

People of God,

The first question of Lord's Day 23 sounds very modern. It is one of those pragmatic questions: "So what's it good for?" Question 59 ask, "What good does it do you however to believe all this?" And the "this" refers to believing all that we confess in the Apostles' Creed.

Lord's Days 9-22 explain the content or object of Christian faith, especially the work of Jesus Christ in saving us. They describe, if you will, God's side of justification—His work. Lord's Day 23 is designed to make sure that we pick up on our side. There is good in believing all that we confess in the Apostles' Creed. What good?

Well, as a child, your mom can make your favourite supper for you: spaghetti, macaroni, pizza or maybe spinach! But whatever it is, you will not know how good it is unless you put it in your mouth and eat it. And unless you believe in Jesus Christ you will not know how great justification is. Without being connected to Christ by faith you are still in your sin.

Think about the sentencing trial that was in the news this past week. Colton Steinhauer was found guilty of two counts of first-degree murder back in May for the December 2015 murders of two Macs Convenience Store clerks. Remember that story? He was sentenced to 25 years in prison. But suppose the judge, because he was gracious, simply declared Steinhauer "not guilty." Even though he really is guilty, the judge says you are free to go. In some sense, that's a picture of God the judge of the world in His relation to His sinful children. But that's only half the picture.

The part that we do not see is that justice must be served. And in the case of our salvation, the judge will serve the sentence for the sinner. Every single person in the world is guilty of transgressing every commandment of God. In Genesis 6:5 we read,

Gen 6:5 "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

Left to ourselves that's the way we would have remained. Eternal death would be our punishment. But God says of His children, "Not Guilty. My son died for your sin. Enter into my rest." That's God's side of justification. That's a large part of the teaching of Lord's Days 9-22.

As I said a moment ago, suppose the judge declares Colton Steinhauer "not guilty." But Steinhauer doesn't believe the judge and won't accept his gift. Suppose he refused to leave the prison because he didn't believe it. He would not receive the freedom offered to him. And would still be in "bondage."

That's sort of what the catechism is getting at when it asks us, "What good is it to believe all this?—all that Christ has done to pay for our sins. The catechism wants you and me to understand that we don't know the comfort of our salvation unless we truly believe all that Jesus has done for us! He has saved us completely!

So tonight as we think about being justified by faith, let us consider the comfort of justification.

When question 59 ask, "What good does it do you to believe all that we confess about God in the Apostles' Creed?" the answer of the catechism is "*In Christ I am right with God and heir to life everlasting.*" That is a marvellous comfort. It speaks of our justification or being made right with God by faith. In fact, the support text for this answer is Romans 1:17 where we read,

Rom 1:17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written [a reference to Habbakuk 2:4 where it says]: "The righteous will live by faith."

So the catechism comforts us by reminding us that we are made right with God **entirely by faith, not works.**

The comfort of our justification is that God in His electing love has reached down and chosen to redeem us. He transforms us. He makes us new. He pays the debt of our sin through Christ's redeeming work even before we believe.

There are, you may know, cults and other non-Christian religions that accuse the Christian religion of being too easy. There's nothing to do. You don't have to earn anything. You don't have to attain a certain standard. You're just saved by faith in Christ. And to that charge we plead guilty. We are saved by God's grace alone. We don't have to do anything. We only believe that Jesus has done it all for us while we were still sinners.

And that, my friends, is what gives us a certainty of salvation and a deeper comfort. We know that Christ has paid the price for our sins. We don't have to pay anything. It's paid in full! This is Paul's point in Romans 4. Right off the top he writes,

Rom 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. ³ What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

It needs to be declared that we are justified completely by faith alone in Christ alone! He has done it all for us. Shout it out! It's good news!!

But even in many Christian churches this truth is sometimes denied in its purest form. Different branches of Christianity belittle the sufficiency of salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus. Most preach that line, but some deny its truth when they say that God doesn't save us unless we come to Him and ask for salvation. They so strongly stress the need for us to reach out to God that they are in danger of making our faith a work of salvation... it's something we have to do in order to earn salvation. Our faith is a prerequisite for God saving us. Similarly,

some Christian circles preach grace but add that need to do good in order to secure your salvation.

As reformed Christians who take sin seriously, we also take grace seriously. We believe it is only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus that we are justified. But we don't make the first move toward God anymore than a pumpkin in the field lifts hands toward the farmer as if to say, "Take me home and clean me up." The Christian faith is powerfully comforting only when we believe the truth of the Bible which the catechism summarizes in these words: "*In Christ I am right with God and heir to life everlasting.*"

Romans 4 reminds us that the comfort of our justification is that God mercifully grants us salvation and then we take hold of it through faith. Our faith is not the reason God grants us salvation. We merely believe that God has already granted it to us. In that way the comfort is deeper. It assures us that God has us in His grip much more than believing that we must somehow hold on to God or lose our salvation. No, if God in Christ justifies us, then we are justified forever. Eternally secure!

That is comforting, especially when we know how weak we are in and of ourselves. It's like we teach our children, "Jesus loves me this I know... we are weak but He is strong!" It's the strength of His work that saves us, not the strength of our faith. That's what we believe to our comfort!

Now, then, the comfort of our justification increases as we unpack the layers of what it means to be justified by faith. For example, being made right with God means **knowing God's anger against my sin is appeased**. John 3:36 says,

Jn 3:36 "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

The Christian who is justified by faith knows that Jesus has borne the wrath of God against our sin. God, we know, is justly angry with our sin. And nothing we do can pay for that sin. All God asks is that we believe in Jesus who justifies us before God, as a free gift. Again Romans 4 says,

Rom 4:4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

So even though God is justly angry with our sin, it is Christ who pays for that sin and through whom we find God's grace and peace instead of His anger. We receive his face shining on us with blessing, instead of his anger. And that gift is ours by faith.

Another comfort of our justification by faith is **certainty**. At times our own conscience will accuse us, the catechism says, but Christ's work in saving us trumps our conscience. How many times has your conscience made you feel guilty?! I just love what Answer 60 says. Listen:

Even though my conscience accuses me
of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments
and of never having kept any of them,

and even though I am still inclined toward all evil,
nevertheless, without my deserving it at all,
out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me
the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,
as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner,
as if I had been as perfectly obedient
as Christ was obedient for me.
All I need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

A sin-tainted conscience raises doubts. You may have had the experience that you cannot believe that God will forgive you for one or more sins. Perhaps you've done something that you believe is unacceptable. You cannot forget that sin no matter how hard you try. And you cannot stop praying to God for forgiveness. You have, in the catechism's words "grievously sinned against God's commandments."

Knowing God's hatred of sin, it is quite normal that a Christian would question God's forgiveness and constantly beg him to forgive a sin that we are sure He will not forgive but, brothers and sisters, the Lord is gracious and compassion slow to anger and abounding in love, says Psalm 103.

We should understand that our own minds have been polluted by sin and sin causes us to doubt the free gift of God. Yes, it causes even our faith to grow shaky at times. Therefore a biblically enlightened conscience is necessary for all of us. It makes living for the Lord much more comforting and powerful. Studying the Scriptures with the aid of the Holy Spirit is the way to improve the weakness of our conscience. The more the Spirit and the Word enlighten us, the more we will see how foolish we are to listen to the lies of our weak conscience.

The point is not that we should never listen to our conscience. Rather, we need a conscience that is informed and shaped by Scripture. It is highly possible that someone could be a Christian and feel so guilty about something they've done wrong many years ago. I know that feeling! If that sounds like you, it's possible that you confessed that sin years ago as well, but you still feel guilty about it. That's where the catechism says that we need to take God at His Word. If Christ has paid for our sin, then we must simply believe that and not listen to the doubts that creep into our minds.

God's truth must be taken hold of and used to crush the doubts and guilt of a misinformed conscience. Romans 4:7&8 point us to the truth which says,
Rom 4:7 "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

We must grab hold of that grace and say to ourselves in those times when the conscience falsely accuses us, "No, I may have sinned but I am washed clean in the blood of Christ. *God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ as if I had never sinned, nor been a sinner. As if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.*" Isn't that

great?! We must plead with the Holy Spirit to assure us of God's forgiveness. We must not give in to doubts in our weak faith that stop us from believing that God has justified His children. His decree is irreversible and our sin, no matter how enormous or grievous, is forgiven because of Christ.

Years ago when I was a mechanic working for my cousin, a regular customer came in. This man went to church faithfully. He sought to live a God-honouring life from what I know. He believed that Jesus was the Son of God who came to save sinners. But when you asked this fellow where he would be when his life was over, he said with great certainty, "I'll go straight to hell."

Isn't that crazy! This man did not have any comfort in life and in death. He believed that Jesus justified some people but he was unable to believe that God's grace would be extended to him. But, dear people, God doesn't want His children living like that. To counteract that kind of sad thinking, you and I need to look at the Saviour. Jesus Christ is the basis for our salvation. He's our rock solid foundation.

It's not the greatness of our faith that saves us. It's the greatness of His mercy and love. And that's why the catechism calls those who doubt their salvation, not to look even at your conscience but to look at the cross.

The ground of our confidence and the comfort of our salvation is Christ. It's not my faith that is valuable. As answer 61 says,

It is not because of any value my faith has
that God is pleased with me.

And that's a good thing because we all know that even strong Christians waver from time to time. We might question their salvation, especially during dark periods of our lives. But salvation's guarantee is not based on my faith. It is guaranteed by Christ's blood. And the catechism drills that home saying

Only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness
make me right with God.

Hold on to that truth. Jesus is the basis for our justification. Believe in Him. Act out of that truth when doubts or guilt or trials come that make you question Christ's grace for you. Stand on Jesus' finished work for you alone!

This is the truth summarized and taught in the Apostles' Creed. This is the glorious gospel which we believe: a gospel for our children, for parents, grandparents and great grandparents. A gospel for you and me to soak in and to find comfort in at every stage of life.