

Herald

ANTIPAS

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No 2

THE CHRISTIAN AND OBEDIENCE

Part 1 : Two deadly enemies

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A CONTRADICTION?

'For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.' (Rom 3:28)

'(We) ... know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.' (Gal 2:16)

'You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.' (James 2:24)

Are Paul and James at loggerheads in the above verses? Was there dogmatic dispute in the early church? Does the Bible contradict itself?

The answer is definitely no. While this would appear to be the case, an understanding of the real issues leaves one with a sense of wonder at the balances and riches of Scriptural revelation.

NOT ADVERSARIES, BUT ALLIES

Paul and James are not in opposition to each other, but are fighting back to back against two deadly enemies of the church from its earliest days. As active and relentless today as ever, both these heresies preach erroneous views on the question of good works in the life of a Christian.

The one would add good works to the merit of Christ as basis for salvation; the other holds that with Christ as the perfect sacrifice of atonement, the presence or absence of good works is in principle irrelevant in our salvation. It is, however, quite clear from God's Word that both these viewpoints are totally wrong and detestable in His eyes.

Paul's battle is against legalism, while James has it against lawlessness. Both are deadly lies and every Christian should be on the alert against them.

LEGALISM

In the early church this heresy was championed by the Judaists. They were Jewish Christians who maintained that both faith in Christ and good works (the ceremonial laws, especially the circumcision), were requirements for salvation.

Paul opposed them most vehemently, especially in his letter to the Galatians, emphasizing again and again that salvation is by faith alone! Christ's mediatory work alone is the basis for justification. To insist on any works whatsoever in addition thereto constitutes a flagrant disregard for the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

Legalism is a far more serious heresy than most would think. This

is how Paul sees the matter: *'Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.'* (Gal 5:2-4; cf. also Rom 4:4-5; 11:6; Gal 4:21-5:12).

Terrifying words indeed! The point at issue here is more than just the fact that my works are superfluous to the perfect work of Christ. What the apostle teaches here under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is that genuine legalism is actually disqualifying and damning.

Why should this be such an important matter in the eyes of the Lord? The answer is simply that we serve a jealous God. He, and He alone must receive all the honour for the salvation of each and every sinner. For this reason Christ is either the all-sufficient and only Saviour, or He does not save at all. No man shall ever play any part in his own salvation. None whatsoever! God shares His praise with nobody!

This principle lay at the very heart of the Reformation. Rome teaches faith plus sacraments, which is nothing else than faith plus works. But the Reformers preached the Word of God unashamedly: Justification comes through faith

alone! *Sola fides* (faith alone) was one of the clarion calls of the Reformation. [In a sense the entire Reformation hinged on the word *sola* (alone).]

In spite of it all, legalism is rife in the contemporary church. The fundamental error of wishing to add something to the merit of Christ has persisted through the ages. And to this day it manifests in typical ways:

Firstly, the legalist externalises God's moral law. The divine will for man is expounded in the Bible and condensed in the Ten Commandments. Not having a regenerated heart, the legalist does not understand experientially what it means to serve God 'in spirit and truth' (John 4:21-24). The biblical emphasis on the fact that obedience is only acceptable to God if it comes from the heart, is largely neglected (cf. Matt 5:21 ff.). Important to him is, therefore, outward conformity to the letter of God's Law. This, after all, is the ladder by which he hopes to reach heaven.

The legalist therefore glories in the form of true religion, but knows nothing of its inward power. Outwardly he can be impressively devoted, but inwardly completely devoid of grace and spiritually barren.

An example of this would be the case of a motorist who likes to drive at 120 km/h, the speed at which his car happens to perform and handle to

his satisfaction. He passes a speed trap on the highway and the traffic officers regard him as a perfect example of a law abiding citizen. However, ten minutes later he drives through town, still at 120 km/h, because that is how he likes it - and he is promptly arrested!

Secondly, the legalist adds to God's moral law. Not having a heart enlightened by the Spirit, he finds it impossible to relate to God's law in its true meaning. He is however eager to establish the necessary religious merit to gain salvation. Therefore, slowly but surely, he begins to create his own expressions of obedience.

These expressions haven taken on a thousand faces through the ages. Every generation and each culture has its own thing. Sometimes it is negative: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!' (Col 2:21). Sometimes it is positive: Do this, and do that!

These things are not necessarily unimportant in themselves - on the contrary, very often they are Biblical imperatives. But this they all have in common: instead of being expressions of gratitude for God's free grace in Christ, they are additions to His merits, the rungs of the ladder which supposedly reaches up to heaven. What is more, they replace Christ as the focal point of zeal, and effectively become conditions, shibboleths (Judg 12:6),

for acceptance within a specific circle.

LAWLESSNESS

This heresy, also called antinomianism, was prevalent among various groups in the early church. Their argument is quite simple and on the face of it watertight: if sinners are justified by the grace of God on the basis of Christ's perfect sacrifice, without any merit on the part of man, then surely good works, obedience and a holy life are of no consequence in the process of salvation. Faith only is required. Apparently some went even further, arguing that since God's grace is emphasised every time He forgives sin, it follows that the more we sin, the more He has to forgive and therefore the greater His glory. Paul destroys this diabolical argument in Romans 6.

Inevitably antinomianism leads to ethical carelessness in the lives of Christians (even to the extent that they may well become worldly and sinful to a shocking degree). This is what James warns us about. He agrees that faith alone is required, but points out that there are many types of faith. Faith without works is a dead faith. It is false and cannot lead to salvation. Devils too have such faith. True saving faith, on the other hand, always goes hand in hand with good works.

In these days legalism fells thousands, but lawlessness claims tens of thousands. Neglect of, and even contempt towards the necessity of persevering in holy obedience to the end is not just an innocent blunder, it is lethal heresy! On this point the Bible is very clear: without holiness, no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

As in the case of legalism, lawlessness comes to the fore in several ways.

In the first place, it manifests itself in the view that the Ten Commandments are irrelevant in our day and age, because 'Christians are under grace, not under the law.' This leads to 'situation ethics' which regards love as the only ethical principle. Therefore, anything you do out of love is right, even if it militates against the Ten Commandments. In terms of this view it is up to the individual to decide on what constitutes love and how it should be expressed in a given situation. The Word of God delivers us from this quicksand of whimsical subjectivism by teaching that love, even for the New Testament Christian, flows in 'ten channels' (Matt 5:17 ff.; Mark 12:28 ff.; 1John 5:2-3).

In the second place, it finds expression in the 'cheap gospel' which assures people of their salvation on the grounds of a once-off acceptance of Christ -

irrespective of whether this action is followed by authentic spiritual fruit. This 'other gospel' with its motto 'once saved, always saved', teaches that your salvation depends only on your acceptance of Christ as your Saviour. If this is not confirmed by your subsequent lifestyle, you are a 'carnal Christian', but saved nonetheless. It differs in essence from the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, which teaches that holy perseverance to the end is the hallmark of true salvation.

THE ROOT PROBLEM OF BOTH ERRORS

What exactly is the root problem of legalism and lawlessness? Are not the supporters of both able to quote scripture upon scripture to brace their views? Is there not, after all, an inescapable contradiction running through the Bible?

The problem with both these views is that *the relationship between justification and sanctification* is not clearly understood. *Legalism confuses the two*, while distinguishing between them is of the utmost importance. *Lawlessness*, on the other hand, does not understand the perfect integration of God's work of salvation in a person and accordingly *separates the two*, while they are, in fact, inseparably connected.

It is therefore essential that

every Christian should have a clear understanding both of the exact nature of justification and sanctification, and of their relationship to each other.

JUSTIFICATION

Justification is a legal pronouncement made by God in respect of every person who truly believes in Christ. It is an action by God alone. It is His prerogative, and His alone. Man has no part in it.

At the heart of justification (and therefore also of the gospel and redemption in Christ) lie the concepts '*substitution*' and '*imputation*'. [The verb 'to impute' ('*logizomai*') which is an accounting term, and which can mean either to debit or to credit, appears no less than 11 times in Rom 4.]

Jesus Christ came as true man in order to stand as Head of God's new humanity (1Cor 15:45-47 calls Him 'the last Adam', 'the second man) before God. He does so on behalf of those sinners who are savingly united to Him through faith, who have been taken out of fallen humanity in Adam and made part of the new creation in Christ (Rom 5:12-21; 2Cor 5:17). *He is our Substitute, our Mediator!* (1Tim 2:5).

Nobody has expressed this truth better than the Puritan, Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680): '*There are*

but two men standing before God, Adam and Christ, and these two men have all other men hanging on their girdles.'

As Mediator of the Covenant of Grace, Christ lived his life on earth in perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father. This *perfect obedience, or righteousness is then imputed (credited) to believing sinners*. But there is more to it. Their *debt is imputed (debited) to Him* - and when He pays it, He dies under the punishing hand of God.

Justification is therefore a *double cure!* It has two components, one positive and the other negative. Both are vitally important. It is not possible to have the one without the other. On the one hand, God acquits sinners because their debt has been paid by Christ; on the other His perfect righteousness is imputed to them, thus qualifying them to live forever in God's holy presence.

SANCTIFICATION

Sanctification is a work of God's grace in the life of everyone whom He has declared righteous. It is aimed at forming the image of Christ in them and is a progressive, lifelong process.

Unlike justification, man plays a full and active role in sanctification. It is a conscious, strenuous and lifelong effort on his part. This dual involvement of man and God is

beautifully brought to the fore in Phil 2:12-13: '... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.'

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

A lack of clarity on the relationship between justification and sanctification can lead to all sorts of distortions in the theologies and lives of men.

Wherein lies the *difference* between the two, and what is it that *legalism fails to understand*?

* Justification has to do with *objective imputation* (my debt to Jesus, His righteousness to me). Sanctification has to do with *subjective impartation* (the forming of His image in me).

* The righteousness which I acquire through justification, is *not my own* but that of Christ (and is therefore perfect). The righteousness which I acquire through sanctification, although worked by the Holy Spirit, is indeed *my own* (and therefore imperfect).

* With justification there is *no place for my own works* (not even faith can contribute anything, being

only the channel through which it flows to me). With sanctification *my works are central and indispensable* - which is why the Bible urges us to run, to fight, to be alert, to labour, to flee, to persevere, etc.

* Justification is *complete and perfect* (in all eternity I shall never be more justified than at the first moment of faith). Sanctification is always *relative and imperfect*, although increasing progressively, and only becomes perfect at the moment of glorification.

* Justification has to do with my *objective legal status* before God; sanctification with my *subjective, moral condition*.

* Justification gives me *the right to eternal glory*. Sanctification *prepares me* for it and is, as such, the '*watermark of authentic salvation*'.

What do justification and sanctification have *in common*, why are they so inextricably connected? *What is it that lawlessness should understand?*

* Both flow from *God's grace* in Christ (1Cor 1:30).

* Both are indispensably part of God's *integrated work of salvation* in my life.

* Both must therefore be *present simultaneously in the same person*: 'If you have it at all, you have it all!'

ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF A KNIFE

The solution of the 'problem of the two apostles' has at least underlined one fact: *the true Christian moves on the cutting edge of a knife, with legalism and lawlessness as yawning abysses on either side!*

It is against these dangers that the apostles warn us in all earnest: Paul against legalism, which teaches that salvation is obtained through grace plus good works, and James against lawlessness, which teaches that salvation can be obtained through a faith which is not accompanied by good works.

In conclusion, let us put it positively. Paul answers the question '*how am I saved?*' James answers the question '*how does salvation find expression in a person's life, how can we recognise it?*'



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