

4. Read Genesis 15:1-19 as background to vv.6. What does it mean that Abraham's faith was 'credited'? On what basis does God credit righteousness to Abraham?

5. How was Abraham's saving faith a model for us?

6. How does the experience of gospel faith contrast with that of a person who seeks to earn God's acceptance? (vv.10-12)

7. If v.10 is true, how can God credit us as righteous and not be unjust (vv. 13-14)? What does it mean that Jesus did not simply take our curse but "became a curse" for us?

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Grace and growth

Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.:IVP, 1979)

1. Justification and sanctification.

In the New Testament... *justification* (the acceptance of believers as righteous in the sight of God through the righteousness of Jesus Christ accounted to them) and *sanctification* (progress in *actual* holiness expressed in their lives) are often closely intertwined... However, they are quite distinct: justification is the perfect righteousness of Christ reckoned to us, covering the remaining imperfections in our lives like a robe of stainless holiness; sanctification is the process of removing those imperfections as we are enabled more and more to put off the bondages of sin and put on new life in Christ...

2. Justification reversed with sanctification.

a. Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the surface of their lives they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: *you are accepted*, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude...

b. A conscience which is not fully enlightened both to the seriousness of its condition before God, and to the grandeur of God's merciful provision of redemption, will inevitably fall prey to anxiety, pride, sensuality and all the other expressions of that unconscious despair which Kierkegaard called "the sickness unto death." [So] we start each day with our personal security resting not on...the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements... Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace.

3. Justification as the basis for all sanctification.

a. Much that we have interpreted as a defect of sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons — much less secure than non-Christians, because of the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches on the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity...

b. It is often said today, in circles which blend popular psychology with Christianity, that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others... But no realistic human beings find it easy to love or forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ... [There is much evidence in our experience against the idea that we are children of God, but] *the faith that surmounts the evidence and is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness...*

c. Presented in this context, even the demand for sanctification becomes part of the good news. It offers understanding of the bondage that has distorted our lives and the promise of release into a life of Spirit-empowered freedom and beauty. Ministries that attack only the surface of sin and fail to ground spiritual growth in the believer's union with Christ produce either self-righteousness or despair...

Discussion questions

1. What helped you the most? What questions did this raise?

2. In 2a, Lovelace mentions two equal but opposite ways you can fail to draw on the benefits of justification. What are they? (Note: They are mentioned also at the very end of 2b and 3c.)

3. In what specific ways do you “reverse” justification and sanctification (i.e., reverse the gospel)?

4. From what sources do you try to “steal love and acceptance” instead of “warming yourself at the fire of God’s love” (section 3b)? How do these things “distort our lives” and deny you “Spirit-empowered freedom” (section 3c)?

