

## **'The Righteous Shall Live by Faith'**

I concluded my last article by touching briefly on the biblical truth in Romans 1:16 that '...the gospel...is the power of God for salvation....' I noted that a genuine saving faith in Jesus Christ alone consists of 1). Knowledge: I know the facts that the Bible teaches about sin and the only remedy for sin in Jesus Christ; 2). Assent: I believe that these biblical facts are true; 3). Trust: I have trusted my life to Jesus Christ. We come now to verse 17 where Paul begins to unpack the truth of the precious gospel. He writes, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"

This early portion of Paul's letter to the church in Rome sets in place the primary theme for the entire epistle. Although he will spend more time later in this letter explaining this great truth, Paul is beginning to teach us what is known as the doctrine of justification by faith alone. There is no more important question in all of life than this, "How can sinful mankind come into a right relationship with a holy God?" The answer to this question lies in Paul's teaching on justification by faith. The word justification in Romans refers to a judgment declared with respect to our judicial status or standing before God (Romans 3:21-28). Justification doesn't mean to 'make righteous or holy' but rather it means 'to pronounce or declare' someone to be holy. Sin involves not only personal pollution but also judicial guilt. 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian James Buchanan writes that, "Guilt cannot be extinguished by repentance or even by regeneration; for while these may improve or renew our character, a divine sentence of condemnation can only be reversed by a divine act of remission."

Because we are born in sin, we stand guilty before a holy God (Romans 5:12-20). We are required to live a perfect life and we cannot. God would not be God if he simply winked at sin and let it pass. His justice and holiness requires perfect obedience, and that sin be punished. So the beauty of the gospel is, first of all, that God, the Judge of all the Earth, declares that we're righteous. How is it possible for God to declare that sinners stand righteous in his sight? This new legal standing with God is possible only because the perfect righteous life of Jesus Christ is imputed or credited to our account. In addition to this all our sins past, present and future are imputed to Jesus who took our punishment on the cross. In Christ we now stand in a new relationship with God; where we were once under his wrath and curse, now we're in his family (Romans 3:21-4:25).

That's the gospel! "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9) Saving faith must rest upon the completed work of Jesus Christ alone for salvation not in any of our works of obedience. Salvation is all of God from beginning to end; 'from faith to faith.' As Luther studied Paul's letter to the Romans it eventually became clear to him that our salvation is based—not on what we do—but rather it is based on what Jesus Christ has done. Luther writes, "I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase, 'the justice of

God,' no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love.'

The Westminster Shorter Catechism succinctly defines justification in this way:  
"Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." This precious truth which was almost completely lost for a thousand years was recovered at the Protestant Reformation. Soli Deo Gloria!

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.