

MARTIN LUTHER'S ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL TO THE GALATIANS

(Paraphrase in modern English by Bill Slack)

Paul sets down the biblical teachings of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness, so that we can know without a doubt the difference between 'Christian' righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness. There is political or civil righteousness that world leaders, philosophers and lawyers deal with. There's ceremonial righteousness (acting correctly at weddings or formal dinners, etc.) that deals with men's tradition. This righteousness parents and teachers can teach safely, because they don't claim that being righteous in these ways pays for sin or makes us perfect or pleases God or earns us God's favor, but they teach these righteous ways to correct our manners and teach us about our day-to-day life with other people. There is another type of righteousness called the 'righteousness of the law', or the Ten Commandments, that Moses teaches. The church teaches about this, too, but in light of faith.

There is another far better righteousness--that is, 'the righteousness of faith' or 'Christian righteousness.' This righteousness we must separate from the rest because it works in a completely opposite way from Christian righteousness. The other kinds of righteousness come out of the laws of governments (we obey the law and are righteous) or church tradition or even the Ten Commandments. The other kinds of righteousness we can work at ourselves by our own strength or by extra strength that God gives us, because we couldn't even be righteous in these ways without God's strength. He gives us all good things that we enjoy.

But this Christian righteousness is the greatest righteousness. God puts it on us without our lifting a finger. It's not political or ceremonial. It doesn't have to do with our obeying God's law. It has nothing to do with what we do or how hard we work, but it is given to us and we do nothing for it. It's 'passive righteousness' because we don't have to work for it. With this 'free righteousness' we don't do anything, we don't give anything to God, but we receive and allow someone else to do it. That's why we'll call it 'passive righteousness.'

This 'passive righteousness' is a mystery that someone who doesn't know Jesus can't understand. As a matter of fact, Christians don't completely understand it and don't take advantage of it when they're tempted. So we have to constantly teach it over and over again to others and repeat it to ourselves, because if we don't understand it and have it in our hearts, we will be defeated by our enemy, and we'll be totally depressed. There is nothing that gives us peace like this 'passive righteousness.'

But men are so weak and miserable that when we are close to death or afraid of God, we do not see anything but the Law (the Ten Commandments) and what we have done to be righteous or, how worthy we have made ourselves. And when we see the Law, we see our sin. The evil in our lives comes to mind, it tears us apart, and we groan and think,

'How bad I have been. My life is full of hate and evil. Please, God, let me live and I will fix up what I have done wrong.' Man is so evil that all he can see is what he should do to be righteous. He is so evil that he cannot see what Christ has done for him to be righteous.

On the other side, Satan, taking advantage of our natural weakness, increases and fires up those thoughts in us. Then our consciences are more troubled, terrified and confused. For it is impossible for a man's mind by itself to find comfort, look for God's grace, or reject Satan's argument about works just because he feels sinful and is disgusted by it. These things are far above man's strength and ability; in fact, it's even beyond the power of God's law. It is true that God's law is the most excellent thing in the world, but it is not able to ease a man's troubled conscience. Rather, it increases his fear and causes him to despair; 'That through the commandment, sin might become utterly sinful.' (Rom. 7:18).

So the afflicted and troubled conscience has no cure for desperation and death unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, that is 'Christian' or 'passive' righteousness. When the person realizes this, he is at peace and can say 'I am not going to work for my righteousness, even though I need to have it, and I need to be righteous. Because even if I could work up to righteousness and fulfill what I thought was righteousness, still, I could not trust it to make me right at the judgement of God. So I throw away all my works, my tries at obeying God's law, and firmly hold on to 'passive righteousness,' that is the righteousness of grace, mercy and the forgiveness of sins. In short, I trust only in the righteousness that Christ and the Holy Spirit give me!!

It is like this: the earth does not produce rain, nor is it able by its own power or work to get it. The earth simply receives it as a gift of God from above. It is the same with 'passive' righteousness. It is given to us by God without our deserving it or working for it. So let's look at what the earth is able to do to get the rain each season so that it can be fruitful, and we will see how much we are able in our own strength and works to do to get heavenly and eternal righteousness. We see we will never be able to attain it unless God Himself, by the great gift of His Son, gives us Jesus' perfect righteousness. The greatest knowledge and wisdom a Christian can have then is not, to know the Law, but to forget works and to forget all our working toward righteousness especially when we think about God judging us. The person that does not know Christ, on the other hand, needs to know and earnestly seek the Law and good works.

But it is a very strange thing, and unknown to the world, to teach Christians not to know the law, and to live before God as if there were no Law or wrath of God, but total grace and mercy for Christ's sake! But even though it is strange, unless one disregards the Law and is convinced in his own heart that there is no Law or wrath from God but only grace and mercy for Christ's sake, he cannot be saved because all the Law does is show us our sin.

On the other hand, works and keeping of the Law must be required in the world as if there were no promise of grace because people are stubborn, proud, and hard-hearted. They only need the Law put in front of their faces so that they will be terrified and humbled. The Law is given to terrify and kill the proud, stubborn man and tear out his old nature, and both the word of grace and wrath must be rightly understood according to Paul. (II Tim. 2).

A faithful and wise preacher or teacher of the Word will give out the Law in such a way that it is kept in perspective. The man who teaches that people are justified before God by obeying the Law gives the Law much more power than it has, and mixes up 'passive' righteousness with 'earned' righteousness, he is a bad teacher because he misunderstands the Word. On the other hand, he that uses the Law to cause a man to see his sinfulness and convict him, and who also shows how God forgives sin (by 'passive' righteousness) when the man repents and turns from that sin teaches the Word well, for the man that does not know Christ must be shown the Law and works. The new man (one who knows Christ) must be affirmed in God's promises and mercy. So when I see a man that is bruised enough already, burdened by the Law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for relief, that is when in truth it is time to take the Law and 'works' righteousness out of his sight and show him by the Gospel 'passive' righteousness (Christian righteousness) which offers the promise of Christ without the Law, that Christ came for the hurting and for sinners. Then the man is raised up and has good hope, he is no longer under the Law but covered by grace. How is he out from under the Law? Because he is a new man to whom the Law does not apply! For the Law does not reach past Christ as Paul says, 'For Christ is the end of the Law.' (Rom. 10:4). Since Christ has come, Moses' Law ends, circumcision ends, the sacrifices, the Sabbaths, yes, even all the prophets end.

This is our goal -- that we teach how to show the difference between the two kinds of righteousness, 'works' and 'passive,' to the end that outward actions and faith, works and grace, policy and religion should not be confused and mixed together or taken one for the other. Both are necessary, but both must be kept in their bounds. Christian or 'passive', righteousness, only applies to the new man (one who knows Christ), and 'works' righteousness only applies to the old man, who is born only of flesh and blood. Upon the old man, as upon a donkey, a great load must be placed to press him down. Until he becomes a new man by faith in Christ, he cannot know the Spirit of grace and enjoy the Kingdom, both that we are able to appreciate now and the fullness of the Lord's grace to come.

This I say so that no man thinks we reject or forbid good works as the Papists falsely accuse us, because they don't understand what they are saying themselves or what we teach. They only know the righteousness of the Law ('works' righteousness). Yet they pass judgment on the doctrine of 'passive' righteousness which is above the Law and which no carnal man is able to judge. That is why they are offended; they can't see any higher than the Law. Whatever is higher than the Law then is a great offense to them. But we see in our minds two worlds, one heavenly, the other earthly. We put these two kinds of righteousness ('works' and 'passive') in these two worlds being set far apart from each other. The righteousness of the Law (works) is earthly and has to do with earthly things, and by it we do good works. But just like the earth does not bring forth fruit unless it is first watered and made fruitful from above, even so by 'works' righteousness, by doing many things, we do nothing, and in obeying the Law, we do not really obey it unless first without deserving it or working for it, we are made righteous by the Christian (passive) righteousness, which has nothing to do with 'works' righteousness of the Law or to earthly righteousness. But this righteousness is heavenly; which as we said, we do not do it ourselves, but receive it from heaven. We don't work for it, but by grace it is given to us,

and we get it through faith. It takes us above all the Law and works. So, as we have looked and acted like, the earthly Adam, as Paul says, let us now look and act as the new man. This new man has: a heavenly image in a new world where there is no Law, no sin, no guilt or pain in our conscience, no death, but perfect joy, righteousness, grace, peace, life, salvation, and glory.

So do we do nothing? Don't we do any work to obtain 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 only this, that Christ is gone to the Father and is not now seen. He sits at His Father's right hand not as a judge but making us before God wise, righteous, holy, and redeemed; briefly, that He is our high Priest pleading for us and reigning over us and in us by grace. In this heavenly righteousness sin can have no place because there is no Law, and where there is no Law, there can be no breaking of the Law. (Rom. 4:15).

You see then that sin has no place here, so there can be no painful guilt, no fear, no weight on our shoulders. That is why John says (I John 5:18) 'He that is born of God cannot sin.' But if there is any fear or our conscience is bothered, it is a sign that our 'passive' righteousness is 'withdrawn' -- that is, grace is hidden from us, and Christ is darkened out of our sight. But when we truly see Christ, we have full and perfect joy in the Lord with peace of mind, and we certainly think: 'Although I am a sinner by the Law and under condemnation of the Law, still I don't despair, still I don't 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 guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, as a child of Adam; where the Law accuses me, death controls me and eventually would destroy me. But I have another life, another righteousness above this life which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death but is eternal righteousness and eternal life; by Him this body of mine being dead and turned to dust shall be raised up again and freed from the chains of the Law and sin and shall be made holy together with the Spirit.

So we have both these (the old man and the new man) with us while we are here. The flesh is accused, tempted, weighed down with sorrow, bruised by the 'works' righteousness of the Law; but the Spirit reigns, rejoices and is saved by this 'passive' and Christian righteousness, because our spirit knows that it has a Lord in heaven at the right hand of His Father who has done away with the Law, sin, death and has conquered all evil, captured it, and triumphed over it Himself. (Col. 2:15).

Because of this St. Paul sets out diligently in this letter to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness that is so great. For if the truth of our being justified by Christ alone is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. Those in the world that do not hold this truth are Jews, Turks, Papists, or heretics. For there is no middle ground between 'passive' and 'works' righteousness. The person who wanders away from 'passive' righteousness has no other choice but 'works' righteousness; that is to say 'If he does not depend on the work of Christ, he must depend on his own work.'

So we must truthfully proclaim and continually repeat the truth of this 'passive' or 'Christian' righteousness so that Christians continue to hold to it and never confuse it with 'works' righteousness. Otherwise we will never be able to understand God's truth, because on this truth and only this truth the church is built and has its being; but eventually we will either become canonists, observers of ceremonies, 'observers of the Law, or Papists, and Christ will become so hidden that no one in the church will be taught the truth or comforted.' So if we are to be leaders or teachers of others, we must pay close attention to these things and to mark well the difference between 'works' righteousness and 'Christian' righteousness. This is easier said than done. Even though we diligently practice it, it is very hard; because when we are about to die or when our consciences are troubled, these two 'righteousness' start to get confused and cluttered together.

'Wherefore I do admonish you, especially those who will become teachers and counselors, and each individual, that you practice this by study, by reading, by meditation of the Word, and by prayer, that when you are tempted you will be able to teach and comfort yourself and others, and bring them from the Law to grace, from 'works' righteousness to 'passive' righteousness and to conclude 'from Moses to Christ.' For when we are in trouble or conscience bothers us, the devil likes to make us afraid by using the Law, and he tries to lay on us the guilt of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, and eternal death to drive us to desperation, make us slaves to him and pluck us from Christ. Furthermore, he wants to set against us the parts of the Gospel where Christ requires works from us and with plain words threatens damnation to us if we do not do them. Now, if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness and we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting on the right hand of God (Heb. 7:25) who pleads our case, sinners that we are, to the Father, then we are under the Law, not under grace, and Christ is no more a Savior, but a Lawgiver; so that now there is no salvation, but a definite despair, and everlasting death, unless we repent.

Let's diligently learn to judge between these two kinds of righteousness so that we know how far to obey the Law. Now, we said before, the Law in a Christian's life must be kept in bounds and should only rule over the flesh which is subject to it and remains under it. When this is true, the Law stays in its bounds. But if it creeps into your conscience and tries to rule there be a shrewd thinker and draw the line on it. Give no more heed to the Law that what it deserves, and say to yourself, 'You, Law, would climb up into my conscience and rule me and reprove me of sin and would take away my joy that I have by faith in Christ and drive me to despair that I would be without hope and perish. This you try to do without authority, keep yourself within your bounds, and use your influence on my flesh, but do not touch my conscience, for I am baptized and by the Gospel am called to partake of 'passive' righteousness and of everlasting life to the Kingdom of Christ where my conscience is at rest, where there is no Law but total forgiveness of sin, peace, quietness, joy, health, and everlasting life. Don't bother me in those matters; I won't allow you, such a tyrant and cruel tormentor, to rule my conscience for conscience is the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God who is the King of righteousness and peace and my most sweet Savior and Mediator. He will keep my conscience joyful and quiet and the sound and pure truth of the Gospel, and in the knowledge of this 'passive Christian and heavenly righteousness.'

When I have this righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven like rain making the earth fruitful that is to say, I enter into a new Kingdom and I do 'good works' whenever and however I get the opportunity. If I am a minister, I preach, I comfort the hurting, I administer the sacraments. If I am a parent, I govern my house and family, I raise my children in the knowledge and the fear of God. If I am a judge, that duty is given to me from above, and I do it diligently. If I am a servant, I do my master's business faithfully. To conclude, whoever is convinced that Christ is his only righteousness, does not only do his work cheerfully, gladly and well, but also submits to the judges and the law, even when they are sharp and cruel, and if necessary submits to all kinds of burdens and dangers in this life with love because he knows this is God's will, and God is pleased by his obedience. This is what the letter to Galatians speaks of. Here Paul shows us this by addressing the presence of false teachers among Galatians who had covered up this 'passive' righteousness. He sets himself against them and defends and commends his authority and office.