

Guiding Thesis

The full appropriation of God's promised blessings
are ours through faith
apart from law-obedience.

This commentary series is guided by Paul's thesis / gospel:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS = BLESSINGS = WORKS

This guiding principle is established in Romans and Galatians, and to a lesser extent in Paul's other letters, as he addresses the issue of nomism. Nomism (pietism), the heresy promoted by the members of the circumcision party, the Judaizers, is the belief that, although a person is justified by faith, law-obedience is essential both to restrain sin and shape holiness (sanctify) for the full appropriation of God's promised blessings. Against this, Paul contends that "the righteous out of faith will live", and this "apart from works of the law", Rom.3:28. For Paul, holiness / righteousness, and thus the full appropriation of the promised blessings of the covenant, is possessed in union with Christ on the basis of faith (Christ's faithfulness and our faith response), and this apart from law-obedience. Works / law-obedience is but the natural fruit of faith, and to this end Paul encourages us to be what we are in Christ.

Paul's thesis / gospel derives from the teachings of Jesus, such that Paul serves as the inspired exegete of Jesus. Although a matter of contention, this commentary series rests on the assumption that to properly understand the mind of Christ, it is necessary to interpret the whole of the New Testament in line with Pauline theology. So, for example, to properly understand the synoptic gospels, it is necessary to read back the above Pauline formula, particularly as it relates to the Law.

Paul's key Text: *"The righteous out of faith will live"*, Habakkuk 2:4.

The grace of God
realised in his righteous reign
(his setting all things right)
in justification
(in judging right / setting right a people before him),
out of FAITH
(based on Christ's faithfulness + our faith response),
establishes the RIGHTEOUSNESS of God's children
(covenant compliance),
facilitating God's promised covenant BLESSINGS
(the full appropriation of his promised new life through the Spirit),

and its fruit, the WORKS of the law
(the application of brotherly love).
cf. Rom.1:16-17

The Pauline synthesis:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS = BLESSINGS = WORKS.

Paul is not a libertine in stressing "apart from works", for he accepts that those in Christ naturally seek to live as Christ and to this end he exhorts believers to be what they are. Paul stresses "apart from works" in response to the nomist heresy of his opponents who taught that:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS + WORKS = BLESSINGS.

James' synthesis:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS = BLESSINGS = WORKS.

James is not giving undue weight to works of the law, as Luther thought, but is seeking to counter the argument of libertine believers who taught that:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS = BLESSINGS - (minus) WORKS .

Luther's synthesis:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS = BLESSINGS = WORKS.

Luther is Pauline in his view of justification, but his perspective is somewhat different to Paul because his opponents are not nomists, but legalists who taught that:

FAITH + WORKS = RIGHTEOUSNESS = BLESSINGS.

Luther focuses on how a person can be saved, but Paul focuses on how a person may fully appropriate the promised Abrahamic blessings / new life in Christ.

The New Perspective synthesis:

FAITH = RIGHTEOUSNESS - LAW = GENTILE INCLUSION.

This flawed synthesis proposes that Paul is not dealing with the issue of how a person fully appropriates the blessings of the covenant, but rather, how a Gentile can be included in God's covenant community, namely, by the removal of Jewish exclusivism, ie. works of the LAW.

Terms defined:

FAITH: **ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πιστὴν**, "from the faith / faithfulness of Christ toward our faith response." Faith entails the linkage of **εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστευσάμεν**, "we have come to believe in Jesus Christ" (our faith / reliance upon the grace of God), and this operative **διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ**, "through the faith of Christ" / by means of the faith / faithfulness of Christ,

Gal.2:16. So, FAITH = Our faith response in Christ's faith / faithfulness (his atoning sacrifice on our behalf).

RIGHTEOUSNESS: Right standing before God, "covenant compliance", Dumbrell, "uprightness", Fitzmyer; "(the state of) rectification", Martyn. Gaining the condition of righteousness is expressed by the verb "justified", *just-if-I'd never sinned*, which word takes one or all of the following shades of meaning:

- "confer a righteous status on", Cranfield;
- judge as covenant compliant, "judged in the right with God", Dumbrell, "count / treat as right/righteous", Barrett;
- "set right before God", Bruce, "rectify", Martyn. (NP = a divine declaration of covenant membership).

BLESSINGS: The promised blessings of the covenant / the fullness of new life in Christ.

WORKS: Paul, following Jesus' lead, uses the term to describe submission to the law of Moses, extending to God's law in general (NP = Jewish badges of covenant membership, eg. Sabbath law, circumcision), which law serves the following ends:

- to expose sin and so reinforce a reliance on divine grace expedited through faith;
- to guide the life of a child of God.

The Bias of Grace

A Christian is free from all things and over all things so that he needs no works to make him righteous and save him, since faith alone abundantly confers all these things. Should he grow so foolish, however; as to presume to become righteous, free, saved and a Christian by means of some good work, he would instantly lose faith and all its benefits", Martin Luther 1550.

There is an abiding truth upon which all Biblical truth rests. The Lord God our creator is a God of grace. Not only is our God a righteous God, right-acting, a God who keeps his covenant promises, but above all he shows covenant mercy. Our God forgives covenant members when a just condemnation would be more appropriate.

God's kindness towards us is realised in the life, death, resurrection and reign of Jesus Christ. We, who are totally unworthy of His kindness because of our sin, find in Jesus eternal approval and acceptance. In Jesus we stand without sin and are therefore righteous in God's sight. Because we are united to Christ, "in Christ", our sin becomes his, dying with him on the cross, and his righteousness becomes ours.

The instrument of this divine grace is faith - faith in the covenant mercy of God operative in the person and work of Jesus Christ. So, it is by divine grace that we stand eternally right in the sight of God, justified - *just-if-I'ed* never sinned.

All is of grace, and this particularly so when it comes to our justification. Justification is an eternal predetermination of the will of God to account us righteous in his sight, judge us right before him, and thus set us eternally right before him. This kindness is graciously granting on the basis of the faithfulness of Christ. So, right-standing before God is a gift of divine grace, a gift which rests on the faithfulness of Christ, and is appropriated through the instrument of faith. This truth, above all others, must frame our understanding of the scriptures.

Paul, the exegete of Jesus' teachings, leaves us in no doubt that "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (ie., law-obedience)", Gal.5:1. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast", Eph.2:8,9.

This is certainly good news. "My righteousness is but filthy rags", yet when I put my hand in Jesus' hand, all my failings are nailed to the cross with Christ. From that moment on and for eternity, I am hidden in Christ and thus approved and made perfect in the sight of God - justified by grace through faith. With my past, present and future sins no longer accountable, my God smiles at me, smiles at me always.

To properly understand the Bible it is essential to apply *the bias of grace*.

