

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 72

Halifax, 8 March 2009

Q. 72 What is justifying faith?

- A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel; but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.**

Introduction:

Today we come to the third question the Catechism presents to us about justification.

- We have seen that justification is the declaration or official pronouncement of a judge that a person is righteous—having done all that is required.
- We have seen that God makes this declaration about His elect people even though they have all sinned and come short of His glory.
- We have seen that there is no injustice in this declaration because it is not made on the basis of what they are in themselves,
 - but on the basis of what they are in Jesus Christ who did everything that was required of them as their representative.
 - They could not pay their debt of sin or, in their fallen condition, do or be what God requires,
 - so He came to do all this for them—in their place!
 - He went to the cross to atone for their sins and met God’s requirement to love Him with all His heart, soul, mind and strength and to love His neighbour as Himself.
 - Jesus came to do this for His people in order that they might be justified in God’s sight.
 - The Father sent His Son for this purpose and graciously accepts His work in their behalf.

We have seen that God’s elect are justified by faith in Jesus and the work He did for their justification...

- When we rely on this work of Lord, His work is credited to us for righteousness.
 - Faith is the way that we are joined to Christ and all His saving benefits.

- The question we come to today (Question 72) as well as the one we will take up next week (Question 73) are both about this faith that justifies.
- It is very important for us to understand what this faith is because it has many counterfeits and substitutes.
 - **There is presumptuous faith** which is simply confidence that everything will be okay—that God will accept us at last for whatever reason...
 - just because it seems right to us...
 - or because we have tried to do good...
 - or because we suppose that God is all-accepting...
 - This is not justifying faith because it does not rest in Jesus Christ.
 - It cannot justify because it does not trust in the only one who can justify...
 - **There is also historical faith...**
 - Historical faith is the belief that Jesus came and died and rose again—that all this really happened...
 - This is certainly a very necessary part of true faith, but historical faith cannot save because it never actually trusts in Jesus Christ—
 - it only believes the facts about Him.
 - **And there is temporary faith...**
 - Temporary faith does not save because it has the appearance of reliance upon Jesus Christ,
 - put proves its true character when testing comes and it turns away from Him to avoid suffering or to pursue something else instead...
 - Such faith proves that it never really laid hold of Christ, for if it had, it would have continued in Him.
 - Not that true believers may not fall for a time, but temporary faith is a faith that is not genuine because it has no true root.

We need to know what true faith is so that we will not be deceived by these substitutes.

- There is a constant battle going on in the world concerning faith as we can see from church history...
 - Heresy after heresy has come along to attack the faith of God's people.
 - In every case heresies attempt to diminish our confidence in Christ...
 - Either by somehow diminishing him—denying His deity or his sinless life or the merits of His cross...

- Or somehow getting us to put confidence in what we have done—in our good works or our orthodoxy or our rituals—something...
- Or to call into question our need of Christ—by denying God’s wrath against sin or the depth and demerit of our sin—so that we will not feel we much need Christ...
- Over and over such heresies gain a foothold and lead false sons away from the church...
 - In every case they are an attack on the faith that justifies sinners.
- So today, I want to turn to Philippians where Paul is seeking to fortify the believers at Philippi against the attack that had come against their faith.
 - This attack had come from the Judaizers (as they are often called).
 - They were Jews who had professed faith in Christ,
 - but then insisted that anyone who wanted to be justified must also be circumcised and keep the rituals of the Old Covenant that Moses appointed.
 - By requiring this for justification, they were taking away from the sufficiency of what Christ did for us on the cross...
 - They were teaching people to trust in Christ plus rituals.
- Please look with me at Philippians 3:1-11.
 - READ> Phil 3:1-11.
- As we begin looking at this passage, I want to draw your attention to verse 9.
 - It is here that Paul sets forth the contrast between two different ways of attaining righteousness...
 - the wrong way and the right way.
 - The wrong way, he refers to as:
 - “my own righteousness which is from the law.”
 - This refers to attempted righteousness and acceptance with God by human effort.
 - And the right way he refers to as:
 - “the righteousness from God through faith in Jesus Christ.”
 - This refers to the righteousness that God has provided for His elect through the work of Jesus Christ.
 - If you want to be justified in God’s sight, it is essential that you trust in this righteousness that God provides.

- Justifying faith receives and rests in Christ alone and what He has done, not in anything that I have done.
 - That has always been the difference in those who are justified and those who are not.
 - Those who are justified look to Christ to save them and put no confidence in what they have done.
 - Let's take a look at how Paul develops this contrast in Philippians 3.

I. First see in Philippians 3:1-3 how Paul sets up the radical contrast between those who trust in Christ and those who trust in the flesh!

A. He begins with an admonition to rejoice in the Lord.

1. He has already told them to do this several times in this epistle and he is going to do it several more times...
 - He says that he is repeating this because it is safe for them.
2. You see, there were false teachers about, and they were doing what false teachers always do...
 - They were trying to draw the Philippians away from the perfect sufficiency of Jesus Christ.
 - They were telling them that something else was needed...
 - Their particular message was that besides Christ you also needed circumcision and the observance of the law of Moses—all the rituals of Old Testament worship.
 - We have our false teachers today who do the same kind of thing...
3. Paul knew that the best antidote against these false teachers was for the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord—that is, the Lord Jesus!
 - If you are rejoicing in what you have in Christ—if you are mindful of His rich grace and the incomparable treasures you have in Him,
 - false teaching will not appeal to you.
 - If you love your vacuum cleaner and a slick salesman comes along, you will not be enticed because you love what you already have.
 - It is when you are grumbling and complaining and feeling cheated—when you have taken your eyes off of what the Lord has given to you—
 - that you are in the greatest danger of looking for the “something else” that the false teachers offer.
 - It is when you feel that you don't have quite enough—that there is something missing—that you are most vulnerable.

B. Paul has some very insulting things to say about those who try to seduce you away from simple faith in Christ...those who require something besides Christ...

1. He calls them **dogs**.

- Dogs in those days were generally viewed with disdain...
 - They were seen as scavengers, preying on the weak and helpless.
 - The Greeks had little use of them and the Jews regarded them as unclean.
- The Jews often called Gentiles dogs as a term of contempt...
 - They did this because dogs are unclean and so were uncircumcised Gentiles.
 - Yet, here Paul calls these Judaizers “dogs”...
 - They thought circumcision itself made them clean, but Paul insists that the insistence on it makes them unclean...
 - because it removes them from simple faith in Christ that justifies.
 - Calling those persons “dogs” who took pride in Jewish ceremonies was about the most insulting thing he could ever say to them...
 - And he meant to be insulting because they were corrupting the gospel.

2. Further, he calls them **evil workers**.

- The words here refer to a person who expends a lot of effort doing evil—he works at it...he is zealous for it!
 - It is bad enough to be a person who does evil because it seems to be the easy way...
 - but here you have those who labouring to the point of exhaustion to promote evil...
- They are working hard to seduce the virgin bride of Jesus Christ...
 - to corrupt the simple faith that justifies even as their own faith has been corrupted...
 - to make the saints unclean even as they themselves were unclean.

3. And then you see that he calls them the **mutilation**.

- It is interesting to look at the play of words here in the Greek...
 - You are probably familiar with the Greek word *tomy*—
 - It means *to cut*.
 - If you put *ek* in front of it, it means *to cut out*...
 - So if you have a tonsillectomy, you get your tonsils cut out.
 - If you have an appendectomy, you have your appendix cut out.

- The Greek word of circumcision is *peri-tomy* which means to cut around.
 - But Paul calls these Judaizers who were insisting that everyone who comes to Christ must be circumcised the *kata-tomy*.
 - This is the word that is used in Lev 21:5 to refer to the lacerations that pagan priests made—cuttings in their flesh.
 - Paul is comparing their inappropriate zeal for circumcision with the lacerations of pagan priests!
 - Talk about being insulting!
 - Paul wanted them to be known for what they were!
 - We must not be too effeminate about such things!
 - They were not pushing for *peritomy* that was authorised by God for Old Covenant believers, but for *katatomy*—mutilation of New Covenant believers.
 - They are not the circumcision, they are the mutilation!
- C. Paul declares that it is not these Judaizers, but the Philippian believers are the true circumcision!
- In verse 3 he says this about himself and the Philippians:
 - **Phil 3:3: “For we are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.”**
 - That is a description of what it means to have justifying faith...
 - That is what it means to be circumcised.
1. Circumcision was never meant to be a symbol of self-righteousness!
- It was a symbol of man’s need to have his sin cut away by God...
 - When God commanded Abraham to be circumcised, it was in connection with the promise He had made to Abraham to save him.
 - It was an outward sign of the circumcision of the heart...
 - In Jeremiah 9:26, we read how God lumped unbelieving (though bodily circumcised) Israelites with the uncircumcised nations:
 - **Jer 9:26: “For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart.”**
 - In Romans 2:28-29, Paul makes it clear that the circumcision that really matters is not the circumcision of the flesh, but that of the heart.
 - Circumcision was only an outward sign of what is an inward reality for all who believe—the renewed heart that God gives to His true people.

- Thus in Romans 2:28-29 Paul says:
 - **“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which it outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not from men but from God.”**
 - True association with God and all His promises is not by the outward rite, but by inward faith.
 - **Phil 3:3: “We are the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh.”**
 - That is what happens when God performs divine surgery on our hearts.
2. Let’s look at these results of this surgery a little more closely.
- a. First of all, those circumcised of the Lord **“worship God in the Spirit.”**
 - 1) God’s Spirit is the one who circumcises our heart.
 - True circumcision, like true baptism, is the cutting away of sin so that we become willing to turn from sin to Jesus Christ for salvation.
 - This is the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - Apart from the Spirit, we do not even want to be saved.
 - 2) Very likely, Paul is also contrasting New Testament worship, which is spiritual, with Old Testament worship which is carnal...
 - meaning that the focus of OT worship was on fleshly ordinances, but the NT is on the preaching of the Gospel.
 - b. Second, those circumcised of the Lord **“rejoice in Christ Jesus”**...
 - This is actually a different word than the word rejoice used in verse 1...
 - Here, rejoice is from a Greek word that means to rejoice in the sense of *boasting*...
 - This is contrasted with the next characteristic...
 - c. Third, that we who are circumcised **“put no confidence in the flesh.”**
 - When you put this together you get the essence of saving faith...
 - When you have saving faith instead of putting confidence in what you have done (in the flesh), you put confidence in Jesus Christ.
 - Instead of boasting in what you have done you boast in the cross.
 - That is what you look to for salvation.

TRANS> Now this is so important that Paul presents to us an extended illustration from his own life of what it means to boast in Christ and to put no confidence in the flesh.

II. See in Philippians 3:4-9 how Paul illustrates the contrast between our own righteousness and the righteousness of faith from his own life.

A. He begins by explaining that he has more reason (more grounds) to put confidence in the flesh than anyone else!

- You see how he says it in verse 4:
 - **Phil 3:4: “though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:”**
 - And in this list, we get an example of the kinds of things that people put their trust in when they put confidence in the flesh—
 - things they trust in instead of Jesus Christ...
- 1. First, that he was circumcised on the eighth day—just like you were supposed to be.
 - Of course this is a good thing, but it is not anything to put confidence in—circumcision is there to show you your need of the cleansing that only God can give...
 - The same is true of baptism—many trust in their baptism when baptism is supposed to teach them to trust in Christ who baptises with the Spirit.
 - It is not something to trust in, but something that directs you to trust in Jesus Christ.
- 2. Second, he says that he might boast because he was of the stock of Israel...
 - Have you met people who trust in the fact that they were born in a Christian country?
 - It is a wonderful thing to be born in a land where the gospel is all around...
 - But this is a privilege—it is not the basis of your righteousness—only Christ is.
- 3. Third, he mentions that he was of the tribe of Benjamin...
 - This was special because in Deuteronomy the Lord expressed that Benjamin was beloved of Him and that he would dwell between His shoulders...
 - Probably this is a reference to the fact that the temple was erected in the territory of Benjamin.
 - This was a special benefit that preserved the Benjamites from apostasy when the ten tribes broke away from Judah.
 - But being born of one beloved of the Lord does not make you righteous...
 - Ishmael was born to Abraham but he was rejected...

- Esau was born to Isaac by the same mother as Jacob, but he was rejected and Jacob was accepted.
 - Birth to a godly parent makes you privileged, but it does not make you righteous—only Christ does.
 - Have you met those who trust in the fact that they grew up in Christian home or that they have an uncle who is a minister?
4. Fourth, Paul says that he is a Hebrew of the Hebrews.
- Many of the Jews in Paul's day had absorbed much of the Hellenistic culture.
 - This had corrupted them as they had taken on Greek ways instead of Jewish ways.
 - But Paul had not been so influenced—he had preserved his Jewishness...
 - But this did not make him righteous in God's sight...
 - not any more than those today who boast that they act like a Christian—doing community service and such things...
 - or keeping certain rules and regulations or going to church...
 - These are good things, but not things to put confidence in for justification...
5. Fifth, Paul points out that he was a Pharisee...
- The Pharisees were perhaps the most respected of all the Jewish sects...
 - They were respected and admired for the piety and dedication.
 - They were very careful to observe God's law...
 - They were men who cared for others as pastors...
 - Claiming to be a Pharisee would, I suppose be something like claiming that you are an elder in the ARP or the URC—or some other denomination known for its orthodoxy.
 - This is all well and good, but it doesn't make you righteous in God's sight.
6. Sixth, Paul points to his zeal...as one who persecuted the church...
- Unlike Gamaliel, Paul's illustrious teacher, Paul was not willing to wait and see if the church just died off...
 - No—before his conversion when he believed the doctrine of the church to be harmful and destructive, he went to work to suppress it.
 - Many boast in the zeal they have for the Lord—fighting against heretics and standing up for the truth...

- That is all well and good, but it does not make you righteous—only Christ can do that.

7. Seventh, Paul says that he was blameless concerning the law...

- This does not mean he never sinned...
 - The Bible refers to a person as blameless when they have respect to all of God's commandments—
 - When they worship Him in the way He commands and do not live a life that is outwardly inconsistent with His law.
 - The Bible tells us that Job was blameless, and so were Elizabeth and Zacharias.
 - And in the New Testament, we are told that a man who serves as an elder must be blameless.
 - There are many people who are blameless, but this is no basis for justification.
 - It is a qualification for eldership, but not a way to be justified.

TRANS> Paul had all of these things—all of them...

- If anyone had grounds for boasting in the flesh, Paul did...
- But he declares very plainly in verse 7-9 that

B. He puts absolutely no confidence in any of these things!

1. He rather counts them as loss—even as dung—manure!

- As one who *once* put confidence in these things and was kept from Christ by them,
 - he now regards them with disdain...
- Once he came to see the righteousness that Christ provides for His people,
 - He saw that there was no comparison in the righteousness he had and the righteousness provided by the crucified Son of God for us.
 - To trust in his own righteousness would be like trusting in that which is best flushed down the toilet!
- It was for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ...
 - Once he came to understand that God's requirement is so great that He sent His Son to redeem us...
 - He could only be satisfied with this righteousness that God provides.

2. He says that he cast all his own righteousness away in order to gain Christ...

- This is very important!
 - It shows you that you cannot hold on to your own righteousness and have Christ too...
 - You have to cast away all trust in yourself to gain Him...to have His righteousness...
 - You cannot trust in what you are as a person...
 - You cannot trust in your birth or your attainments...
 - You cannot trust in your church going or your baptism or your ritual observance...
 - You cannot trust in your zeal or your blameless conduct...
 - You cannot trust in anything that God has worked in you or that you have done...
 - If you want to have the righteousness of Christ, all this has to go!
 - Not that you should stop being blameless, but it must go as any ground for your confidence—as any basis for your acceptance with God.
 - When you want to be justified, you must trust in Christ alone...
 - As I mentioned before, if even a thimble of your own merit is allowed, that thimble will be more important to you than the ocean of righteousness provided by Christ.
 - It must be all Him.
 - To add anything impure, anything unholy, anything imperfect, anything of your own to Christ
 - is to degrade the righteousness that Christ provides and make it common and unclean.
 - God will not allow that.
 - To gain Christ, you must give up all else.
3. On the day of judgement you do not want to be found with your own righteousness, for that will not save you.
- You want to be found with a righteousness that is pure and holy and perfect...
 - You want to be found with a righteousness that is complete...
 - You want to be found with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.
 - This is what Paul wants...
 - This is the reason he has given up all confidence in the flesh...
 - He says (starting at the end of verse 8)
 - **Phil 3:8-9: that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is**

through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

- That is the only righteousness that God will accept.
- It is the righteousness obtained by faith in Jesus alone.

TRANS> But there is one more thing you must understand here about true saving faith...

- Justifying faith has a goal...

III. In Philippians 3:10-11, see what the goal of true justifying faith is: to know Him—to know Jesus Christ!

A. Paul says that he has trusted in Christ's righteousness alone in order that he might know Him...

- There are some who want to be saved from judgement and that is all...
 - They learn that a person is saved through faith in Christ and so they cry out to Him for forgiveness and deliverance from the coming judgement.
 - But the gospel calls us to be reconciled with God—
 - It is not there just to rescue us from judgement, but it is also there to bring us to God—that we might know Him.

1. When you have this faith, you come to “know Jesus” as it says in verse 10—

- you *know Him* because you are *in Him*.
- a. This is the language of a covenant relationship—a covenant binds two parties together by a solemn commitment.
 - Marriage is a covenant—it is a binding together of a man and woman so that the two become one flesh.
 - In becoming one, the husband and wife do not lose their identity as separate persons, but they also take on a new identity as a family unit.
 - They are joined together so as to enrich one another and to benefit one another as they pour their lives into each other.
- b. When Jesus calls you to Himself and you believe on Him, you are brought into a covenant relationship with Him.
 - And what a grand relationship it is!
 - He loves us and gives Himself for us!
 - As joined to Him, we gain Him together with all that He is!
 - We have the Son of God joined to us to share with us His righteousness, his inheritance, his love, his power, his virtue!

- It is an altogether enriching relationship!
 - You come to know Him in the way that Paul speaks of in verse 10!
 - Phil 3:10: **“that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,”**
- c. The word *know* is used in the way it is often used in the Old Testament—
- It carries the idea of coming to experience someone else as a person, to gain them as an associate or a companion who shares themselves with you.
 - It does not refer to mere intellectual knowledge or mere mystical association, but it refers to a real communion of persons—
 - an organic relationship where each gives to the other and responds to other with what he or she has to offer.
 - In other words, there is a real giving and receiving that occurs, a real sharing of what one is with his covenant companion.
2. And when your covenant companion is Jesus Christ, what riches He has to share with you!
- These are outlined by Paul for us in verse 10!
- a. First of all, there is the power of His resurrection—He brings this power into the relationship and uses it for our sake!
- 1) What power Jesus had when He was raised from the dead.
 - It was our sin and our death that brought Him to the cross and the grave in the first place.
 - He went there for us—that He might bring His power to deal with our sin and death!
 - He went to the cross and the grave with the terrible weight of all our sins and all our guilt laid on His shoulders.
 - How could He possibly emerge from that grave with such a tremendous load that had put Him there?
 - 2) But He did rise from the dead!
 - All our guilt and all our sin could not keep Him there!
 - When He rose again, the entire church was liberated from the condemnation of sin and death...
 - because He did it all for our sake—for His bride whom He loves!

- By His mighty power, Christ emerged with His bride to live forever!
 - He scooped her up in her death, and now she lives in Him!
- 3) And every believer is able to experience this great power of Jesus that raised us from the dead!
- We are the ones who have been raised by that power to new life—abundant life—eternal life with God!
 - It is by His resurrection power that you first responded to His call when you were dead in your trespasses and sins.
 - You were so dead that you could respond to God, but He was able to raise you up.
 - And Christian, day by day this power is yours to experience as you live in harmony with God by His resurrection power!
 - No wonder Paul prays that we would come to know
 - “what is the exceeding power toward us who believe according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named, no only in this age, but also in the age to come!”
 - That is the power that is working in you if you are a Christian!
 - That power is found in Christ—through faith in Him, not in works of righteousness which we have done!

TRANS> What blessedness there is in knowing Jesus and the power of His resurrection!

- b. And secondly, you are said to be brought into the fellowship of His sufferings!
- 1) Jesus came into this world in order that He might pay the penalty for our sins.
 - To do that, He went to the cross and suffered for the sake of the entire church.
 - He bore the wrath and curse of God Almighty so the rest of us could be set free.
 - As our shield, He stood between God and us and took all the arrows of God’s wrath that should have struck each of us.
 - 2) His suffering for us is incomprehensible—it was a suffering that we do not even have the capacity to endure, and that would take each of us all of eternity to bear.

- How thankful you should be that you now have fellowship in His suffering!
 - Fellowship means that you have a share in it, a communion in it, a participation in it.
 - In other words, His death is a death that benefits you, so much so, that we can look at ourselves as having already died...
 - of having already paid sin's penalty because Jesus our husband has paid it all!
 - His death was so much a death-for-us that as soon as we are joined to Him by faith, we can consider ourselves as already having paid the penalty for sin.
 - It is not, of course, that we paid it by our own sufferings, but that Christ paid it by His sufferings—and that we have fellowship in those sufferings!
 - Christ reminds us of this every time we come to the Lord's table to remember our communion in His broken body and shed blood.
- 3) But the fellowship of His sufferings also works the other way—
- Because of our association with Him, we are also called to suffer for Him.
 - The more we learn to live as He lived,
 - the more we will be despised by those who are trying to suppress the truth and pretend that they do not have to answer to God,
 - or by those who are trying to establish their own righteousness.
 - But this suffering is a glorious thing because it shows us that we are indeed associated with Him and it enables us to show our love for Him, namely,
 - that we will gladly bear reproach rather than deny His name or His truth.
 - It is also a suffering that God uses both to call and edify His church...
 - As Tertullian put it,
 - “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of church.”
- c. The next phrase, “being conformed to His death,” seems to be the result of the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings.
- Jesus' death, as Paul showed us in chapter 2, was a death of obedience—
 - Christ was willing to be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross!

- You are conformed to His death when you are willing to lay down your life for Him, and for one another, even as He was willing to lay down His life for all of us.
- You are conformed to His death when you are willing to do as Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus, and look out not only for your own interests, but also for the interests of others.
- Your union with Christ in His resurrection and suffering makes you a servant of God who is willing to do His will.
 - It makes you into a new creation in Christ who is zealous to do good works...
 - Only, these works are not done in an effort to attain righteousness,
 - they are rather done in loving response to Christ with whom we have union, and in whom we have perfect righteousness by His suffering and resurrection.
 - They are not done in order that we might be justified, but in order that we might know Christ.

Conclusion:

And what is the goal of all this for us?

- It is to attain to the resurrection from the dead.
- It is that we may fully acquire all that Christ has for us as our Mediator, even immortality in an everlasting union and blessedness with Him.
- This will not be attained by your own merit, but only through faith in Him who died and rose again to make us righteous.
 - Where else do you want to be found but in Him?