

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 71

Halifax, 1 March, 2009

Q. 71 How is justification an act of God's free grace?

A. Although Christ, by His obedience and death, did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in the behalf of them that are justified; yet in as much as God accepteth the satisfaction from a surety, which He might have demanded of them, and did provide this surety, his own only Son, imputing His righteousness to them, and requiring nothing of them for their justification but faith, which also is His gift, their justification is to them of free grace.

Introduction:

Last week we talked about justification...

- We saw that when God justifies us, He declares that we are righteous in His sight.
 - He declares that we are not guilty of breaking His law—
 - that we are not even guilty of coming short of His glory.
 - He declares that in His sight, we are as one who has fully lived up to all that a human being should be before his Creator!
 - that we are as those who, being made in His image, have been a perfect reflection (an exact moral image) of Him in everything from our deepest thoughts and motives to our actions...leaving nothing undone that ought to be done and doing nothing that ought not to be done.
 - God says that about us even though we are sinners!
 - He declares us to be righteous even though we are not righteous.
- And we saw that He does this without lying.
 - He does this by imputing our sins to Jesus Christ and by imputing Christ's righteousness to us.
 - Imputation is an accounting term—
 - For example, if you make a payment, the sum is imputed to your account.
 - If you borrow money, then the debt is put on, or imputed to your account.
 - The Bible often looks at sin as a debt—
 - We have obligations to God as those who are made in His image...
 - And inasmuch as we have failed to measure up to those obligations, we have incurred a debt that must be paid.

- It absolutely must be paid because our coming short of God's glory and not giving Him the honour that is due to Him leaves a standing lie about God.
 - The lie has to be put right when God is revealed.
- It requires eternal condemnation.
 - Of course we human beings don't think it to be such a big deal because we are so familiar with people coming short of God's glory...
 - and He hasn't exposed us yet—He has appointed a day to do that at the end—but He hasn't done it yet...
 - so of course we trivialise the debt and consider it to be but a trifle...
 - We are like a bunch of cannibals who have been cannibals for generations—and they don't think it's a big deal the way outsiders do because they are used to it.
 - Or we are like a bunch a racists who live in a society where racism has become completely acceptable—those who look at us from outside are appalled, but if we are living among it, it doesn't seem so bad.
 - And you see, if there is anything that we have been living in the midst of as human beings,
 - it is coming short of the glory of God—sinning against God.
 - We don't even have another group of people to judge us about this because it is a universal problem.
 - The sins that everybody—even the best people commit against God daily don't seem like much to be concerned about.
 - But they are!
 - We are diminishing the glory of God we were made to promote and the penalty for that is eternal suffering!
 - We cannot be the judge because we are the perpetrators and we are all in it together and just don't see how wrong it is.
- This is why we must have God's Word come and speak to us.
 - This is why Christianity is so offensive to people...
 - Because it has to do with God's judgement which tells us we all have come short of God's glory and owe a debt of eternal punishment!
 - Because all other religions are man-made, they all minimise the problem.

- In every other religion, if the debt is recognised at all, it is something that human beings can pay or that God can overlook.
- But in the religion that God reveals, the debt is taken seriously and it must be paid in full.
 - And in the true religion that God reveals, we cannot pay this debt unless we spend eternity in the lake of fire.
 - God's glory is that important—and every one will realise this when He is revealed in His glory at the last day...
 - But of course the good news is that Jesus Christ came to pay the debt for us...
 - And we saw last week that our sin—the entire debt—is taken from our account and put on His...
 - And He was publicly crucified and cursed by the Father—being Himself the very Son of God—to pay our debt...
 - And then His righteousness is imputed to us—taken from His account and transferred to ours.
 - God declares us righteous because He accepts the payment of Jesus.
 - It is just the way it would be if you were in trouble because you owed a million dollars to someone,
 - and another person came along and paid the million dollars for you.
 - Now you would no longer owe anything.
 - You would be justified in the sight of the creditor.
 - Through Jesus Christ crucified, God is able to be just and yet justify sinners.
 - Jesus has paid it all.
 - Those who look to Him and His work on the cross are fully justified in God's sight.
 - They have a payment for their sin debt that God accepts.

Once you have come to Christ, this is a most wonderful doctrine!

- But before a person is saved, it is one of the most offensive and bitterly opposed doctrines of all.
 - Why is this?
 - Because it leaves us with *nothing* to contribute to God who is viewed as the perfect judge.
 - And we like to think better of ourselves.

- I have noticed that outspoken atheists like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens deny God because of bitterness about His judgement against sin.
- The thing that they really hate most of all is that God has such severe things to say about human sin,
 - and that His displeasure is felt every day in the curse that we live under—all the problems we have in this world.
 - They say that if God is good, these problems would not be.
 - But the truth is, we have these problems because God **is** good and **we** are bad.
 - That is the thing they refuse to admit.
 - They want to blame God.
 - They are too proud to admit their guilt before a just God.
- You see how the apostle Paul, after explaining justification in Romans 3, concludes by saying that we have **nothing** to boast about.
 - Actually, he even goes a step farther and says that when we once understand justification, boasting is **excluded!**
 - There is no place for it at all because our justification has nothing to do with righteousness that we have done...
 - It is all about what Christ has done for us!
 - We are not declared righteous because we are better than other people, but because Christ has paid the huge debt we owe.
 - Sadly, we find ways to boast,
 - But all of our boasting is completely illegitimate...
 - there are no grounds for boasting except in the cross—
 - in what Jesus did, coming, as He did, to pay such a huge debt that He was not at all responsible for...
 - a debt, in fact, that was just as offensive to Him as it was to the Father!
 - He did not come to pay it because we deserve it in any way at all, but out of sheer mercy and grace.
- But those who have still not found peace with God through justification are offended by the very idea that we need to be justified,
 - and they constantly look for ways to attack and discredit the doctrine.
- And today's question addresses one of those ways.
 - They say,

- “Well if God requires the death of a substitute, then He is not really a forgiving God at all—
 - He is not **giving** anything because He is requiring full payment to be made.
 - How then, can you call it free grace?”
 - “He is getting His due, isn’t He?”
- How can we answer this question?
 - Well, let’s look at Romans 3 again:

READ Romans 3:19-31

- Now you will notice that in verse 24, it says expressly that we are justified “freely by His grace.”
 - That means that justification is something God does that He is in no way obligated to do.
 - Even though He requires full payment to be made, it is still an act of sheer grace—of God giving when He might justly have done the opposite...
- There are three ways that this is so...outlined for us in the answer to Q. 71.

I. First, justification is still grace (even though payment has been made in full) because God is willing to *accept* a surety.

A. A surety is someone who stands in your place to pay a debt...

1. We would often refer to such a person as a co-signer on a loan.
 - If you are buying a car and you can’t convince the creditors that you will be able to pay,
 - you can get someone else to back you up—to co-sign the loan so that if you do not pay, they will pay.
 - This is something that Proverbs warns you never to do if you want to remain friends, unless you are prepared to give the person the money they are asking you to co-sign for.
 - I know a fellow who signed onto a \$40,000 debt for a friend, and now he is strapped with a \$40,000 debt.
 - He expected the guy he was a surety for to be responsible, but he wasn’t.
2. The passage we read in Romans 3 shows us (as do many other scriptures) that Jesus Christ paid our debt.

- His suffering on the cross was a vicarious suffering for our sins—it was the suffering as a surety for those who could not pay to redeem themselves.
 - You can see that in verse 24 where it says that we are justified freely by His grace *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*,
- When one person *redeems* another person, he pays what is required to set that person free, often from slavery.
 - In the case of Jesus, the redemption is, as verse 25 goes on to say, *a propitiation through His blood*.
 - A propitiation is that which turns away the wrath of an angry judge—a judge who has been offended by one who had transgressed the law.
 - He imposes a penalty, and when the penalty is paid, the judge is propitiated—justice has been satisfied.
 - Jesus turns away the wrath of God from our sins by making Himself an offering for our sins...
 - He is our surety who pays the penalty for those who could not pay it for themselves (apart from eternal suffering).
 - He is able to pay it on the cross because He is the Son of God who suffers for us...
 - He dies in our place...

TRANS> Now someone will say,

- Well then, I can see the grace of Jesus in this, but what about the grace of the Father?

B. Well, the grace of the Father is seen in that He accepts the payment of a surety for us.

1. For this to make sense, you must consider the nature of our sin debt.

- a. While we use finances to illustrate our sin debt because it is helpful for illustration,
 - our sin debt is a different kind of debt because it is a personal offence—an attack on the very person of God Himself—an attack on His honour.
- b. In a simple financial debt, there may not be a personal offence...
 - The person you owe simply wants to have his money...
 - What I mean is, his only grievance with you is that you have not paid him the money you owe him,
 - and of course, if someone else comes along and is willing to pay the debt,
 - it is all the same to your creditor as long as he gets his money.
 - He is perfectly happy to accept your friend's payment for you.

- He doesn't really care if it comes from you or from your friend who acts as a surety.
- c. But you see, our sin debt is more like malicious slander and treason...
- God our Creator is our rightful King.
 - He is holy and perfect, a God of love and grace, a God without blemish...
 - And we ought to be absolutely delighted to serve such a great one!
 - And He has even tied us closely to Him that we, at our creaturely level, should be His image—to constantly represent Him.
 - But we have broken away from Him.
 - It is a great wickedness, highly offensive to Him.
 - This is not the kind of offence that can ordinarily be made up by a surety.
 - It is the kind of offence that ordinarily requires you, the one who committed the offence, to be punished.
 - It would be like punishing in place of a person who committed adultery...it is not quite the same as paying a monetary debt.
2. But the grace of God is seen in that He is willing to accept Christ as our surety, even for this kind of offence.
- He is willing to completely receive us who have personally offended His majesty and person with an offence the nature of which cannot be made up to Him.
 - He has every reason to refuse to accept a surety in this case because restitution cannot really be made.
 - It is an act of extreme grace that He does not continue to hold such sin as we have committed against us, but completely and fully pardons us.
3. Now someone might ask,
- If this is so, then why did He require Christ to suffer?
 - If it is an offence for which restitution cannot be made, and if God has to graciously pardon it, why does He yet require His Son to suffer?
- a. And the answer is given to us in verse 25 & 26 where it speaks of *demonstrating His righteousness*.
- Being God Almighty, He cannot allow a breach of justice to go without punishment, for this would be contrary to His nature.

- By sending Christ to suffer in our place, His honour and glory are upheld in that punishment is brought against so great a sin as our rebellion...
- Now I know that we do not understand honour very well in our society, especially the honour and glory that belong to deity...
 - but it is not for us to judge God on the basis of what we don't understand very well, but to bow before His revelation with humility and meekness.
 - We are like the cannibals or the racists I spoke about before when it comes to understanding the honour that belongs to deity...
 - People from some other cultures understand this a lot better than we do.
 - But the one thing that is certain,
 - When Jesus prayed that God would spare Him if it were possible, the Father did not spare Him because it was not possible.
 - Divine justice could not be satisfied apart from His suffering in our place.

b. Perhaps this point could be summarised in this way...

- God's grace is seen in that He does not hold a grudge against us when we have personally offended Him, but fully accepts Christ as our surety...
- And His righteousness is seen in that He will not accept us or account us as righteous (as far as naked justice) without a surety.
- There is personal forgiveness from Him of a grave offence, and exact justice meted out through the offering of Christ.

TRANS> So this is the first way that our justification is of free grace, even though payment had to be made in full...

- That the Lord accepts the satisfaction of our debt from a surety.
- Now let's look at the second way that grace is seen...

II. Second, our justification is still grace (even though payment has been made in full) because God Himself *provides* the surety.

A. In Romans 3:25, it says that God set Christ forth as a propitiation.

1. The idea of *setting him forth* is suggestive that God presented Him to the world as a propitiation—
 - That it was the Father's act to *set Christ forth* for the purpose of turning away His wrath from His people's sin.

2. This idea that the Father did send Christ is presented much more directly in other places...
 - For example, in the gospels,
 - Jesus again and again speaks of being sent by the Father to redeem us or to save us or to do God's will.
 - In John 3:16, we are told that God so loved the world that He *gave* His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
 - The Father is recognised as the one who gave Him...it is presented as the Father's sacrifice of His Son.
 - In Philippians, we are told that the Son of God left the glories of heaven to come and suffer in obedience to the Father's command...
 - and in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Him submitting Himself to the Father's command to go to the cross and bear the curse.
3. Sometimes, the gospel can be twisted in a way that seemingly honours Jesus but dishonours the Father...
 - There are those who wrongly think of the Father as being harsh and of Jesus being soft and tender...
 - and of Jesus being the one to take the initiative to come and offer Himself for us and then having the Father reluctantly agree to accept His offering.
 - But the Scripture presents something quite different than this!
 - While it certainly does highlight the love and grace and condescension of Christ in willingly giving Himself for our sins,
 - It emphasises even more the love of the Father in providing Him as a surety for us...
 - in sending the Son He loves (giving Him up) to take away our sins.

B. We see the free grace of the Father in this in two ways...

1. First, that He should even *want* to forgive sinners like us—even while we were yet sinners, not even looking to be reconciled to Him!
 - If someone were to wrong you—
 - to murder your family, to ruin your reputation by slandering you, to steal everything that is yours...
 - and this was in response to kindness shown to them on your part,
 - and if they were still raging against you and ready to do more if they could,

- your first thought would not be to consider how you might secure their pardon.
- But the Father's grace is seen in that He did indeed seek out measures to redeem us even though our sin was entirely inexcusable and was committed against Him...
 - He became creative in a way that only the richest fullest love can be creative...
 - designing for His elect people a way of salvation that would fully secure their pardon and satisfy His divine justice at the same time!
- 2. And secondly, His grace is seen all the more in that He not only finds out a way, but provides a way at such great cost to Himself!
 - a. When we say that our salvation is free, we mean that it is free for us!
 - It is not at all free for the Lord!
 - b. Giving His Son to bear the curse was, as you parents know, a greater sacrifice than if He had come Himself to bear the curse for us...
 - God the Father loves God the Son with a divine love that is deeper than we can comprehend!
 - There is a tenderness and a regard and mutual delight and pleasure in each other...
 - And to take His Son, His only Son, and provide Him for us is an act of such great grace to us that we can never appreciate it enough.
 - For the Father to see His Son's tears in the Garden and to send Him on to the cross!
 - For Him to turn away from Him as a cursed object, as a sin bearer, is that which exceeds our ability to understand!
 - It is extreme grace!
 - Grace beyond all comprehension!
 - Why would He even do such a thing?
 - Because He so loved the world!
 - Because He is a God of infinite grace.

TRANS> Oh let us humble ourselves and give thanks to His name!

- So far we have seen that even though there is complete satisfaction from Christ our surety, God's grace is seen
 - first in that He should accept a surety

- and second in that He should provide that surety as so great expense to Himself...
- and now third...

III. Third, justification is still grace (even though payment has been made in full) because God requires nothing more than faith from us which faith He gives to us.

- A. He might have required us to do some great sacrifice or some great act of penance,
1. But you see that Romans 3 emphasises that it is by faith that we are saved, not by works of righteousness that we have done...
 - Faith is reliance on another...in this case, reliance upon Christ.
 - You contribute nothing, but rely entirely on what He has done for your justification.
 - This is all that God requires of you...
 - He does not require anything else from us.
 2. If He did, it would cheapen what Christ had done...
 - For whatever great work He might require of us as a condition of our pardon would be so inferior in value to the sacrifice of our Saviour that it would mock Him for it to be added to what He has done...
 - He has paid the price of eternal suffering in Hell for us!
 - What could God possibly ask of us that would be worthy of us to put up beside that?
 - It would be like pouring a thimble into an ocean and claiming that you had helped to fill up the sea.
 - And you can be sure that we would count the thimble to be so important that we would diminish from the ocean that Christ provided.
 - The LORD will not have that!
 - He excludes all boasting by making it all depend on Christ—whose work for us is received by faith.
 3. We have a hard enough time with boasting even in that faith is required...
 - For there are those who want to boast in the fact that they have believed as if there is merit in that that contributes something to their salvation!
 - And as repentance is required for reconciliation—we cannot be reconciled to God unless we turn to Him—we want to count that as something that justifies as well!
 - But it is not—
 - Faith does not justify us—it simply lays hold of Christ who justifies us by His righteousness...

- And repentance does not justify us—it simply turns us away from our sin to God in order that we may be justified by Christ and His work.
 - The Lord graciously requires nothing by faith...
 - and faith is not accepted because of its own value...
 - It is accepted because its object is accepted—even Christ on whom we believe.
- B. And besides all this, even our faith itself is something God works into us by grace... it is a gift of grace...
1. As we saw when we studied about effectual calling, if we had been left to ourselves, we would never have trusted in Christ...
 - We are too blind and hardened to see our sin and our need of Him...
 - too stubborn and proud to ever turn to Him...
 - It is only after He has worked in us to change our stubborn heart that will turn to Christ.
 2. That is why, in Ephesians 2, we are told that even faith is His gift...
 - Eph 2:8-9: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.**
 3. This is an amazing example of extent to which our salvation is of grace...
 - To think that the LORD would even want to bother with those that hate Him so much, we would even refuse the free offer of salvation if left as we are!
 - To think that He should come to us to work in us so that we will be willing to receive His salvation!
 - Truly there is not room for boasting...
 - All the glory goes to our gracious God.

Conclusion—

- Justification is entirely of God’s free grace...
 - That God accepts a surety...
 - That God provides a surety...
 - And that God requires nothing else but faith which is His gift.
- All this goes to show that it is an act of free grace.