**Foundations (41 of 60) Justification by Faith Alone - RC Sproul**

The doctrine of justification by faith alone was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation and it's our topic today on Renewing Your Mind. What does it mean to have saving faith? Does a person simply need to believe the right things or is there more to it? And if there's more to faith, does this mean that both faith and works are necessary for salvation? Well, today on Renewing Your Mind, Dr. R.C. Sproul, the founder and president of Reformation Bible College, clarifies the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This lesson is part of the comprehensive series titled Foundations, an overview of systematic theology.

And right after today's lesson, we'll explain how to get the entire series on DVD. But first, here's R.C. Sproul. When we looked at the doctrine of election, you will recall that I mentioned that Luther called that doctrine the Chora Ecclesia, or the heart of the church.

And yet Luther is not known so much for the doctrine of election as he is for the doctrine of justification by faith alone because it was that doctrine that stirred the deepest controversy in the history of Christendom, that controversy that provoked the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, and the popular slogan going out of it, sola fide, namely, that justification is by faith alone. Historians look back at that, as I mentioned earlier when we looked at the doctrine of Scripture, that they consider the formal cause of the Reformation to be the debate and issue over the final authority in church doctrine, and the material cause of the Reformation, that is the matter that was the center of the focus of controversy, was this doctrine of justification. As I said, Luther maintained that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the article by which the church stands or falls.

Calvin agreed with that assessment of the urgency of the matter, saying that the doctrine of justification is the hinge upon which everything turns. Now, the reason for that, and the reason why Luther, for example, considered other theological issues to be trifles compared to this one, was because what was at stake here was nothing less than the gospel itself, because the doctrine of justification answers the question that we remember was raised to the Apostle Paul by the Philippian jailer, what must I do to be saved? So here we're not engaged in a controversy over whether we sprinkle or dip or immerse people for baptism, over technical issues of super- and infralapsarianism and matters of that sort, but we're dealing with the question of salvation itself. And there is no greater question, no more important question for a Christian to struggle with obviously than that.

The doctrine of justification addresses our most serious plight as fallen human beings, and the problem that it addresses ultimately is the problem of the justice of God. And the problem is this simply, God is just and we are not. And as David raised the question in antiquity, if the Lord would mark iniquities, who would stand? Now obviously that's a rhetorical question, and the answer is no one could possibly stand.

The divine scrutiny, if God would extend the measuring rod of His justice and by that standard evaluate your life and my life, both of us would perish because we are not righteous. And most of us think that the way to solve this problem is simply to work harder, to try with greater urgency to be good people, and to do the best that we can, and that that should suffice when we come to the judgment seat of God. And that to me is the great myth of the popular culture that has even penetrated the church that people really still believe that they can work their way into heaven or earn the favor of God.

Even though we have the unambiguous warning from Scripture that by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. So we have this problem, God is just, we are not, we are debtors who can't pay our debt, and we know one way we can't solve the dilemma is by our good works. Well if by the works of the law no one will be justified, and God is not going to negotiate His justice, then how in the world are we going to solve this dilemma we face? It's for this reason that the gospel is called good news, for as Paul introduces the doctrine of justification in his letter to the Romans, he says, now the gospel is revealed from heaven, it is the righteousness of God that is revealed from heaven from faith to faith, for the just shall live by faith.

Well we ask the question then, what is justification, and what are its necessary ingredients? Justification in the final analysis is a legal pronouncement from the voice of God. It is a legal declaration whereby God declares people to be just. That is, justification only can occur when God, who is Himself just, becomes the justifier by decreeing a person to be just in His sight.

Now of course this is what prompted the severe debate of the sixteenth century. The question is this, does God wait for people to become righteous by whatever means before He will declare them just, or does He declare a person to be just in His sight, while in effect they are still sinners? Luther's famous formula that has survived since the sixteenth century is the formula simul justus et peccator, that is, that the justified person is at the same time, simultaneously, just and sinner, that we are just by virtue of the work of Christ while yet in and of ourselves we have not yet been sanctified, we have not yet been perfected, and we still sin. And so the problem that the Roman Catholic Church had with Luther's doctrine was that they heard in this articulation of justification what they called a legal fiction.

They raised this point, how in the world can God declare somebody just when in fact they are still sinful? This would be a fiction, it would be unworthy of God, it would have God to be a liar. And so Rome has its view of what's called forensic justification, forensics refer to legal declarations, where they agree that justification occurs when God declares a person to be just. But for Rome, God will not declare a person to be just until that person is in fact just, and there can be no fiction about it.

But of course the Protestant response to that is that when God declares a person just, there's nothing fictional about it, that person is just in His sight, and He's just by virtue of the real work of Jesus Christ, which is anything but fictional. We want to see how that works itself out in our theological formulation. We say that justification is by faith alone.

Now that word, little word by, was also part of the controversy of the sixteenth century. When we say that something happens by such and such an action, we're talking about the means by which something is brought to pass. For those of you who are grammarians, we call this the dative of means, the means by which something takes place.

And so one of the disputes of the sixteenth century was the question over what is the instrumental cause of justification. Now that's not part of our normal language. We don't talk about instrumental causes.

In fact, that kind of language goes all the way back to ancient Greece, to the distinctions the philosopher Aristotle made among different types of causes, where he distinguished among material causes, formal causes, final causes, efficient causes, and instrumental causes. And he uses an illustration for that, the creation of a statue by a sculptor. And he, the sculptor, would go out and fashion his block of stone, and the material cause for the statue was the matter out of which the artwork was produced, and so the material cause would be the stone itself, and so on.

But in that process, Aristotle said the instrumental cause, or the means by which the statue was transformed from a raw block of stone to a magnificent statue, was the instruments of the hammer and the chisel. So it's that kind of language that emerged in the sixteenth century with this distinction of what is meant by, by, or through faith. And the Roman Catholic Church's answer to this question was that the instrumental cause of justification is the sacrament of baptism.

Baptism sacramentally confers upon the recipient the grace of justification by which, according to the church, the righteousness of Christ is poured into the soul of the person receiving baptism, and in that act of pouring in, it is called the infusion. An infusion is the difference between an infusion and a transfusion. An infusion is a pouring in of grace into the soul, so that Rome does not believe that people are justified apart from grace, or that they're justified apart from faith, that the justification relies upon this infusion of grace by which now it is possible for a person to become righteous.

Now, in order for a person to become righteous, they have to do something with this grace that has been poured into their soul, and Rome defines that something as cooperating with it and assenting to it to such an extent or such a degree that by the assistance of the help of Christ's righteousness poured into my soul, if I cooperate with it and assent to it, I can become truly righteous. And as long as I keep myself from mortal sin, I will remain in a state of justified grace, and so on, so that the instrument by which a person is justified initially for Rome is baptism. Now that justification can be lost.

I obliquely mentioned a moment ago the commission of mortal sin. We've heard the distinction between mortal sins and venial sins, more egregious sin, lesser sin. Mortal sin is called mortal sin by the church because it means that that sin is serious enough to kill the justifying grace that is possessed in the soul.

And if a person commits a mortal sin, loses the grace of justification, all is not lost. One can still be restored to a state of justification, and again sacramentally through the sacrament of penance. And the Roman church defines the sacrament of penance as, quote, the second plank of justification for those who have made shipwreck of their faith.

So that's why people go to confession, because confession is part of the sacrament of penance. And when one goes there and confesses your sins, you receive absolution, then you have to perform works of satisfaction, which earn for you what the church calls congruous merit, as distinguished from condign merit. It's not merit of such a nature that is so pure and righteous that it imposes an obligation on God to reward it, but it's called congruous merit because the person who performs these works of satisfaction integral to the sacrament of penance, when you do that, it makes it fitting or congruous for God to restore you once again to a state of grace.

And so, really, Rome has two instrumental causes of justification. In the first instance, it's baptism. In the second instance, it's the sacrament of penance.

Now, over against that, the Protestant Reformers argued that the instrumental cause and the only instrumental cause of justification is faith. And as soon as a person lays hold of Christ by faith, then the merit of Christ is transferred, or reckoned, or counted for the person who is trusting in Christ. And let me see if I can show you another distinction that will clarify that.

I mentioned, first of all, the concept of infusion by the Roman Catholic Church, and in distinction from infusion is the concept of imputation. In fact, if I could simplify the whole issue of the sixteenth-century struggle over justification, it all came down, really, to these two words, infusion or imputation. And the question was this, what is the ground or the basis upon which God ever declares a person to be just in His sight? For the Roman Catholic Church, as I mentioned, God will only say that a person is just when they are just by virtue of their cooperation with the infused grace of Christ.

For the Protestants, the ground of justification remains exclusively not our own righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ. And when I talk about the righteousness of Christ, I'm not talking about the righteousness of Christ in us. I'm talking about the righteousness of Christ for us, the righteousness that Christ achieved in His own life of perfect obedience to the law of God.

That is to say, His righteousness earned for Him the blessing of God. But God counts the righteousness that He accrued, the righteousness that He achieved in His own life, not only for Christ, but for all who put their trust in Him. Now, that's part of the ground of justification.

The other part of the ground of justification is Christ's perfect satisfaction of the negative sanctions of the law in His sacrificial death upon the cross. As I've said many times, we are saved not only by the death of Jesus, but also by the life of Jesus. And what takes place here is a double transfer, a double imputation.

What we're talking about when we're talking about imputation is a legal transfer. Christ is the Lamb of God. When He goes to the cross and He suffers the wrath of God there on the cross, He's not being punished for any sin that God finds in Him.

But it's only after He voluntarily takes upon Himself our sins, He becomes the sin bearer, that God then transfers or reckons or counts our sins on Jesus. That's what imputation is. It is a legal transfer so that Christ assumes in His own person our guilt.

God transfers our guilt to Him. That's one transfer. The other transfer is then God transfers Christ's righteousness to us.

So that what Luther is saying when he says that justification is by faith alone is only theological shorthand for saying justification is by Christ alone, by what He has accomplished to satisfy the demands of God's righteousness. And so, imputation involves a transfer of somebody else's righteousness. Infusion involves an implantation of that righteousness that you have to cooperate with so that for Rome you actually become inherently righteous because now righteousness inheres or exists within you.

Now, to summarize this whole issue of the debate, I'm going to give a little chart here on the board. I know we're going over a lot in great detail and very quickly. That's why I spent a whole time writing a book on this, and so if you want to go into it in more detail, get that.

But we have here the Roman Catholic view of justification, and on this side the Protestant Reformation view of justification. And so we see certain differences. First of all, we saw that the instrumental cause according to Rome are the sacraments of baptism and penance, whereas on this side the Protestant Reformation view would be that the instrumental cause is what? Faith and faith alone.

Secondly, we see that the Roman Catholic view of justification rests upon the concept of infusion and the Protestant view on the basis of imputation rather than infusion. Thirdly, the Roman Catholic view is called analytical, and I'll explain that in a second, where the Reformation view is called synthetic. Now, technically when we discuss language, we distinguish between synthetic statements and analytical statements.

An analytical statement is a statement that is true by definition. For example, a triangle has three sides, or a bachelor is an unmarried man. Let's take that statement, a bachelor is an unmarried man.

In the subject, when you say somebody is a bachelor, you've already told them that he's an unmarried man. The predicate, unmarried man, adds no new information to what's already there in the subject. So that that statement is true, what we could say true by definition, true by analysis.

Nothing new is added to it. Now, if I say the bachelor is a wealthy man, now I've predicated something, I've said something about the bachelor that isn't found inherently in the word bachelor, because not all bachelors are what? Wealthy. Okay.

So, that would be a synthetic statement. Now, how this applies to justification is simple. The Roman Catholic Church says God will never declare a person just until under analysis they are just.

Whereas for the Protestant, we are just synthetically because we have something added to us, which is the righteousness of Jesus. Again, finally, here, righteousness must inhere, where in the Protestant view, as Luther said the righteousness by which we are justified is an alien righteousness. It is a righteousness that is extra nos.

It is outside of us. It is properly speaking not our own. It only counts for us when by faith we lay hold of Christ.

That's the wonderful good news of the gospel, is that we don't have to wait until we're purged and purgatory from all abiding impurities. But the moment we put our trust in Jesus Christ, all that He is and all that He has becomes ours and we are translated immediately into the fellowship of reconciliation with God. Dr. Sproul is founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, which is the home of Renewing Your Mind.

For more than four decades, Ligonier Ministries has existed as an international organization bridging the gap between Sunday school and seminary by bringing clear biblical teaching to people all around the world. Our passion is to proclaim, teach and defend the holiness of God in all its fullness to as many people as possible. Next weekend, Dr. Sproul continues this series in Systematic Theology by answering the question, what is saving faith? We'll hear three perspectives as we examine the antinomian, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant reformers definitions.

So listen next weekend to Renewing Your Mind.