

Reformed Congregational Fellowship April 25-27, 2006

Savoy Declaration 9:4-5

Of Free Will

4. *When God converts a sinner and translates him into the state of grace, he frees him from his natural bondage under sin; and by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly or only will that which is good, but does also that which is evil.*
5. *The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory.*

“Avoiding Lawlessness, Legalism and Depression in the Christian Life”

I’d like to thank David Green for giving me the opportunity to share. It’s my first time even being at one of these gatherings of “Reformed Congregationalists,” and in some ways it’s like a “coming home” experience to me. Not merely because I have only recently returned from eleven years in Honduras, but because I have found such a spiritual home in the Reformed “Camp,” or the Reformed understanding of biblical theology.

I was telling David that I was raised in a Federated Church here in Massachusetts—the merger of a UCC and ABC church—whose theological position could best be labeled “generic shallow semi-Unitarian New England liberalism.” We had a deacon board consisting of a retired Unitarian minister, and another gentleman who once told me, “*It doesn’t matter what you believe in—you could believe in a pencil for all it matters—as long as you believe in something.*” I even remember one of the pastors (in the late 60’s) preaching on aspects of the “Death of God” theology that was coming out of Harvard and Yale at the time.

And I tell you that because it left me so disillusioned and so spiritually empty that it drove me into a lengthy search for truth. A search that led me back into Congregationalism—but of an entirely different brand than the one I grew up in—Congregationalism as it used to be in days gone by, when Congregational churches were Congregational in polity, and yet Reformed in theology. Though I must admit, it was the theology, rather than the polity that drew me back—the message of free grace in Jesus Christ.

And somewhat providentially (at least in regard to this conference), it was in studying the doctrine covered in this chapter of the Savoy Declaration—actually the doctrine of the bondage of man’s will in sin found here in point three of Chapter 9—which brought about somewhat of a spiritual epiphany.

It was one of those “post-conversion conversion-like experiences” where all the theological puzzle pieces I was trying to fit together just fell into place and it all made sense! As I once explained it to a friend, “*It was like putting a jig-saw puzzle together and being unable to find that one piece—but then finding it, and immediately having 6 or 7 other pieces fall right into place around it, because their placement was dependent upon finding that one particular piece.*” Or for you who play on the computer, it was like watching my wife play solitaire, and finish a run of cards, and watching them all start flying down into a stack at the bottom of the screen.

That's what the doctrine of human inability is to the doctrines of grace—it's the key that makes the whole structure of a biblical Gospel of salvation by sheer grace make sense! In fact, coming from a non-theological background, with heavy Arminian influences as my first contact with evangelicalism, I can say from personal experience that I could never fully understand why salvation had to be by free and sovereign grace until I came to understand the doctrine of human inability, or the bondage of the will in sin. As J.I. Packer rightly notes in the preface to Luther's classic, The Bondage of the Will:

The denial of 'free-will' was to Luther the foundation of the biblical doctrine of grace, and a hearty endorsement of that denial was the first step for anyone who would understand the gospel and come to faith in God. The man who has not yet practically and experimentally learned the bondage of his will in sin, has not yet comprehended any part of the gospel; for this is 'the hinge on which all turns,' the ground on which the gospel rests...¹

To Luther, says Packer,

the doctrine of the bondage of the will in particular was the corner-stone of the gospel, and the very foundation of faith.... Luther believes himself to be fighting for the truth of God...The Gospel of God is in jeopardy; the springs of Luther's religion are touched; the man is moved; the volcano erupts; argument pours out of him white-hot.²

Thus, I would assert, it is this doctrine (this chapter of the Savoy Declaration) which we must take special care to explain to those who were *not* raised with a Reformed understanding of the faith. More than any other doctrine (excepting maybe justification), this is the one we need to make sure our people understand. For it is this doctrine alone that convinces the sinner of his absolute, indispensable need for the sovereign intervention of God's grace in regeneration. It alone forces us to see why we are so totally reliant, in very way, upon the unmerited, gracious, sovereign and supernatural intervention of God to regenerate us. And the writers of the Savoy Declaration surely understood this—which is why they *wisely*, and *sequentially* placed this doctrine where they did—immediately preceding Chapter 10, on "*Effectual Calling and Regeneration*." For apart from understanding that humanity has "wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation," and that the sinner is "dead in sin, nor able by his own strength to convert himself"—the mind struggles to comprehend how it is that God's free and sovereign grace in regeneration must precede faith, or must be free and sovereign in the first place.

But, of course, my topic is *not* the bondage of the will in sin! My topic is, **How a person, after God has freed their will from its bondage to sin, by sovereign grace alone, and translated them into a state of grace, thus "enabling them to will and to do that which is spiritually good," can avoid lawlessness, legalism and depression in their Christian walk.**

So, without any further delay, let me address how the earnest, truly regenerate believer can avoid: **1.) Lawlessness 2.) Legalism and 3.) Depression in the Christian life**—all of which (I believe) are prevalent in the church at large—even in churches who embrace the Reformed understanding of theology. I believe we have all known people in our congregations who have used grace to endorse lawlessness; twisted grace to endorse legalism; and misunderstood grace in such a way as to suffer from spiritual depression as a result.

¹ Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957, pp. 44-45.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 42-43.

And I must also say (lest I mislead you) that I myself have *unwittingly*, or worse yet, *consciously* on occasion, fallen prey to all three of these traps. At one time or another in my Christian life, I have succumbed to each one. Some of you seated here today may be able to confess the same thing. Some may actually be guilty of, or presently wrestling with, one of these three things right now. If so (or if you know someone else who is), then I hope my words may be of some encouragement to you.

So ***FIRST***, *how do we avoid **LAWLESSNESS** in our Christian walk?* It's an especially pertinent question given the fact that we have, as paragraph 4 declares, been translated into a state of grace, and as most here (I assume) would agree, are then kept by the power of God in that state of grace. What some would call, not the perseverance of the saints, but the perseverance of God toward the saints.

In John 10:28 Jesus says, "I give them eternal life." And that divine act of giving us life, we could say, is what "translates us into a state of grace." But it doesn't end there. Jesus then continues on to say, "and they shall never perish, for no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who gave them to me is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." That's what we could call, "being kept by the power of God in the state of grace into which we are translated" (Jn. 10:28b-29).

These two truths—"saved by grace," and "kept by grace"—have often been used by some as an excuse to ponder, embrace, participate in, or walk in sin. Since the forgiveness of all our sins—*past, present and future*—was purchased by Christ on the cross (and not by our efforts, either present or foreseen); and since we have become the recipients of that forgiveness by God's sheer unmerited grace who made us alive with Christ when we were dead in trespasses and sins—a grace in which we are eternally secure (Eph. 2:1-5, Col. 2:13, Jn. 10:28-29, Rom. 8:28-39)—it is easy to see how one could reason that the forgiveness of whatever sin they commit (repugnant as it may indeed be to God) has already been purchased on the cross and therefore will not be held against them once confessed (I Jn. 1:9-10)—even if it was premeditated. This type of reasoning is especially easy for people in relation to the more "secret" or "just this once" type of sins.

Free and sovereign grace *is* meant to impart rest and peace to the struggling soul. It is meant to instill a sense of security in hearts that yearn for, yet sometimes lack, assurance. It is a necessary component of true gospel faith and godliness (Isaiah 30:15, Heb. 4:9-11), which is why Jeremiah Burroughs could say,

This is a mighty mystery, for when God takes a poor soul and forgives his sin, He not only forgives him his present and past sins, but lays in a pardon for all the sins that shall ever be committed by him afterwards... This is a great mystery, and those who teach otherwise rob the people of God of an abundance of comfort that they might otherwise have, were this truth made clearly known unto them.³

Yet as Paul assures us in Romans 6:1 and 15, we can be tempted, when the pleasures of sin call, to twist this cross-purchased grace and our security in it, into an excuse to gratify the lusts of the flesh. As sinners we are naturally equipped and endlessly capable of coming up with rationalizations that justify doing what sin makes us want to do. We are amazingly adept, as Jude

³ Jeremiah Burroughs, Gospel Remission, Soli Deo Gloria, Morgan, PA, 1995, pp. 27, 30-31.

puts it, at changing “the grace of God into a license for immorality” when we want to (Jude 4). And people (dare I say we) often want to.

Whether it be escape from a difficult marriage through divorce, or that one fleeting glance at that pornographic image, magazine, or website, or fudging on our taxes or that college financial aid application; whether it be the urge to gossip or slander a brother or sister in the faith whom we have issues with or wallow in self-pity; whether it be that secret desire to flirt with that person who isn’t our spouse (and justify it by the fact that nothing “physical” has taken place); or be it that desire to bask in the pleasure of an ego stroked by someone who praises us for our spiritual maturity and accomplishments in a way that we take credit for producing them, and thereby rob God of the glory due His name—regardless of what sin it is—sometimes it is our translation into a state of grace, and our security in that state of grace that we use to rationalize such sin in our minds, entertain it in our hearts, and even participate in it in our lives. And again, this is usually in relation to the more subtle, private, secret, one time, “*no one will find out*” type of sins.

So how can we avoid this temptation which grace, by the very freeness of its nature, seems to lay before us? What weapons can we avail ourselves of in the fight against lawlessness? I believe we must use many, since our temptations are many and varied in their appeal.

First, Paul sets before us the glory of God. In the first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 6 verse 19, and chapter 10 verse 31 he tells us that a desire for God’s glory should so consume our hearts, and govern our choices and actions, that we “*do everything to the glory of God.*” That we have a heart bent on honoring God with our bodies, minds, attitudes, affections and actions.

The **second** common answer I’ve heard (especially in Reformed circles) is that we should avoid lawless acts “*out of gratitude for grace received.*” Yet as often as I’ve heard it, I find it to be more a deduction from sanctified reason, than an explicit admonition from Scripture itself.

Third, some have said (and I agree with them) that we can buffet ourselves against the temptation toward lawlessness by *seeing and savoring God Himself as the superior, infinite, unequalled and eternal source of pleasure for the Christian* (C.S. Lewis, Blaise Pascal, and John Piper, just to name a few). God, such people correctly point out, is not opposed to pleasure. The Christian life is not merely grit your teeth and tough it out here and you’ll get your reward in heaven. The choice isn’t earthly pleasures (or the pleasures of sin) versus no pleasures at all in this life! Rather, the choice is the temporal and fleeting pleasures of sin, or the infinitely richer and lasting pleasures of communion with God through His Spirit now, followed by everlasting pleasures in His presence for all eternity (Psalms 16, 32, etc., etc.) As Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish pastor/theologian once said:

We only cease to be the slave of one appetite because another taste has brought it into subordination. A youth may cease to idolize sensual pleasure, but it’s only because the idol of material gain has gotten the ascendancy. There is not one personal transformation in which the heart is left without an object of beauty and joy. Its desire for one particular object may be conquered, but its desire to have some object is unconquerable. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.⁴

Luther likewise said, “Ask experience how impervious to dissuasion are those whose hearts are set on anything! If they abandon their quest of it, they only do so under pressure, or because of some counter-attraction, but never freely...”⁵ Jonathan Edwards asserted a similar truth in his Inquiry into

⁴ Cited by Tim Keller in a sermon entitled, “Resting Grace,” New York, New York, Cassette #324.

⁵ Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, Fleming Revell, 1957, pg. 103.

the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will, suggesting that we will always follow the strongest inclination at any particular time.

A **fourth** weapon in the fight against lawlessness is *the promise of future blessing for obedience*, such as God promises the 5th commandment, which Paul called, “the first commandment with a promise” (Eph. 6:2). It is the belief in Future Grace (as Piper has put it in his book by that title). Faithful obedience in the present (though not “meriting” God’s favor) will result in God’s blessing in the future—even if that blessing be nothing more than the deadening of our sinful appetites, the integrity of our witness, a life without regrets, or greater conformity to the image and likeness of Christ (Hebrews 11:1-40).

The **fifth** is spoken of in this chapter of the Savoy Declaration. *The Christian is to avoid lawlessness because he now can!* As one who has been translated into a state of grace and freed from his natural bondage under sin, the believer is now enabled to “freely will and do that which is spiritually good.” In other words, he is to avoid lawlessness because he has now been enabled to do so, and being enabled to do so, has a greater obligation to do so (Rom. 6:18; 8:12). It is a common scriptural theme that the reception of grace makes one more responsible, rather than less responsible as is commonly conceived (Amos 3:2). Jesus tells us, “To whom much [grace] is given, much is expected” (Luke 12:48).

Grace, by freeing us from our natural enslavement to sin, makes us *more* responsible precisely because it imparts “*response-ability*”—ability to choose the good we could not previously choose. Before God “by His grace alone” freed us from the dominion of sin, we were slaves to it, and could not by our own strength or efforts be, or do, otherwise. But because the believer has had his nature altered by God’s converting grace, he is now able to will and do that which is spiritually good—and being *able* to do so, he is *expected* to do so. Better yet, he is *obligated* to do so (Rom. 8:12). God’s regenerating grace puts him under a new obligation to “*put to death the misdeeds of the body*” (Rom. 8:13), because now, through the gift of the Spirit, *he can*.

Grace does not simply liberate us from our slavery to sin to make us morally neutral free agents. Not at all! It liberates us from our slavery to sin so that we may become slaves of righteousness. We are not simply freed for the sake of being free! He frees us to be able to choose the good we could not choose before we became the recipients of His enabling grace. We are freed from one form of slavery, unto a better form of slavery! “Though you used to be slaves to sin...you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness” (Romans 6:18). “Yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he does not perfectly or only will that which is good, but does also that which is evil.”

And **last**, as contrary as this reasoning may sound to some, *the final weapon against lawlessness is the declaration of the uncanny freeness of the pardon and forgiveness which the Gospel promises to anyone who will merely receive it by faith* (Is. 55:1-3)—a freeness which makes some very nervous, and even causes them to libel it as the very cause of lawlessness in the first place! But this misconception rests upon a wrong understanding of what the promises of free grace produce in a person’s inner being. No one has stated this point better or more forcefully than Horatius Bonar in his classic work, God’s Way of Holiness. The quote is lengthy, but extremely pertinent, so please bear with me as I read it.

I confess that I do not see how my being thoroughly persuaded that a holy God loves me with a holy love, and has forgiven me all my sins, has a tendency to evil [license or lawlessness]. It seems of all truths, one of the likeliest to make me holy, to kindle love, to stimulate to good works, and to abase all pride; whereas an uncertainty in this matter enfeebles me, darkens me, bewilders me, incapacitates me for service or, at

best sets me striving to work my way into the favor of God under the influence of a subordinate and mercenary class of motives, which can do nothing but keep me dreading and doubting all the days of my life... In all this there is not one thought of grace or divine free love, no recognition of forgiveness as the root of holiness... [Man] is slow to learn that all legal deterrents are in their very nature irritants, with no power to produce or enforce anything but a constrained externalism... Forgiveness of sins, in believing God's testimony to the finished propitiation of the cross, is not simply indispensable to a holy life, in the way of removing terror and liberating the soul from the pressure of guilt, but of imparting an impulse, and a motive, and a power which nothing else could do. Forgiveness put at the end, or in the middle, a partial forgiveness, or an uncertain forgiveness, or a grudging forgiveness, would be to no avail; it would only tantalize and mock. But a complete forgiveness, presented in such a way as to carry its own certainty along with it to everyone who will take it at the hands of God—this is a power in the earth, a power against self, a power over the flesh, a power for holiness, such as no amount of suspense or terror could create... An unforgiven man cannot work. He has not the will, nor the power, nor the liberty. He is in chains... A forgiven man is the true worker, the true Law-keeper. He can, He will, he must work for God. He has come into contact with that part of God's character which warms his cold heart. Forgiving love constrains him. He cannot but work for Him who has removed his sins from him as far as the east is from the west. Forgiveness received freely from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, acts as a spring, an impulse, a stimulus of divine potency. It is more irresistible than law, or terror, or threat... Terror accomplishes no real obedience. Suspense brings forth no fruit unto holiness. No gloomy uncertainty of God's favor can subdue one lust, or correct the crookedness of our will. But the free pardon of the cross uproots sin, and withers all its branches. Only the certainty of love, forgiving love, can do this.⁶

*Then **SECONDLY**, we come to the question of how we avoid **LEGALISM** in the Christian life.* How, some might ask, does one get from grace to legalism? The answer is really quite simple. Actually there are two ways: **1st)** *Legalism often flows out of the belief that grace does indeed make us able "to freely will and do that which is spiritually good."* And because grace gives us the power to choose the good we could not previously choose, some have therefore reasoned that because we now *can*, we *must*, and any failure to do what we *can and must* should be met with legalistic demands or sanctions—thereby effectively twisting God's enabling grace into a way to enforce legalisms.

2nd) *Legalism is also commonly used as a guard against lawlessness.* When pastors want to ensure that their people either embrace some spiritual or moral virtue, or avoid some immoral vice or practice (often cultural rather than scriptural) it is extremely tempting to do what so many others have done—declare that one's acceptance with God (or their justification) somehow, or to some degree, hinges upon doing the desired thing, or not doing the undesirable thing.

And it's not just in the moral spheres. I had one man (from a Reformed church) tell me, "*No one can be truly saved, unless, or until, they believe in the doctrine of election.*" Having read some

⁶ Horatius Bonar, God's Way of Holiness, Evangelical Press, Durham, England pp. 40, 49-50, 51-52.

of the older Strict English Baptists who had “made faith in election part of saving faith,”⁷ he had added belief in election to faith in Christ. Another brother withheld the blessing of Christian fellowship from me until *after* I had satisfactorily answered his questions relating to the 5 primary doctrines of grace. In addition, I had people in my church in Honduras who were raised in such “hairsplittingly legalistic Calvinistic churches” (as they referred to them—mostly in the South) that they hesitated even coming to my church once they found out I was a Calvinistic. (Imagine purposely avoiding a church that preaches grace because it might be too legalistic!) It was an issue that had so soured one brother’s attitude toward Calvinism that he told a visiting friend that unlike many he had met, I was a “nice Calvinist.”

And I tell you all that because it was one of my great surprises (after having discovered the riches of God’s grace expounded by the Reformers) to find Reformed or Calvinistic churches that were “legalistic.” I had been in Pelagian or semi-Pelagian churches (before and after I was first converted) that were extremely legalistic (and I suffered the joy-robbing, and spiritually abusive effects of being in those environments). Yet I had at least found legalism to be somewhat consistent with their theology. I can see how Arminianism and legalism could co-exist harmoniously.

But Reformed and legalistic? Or Calvinistic and legalistic? It seemed so contradictory. It is contradictory! And yet as I struggled to understand how Reformed theology and legalism could co-exist, I didn’t have to go far to find the answer, because it was right there in my own heart. As I examined myself I realized that self-righteousness (which is the root, or well-spring, of all legalism) was present in my thoughts, and attitudes, and affections, and actions, even though I also had come to embrace the doctrines of grace.

The deeply rooted remnants of the Pharisaical nature are hard (no, impossible!) to completely eradicate or put to death. When beginning his Sonship Conferences, C. John Miller used to say: “*Hello, my name is Jack Miller, and I am a recovering Pharisee.*” And as much as I don’t like to admit it, I am too. Try as I might, I just can’t seem to rid myself of those God-dishonoring, witness-damaging, love-diminishing, affection-distorting tendencies of the Pharisee that lives inside me. The Pharisee who refuses to let go of the idea that it’s something *in me*, or *done by me*, that makes me more loved, or more acceptable, or slightly more pleasing to God than that other pastor or group whose theology is so inconsistent, practice is so erratic, and ideas so novel.

Calvin once said, “The human heart is an idol factory.” And if I may take a stab at what the idol is which the human heart is incessantly mass-producing, I would have to say it is the *idol of self*—or to be more precise, *the idol of the self-justifying self*. No matter how many times I have sought to smash that idol, and cast it down from the altar of my life, it always seems to regain its strength, piece itself back together, and creep back onto that altar in my heart again and again.

George Whitefield in his classic sermon The Lord Our Righteousness, said of the self-righteous, self-justifying nature of man (which is the root of all legalism),

Whoever is acquainted with the nature of mankind in general, or the propensity of his own heart in particular, must acknowledge that self-righteousness is the last idol that is rooted out of the heart... We cry out against popery, and that very justly; but we are all Papists; at least I am sure that we are all Arminians by nature...⁸

Roger Nicole put it a little differently. He said, “We are all by nature Pelagian in our thinking.”⁹ Not just semi-Pelagian, but Pelagian!

⁷ Iain Murray, Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1995, pg. 111.

⁸ George Whitefield, Memoirs, Hunt and Noyes, 1834, pg. 297.

⁹ Cited in R.C. Sproul, Willing to Believe, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, pg. 22.

What do they mean? We always want to think that its something we do, some attitude we have, some doctrine we hold to, some idea we have in relation to the things of God; some spiritual discipline we've mastered, or experience we've had, or church growth technique we've used with some degree of success; some discipleship methodology, or personality trait we possess, or moral vice we lack, that makes us just a little bit more acceptable to God than the other guy—like that semi-Pelagian neighbor, or that Charismatic pastor, or that new emergent group that abhors tradition and sings only contemporary choruses!

You see, every time I allow myself to think that something in me, or done by me, makes me just a little bit more loved, or a little bit more acceptable, or a little bit more pleasing to God than another brother or sister in Christ who isn't as knowledgeable, or doctrinally sound, or morally and spiritually disciplined as myself, then I have fed the idol of self-righteousness and watered the seeds of legalism in my heart. Every legalism (be it doctrinal, cultural, or moral) begins with a self-justifying—*“I want to be holier, more acceptable, more loved and pleasing to God than you”*—type of desire in our hearts.

So how do we combat that innate self-righteous? Those innate Pelagian tendencies and self-justifying thoughts that lie at the root of all legalism? There is only one way: Our self-righteous sickness can only be healed by applying to our hearts and minds the medicinal salve of the Gospel of free grace—over, and over and over again—until it really starts to permeate my thoughts and affections at their root, where sin conceives and spawns them in the center and core of my being.

As Luther once put it (probably speaking from personal experience), “The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.”¹⁰

“The Gospel,” says Paul, “is the Power of God for the salvation of all who believe” (Rom. 1:16). And Tim Keller adds,

We never get beyond the gospel to something more advanced. The gospel is not the first “step” in a stairway of truths, rather, it is more like the “hub” in a “wheel” of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C's, but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom. We are not just justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience, but the gospel is the way we grow (Gal. 3:1-3) and are renewed ((Col. 1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier (Rom. 1:16-17)...All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel.¹¹

The answer to legalism, then, is a faith gaze that refuses to take its eyes off Jesus, and a heart constantly being exposed to the healing and transformational truths of the Gospel of God's free grace. Many preach grace, but it's a grace, or favor, based upon one's performance, rather than a grace that comes freely from the hand of a generous God who delights in freely supplying the needs of His children, and thereby enabling their performance. Much evangelical preaching conveys the idea of “conditional grace”—if we do this, God will do that—preaching that implies that we by our duties, or devotion(s), or giving, or efforts call down the blessings of God. Sermons which give many the impression that God passively stands back with arms folded, waiting for us to do the things that will spur Him to respond to our needs and desires. Graeme Goldsworthy has said,

¹⁰ Cited by Tim Keller, Class Notes, RTS DMin Class, Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern World, January 10, 2002.

¹¹ Tim Keller, *ibid*, pg. 1.

Exhortations without the Gospel are legalistic... Suppose we happen to have been preaching through an epistle and on that Sunday have arrived at the ethical exhortations. We happily expound on these and ignore the wider context of the gospel. In so doing, we confirm the visitors' worst misconceptions about Christianity—being a Christian, they now know, is indeed a matter of trying to live a good life...Any sermon then, that aims to apply the biblical text to the congregation and does so without making it crystal clear that it is in Christ alone and through Christ alone that the application is realized, is not a Christian sermon. It is at best an exercise in wishful and pietistic thinking. It is at worst demonic in its Christ denying legalism.¹²

Thus, the only way to uproot legalism, if I may use Luther's somewhat striking phrase, is to "*beat the Gospel into my head continually.*" For only the Gospel can dislodge my natural Pelagian and semi-Pelagian tendencies and beat the Pharisee out of me. Only then do I become convinced I cannot receive any more love than what Christ merited for me in His life of obedience and His death for sin. I cannot be made any more pleasing to my Father than what Christ has made me by His merits credited to my stead. I can not be made any more acceptable than what Christ has made me to be by His flawless righteousness imputed to me by grace through faith. To quote Melancthon in his letter to his friend Brentius:

You can only rightly comprehend it [the righteousness that comes from God] by turning your eyes entirely from the Law, and Augustine's idea about our fulfilling the Law, and by fixing them wholly upon the free promise, so as to see that it is on account of that promise, and for Christ's sake, that we are justified—that is, accepted and obtain peace.¹³

Which brings me to my LAST point — How we avoid depression in the Christian life (Actually there is such a close connection between legalism and depression in the Christian life that I contemplated addressing them under the same heading).

I must begin this section by saying I am thankful for, in agreement with, and indebted to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones for His book Spiritual Depression—especially the first chapter where he thankfully (as a medical doctor as well as a theologian) lists numerous causes of depression that have nothing to do with wrong thinking, doubt or unbelief.

The first common cause he lists is *temperament*, noting that introverted people are much more susceptible to spiritual depression than extroverts. I have found the same to be true in my own pastoral experience, and for the reasons he mentions: "Introverts, he says, tend to be more introspective, whereas the extrovert is generally a more superficial person."¹⁴ Using Henry Martyn as an example he says, "he suffered from an obvious tendency to morbidity and introspection,"¹⁵ being careful to note that there is a great difference between *self-examination* and *introspection*. The first is healthy and necessary, the latter frequently leads to morbidity. The introvert is a person "who tends to always be analyzing himself, analyzing everything he does, and worrying about the possible

¹² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, pg. 124.

¹³ Cited by Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, Evangelical Press, Durham, England, 1992, pg. 19.

¹⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003, pg. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

effects of his actions, always harking back, always full of vain regrets.”¹⁶ This means introverted people are “more given to this spiritual disease called spiritual depression than others.”¹⁷ He must be careful that he is not “always putting his soul on a plate and dissecting it.”¹⁸

Another cause of spiritual depression is *physical ailments*. Spurgeon, says Lloyd-Jones, was “subject to spiritual depression and the main explanation in his case was undoubtedly the fact that he suffered from the gouty condition which eventually killed him. A tendency to acute depression is an unailing accompaniment of the gout he inherited from his forebears.”¹⁹

He goes on say that exhaustion, tiredness, overstrain (or burnout), and any form of illness also cause depression in many. “The greatest and the best Christians when they are physically weak are more prone to an attack of spiritual depression than at any other time...”²⁰ In our day it is almost universally accepted that depression can often stem from physiological or psychological ailments which are beyond the realms of my expertise to comment upon—but just as real all the same. But I would like to point out what I have found to be the most significant cause of spiritual depression in people—an inadequate view, or understanding of the biblical teaching on justification by faith.

Much preaching in evangelical circles today is little more than Christian moralism. Sermons often cite statistics and polls which show the moral deterioration of society, denounce the immorality of the world around us, and then encourage the believer to be different (often in the form of a verbal spanking from the pulpit (guilt inducing sermons), or motivational pep talks from the pulpit (“you can do it” type sermons) encouraging the flock to simply follow the three proven steps guaranteed to generate the energy and stamina needed to perform up to par (or above it). These sermons (as mentioned before) give people the impression (implied rather than explicitly stated) that one’s acceptance or approval before God (their justification), even if it’s only to the slightest degree, is conditioned upon their performance. Or maybe a better way of stating it is that such sermons spawn a conscious or unconscious belief that one’s sanctification is dependent upon their justification. Even the contemporary fad of reading the Early Church Fathers has fed into this, since by as early as the beginning of the second century nearly all Christian writings,

uniformly assume that our justification is based on our sanctification, and that we are made acceptable to God by our works. This concept reached it’s highest refinement in the work of Augustine, who taught that along with the gift of faith, God infuses into the believer’s actual experience the righteousness of Christ, placing them in a ‘state of grace’ which makes them acceptable to God.²¹

This doctrine of an *infused* or *imparted* righteousness, rather than the Pauline doctrine of a righteousness *credited* or *imputed* to the believer’s stead by faith alone has produced much emotional anguish in earnest believers. Thus Lovelace goes on to point out what I also have found to be true in the congregations I have pastured, that,

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives... Many have a theoretical commitment to [the doctrine of justification by faith] but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification, in the Augustinian manner, drawing their

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 18.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 19.

²¹ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1979, pg. 99.

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.²²

In my experience I have found this one thing to be the main (non-physiological) cause for spiritual depression. Spiritually awakened people (who are conscious of their sinfulness and depravity) and yet look to their sanctification for their justification, or draw their assurance of acceptance with God from their most recent religious or moral performance, tend to place themselves on a lifelong emotional roller-coaster ride. When they perceive themselves to have performed well they drift into emotional self-congratulation or self-righteous ego stroking, and when they perform poorly they go into self-berating depressions—up and down and up and down. Though the more introspective fall quickly into despair and disillusionment even when they do well, for they realize that even their best performance is shot through and through with selfishness, imperfection and the polluting effects of sin. Poor performance merely leads to self-berating and depression a bit faster.

Of course this is nothing new. The English Puritans constantly warned their people against the dangers of looking to their performance. Thomas Wilcox, in his most famous tract Honey from the Rock wrote:

Labor after sanctification to your utmost, but do not make a Christ of it to save yourself...Christ's infinite satisfaction, not your sanctification, must be your justification before God.²³

Stand with all your weight upon Christ's righteousness. Take heed of having one foot on your righteousness, and another on Christ's. Till Christ come and sit on high upon a throne of grace in the conscience, there is nothing but guilt, terrors, and secret suspicions; the soul hanging between hope and fear, which is an un-gospel-like state.²⁴

And again, "He that sets up his sanctification to look at, to comfort him, he sets up the greatest idol which will strengthen his doubts and fears. Do only look away from Christ, and straightaway, like Peter, you sink in doubts."²⁵ And we might justifiably add from personal experience, "like Peter you will also sink into despair, guilt and depression as well." Horatius Bonar, also speaking of the mistake of making forgiveness, acceptance or justification before God uncertain, or dependent upon one's performance, says:

uncertainty in this matter enfeebles me, darkens me, bewilders me, incapacitates me for service or, at the best sets me striving to work my way into the favor of God under the influence of a subordinate and mercenary class of motives, which can do nothing

²² Ibid., pg. 101.

²³ Thomas Wilcox, Honey from the Rock, Chapel Library, pg. 8, 12.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 5.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 19.

but keep me dreading and doubting all the days of my life, leaving me, perhaps, at the close, in hopeless darkness.²⁶

Lloyd-Jones concurs. After writing in 1965 that “*so many Christians are in this condition (of spiritual depression)*”²⁷ he says,

I would suggest they are miserable [depressed] Christians, simply because they have not understood the way of salvation, and for that reason all their beliefs and efforts [at overcoming depression] have been more or less useless. They often concentrate on the question of sanctification, but it does not help them because they have not understood justification.²⁸

Here I would like to highlight a personal struggle I had with depression. As the above cited quotes all infer, it often has to do with mixing thoughts of sanctification with justification—and that is exactly what I had done—though it was more out of ignorance than anything else. I knew that I was saved by grace; the grace of election; the grace of effectual calling and regeneration by the Holy Spirit; the grace of Christ’s substitutionary sin-pardoning death credited to my stead by faith alone. I knew all that! Yet my understanding of justification was *lacking* and *imbalanced*, because as you can see, it focused exclusively on God crediting to my stead only the atoning merits of Christ’s *death*. My faith gaze, in other words, was completely *cross-focused*. I believed that the righteousness imputed to my account by faith was exclusively that of Christ’s death for my transgressions of God’s law.

Yet my exclusively cross-focused view of justification left me wondering how God’s righteous demands were to be met if it were not somehow through my strenuous attempts to meet them, or the Spirit’s ongoing work of producing them in me (Augustinian style). I had mistakenly confused *impartation* (a righteousness God gives or works in us by His Spirit) with *imputation* (a righteousness God credits to us freely by grace). I’m embarrassed to even admit it now, but my view of impartation even caused me to think that pardon as well was conditioned on something the Spirit produced in me—like being sincere when I asked for it, or broken hearted over my sin, or full of contrition and remorse. I would never have denied that forgiveness was dependent upon the atoning work of Christ, but at the same time I wrestled with believing that one could be forgiven if they didn’t feel guilt, remorse or shame for their sins. And if they didn’t feel these things, I reasoned, it was not true repentance. How could a request for forgiveness be *valid* if the person asking wasn’t full of self-abhorrence for their sins?

I did not see it then, but in a very subtle way I somehow believed that my self-abusive, self-berating, emotional self-punishment was what really showed God I was sorry for my sin and thus made me *worthy* to partake of the forgiveness laid up for me in Christ. It wasn’t faith alone, but faith accompanied by the fruit of contrition.

Then, as I was doing a paper on the Puritans, I came across this quote by George Whitefield, again, in his sermon, The Lord Our Righteousness:

Here we see the meaning of the word righteousness. It implies the active as well as passive obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. We generally, when talking of the merits of Christ, only mention the latter, that is, His death; whereas the former, that is, His life of active obedience is equally necessary. Christ is not such a Savior as becomes

²⁶ Horatius Bonar, God’s Way of Holiness, pg. 40.

²⁷ Lloyd-Jones, Spiritual Depression, pg. 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 25.

us, unless we join both together. Christ not only died, but lived; not only suffered but obeyed for, or instead of, poor sinners. And both these jointly make up that complete righteousness which is to be imputed to us.²⁹

I had never considered that before. In the church I grew up in Christ's life was merely an example to follow, not a life of perfect Law-abiding and Law-fulfilling substitutionary obedience credited to the believing sinner in the grace of justification! Even in evangelical circles I heard the same thing—Christ lived as an example of love. Yet as Owen rightly points out: “Can it be supposed that all the great and glorious effects of present grace and future blessedness should follow necessarily on, and be the effect of, mere pardon?”³⁰ Owen's response is “no.” The law not only required that a *due penalty* for transgressions be paid, but also that a *due obedience* be rendered to all the Law's demands. “*It is evident,*” says Owen,

that unto our justification before God is required, not only that we be freed from the damnatory sentence of the law, which we are by the pardon of sin, but moreover, ‘that the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in us,’ or that, we have a righteousness answering the obedience that the law requires; whereupon our acceptance with God, through the riches of his grace, and our title unto the heavenly inheritance, do depend. This we have not in ourselves, nor can we attain to it... Wherefore the perfect obedience of Christ is imputed unto us, or in the sight of God we can never be justified.³¹

It is hard to explain the weight that was lifted from my shoulders when that truth struck me. When an incomplete righteousness (pardon only) is proclaimed, the believer is driven to do one of two things: lower the righteous standards of God to a level so low he actually thinks he is able to achieve them, or live a life of constant guilt, failure, and frustration (with frequent depressions) by trying to do what he is incapable of doing, but feels compelled to supply. It was this obvious dilemma that caused Owen to say, “leaving us in ourselves to answer [the Laws] obligation unto obedience, we are not freed nor delivered.”³²

Yet the unbelievable and truly liberating news of the gospel; news that frees us from the cycle of habitual failure and depression is that Christ has supplied not only our *pardon*, but also our *perfection*. Not just our *forgiveness* for our violations of the Law through His death, but the *perfect, sinless obedience* the Law requires of us as well!

Without knowing it I had joined John Wesley in “restricting the doctrine of justification to pardon, and consigning the fulfillment of the law to...sanctification,”³³ believing also with him that, “we are every hour and every moment pleasing or displeasing to God according to our works; according to the whole of our inward tempers, and our outward behavior.”³⁴ And because I had, I was locked into a cycle of emotional ups and downs—a seemingly endless cycle of repentance and pardon, followed by renewed resolutions, will-effort, and pledges of moral reformation, followed by habitual failure and bouts with depression.

²⁹ George Whitefield, The Lord our Righteousness, pg. 5.

³⁰ John Owen, The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, Vol. 5, pg. 270.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., pg. 272.

³³ Watson as cited by Nettles, The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, pg. 309.

³⁴ John Wesley as cited by Nettles, Ibid., pg. 310.

To this day it still amazes me how the discovery of this one gospel truth could impart to my soul a long sought after emotional stability and evenness, deaden long-standing sinful passions, engender an inner restful composure, liberate my conscience from the burden of guilt for repeated failures, and produce in me a holy confidence and consistent joy.

Owen said that the imputation of Christ's perfection "is cried out against, as inconsistent with the necessity of personal holiness and obedience,"³⁵ and "there is nothing in the whole doctrine of justification which meets with a more fierce and various opposition."³⁶ Wesley said to speak of it "sparingly" since it would make people "careless."³⁷

Please, my brothers, for the sake of your people's spiritual health and renewal, do not follow his advice, lest your desire be to consign your people to what Wilcox called that "*un-Gospel-like state*" of hanging between hope and fear, and produce what Lloyd-Jones called, "*miserable (depressed) Christians.*"

The Guilt / Failure / Depression Cycle

Many have been raised in a home where guilt was used to keep them morally straight. When conversion took place, this method of heaping guilt upon the conscience was incorporated by the individual into their Christian life (a part of the "worldly wisdom" they carried into their Christian life unquestioned). Guilt, they had come to believe, was a necessary part of keeping them on the straight and narrow road, morally speaking.

It never dawned on them that guilt was part of the problem, and not part of the solution for keeping them from sin. I myself fell into this trap, which actually kept me enslaved to sinful passions, and more susceptible to the lure of temptation. In fact, it wasn't until I read the Puritans that I realized my folly—the folly of trying to use guilt to keep me morally straight.

Two Puritans helped me see that heaping guilt upon the conscience actually enhanced the power of sin that Christ, by His sin atoning death, had come to break. Many people, I have found, heap guilt upon their consciences for failure or poor performance using emotionally self-punishing phrases such as, "*You stupid fool, how could you do such a thing?*" or, "*You idiot. You should know better.*" And many use inner chidings which involve self-loathing comments much worse than those. Yet the English Puritans, Walter Marshall in his book, "The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification," and Thomas Wilcox in his famous tract, "Honey from the Rock," show us how such tactics are not only counter-intuitive but contrary to a gospel state of mind and heart.

Marshall tells us that a guilty conscience "strongly maintains and increases the dominion of sin and Satan in us."³⁸ Guilt works, "mischievous effects in the soul against godliness," and, "so disaffects people toward God, that they cannot endure to think, or speak, or hear of Him and His Law; but strive to put Him out of their minds by fleshly pleasures and worldly employments."³⁹ Again Marshall asserts (and I believe correctly), "A guilty conscience is a foul conscience, and it will make all our services and duties dead works, unfit for the living God."⁴⁰ Keeping guilt in the

³⁵ John Owen, The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, Vol. 5, pg. 252.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ John Wesley as cited by Nettles, The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will, pg. 308.

³⁸ Walter Marshall, The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification, Sovereign Grace, Lafayette, IN, 2001, pg. 16.

³⁹ Ibid., pg. 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 142.

conscience, or heaping guilt upon the conscience makes us, “more weak and prone to fall into other sins.”⁴¹

That’s why he could advise believers: “Let not the guilt of sin stay at all upon the conscience, but wash it with all speed in the fountain of Christ’s blood.”⁴² In other words, we are to use the *gospel* and not *guilt* to fight sin! Marshall understood what the gospel plainly teaches—that God broke the power of sin by forgiving it. “If sin is forgiven you shall be delivered from its power.”⁴³

Wilcox agrees. Guilt retained in the conscience makes even the justified believer more susceptible to the lure and temptations of sin. “Where guilt is there is hardness of heart, and therefore much guilt argues very little if anything of Christ.”⁴⁴ That’s why Wilcox mimics the advice of Marshall: “Keep not guilt in the conscience, but apply the blood of Christ immediately. God charges sin and guilt upon you to make you look to Christ...”⁴⁵ Guilt does nothing to enhance holiness, it merely enhances the power of sin over us.

This should teach us that instead of berating the conscience with self-punishing and self-loathing comments intended at making us *feel more guilty* (a worldly ploy at seeking to stem participation in sin), we should restrain ourselves from doing so and instead look to Christ immediately before guilt has a chance to pollute and contaminate the conscience and thereby “increase the dominion of sin and Satan in us” (the gospel answer).

Though most evangelicals have consciously rejected the Catholic doctrine of penance and the *physically* self-abusive practices which go along with it, like flagellating themselves with a whip, or climbing up rock stairs on the knees until they bleed, many still regularly engage in *emotional* forms of the penance on a regular basis—berating themselves verbally (or internally) for their failures.

In the ranks of the evangelical church (and even some Reformed bodies of believers) there are many “closet Catholics” who somehow (it seems) believe the work of Christ wasn’t sufficient to purchase in full the forgiveness of their sins. And therefore they *add* to the atoning work of Christ by punishing themselves emotionally for their sins—a “work” that either completes, or adds to, the punishment Christ received for all their sins when He died in their stead. As both Wilcox and Marshall suggest: *Those who do so make a Christ out of their guilt, contrition and remorse, believing there is somehow sin-crucifying or sin-restraining power in their self-loathings—or in the worst case scenario, some type of sanctifying or salvific merit.* In fact, as Wilcox *does* say:

When Satan charges sin upon the conscience, then for the soul to charge it upon Christ, that is gospel-like; that is to make Him Christ. He serves for that use, to accept Christ’s righteousness alone, His blood alone for salvation, that is the sum of the gospel. When the soul, in all duties and distress, can say, “Nothing but Christ, Christ alone, for righteousness, justification sanctification, redemption” (I Cor 1:30); not humbling, not duties, not graces; that soul has got above the reach of the billows.⁴⁶

How hard it is to *really* and *truly* believe Christ paid our sin-debt *IN FULL!* Few things are harder for our Pelagian natures to believe than the Gospel of free grace, and that Christ meant it when he said of His redemptive work, “It is finished.”

⁴¹ Ibid., pg. 89.

⁴² Ibid., pg. 89.

⁴³ Ibid., pg. 135.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 5.

⁴⁵ Thomas Wilcox, *Honey from the Rock*, Chapel Library, Pensacola, FL, pg. 14.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg. 4.

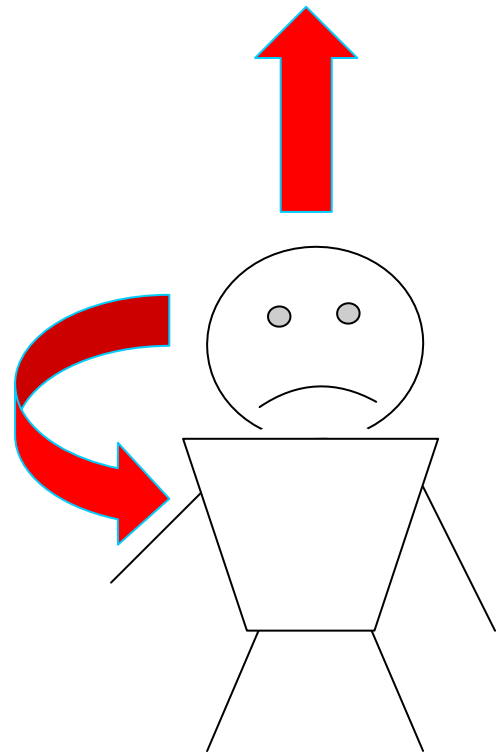
Augustinian View of Impartation

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives... Many have a theoretical commitment to [the doctrine of justification by faith] but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification, in the Augustinian manner, 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.

Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1979, pg. 99.

But looking on the other hand, in faith to our own religious performance, or some evidence of spiritual fruit in us to meet the law's demand for obedience, can only lead to despair.

Looking on the one hand, in faith to Christ's death for pardon brings assurance of forgiveness



The believer's faith gaze under the Augustinian view is divided. He looks in part to Christ and in part to himself for assurance of his justification. He looks to the death of Christ for pardon, but to his own religious performance for the supply of righteous God demands. He looks to something in or done by him for assurance that God accepts him. And by looking in this way to his *sanctification* for assurance of his *justification*, he can't help but subject himself to despair, anxiety, guilt and depressions—especially when he knows deep down, as Isaiah 64:4 declares, that even his most glorious efforts or righteous deeds are stained through and through with sin.

Luther and the Puritan View on Imputation

Few (Christians) 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.

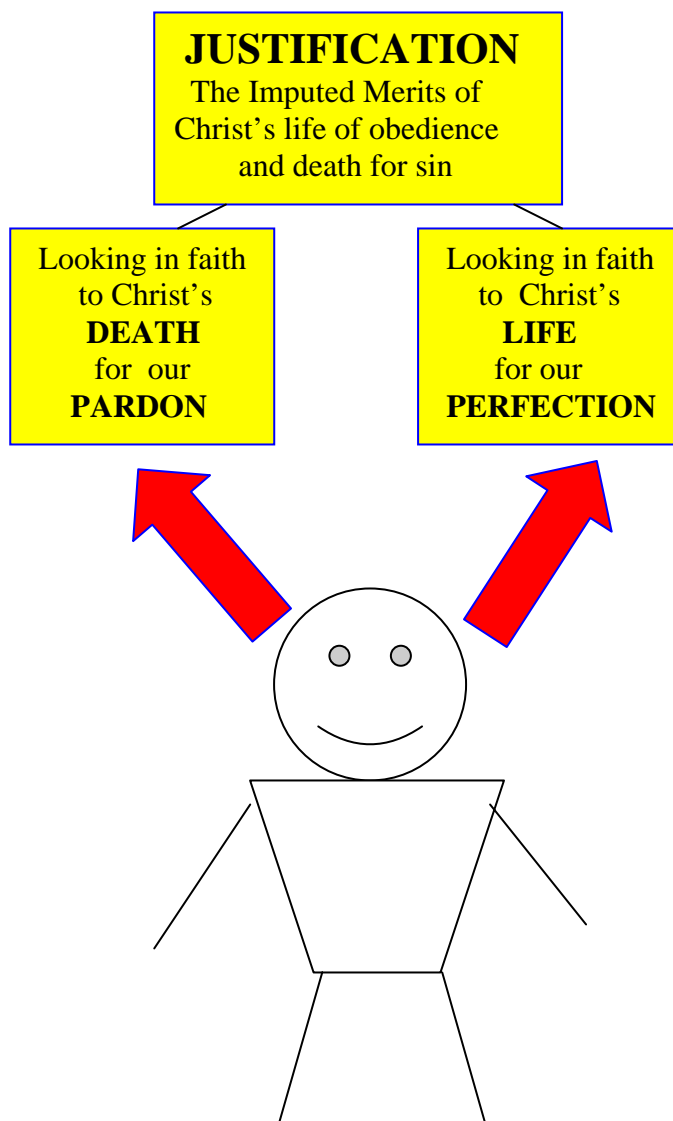
Richard Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1979, pg. 99.

Stand with all your weight upon Christ's righteousness. Take heed of having one foot on your righteousness, and another on Christ's. Till Christ come and sit on high upon a throne of grace in the conscience, there is nothing but guilt, terrors, and secret suspicions; the soul hanging between hope and fear, which is an un-gospel-like state... Labor after sanctification to your utmost, but do not make a Christ of it to save yourself... Christ's infinite satisfaction, not your sanctification, must be your justification before God.

Thomas Wilcox, Honey from the Rock, Chapel Library, pg. 5, 8, 12.

Unto our justification before God is required, not only that we be freed from the damnatory sentence of the law, which we are by the pardon of sin, but moreover, 'that the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in us,' or that, we have a righteousness answering the obedience that the law requires... This we have not in ourselves, nor can we attain to it... Wherefore the perfect obedience of Christ is imputed unto us, or in the sight of God we can never be justified.

John Owen, The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, Vol. 5, pg. 270.



Luther's Platform—Sinner yet Accepted

The believer is to look solely to the righteous merits of Christ for his assurance of acceptance with God—merits Christ purchased by His life of perfect obedience and His death for sin, and receives as a gift imputed (credited) by faith alone. Only this undivided gaze can give the sinner unwavering assurance of his acceptance with God, and alleviate fear, anxiety, guilt and depressions. By looking solely to Christ (and not partially to Him and partially one's sin-stained performance as with Augustinian Impartation), one comes to discover and experience the fullness of joy, rest of soul, and incomprehensible peace that the Gospel promises.

Christ

has become for us
wisdom from God, our
righteousness, holiness
and redemption
(I Cor. 1:30)

PARDON

Christ's **death**
atoned for all our
transgressions of
God's law.

JUSTIFICATION

The righteousness
imputed to us must
consist of **BOTH** pardon
and perfection, "*or in
the sight of God we can
never be justified.*"
(Owen)

PERFECTION

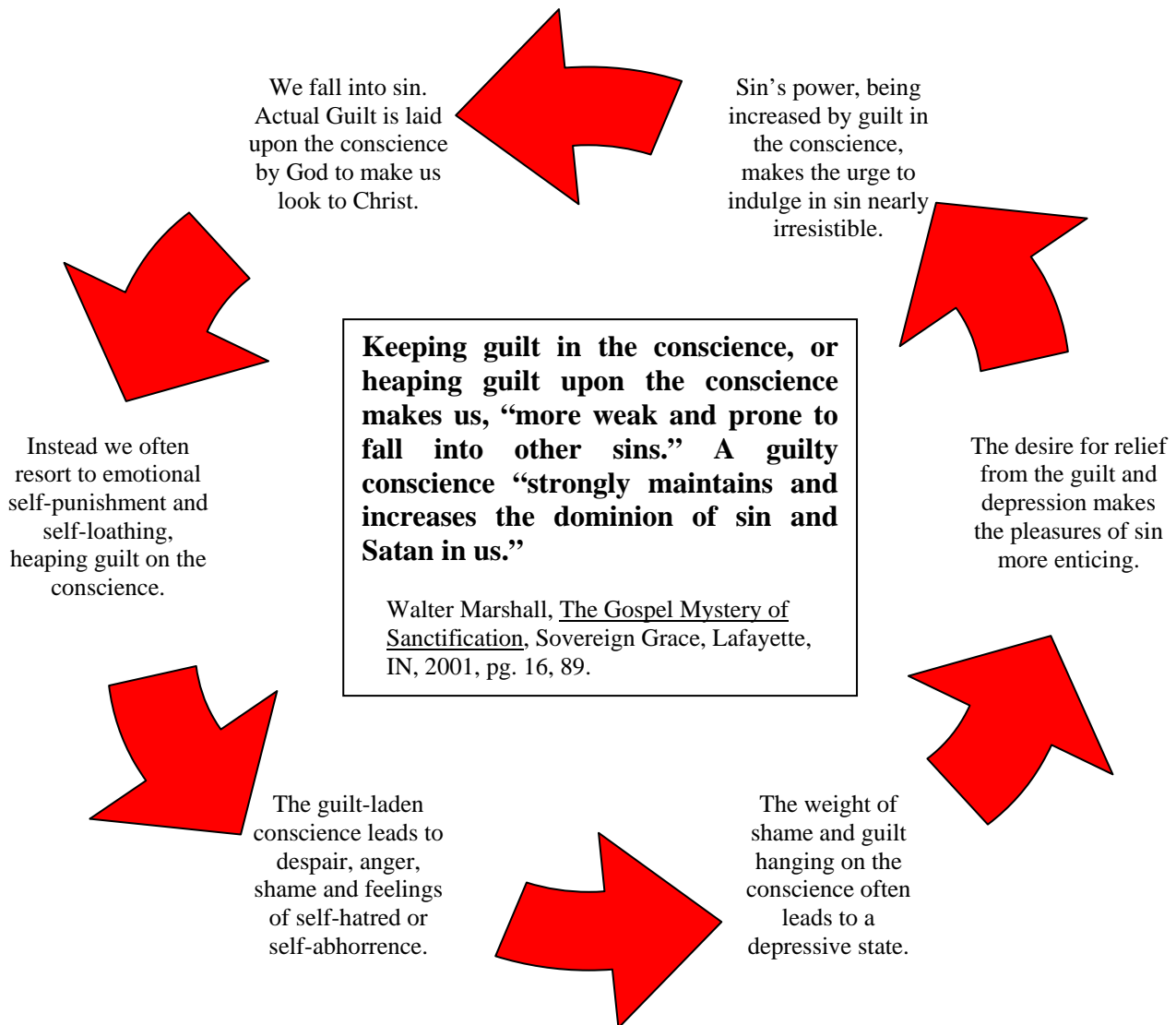
Christ's **life** of
perfect, flawless
obedience to all the
law's commands
becomes ours.

“It is evident that unto our justification before God is required, not only that we be freed from the damnatory sentence of the law, which we are by the pardon of sin, but moreover, ‘that the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in us,’ or that, we have a righteousness answering the obedience that the law requires; whereupon our acceptance with God, through the riches of his grace, and our title unto the heavenly inheritance, do depend. This we have not in ourselves, nor can we attain to it... Wherefore the perfect obedience of Christ is imputed unto us, or in the sight of God we can never be justified.”

John Owen, The Doctrine of Justification by Faith, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, Vol. 5, pg. 270.

Sin, Guilt, Failure Cycle

Our normal un-gospel-like tendency is to sin, and then load guilt on the conscience as a way of trying to keep us from falling to sin the next time. But this ploy merely *“maintains and increases the dominion of sin and Satan in us,”* as Marshall puts it. It does *not* help us to resist sin, but actually strengthens the power of sin, intensifies the lure of the immediate pleasure sin offers, and keeps us locked in a compulsive and inescapable cycle of sin and failure, followed by guilt, shame and depressions, followed by sin and failure,



How to Break the Sin, Guilt, Failure Cycle

JUSTIFICATION

(Imputed Righteousness)

Look to **CHRIST**
for
PARDON

Look to **CHRIST**
for
PERFECTION

When God charges the conscience with actual guilt for sin, look to Christ immediately!

“Keep not guilt in the conscience, but apply the blood of Christ immediately. God charges sin and guilt upon you to make you look to Christ...”

Thomas Wilcox, *Honey from the Rock*, Chapel Library, Pensacola, Fl, pg. 14.

“Let not the guilt of sin stay at all upon the conscience, but wash it with all speed in the fountain of Christ’s blood.”

Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, Sovereign Grace, Lafayette, IN, 2001, pg. 89.

STOP!

Do **NOT** resort to emotional self-punishment or heaping guilt upon the conscience. **CHRIST** already bore your punishment in full by His death for sin, and supplied your perfection in His life of perfect obedience.