

A SERMON ON THE SALVATION OF MANKIND BY ONLY CHRIST OUR SAVIOR FROM SIN AND DEATH EVERLASTING

Part I

Because all men are sinners and offenders against God, and breakers of his law and commandments, no one can by his own acts, works, and deeds, regardless of how good they are, be justified and made righteous before God. Everyone must seek another righteousness or justification to be received at God's own hands, that is to say, the remission, pardon, and forgiveness of his sins and trespasses. And this justification or righteousness, which we so receive by God's mercy and Christ's merits, embraced by faith, is taken, accepted, and allowed of God for our perfect and full justification.

To better understand justification we must remember the great mercy of God; how that, when all the world was wrapped in sin by breaking of the law, God sent his only Son our Savior Christ into this world to fulfill the law for us, and by shedding of his most precious blood to make a sacrifice and satisfaction or (as it may be called) amends to his Father for our sins, to assuage his wrath and indignation conceived against us for the same. Infants, being baptized and dying in their infancy, are by this sacrifice washed from their sins, brought to God's favor, and made his children and inheritors of his kingdom of heaven. And all who commit sin after their baptism, when they turn again to God in sincerity, are likewise washed by this sacrifice from their sins so that there remains no spot of sin to be imputed to their damnation. This is that justification or righteousness of which St. Paul speaks when he says that no man is justified by the works of the law, but freely by faith in Jesus Christ, saying further, "We have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."¹ Although this justification is free to us, it does not come so freely that no ransom is paid at all.

But this line of reasoning brings consternation. If a ransom is paid for our redemption, then it is not given to us freely. A prisoner who pays his ransom is not let go freely, for what does going freely mean unless to be set at liberty without payment of ransom? This difficulty is satisfied by the great wisdom of God in the mystery of our redemption, in that he has so tempered his justice and mercy together that he would neither by his justice condemn us unto the everlasting captivity of the devil and his prison of hell, remediless forever without mercy, nor by his mercy deliver us clearly without justice or payment of a just ransom, but with his endless mercy he joined his most upright and equal justice. He showed us his great mercy in delivering us from our former captivity without requiring us to pay any ransom or make any amends; indeed, it was impossible for us to do so. And because we could not pay the price, he provided a ransom for us, the most precious body and blood of his own most dear and best beloved Son Jesus Christ; who, besides his ransom, fulfilled the law for us perfectly. And so the justice of God and his mercy

¹ Galatians 2:16

embraced and fulfilled the mystery of our redemption. In Romans 3, St. Paul speaks of this justice and mercy of God knit together:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.²

He also speaks of it in Romans 10: “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth,”³ and in Romans 8:

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.⁴

In these Scriptures, the Apostle covers three things that must go together in our justification: upon God’s part, his great mercy and grace; upon Christ’s part, justice, that is, the satisfaction of God’s justice, or the price of our redemption by the offering of his body and shedding of his blood with fulfilling of the law perfectly and thoroughly; and upon our part, true and lively faith in the merits of Jesus Christ; which yet is not ours but by God’s working in us. So that our justification involves not only God’s mercy and grace, but also his justice, which the Apostle calls the justice of God; and it consists in paying our ransom and fulfilling of the law. Thus the grace of God does not shut out the justice of God in our justification, but only shuts out the justice of man, or more specifically, the justice of our works as merits deserving our justification.

St. Paul declares here nothing upon the behalf of man concerning his justification, but only a true and lively faith; which nevertheless is the gift of God, and not man’s only work without God. That faith, however, does not shut out repentance, hope, love, dread, and the fear of God, which all accompany faith in everyone who is justified. These do not, however, accomplish justification. Similarly, that faith also does not shut out the justice of our good works, which are our duty towards God, commanded in Holy Scripture all the days of our life; but it excludes them so that we may not do them to the intent of being made good by doing them. For all the good works that we can do are imperfect, and therefore do not merit our justification. Rather, our justification comes freely, by the mere mercy of God. This mercy is so great and free mercy that even though no one in the whole world was able to pay even a part of the ransom, and none of us deserved to be ransomed, our heavenly Father was pleased to prepare for us the most precious jewels of Christ’s body and blood, by which our ransom might be fully paid, the

² Romans 3:23–26

³ Romans 10:4

⁴ Romans 8:3–4

law fulfilled, and his justice fully satisfied. As a result, Christ is now the righteousness of everyone who truly believes in him. He paid their ransom by his death. He fulfilled for them the law in his life. Now in him and by him every true Christian may be called a fulfiller of the law. Whatever we lacked in our infirmity, Christ's justice has supplied.

Part II

In the first part of this homily, you heard from whom all men ought to seek their justification and righteousness, and how also this righteousness comes unto men by Christ's death and merits. You also heard that three things are required to obtain our righteousness; that is, God's mercy, Christ's justice, and a true and a lively faith from which springs good works. It has also been declared that no man can be justified by his own good works, because no man fulfills all the requirements of the law. As St. Paul declares to the Galatians, "For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law."⁵ And again he says, "If righteousness comes by the law, then Christ died in vain."⁶ And again he says, "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."⁷ And furthermore he writes to the Ephesians as follows, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."⁸ The sum of Paul's argument is this: if justice comes of works, then it does not come of grace; and, if it comes of grace, then it does not come of works. And to this end all the Prophets preached, as St. Peter says: "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."⁹

Furthermore, all the ancient authors, both Greek and Latin, spoke of justification by true and lively faith in Christ. Let us look at three of these: Hilary, Basil, and Ambrose. St. Hilary says these words plainly in the ninth Canon on Matthew: "Faith only justifies." And St. Basil, a Greek author, writes thus: "This is a perfect and a whole rejoicing in God, when a man does not boast in his own righteousness, but acknowledges himself to lack true justice and righteousness, and to be justified only by faith in Christ."¹⁰ He continues, "Paul¹¹ glories in contempt of his own righteousness, and looks for the righteousness of God by faith." And St. Ambrose, a Latin author, says these words: "This is the ordinance of God, that he which believeth in Christ should be saved without works, by faith only, freely receiving remission of his sins." Consider these words carefully. Without works, by faith only, freely we receive remission of our sins. What can be spoken more plainly than to say that freely, without works, by faith only, we obtain remission of our sins?

⁵ Galatians 3:21

⁶ Galatians 2:21

⁷ Galatians 5:4

⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁹ Acts 10:43

¹⁰ From St. Basil's Homily on Humility

¹¹ Philippians 3:9

These and similar statements are found often in the best and ancient writers. Besides the passages quoted from Hilary, Basil, and St. Ambrose, we read the same in Origen, St. Chrysostom, St. Cyprian, St. Augustine, Prosper, Oecumenius, Photius, Bernardus, Anselm, and many other authors, Greek and Latin.

Nevertheless, when the ancient authors say that we are justified by faith only, they do not mean that justifying faith is alone in man without true repentance, hope, charity, dread, and fear of God, at any time or season. And when they say that we are justified freely, they do not mean that we should afterward be idle, with nothing else required of us. They certainly do not mean that being justified without our good works means that we should do no good works. Saying that we are justified by faith only, freely, and without works takes away all merit of our works, which are unable to deserve our justification at God's hands, and it plainly expresses the weakness of man and the goodness of God, our great infirmity and God's might and power, and the imperfectness of our own works and the most abundant grace of our Savior Christ. The merit and deserving of our justification is attributed to Christ only and his most precious bloodshedding. Holy Scripture teaches this faith, and this is the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion. All of the ancient authors of Christ's Church approve this doctrine, which advances and sets forth the true glory of Christ, and beats down the vainglory of man, and whoever denies this doctrine is not to be counted for a true Christian man, nor for a promoter of Christ's glory, but for an adversary of Christ and his Gospel, and for a promoter of men's vainglory.

True indeed is this doctrine that we are justified freely without all merit of our own good works (as St. Paul states), and freely by this lively and perfect faith in Christ only (as the ancient authors wrote), yet this true doctrine must be also truly understood and most plainly declared, or else carnal men would unjustly take occasion to use this doctrine as an excuse to live carnally after the appetite and will of the world, the flesh, and the devil. To prevent this mistaken view of justification, the third part of this homily will set for a right understanding of this doctrine so that no man shall use it as an occasion of carnal liberty to follow the desires of the flesh or as an excuse to fall into greater sin or an ungodly lifestyle.

The first thing to note is that in our justification by Christ, it is not all one thing, the office of God unto man, and the office of man unto God. Justification is not the office of man, but of God, for man cannot make himself righteous by his own works, neither in part, nor in the whole; for it would be the greatest arrogance and presumption of man that Antichrist could devise, to affirm that a man might by his own works take away and purge his own sins, and so justify himself. Justification is the office of God only; and is not something we offer him, but which we receive of him; not which we give to him, but which we take of him, by his free mercy, and by the only merits of his most dearly beloved Son, our only Redeemer, Savior, and Justifier, Jesus Christ.

The doctrine that we are justified freely by faith without works—or that we are justified by faith in Christ only—does not mean that our own act of believing in Christ, or even the faith in Christ that is within us, is what justifies us or causes us to deserve justification. If that were the case, we could count ourselves to be justified by some act or virtue that is within ourselves. What it means is that, although we hear God's Word and

believe it, although we have faith, hope, charity, repentance, dread, and fear of God within us and do many good works, yet we must renounce the merit of all our virtues and good deeds that we have done, shall do, or can do, recognizing them as being far too weak, insufficient, and imperfect to deserve remission of our sins and our justification.

Therefore we must trust only in God's mercy and in that sacrifice which our High Priest and Savior Christ Jesus, the Son of God, once offered for us upon the cross, to obtain thereby God's grace and the remission of our original sin in baptism, as well as of all actual sin committed by us after our baptism, if we truly repent and sincerely turn to him again. Although St. John Baptist was a virtuous and godly a man, yet in this matter of forgiving of sin he turned the people from himself and pointed them unto Christ, saying, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."¹² Even so, as great and as godly a virtue as the lively faith is, it turns from itself, and points us unto Christ, for only by him do we have remission of our sins or justification. So that our faith in Christ, as it were, says unto us thus: It is not I that take away your sins, but it is Christ only; and to him only I send you for that purpose, forsaking all your good virtues, words, thoughts, and works, and only putting your trust in Christ.

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Part III

In the previous parts of this homily it was plainly declared that no man can fulfill the law of God, and therefore by the law all men are condemned. As a result, it stands to reason that something else other than the law is required for our salvation, and that is a true and a lively faith in Christ, which brings forth good works and a life according to God's commandments. You also heard the ancient authors' teachings on justification declared so plainly that the true meaning of the statement, "We are justified by faith in Christ only," is as follows: We put our faith in Christ, that we are justified by him only, that we are justified by God's free mercy and the merits of our Savior Christ only, and that we do not deserve it by any virtue or good work of our own that is in us, or that we are able to have or to do, Christ himself only being the cause meritorious thereof.

Here you will notice many words have been used, to avoid contention with those who delight in bickering over words, and also to show the true meaning in order to avoid evil interpretations and misunderstanding. Yet perhaps even this effort will not quiet those who are contentious, for contenders will ever forge matters of contention, even when they have no occasion to do so. Nevertheless, such plain language offers less to dispute, so that all those may profit who are more desirous to know the truth when it is plain enough than to contend about it and obscure and darken it with pedantic arguments.

¹² John 1:29

Truth it is that our own works do not justify us. In other words, our works do not merit remission of our sins, nor do they make us who are unjust, just before God. But God of his mere mercy justifies us through the only merits of his Son Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, because faith directs us to Christ for remission of our sins, and by faith given us by God we embrace the promise of God's mercy and of remission of our sins, which could not be accomplished by any of our virtues or works, therefore Scripture states that faith justifies without works. And since the statement "Faith without works" is essentially the same as "Only faith justifies us," the Church fathers sometimes used the latter statement to mean the same as St. Paul meant when he said that faith without works justifies us. And because all this is brought to pass through the only merits of our Savior Christ, and not through our merits, or through the merit of any virtue that we have within us or any work that comes from us, therefore, in that respect of merit and deserving, in a manner of speaking, we forsake our own faith, works, and all other virtues. For our own imperfection is so great, through the corruption of original sin, that all is imperfect that is within us, faith, charity, hope, dread, thoughts, words, and works, and therefore not apt to merit and deserve any part of our justification for us. And we speak in this way to humble ourselves before God and to give all the glory to our Savior Christ, who is most worthy to have it.

Here you have heard the office of God in our justification, and how we receive it of him freely, by his mercy, though we do not deserve it, through true and lively faith. Now you shall hear the office and duty of a Christian man unto God, what we ought to return unto God for his great mercy and goodness. Our office is not to pass the time of this present life unfruitfully and idly after we are baptized or justified, not caring how few good works we do to the glory of God and profit of our neighbors. Much less it is our office, after we have been made members of Christ to live contrary to that calling, making ourselves members of the devil, walking after his enticements and after the suggestions of the world and the flesh; whereby we know that we serve the world and the devil rather than God. For that faith which brings forth, without repentance, either evil works or no good works is not a right, pure, and lively faith, but a dead, devilish, counterfeit, and feigned faith, as St. Paul and St. James call it. For even the devils know and believe that Christ was born of a virgin, that he fasted forty days and forty nights, and that he worked all kind of miracles, declaring himself very God. They also believe that Christ suffered most painful death for our sakes, to redeem us from everlasting death, and that he rose again from death the third day: they believe that he ascended into heaven, and that he sits on the right hand of the Father, and at the end of this world shall come again and judge both the living and the dead. These articles of our faith the devils believe; and so they believe all things written in the New and Old Testament to be true: and yet for all this faith they are still devils, remaining in their condemned estate, lacking the very true Christian faith. For the true Christian faith is not only to believe that Holy Scripture and all the previously mentioned articles of our faith are true, but also to have a sure trust and confidence in God's merciful promises to be saved from everlasting damnation by Christ; and from this follows a loving heart to obey his commandments. No devil has this true Christian faith, nor does any man who in the outward profession of his mouth and in his outward receiving of the Sacraments, in coming to the church and in all other outward appearances seems to be a Christian man and yet in his living and deeds shows the contrary.

How can a man have this true faith, this sure trust and confidence in God, that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven and he is reconciled to the favor of God and made a partaker of the kingdom of heaven by Christ, when he lives ungodly and denies Christ in his deeds? Surely no such ungodly man can have this faith and trust in God. For just as they know Christ to be the only Savior of the world, so they know also that wicked men shall not enjoy the kingdom of God. They know that God hates unrighteousness and that he will destroy all those who speak untruly. They know that those who have done good works, which cannot be done without a lively faith in Christ, shall come forth into the resurrection of life, and those that have done evil unto the resurrection of judgment. They also know well that to those who are contentious, and to those who will not be obedient unto the truth, but will obey unrighteousness, shall come indignation, wrath, affliction, and so forth.

Therefore, to conclude, we must consider the infinite benefits of God mercifully given unto us, though we did not deserve them. He not only created us out of nothing, and from a piece of vile clay, of his infinite goodness, has exalted us, with regard to our soul, unto his own likeness; but also, while we were condemned to hell and death everlasting, has given his own Son (who is God eternal, immortal, and equal unto himself in power and glory) to be incarnated, and to take on our mortal nature with the infirmities of the same, and in the same nature to suffer most shameful and painful death for our offenses in order to justify us and to restore us to life everlasting; so making us also his dear beloved children, brothers to his only Son our Savior Christ and inheritors forever with him of his eternal kingdom of heaven. These great and merciful benefits of God, if they are well considered, neither provide us occasion to be idle and to live without doing any good works, nor provoke us to do evil things. To the contrary, unless we are desperate persons with hearts harder than stones, they move us to render ourselves unto God wholly with all our will, hearts, might, and power. They move us to serve him in all good deeds, obeying his commandments throughout our lives; to seek in all things his glory and honor, not our sensual pleasures and vainglory; and to live in dread of willingly offending such a merciful God and loving Redeemer in word, thought, or deed. The benefits of God, deeply considered, also move us for his sake to be ever ready to give ourselves to our neighbors, and to endeavor to do good to every man. These are the fruits of the true faith: to do good, as much as lies in us, to every man; and, above all things and in all things, to advance the glory of God, of whom only we have our sanctification, justification, salvation, and redemption. To him be glory, praise, and honor, world without end. Amen.