

Martin Luther

Commentary on Galatians

Justification by Grace alone through faith alone

A comparison: ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE in the obtaining of righteousness

I have taken in hand, in the name of the Lord, once again to expound this Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians; not because I desire to teach new things, or such as you have not heard before, but because we have to fear, as the greatest and nearest danger, that Satan take from us the pure doctrine of faith and bring into the Church again the doctrine of works and man's traditions.

Summary

First of all, we speak of the argument of this epistle: in it Paul is seeking to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins, or Christian righteousness in order that we may know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness. There are many other kinds of righteousness. There is a civil or political righteousness, which kings, princes of the world, magistrates and lawyers deal with. There is also ceremonial righteousness, which the traditions of men teach. Besides these, there is another righteousness, called the righteousness of the law, or the Ten Commandments.

Above all these, there is yet another righteousness: the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, which we must diligently discern from the others. The others are quite contrary to this righteousness, both because they flow out of the laws of kings and rulers, religious traditions, and the commandments of God; and because they consist in our works, and may be worked by us either in our natural strength, or else by the gift of God. These kind of righteousness are also the gift of God, like all other good things which we enjoy.

But the most excellent righteousness of faith, which God through Christ, without any works, imputes to us, is neither political, nor ceremonial, nor the righteousness of God's Law, nor consists of works, but is contrary to these; that is to say, it is a mere **passive** righteousness, as the others are **active**. For in the righteousness of faith, we work nothing, we render nothing to God, but we only receive, and suffer another to work in us, that is to say, God. This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not know. Indeed, Christians themselves do not thoroughly understand it, and can hardly take hold of it in their temptations. Therefore it must be diligently taught, and continually practiced.

The troubled conscience, in view of God's judgment, has no remedy against desperation and eternal death, unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by free grace, freely offered in Christ Jesus, which if it can apprehend, it may then be at rest. Then I can boldly say: I seek not **active** or working righteousness, for if I had it, I could not trust it, neither dare I set it against the judgment of God. Then I abandon myself from all **active** righteousness, both of my own and of God's law, and embrace only that **passive**

righteousness, which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and forgiveness of sins. I rest only upon that righteousness, which is the righteousness of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The greatest knowledge and the highest wisdom of Christians is not to know the law and to be ignorant of works, and of the whole active righteousness, especially when the conscience is wrestling with God. Contrary, among those who are not of God's people, the greatest wisdom is to know and to urge the law and the active righteousness. But it is a strange thing and unknown to the world to teach Christians to be ignorant of the law and to live before God as if there were no law; notwithstanding, except you be ignorant of the law and be assuredly persuaded in his heart there is now no law, nor wrath of God, but only grace and mercy for Christ's sake, you cannot be saved; for by the law comes the knowledge of sin. Conversely, works and the keeping of the law is strictly required in the world, as if there were no promise, or grace.

A wise and faithful disposer of the Word of God must so moderate the law that it may be kept within its bounds. He that teaches that men are justified before God by the observation of the law, passes the bounds of the law, and confounds these two kind of righteousness, **active** and **passive**. Conversely, he sets forth the law and works to the old man, and the promise and forgiveness of sins and God's mercy to the new man, divides the Word well. For the flesh or the old man must be coupled with the law and works; the spirit or the new man must be joined with the promise of God and His mercy.

When I see a man oppressed with the law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for comfort, it is time that I remove out of his sight the law and **active** righteousness, and set before him the gospel, the Christian or **passive** righteousness, which offers the promise made in Christ, who came for afflicted and sinners.

We teach the difference between these two kinds of righteousness, **active** and **passive**, to the end that manners and faith, works and grace, political and religious, should not be confounded, or taken the one for the other. Both are necessary; but each must be kept within its bounds: Christian righteousness pertains to the new man, and the righteousness of the law pertains to the old man, which is born of flesh and blood. Upon this old man, as upon a donkey, there must be laid a burden that may press him down, and he must not enjoy the freedom of the spirit of grace, except he first put upon him the new man, by faith in Christ. Then may he enjoy the kingdom and inestimable gift of grace. This I say, so that no man should think we reject or forbid good works.

We imagine two worlds, the one heavenly, the other earthly. In these we place these two kinds of righteousness, the one far separate from the other. The righteousness of the law is earthly and deals with earthly things. But Christian righteousness is heavenly, which we have not of ourselves, but receive from heaven; we work not for it, but by grace it is worked in us, and is realized by faith.

Do we then do nothing? Do we do nothing at all for the obtaining of this righteousness? I answer, Nothing at all! For this is perfect righteousness, to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing of the law, or of works, but to know and believe this only, that Christ is gone to the Father, and is not now seen; that He sits in heaven at the right hand of His

Father, not as judge, but made unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption -- briefly, that He is our high priest entreating for us, and reigning over us, and in us, by grace. In this heavenly righteousness sin can have no place, for there is no law; and where there is no law, there can be no transgression (Romans 4:15). Seeing then that sin has here no place, there can be no anguish of conscience, no fear, no heaviness. Therefore John says (1 John 5:18): "He that is born of God cannot sin."

But if there is any fear, or grief of conscience, it is a token that this righteousness is withdrawn, that grace is hidden, and that Christ is darkened and out of sight. But where Christ is truly seen, there must be full and perfect joy in the Lord, with peace of conscience, which thinks this way: Although I am a sinner by the law and under condemnation of the law, yet I do not despair, yet I do not die, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my everlasting life. In that righteousness and life I have no sin, no fear, no sting of conscience, no care of death. I am indeed a sinner as touching this present life, and the righteousness thereof, as a child of Adam. But I have another righteousness and life eternal; by whom this my body, being dead and brought to dust, shall be raised up again, and delivered from the bondage of the law and sin, and shall be sanctified together with my spirit.

So both these continue while we live here. The flesh is accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, bruised by the **active** righteousness of the law; but the spirit reigns, rejoices, and is saved by this **passive** and Christian righteousness, because it knows that it has a Lord in Heaven, at the right hand of His Father, who has abolished the law, sin, death, and has trodden under His feet all evils, led them captive, and triumphed over them in Himself (Colossians 2:15).

St. Paul, in this epistle, goes about diligently to instruct us, to comfort us, to hold us in the perfect knowledge of this most Christian and excellent righteousness. For if the article of justification is lost, then all true Christian doctrine is lost. He who strays from Christian righteousness falls into the righteousness of the law; that is, when he loses Christ, he falls into the confidence of his own works. Therefore we also earnestly set forth, and so often repeat the doctrine of "faith", or Christian righteousness, that by this means it may be kept continual exercise, and may be plainly discerned from the **active** righteousness of the law.

Let us diligently learn to judge between these two kinds of righteousness. We have said before that, in a Christian, the law ought not to pass its bounds, but ought to have dominion only over the flesh, which is in subjection to it, and remains under it. But if it creeps in to the conscience, play the cunning logician, and make the true division. Say: "Law, you would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reprove it of sin, and take from me the joy of my heart, which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation that I may be without hope, and utterly perish. Keep within your bounds, and exercise your power upon the flesh: for by the gospel I am called to the partaking of righteousness and everlasting life."

When I have Christian righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven as the rain makes fruitful the earth; that is to say, I do good works, how and wherever the occasion arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the broken-hearted, I administer the Sacraments. If I am head of a household, I govern the house and family well, and in the fear of God. If I am a servant, I do my master's business faithfully.

To conclude, whoever is assuredly persuaded that Christ alone is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation, but also submits himself through love to the rulers and to their laws, yes, though they might be severe, and, if necessity should require, to all manner of burdens, and to all dangers of the present life, because he knows that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases Him.

I can hardly believe I was as verbose when I lectured on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, as this volume indicates. But since I recognize as mine all the thoughts which the brethren have taken such pains to set down in it, I am forced to admit that I said as much and perhaps even more. For the one doctrine which I have supremely at heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth, day and night. Not that I find I have grasped anything of wisdom so high, so broad and so profound, beyond a few meager rudiments and fragments; and I am ashamed that my poor, uninspired comments on so great and apostle and chosen instrument of God should be published. Yet I am compelled to forget my shame and quite shameless in view of the horrible profanation and abomination which have always raged in the Church of God, and still rage today, against this one solid rock which we call the doctrine of justification. I mean the doctrine that we are redeemed from sin, death and the devil, and made partakers of eternal life, not by ourselves (and certainly not by our works, which are less than ourselves), but by the help of another, the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ.

This rock was shaken by Satan in Paradise, when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God, abandoning faith in God, who had given them life and promised its continuance. Shortly afterwards, that liar and murderer incited a brother to murder his brother, for no reason that that the latter, a godly man, had offered by faith a more excellent sacrifice, while he himself, being ungodly, had offered his own works without faith and had not pleased God. After this there followed a ceaseless and intolerable persecution of this same faith by Satan through the sons of Cain, until God was compelled to purge the world and defend Noah, the preacher of righteousness, by means of the Flood. Thereafter the whole world acted like a madman against this faith, inventing innumerable idols and religions with which everyone went his own way, hoping to placate a god or goddess, gods or goddesses, by his own works; that is, hoping without the aid of Christ and by his own works to redeem himself from evils and sins.

Since, therefore, Cain kills Abel continually and the abominations of Satan now reigns supreme, it is necessary to pay the very closest heed to this doctrine, and to oppose Satan

with it, whether we are eloquent or not, learned or not. Hence I am willing to do my duty and let this extremely verbose commentary be published in order to stir up my brethren in Christ against the wiles and malice of Satan, who in these last days has become so infuriated at the recovery of the sound knowledge of Christ, that it now seems as if the demons themselves are possessed by worse demons and raving with a more than demonic madness -- which strongly suggests that the Enemy of truth and life feels the Day of Judgment to be imminent -- a dreadful day of destruction for him, but a lovely day of redemption and the end of his tyranny for us. For he has reason to be alarmed, when all his members and his powers are so assailed, just as a thief or adulterer is alarmed when the dawn breaks upon him and he is caught in the act.

But these thoughts of mine on this epistle are being published not so much against these people as for our people, who will either thank me for my pains or pardon my weakness and recklessness. I have certainly no wish that the impious should approve of them, but rather that they and their god should be irritated by them; for I produced them (with much toil) only for such as those to who St. Paul himself wrote his epistle -- the troubled, afflicted and tempted (who alone understand these things), wretched Galatians in the faith.

Let him who can, then, hold fast to this one article; and let the rest, who make shipwreck, be driven by the wind and waves until they either return to the ship or swim to the shore.