

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER
717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500
Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

Series: Special Message

Pastor/Teacher

Text: Phil. 2:5-11

Date: November 25, 2007(am)

Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ

INTRODUCTION: This is John Piper's Crossway lecture that he recently gave at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Due to a variety of developments that have taken place within Evangelicalism over the past few years, I consider this a critically important message.

November 14, 2007

By John Piper

For about ten years now, the biblical reality of justification of by faith has captured more of my time than any other doctrine. There are at least five reasons for this. One is that eight of those years I was preaching through the book of Romans, and justification is at the heart of Romans. A second reason is that I have been surrounded by apprentices that read widely and ask tough questions, and I don't have the luxury of indefinitely equivocating.

The Embattled Truth of Justification

The third reason is that in those ten years the truth of justification has become increasingly embattled, so that the truth as I see in the New Testament is increasingly confused and reduced and contradicted.

- The lines between evangelical faith and Roman Catholic teaching have been blurred.
- The doctrine of the imputation of Christ's obedience has been denied.
- The New Perspective on Paul, especially N. T. Wright, has redrawn the map of New Testament theology in such a way that confusion is widespread as to just what justification is and how it relates to the gospel and conversion and judgment.
- Others have so merged faith and its fruits that the term "by faith alone" has ceased to provide a foundation for holiness but is now virtually identical with it.
- And some have so changed the ordinary meaning of the word "righteousness" that in the act of justification, it no longer refers to anyone's right attitude or right action but only to a courtroom verdict of acquittal.

In other words, year after year, as I try to win people to faith in Christ and help my people enjoy the fullness of assurance so they can live radical, risk-taking lives of love, I keep bumping into ever new permutations—John Owen in his day called them "innumerable subterfuges"—of the denial of the New Testament teaching on the imputation of Christ's obedience to believers.

"Now Did My Chains Fall Off"

The fourth reason why the doctrine of justification has held my attention for these years is that I relate to this truth personally much the way John Bunyan did. My fears are conquered and my courage (what there is of it) is released and my perseverance in the pursuit of love is sustained by the truth that Christ's perfect faith and obedience counts as mine so that God looks on me as having done with sinless perfection everything required of me. John Bunyan was tormented

with uncertainty about his standing with God until this truth broke in on his soul. He speaks for thousands of us when he says,

One day as I was passing into the field... this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just [in front of] him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today and, and forever."...

Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [e.g. Hebrews 12:16-17] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.

In other words, this doctrine, more than many others in these recent years, holds my attention because huge and eternal things are at stake for my soul and the souls of the people for whom I will give an account before Christ.

When Right Willing Precedes Right Knowing

I'm aware that for some in the academic world, perhaps some of you, this very confession calls my fitness into question as a competent exegete. "This fellow has so much personal and pastoral allegiance to what he believes about justification, and feels such a great need for it, and has so much joy in it, that there is no way he can be objective when he comes to the biblical text, or be open to finding that his view is mistaken." Well, that may be true. But there is another way to look at a person's passion for particular truths.

A passion for a particular truth may be a blinding passion. That's true. But it may also be the very means that God uses to make some truths visible and beautiful. I say that because of what Jesus said in John 7:17: "If anyone *wills* (or desires or wants, *thele*) to do God's will, he will *know* (*gnosetai*) whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." In other words, Jesus taught that, at least in some matters, right *willing* precedes right *knowing*. Jesus is saying, "If you *want* the will of God you will have the disposition of heart to recognize it when you see it in his word." He does not say, "If you don't want the truth God is revealing—if you have no passion for this truth—and therefore have a measure of objective distance and detachment from the truth, you will be able to assess clearly whether something is of God." He says the opposite. There are some matters in which prior neutrality does not serve the truth, but serves death.

Of course, that doesn't mean that my Bunyan-like desperation for the truth of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ certifies my exegetical or doctrinal accuracy. It doesn't. What it does is give me balance in the fray by reminding me that some claims to openness that holds a position loosely are not only an illusion but maybe a blinding illusion.

None of that means we are trapped in our prior perceptions and prior passions. The word of God is powerful. It can break through our preconceived errors, and that can happen for those who are the most committed to their mistakes. And if I am one of those, I pray that God will have mercy and open my eyes.

So eight years preaching through Romans, and continual querying from thoughtful apprentices, and having to deal with ever new ways of how the doctrine is rejected and redefined, and believing that the imputation of Christ's obedience to us through faith is immeasurably precious has caused me to focus more on this truth in the last ten years than any other.

Magnifying the Person and Work of Jesus

But (fifth) I haven't mentioned the impulse that is most important and most ultimate from the Scripture. For this impulse I would like to go to Paul's letter to the Philippians and build the rest of what I have to say around what he says there. The impulse I have in mind, that is supreme above all others in guiding what we study and think and teach and say and feel and do, is the expressed in Philippians 1:20: "It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." The word for "honored" here is *megalunthesetai*. It's the same word used in Luke 1:46 where Mary says, "My soul *magnifies* (*megalune*) the Lord." Paul's supreme passion in life was to feel and think and write and preach and live and die in a way

that would magnify Christ—not the way a microscope magnifies, but the way a telescope does. He wanted his life and his death to make Christ—his person and his work—look as great as he really is.

Paul described the heart of his message, the gospel, like this in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6: It is “the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . [or] the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” When all of his Christology and all of his soteriology come together, even now as we see in a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12), the aim of it all is to display the fullness of the glory of Christ, which is the glory of God. Everything that Christ did, and everything that he reveals about himself, and everything that Paul and the other biblical writers teach about Christ, aim at this—that the world would see and savor and show the fullness of the glory of Christ.

Calvary: The Apex of God’s Glory

And this glory reaches its apex in the gospel—that is, in the saving work of Christ that climaxes at Calvary. That’s part of what Paul means when he says the gospel is “the gospel of the glory of Christ.” In the gospel—the good news of how Christ saves the enemies of God—the glory of Christ reaches its supreme expression.

So the ultimate impulse of these last ten years of preoccupation with justification is my longing to live Philippians 1:20. It is almost laughable to me, knowing what I know about myself, and what my wife knows about me, to make this claim. That’s why I express it in terms of longing, not accomplishment—which is also the way Paul said it: “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death”—that Christ will be magnified in my preaching and writing about the doctrine of justification.

Departures Diminish the Glory

The ultimate impulse that keeps me coming back to this issue is that departures from this truth diminish the work and the glory of Christ. Hence, the title of this talk: “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ.” The ultimate impulse for explaining and defending the doctrine of justification is to display the fullness of the glory of Christ in the gospel—that Christ might be magnified in my body whether by life or by death. What keeps me coming back to this doctrine is that this ultimate purpose of the gospel—to display the fullness of the glory of Christ in saving sinners—is being obscured and diminished.

How Christ’s Glory Is Diminished

I will try to show how this diminished work and diminished glory of Christ happens in three ways. 1) One of Christ’s great achievements for us is denied. 2) The deficiency of the sinful human soul that was meant to be remedied by that achievement goes languishing, with the assumption that Christ’s other achievements will suffice to meet the need. 3) The diminishing of the fullness of Christ’s glory and languishing of many redeemed souls hinders the costly labor of love that justification is designed to produce and that Jesus said gives glory to our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Let’s take those one at a time and give an illustration of what I mean.

1) By Denying One of Christ’s Achievements

First, the fullness of the glory of Christ in the gospel is diminished because one of his great achievements for us is denied, namely, the achievement of a perfect faith in his Father’s love and power and wisdom, and a perfect obedience to his Father’s will, because of our union with him through faith alone, the imputation of that obedience to us as an expression of God’s own righteousness. Therefore, when people deny the truth of the imputation of Christ’s obedience to us because of our union with him by faith alone they diminish the glory of Christ’s achievement for us.

As Paul pursues his supreme desire to magnify Christ in writing this letter, he celebrates in chapter two the obedience of Jesus. Verses 6-8: “Though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

One way Paul magnifies the glory of the life of Jesus is by treating it as one magnificent obedience stretching from his “being found in human form” to its climax in his crucifixion. Verse 8: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” This is amazing. The summary goes like this: “Birth as a human. Then humble obedience climaxing in crucifixion. Then resurrection.” It’s as though in Paul’s mind the life of Christ, from birth to death, was one great, complete act of humble obedience.

This goes a long way to explaining why Paul wrote Romans 5:18 and 19 the way he did. “As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness (*dikaionomatos*) leads to the justification of life (*dikaiosisin zoes*) for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were appointed sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be appointed righteous.” I think it is diminishing to Christ’s achievement to say that the obedience here refers only to his death. Paul doesn’t think of Christ’s obedience that way. “Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” His death was the climax of his lifelong obedience—its highest and most glorious expression. But Christ had set his face to die for us from the beginning, and every step he took was obedience unto death, even death on a cross.

One Righteous Act: The Totality of Christ’s Obedience

So when Paul says in Romans 5:19 that “by one man’s obedience many are appointed righteous,” and calls that obedience in verse 18 one great *dikaionoma* (one righteous act), there is no reason to think that he has any other obedience in mind than the totality of Christ’s obedience in Philippians 2:8. And the function of that obedience was not merely to fit him to be a suitable sacrifice, but so that he could become not only our substitute punishment, but our substitute perfection--righteousness. “By the one man’s obedience the many will be appointed righteous.”

As Paul continues to magnify Christ in Philippians 3, he leads into his own experience of exultation in Christ as his righteousness. He lists his former achievements as a law-keeping Pharisee. Verses 5-6: “As to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness in the law, blameless.” It’s crucial to see how he uses the word “righteousness.” Verse 6: “According to righteousness under the law, blameless.” It’s parallel with “according to zeal, a persecutor.” So the natural meaning is: His zeal is expressed in persecution, and his righteousness is expressed in blameless behavior. So righteousness here has its very normal and usual meaning. It means the way one behaves when one behaves in accord with some right standard.

Then he says in verses 7-8, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” So he counts his “righteousness” from verse 6 as worthless, indeed as excrement.

Then over against that righteousness he exults in another in verse 9: “. . . and be found in him, not having a *righteousness* of my own that comes from the law, but *that* [righteousness] which comes through faith in Christ [or some take “faith in Christ” (*pisteos Christou*) to mean the “faithfulness of Christ.” I doubt it, but it would not contradict what I am saying; it would, in fact even support it], the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” So it seems plain to me that the righteousness Paul exults in having now is not “his own” but is a righteousness that he is in some sense receiving by faith in Christ. And more specifically, it is a righteousness he says that he has by being found “in Christ.”

We can say a few things about this righteousness that Paul has in Christ. One is that it is not a verdict. It’s not the mere status of acquitted. It’s the same kind of “righteousness” (*dikaiosisune*) from verse 6: “According to righteousness under the law, blameless.” That was *his* “righteousness” (*dikaiosisune*) and now in Christ he has the “righteousness” (*dikaiosisune*) of another. “Righteousness” meant someone’s behavior in verse 6. And that is the natural way to take it in verse 9. In fact, it simply would not make good sense for him to say “not having a verdict of my own” or “not having the status of acquitted of my own.” A verdict of acquitted *would* be his own. What Paul is saying is that the record of his own behavior is now worthless as the basis of God being totally for him. He needs the righteousness of someone else.

Another thing we can say about this righteousness that Paul has “in Christ” according to verse 9 is that it’s not Paul’s new Spirit-empowered behavior. Paul is not replacing the *righteousness* of old law-keeping with the *righteousness* of new law-keeping, which is not called “my own” because the Spirit helps him do it. There are at least three reasons for saying this.

First, the language of “being found in him” with this new righteousness that is not his own puts the emphasis on union with Christ and the way we *find Paul in Christ*. It seems most natural to think that Paul is emphasizing his position in Christ and the new righteousness he has there, which would not be the imperfect behavior he is going to refer to in a moment, in verse 12 (“Not that I have already attained or am already perfect . . .”).

Second, the righteousness that Paul renounces as “my own” is not called fleshly or legalistic in verse 9. That’s not what he focuses on. He simply calls it “my own” and “from law.” The term “from law” (*ek nomou*) is used four times in Paul (Romans 4:14; Galatians 3:18, 21; Philippians 3:9), and each time it is naturally translated as a simple reference to “law-keeping” with no necessary self-reliant connotations. Paul is simply saying: One way to have righteousness is to pursue it by law-keeping, that is, by having a behavior that measures up. That would be *one’s own* righteousness, even if it were done in reliance on God, because it is one’s own behavior, not that of another. And Paul is despairing of his own behavior as a sufficient righteousness to support God’s irrevocable acceptance.

Third, when Paul gets to verse 12, he shows that the way he thinks about his own behavior is that it is imperfect and not the basis of his standing with God but the fruit of it. “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” I think the link here with verse 9 is that Christ “making Paul his own” or “grasping” Paul or “seizing” Paul (*katelemphten hupo Christou*) is essentially the way we are “found in Christ.” Christ makes us his. He takes us. Seizes us. So the way Paul thinks about his pressing on in life—the living of his life of Christian obedience—is not that this living is the foundation of his acceptance, but that Christ has obtained him in such a way that he is now “found in Christ” and, as such, already has a perfect righteousness that is not his own. So he presses on to become perfect because in Christ he is perfect. “Cleanse out the old leaven . . . as you really are unleavened” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Paul’s Righteousness: The Obedience of Christ

The most natural way to understand this righteousness that we have in Christ is that it’s the perfect obedience of Christ that Paul celebrated in the previous chapter. Philippians 2:8: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” One pointer to this link between Philippians 3:9 and 2:8 is the presence in both verses of the passive voice of the word “find” (2:8, “*being found (heuretheis)* in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death;” 3:9, “and *be found (heuretho)* in him, not having a *righteousness* of my own”). The link would be: Christ was found in human form *obedient*; we are found in him *righteous*. Which would naturally mean that in Christ—in union with him—his perfect obedience is counted as ours as gift from God (*ek theou*, Phil. 3:9).

Paul says this same truth in at least five different ways. 1) Here he says we “have” this righteousness, which is not our own, “in him” (Philippians 3:9). 2) In Romans 5:19, he says that by Christ’s obedience we are “appointed righteous.” 3) In 2 Corinthians 5:21, he says that “in him” we “become the righteousness of God.” 4) In Romans 4:6, he says that God “imputes righteousness” to us “apart from works of the law” (*ho theos logizetai dikaiosune choris ergon*), which is 5) virtually synonymous with Romans 3:28 which says that we are “justified . . . apart from works of the law.”

Therefore, I conclude that when the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, as the ground of his being totally for us with no wrath against us—when that is denied, the glory of his saving achievement is diminished. This is a spectacularly great work he has done for us. It shines as one of the crown jewels of Christ’s achievement. If the jewel is removed or painted over, the crown is diminished.

And two other diminishing effects follow that I mentioned earlier.

2) By Leaving the Human Soul Languishing

Second, there are deficiencies—defects—in the sinful human soul that were meant to be remedied by the achievement of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers. Christ did not perform this great work for nothing. There was a need for it. When that achievement is denied, that need languishes without remedy, and the assumption is made that it can be remedied by Christ’s other achievements, like the forgiveness of all our sins.

And here I will only mention the subjective side of the problem, the more pastoral side—namely, the struggle for assurance. Suppose you say to me, what more assurance could a person get from the doctrine of imputation that he doesn't get from the fact that, because of Christ, all his sins are forgiven? My response will be, don't try to be wiser than God. The human soul is a great mystery. Who can understand it? Who are we to say that there are not unique kinds of fear and doubt that, for reasons we may not fully understand, will vanish only before the teaching of Christ's imputed righteousness, but would not budge before the teaching of the forgiveness of sins?

Doubt is a frightening thing. If a person is bent on doubting, he can doubt anything. You can't stop him. No mere doctrine can bring peace to the soul bent on doubting itself. Assurance is a supernatural work of God, not man. "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16). But it seems very clear to me: The fullness of the glory of the achievements of Christ corresponds to the particular needs of the sinful soul. Therefore, when we deny and withhold the great achievement of Christ's imputed perfect righteousness through faith alone, we rob people of one very precious remedy for their lack of assurance.

3) By Hindering Costly, Sacrificial Love

Finally, there is one other effect of diminishing the achievement of Christ in justification. When the glory of Christ is partially obscured and the assurance of the soul is weakened, the costly, sacrificial labor of love is hindered.

Let me make this point and sum up the others by quoting from the conclusion to the book, *The Future of Justification*.

My ultimate reason for writing this book [and giving this message] is to avert the double tragedy that will come where the obedience of Christ, imputed to us through faith alone, is denied or obscured. Inevitably, in the wake of that denial, our own works—the fruit of the Holy Spirit—begin to take on a function that contradicts the very reason these good works exist. They exist to display the beauty and worth of Christ whose sacrifice *and obedience* (counted as ours through faith alone) are the only and all-sufficient security of the fact that God is completely for us. That's the first tragedy: In our desire to elevate the importance of the beautiful works of love, we begin to nullify the very beauty of Christ and his work that they were designed to display.

The other tragedy that I pray we can avert is the undermining of the very thing that makes the works of love possible. What makes radical, risk-taking, sacrificial, Christ-exalting works of love possible is the fact that Christ's perfect obedience (counted as our righteousness) and Christ's perfect sacrifice (counted as our punishment) secured completely the glorious reality that God is for us as an omnipotent Father who works all things together for our everlasting joy in him. If we begin to deny or minimize the importance of the obedience of Christ, imputed to us through faith alone, our own works will begin to assume the role that should have been Christ's. As that happens, over time (perhaps generations), the works of love themselves will be severed from their root in the Christ-secured assurance that God is totally for us. In this way, for the sake of exalting the importance of love, we will undermine the very thing that makes it possible. (187-188)

Therefore, for the sake of the undiminished fullness of the glory of Christ and for the sake of the radical sacrificial love that the world needs from us, I plead for your allegiance to a robust, biblical, historic vision of Christ whose obedience is counted as ours through faith alone.

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