



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

The Theology of the Reformers

TRANSCRIPT

“The Means of Justification, or the Office of Faith in Justification”

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee again for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures. We ask, Lord, that Thou wilt give us guidance again as we think about justification by faith as set forth in Thy word. Enable us, Lord, to stand and we pray that our knowledge of Thee may be deepened as a result of our studies together tonight.

We pray that each one of us may profit from looking into Thy word. Enable us, Lord, to develop a love for the Scriptures. We remember the Apostle Peter said, “Desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow unto salvation.” May, O God, that be our own particular experience, to have that love for the Scriptures that will issue in our spiritual growth.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Our study tonight in the subject of the doctrine of justification by grace, is “The Means of Justification, or the Office of Faith in Justification.” I did not put the complete title on the transparency for the sake of space, but the complete title of this fifth study in the series is “The Means of Justification, or the Office of Faith in Justification.” And I would like to read Romans chapter 4 verse 1 through verse 5 as a beginning basis for our study tonight. Romans chapter 4 verse 1 through verse 5. You remember from your reading from the Epistle to the Romans, the opening two or three chapters are

chapters in which the apostle sets forth the guilt of man. He talks about the guilt of the Gentiles, the guilt of the Jews, and he speaks of the fact that all, both Jews and Greeks are under sin and then proves it from a series of quotations from holy Scripture, the Old Testament. And then in the latter part of chapter 3, he expounds the doctrine of justification by grace in probably the passage that is the normative passage of that doctrine.

You know, the Romans, who understood probably a little bit about the Bible would probably have had some of the same questions that we would have had if we knew something about the Old Testament and were told that we were justified by grace through faith and not by the works of the Mosaic law. And so the apostle in chapter 3, beginning at verse 27 and on through chapter 4 and chapter 5, the first part of the chapter, answers some objections that biblical students might have raised. They might have said, well now, are you sure that this is in harmony with the Old Testament. Or, are you sure that this was the way in which the Old Testament saints were justified.

And so, the apostle seeks to answer these questions. They no doubt arose out of his experience, because he was a man who preached on the street corners of the Eastern world and had many an argument over biblical doctrine, and so all of these questions that he asks are questions that he anticipates his audience wanting to understand. So we’re not surprised then when we read in verse 1 of chapter 4,

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’ (In other words, Abraham did not achieve. He believed. He received the imputation of righteousness on the basis of faith, not on the basis of works. And then Paul argues this. He says,) Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. (That’s what you think when you

get your paycheck. That’s not what your employer is giving you; it is something that you have earned. And so he says,) But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.”

Now the translators of the New American Standard Bible were not really acquainted with the doctrine of justification by faith from the Calvinistic perspective, and it is evident by the way they have translated the fifth verse. His faith is reckoned as righteousness, because that is exactly the way in which the Arminians like to understand that passage. They like to understand it to mean, simply, that a man’s faith *is* his righteousness. It is substituted for his righteousness, so that when a man believes, his faith is righteousness.

Now we’ll say something about that, but it’s an illustration of the fact, for some of you seminary students here, it’s an illustration of the fact that a man’s theology intrudes into the translation of the word of God. That’s why some translations, made by men who know Greek quite well, are nevertheless reflective of their theological positions.

Now we want to discuss tonight this means of justification, of the office of faith in justification. And for the sake of a few of you who are here for the first time – usually have a few – and then you who like to have a little bit of review, let me remind you of what we’ve been saying.

We’ve been saying that justification by grace is a central doctrine of the New Testament. It is a very relevant doctrine, because it is in a sense that toward which all of Jesus Christ’s work was directed: the reincarnation, the sufferings, the death, the burial, the resurrection – all took place in order that God might have a righteous basis upon which he could give us through imputation the righteousness that makes us acceptable to him.

It is a forensic work. That is, it is a legal work. We are reckoned righteous. That is what it means to be justified. It does not mean that we are righteous inherently; that’s

the work of sanctification and glorification to bring us to that state. It means simply that we have been declared righteous before God. We have a legal standing of righteousness before him.

Then we talked about the ground of God’s act of justification, and we said that the ground of it was the imputation or the reckoning of God’s righteousness to the elect believer. And we said this imputation of righteousness, this reckoning of this righteous position is possible by reason of the penal substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who died under God’s wrath for us, so that we who are his elect believers have borne the wrath due to us in our substitute. We are reckoned as having already suffered the wrath of God, because we suffered it in our substitute. And since we have suffered the wrath of God, the penalty and the guilt of sin and the condemnation thereby in our substitute, then it is no longer necessary for us to suffer the wrath of God. That is why if we believe in the doctrine, we must believe in a particular redemption, or a definite atonement.

Then we also said that we have participated in what Christ has done by virtue of an exchange. He has taken our place, and in a sense we have taken his. He hath made him to be sin for us, him who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. So that he has borne our Hell that we might have his Heaven.

Then we also said last time that the fundamental principle by which God has carried out this great work of justification is grace, sheer grace. We have said that this work is a manifestation of *solo Christo* and *sola gratia*. By Christ alone, in his work we stand righteous before God, and by grace alone, it has become possible for us to be justified.

We talked about “the gospel of the five onlys,” *sola scriptura* – not sure I can remember them all on the spur of the moment – *sola scriptura*, by Scripture alone; *sola gratia*, by grace alone; *sola fide*, by faith alone; *solo Christo*, by Christ alone; and *solī deo gloria*, to God alone be the glory. So what we are talking about is the gospel of the five

only, which stress the fact that our salvation is a work of grace. Now that’s Christianity. Anything else is not Christianity in its truest and purest sense.

In this study, we seek to answer the question, how does this imputation become ours? Do we do something for it? Now, we’ve anticipated this when we say that the fundamental principle of our justification is grace, but we want to deal a little bit more with the question of, do we do something in order for it to become ours? And what I want to seek to do is to show that faith is the means of justification.

And I want to show that while faith is our act, it is not our work. It is true to say that we exercise faith. God doesn’t exercise faith. He doesn’t have to exercise faith. We do exercise faith. But the faith that we exercise is the gift of God, it is not, therefore, our work by which we earn justification. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8 and 9, and very familiar verse. I imagine most of you could recite it word for word,

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.”

So, the Bible makes very plain, then, that faith is the means of justification but that while it is our act it is not our work.

Now we must remove from our minds that faith is a man-centered existential commitment. Faith is an activity of a human being which is centered in an object. So it is object-centered. It is God-centered. It has as its object the Lord Jesus Christ and his saving work. So, when we talk about faith, we should not talk about some feeling that we have or some general idea that there is a God in heaven or some general idea of faith in the Bible or faith in Christ, generally. It’s not enough. We must define the faith that we have.

For example, it’s not enough to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God unless we are able to clearly define what the Son of God means. For some people, Son of God

means that he’s just the same thing as we are, except just a little holier than we are. Because, are we not all the sons of God? Are we not all brethren? Are we not all members, really, of the universal church, though we may have some local cells to which we belong down here on earth, but we’re all going to Heaven, ultimately, are we not? So the world says.

Now it’s not enough to simply say you believe in Christ or you believe in the Bible or your believe in Christianity. You must be able to define that. When we say that Christ is the Son of God, we mean that he is or possesses full deity. We mean that he is the second person of the Trinity. We mean that he is the one who has existed from eternity past, and that there are, of course, other things that we believe about him: he has become incarnate, he has done an atoning work, he has been resurrected in bodily form, he’s at the right hand of the Father and in his glorified bodily form will return again and so on. And so, faith, biblically is object centered. It is God-centered, it is Christ centered. It is not man-centered. It is not faith in ourselves, our feeling or ideas about religion and so on.

Now there are some people who tell us that to have faith in the Bible is wrong. Because, what we really have then in the Bible is a kind of paper pope. And this paper pope that we have is something that is impersonal, and the Bible speaks about a relationship to a person, and so the idea that we should believe in the Bible is said by many contemporary theologians to be unscriptural.

Strictly speaking again, faith is biblio-centric. That is, it is centered in what the Bible says, but it also is Christo-centric. That is, it is faith in what the Scripture says about the person of Christ. We cannot know anything about Jesus Christ, truly, that is not found right here in the word of God. But our faith is not in the paper of the Bible. Our faith is in the biblical content of the words of holy Scriptures. So faith is biblio-centric, and it is Christo-centric. To receive Scripture as the word of God leads inevitably and surely to the

embracing of Jesus Christ as a person and his saving work for our salvation. Don’t let anyone scare you with comments like that.

Now we turn to the subject of faith and justification in history. But I want to note just three principal views: the Roman Catholic view, the Arminian view and the Reformed view. You will, of course, gather by now that it is my opinion that the Reformed view is correct. I do not think the Reformed view is necessarily correct in every biblical doctrine, but in this case, I do.

You know, there is a very interesting thing in Christianity, and I think it is an important thing for us to recognize. There is a great deal of agreement in many of the professing churches that make up Christian profession in the facts of the gospel. For example, if you were to speak to one who is a member of perhaps the largest religious organization claiming to be Christian on the earth, if you were to speak to one of them about the deity of Christ, why they would say we believe in the deity of Christ.

If you were to say, do you believe in the atonement? They would say, yes, we believe in the atonement. Do you believe that Jesus Christ has accomplished an atonement? They would say yes. Do you believe that he was raised from the dead bodily? Yes, that is our doctrinal position. Do you believe that he is coming again? Yes, we do.

But then if you were to ask them, how do we as an individual lay hold of the benefits of the benefits of Christ? Well, they might say, well first of all you must be baptized as an infant. Then you must be sure to confess your sins to the proper authorities. You must also be prepared to observe the daily sacrifice of the Mass. You must also as you die receive the benefits of the oil of extreme unction. You must also be prepared to spend a little time in Purgatory, and ultimately, as a result of the sacramental system which makes up our church, well we can generally guarantee that you finally will reach the presence of the Lord.

As you can see, there is a great deal of agreement in the facts, but a great deal of disagreement over the terms by which those benefits become ours. And it is possible for a person to teach that men are saved through Christ, but we don’t obtain the benefits of what Christ has done except by works, sacramental works, which the church has ordained that we should do. So in a sense, we affirm grace and we take it back by the sacramental system.

Now, it’s not only the Roman Catholic Church that is guilty of this, but many Protestant churches are too. See, this is something that does not pertain to one particular part of the professing Christian community. You may speak to a member of another particular denomination and they will say, yes, we believe Christ was the Son of God. We believe he became incarnate. We believe he was God. We believe he offered an atoning sacrifice. We believe he was raised from the dead bodily. We believe he’s bodily, in bodily glorified form at the right hand of the Father. Well, then, how do we obtain the benefits of what Christ has done? Well it is believe, baptize, or confess, believe baptize, or whatever the particular formula may be. But may involve some particular work like baptism as the basis for the forgiveness of sins.

There are others who have confused the issues of the reception of Christ by saying we must make him Lord. There is a half-truth in many of these things. We must make him Lord or we must ask him into our hearts, or we must open the door of hearts that he might come in – various types of things are suggested instead of the great emphasis of the Bible on “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

Now with that in mind, I want to say just a word about the Roman Catholic view of justification. One Protestant theologian has called this “a masterpiece of cunning and plausible error.” Justification is initiated by the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit who infuses grace. Now, he infuses grace in the form of a faith in the soul. This bestowal of grace takes place first of all in water baptism. And furthermore, it does not take place without the concurrence of the human will.

So what we have then is a system by which through water baptism a work of salvation is begun, providing men concur in the assent of their human will with what the human will does. Now this we call, synergistic. I don’t think there is anything I can write on here, but synergistic is spelled s-y-n for the Greek preposition “with,” and e-r-g-i-s-t-i-c for the word *ergon* in Greek means “work.” So that synergistic is – thank you, I do see it, Larry – synergistic means that salvation is a matter of cooperation. A matter of human works. Synergistic.

So, the in-wrought love, then, and faith, infused into the human heart by the Holy Spirit, and good works that follow become the righteousness that is imputed to the believer. The result is that the sinner is regarded as personally righteous – not imputedly righteous but personally righteous – and the means by which he becomes righteous is water baptism as the beginning and the decision of our free will. So you can see that our salvation is the product of human works.

We are taught that Christ is the Son of God and that he has died and offered an atonement, but it only becomes ours if we do some works. The Council of Trent says, “The righteousness of God is imparted through baptism.” And then it says in the 6th of the sessions, “It is necessary for the sinner to prepare himself by means of his own will,” and if we deny this teaching, the Council of Trent, the official doctrinal stand of the Roman Catholic Church says “the person who denies this is anathema.” That is, he’s not only not a member of the church, but he’s under the curse, anathema.

Furthermore, in the Council of Trent, it is specifically stated that they do not accept the view that a man is justified by faith alone. By faith – yes – but faith plus – the works of the sacramental system. So you can see then that the doctrine of justification by faith, as taught by the Roman Catholics is really a doctrine of justification by works and not by grace at all.

Now let me hasten to say that today in the Roman Catholic Church, as a result of Vatican II, there is a great deal of a difference of opinion, particularly among the common

people of that church. There are many people in the Roman Catholic Church who have come to a genuine faith in Christ and recognize the errors of the system in which they find themselves. And in a number of places, priests have become, evidently, evangelical Christians, and some of them, they have taken out the images and other objects of worship that have been in the cathedrals for many years. I was in one in Cuernavaca, in Mexico, a couple of years ago in which all of the images had been taken out of that cathedral because the bishop in that particular area has become rather evangelical. And Bible classes, a number of Bible classes are taking place among the Roman Catholic believer’s there.

So my words are not to be understood as meaning that every Roman Catholic is not a Christian. Nor would I want to say that every Presbyterian or Baptist is a Christian, either. Christianity arises out of a relationship with Christ, as you well know, and it’s possible for a Roman Catholic to be a Christian in spite of his system. And it’s possible for a Baptist to be an unbeliever in spite of what he’s supposed to believe, too.

The Arminian view. Now I’m going to talk about the Wesleyan Arminian view, because the Wesleyan Arminian view is the most evangelical of the Arminian interpretations.

Wesleyans are Arminians who reject the doctrine of imputation. They do not believe that the Bible teaches imputation. They argue that faith is our righteousness. If imputation is used by them, it is, “faith is imputed as our justifying righteousness.” So that when a man believes in Christ, this belief itself becomes the basis of his justification.

To them, justification does not mean that they are declared righteous before God, but it generally means that we are simply pardoned from our sins. But of course, this, too is legalism, and justification by human merit, because faith is a work of man according to the Arminians. The Arminians do not believe that faith is a gift of God. They believe that faith is a, not simply, an act of man, but a work of man. In other words, it is our faith totally. It originates in our hearts. So that they do believe that when a man is justified,

he’s justified by faith, but the faith is not the gift of God. So, we’re justified not by what Christ did, plus our work of faith.

Now again, you see, you say with one hand, salvation is by grace, and with the other hand you take it away by insisting on some work by which the work of Christ becomes ours.

Now of course, if righteousness, as the Bible says over and over again, if righteousness is through faith, how can it be faith? It would seem that the many times in which faith is said to be the instrumentality by which we receive righteousness, would make it plain that they must interpret that text wrong in Romans chapter 4 verse 5, because if righteousness is by faith, how can it *be* faith? It cannot be both that righteousness and the means of righteousness.

Furthermore, faith is an act purely receptive. It is a beggar’s confession of destitution. Now if a beggar confesses that he is destitute, is that a proper price for purchasing relief? So faith is receptive. Faith is the knowledge that we have nothing with which to commend ourselves to God. So how can faith be a work by which we obtain something?

Now if you’ll turn over to Philippians chapter 3 verse 9 you will also see that we are not justified by reason of our righteousness, but as Paul so frequently makes it evident in his comments in his epistles, it is because of God’s righteousness. Philippians chapter 3 and verse 9, we read these words, “And may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own (notice that, a righteousness of my own) derived from law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

But notice those words, “not having a righteousness of my own.” But if my justification is really due to my faith as a work of mine, then it is partially a righteousness that is my own. But Paul says the righteousness that justifies is not our own.

Or what about that text in Romans 4 verse 5 that we read? So let’s turn back to that passage. Romans chapter 4 verse 5. After all, does not Paul say, “But to the one who does not work but who believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness.” His faith is reckoned as righteousness. Does that not seem to say that his faith is substituted for righteousness? The faith becomes the righteousness. If we only had this English text here translated by my friends, one of whom was a former pupil of mine, we’d have no way to answer these Arminians, because this text does say it, and two more times in this passage, the same thing is said. His faith is reckoned as righteousness.

But now of course, he’s arguing on the basis of what Abraham said before God, and if you turn back and read in Genesis 15, we don’t have time, if you remember the occasion when God called him out and told him to look at the stars in the heaven, and then he said, “So shall thy seed be,” and the text says Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.

Now if you’ll remember the context, you will see that what Abraham did was simply embrace a set of promises which God had given him. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which the apostle relies upon here, the text says “his faith is reckoned” – now, some of you know Greek. I was delighted. Some fifty-five people started out in Greek. I understand that perseverance of saints does not hold [laughter] in taking of Greek and Hebrew, however, and there’re not that many there now, but that manifested quite an interest, and I was delighted, and there are some of you who are reading the Greek New Testament now as a result of your studies. I hope there will be more, ultimately. In the Greek text it reads that faith is reckoned *unto* righteousness. Unto righteousness.

In other words, this expression, unto, is the expression of a designed result. His faith is reckoned unto righteousness. That is, in order to the attaining of righteousness. And since so often through the Scriptures we are taught it is by means of faith that we are

justified, it is clear that this is to be understood in harmony with it. So this should not have been rendered, “his faith is reckoned as righteousness,” but “his faith is reckoned as that which obtains righteousness,” and the precise type of instrumentality is to be derived from the other passages in the Epistle to the Romans and in other Pauline literature.

We don’t have time to turn to Genesis chapter 50 and verse 20, but I wish that some of you would put that in your notes and look it up, because we have the same type of usage in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. What we have, then, here, is designed result. And the apostle is not saying that faith is accepted as righteousness, but faith is reckoned as that which is the means by which we attain unto righteousness, the designed result. Faith is in order to the attaining of righteousness.

Well now, let’s come to the Reformed view. The Reformed view, then, is that faith is the means or instrumentality by which imputed righteousness is received. The faith is faith in-wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. He is the one who creates faith. He gives us faith. And by this faith, we receive the righteousness that has been wrought for us in the gracious work of our Savior and the atoning sacrifice that he has accomplished.

Let’s turn now to the Scriptures and talk about this positively, and we will turn first of all to Ephesians chapter 2 verses 8 and 9. We’ll look at only a few of these passages. The New Testament is full of them. But just for the sake of time, we will have to concentrate on two or three of the more familiar ones. So, Ephesians chapter 2, verse 8 and verse 9. This is of course one of the more important passages in the Apostle Paul.

He has told us in the opening part of chapter 2 of man’s condition. He’s dead in trespasses and sins. That ought to let us know right then that we cannot believe of ourselves, but must be recipients of the irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit who creates within us faith that we must believe. Then, he talks about the transformation that has taken place by virtue of the riches of God’s mercy toward us who are sinners. And then in verse 8 through verse 10, he expatiates on the principle: it is by grace.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith.”

Now notice the expression. The Greek is *dia pisteos* if you want to transliterate that. It would be d-i-a, p-i-s-t-e-o (long o)-s. *Dia pisteos*; through faith. *Dia* with the genitive indicates instrumentality. So, by or through faith we are justified. Faith is the instrument.

It is not, strictly speaking, a condition. We can speak of faith as a condition. I don’t want to be too technical – I’m technical enough ordinarily. But I don’t want to be too technical except to say simply this, that it is not really the best thing to say that faith is a condition of salvation. I think that one could make a case for it, but it’s much better to say faith is the instrumentality by which we receive the righteousness of God. So, in faith, we go out of ourselves. We renounce confidence in everything but Jesus Christ, and we receive as a gift, righteousness, and faith is simply the means by which we receive it. It is not a work, therefore. It is our act, but it is not our work in the sense of a saving work.

Now incidentally, that passage, I think, makes it very plain that faith is a gift, for it says by grace you have been saved through faith, and that – that, incidentally, that “that” is neuter in gender, whereas the word grace in the preceding clause is feminine and the word faith is feminine, and so it is not the ordinary thing, though there are some exceptions to the ordinary rule. It is not the ordinary thing however for a demonstrative pronoun to agree with its antecedent in gender, so if this were a specific reference to faith, normally that that would be feminine. It however is neuter.

Now in the light of the fact that it is neuter, the probable reference of the “this,” this, or that, I should say, that not of yourselves, the probable reference is to the whole clause: for by grace are you saved through faith, and that – that is, that-by-grace-through-salvation is not of yourself. Now of course, if the by-grace-through-salvation does not arise out of ourselves, then all parts of it are not of ourselves, either, so the faith and the grace, of course, do not arise from ourselves. So this text, regardless of how we take it, is a clear text that teaches that faith is the gift of God. It is something God gives.

To whom does he give it? To the handsome? To the well-born? To those who are earnest in the exercise of their free will? Church members? Those who have been baptized and sit regularly at the Lord’s table? Southerners? [Laughter] Politicians? Lawyers? Even lawyers can be saved [more laughter]. There is one in the Epistle to Titus which proves that lawyers can be saved. Preachers? We said the other day that there’ll probably be no preacher in heaven who’s not constantly surprised that mercy has been shown to him. I really do believe that.

No, the Bible says that faith as a gift of God is given to his own people. His own people. They are the ones to whom faith is given. The Lord Jesus came to save his people. That was his name, Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. And a step along the way is the regeneration that issues in faith and justification. So, for by grace are you saved through the instrumentality of a God-given faith.

Isn’t it great to know that we have salvation? Isn’t it great to know that we have been given by God faith to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ? If you have come to faith in him, that is evidence that you are the objects of, not the temporary love of God, but the eternal love of God. For if he loves, he loves, what? Immutably. Immutably. His love is immutable, unchangeable. And if we stand on the basis of his love for us, we’ll always stand, because he shall always love those who he has loved. It’s great.

Now let’s turn to another passage, Romans chapter 5 verse 1. There is a temptation to say too much about these great passages. Romans chapter 5 and verse 1. And the only reason I’m citing this one is because we have a different kind of construction. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here, the construction is *ek pisteos*. *Ek* is normally a preposition that indicates source. But this expression *ek pisteos*, transliterated e-k, p-i-s-t-e-o-s (long o), means practically the same things as *dia pisteos*. It expresses instrumentality or means. Therefore, having been justified by means of faith, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. Again, the apostle affirms that.

Let’s turn to our third passage, to Philippians chapter 3 and verse 9, and read that text, because we have two expressions here that have to do with faith and salvation. The apostle says in Philippians chapter 3 and verse 9, “And may be found in him.” Oh, I guess we should read verse 8, also, “More than that I count all things to be lost in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I’ve suffered the loss of all things and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived of my own keeping of the Mosaic law, but that which is through faith” – the same expression that the apostle used in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8 and 9 is used here. Through faith, through the instrumentality of faith.

Then he goes on to say, “The righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” And here the expression is *epi te pistae*, which would be transliterated e-p-i, t-e (long e), can use a little i after it for the subscript, and then p-i-s-t-e-i: *epi te piste*. *Epi* indicates a construction like this: a foundation or a basis. And they’ve translated it correctly here, on the basis of faith.

Now, the thing that I want you to notice is the fact that all of these expressions are consonant with the idea of instrumentality. Through faith by faith, through faith, on the basis of faith; this of course to be defined by the many uses of through faith, meaning essentially the same thing – slightly different in the sense that it is on the basis of faith that this becomes ours.

The striking thing about the apostle’s language is this. He never says, he never says, “On account of faith,” as if faith is the cause of salvation. The cause of our salvation is God and his grace. But, the apostle never says this. And the striking thing about it is that soon after the New Testament was completed and the church fathers began to write, then this expression begins to appear, which is our only indication of the fact that the church fathers did not understand doctrine as well as they should have, and the rest of their writings prove that.

But you, see, it is very easy for people who will not pay attention to whole of the world of God to ultimately stray off into little errors which soon become big errors and soon become such big errors that they lead astray countless multitudes of people, and that’s why the Bible has such harsh words to say about Bible teachers who mislead the flock of God.

J. I. Packer has said, “Faith is a conscious acknowledgement of our own unrighteousness and ungodliness, and on that basis, a looking unto Christ for our righteousness, a clasping of him as the ring clasps a jewel, so Luther, a receiving of him as a vessel receives treasure, so Calvin, and a reverent, resolute reliance on the biblical promise of life through him for all who believe.” So faith is the instrumentality by which we’re saved. Faith does not save us. The object of faith saves us.

Now everybody in this room has a little bit of money. And probably most of you in this room have a little account at the bank. Let me assure you that your money is not safe in your bank because you think that your bank is safe. The mightiest faith in an insolvent bank will not keep your money safe.

But a tiny little bit of weak faith in a strong bank means that your money is absolutely safe. You see, it is the object of faith that saves a person, not his faith. His faith is the instrumentality by which he lays hold of that which saves. Christ saves. Faith is the instrumentality.

Someone might say, well how do I know that I have faith? How do I know that I really trusted Thee, the Lord Jesus Christ, properly? How do I know that I have faith in the atonement? You have faith in the atonement when you plead the atonement for your salvation with God. That’s faith in the atonement, to get down upon your knees and say, O God, there is not one thing in me that could make me acceptable to Thee, according to Thy word. I do trust in myself. I do not trust in my family, my education, my culture, my whatever it may be. I plead the atoning work of the Lord Jesus which he has objectively accomplished for sinners. And I’m a sinner; it must be for me. I plead the atonement. I

lean upon him. That’s faith. That is the faith that saves. The faith in the atonement that saves is the faith that pleads the atonement before God. That’s saving faith.

Now let me close by just saying a few words about faith and justification in figure. There are just three of the figures I’ve mentioned, and the first is the figure of looking, and so I ask you to turn with me to John chapter 3 and let’s read these two verses, John chapter 3 and verse 14 and verse 15.

The Lord Jesus is the author of these words, and in his interview with Nicodemus, if he is still speaking – I rather think that he is. John you know lived so long with the words of our Lord Jesus that when you read the gospel of John, you’ll find that John says, Jesus said this, and he goes on and on and on, and pretty soon, you can tell it’s something that John is saying. And so the words of our Lord have faded into the words of the Apostle John. He was through so many years so well acquainted with what our Lord had said and what the Holy Spirit had taught him, that they just drift imperceptively with one another, and this is one of those things that make modern scholars tear their hair out, because they want to know such inconsequential things as where does Jesus’ statement end and where do John’s begin. But, fortunately that’s not too important for us. And we read here,

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.”

Now, if you will go back to the passage in the Old Testament to which this refers, you’ll find that it’s the passage in which God was very displeased with the Israelites and so he sent serpents among them. And they bit much people, and they died. And so finally, in the midst of their sin, they appealed to the Lord, and the Lord told Moses, I want you to take a brazen, a brass serpent. I want you to put it on a pole, and everyone who looks unto that serpent shall live.

Now, that’s the illustration our Lord has in mind when he says, And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so, the son of man must be lifted up that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life. So what happened in Israel was that when the people were bitten by the serpent, and they believed the message that Moses had for them from the Lord, if they looked to that serpent, they would live, they would immediately, wherever they could get a view of that serpent on the pole, and they took a good look, and they were healed.

Now the Lord Jesus uses that as an illustration of faith, and you can see he substitutes for looking, believing. Believing is as simple as looking, so to look at the serpent on the pole – why the serpent? Because it is a picture of our Lord Jesus as the sin offering. He hath made him to be sin for us, the sin offering on the cross. Him who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God in him. And so, as a person looks off to our Lord Jesus as the sin offering, hanging upon the cross for sinners, and looks at him in response to the obedience of the word – translated equals believe that an atonement has been made for sinners – he shall live. So, looking. What could be simpler than to look?

There are people who tell us today that we must not only believe in our Lord Jesus in order to be saved, but also make him Lord of our lives. I believe the second is the work of sanctification, and sanctification is not a condition of salvation. Let me hasten to say that every true believer in Jesus Christ does have to come to the conviction that Jesus Christ is Lord. So, a simple look to him as the sin-bearing substitute, that is saving faith. So, to trust the atonement is to plead the atonement.

Now, the figure of eating and drinking is used in John chapter 6. We’ll just take a quick look there. John chapter 6 verse 50 through verse 58. You’ll remember in the great sermon on the Bread of Life, the Lord Jesus says in the 50th verse,

“The Means of Justification, or the Office of Faith in Justification” by S. Lewis Johnson
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“This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. (Notice the figure of eating) I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, “How can this man give us His flesh to eat?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.”

Eating and drinking; what are these but figures of the assimilation of the truth. And in this passage there is taught the truth of the incarnation, there is taught the truth of the vicarious satisfaction, the atoning work of the Lord Jesus and to eat his flesh and to drink his blood is to simply to take those doctrines into our inmost being through faith. Eat and drink.

Calvin said, “Faith alone is so to say, the mouth and stomach of the soul.” The Reformers spoke very directly and plainly, but they referred to assimilation.

And finally, the figure of coming to Christ. John chapter 7 and verse 37 and verse 38. We’ll just read these passages, these two verses.

“Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me (you see, coming and believing are equated) as the Scripture has said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’”

So, to come to him is one of the figures of faith.

So to have faith is to look to Christ. To have faith is to eat his flesh and drink his blood. To come to Christ is to have faith.

Let me summarize. We have one minute. We’re justified by grace on the ground of imputation of God’s righteousness, made possible by Christ’s discharge of our debt. He has offered and made a full satisfaction of the Father’s justice in his death. The instrument of appropriation is faith. We add nothing. If we add anything, then we invalidate our grace-salvation. But the Bible says we are saved by grace. Or, we insult the work of Christ, because if we say, since he said it is finished, we must not only believe in our Lord Jesus who died for our sins, but we must also add our faith – all our works in any way are going through a sacramental system or be baptized – we are in effect saying, he didn’t really do it all. He does part, and we do part. Though he may do the most and we do little, nevertheless, it would be not be a grace salvation.

Worse than that, the Apostle Paul says in Galatians chapter 1 concerning his gospel of the grace of God, he said, “If any man or any angel preach unto you any other gospel other than that which I have preached unto you, let him be anathema.” Let him be accursed. Now do you know what that means? Will you pardon my expression? It means simply this, that if we add anything to the saving work of our Lord Jesus, and to faith as an instrument alone, the Holy Spirit says to us, pardon the expression, “Go to Hell.” Let him be anathema.

That’s why the apostle was so excited over this and felt so strongly about it, because the issue is the eternal life of the souls of men. Our responsibility then is simply to believe.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, in one of his sermons on the Epistle to the Romans says that he was once speaking to a man who was very much in darkness, and he could not get home to the man at all. He said it was just impossible; I was getting nowhere until finally the man said to him out of a sense of agony, “But what does God want? Tell me, what does God want?”

And Dr. Barnhouse said, “The Lord gave me an answer in a coruscating sentence.” I had to look that up in the dictionary [laughter]. In a glittering sentence he said, “I said

to him, God wants men to believe him. That’s what he wants. He want men to believe him, and that’s all he wants.” He wants us to realize he has accomplished the work of salvation, and he wants us to do him the honor of taking him at his word and believing him, trusting him and his word. That’s what God wants. That’s what pleases him. Everything else is an insult, because in effect we say, you’re not really telling us the truth. And he says, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. I believe it. That pleases God. Shall we bow in a word of prayer?

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the wonderful truth that we do not work for our salvation, because we could never work out of our sinful existence that would be acceptable to our holy Father. So we thank Thee that in grace, Thou has wrought the sacrifice through your Son and imputed the benefits, the righteousness to us through the instrumentality of faith. Accept our thanks.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.