

Reformed Congregational Fellowship

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(www.ChristCommunityBibleChurch.org)

"Human Inadequacy, Sin's Pollution and the Acceptance of God"

Savoy Declaration Chapter 16:3-5 - Of Good Works

3. *They who in their obedience attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate¹ and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.*
4. *We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because, as they are good, they proceed from the Spirit, and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment.*
5. *Yet notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreproveable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.*

¹ The word "supererogate" (which means "to pay over and above," or "to perform to a degree that is more than duty requires") is obviously inserted here in direct contradistinction to the Roman Catholic doctrine of "Works of Supererogation." This Catholic doctrine teaches that certain works not absolutely required for salvation may be done so well that God will, or may be pleased, to accept the performance of them in atonement for the defective service of those works that are said to be absolutely required. The supererogate merit of works performed "over and above what is required by God," therefore, can according to this view, compensate for the deficient performance of other inadequately performed works.

I. The Only Acceptable Standard of Obedience.

There is probably no Christian doctrine that grates more heavily against the general persuasion of people everywhere (including many who claim to hold to the Christian faith) than the biblical doctrine that no human works nor any degree of obedience rendered to God (regardless of how well or consistently or sacrificially it is performed) can ever do anything but *"fall short of much which in duty we are bound to do."* Yet even that fails to stun people as much as the truth that follows right in line with it: That such flawed obedience is not only unacceptable to God as it is, but would bring upon us the just condemnation of our holy God were such flawed performances not covered by the grace that comes to us through Jesus.

As holy and righteous, God's standard for human obedience is nothing less than absolute perfection. He deserves nothing less and will settle for nothing less. The commands to, *"Be holy as I am holy,"*² or *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"*³ both express the standard of righteousness that God requires. And because perfection is the standard of obedience that God requires, no fallen and imperfect creature can possibly offer to God that which He requires, let alone offering Him *"over and above"* what He requires. The common teenage lament often voiced to demanding parents in utter frustration, holds true in regard to God's law: *"No matter what I do it is never good enough."* It can't be if sinless perfection is the only acceptable standard.

Therefore, far from performing to a degree that is more than what duty requires, *"those who in their obedience attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life"* fall short of even reaching the standard set forth for all. It's just not possible. The person who understands what the law requires, and is familiar with the inner workings of sin in their own heart and soul, knows all too well how that sin stains and pollutes even their best motivations, plans and actions.

One of the things the law is intended to do in carrying out its evangelical goal of leading sinners to Christ is to convince all people, without exception, of the utter impossibility of fallen creatures attaining a degree of righteousness acceptable to God. The purpose of the law, as Paul points out, is to convince humanity of its sinfulness, *"that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God"* (the scene described being that of a lawbreaker standing before their divine judge so obviously guilty that they have no ability to even try and plead innocence).⁴

The purpose of the law, in relation to grace, is to show what God requires, and thus convince us that, *"no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law."*⁵ It is to make us *"conscious of sin"*⁶ and thus show us how far short we fall from attaining to God's standard of righteousness. It is intended to *"put us to death,"*⁷ or we could legitimately say, *"kill any hope that we could possibly merit salvation by our works, obedience or observance of it."*

The law should convince us that we could never fulfill it. That was left for Christ, and Christ alone, to do. *"If there be ground for you to trust in your own righteousness,"* says Jonathan Edwards mimicking the words of Paul in Galatians 2:21, *"then all that Christ did to*

² Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:16

³ Matthew 5:48

⁴ Romans 3:19

⁵ Romans 5:20

⁶ Romans 5:20

⁷ Romans 7:11

purchase salvation, and all that God did to prepare the way for it, is in vain."⁸ The person who suggests we can live up to God's righteous standard, let alone supererogate it, effectually negates our need for Christ as Law-Fulfiller or the One who is Himself our only acceptable righteousness, holiness and redemption.⁹

The sinful passions at work in our bodies, says Paul, were aroused by the law, "so that we bore fruit for death."¹⁰ In accordance with its purpose of leading sinners to Christ, its goal was to cause "sin to be recognized as sin," producing death in us through what was good, "so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful."¹¹ Put more simply, the law is meant to drive us to a point of absolute despair in ourselves and our own human efforts to comply with what God requires, and thus convince us that there is nothing we could ever do to save ourselves. It is meant to drive away all our vain and prideful hopes that we could ever merit anything but death and eternal condemnation for anything we do, since everything we do falls so far short of God's holy standard of perfect obedience.

As J. Gresham Machen once noted, "A low view of the law leads to legalism in religion; a high view makes one a seeker after grace."¹² So long as people are under the misconception that all God requires in His law is an earnest and honest attempt to give it their best try (as long as they hold to a low view of the law), they will naively continue seeking His acceptance through self-justification by offering Him their sin-stained and flawed attempts at being righteous. They will lock themselves into the condemnable practice of the Pharisees who "put their confidence in their own righteousness"¹³ -- a common but lamentable course of action which caused them, unlike the repentant prostitutes and tax-collectors, to go home without being "justified."¹⁴ When people understand the perfect obedience God requires in His law (or hold to a high view of the law)¹⁵ in conjunction with their absolute inability to provide anything that even comes close, they will be driven by a despair in themselves and their own efforts to be a "seeker after grace."

Nothing is more effective in driving lost sinners to seek refuge in God's grace and the shelter offered by Christ than the conviction that God demands perfect righteousness, and that they themselves are wholly unable to provide it.

Walter Marshall summarizes the Reformed position when he states: "It is impossible for us to keep the law perfectly, and to purge ourselves from all sin, as long as we live in this world, though we use our best endeavors."¹⁶

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, cited in "The Promises of God," Garborg's, Bloomington, MN, 1988, February 17 entry.

⁹ 1 Cor. 1:30-31

¹⁰ Romans 7:5

¹¹ Romans 7:13

¹² Cited by Philip Yancey, Grace Notes, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2009, pg. 373.

¹³ Luke 18:9

¹⁴ Luke 18:14

¹⁵ In the Gospel we see that Jesus Himself took the law of God so seriously--*He had such a high view of the law*--that He fulfilled every demand for obedience and paid to the utmost degree the penalty for disobeying it. Such knowledge should keep any believer from adopting a low view of that which Jesus held in such high esteem and considered so crucial to the completion of His redemptive work. If Jesus had held a low regard for the law (as some suggest) or saw no reason to fulfill it perfectly, in every way, He would not have attained for offending sinners an impeccable righteousness that could be offered to satisfy the justice of God and therefore make them acceptable to His sight.

¹⁶ Walter Marshall, The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., Lafayette, IN, 2001, pg. 94.

Jerry Bridges agrees. In his attempt to drive people from an *"almost is surely good enough"* mindset he writes:

Only perfect obedience is acceptable to God. Years ago Ivory soap had a slogan, 'Ninety-nine-and-forty-four-one-hundredths-percent pure.' Apparently that is quite an accomplishment for soap, but that is not good enough for God. For God only 100 percent is acceptable.¹⁷

This brings Bridges to verbalize the conclusion he expects every rational person to come to: *"that we can never through our own obedience attain a righteousness that is sufficient for salvation."*¹⁸ The law was meant to lead people to the understanding that apart from the grace of God and the righteousness He gives as a gift to faith, no one could ever have any hope of being saved.

In saving sinners God refuses to lower His holy standard or His demand for perfect, flawless and habitual obedience. As a just and holy God He cannot do so. What He commands is what He requires, and what He requires is the only thing He will accept -- *absolute, impeccable, flawless obedience*. The consideration of this fact should help us realize that the only righteousness God will ever accept is His own perfect righteousness. That, and nothing less than that, is what God requires to justify the sinner.

This is why union with Christ and the imputation of His perfect righteousness to us, through faith, is absolutely indispensable for salvation. It is the possession of this righteousness which comes from God -- *the perfect righteousness of Christ* -- received as a gift by faith and offered back to Him as the fulfillment of the law's demand for obedience and punishment for sin, that justifies and saves the sin-filled soul from hell.

This we call the righteousness of faith, that is, when a man, empty and drained of all confidence in works, feels convinced that the only ground of his acceptance with God is a righteousness which is wanting in himself and is borrowed from Christ... God reconciles us to himself, from regard not to our own works, but to Christ alone, and by gratuitous adoption makes us his own children instead of children of wrath. So long as God regards our works, he finds no reason why he should love us. Wherefore it is necessary that he should bury our sins, impute to us the obedience of Christ which alone can stand his scrutiny, and adopt us as righteous through Christ's merits.¹⁹

It is this message (and this message alone) that will humble the sinner, crucify all human pride and presumption, and nullify all vain hopes of being able to fulfill the law, let alone be *"able to supererogate or do more than God requires."* It will deaden the deeply ingrained beast of self-righteousness and cause us to cast aside every vain hope for salvation that rests in anything other than the all-sufficient merits of Jesus' flawless righteousness. And most of all, it will cause helpless sinners to see that Christ is their only hope for salvation.

This message alone helps believers gain a greater assurance of salvation, experience true joy, live day by day by faith in constant dependence on Christ, and gain an ever increasing sense of indebtedness and gratitude toward God for His unspeakable mercy and kindness.

¹⁷ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1994, pg. 48.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, translated by Erasmus Middleton, Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979, pg. xv.

II. The Fallacy of Human Merit, the Reality of Human Inadequacy and the Death of Pride.

I was once told that good Lutheran preaching had two primary objectives: *To Humble the Sinner and Exalt the Savior*. It's a methodology that follows the example which Jesus used in two closely linked parables in Luke's Gospel.

The first parable (which is actually referenced in the Savoy, XVI:4) addresses the fact that in the Christian life there is no place for the concept of merit. In the economy of grace, coins stamped in honor of our efforts or achievements have no value. They are as worthless and out of place as the post-Civil War confederate bills which were often used in the years that followed as tinder to start fires!

Jesus uses the example of a servant asked by his master to prepare and serve him a meal after the servant has already spent a long day of working in the field. Upon receiving the meal, Jesus asks, *"Would [the master] thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?"* The reply He expects would have been obvious to anyone living in that day: *"No."* The owner of a servant would never thank that servant for simply doing what he was told to do. It would be expected of him as part of his regular duty.

If the servant went far above and beyond what the master required, he might in such a case receive a thank you. Yet as we have already seen, if the "servant" represents "disciples," it is not possible for any one of them to offer to God an obedience that is greater than what He requires. Therefore, Jesus can end His instruction to His disciples with these words: *"So you also, after you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty.'"*

They are to call themselves *"unworthy servants,"* despite the fact that they did their duty, because that duty, though done to the best of their ability, was still lacking in its performance. Why? Because no sinner has the ability to offer the Master an obedience that *supererogates* the standard of His glory. Thus Owen can say: *"The best of God's saints have not a righteousness of their own whereon they can, in any sense, be justified before God..."*²⁰ Owen is willing to grant an *"inherent"* righteousness in all that believe. *"There is an habitual righteousness inherent in believers, as they have 'put on the new man, which after God is made in righteousness and true holiness,' Eph. 4:24, as they are the 'workmanship of God, created in Christ Jesus unto good works,' 2:10..."*²¹ But as he goes on to point out, *"concerning this righteousness it may be observed, that men are said in the Scripture to be just or righteous by it, but no one is said to be justified by it before God."*²² No one, not even the most godly believer, ever attains to the perfect righteousness God requires for justification. We will always fall short of the divine standard of righteousness in this life.

This understanding forms the basis for the second related passage as well--the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.²³ This passage is not simply intended to rebuke the universally abhorrent attitude of *"holier-than-thou"* self-righteous or religious snobbery. It's a passage about justification. It's about what a person looks to, trusts in, or places their

²⁰ John Owen, Faith and It's Evidences, Vol. 5, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1998, pg. 230, 231.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 231.

²² Ibid, pg. 231.

²³ Luke 18:1-9

confidence in for their right standing before a just and holy God. It was spoken as a rebuke to anyone who would embrace the fatal error of being, "*confident in their own righteousness.*"²⁴

On the one hand, the parable is about notoriously sinful and repentant villains who "*went home justified before God*"²⁵ because they knew they had no righteousness of their own to trust in, and thus cast themselves upon the mercy of a God who promises to clothe us in the robe of His righteousness²⁶ -- the God whose name is "*The Lord Our Righteousness.*"²⁷

On the other hand, it's about devout, religious, pious, law-keeping, church-going (synagogue-going) people who will fail to "*go home justified*" because they have made the eternally fatal mistake of "*putting their confidence [for salvation] in their own righteousness.*"²⁸

These two men, therefore, represent the two basic ways people seek to be justified before God.

The conscience of the convinced sinner, who presents himself in the presence of God, finds all practically reduced to this one point, namely, whether he will trust unto his own personal inherent righteousness, or, in a full renunciation of it, betake himself unto the grace of God and the righteousness of Christ alone.²⁹

Yet as we see from Scripture, it's not always easy to tell which camp one falls into. Like the Galatians, many Christians embrace a position of placing their confidence for salvation in Jesus *plus* their performance. They are either taught to look to Jesus/plus, or they do so unconsciously in their heart -- affirming Christ only in their minds yet succumbing to performance-related guilt and compulsive self-punishment in their psyche or emotions.

As it is commonly put: *They mistakenly look to their sanctification to gain assurance of their justification.*³⁰ Or, worse yet, they look in the soul-damning sense *to their sanctification for* their justification, as the Pharisee did in this parable.

And because this issue of what we trust in is of such great consequence, Jesus doesn't leave us to wonder if we ourselves have inadvertently placed some degree of "*confidence in [our] own righteousness.*" We can know if we do, because Jesus point is that those who trust in their own performance or righteousness for their acceptance with God will almost invariably do what the Pharisee did. They will find themselves looking down upon others or struggling frequently with judgmental attitudes or attitudes of feeling superior to those who we consider to be more sinful than we are.

²⁴ Luke 18:1

²⁵ Luke 18:14

²⁶ Isaiah 61:10

²⁷ Jer. 23:6 and 33:16, Isaiah 45:24. This is also the title of Whitefield's famous "Great Awakening" sermon.

²⁸ Luke 18:9

²⁹ John Owen, *Faith and It's Evidences*, Vol. 5, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1998, pg. 230.

³⁰ Richard Lovelace explains so well the tendency of many an earnest believer when he writes: "*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, 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.

We may not be as crude or vocal about our proud moral superiority as this Pharisee, but if the raised eyebrow can still be seen, and the look of disdain and disgust directed toward those who are not as righteous, religious, ethical, clean cut, hard-working, or conservative as we are, we are surely on dangerous ground. If we are hesitant to reach out in love to those whose hair is colored and spiked, and bodies are covered with tattoos, or draped in black leather and chains; those who belong to the wrong political party, or are involved in some cult, we may inadvertently be evidencing in our hearts the un-gospel-like doctrine of confidence in one's own righteousness that we intellectually repudiate in our minds and vocally denounce with our lips.

Jesus ties the two together. Trusting in one's own righteousness and looking down on others are flip sides of the same problem. The one can't help but spawn the tendency to do the other. When we find ourselves struggling with judgmental attitudes and secretly shunning, avoiding, gossiping about, or looking down upon others, we can *know* that to some degree (whether we are conscious of it or not) our "*confidence*" for salvation is somehow tied up in "*our own righteousness.*"

The Pharisee in this parable clearly does not steal, do evil things, or commit adultery.³¹ He fasts two days a week and gives at least ten percent of everything he has to the Lord's work.³² And obviously there's nothing wrong with such things. Scripture advocates and encourages each one -- as long as the person doing them understands they gain no saving merit by doing so. In fact, if gaining merit is our reason for doing these works, then like this Pharisee, we sin in the very act of doing the things God calls us to do. To do the right thing for the wrong reason is sin, and therefore do nothing in terms of securing our justification. That's why Jesus can say that this Pharisee, unlike the tax-collector, did not go home justified.³³ He *couldn't* be justified, since his faith or confidence for salvation was in his own flawed and sin-stained efforts to please God or be righteous.

That is what the sin of self-righteousness is: It is nothing more than trusting in what the self does rather than in what Christ did as the basis of our right standing with God. And the saddest thing of all is that there are millions upon millions of people the world over sitting in church every Sunday, who, like this Pharisee, do that very thing -- *not realizing it is wrong*. They fast, pray, tithe, and do all kinds of moral and religious things in earnest, yet are not justified, and will never be justified, so long as their "confidence" for their acceptance with God is in their flawed attempts at being righteous. Like this Pharisee, they can actually lock themselves out of heaven so long as the thing they persist in trusting in to save them is "*their own righteousness.*"

III. Repenting for the Sin of Trusting in our Performance.

So, what separates the two men? The Pharisee thinks his righteousness is sufficient to merit God's acceptance and he thus places his trust in it, only to discover he went home in an unjustified state. The tax-collector is just the opposite. He knows full well he has no righteousness of his own to trust in and, thus, in utter desperation he lays aside all presumption and casts himself upon the mercy and righteousness that comes from God as a gift, and unlike the Pharisee, goes home justified.

³¹ Luke 18:11

³² Luke 18:12

³³ Luke 18:14

What the Pharisee didn't understand (as with Christians of all stripes and colors) is that they not only need the grace of God to cover the guilt of their sins, transgressions, and disobedience, they also need the grace of God to cover the sin that stains and pollutes their obedience and attempts to be righteous -- the sin that stains even their very best deeds.

As a Pharisee (who would have been more than familiar with the OT) the man in this parable should have known that the only thing God accepts is perfect, holy, and flawless righteousness or one hundred percent obedience to all His commands. He should have known that God accepts nothing less. A good try is never good enough. Flawless righteousness offered twenty-four/seven with all one's heart, all one's soul, all one's mind, and all one's strength, all the time is what the law demands -- an expression of love God both deserves and commands!

Yet here's the dilemma: Although God demands and requires it, it's something no human being can ever comply with or provide, because everything every person does, regardless of how godly those acts or people may appear, are spotted or stained by the sin that resides within them.

I Kgs 8:46 tells us: "For there is no one who does not sin." II Chron. 6:6 says the same: "There is no one who does not sin." Psalms 130:3 states: "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" Prov. 20:9 says: "Who can say, I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?" Eccles. 7:20 says: "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins." Rom. 3:10 says: "There is none that are righteous, no not one." And Rom. 3:23 summarizes them all when it declares: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

So, what is sin? It is transgression of God's law. Yet it's not just transgression of the law in the sense of *outright disobedience*, it is also *inadequate, flawed or sub-standard attempts to fulfill the law*. It is to miss the mark. It is to fall short of living according to God's exacting standards. It is doing the right thing for the wrong reason. It *is* disobeying (in the rebellious sense) but it is also obeying in a deficient, inadequate or substandard way. It is failure to do something to His glory, as it should be done, or as He has required it to be done. That is why even our best deeds count for nothing in terms of meriting us salvation or a right standing with God. Because even the most righteous things we do can never measure up to the standard of perfect righteousness and obedience that God requires (perfect compliance carried out with all with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, all the time, and for His glory alone).

In this sense Isaiah 64:6 is unspeakably helpful where the prophet writes: *"All our righteous deeds are as filthy rags."* This refers not to our sinful or evil deeds, but our righteous deeds! They are, says Isaiah, but *"filthy rags"* in God's sight. And as I mentioned two years ago (and I do apologize to the women present if it seems offensive), the Hebrew words translated *"filthy rag"* refer to a woman's menstrual cloth -- literally *"a cloth of times,"* or *"a cloth of menstruation."*³⁴ A cloth which has been *"stained by menstrual blood."*³⁵

Therefore we can see that our *"righteous deeds"* are like clean, sanitized, spotlessly white cloths that have been stained and spotted with sin just as a woman's menstrual cloth is stained and spotted with the blood of a woman's flow. It is imagery that assures us, as J. Alec Motyer points out, that *"Even what we might consider to be in our favour, our righteous acts,*

³⁴ Edward J. Young, The Book of Isaiah, Volume III, Eerdmans Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1972, pg. 496.

³⁵ J. Alec Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1993, pg. 520.

flow from a fallen nature and partake of its fallenness." ³⁶ Even the most glorious of good deeds performed by the most godly of people are spotted and stained with the flow of sin that taints everything that issues forth from within them.

That's what we Christians, like this Pharisee, often forget. Since all our righteous deeds issue forth from a heart where sin is still present, that sin spots and stains every single one. And in doing so it makes every single one of them unclean and thus unrighteous and therefore unacceptable, as it is, to God. It makes all our best deeds just as much in need of the atoning blood of Jesus as the more obvious and vile sins of the dishonest, thieving, irreligious, promiscuous, foul-mouthed "tax-collector" types. It is sin that condemns, and not greater degrees or expressions of it -- confirming everyone's universal and desperate need to look entirely away from their own attempts at being righteous and trust solely and entirely in the justifying work of Christ. His righteousness alone is able to cleanse, cover and save from the polluting effects of sin. Even if some particular thought or desire were to come directly from God Himself, by the time it passed through me and came forth in my actions, it would be severely spotted and stained by the sin that dwells within me.

If one takes a spotlessly white sanitized cloth and slides it through a pipe that still has some rust or grime in it, by the time it comes out the other end it's going to be spotted and stained by those soiling or defiling elements. The same is true in regard to the good deeds we do; they come out spotted or stained even if they started out clean. This means the Pharisee in this parable, despite his attempts at obeying the law, should also have been pleading for God's mercy and trusting in the righteousness He credits to faith to cover, the sin that spotted and stained even his good deeds, making them just as unrighteous, unclean and unacceptable to God as the tax-collector's more blatant forms of sin. This is the understanding the Savoy sets forth, and we need to embrace.

It is also this view of sin-stained righteousness which led Bryan Chapell to say in his book, *Holiness by Grace*:

When I face the reality of the inadequacy of my good works in meriting God's favor, then I recognize I must depend on His goodness and not on mine. There is no other choice when I recognize the true character of my good works, because according to Scripture even my best works are only 'filthy rags.' There is too much human imperfection and mixed motives in even my best deeds to have them obligate God to [show me favor]... *'To man,'* as Calvin once wrote, *'we may assign only this: That he pollutes and contaminates by his impurity, even those things which are good. For nothing proceeds from a man, however perfect he may be, that is not defiled by some spot (of sin).'*³⁷

And again:

There is never sufficient goodness in our best works to make them truly holy by God's ultimate standard. That is why our best works still fall short of qualifying us for heaven... Our best deeds will never be sufficiently free of the contamination of human motive and imperfection that they are acceptable to God on their own merit. ³⁸

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness By Grace*, Crossway Books, Wheaton Illinois, 2001, pg. 24.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 75, 77.

That's why, *"we cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God,"* or place our confidence in our obedience or attempts at righteous living. The *"disproportion"* between them and God's glory is simply too great. It is so great, in fact, that it makes putting our confidence for salvation in such things akin to putting our confidence in a pile of filthy, unrighteous or sin-stained *"rags."*

Even if it were possible for someone to do something that was 98 or 99 percent pure (if only 1 or 2 percent of the "rag" or "cloth" Isaiah calls our "righteous deeds" were stained by sin) it would still make the entire thing unclean, unrighteous, and, therefore, unacceptable to God. That's why even our best deeds can never be anything more than a reason for humility and even repentance and never self-righteous trust or confidence. John Owen was right: *"Even our tears of repentance need to be washed in the blood of Christ,"* for even they are stained by the sin that resides within us.

We should be able to say to God, 'I repent even of the inadequacy of my repentance, in order that I may rely solely on your mercy. Remorse precedes true repentance. Changed behavior follows true repentance. But this necessary prelude and postlude of true repentance are not themselves the essence of repentance. True repentance is a denial that anything in us ever would or ever could satisfy God's holiness or compel his pardon.'³⁹

*"The religious only repent of sins. The irreligious don't repent at all. Christians, however, repent of both their sins and of their self-righteousness."*⁴⁰ No matter how ardently, zealously, purely or continually we do whatever we do, it will always be stained by the sin and ill-motives that will continue to reside within even the most godly of believers until the day they die. And God, righteous and holy as He is, will not accept sin-stained righteousness any more than in the Old Testament He accepted a lamb with spots and defects.

This will surely come as a surprise to many in evangelicalism, as will the logical conclusion that necessarily flows from it: That because even our best deeds are stained by sin and unrighteous, they would actually count against us and serve as just reasons to condemn us were they not covered and washed by faith in the blood of Christ.

*"As they are wrought by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment."*⁴¹ It is a truth that leads us into our desperate need for the good news of the Gospel, which sets forth a righteousness that comes from God as a gift.

IV. Human Inadequacy, Sinful Pollution and the Acceptance of God

Everything that I have said up until this point could be sufficient reason for utter despair, gloom, and hopelessness were it not for the unfathomable grace of a righteousness merited for sinners by Jesus and offered to all who will believe through the preaching of the Gospel.

³⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace*, pg. 83

⁴⁰ Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pg. 15.

⁴¹ *Savoy Declaration*, XVI:4.

For the glorious news of the Gospel is that when God justifies the believing sinner, He not only forgives and covers⁴² them as individuals, but He also forgives and covers all that they do. He not only justifies and accepts them as people, though still sinful, He also accepts the deeds they offer to Him, though stained and spotted by the sin that continues to indwell them until death. Our works are not accepted on the basis of the purity with which they are done or performed, but on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ, which covers all the impurity in them. For it is His righteousness alone, imputed or credited to the believer by faith, that covers all that is sinful, selfish, lacking, improper and ill-motivated in them. Even though they are *"defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection,"* God accepts them from His grace-adopted children for Christ's sake.

Richard Sibbes, the great Puritan divine, put it better than anyone else when he wrote in his book, *"The Bruised Reed"*:

All believers do not have the same strong faith, though they have the same precious faith (II Pet. 1:1). And by that faith, whether strong or weak, they lay hold of, and put on, the perfect righteousness of Christ. A weak hand may receive a rich jewel as much as a strong hand. Only a few grapes are needed to show the plant is a vine and not a thorn. It is one thing to be deficient in grace, and another thing to lack grace altogether. God knows we have nothing of ourselves, and therefore, in the covenant of grace he requires no more than he gives, but gives what he requires, and accepts what he gives. 'If she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtle doves' (Lev. 12:8). What is the gospel itself but a merciful moderation, in which Christ's obedience is esteemed ours, and our sins laid upon him? A gospel wherein God goes from being our judge to being our Father,

⁴² Alec Motyer states: *"In the Old Testament...the verb 'to make atonement' is rooted in the idea of 'covering,' and when it became part of the technical vocabulary of the levitical sacrifices it did not lose this basic concept. We today have not lost this either. We speak of a sum of money sufficient to 'cover' a debt--not at all meaning that it hides the debt out of sight or seeps it under the carpet, but rather that, because it is the exact 'covering', it actually cancels the debt by an equivalent payment. This is precisely what the Old Testament means by 'atonement.' Thus the noun 'koper' means 'ransom price.'... The verb 'to make atonement' is thus a key word in understanding Leviticus 17:11, and it is decisive when it relates the shedding of blood and its cultic use to a basic 'hiding' and 'price-paying' function. The idea of 'hiding' could derive from the Passover situation itself when the people 'hid away' in the blood-marked houses, but the terms of the Passover story would not be satisfied if we failed to press beyond the pictorial elements of 'hiding' to the spiritual realism of being 'covered' by an equivalent and satisfactory payment designed to 'propitiate' or satisfy the hostile intent of the God of judgment. Thus S. R. Driver commented on Leviticus 1:4: Though the burnt peace and meal offerings were not offered expressly, like the sin and guilt offerings, for the forgiveness of sins, they were nevertheless (in so far as kipper is predicated on them) regarded as 'covering' or neutralizing the offerer's unworthiness to appear before God, and so... as effecting (atonement) in the sense ordinarily attached to the word propitiation."* He goes on to point out that the other key word used in Leviticus 17:11, is 'nepes' in the Hebrew -- "soul/life." In the context it is used to stress *"how the blood makes atonement (i.e. by an equivalent price)"* and *"how this applies to the individual's need (i.e. by paying a price exactly equivalent to the offence)."* The whole idea, he says, culminates in the idea of 'substitution.' *"The remarkably strong emphasis on the element of 'equivalence' in the choice of a lamb (Ex. 12:3-4) coupled with the reality of a death in every house (12:30), and the balance between the firstborn of Pharaoh and Israel as the corporate firstborn of the Lord (4:22), are, without question, best summed up by saying that the Passover lamb was a substitute."* Alec Motyer, Look to the Rock, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1996, pp. 51, 52 and 53.

pardoning our sins and accepting our obedience, though feeble and blemished. We are now brought to heaven under the covenant of grace by a way of love and mercy.

It will prove a special help to know distinctly the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, between Moses and Christ. Moses, without any mercy, breaks all bruised reeds, and quenches all smoking flax. For the law requires personal, perpetual, and perfect obedience from the heart, and that under the most terrible curse, but it gives no strength. It is a severe task-master, like Pharaoh's, requiring the whole quota of bricks, yet giving no straw.

Yet Christ comes with blessing after blessing, even upon those whom Moses had cursed, and with healing balm for those wounds which Moses had made. The same duties are required in both covenants, such as to love the Lord with all our hearts and with all our souls (Deut. 6:5). In the covenant of works this must be fulfilled absolutely, but under the covenant of grace it must have a gospel mitigation. A sincere endeavor proportionate to grace received is accepted. The law is sweetened by the gospel, and becomes delightful to the inner man. Under this gracious covenant, sincerity is perfection.⁴³

Lest Sibbes be misunderstood (and his words be seen to contradict all I've said!) I must point out that this proclaimed acceptance of "*a sincere endeavor*" or what we might call "*one's best effort*," is ***not*** because in the covenant of grace God has become permissive, less demanding, or has lowered his righteous standards in order to let people into heaven on the basis of a good try. That would be to abrogate the law and fall into the error that Owens refutes when he refers to the view of some Christians who suggest that Christ, by His death and obedience, "*procured for us the new covenant*," and:

by this procuring the new covenant for us... they intend the *abrogation* of the old covenant, or of the law,--or at least such derogation from it, that it shall no more oblige us either to sinless obedience or punishment, nor require a perfect righteousness unto our justification before God,--and the constitution of a new *law of obedience*, accommodated unto our present state and condition; on whose observance all the promises of the Gospel do depend.⁴⁴

Sibbes point is ***not*** that under the new covenant God no longer requires "*a perfect righteousness unto our justification before God*." The Good News is not that God now accepts defective righteousness and obedience as a "*new law of obedience accommodated unto our present state and condition; upon whose observance all the promises of the gospel do depend*." Not at all! Under the new covenant God still requires a perfect obedience unto our justification before God. The difference being that He supplied it to the utmost degree in the place of offending sinners, and through that perfect supply alone and not our defective performance of His commands under a new and more permissive version of the law, the "promises of justification, adoption, and future glory do depend."⁴⁵ It's all Christ! The acceptance of all that we do rests upon Him and His perfect righteousness!

⁴³ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1998, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁴ John Owen, *Faith and Its Evidences*, pp. 188-189.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 188.

To some it may seem like a minor distinction, or a matter of semantics, but it has grave consequences. For if *God now accepts flawed righteousness for justification*, instead of *Christ's flawless righteousness for our justification*, Christ may be thanked, but He will not be our habitual object of trust to *cover* both us and all that we do with His righteous merits.

The first understanding would make us thankful that all we must now do to be justified is whatever we are able to do. Under its teaching unrighteous righteousness now becomes the acceptable means of our justification before God.

But the other is different. It not only makes us thankful, it shows God to be just, and keeps us habitually looking to Christ in faith. It keeps us humbled by the conscious knowledge of our inability to measure up. Pride is crucified when we realize nothing we do can ever be good enough to merit God's acceptance. If perfect righteousness is still required, we are forever dependent upon the mediation and merits and gracious intercession of Christ's blood and righteousness on our behalf. The first view makes God into a permissive and unjust God, whereas the latter shows Him to be both "*just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*"⁴⁶

Thus Sibbes' point is that in justification God chooses to cover not only *His people* through faith (though still sinful), but the *deeds His people offer to Him* though they also are flawed, polluted, and stained by sin.

The persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unproveable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.⁴⁷

Even our "*spiritual sacrifices*," as Peter notes -- *our worship and praises and prayers and preaching and ministry* -- are "*acceptable to God*" only because they are offered "*through Jesus Christ.*"⁴⁸ Were it not for God's mercy, which receives our best works, as well as those that are far from our best, with a divine delight that they could never warrant on their own, such imperfect offerings would justly receive the treatment of "filthy rags." They would be an offering that offends God. Even my worship and pastoral service would be treated as such, were they not covered by the blood and righteousness of Jesus.

I say all this, at least in part, because far too many Christians I've known have been stymied and paralyzed in their Christian walk by believing God will only accept their offerings or sacrifices, or obedience if it is performed with a purity or life and motive not attainable this side of glory! They sensed God calling them to some service or endeavor prompted (I believe) by the Spirit, yet refused to engage in it because they were convinced (by improper teaching or assumptions) that they could not engage in it until their motives were pure. They were convinced such deeds would only be acceptable to God if they are performed with holy and pure motivations, and so they waited, and waited, and waited...

Calvin's words (based on Isaiah 64:6) would have helped liberate them from such paralysis where he assures us, "*To man we may assign only this: That he pollutes and contaminates by his impurity, even those things which are good. For nothing proceeds from a*

⁴⁶ Romans 3:26

⁴⁷ Savoy Declaration, Chap. 16:5.

⁴⁸ I Peter 2:5

man, however perfect he may be, that is not defiled by some spot (of sin)." And thus he who waits for such purity, convinced it is not only possible but necessary for God's acceptance and blessing upon their endeavors, will wait forever and watch many blessed opportunities pass.

So many divinely prompted deeds and actions are placed on hold and never followed through on, simply because people forget what makes them acceptable as offerings before God. Not the purity of motive with which they are performed, but the fact that by faith they are washed in the blood of Jesus and covered by His impeccable righteousness. It is His worthiness that makes them worthy and not some degree of supposed worthiness or purity of motive in us.

There is nothing in us or done by us at any stage of our earthly development because of which we are acceptable to God. We must always be accepted for Christ's sake or we cannot be accepted at all... It is always on His blood and righteousness alone that we can rest. There is never anything that we are or have or do that can take His place or that take a place along with Him. We are always unworthy, and all that we have or do of any good is always of pure grace.⁴⁹

Likewise, as Robert Haldane notes, referring to the righteousness of God:

In justifying men, God does all, and men receiving justification, contribute nothing towards it. This is in opposition to the justification proposed by the law by means of obedience, in which way a man would be justified by his own righteousness, and not by the righteousness God has provided and bestows... No explanation of this expression, 'the righteousness of God,' will at once suit the phrase and the situation in which it is found in [Rom. 3:21], but that which makes it the righteousness or obedience to the law, both in penalties and requirements, which has been yielded to it by our Lord Jesus Christ... To that righteousness is the eye of the believer ever to be directed; on that righteousness must he rest; on that righteousness must he live; on that righteousness must he die; in that righteousness must he appear before the judgment seat; in that righteousness must he stand for ever in the presence of a righteous God.⁵⁰

THAT is our glorious hope and our *only* reason for confidence! Not only are we as people pardoned and justified through faith, so also are all our flawed attempts at obedience. In justification God accepts and receives "*both the persons and duties of believers into special grace and favor for Christ's sake.*"⁵¹ "*It includes the offering or the tendering of our persons and duties to God by Jesus Christ.*"⁵² Concerning evangelical obedience or righteousness, says Owen, "*it may be observed, that men are said in the Scripture to be just or righteous by it, but no one is said to be justified by it before God.*"⁵³

I need not wait until I attain some unattainable degree of purity or holiness or sinless perfection before I act upon some endeavor for God or His kingdom. I need not rewrite my

⁴⁹ B.B. Warfield, Miserable Sinner's Christianity, The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 7, Grand Rapids, MI, 1931, pp.113ff.

⁵⁰ Robert Haldane, Commentary on Romans, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, pg. 132, 139, 140.

⁵¹ John Flavel, The Method of Grace, Summit Books, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1977, pg. 309.

⁵² *Ibid*, pg. 310.

⁵³ John Owen, Faith and It's Evidences, Vol. 5, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1998, pg. 231.

sermons three hundred times to make them "acceptable offerings." Nor must I refrain from worship or prayer because my soul is not perfectly prepared. Because from the divine perspective of what is required to make it acceptable to God on its own, it's *always* ill-prepared -- even on those days when I feel I'm the most prepared!

I must stop looking to something in me and simply act and obey, humbly praying as I do that the same blood and righteousness of Jesus that washed me, and made me "acceptable to God," will wash all my efforts, endeavors, works and worship, and thereby make them acceptable as well.

For the glorious news of the Gospel is that the same impeccable righteousness of Jesus that clothes and covers me, will clothe and cover all the flawed things that come forth from me. It is Gospel mercy and nothing more than Gospel mercy that makes both me, and all I do for God, acceptable in His sight.

Better yet, it is Gospel mercy that makes both me, and all I do, pleasing to God and a source of divine delight! Though I myself am terribly flawed, along with all that I do, yet both my person and works are still a source of immense delight to God when offered to Him through the Son that He loves and in whom He takes nothing but great delight. In and of themselves they are far from perfect and do indeed fall short of the glory of God. Yet the astounding message of the Gospel, which magnifies the glory of His grace and the riches of His mercy all the more, is the fact that *"through Jesus Christ"* God accepts, forgives, covers and is pleased to receive them all anyway -- for Christ's sake! Sibbes was right:

What is the gospel itself but a merciful moderation, in which Christ's obedience is esteemed ours, and our sins laid upon him? A gospel wherein God goes from being our judge to being our Father, pardoning our sins and accepting our obedience, though feeble and blemished.⁵⁴

This understanding of an alien righteousness accepted as my own, and in my stead, covering both *me* and *all that I do*, fills my heart with joy and peace and praise and gratitude and rest of soul! The soul-fortifying, heart-strengthening, life-transforming message of the Gospel is does its work in us as we come to grasp and believe the gracious truths of substitution and the imputation of a perfect righteousness that is not our own -- yet is credited to us as if it we our own. *"In the covenant of grace he requires no more than he gives, but gives what he requires, and accepts what he gives."*⁵⁵

Where Christ is truly seen, there must be full and perfect joy in the Lord, with peace of conscience, which thinks this way: Although I am a sinner by the law and under condemnation of the law, yet I despair not, yet I die not, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my everlasting life. In that righteousness and life I have no sin, no fear, no sting of conscience, no care of death. I am indeed a sinner as touching this present life and the righteousness thereof... But I have another righteousness and life, above this life, which is Christ the Son of God, who knows no sin, no death, but is righteousness and life eternal.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Richard Sibbes, The Bruised Reed, Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 1998, pg. 36.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther, Commentary on Galatians, Flemming H. Revell, Grand Rapids, MI, pg. 20.