

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 73

Halifax, 15 March 2009

Q. 73 How does faith justify a sinner in the sight of God?

A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receives and applies Christ and His righteousness.

Introduction:

This question zeros in on a very important matter—

- How faith actually justifies us.

For you see, there are a lot of things that happen when a sinner comes to Christ...

- Let me give you a few examples...
 1. First, when you come to Christ, you are given a new heart...
 - You would not have come at all if God had not first changed your heart so that you **want** to come to Him and **want** to turn away from your sins.
 - You would have been content to just go on in your rebellion to destruction.
 - God has promised to His people from the beginning that He will circumcise their heart and give them a heart that loves Him...
 - **De 30:6** “**And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.**”
 - In Hebrews 10:16; the LORD tells us how this new heart will cause us to delight in His commandments—it will cause us to desire to please Him.
 - **Heb 10:16:** “**This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them.**”
 2. Secondly, we are told that we will become a people who are given to do good works.
 - In Ephesians 2:10, Paul says:
 - **Eph 2:10:** **For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.**

- This is a wonderful thing—
 - not only do we love God and want to obey Him when we come to Christ, but we also actually begin to do good works—to live differently.

- 3. Thirdly, not only do we do good works when we come to Christ...
 - But we actually begin to bear fruit—to grow into greater and greater holiness and virtue...
 - In John 15:4-5, Jesus says:
 - **John 15:4-6: “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”**
 - We are actually able to become like Jesus because of His work in us.
 - As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians,
 - **2Co 3:18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.**
 - And this abiding in Christ is not something that just might happen.
 - If you have truly come to Him, you **will** abide in Him and you **will** bear fruit.
 - If you do not, it is a sure sign that you do not really know Him.
 - In John 15:7, Jesus says what will become of you if there is no fruit:
 - **John 15:7: “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.”**
 - This is not to suggest that fruit saved you—
 - it is only to show you are not really savingly united to Christ unless you have a faith that bears fruit.

TRANS> But that is still not all that happens when you come to Christ...

- 4. You are also brought into loving communion with His people.
 - In John’s first epistle, he makes it clear that unless we love one another, we have not really come to Christ at all.
 - He says:
 - **1 John 4:7-13: Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not**

love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

- It is by the Spirit which Jesus gives to us that we are enabled to love one another, and do love one another.
 - This is what happens to us when we come to Jesus...

Now these are all very wonderful things!

- a new heart, good works, fruitfulness, and loving communion with His people!
 - And you have all these things through faith in Christ—
 - You have them when you come to Him for eternal life...
 - This is the new life that He gives you and causes you to grow into more and more.
 - It is life with God...
 - It is truly a marvellous thing!

But you need to understand that none of these things, as marvellous as they are, justify you in God's sight.

- They all give evidence that you have been justified.
 - They all accompany true justifying faith so that we can say that if you do not have these things, you are not actually justified.
 - If you do not have a new heart, good works, fruitfulness, and love of your brothers and sisters in Christ,
 - then you don't know Christ in a saving way.
 - It is that simple—if you don't have these things, you don't have justifying faith.
 - But none of these things are able to justify you.
 - Think about it—
 - How could they?
- Do you remember what justification is in the Bible?
 - Justification is God's declaration that a person is righteous...
 - It is when God looks at you and He says,
 - "You are righteous in my sight."

- "You have met all of my requirements that I have set for a human being."
- "Every obligation that you have to Me has been fully met for Me to give you an everlasting inheritance in My house."
 - That is what justification is.
- But what you need to know is that God does not make this declaration because of the changes that He has wrought in you as one who has come to Christ...
 - He doesn't say "You have met all of the requirements I have set for a human being"
 - because He looks at you and He sees that you have a new heart and good works and fruitfulness and love for His people.
 - He can't say it on that basis...
 - because even though you have all these things, growing and increasing (if you are in Christ)
 - you still come short of all that He requires...
 - Even Paul said, "I have not attained, but I press on to the mark of the high calling."
 - As long as you are in this world, you still have not done all that is required...
- But even if you had a perfect heart and perfect works and perfect fruitfulness and perfect love—
 - God **still** could not declare that you are justified on that basis.
 - There would be a **big** problem that would get in the way of that:
 - Namely, the fact that you have previous sin on your record.
 - The fact that you have previous sin on your record and have not done anything to atone for it...
 - And what could you do, for the wages of sin is death—eternal death...
 - So the only way that you could pay for your sin is by dying forever.
 - By going to Hell forever and ever...that is the price of sin.
 - So there is no way that you could be justified on the basis of what you have done...
 - It would take your forever to do what God requires for you to be justified as a fallen sinner.
 - That is why Psalm 143:2 says,

- **Psalm 143:2: Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous.**
- And why Psalm 130:3-4 says:
 - **Psalm 130:3-4: If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But *there is* forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.**

But of course, the Bible teaches that we are justified by faith.

- That is why in Galatians 2:16, Paul says of himself and other believing Jews:
 - **Ga 2:16 “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.”**
- So does this mean that God, looking upon us and seeing that because we are all born in sin and have committed sin,
 - decided that He would lower the standard a little?
 - Did he look at us and say—“poor things—I know what I will do...”
 - “Instead of requiring sinners to meet the requirements of my just and holy law, I will only require them to believe.”
 - “That should be easy enough for them.”
 - “I will simply change the requirement and then they can be justified.”
 - “If they will meet this requirement, then I will declare that they are justified.”
 - That is not quite right...
 - Do you understand why?
 - It is not right because God cannot just drop His standard.
 - For Him to do that, He would have to change His very nature...
 - And He does not want to do that—not at all!
 - There is nothing wrong with His nature, so if He were to change it, it would ruin Him!
 - As God, He is unchanging—and He does not want to change—He has no desire of changing.
 - Faith is not just a lowered standard for righteousness!
 - Not at all!
- Nevertheless, it is true that faith is all that God requires of us for justification.

- That where we could not be justified by the law, we must now be justified by faith—
 - there is no other way for us to be justified than by faith.
- But you see, faith itself is not our righteousness.
 - You don't put your faith in faith for justification.
 - No—you put your faith in Christ and the work He did to make us righteous.
 - Jesus was sent to meet all the requirements of God's law to justify a sinner in His sight.
 - He came to represent us...
 - He came to meet every demand including the demand of eternal punishment.
 - You will say, "If that is so, why didn't He have to suffer for eternity?"
 - "Did the LORD just lower the standard a little?"
 - Not at all!
 - Jesus was able to bear eternal punishment while hanging on the cross because He is the eternal Son of God.
 - If He had been an ordinary man, He could not have done it.
 - But because He was the eternal Son of God in human flesh,
 - His suffering was equivalent, in the eyes of God's holy law, to our suffering for all eternity.
 - And don't you dare ever minimise this!
 - His sufferings as the Son of God are completely incomprehensible to us!
 - So you see then that faith is not just God reducing what is required for justification...
 - Faith is depending on God's full provision for our justification in Jesus Christ His Son.

So then, how exactly does faith justify us?

- Faith justifies us by connecting us to Jesus Christ.
 - It is the instrument God uses to connect us to Him for justification.

- We are to depend entirely upon what He has done—His suffering and death for us.
- There is nothing else for us to depend on.
- It is sinners looking to God to do what we could never do for ourselves:
 - namely, to meet the unchanging demands of His law for us as sinful human beings.

Well then, I guess it is about time we got to our scripture reading.

- I have selected Romans 4:1- 5:2.
 - READ Romans 4:1-5:2.

Here you see demonstrated for you what I have been talking about...

- Paul keeps emphasising that righteousness comes through faith...
 - But interestingly enough he does not mention Christ until the end of chapter 4.
 - Of course he was talking about Him in chapter 3 as the One who was crucified to turn away God's wrath,
 - but in Romans 4, he focuses in on faith, the instrument by which we are justified.
- But why does he refrain from mentioning that our faith is to be in Christ until the end of the chapter?
 - Well it is because he is here demonstrating that faith was also the only instrument of justification in the Old Testament,
 - And of course, in the Old Testament,
 - they did not yet have the *name* of Christ.
 - What they had was faith that God would justify them—somehow—that somehow, He would provide a sacrifice that would take away sin.
 - Even before the details of the Law of Moses were appointed,
 - sacrifices were offered in accordance with God's command by the heads of households.
 - And those who offered them properly, offered them with faith in God who would make a way to save them as He had promised.
 - Paul's concern, therefore, in the first part of Romans 4, is to show that faith is the only instrument for justification.

I. He shows that justification was not based upon what Abraham did, but upon his faith in what God would do...

A. This is true because the Scripture states that “Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

1. We are not told that Abraham did some work for his justification...

- The very point of Abraham is that God came to him and promised to bless him and to make his name great...
- The very point is that God promised to do for him what the families of the earth had tried to do for themselves.
- At Babel, they had wickedly abandoned God and were trying to make a name for themselves and to secure themselves in safety.

2. They should have known that they were incapable of doing this...because they were sinners!

- Unless they were first reconciled to God and had their sins forgiven, how could they obtain blessing?
 - This huge problem of an offended God had to be dealt with.
 - It was a major detachment from reality that required a serious dodging of the truth for them to go on as if they could bless themselves.

3. That is why it was so important that Abraham believed God when God promised to bless him.

- Abraham had come to realise that he could not bless himself the way the nations were trying to bless themselves at Babel...
 - And of course to this day, there are still many who are without faith...
 - They actually dream that somehow they can get along okay when they have not been reconciled to their creator against whom they have sinned.
- They need to know that it is not to him who works (vs 4),
 - but to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly. (vs 5)
 - That one’s faith is counted for righteousness.
 - You can’t somehow work around God into a blessing...or do something for God to gain His favour.
 - That is what idolatry teaches...
 - But the true God must be trusted in to provide righteousness for you according to His promise.

B. You see, the real problem that keeps us from being able to justify ourselves is that we are ungodly...

- Even Abraham is said here to trust in God who justifies the ungodly, because Abraham too was ungodly.
- An ungodly person cannot do something to justify himself because no matter what he does, he always has his ungodliness...
 - That is why Paul speaks of David who describes the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin in verses 6-8.
 - Somehow, our sin must be taken away or there is no possibility for blessing.
 - This is something God must do.
 - He must impute righteousness to us apart from works because if our works are considered, we are under the wrath of God.
 - God must do something to take away our sin—to take it off our account so that it will not be imputed to us—
 - That is the only way we can be blessed.

II. And Paul goes on to show that justification has nothing to do with circumcision or law keeping in verses 9-15.

- A. His proof that it has nothing to do with circumcision is that God declared Abraham righteous when Abraham believed, and that was long before he was circumcised.
1. The quote that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness is from Genesis 15.
 - Abraham was not circumcised until Gen 17 when he was 99 years old.
 - So he was declared righteous long before he was circumcised.
 - Verse 11 explains that circumcision was a seal of the righteousness of the faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised.
 - It was God's testimony to him that he was righteous through faith.
 - It was the testimony that God saves—that salvation is His work, not ours.
 - So what a distortion it was for the Jews to make circumcision itself the thing they trusted in rather than God who promised by it that He would save the soul that looked to Him.
 2. The same thing may be said of the Law...
 - As verse 15 points out—the promise that Abraham would inherit the world was not given by the law...
 - The Lord did not give him a list of things to do so that he could obtain the promise...
 - but He called him to believe that He, the LORD would give this blessing to him.

- B. According to verse 16, this is what makes the promise certain to us...
1. If it was something we had to do, we would have no confidence...
 - but when the promise depends on what God has promised to do, then we can be sure that we will have what is promised.
 - But how do you know if God has promised it to you?
 - If you believe the promise...
 - All who believe, receive the righteousness that is promised.
 2. And God demonstrated in a very clear way that the promised salvation was His gracious work.
 - He did this in the way He provided the son of promise to Abraham...
 - a. Abraham and Sarah kept trying to have a son, but Sarah was desperately barren...
 - They tried a surrogate mother, but that also failed...it only brought forth an Ishmael who was not the child of promise.
 - So what could Abraham do?
 - He could do nothing but believe.
 - Only God could bring forth the child through whom the promised salvation would come.
 - b. In the long run, only God could bring forth Christ!
 - The miraculous birth of Isaac was designed to point to the miraculous birth of Christ...
 - It was designed to show that salvation was not to be something man did in his own strength, but something the Lord would provide.
 - c. And so we are told again that Abraham believed God—concerning the birth of Isaac...
 - But it almost seems like the scripture speaks too highly of Abraham's faith...
 - If you read the account in Genesis, you will see that Abraham kept asking how it would be possible and how he could know that it would be so...
 - and of course, he even took Hagar and tried to raise up a child of promise in that way...

- So how is it that in Romans 4:17-21, it says that he was not weak in faith and that he did not waver but was fully convinced that what God had promised He would perform?
 - Why is he presented as having perfect faith when we can read of his struggles?
 - It is because the LORD strengthened his faith until it was absolutely clear to him that only the Lord could bring about what was promised.
- Abraham was brought to the place, you see, that he knew that it was only the LORD who could pull this off.
 - There was nothing he himself could do—he had to depend entirely upon the Lord.
 - That is what your faith needs to be like.
 - You need to see that when it comes to meeting the demands of God’s law for justification,
 - either God must meet those demands or they will not be met.
 - That is the essence of faith...
 - We trust in God and it is imputed to us for righteousness.

III. And now, you see, in verse 23, Paul turns to those who live after the coming of Christ and mentions Him by name as the object of our trust...

- A. He was the object of Abraham’s trust, but Abraham did not know Him by name...
- He was the object of Abraham’s trust, but Abraham did not know that He was to be delivered up because of our offenses and raised because of our justification.
 - Abraham did not know these things because they had not been revealed.
 - He believed that God would provide salvation for him, and that was sufficient for him in the day in which he lived.
 - That is the essence of faith.
 - It is belief in the promise of God to save once the promise is heard.
 - By this faith, Abraham was connected to Christ for his righteousness.
 - He was connected to Christ and what God would do by Him for his salvation.
 - As for Abraham, so for us, faith is the instrument that connects us to Christ for our righteousness.

- B. But now that Christ has come, we must believe in Him by name as the One God promised...
1. and we must believe in the work He did for our justification...
 - namely, that He was delivered up because of our offenses...to atone for our sins as a sacrifice...
 - and that He was raised because of our justification...
 - He was raised to show that God accepted His sacrifice for us.
 - This is what we are to believe.
 2. When we do believe, then we are justified through this work that Christ did...
 - That is what Paul declares in Romans 5:1-2:
 - Rom 5:1-2: **“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”**
 - We are justified, or declared righteous, by God because we are trusting in what God did through Jesus for our justification...
 - We are relying on the salvation that God provided.
 - By that provision, we have access into God’s grace and favour.

Conclusion:

- That is how faith works as an instrument.
 - It connects you to Christ who died and rose again to justify sinners.
 - If you believe, you too will be justified.
 - And when you have justifying faith,
 - You will also have a new heart, good works, fruitfulness, and love for the brethren...
 - But none of these will justify you in the sight of God...
 - It is only by faith in Christ and what He did that you can be justified in God’s sight.
 - The other graces will always be there—
 - but only Christ and the work He did will justify you.