

Pauline Ethics: Lecture 2

Justification by Grace through Faith: The Basic Principle of Ethics

There are two parts to this lecture. The first will talk about the position of the human race in the world; a position which Paul thinks requires God to justify us if we are to attain any wholeness. In other words, we will discuss Paul's idea of sin. The second part of the lecture will outline how Paul believed God had dealt with this state; it will deal with the meaning of justification by grace through faith alone.

Paul outlines his conclusions about the true situation of humans in the world in Romans 3:9-20. This passage is a series of quotations from different Old Testament books. Paul has conflated them and uses them as both a final proof and a summary of his argument in the first section of Romans. He has discussed already how it is that both the Jew and the Greek are guilty before God. This passage is the summary and clincher; whatever we mean by sin it is universal in the human race; it does not apply just to some people called sinners, but to everyone, whatever his special claims to virtue may be. The Greeks claim special privilege because of their knowledge and the Jews claim special privilege because they have received and keep the law and are descendants of Abraham ---yet neither of these claims is sufficient to avoid being caught up in that universal human condition Paul describes as sin.

Paul makes a distinction between being "in sin" and committing sins. Romans 5:21, to pick one passage among many, gives the idea that sin reigns, that it is a power in the world, not just an occasional act. Paul's almost constant use of the singular form "sin" rather than the plural "sins" implies the same thing, that for him, sin is a state of being as well as a description of the nature of certain particular acts. (See Romans 6:1, 12-14, 20 etc.) This is especially important because we sometimes think of sin as the state we are in when doing specifically sinful acts. In between these acts, provided we have repented of them, we may think ourselves righteous or at least O.K. But for Paul sin does not describe just a collection of acts or thoughts, but a state of human existence; people not only commit sins, they are "in sin" and constantly subject to its power.

For Paul, this state of sin is one of estrangement or separation from God. That is more than committing a wrong act. Individual wrong acts do not necessarily imply a state of continuing estrangement from God. Wrong acts may be committed from ignorance, or from a flash of malice or even because there is no better solution to a difficult and complex situation growing out of the evils of the past. Theoretically ideal solutions are not always possible ones. Anyway, incidental wrong acts may be incidental to who you really are. But Paul is not talking about incidental wrong acts. To live as one estranged and separated from God can only be a part of the fundamental description of who we really are. Paul does not sweat the small stuff.

This is the key point. The matter under contention between God and ourselves is not an occasional act of law breaking or disobedience, but the tenor and direction of our entire lives. Sin, for Paul, is a universal human experience not because everyone sooner or later slips and

commits a wrong act but because estrangement from God is a characteristic of all human life not lived in Christ. (Philippians 3:4-6) Paul is blameless under the law; his acts according to its requirements are sufficient. But he still feels himself to remain a sinner. (See also Philippians 3:12-15)

The characteristics of this estrangement are helplessness, enmity to God and sinfulness. For Paul, our individual, concrete acts of sin grow out of our estrangement from God; the estrangement is not the result of repeated individual acts. (Romans 6:5-11) Notice that it is not our abstinence from specific acts that frees us, but the death of the body of sin in us. So the gift of salvation needs to offer a change for the whole of our existence; it needs to cure our estrangement, not just patch individual fragments of our broken lives back together.

Let me offer an interpretation of this state of sin in non-Pauline language. Basically, sin is trying to earn one's salvation, or in altogether non-theological talk it is trying to make your own life secure through your own acts. Paul calls this trying to secure one's own life salvation by works; works are the means to security which we create for ourselves.

For example, I'm a priest. I get anxious about what people think of my preaching, about whether my teaching is good enough, about whether I'll have a job a year from now or not. I frequently act in ways designed to overcome that anxiety, ways that assure my future and my sense of worth as a person. But to satisfy anxieties means to perform, to achieve, to be able to show results that demonstrate my right to a job, that demonstrate the excellence of my preaching and teaching. That felt necessity to demonstrate my worth is self-justification. It is an endless process since I always have to prove myself afresh every time I teach another class or preach another sermon. If I perform badly, I feel more than sorrow for an inadequate job and the consequent lost opportunities for good. An inadequate performance makes me call into question my own value as a human being. Because my value is bound up with my performance, who I am bound to my works, a failure in my profession is a threat to my selfhood. So the attempt to guarantee my value by my behavior becomes a basic part of my life; it becomes a basic aim to be able to say to God, "See all the good things I have done, I have kept your law, I am a valuable person, I deserve eternal life." In this way the source and foundation of my life, my life now, is subtly shifted from God to myself. I become worthy, OK, saved or whatever, not because of what God does and the gifts he gives me, but because of what I do. God, in this view can do nothing else with us than that which our deeds determine. Such a god is not a free god. Anyway, all that is what Paul means by salvation by works -- that my own efforts guarantee and validate my life.

Yet to look to myself for the guarantee and validation of my life is rebellion against God who is the origin of my life. To seek justification through my own acts is to refuse God's justification and to rebel against his claim to be the origin and maintainer of all life. Those who rebel in this way are estranged and separated because they do not accept God's gift of justification. They seek to remake their world in their own image of obedience to the law of a passive god rather than the thankful acceptance of the action on our behalf of a free god. Hence, they are not just occasional sinners, but constantly subject to the power of sin since the whole of each of their lives is misdirected in the attempt to secure their own value and prove their own

right to life.

If you desire evidence that this is a true description of the state of humankind, reflect on the ease with which we are hurt when criticized, the ease with which we are threatened and consequently get angry, the lack of trust between ourselves and others because we are afraid of what they will think about us, our attempts to create physical and emotional security by our work -- frequently at the expense of our human relationships -- and the rest of the host of things we do with the motivation of proving that we are really all right and worthy of acceptance.

Paul gives an example of this attempt in Romans 10:1-4. The Jews seek to establish their own justification through the law, to secure their own life through obedience to the law, through the acts they perform in trying to live up to God's standard. The problem is not in the acts of obedience themselves; such acts are good, but in the motivation, that such acts were done to create spiritual security and meaning in their own lives. These deeds are, therefore, as Paul says, manifestations of covetousness, their covetous desire to control and secure their own lives. (Romans 7:7-12) Ironically enough, this is to deny God's direction of our lives through the use of his own law. This may be contrasted with Romans 3:24, where God's salvation is to be accepted as a gift, where one accepts that He is freely merciful.

I have spent this time discussing Paul's understanding of the human situation to prevent one great misunderstanding. Ethical living is, for the Christian, the last logical stage in the development of a human life. We do not live ethically in order that God love us; we live ethically because God already loves us. We do not live ethically in order to thereby satisfy God in some way; but because God has already pronounced his satisfaction with us. Good deeds do not save us; they are our response to being saved. So whatever ethics you discover in Paul as you read him, that ethics is a form of thanksgiving not a means of earning a right to life, to heaven, to salvation or even the right to call ourselves valuable and worthwhile. Paul's ethics is result, not cause; thanksgiving, not demand; loving response, not anxious obedience.

Now for the second part of the lecture. Paul says that we are freed from this situation of sinfulness by God's justification of us. (Romans 3:21-25) Justification is a technical term from the Old Testament language of law courts and legal pronouncements. It means the pronouncement of a person's innocence by his judge. Acquittal would be just as good a translation. Now in the Old Testament the term justification does not mean quite the same thing as a pronouncement of innocence would mean to us. In our legal system, the judge is supposed to be impartial, reaching objective conclusions based on presented evidence. In Hebrew legal thinking, the judge was also the reconciler, whose duty it was not only to seek out the guilty but also to heal the breach between the guilty and the community. Ideally, the judge was a restorer of wholeness to the broken relationships between person and person. So justification by grace simply means that God pronounces us to be innocent. It does not mean that the objective evidence backs up that decision, but that God wills it and he is able to accomplish what he wills. God will not hold our sins against us and will not allow them to separate us from himself. God is, then, not only a judge who pronounces the truth about our lives, but is also a healer of those lives. Here is the ethical importance of God's freedom which we talked about in the last lecture. He is not bound by his nature (Greek sense) to give us our just deserts, but can, through his

freedom, graciously revoke the penalty of estrangement that is the result of sin. (Romans 3:24)

Much modern interpretation of legal imagery in scripture is vitiated by this misunderstanding of ancient Hebrew legal thought. For instance, coming into a law court held out some hope even for the guilty because it was only through the pronouncement on their situation by a judge that they could be reconciled to the community. So condemnation by a judge might also be the road to restoration. This removes from the legal imagery of the Old Testament some of the oppressive sense of hopelessness moderns attribute to it.

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ is the means by which this pronouncement of innocence is made possible.

NOTE: How through Christ justification is made possible is the concern of systematic theology and not of ethics. For a hint of how Paul thought about it, see Romans 6:6-11. But that we are justified by grace has every ethical importance for our lives since it puts the whole of ethical life in perspective. Ethical life, all of it, is re-sponsible, responding to what God has done, with thanksgiving, in imitation of Him, in the keeping of the law because the keeping of the law is the glad living style of one who knows he is loved by God and loves in return. For those more advanced in the love of God than I perhaps even painful obedience to the law can be a joy, not because it is obedience, but because it is loving response.

But if God's justification of us is to be effective there is one condition that must be fulfilled. One must have faith. (Romans 10:4, Galatians 2:19-3:5) Again, as in other places where I use technical terms, let me start by saying what faith is not. It is not the intellectual belief that certain specific theological doctrines are true. It is even less the unreasonable belief that something is true when we wish it to be and cannot prove it except by making it a matter of faith. Faith for Paul is something much more personal and interior, to use that recently much maligned word, existential.

So faith is neither intellectual assent nor the method of accepting as truth that which we can accept in no other way. Perhaps one way to get at it is to notice that for Paul faith is the opposite of boasting. (Romans 3:27, 2:17, 4:2) To boast is to point to our own achievement, so to have faith is, then, to trust in God's achievement. The natural man relies on himself; the man of faith trusts God to keep his promises -- especially his promise that we are justified in Christ by grace. This confirms that the right ethical base for life before God is thanksgiving first, and then, stemming from thanksgiving, obedience. Obedience can rapidly turn into a self-assertive act. Because I am obedient, I am worth something, that is salvation by works. It is also a lack of trust in God since we are trying to create our own salvation rather than accepting His gift of salvation. An ethics that places the highest value on obedience encourages us to think in terms of our own success or failure in keeping the law as most important to who we are. Now, to have my own obedience as the base of my moral life is very self-centered. An ethics in which obedience is the highest value places the ultimate authority in my hands and the ultimate value on myself, my actions, my desires and my abilities.

But if thanksgiving is the basis of the moral life than we are radically other centered; we become acutely aware of the nature of our life as gift, gift from God, from other people, from the

natural world. And we respond to each of these with the love and respect appropriate in one who receives gifts. People who are at ease receiving life as a gift don't have to prove anything, either to God or to others. Their faithful trust in Him has set them free, unlike people who feel that they must be constantly proving their righteousness by obedience and are consequently constantly anxious about whether their obedience is sufficient for a demanding God.

(Thanksgiving, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9)