny. In fact, the temptation that our first parents were confronted with was exactly that: choosing between God as master or being your own master. And even if people realize that they cannot do it themselves completely, they still like to be involved. When a child is making a drawing and things aren't going quite right, an older child or a grown-up might try to become involved. But the child won't let it happen. "Me do it."

People are like that when it comes to God. The Christ came to bear our guilt. Jews repent to Christianity, confess their sins, acknowledge that their past evil deeds are forgiven in the Christ. There's no need, anymore for the sacrifices of the temple. But many Jews were not prepared to let go of their old approach to things completely. For man to be justified, they figured the law still had to be kept. Christ's sacrifice is good with respect to the past. Those who repent, make a new start. But they will have to reach eternal life through their own efforts. It's this line of thought that is tackled by Paul in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he taught that man is not justified by works. Man is not justified by works alone. Nor is man justified by works in combination with the work of Christ. Justification is by God's grace.

But this works approach to justification just would not go away. The British monk Pelagius taught an extreme version of it. He denied the atoning value of Christ's work, convinced that Christ simply had come to teach us the right way of salvation in words and by example. Man is by nature healthy but will follow the example of others. If people have bad health habits, new people will fall into these same habits. What is needed is a good information campaign. Well, said Pelagius, that's what the Christ is all about. Man is to look to Christ for the perfect example of being good and acceptable to God. Copy that example, and you will be justified.

The Church did not accept this Pelagian approach. However, a mid-way doctrine became very prominent. And, in many ways, it was very much like the Jewish approach. It's called semi-Pelagianism. While Pelagius taught that man is by nature healthy, semi-Pelagians teach that man is by nature sick.

This semi-Pelagianism comes in two forms.

The first is that taught by the Roman Catholic church. The sick person goes to the hospital to be

operated on. That's the work of Christ, which takes place personally through the sacraments. And then you come out of the hospital a healthy person. And now you are to live the good life in your own strength. You've got to make sure you don't get sick again. If you do, you've got to go back to the hospital again. Here's where the sacrament of penance comes into play. For the rest, the basic thought is: the more good works you do and the less sins there are in your life, the less time you'll have to spend in purgatory and the quicker you will make it to eternal life. Roman Catholicism teaches: justification is a combination of God's grace and man's work: his good deeds.

Then there's the approach of the Remonstrants, the Arminians, common here in North America. This is a little more complex, for it can sound very Reformed to our ears. Both Calvinists and Arminians emphasize the need to have faith. But to Arminians, faith is not just the *instrument* unto justification, it is the *grounds* for justification. Faith is man's contribution to justification. Faith becomes a good work that earns salvation. Arminians will argue that God changed the demands of the law when Christ came. To stick with the imagery of a sick or healthy person, when Christ came, God changed the definition for being healthy. What used to be considered sick (condemnable) – people sinning – is no longer considered sick by God. Today, God considers only those people sick (condemnable) who do not believe. Now Arminians come in various degrees, so there's all sorts of variants on this approach. But full Arminians will argue that true Christians are unable to sin, because God has changed the definition of sin from "doing evil" to "not believing" (cf. CoD III/IV r.e. 4).¹ Arminianism teaches: justification is a combination of God's grace and man's work: his faith.

So what about our good works? The problem with our good works is, in short, that they don't measure up.

For starters, God's demands are complete. God doesn't give grades. He only gives a pass or a fail. Said Moses to the people: "Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them." (Deut 27:26). These words are quoted by Paul to indicate that keeping the law of God will not lead to justification (Galatians 3:10-13). Our Highest Prophet and Teacher taught us: "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19-20). To be acceptable before God, we are to be absolutely perfect.

That's what the Lord Jesus pointed out to the rich young man. The rich young man thought, well, I'm doing fine. We too may be inclined to think, okay, some commandments are an issue for me, but not all of them. I can still score 7 out of 10. However, again, God does not give grades. He only gives a pass or a fail. We read in the letter by James (2:10-11): "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." There is a deep unity to the law. For God is one (Mark 12:29 & 32). The law of God, the revealed will of God for our lives, can be summed up with one command: "You shall love." As Scripture makes clear, "Love is the fulfilment of the law." (Romans 13:10b). Again, that's what the Lord Jesus then pointed out to the rich young man. And he got the message, he failed.

So there's two problems right there. First of all, we tend to pull the law apart. To cheat on your wife is a worse sin than to work on the Day of Rest. Hating someone is worse than disobeying your parents. Stealing someone's car is worse than lying about someone. But God does not give out grades. It's pass or fail. Pass or fail. What people may regard "the least of these commandments" is already huge in God's

¹ This approach is found in *The Bondage Breaker* by Neil Anderson, originally published in 1990 and still very popular.

view of things. The Lord our God is one. Break a commandment, any commandment, and you've broken the law. Disobey even in the slightest way, and you've failed.

That becomes even more clear when we measure our deeds by that most basic, most fundamental standard of God's law: love. Here's the second problem. Who would dare to say that their love is perfect, that their lives are totally other-centred? By God's definitions, those who do not love perfectly are guilty of hatred.

Brothers and sisters, the problem is, our works just don't measure up to the standard which God has set. They just don't. Boys and girls, whatever we do, it's never going to be good enough. *We* might think we're pretty good. But *God* isn't satisfied with "pretty good." It's got to be "perfect."

And we're not perfect. We're nowhere near perfect. Each Lord's Supper celebration our liturgical form has us confess: "We also are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh." We're nowhere near perfect. And because we're not perfect, our works will condemn us.

Justified by works? *Theoretically* speaking that's possible. But it will only happen, if our works are perfect. And they are not. We don't keep God's law as we ought. Our faith is not as strong as it could be. If we were to be justified by works, fully or in part, we would never be justified. We'd all be condemned.

So, we thank God that He does not justify us by our works, but by His grace.

(2) This does leave us with a question. If it's all so black and white, what are we to make of the reward which God has promised? It brings us to our second thought: But what about God's reward?

There's a logical issue here. God has promised to reward our works. If God rewards our works, they must be earning something. So, something is not making sense here.

When someone comes with a counter-argument, the first thing a Christian should do is to check whether the *question* is correct. Asking a misleading question will result in a misleading answer. So: is it indeed true that God has promised to reward our works? The answer to that question is, yes, it is. We've read of that in Matthew 19. The disciples will receive thrones for following Jesus. Those who have had to sacrifice much will receive many times more and inherit eternal life. Hebrews 11:6 explicitly states: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and *that he rewards those who seek him.*"

The question should make us, as Reformed people, stop and think. There is a tendency among us to down-play our works. We'll emphasize "only a *small* beginning of this obedience". We'll talk as if imperfect means our works are absolutely no good at all. We'll understand "total depravity" to mean "depraved to the maximum degree". It's true, when it comes to justification, God will only give a pass or a fail. And as none of our works are perfect, we fail. But don't now turn the argument around and say: because we've failed, our works are absolutely no good at all. While not perfect, there is good in what we do. When we are rewarded by God, it is indeed a reward. You receive what you deserve.

And what you deserve is not the same for everyone. The reward Scripture speaks of is not the same for everyone. There are different rewards for different people. Let me quote some Scripture passages to prove this. Matthew 10:41: "The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward." Matthew 18:4. "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." If there's a greatest, there are also people who are less great. Matthew 19:30: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Think also of the parable of the talents, the one servant received 5 and ended up with 10, another servant received 2 and ended up with 4. And the talent of the servant who received just one was given to the servant who already had ten. And when some complain: that's not really fair, the master says, it is too, those who have shall receive more.

(Matthew 19:11-27, esp. 24-26).

There's not just a reward, there's even difference between rewards!

So the question is legitimate. Scripture does teach that God rewards our works.

The next question we need to ask is, is this reward related to our justification?

The answer to *that* question is, no. The reward is not related to our *justification*. It's related to our *sanctification*. For look at the logical order of things. I am a sinner. God justifies me, forgiving my sins and granting me access to eternal life. He sends His Spirit into my life, to make me believe and seek to do good works. And the good works that are then present in my life, He rewards. First we get justification and then we get sanctification. First we have forgiveness and then we get good works. If good works and their reward follow justification, they cannot be the grounds for justification.

Our Catechism says that our reward is not earned, it is a gift of grace. It's a little brief here, a few more words would have been helpful. The logic here is: justification is by grace alone, through Christ, without any merit on our own part. Justification leads to the gift of good works: those who are justified are also glorified (Romans 8:30). So good works is a gift of grace as well. Justification is by grace. Our good works are by grace. And our good works are rewarded. So the reward is a gift of grace as well. Justification is by grace. Our good works are by grace. And the reward is by grace. It's grace upon grace upon grace. Amazing, isn't it?

Maybe you're thinking now, but that's not really fair. Justification by grace, okay. But good works by grace. Why would God give one person more good works than another? And then reward by grace? Why does God reward the person whom He has given more good works also with a greater reward? That's not fair.

But, brothers and sisters, that's part of the counsel of God. If we are okay with justification by grace – and we should be, because it's what the Bible teaches – we should be okay with the rest as well. For it all goes back to the first link in the chain of salvation: election, predestination. It's God's sovereign choice that He justifies some, and let's rejoice in the fact that we may belong to that group. It's God's sovereign choice to give some 5 talents, some 2, and some 1. Let's be faithful in using what talents God has given us. It's God's sovereign choice to reward our labour as He chooses. Let's not begrudge each other the grace God shows, but let's be thankful for the grace God reveals to us individually and work out the gift of grace communally.

(3) But doesn't living by grace make us easy-going and careless. What about our lifestyle? If everything is by grace, what will motivate us to do good? Let's consider this in the third place.

This response to the doctrine of justification by grace is not really one that is motivated by the Bible. It's motivated by logic. The thought underlying it is: if justification is by grace alone, every motivation for living a loving and loyal life is gone. People will become careless: it makes no difference what I do, God will save me anyway. People will even become godless: I don't have to worry about what I do.

It sounds logical. But brothers and sisters, it's not logical. This question, too, confuses justification and sanctification. In terms of justification, works are to no avail. But in terms of sanctification, works form the essence. We need to get the order right. When a car is switched on and in gear, depressing the gas pedal will make the car move forward. But if the car moves forward, this doesn't depress the gas pedal. If I water my garden with a garden hose, switching on the tap will make water come out of the hose. However, water coming out of the hose does not switch on the tap. The one action comes before the other. Justification precedes sanctification. God justifies me, by grace, through Christ, without any merit of my own. My works play no role in my justification. But they do play a role, a central role, in what comes next, my sanctification.

And, sanctification always, always follows on the heels of justification. It's impossible for someone to

be justified and not undergo sanctification. The two are mutually related. God doesn't allow for the one to exist without the other. That's also why you can tell whether someone is justified by how they stand in life with respect to sanctification. Those who do not hate sin and do their best to flee from it, are also not forgiven of their sin. Which makes sense. Because, if you don't hate sin, why would you want it to be forgiven?

There's a second problem with this rebuttal too. To think that true Christians need the promise of justification to motivate them to good works is to think of Christianity in a pagan way. It's the "do ut des" religion. "Do ut des", that's Latin for, "I do something so that you do something." I do good works so that God will let me into heaven. But that approach to religion is foreign to the Bible. The Old Testament is filled with countless attempts at this, and all fail. Christ has paid the price to get us into the perfect Creation. Our good works will not get us there.

But, because life in that perfect Creation is filled with good works alone, with works of love and loyalty, those who are in Christ will already now do their utmost to do good works. And they are motivated, motivated by gratitude for grace received (like I said, here's the hint of Lord's Day 32.)

We should not be into Christianity because then we'll go to heaven. Not self-enrichment is our aim, but self-denial is determinative. When all is said and then, we'll say no more than "we've done our duty." Those who are Christians merely to live forever are deceiving themselves. Eternal life is not our goal, it too is the means to our goal. Our goal is to be with God and to live for God. To be with God, we must be perfect. To live for God, means to act with perfect love and loyalty. That's why perfection is number one on our list of goals in this life already.

Justification is by grace alone. Brothers and sisters, we cannot contribute anything to our justification. No work of ours is perfect. The reward God gives is a reward in the context of sanctification, not justification, and it is a reward of grace. This Biblical teaching will not make true Christians careless and godless. For justification inevitably leads to sanctification, those who are forgiven in Christ will also be renewed by the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, in short, we are justified by grace alone. We are justified, not *by* good works, but *to do* good works.

Amen.