Martin Luther's introduction to Paul's Epistle to the Galatians
Posted by Pastor Bryan Wolfmeuller – May 12, 2019

First of all, it is good for us that we speak of the argument of this Epistle [to the Galatians]: that is to say, what matter St. Paul here chiefly treats.

The argument therefore is this…

St. Paul goes about to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins, or, to say it another way: Christian righteousness, to the end that we may have a perfect knowledge and know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.

There are different sorts of righteousness. There is a *political* or *civil righteousness*, which emperors, princes of the world, philosophers and lawyers deal with. There is also a *ceremonial righteousness*, which the traditions of men teach. This righteousness parents and schoolmasters may teach without danger, because they do not attribute to it any power to make satisfaction for sin, to placate God, or to deserve grace: but they teach such ceremonies as are only necessary for the correction of manners, and certain observations concerning this life.

Besides these, there is another righteousness called *the righteousness of the law*, or of the Ten Commandments, which Moses teaches. This we also teach after the doctrine of faith.

There is yet another righteousness which is above all these: namely, *the righteousness of faith*, or *Christian righteousness*. This we must diligently discern from the other aforementioned kinds of righteousness: for all these are quite contrary to this Christian righteousness. This is because, first, they flow out of the laws of emperors, the traditions of the Pope, and the commandments of God, and, second, because they consist in our works, and may be accomplished by us either by our pure natural strength (as the sophisters term it) or else by the gift of God. For these kinds of righteousness are also of the gift of God, like all the other good things are which we enjoy.

But this most excellent righteousness of faith (which God through Christ, without works, imputes to us), is neither political nor ceremonial, nor the righteousness of God's law, nor does it consist in our works, but is the opposite: that is to say, a mere passive righteousness, as the other above are active.

For in this we work nothing, we render nothing unto God, but only we receive and suffer another to work in us, that is to say, God. Therefore it seems good to me to call this righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, the passive righteousness.

This is a righteousness hidden in a mystery, which the world does not know, yea, Christians themselves do not thoroughly understand it, and can hardly take hold of it in their temptations. Therefore it must be diligently taught and continually practiced. And whoever does not understand or apprehend this righteousness in afflictions and terrors of conscience, will necessarily be overthrown. For there is no comfort of conscience so firm and so sure as this passive righteousness.

But man's weakness and misery is so great that in the terrors of conscience and danger of death, we behold nothing else but our works, our worthiness, and the law: which when it shows us our sin, by and by we remember our past evil life. Then the poor sinner with great anguish of spirit groans, and thus thinks with himself: "Alas! How desperately have I lived! Would to God I might live longer, then would I amend my life." Thus man's reason cannot restrain itself from the sight and beholding of this active or working righteousness, that is to say, her own righteousness: nor lift up her eyes to

behold the passive or Christian righteousness, but rests altogether in the active righteousness, so deeply is this evil rooted in us.

On the other side, Satan abusing the infirmity of our nature, increases and aggravates these cogitations in us. Then it must be but that the poor conscience is more grievously troubled, terrified and confounded.

For it is impossible that the mind of man itself should conceive any comfort, or look up to grace only in the feeling and horror of sin, or constantly reject all disputing and reasoning about works. For this is far above man's strength and capacity, yes even above the law of God also.

It is true that of all things in the world the law is most excellent: yet is it not able to quiet a troubled conscience, but increases terrors, and drives it to desperation. By the commandment sin is made exceeding sinful (Romans 7:13).

Therefore the afflicted and troubled conscience has no remedy against desperation and eternal death unless it take hold of the promise of grace freely offered in Christ, that is to say: this passive righteousness of faith, or Christian righteousness. Which if it can apprehend, then may it be at quiet and boldly say: "I seek not the active or working righteousness, although I know that I ought to have it, and also to fulfill it. But be it so that I had it, and did fulfill it indeed, yet notwithstanding I cannot trust unto it, neither dare I set it against the judgment of God. Thus I abandon myself from all active righteousness, both of mine own and of God's law, and embrace only that passive righteousness, which is the righteousness of grace, mercy and forgiveness of sins. Briefly, [I rest only upon] the righteousness of Christ and of the Holy Ghost, in which we *do* not, but suffer, and *have* not, but receive; God the Father freely giving it unto us through Jesus Christ."

Like as the earth does not engender rain, nor is able by her own strength, labor and travail to procure the same, but receives it of the mere gift of God from above: so this heavenly righteousness is given us of God without our works or merit. As much therefore as the earth of itself is able to do in getting and procuring to itself seasonable showers of rain to make it fruitful, even so much are we men able to do by our strength and works in winning this heavenly and eternal righteousness; and therefore we shall never be able to attain to it unless God Himself by mere imputation and by His unspeakable gift bestows it upon us.

The greatest knowledge, then, and the greatest wisdom of Christians is, not to know the law, but to be ignorant of works and of the whole active righteousness, especially when the conscience wrestles with the judgment of God. Like the contrary, amongst those which are not of the number of God's people, the greatest point of wisdom is to know and earnestly to urge the law, works, and the active righteousness.

But it is a thing very strange and unknown to the world, to teach Christians to learn to be ignorant of the law, and so to live before God, as if there were no law. But is stands: except you are ignorant of the law, and are assuredly persuaded in your heart that there is now no law nor wrath of God, but altogether grace and mercy for Christ's sake, you cannot be saved; for "by the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20).

On the other hand, works and the keeping of the law must be so straightly required in the world, as if there were no promise or grace; and that because of the stubborn, proud and hard-hearted, before whose eyes nothing must be set but the law, that they may be terrified and humbled. For the law is

given to terrify and kill such, and to exercise the old man; and both the word of grace and of wrath must be rightly divided, according to the Apostle (Timothy 2:25 f.).

Here is then required a wise and faithful disposer of the Word of God, which can so moderate the law, that it may be kept within his bounds. He that teaches that men are justified before God by the observation of the law passes the bounds of the law, and confounds these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive, and is but an ill logician, for he does not rightly divide. On the other hand, he who sets forth the law and works to the old man, and the promise of forgiveness of sins and God's mercy to the new man, divides the Word well. For the flesh or the old man must be coupled with the law and works: the spirit or new man must be joined with the promise of God and his mercy. Wherefore when I see a man that is bruised enough already, oppressed with the law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for comfort, it is time that I should remove out of his sight the law and active righteousness, and that should set before him by the Gospel the Christian and passive righteousness, which excluding Moses with his law, offers the promise made in Christ, who came for the afflicted and for sinners. Here is man raised up again and conceives good hope, neither is he any longer under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

How is this man not under the law? According to the new man, to whom the law does not appertain. For the law has his bounds to Christ, as Paul says afterwards: "The end of the law is Christ" (Galatians 3:24; Romans 10:4); who has come, Moses ceases with his law, circumcision, the sacrifices, the Sabbaths, yes and all the prophets.

This is our theology: we teach how to put a difference between these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive, to the end that manners and faith, works and grace, policy and religion should not be confounded, or taken the one for the other. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their bounds: Christian righteousness pertains to the new man, and the righteousness of the law pertains to the old man, which is born of flesh and blood.

Upon this old man, as upon an ass, there must be laid a burden that may press him down, and he must not enjoy the freedom of the Spirit, or grace, except he first put on him the new man by faith in Christ (which nevertheless is not fully done in this life); then may he enjoy the kingdom and unspeakable gift of grace.

This I say to the end that no man should think we reject or forbid good works, as the Papists most falsely slander us, neither understanding what they themselves say, nor what we teach. They know nothing but the righteousness of the law, and yet they will judge that doctrine which is far above the law, of which it is impossible that the carnal man should be able to judge. Therefore they must of necessity be offended, for they can see no higher than the law. Whatsoever then is above the law is to them a great offense.

But we imagine, as it were, two worlds: the one heavenly and the other earthly. In these we place these two kinds of righteousness, being separate the one far from the other.

The righteousness of the law is earthly and has to do with earthly things, and by it we do good works. But as the earth doesn't bring forth fruit except it first be watered and made fruitful from above (for the earth cannot judge, renew and rule the heaven, but on the other hand the heaven judges, renews, rules, and makes fruitful the earth, that it may do what the Lord hath commanded): even so by the righteousness of the law, in doing many things we do nothing, and in fulfilling of the law we fulfill it not, unless first, without any merit or work of ours, we are made righteous by the

Christian righteousness, which nothing appertains to the righteousness of the law, or to the earthly and active righteousness.

But this righteousness is heavenly and passive: which we have not of ourselves, but receive it from heaven: in which we do not work, but apprehend it by faith; and thereby we mount up above all laws and works.

Therefore, just as we have borne (as St. Paul says) the image of the earthly Adam, so let us bear the image of the heavenly (1 Corinthians 15:49), which is the new man in a new world, where there is no law, no sin, no sting of conscience, no death, but perfect joy, righteousness, grace, peace, life, salvation and glory.

What, do we then do nothing? Do we work nothing for the obtaining of this righteousness? I answer: Nothing at all. The nature of this [Christian] righteousness is to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing whatsoever of the law or of works, but to know and to believe this only: Christ has gone to the Father and is not now seen, He sits in heaven at the right hand of his Father, not as a judge, but made for us by God wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Briefly, He is our high-priest interceding for us, and reigning over us, and in us by grace.

Here no sin is perceived, no terror or remorse of conscience felt; for in this heavenly righteousness sin can have no place. There is no law, and where there is no law, there can be no transgression (Romans 4:15).

Seeing then that sin has no place here, there can be no anguish of conscience, no fear, no heaviness. Therefore St. John says: 'He that is born of God cannot sin' (1 John 3:9). But if there is any fear or grief of conscience, it is a token that this righteousness is withdrawn, that grace is hidden, and that Christ is darkened and out of sight. But where Christ is truly seen indeed, there must of necessity be full and perfect joy in the Lord, with peace of conscience, which most certainly thinks: "Although I am a sinner by the law, as touching the righteousness of the law, yet I despair not, yet I die not, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my everlasting and heavenly life. In that righteousness and life I have no sin, no sting of conscience, no care of death. I am indeed a sinner as touching this present life and the righteousness thereof, as the child of Adam, where the law accuses me, death reigns over me and at length would devour me. But I have another righteousness and life above this life, which is Christ the Son of God, who knows no sin nor death, but is righteousness and life eternal: by whom even this my body, being dead and brought into dust, shall be raised up again and delivered from the bondage of the law and sin, and shall be sanctified together with the spirit."

So both these things continue while we live here. The flesh is accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, bruised by the active righteousness of the law; but the spirit reigns, rejoices and is saved by this passive and Christian righteousness, because it knows that it has a Lord in heaven at the right hand of the Father, who has abolished the law, sin, death, and has trodden under His feet all evils, led them captive and triumphed over them in Himself (Colossians 2:15).

St. Paul therefore in this Epistle goes about diligently to instruct us, to comfort us, to hold us in the perfect knowledge of this most Christian and excellent righteousness. For if the article of justification be lost, then is all true Christian doctrine is lost. And as many as are in the world that do not hold this doctrine are either Jews, Turks, Papists or heretics. For between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of Christ, or between active and passive righteousness, there is no

middle ground. He then who strays from this Christian righteousness, must need fall into the active righteousness; that is to say, when he has lost Christ, he must fall into the confidence of his own works.

This we see at this day in the fantastical spirits and authors of sects, which teach nothing, neither can teach anything aright, concerning this righteousness of grace. The words indeed they have taken out of our mouth and writings, and these only do they speak and write. But the thing itself they are not able to deliver and straightly to urge because they neither do nor can understand it, since they cleave only to the righteousness of the law. Therefore they are and remain exactors of the law, having no power to ascend higher than that active righteousness. And so they remain the same as they were under the Pope, except that they invent new names and new works, and yet nonetheless thing remains the same: even as the Turks do other works than the Papists, and the Papists than the Jews, etc. Some do works more splendid, great, and difficult by far than others, but the substance is the same, the quality only is different. The works differ in appearance and name only, and not in very deed, for they are works nonetheless, and they who do them are and remain, not Christians, but hirelings, whether they be called Jews, Mahometists [followers of Mohammed, i.e. Muslims], Papists, etc.

Therefore we earnestly set forth and often repeat this doctrine of faith or Christian righteousness, that by this means it may be kept in continual exercise, and may be plainly discerned from the active righteousness of the law. (For by this only doctrine the Church is built, and in this it consists.) Otherwise we shall never be able to hold the true theology, but by and by we shall either become theological legalists, observers of ceremonies, observers of the law, or Papists, and Christ is so darkened that none in the Church shall be either rightly taught or comforted.

Therefore, if we will be teachers and leaders of others, it behooves us to have great care for these matters, and to mark well this distinction between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of Christ.

This distinction is easy to be uttered in words, but in use and experience it is very hard, even if it is so diligently exercised and practiced; for in the hour of death, or in other agonies of the conscience, these two sorts of righteousness come more near together than you would wish or desire.

I admonish you, especially you who would become instructors and guiders of consciences, and also every one, that you exercise yourselves continually by study, by reading, by meditation on the Word and by prayer, that in the time of temptation you may be able to instruct and comfort both your own consciences and others, and to bring them from the law to grace, from active and working righteousness to the passive and received righteousness, and, to conclude, from Moses to Christ. For it is the devil's custom, in affliction and in the conflict of conscience, by the law to make us afraid, and to lay against us the guilt of sin, our past wicked life, the wrath and judgment of God, hell and eternal death, that by this means he may drive us to desperation, make us slaves to himself, and pluck us from Christ. Furthermore, it is also his custom to set against us those places of the Gospel where Christ Himself requires works form us, and with plain words threatens damnation to those who do not do them. Now, if here we be not able to judge between these two kinds of righteousness, if we do not take hold of Christ by faith sitting at the right hand of God, who makes intercession to the Father for us wretched sinners (Hebrews 7:25), then are we under the law and not under grace, and Christ is no more a Savior, but a lawgiver. Then can there remains no more salvation, but a certain desperation and everlasting death must need follow.

Let us then diligently learn to judge between these two kinds of righteousness, that we may know how far we ought to obey the law. Now we have said before, that the law in a Christian ought not to pass his bounds, but ought to have dominion only over the flesh, which is in subjection unto it, and remains under the same. When it is thus, the law is kept within his bounds. But if it shall presume to creep into your conscience, and there seek to reign, see to it that you play the cunning logician, and make the true division. Give no more to the law than belongs to it, but say: "O law, you would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and reprove it of sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart, which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without all hope, and utterly perish. This you are doing apart from your office. Keep yourself within your bounds, and exercise your power upon the flesh, but do not touch my conscience; for I am baptized, and by the Gospel I am called to the partaking of righteousness and of everlasting life, to the kingdom of Christ, wherein my conscience is at rest, where no law is, but altogether forgiveness of sins, peace, quietness, joy, health and everlasting life. Trouble me not in these matters, for I will not suffer you, so intolerable a tyrant and cruel tormentor, to reign in my conscience, for it is the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the Gospel, and in the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness."

When I have this righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven as the rain making fruitful the earth. That is to say, I come forth into another kingdom, and I do good works, how and when ever occasion is offered. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the brokenhearted, I administer the Sacraments. If I am a householder, I govern my house and my family, I bring up my children in the knowledge and fear of God. If I am a magistrate, the charge that is given me from above I diligently execute. If I am a servant, I do my master's business faithfully. To conclude: whosoever is assuredly persuaded that Christ is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation, but also submits himself through love to the magistrates and to their laws, yes though they are severe, sharp and cruel, and (if necessity do so require) to all manner of burdens and dangers of this present life, because he knows that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases Him.

Thus far as concerning the argument of this Epistle, where Paul implores, taking occasion of false teachers who had darkened this righteousness of faith among the Galatians, against whom he sets himself in defending and commending his authority and office.