



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH"

Sunday Morning, April 1, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: II Corinthians 5:17-21

On first hearing, the Christian Gospel comes as a shocking surprise. It affirms something about God's attitude toward men that we would never deduce on our own. In fact, it is the very opposite of what we would expect. I know myself to be evil, and therefore I assume I am rejected by God. Yet in Christ comes the word that I am accepted. I know myself to be unrighteous, yet in Christ God declares me to be righteous. I know myself to be guilty before Him, yet in Christ I am treated as if I were innocent.

At first this is so incredible I can hardly believe, yet it is confirmed throughout the New Testament. When God appeared on earth as a Human Being, the outcast and the evildoers were the first objects of His concern. And Paul never tires of writing about "justification by faith." He pictured it in terms of a law court. A defendant appears before a judge, and expects to be found guilty on the basis of the evidence. But instead, the judge acquits the accused and he is freed of his guilt. So is man dealt with by the mercy of God, says Paul. "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). This is the essence of "the Good News," according to the New Testament. To our startled eyes is revealed an incredible sight - a holy God who justifies the ungodly.

Now this idea has been a central characteristic of Christianity down through the years, but it raises many problems for the serious thinker. Once the surprise has worn off and one tries to follow out the implications, grave questions begin to arise. I must confess years of baffled confusion on my own part. The difficulty appeared along two lines. First, I found myself asking: "How can God call me one thing when actually I am something else?" It all seemed so utterly arbitrary. If the unrighteous is declared righteous and the guilty treated as if they were innocent, what is the meaning of these ethical distinctions? Does not this turn moral reality into utter chaos? If God can simply call black white and by pronouncement make evil good, then these words no longer have any significance. If God's verdict has no relation to fact as we know it, then the whole realm of moral judgment is in shambles. Thus the whole concept of a constant Divine Being was in question. My second difficulty was this: the whole structure of morality seemed to be threatened. If God treats the wrongdoer just the same as if he were good, why bother about ethical discipline? If it all comes to the same end, then why should we concern ourselves about morality? Think of what would happen in the business world if the irresponsible debtor was regarded the same as the man who honorably guarded his credit. Soon the whole fabric of commerce would collapse. Or what would result in a home where a child flagrantly disobeyed his parents, yet was treated as if he were obedient? Pretty soon every semblance of control and order would be gone.

Therefore, this idea of "justification by faith" needs radical attention. Although it appears to be true to the Gospel, it poses a threat both from above and below. Our concept of God and our attitude toward life are bound up with the interpretation. How can this Gospel of shocking surprise be related to divine and moral reality?

I do not think this is an irrelevant question, for it seems to have been raised in every age. Paul himself had to contend with those who used this as an excuse "to sin more that grace may abound." He saw the dangers, and struggled manfully to overcome them. What can we say about the meaning of this crucial idea?

I found the key to a solution in a verse in II Corinthians. Having said earlier that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (5:19), Paul goes on to add: "He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (5:21). The word "become" gave me the flash of insight; it was like lightning illuminating a brand new sight. Justification by faith is not an arbitrary verdict of God; it is rather a process of becoming. When God takes an unrighteous person and declares him righteous, He is pointing to what that person can be. He is saying in essence: "You are now a sinner, having fallen short of the glory that was intended. But I will not leave the matter here. By My grace and through your faith, we can still make the goal. You can become what you are not." So, in actuality, God does not ignore reality. He simply unites the present and the future, and asserts now, what, by His grace, can someday be.

To me, this interpretation is an infinite improvement. We are not dealing here with some game God is playing with Himself or with some mysterious juggling of the celestial record; rather, this is God's realistic approach to the human predicament. In Jesus Christ, God made a new thrust into the problem of evil. As Moffatt translates the passage in II Corinthians 5: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, instead of imputing their trespasses to them." Christ Jesus set in motion the process of redemption, and this is what Paul means by the phrase "justification by faith."

Perhaps you can grasp the reality more firmly if I break it down into two component parts. First of all, justification by faith means this: it is God's faith in what His grace can make of us. It holds forth to broken man a hopeful possibility. It says emphatically to every person: "You can be different; you need not always be as you now are."

This faith in God's creative grace was the distinctive outlook of Christ. In this He was radically different from the other religious leaders of His day. They had abandoned hope that anyone could change, but not the Christ! To the very ones that seemed to have no promise - to that segment of society that had long been "written off" - to them He went first of all. He saw what men were in all realism, but He also saw what they could be. Jesus had what Peter Marshall called "spiritual bifocals," and He saw in men potentialities that no one else had seen. His whole ministry was characterized by this "double vision." Who would have dreamed that Simon the fisherman could have become Peter the Rock? Who would have seen in that Samaritan woman anything but fallen shame? Who else would have dared have faith in Matthew, that scoundrel of a tax collector? Who else would have recognized anything in Zaccheus except an undersized extortioner? Yet this was Jesus, acting out God's hope for re-creation, and demonstrating what men could become by Divine grace.

It is an old and familiar strain, yet so basic to the Christian Gospel: God has not yet given up! For all our talk about "the leopard and his spots"; in spite of our dictum: "You can't change human nature"; in the face of our tired resignation to evil's supremacy - still there stands the Christ - God's grand Manifestation of hopes.

Do you realize how desperately this word is needed in our day? The lost chord in our modern symphony is the chord of hope. Look in all directions and it is nowhere to be found. In all the mediums of self-interpretation - drama, literature, philosophy - the consensus about life is one of utter hopelessness. A good illustration of the modern mood is found in Tennessee Williams' latest play, The Night of the Iguana. An iguana is an oversized lizard, found in Mexico and a delicacy to eat. In the play, such an animal has been captured and is tied to a post until it will be killed the next day. This becomes one of the main symbols of the drama - and a symbol of man's plight in this world. Here we are, dangling helplessly on the end of existence, waiting through the night with nothing better to look forward to than our own destruction. This is modern man as he sees himself, and against this background the relevance of hope is obvious. To believe that man can be redeemed by God's grace is the hope most needed in 1962.

This is the first meaning of the doctrine "justification by faith." It is God's faith in what His grace can make of man. In a world of despair, it is a hopeful possibility.

The second part of the precept can be described this way: it is man's faith in God's hope. To be justified by faith does not mean that we earn merit by giving mental assent to an idea. It is rather a willingness to trust the promise of God, and to open one's self in responsive cooperation. Over against God's willingness to recreate us must be our willingness to let Him.

Now any doctor can tell you about the decisive significance of a patient's faith. It holds the key to the entire healing process. The doctor can say to the patient: "I think I have diagnosed your trouble and can enable you to recover." He can hold out this hope, but all depends on the response of the patient. If that one believes what the doctor says and is willing to cooperate in the treatment, then healing is possible. But without that openness, very little can be done. So it is with the process of redemption. My faith is the act of opening the door to God's grace; it allows that hopeful power to become operative and thus begin achieving the ultimate goal.

Therefore, both factors must be present in this process for it to become actual. It is literally "by grace through faith," as Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:8; or as he says in Romans 1:17, the righteousness of God is revealed "from faith to faith." Beginning with God's faith in the power of grace, and continuing to man's faith in God's promise, the process moves toward fulfillment.

This, then, is my solution to a baffling problem. What looked like a statement of moral chaos is really a statement of moral redemption. To repeat my conclusion: justification by faith is not God's arbitrary verdict; it is a process of becoming. He can declare the unrighteous to be righteous, because this is what His grace intends to achieve. Reality is not ignored; it is simply viewed from the perspective of hope.

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Here, then, is a pertinent message for everyone. God comes to us as we are, and pronounces a surprising verdict: although rejected by our sin, still we are accepted; although unrighteous, still we are declared to be righteous; although guilty, still we are pronounced innocent. How can this be? Is God mocking us in our plight? No! In Christ this is entirely possible. Through Him, God intends to make this pronouncement into fact. Just as a key is the means of setting a prisoner free from a cell, so Christ is God's "means of becoming." God's faith in His grace, our faith in God's hope - this is "justification by faith."

And this is the essence of the Gospel!