

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Scripture Memory</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>28</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Romans 8:1-37</b>		
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### THE ABSOLUTE FINALITY OF “NO CONDEMNATION” . . . MAYBE?

“If Christ provides only a part of our salvation, leaving us to provide the rest, then we are still hopeless under the load of sin. For no matter how small the gap which must be bridged before salvation can be attained, the awakened conscience sees clearly that our wretched attempt at goodness is insufficient even to bridge that gap. The guilty soul enters again into the hopeless reckoning with God, to determine whether we have really done our part.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote Gresham Machen. However, John Piper and the folks at Desiring God think otherwise. In a recent article entitled “How to Train Your Dragons,” we read this graffiti-type statement: “But what about being saved by faith alone? You are not. You are justified through faith alone. Final salvation comes through justification and sanctification – both initiated and sustained by God’s grace.”<sup>2</sup> Piper, in a sermon entitled “Does James Contradict Paul” (August 8, 1999): “God’s verdict of not guilty and his imputing of his own righteousness to us at the beginning of the Christian life by faith alone . . . that’s how we get started. James is answering the question ‘does the ongoing and final reckoning of Abraham’s righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of true and living faith?’ James’ answer to that question is ‘Yes.’ And Paul’s answer is also ‘Yes.’ Gen. 15:6. If you ask them, ‘Does justification as an ongoing and final right standing with God depend on the works of love?’ . . . So when Paul renounces ‘justification by works,’ he renounces the view that anything we do along with faith is credited to us as righteousness. Only faith obtains the verdict, ‘not guilty,’ when we become Christians. Works are not acceptable in the moment of initial justification. But when James affirms ‘justification by works,’ he means that works are absolutely necessary in the ongoing life of a Christian to confirm and prove the reality of the faith which justifies. . . . For James, ‘justification by works’ means ‘maintaining a right standing with God by faith along with the necessary evidence of faith, namely the works of love.’”

Scott Clark of Westminster Seminary, California, rightly points out that Piper’s formula reflects Rome’s understanding of justification. “Faith working through love is Scripture. Faith formed by love is Rome. The problem is, there is a great temptation to construe ‘working through’ as if it means ‘formed by.’ Further, ‘get in by grace and stay in by works’ (cooperation with grace) is certainly Roman. Talk of ‘maintaining justification’ is a repudiation of the Reformation. True faith does work through love because it unites the believer to Christ because the Spirit works sanctity in those whom he unites to Christ. That sanctity is a gracious consequence of salvation and good works are the necessary consequence of sanctification.”<sup>3</sup>

Calvin, in his analysis of the Council of Trent, wrote: “. . . while I admit that we are never received into the favour of God without being at the same time regenerated to holiness of life, contend that it is false to say that any part of righteousness (justification) consists *in quality*, or in the habit which resides in us, and that we are righteous (justified) only by gratuitous acceptance. For when the Apostle teaches that ‘by the obedience of one many were made righteous’ (Rom. 6:19), he sufficiently

shews, if I mistake not, that the righteousness wanting in ourselves is borrowed elsewhere. And in the first chapter to the Ephesians, where he says that we are adopted to the predestination of sons of God, that we might be accepted in the Beloved, he comprehends the whole of our righteousness. For however small the portion attributed to our work, to that extent faith will waver, and our whole salvation be endangered. Wherefore, let us learn with the Apostle to lay aside our own righteousness, which is of the law, as a noxious impediment, that we may lay hold of that which is of the faith of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:9). Of what nature this is we have abundantly shown; and Paul intimates in a single sentence in the third chapter to the Galatians that the righteousness of the law, because it consists of works, has no congruity with the righteousness of faith. But what can you do with men like these? For after they have enumerated many causes of Justification, forgetting that they were treating of the cause of justification, they infer that righteousness partly consists of works, because no man is reconciled to God by Christ without the Spirit of regeneration. How gross the delusion! It is just as if they were to say, that forgiveness of sins cannot be dissevered from repentance, and therefore repentance is a part of it. The only point in dispute is, how we are deemed righteous in the sight of God, and where our faith, by which alone we obtain righteousness, ought to seek it? Though they should repeat a thousand times that we cannot share in the merit of Christ's passion without being at the same time regenerated by his Spirit, they will not make it cease to be a fundamental principle; that God is propitious to us because he was appeased by the death of Christ; and that we are counted righteous in his sight, because by that sacrifice our transgressions were expiated."<sup>4</sup>

Piper's position leaves Christians in a perpetual state of doubt. The comments of G. K. Chesterton are as relevant today as ever, "What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition . . . [and] settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table."<sup>5</sup> More importantly, the Apostle asserted very forcefully that he was absolutely *sure* of theological certainties. "It is a faithful (very trustworthy, i.e., factual) saying, that Christ came to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15); "the saying is sure, deserving full acceptance (another way of affirming the absolute truthfulness of this statement), that we have put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all men, and especially those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:9, 10); "The saying is sure (another trustworthy affirmation), if we die with Him, we will also live with Him" (2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8); "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced (Paul's personal conviction that this truth was indisputable) that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Tim. 1:12). In Romans 8:1, Paul affirms another *Apostolic absolute*.

## I. FOUR GREAT WORDS & A KEY EXPRESSION

Romans 8:1 makes sense *only* to those who know themselves to be sinners "in the hands of an Angry God."

- A. **NO (*ouden*)** -- The word order in the Greek text is very significant. The word *ouden* is highly emphatic by its position at the beginning of the sentence. Literally it could be translated "none at all, of any kind."
- B. **NOW** – This is a time word. It harkens back to Romans 5:6, "For while we were still weak, *at the right time* Christ died for the ungodly."
- C. **THEREFORE** – This points back, as we sought to establish earlier in this series, to the nature and effects of justification that is grounded in Christ's work of making propitiation (Rom. 3:25).
- D. **CONDEMNATION** – It's not that we are not worthy of condemnation – we certainly are (Rom. 3:9-20). This statement is not simply descriptive of our *present* estate but our *future* estate as well.

- E. ***IN CHRIST JESUS*** – Charles Hodge has an excellent section in his masterful commentary, “Those who are in Christ are not exposed to condemnation. And this again is not to be understood as descriptive of their present state merely, but of their permanent position. They are placed beyond the reach of condemnation. They shall never be condemned. The meaning of a proposition is often best understood by the arguments by which it is sustained. It is so in this case. The whole chapter is a proof of the safety of believers, of their security not only from present condemnation, but from future perdition. Nothing shall ever separate them from the love of God, is the triumphant conclusion to which the apostle arrives. Those to whom there is and never can be any condemnation are described, first as to their relation to Christ, and secondly as to their character. The first assigns the reason of their security, the second enables us to determine to whom that security belongs. First, *they are in Christ*. In what sense? This must be determined not so much from the force of the words as from the teachings of Scripture. (1) They are in him federally, as all men were in Adam, 1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:12-21. (2) They are in him vitally, as the branch is in the vine, John 15:1-7; or, as the head and members of the body are in vital union, 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23. This union arises from the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, 1 Cor. 12:13; 6:15, 19. (3) They are in him by faith, Eph. 3:17; Gal. 3:26, 27. It is not in virtue of any one of these bonds of union exclusively, but in virtue of them all (so far as adults are concerned), that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. It follows from the nature of this union that it must transform the character of those who are its subjects. If, therefore, any man is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature, 2 Cor. 5:17; John 15:4; Phil. 3:20; Col. 2:6; 1 John 2:5; 3:6.”<sup>6</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** “Reconciliation through Christ’s cross,” declares G. C. Berkouwer, “broadcasts God’s righteousness. For this reason, we can speak of justification only forensically. And for this reason, Paul’s thought suggests the atmosphere of the *tribunal Dei*. It is not as though he wants to circumscribe the mystery of salvation in juridical categories. It is simply that in justification, pardon appears in the context of accusation and guilt. ‘Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth?’ (Romans 8:34, 35). ‘The employment of the forensic idea by Paul is consistent and incontrovertible.’ Justification is the unmerited righteousness of the ungodly, the righteousness which the publican received and which set him apart from the Pharisee who justified himself and remained unjustified (Luke 18:145). . . Forensic justification has to do with what is *extra nos*, with the imputation of what Christ has done on our behalf. This was, indeed, the original disposition of the Reformation. The Reformed confession offers the strongest possible resistance against every entanglement of our salvation with a concept of faith watered down with a mixture of merit. Naturally, the confession cannot force the believer to honor grace in his faith. The human heart is deceitful in matters of grace and justification, as it is in everything. But the declarative character of justification does perpetually recall the pure correlation between faith and grace. He who ignores this recollection will tend to rationalize the correlation, and so doing will fasten proportionate attention to faith ‘in itself’ as a subjective conditional function. The confession directs us away from such rationalizing, for it confesses grace apart from *any* work of the law, even a work clothed in the garment of faith. Thus, in the forensic idea of justification, the *sola fide-sola gratia* finds its purest incarnation. The doctrine of forensic justification embodies the gracious act of God in Christ Jesus, whom man can take to himself in faith alone.”<sup>7</sup>

Writing as if he had John Piper in mind, Calvin in his acerbic criticism of the Council of Trent on justification, declares: “Their words are, ‘Believers increase in righteousness by good works, through the observance of the commandments of God and the Church, and are thence more justified.’ They ought at least to use the exception of Augustine (De Civit. xix, c. 27). ‘The righteousness of believers, while they live in the world, consists more in the forgiveness of sins than the perfection of

virtues.’ He teaches that no dependence at all is to be placed on righteousness of works, which he names with contempt. For he declares that the only hope of all the godly who groan under the weakness of the flesh is that they have a mediator, Christ Jesus, who is the propitiation for their sins (Lib. ad Bonif, v. c. 5). On the contrary, the Fathers of Trent, or rather the hireling monks, who, as a kind of Latin pipers, compose for them whatever tune they please, doing their utmost to call their disciples away from the view of grace, blind them by a false confidence in works. We, indeed, willingly acknowledge, that believers ought to make daily increase in good works, and that the good works wherewith they are adorned by God are sometimes distinguished by the name of righteousness. But since the whole value of works is derived from no other fountain than that of gratuitous acceptance, how absurd were it to make the former overthrow the latter! Why do they not remember what they learned when boys at school, that what is subordinate is not contrary? I say that it is owing to free imputation that we are considered righteous before God; I say that from this also another benefit proceeds, viz., that our works have the name of righteousness, though they are far from having the reality of righteousness. In short, I affirm, that not by our own merit but by faith alone, are both our persons and works justified, and that the justification of works depends on the justification of the person, as the effect on the cause. Therefore, it is necessary that the righteousness of faith alone so precede in order, and be so preeminent in degree, that nothing can go before it or obscure it.”<sup>8</sup> I find myself asking over and over again, “How could John Piper, of all people, fall into this kind of confusion?” His excellent book *Counted Righteous In Christ*, deserves to be read by all who wish to understand the importance of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. So why did he go wrong? James tells us “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways” (James 3:1, 2). May God grant John Piper grace to recover.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (rpt. Eerdmans, 2009), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> [www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-train-your-dragons](http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-train-your-dragons) .

<sup>3</sup> R. Scott Clark, *Why We Remember the Reformation (Part 3)*, The Heidelbergblog, October 23, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Select Works of John Calvin: Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote III* (rpt. Baker, 1983), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Doubleday, 1957), p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> C. Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (rpt. 1972), p. 249.

<sup>7</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Faith and Justification* (Eerdmans 1954), pp. 91-93.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, op. cit., p. 128.