AWWOP Tuesday

Righteousness: A Practical Matter

Does anything come after justification?

By Hans Heinz

PULLQUOTE: The Christian life is a life “of faith, of victory, and joy in God” (Ellen G. White).

Faith alone justifies, but it does not remain alone.

Following Martin Luther’s courageous testimony to the emperor, the princes, and theologians on April 18 of 1521, during which he refused to recant any of his positions, the emperor’s Spanish entourage shouted: “Into the fire with him!”

Luther threw up his arms and cried, “I’ve been through it, I’ve been through it.”

What Righteousness by Faith Looks Like

*“Behold, new things have come”* (2 Cor. 5:17, NASB).1

This dramatic event in the history of the Reformation provides a vivid illustration for what righteousness by faith means. Although Luther had not been acquitted, he had courageously stood firm before the court. Before the judgment seat of God we too can stand firm and be acquitted because of the saving work of Christ. By faith, we have already been through our personal judgment and have “crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24, NIV).

But there is a great difference between human judgments and God’s judgment: a human judge can only acquit, but the divine judge is capable of creating anew. God’s acquittal is a creative judgment that transforms the natural into a spiritual person: believers become what they already are! Justified, they now live ust lives. Both together meant “justification in its fullest sense”2 for the Reformer.

Today we speak of “justification” (forgiveness of sins) and “sanctification” (overcoming of sins). Ellen White calls the Christian life a life “of faith, of victory, and joy in God.”3 Miraculously, a new life begins.4

By faith we grasp Jesus and submit to heaven’s reign. Christ and the Holy Spirit inspire in us a vibrant and dynamic spiritual life. This life is fruit and testimony of the salvation we have received. It is for the glory of God and for the good of others, because faith is, as the Reformer says, “a divine work in us that transforms and lets us be born anew from God (John 1:13).”

Faith “kills the old Adam, and changes our heart, courage, mind and all powers, bringing the Holy Spirit along. There is something lively, industrious, active, powerful about faith that makes it impossible to not continuously do good. It also does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before one asks, faith has already done it and continues to do so.”5

A Walk That Honors God

*“So we also should walk in newness of life”* (Rom. 6:4).

Although this newness of life is indeed a consequence of the salvation received by faith, it is nevertheless necessary if the Christian life is to be credible. In His work of salvation God aims not only at forgiveness but also at transformation.

While being righteous before God occurs the moment we believe in Jesus, becoming righteous in our life is a process that continues throughout our lifetime. This process begins Christ’s reign over the life of the faithful. It represents, as Luther says, “the beginning of the new creation.”6 After believers have been legally justified, Christ through the Holy Spirit initiates in them a day-to-day life of godly existence.

God works with sinners like the “good Samaritan” who saved the man’s life after he had been robbed and wounded. As the Samaritan did not hesitate to help a Jew, so God does not shy away from loving those who live far away from God (Rom. 5:8). His ultimate intention is to save them (verse 10). And just as the Samaritan did everything and paid what was necessary for the healing of the wounded, so “God in Christ” has “done and paid” everything so we may be reconciled with Him, and become new in Him (see 2 Cor. 5:17, 19, 21).

But just as the victim needed time to heal, so it is with sinners. They need growth (2 Peter 3:18). Even if forgiveness has been received and a new life has already begun, there is nevertheless still sin in (Rom. 7:17) and around (1 John 5:19) sinners.

Through the working of the Holy Spirit, sin no longer reigns in Christians’ lives. Sin has, in fact, been reined in (Gal. 5:16). Nevertheless, believers are not now exempt from the battle with sin (verse 13). We are called to victory in this battle (1 John 2:1), and comforted to know that God’s forgiveness is not a one-off event, but is continuously offered to those who repent (verse 1; Heb. 7:25).

Luther vividly described this tension between being righteous before God and the struggle with sin in the world. Growth in sanctification is progressive, but will be completed only when the “beloved day of judgment” dawns: “This life is not about being pious but becoming pious, not being healthy, but becoming healthy, not being, but becoming, not rest, but exercise. We are not there yet, but we are getting there. Not all is said and done, but it is under way and in motion. It is not the end, but it is the way.”7 It is God’s will that “day by day we will be more sanctified.”8

Similar thoughts can be found in the writings of Ellen White: Sanctification is “the work . . . of a lifetime”; a “lifelong” experience. The struggle with sin is “daily work,” but “faith” gives “victory” even though our struggle never ends while we are alive on earth.9

Love Known by Action

*“Faith working through love”* (Gal. 5:6).

We affirm that both the righteousness that God declares and the newness of life we live depend on faith in Christ. For the apostle Paul this faith shows itself in love, and love shows itself in action.

To understand what believers receive in the gift of justification and sanctification, justification has at times been compared to a $100 bill, given by a father to his son. The son is not to keep the bill for himself; he should change it into smaller bills in order to do good with the gift: This is sanctification, or as Luther wrote: “For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable riches of His, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole heart and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to Him, and acceptable in His sight? I will therefore give myself, as a sort of Christ, to my neighbor, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will do nothing in this life, except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my neighbor, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.”10

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING

1. What gift does God give us through justification and sanctification respectively?

2. How does sanctification relate to sinlessness?

3. What does sanctification mean in the daily life of Christians?

4. Sanctification does not create salvation, but is a necessary testimony of it. Discuss.

1 Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

2 Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1975), p. 205.

3 Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 477.

4 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), vol. 39/I, p. 98.

5 Quoted from Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 182.

6 Luther, p. 83.

7 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 7, p. 337.

8 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), vol. 40/II, p. 355.

9 Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), pp. 560, 561; *idem*, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1930), p. 114; *idem*, *The Great Controversy*, p. 471.

10 *First Principles of the Reformation or The 95 Theses and the Three Primary Works of Dr. Martin Luther,* ed. Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim (London: John Murray, 1883), p. 127.