

DAILY MEDITATIONS ON THE BELGIC CONFESSION

by pastors of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

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AUG
Articles 24-25

Article 24: Man's Sanctification and Good Works.

We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost, doth regenerate and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary, without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a faith that worketh by love, which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word.

These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace; howbeit they are of no account towards our justification. For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.

Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?) nay, we are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Let us therefore attend to what is written: When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do. In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards our good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns his gifts.

Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior.

August 13 – Regeneration by Faith?
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Titus 3:5, “...by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;”

Perhaps your Reformed antennae quivered when you read Art. 24, “We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Ghost, *doth regenerate* ...” Faith doth regenerate? Surely the *Belgic Confession* is mistaken. We must understand, however, that we can speak of regeneration in two senses: the narrow and broad sense. Regeneration in the narrow sense is usually what modern Reformed theologians mean by regeneration. We might call it regeneration proper. The *Belgic Confession* does not speak much about it. It is that first work of God in which He implants, imparts or breathes life into a spiritually dead sinner. Scripture calls it the new birth (John 3:3). Faith certainly does not regenerate a sinner *in that sense*. It is impossible for a sinner who is dead in trespasses and sins, to regenerate himself by the activity of faith. Similarly, it is impossible for an unborn child to give birth to itself, a man to give himself a new heart, or a dead man to raise himself from the dead—all illustrations of regeneration in Scripture (Ezek. 36:27-28; 37:5; John 3:6-8, etc.). Regeneration is a sovereign work of God in which man’s activity of faith has no part.

Art. 24 is not treating *that* aspect of regeneration. Regeneration in the broad sense is the entire life of renewal which flows out of regeneration itself. I John 3:9 speaks of God’s seed in the believer—that is the life of Jesus Christ, regeneration in the narrow sense. If regeneration in the narrow sense is the seed, regeneration in the broad sense is the tree with its leaves, blossoms and fruit. In *that* sense Art. 24 declares (rightly) that “this true faith ... doth regenerate and make him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin.”

That new life which flows out of the principle of faith in the believer—which faith, remember, is kindled in his heart by the Holy Spirit, thus uniting him to Jesus Christ—is the theme of Art. 24. This article necessarily follows because the Reformed Faith needs to answer the charge hurled against it by the Roman Catholics and others that justification by faith alone without works leads to a careless and profane life. Their argument is very simple: if, as we have demonstrated, a man is justified without works, a justified believer needs not and will not produce good works, and instead will live an ungodly life.

The answer of the Reformed Faith is this: yes, it is true that God has justified us—legally declared us to be perfectly righteous before Him on the basis of the imputed, alien righteousness of Christ alone—but God has not finished our salvation at that point. God *also* sanctifies us, or makes us holy. Sanctification—the subject of Art. 24—must be distinguished from justification—the subject of Art. 23—but they cannot be separated. God justifies no one whom He does not also sanctify.

So, where do good works fit into our justification? They are excluded: “they are of no account towards our justification.” “We do not found our salvation upon them.” But does that mean that there is no place for good works in the Christian life at all? Absolutely not!

Good works have a place—a very important place—as we shall see in future meditations.

August 14 – Whom God Justifies He Also Sanctifies
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Corinthians 1:30, “But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”

The subject of Art. 24 is “Man’s Sanctification and Good Works.” Sanctification, like justification, is part of salvation, and endless confusion will be avoided if we carefully distinguish between these two aspects of our salvation. Sin, like a many-headed monster, has different parts, and when God saves us He gives us complete deliverance from sin.

Justification is a legal declaration that we are righteous based on the alien imputed righteousness of Christ alone and received by faith alone. Justification, therefore, delivers us from sin’s *guilt*. Sanctification is God’s work of making elect, believing, justified sinners *holy*. Sanctification, therefore, delivers us from sin’s *defilement*. Both justification and sanctification are necessary because we need deliverance from both the guilt and defilement of sin.

Salvation is, in its entirety from beginning to end, the work of God. Therefore God alone justifies and God alone sanctifies. Just as we cannot justify ourselves, so we cannot make ourselves holy. Sanctification is the peculiar work of the Spirit, which is why He is called the *Holy Spirit*. Justification is God’s act as Judge, in declaring us righteous. Sanctification is a work which God performs in our souls, in which He works holiness in us. Justification changes our legal state or status. Sanctification changes our actual moral condition. God never simply justifies us and then leaves us in our sins. Whom God justifies, He also sanctifies. Justification is the once-for-all, final, legal verdict of Almighty God as Judge: justification cannot be overturned, changed, annulled, increased or decreased. Sanctification is a progressive work of God in us, by which we are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, progressively devoted and dedicated to God in love, and increasingly separated from sin. Sanctification is never completed in this life. Perfect sanctification (glorification) awaits the Last Day.

There are other differences between justification and sanctification as well. In justification we are passive. God declares concerning us that we are righteous. We did nothing at all. In sanctification we are active. God does not sanctify us without means: He uses our activity of living in good works; He uses prayer; He uses the means of grace (the preaching and the sacraments) received by faith in order to make us more and more holy. We must not imagine that we will simply be “zapped” with holiness as we sleep! Sanctification requires of us that we fight against sin in ourselves and produce good works. In sanctification, says Art. 24, God “make[s] him [the believer] a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin.” However, we must also understand that sanctification is never dependent on us. Sanctification is not even a cooperative effort between God and us. In sanctification, we are active, and God will not sanctify us without our activity, but *God produces activity in us*.

If you understand that as a sinner you are not only guilty, but also defiled, polluted and enslaved by sin, you will rejoice in sanctification as much as in justification. You will pray, “Lord, sanctify me. Make me holy. Cause me more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. Cleanse me and create in me a new heart.”

What man who stands accused before the law is content merely to hear the justifying verdict from the judge without also experiencing freedom? Sanctification is the blessedness we experience as we leave God’s court, free to serve Him in thankfulness for what He has done for us. Let us live thus to God’s glory.

August 15 – Remissness Impossible in the Justified
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 6:1-2, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?”

The doctrine of justification by faith alone has many enemies. *The* greatest of all enemies is our own prideful flesh. Sinners are offended, when they hear that their works are not good enough to please God so that, as Art. 24 explains it, “they are of no account towards our justification,” “we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable,” and “the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them.” Remember, those phrases in the *Confession* describe our works, as believing children of God!

It takes a miracle of God’s grace to transform a proud, self-seeking sinner into one who humbly cries out to God, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13), and who then, out of thankfulness, goes forth and lives in all good works. It takes the almighty Holy Spirit Himself to break our pride, which is so rooted in our hearts, before we can confess our unworthiness and receive the truth that our justification is grounded in the righteousness of another.

The objection voiced in all ages to this doctrine is this: “But that doctrine will make men careless and profane! But that doctrine gives no incentive to good works! If salvation is guaranteed simply through believing in Jesus, and if Jesus has done it all already for us, why should we do good works?” Paul heard the same objection in his day: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1). Paul’s answer is an indignant, “God forbid” (vs 2). Art. 24 answers the same objection: “it is so far from being true that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary, without it they would never do anything out of love to God.”

Justified sinners are not remiss in a pious and holy life. That can never be, because justification is never in isolation from the other benefits of salvation. Justification must be distinguished from the other benefits of salvation, but it cannot be separated from it. Rom. 8:30 teaches us, “whom [God] did predestinate, them He also called, and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified.” Glorification is not merely going to heaven, but is “to be conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (vs 29). Glorification is the end goal of sanctification, a lifelong process of God making us holy. In Rom. 6, Paul shows how absurd it is to teach that justified sinners could be remiss in piety and holiness. By virtue of our union with Christ—that union created by the Holy Spirit by which all the benefits of Christ including justification become ours—we are “dead to sin” (vs 2); we are “baptised into [Jesus’] death” (vs 3); “we are buried with Him” (vs 4); “we are planted together in the likeness of His death” (vs 5); “our old man is crucified with Him” (vs 6). What are the effects of such a fundamental change? Surely, it is not that we are remiss in holiness, or that we actively walk in the ways of sin as before! Listen to the Word of God: “even so we also should walk in newness of life” (vs 4); “that henceforth we should not serve sin” (vs 6); “sin shall not have dominion over you” (vs 14); “ye became the servants of righteousness” (vs 18).

This is exactly what Art. 24 teaches. You will find that faith “doth make [us] a new man, causing [us] to live a new life, and freeing [us] from the bondage of sin.”

Let unbelievers scoff, and hypocrites misuse this doctrine to their own spiritual ruin. We, who know the mercy of God in justification, *will* be rich in good works to His glory.

August 16 – Good Works Impossible Without Justifying Faith
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 14:23, “... whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”

There are two commonly held false views on the place of good works in the Christian life. The first is legalism, that good works contribute to a sinner’s justification before God. The other view is antinomianism, that good works are not necessary in the Christian life, and that the Law of God is not a guide for the Christian. The *Belgic Confession* avoids both errors and sets forth the real place of good works in our lives.

The first thing we noticed is that Art. 24 emphatically denies that “justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life.” In fact, insists Art. 24, “it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man.” Therefore it is impossible for a justified sinner *not* to bring forth good works as the fruit of faith.

The second assertion is that, on the contrary, it is impossible without faith to please God, and therefore it is impossible for one not justified by faith to produce any truly good works. When we think about good works as the fruit of salvation, we need to consider the source of these good works. A sinner cannot produce good works *of himself*! Of ourselves we are nothing but sin and depravity. The only way in which a sinner can produce good fruit is through union with the source of all goodness, Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus teaches that in John 15 with the figure that He is the True Vine and we are the branches. A branch can only produce fruit when it lives out of the Vine, and absorbs the succulent sap from the Vine. Without that vital connection to the Vine—which the Bible calls faith, by which we are justified and out of which we live and are made partakers of all Christ’s benefits—we are dead, withered sticks lying on the ground. Therefore, for anyone to suggest that we could be justified on the basis of our works is to reverse the order. But *first*, we are justified by faith alone. *Then* as a consequence, we begin to produce the good fruits of faith. That is the argument in Art. 24: “without it [justifying faith] [we] would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.”

Many people in the world think that a good work is any work which is useful to society. To feed the hungry is a “good work;” to find a cure for disease is a “good work;” to help an old lady to cross the street is a “good work.” Men often boast in their good works. Witness the celebrities of our day with their “benefit concerts,” raising money for charity! Surely these are “good works.” There are others who think that “good works” are religious activities. Prayers, fasting, pilgrimages, giving to the church are “good works,” they say. Others try to be active in “good works” by doing no harm to their neighbour. We do not of course, mean to discourage charitable behaviour in society. Better to help an old lady than to steal her purse! But there is more to genuine “good works” which please God than that!

Jesus warned the Pharisees: “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). The Pharisees—for all their seeming piety—were abominable in God’s sight. They had not produced one good work, not one! Why? They did not believe in Jesus Christ, and because they were not united to Him by faith they could not produce any fruit, nor did they even desire to produce any good fruit. As Jesus said, “Without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5)—not “a little imperfect something,” but nothing!

Good works from a *dead branch*! Impossible!

August 17 – Evil Motives in the Unjustified: Self-Love
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

II Corinthians 5:15, “And that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.”

What insight the *Belgic Confession* has into the human condition! It identifies two main motives for so-called “good works” in those not justified by faith alone—self-love and fear. When you examine the works of unbelievers—especially religious unbelievers—those are the two motivating factors. Either a sinner desires to earn for himself some great good—self-love—or he desires to avoid some great evil—fear of damnation. But those two motives are not the motives behind truly good works. A truly good work is done out of love for God which flows out of gratitude for salvation.

As sinners, we are naturally selfish. Before doing something we ask, “What is in it for *me*? How will that affect *me*?” That is true even in our best works. A husband might love his wife only because she makes him feel good. Friends might be friends only because of what they can do for one another. But when such love and friendship either become inconvenient or begin to cost something, often the relationship feels the pressure. That is a test—do you love someone only because of what that person gives to you? When that person stops giving what you want, is the result anger and resentment? And what about God? When God gives you everything you want, do you serve Him? But when He begins to take away certain things, are you bitter against Him? Alas, the idol of self has too prominent a place in our lives!

The works of unbelievers are not merely tainted by selfishness. Their primary motive *is* selfishness! Many live in an outwardly moral fashion because they love the praise of men, and because they value their reputation. That is the motive behind much charity work—people want to be *seen* to be charitable. No wonder Art. 24 says that without faith we act “only out of self-love.”

Self-love can only be rooted out of our hearts by Christ’s cross. This is the teaching of II Cor. 5:14-15. According to vs 15, sinners “live unto themselves.” Christ died so that “they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again.” About us for whom Christ died, Paul writes that we now *live unto Christ*. That is the fruit of the death of Christ in our lives. This is not something that might possibly happen, but this is the certain fruit of the death of Christ, with respect to all those for whom Christ died. So true is this, that if a person does not live unto Christ, there is only one explanation—Christ did not die for him and he is an unbeliever.

This must be so because of the intimate union between Christ and the elect. The explanation is given in vs 14, “... that if one died for all, then were all dead.” A more accurate translation is “therefore all *died*.” When Christ died, He did so as the head of His people. Therefore, we died *with Him* and *in Him*. Although we were not personally present at the cross, we were there legally. This means, first, that Christ died for our sins, bearing our punishment. Second, our sinful flesh was crucified with Christ, so that it no longer has dominion over us to rule us. Therefore, by the cross, we are delivered from the terrible idol of self.

But for that—the death of Christ received by faith—we produce no works which are not born of selfishness. The love of Christ—not selfishness—constrains us to do good works to His glory, who selflessly lived and died for us, to deliver us from our sins!

August 18 – Evil Motives in the Unjustified: Fear of Damnation
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Kings 21:27, “And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.”

There are many in the church today, who are impressed by the lives of some unbelievers. They conclude—wrongly—that unbelievers are able to do genuinely good works. Yesterday we examined the first of the evil motives of unbelievers—self love. The second evil motive of unbelievers is fear, especially fear of damnation.

Not all unbelievers sin in the same way. Not all unbelievers are murderers, for example. But all unbelievers are murderers at heart—and so are we (Matt. 5:21-22). One reason why many, who are murderers at heart, do not commit the act of murder is fear of being caught and punished. The same is true with respect to many other crimes. It is not that people would not like to commit certain crimes, but that they dare not risk being caught—the shame, the court appearance, the prison sentence are active deterrents. But that is not the Christian motivation for doing good works or for avoiding sin.

Others do not commit sins—at least not outwardly—because they are afraid of *God’s* judgment, which is so much greater than man’s judgment. Fear of hell keeps many people religious, and acts as a bridle for many sinners. Pope Gregory I summed up the position of the medieval church thus: “the holy church ... mingles hope *and fear*, in order that they may neither incautiously trust in His mercy nor in despair fear His righteousness.” The message of Rome was to keep the people guessing, not to give assurance, to keep them “on their toes.”

King Ahab in I Kings 21 was afraid of the judgment of God. Elijah the prophet had declared that God would “bring evil” upon Ahab and “cut off” Ahab’s house. In response, Ahab did not repent, but put on sackcloth. When Ahab—the worst of Israel’s kings—wore sackcloth and appeared to repent, he did not perform a good work pleasing to God. Ahab had already rejected God by marrying the heathen Jezebel and worshipping Baal. He thought a show of humility and sackcloth would turn away God’s anger. But Ahab was not sorry for his sin, merely for the evil consequences of his sin. Ahab would have gladly sinned further if he could have escaped punishment. There was no love for God in Ahab’s heart—he acted out of self-love and fear of damnation.

Self-love and fear of damnation are the only motivations of the wicked with respect to God. That is why unbelievers cannot understand the motivation of the Christian, which is love. The unbeliever, who does not know the love of God, never acts out of love for God, but the believer who knows God’s love, lives out of thankfulness. That is why the believer does not need to be threatened with hell and damnation. The heart of the Christian melts because of love!

These are two very different motives. One is the motivation of a slave. A slave obeys the master because he fears his master’s wrath, but he does not love his master. He only obeys out of necessity. The other is the motivation of a son who obeys his father out of love. A son does not serve his father because he fears being beaten and even disowned as a son if he does not perform well enough as a son. A son serves his father because he loves his father, and because he is thankful for all the good things that his father has given to him.

Thus, it is with us. We keep God’s commandments and we perform good works, because we are filled with thanksgiving. That is the only true motivation. Is it yours?

August 19 – True Faith Is Excited by Love
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Luke 7:47, “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”

It is impossible for any unbeliever, who is not engrafted into Jesus Christ by a true faith, to bring forth anything but “dead works”—works that are either rooted in selfishness or slavish fear. But the believer has a different motivation—love.

Art. 24 speaks of this activity of faith as the fruit of justification. It is not that the works, which are the fruit of faith, justify us or contribute to our justification. How could they? We are already justified before we can begin to do any good works motivated by love. Without free and gracious justification received by faith alone, we would never “do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation.” The Judge utters the verdict—“Not guilty! Righteous! Worthy of eternal life!”—and that verdict has an effect upon the one justified.

Try to imagine the scene for a moment. A homeless beggar is led into the courtroom. He knows that he is guilty of crimes which are worthy of death. He has no reason to expect anything else but condemnation. The indictment is made, and the evidence of guilt is unmistakable. Trembling, the beggar waits for the judge to read out the sentence of doom. But the judge does not condemn him. Instead, he says to him, “I know you are guilty, but another has been punished in your place. You are free to go. The law has been satisfied.” What relief must flood that man’s soul! As the man turns to leave the courtroom, the judge speaks again, “I have more to say. These papers in my hand are adoption papers. I have signed them. You will live with me, sit at my table, and become part of my family. You will inherit everything I possess.” What surprise, what wonder, what joy will flood the soul of that beggar! Before his justification, he had nothing. Now he has the title to a great inheritance. That is but a faint picture of what happens in justification—and we have seen how that happens in earlier meditations.

Such an experience will have an effect upon the beggar. He will be filled with thanksgiving. He will desire to show his gratitude by the way in which he lives in the home of the judge—the home of his father! That is the point of Art. 24. What is true of our imaginary beggar is infinitely truer of the child of God. This is because, when God justifies us, “...the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” (Rom. 5:5). What the judge cannot do to the imaginary beggar—make him love him—God does to those whom He saves from sin. He sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts, and He fills our hearts with love—His own love which returns from our hearts as ardent love to Him.

Art. 24 explains the relationship between faith and love. We are not justified by love—because we loved God or our neighbor. We cannot love God and our neighbor by nature, and even the love we have as regenerated believers is weak, imperfect and tainted with self-love and fear. But the faith by which we are justified—by which the perfect righteousness of Christ becomes ours, being imputed to us—“...worketh by love.” (Gal. 5:6). That love “excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word.”

Is that not true for you, believer in Christ? Is it not your chief delight—now that you are justified by free grace—to live out of gratitude to Him who loved you so?

From the one who has been forgiven, the only response is love!

August 20 – Paul and James
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

James 2:24, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”

Do James and Paul contradict one another on the subject of justification? Paul writes, “...we conclude that a man is justified by faith *without the deeds of the law*” (Rom. 3:28). God justifies the believing sinner on the basis of “the righteousness of God *without the law*” (Rom. 3:21). In Galatians, he is equally emphatic: “...a man is *not justified by the works* of the law ... *by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified*” (Gal. 2:16). Moreover, Paul proves the doctrine of justification by appealing to the example of Abraham: “if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God” (Rom. 4:2). About Abraham, Paul writes, “but to him that *worketh not* but believeth ...” (Rom. 4:5) and points out that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he was circumcised! (Rom. 4:10).

James, however, writes something, which, on the face of it, seems contradictory to Paul. James writes that Abraham “was justified *by works*” (Jam. 2:21) and then adds this conclusion, which would appear to be devastating to the Reformed position: “Ye see then how that *by works* a man is justified, and not by faith only” (vs 24). Even today you will meet Roman Catholics who will say, “The phrase ‘justified by faith alone’ is not found in the Bible. The only place where Scripture mentions it is to condemn it, as in James 2:24, ‘not by faith alone.’ Case closed. The Reformation was wrong.”

But, before we address the question, we must stress the truth that James and Paul do *not* contradict one another. How could they, when they both wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (II Pet. 1:21)? Moreover, both were present at the Jerusalem Council as recorded in Acts 15 and there was no hint of disagreement between Paul, Peter or James. Remember the subject of that Council was justification! (Acts 15:10-14,19).

Both Paul and James use the same Greek word for “justify.” They appeal to the same Old Testament example of Abraham. Both Paul and James quote Gen. 15:6, “And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”

We must understand that Paul and James are addressing two very different situations. Paul is addressing the question of a sinner’s justification before God. Carefully, systematically and in great detail, Paul explains the utter depravity of man, that “there is none righteous” (Rom. 3:10), and that therefore God Himself has provided the only righteousness which is acceptable before Him (Rom. 3:21ff.). Therefore, Paul deals with great theological concepts such as “righteousness” and “imputation”, which we have already studied in some detail. He sets forth the glorious work of Jesus Christ as the only ground on which the believer’s justification rests; and, although he does not use the phrase, “by faith alone,” he emphatically and repeatedly excludes works from justification.

Therefore, to understand justification, we must start with Paul, not with James. This does not mean that James is less authoritative, less important or less inspired than Paul. However, if you want to study a subject, you must first study that place where the subject is treated at length. James’ main point is not justification but the life of faith in the believer’s life.

Tomorrow, we will examine what James is teaching in context, and we will conclude that James and Paul are in complete harmony. Both teach justification by faith alone, and both teach that there is an important place for works—but not in justification before God.

**August 21 – If A Man Say He Hath Faith
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

James 2:14, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?”

Yesterday, we began to deal with the relationship between Paul and James, and we insisted that there is no contradiction. But we still must explain what James means by “justified by works” (Jam. 2:21, 24-25).

In chapter two of his epistle, James is addressing the man, who says that he has faith, but, who has no works to demonstrate his faith. “...though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?” (vs 14); “... you say ... and give them not” (vs 16); “...a man may say,... shew me thy faith ... I will shew thee my faith...” (vs 18). Faith, you see, is invisible. But, the fruits of faith are not invisible. True faith—as opposed to “dead” faith (vs 17)—always displays itself to others by means of works. The examples in the chapter are striking: one with true faith does not ignore the needs of a destitute brother or sister in the church (vs 15-16). He goes beyond the mere intellectual knowledge of devils (vs 19)—who know many facts about God, but hate and fear Him—and one with true faith is willing to deny himself, as did Abraham and Rahab (vs 21, 25). All of this simply means that you know a believer—not by the loudness of his profession—by the fruit of his faith. Our faith in Jesus Christ will lead us to love God and the neighbour; it will bring us to true sorrow for sin and hearty thankfulness to our Saviour manifested in obedience. One without true faith—a hypocrite or a “vain man” (vs 20)—will lead an ungodly life.

James uses the example of Abraham. Abraham was justified by faith some seven chapters and thirteen years *before* the test of his faith on Mt. Moriah (Gen. 15:6, 22:16). Both Paul and James teach this (Jam. 2:23; Rom. 4:3). What was God doing on Mt. Moriah then? He was not justifying Abraham again. He was proving to Abraham, to us and to all in the world that Abraham had true faith, that Abraham’s faith was not a pious sounding sham. So strong was Abraham’s faith—a faith which God worked in him and perfected through this trial and by which He had already justified him—that he was willing, when commanded, to sacrifice his son (Rom. 4:19-22; Heb. 11:17-19; Jam. 2:21-23). Thus, writes James concerning the trial, “...faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness:...” (Jam. 2:22-23). Gen. 22 proves the genuineness of the testimony of Gen. 15! The same is true with Rahab, the harlot of Jericho. She believed in the true God (Josh. 2:8-13), but how did she demonstrate to the spies of Israel the genuineness of her faith? By siding with Israel, helping Israel’s spies, saving them from death, and betraying her own city in a time of war and at great risk to herself (Jam. 2:25).

So, in what sense were Abraham and Rahab—and in what sense are we—justified by our works? Is it in the sense that our works are part of or even all our righteousness before God? Or is it in the sense that God accepts our imperfect obedience as a suitable alternative to the perfect righteousness of Christ? Absolutely not (see Jam. 2:10)! We are justified by works in that our good works—which flow from faith—vindicate or prove the genuineness of our faith *before men*. Those who have no good works and who live in an ungodly manner show by that very fact that their faith is counterfeit, or as James puts it, that their faith is “dead” (Jam. 2:17,20,26).

But, says Art. 24, “we do not speak of a vain faith.” Thank God that true faith in Jesus Christ can be neither dead nor vain!

August 22 – Holy Faith Never Fruitless
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 15:5, “...He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit ...”

It is impossible for any unbeliever, who is not engrafted into Jesus Christ by a true faith, to bring forth anything but “dead works”—works motivated by self-love or fear. It is equally impossible for a believer, who is engrafted into Jesus Christ by a true faith, *not* to bring forth the fruit of good works.

In Matt. 12, Jesus illustrates this: “Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.” (vs 33) By nature, says Jesus, we are all evil trees. In fact, some trees are trees not planted by the Father. They will be uprooted and destroyed (Matt. 15:13). How does an evil tree change into a good tree? Its very nature must be changed, and that happens by God’s grace. The inevitable result, fruit and evidence of that change in the believer are the bringing forth of good works. A similar illustration is used in John 15, which we have already seen. The inevitable result of being engrafted into Jesus Christ by the bond of faith is good fruit. It simply cannot be any other way.

The good works in the life of the believer come from Christ! Without Christ—that is, severed or separated from Christ—we can do nothing, but as we abide in Christ, and continue to live out of Him, we will produce fruit, indeed much fruit (John 15:5).

Art. 24 gives several reasons why justifying faith cannot be “unfruitful in man.” First, justifying or holy faith is not a “vain” faith. Vain faith is the subject of Jam. 2—it is mere belief in God which is no better than the faith of devils (vs 19); it is “faith” which refuses help to a fellow church member in need (vs 15-16); it is the “faith” of one who says he has faith but really has no faith at all (vs 14). By that “faith” no man is justified. It is a “vain faith” because it is an empty, useless “faith”, a faith which does not unite a sinner to Jesus Christ but to some other object in which there is no salvation. It is the rootless faith of the stony-ground hearer in Matt. 13:21. Second, the holy, justifying faith is not an idle, dead faith (vs 17) but “such a faith which is called in Scripture, a faith that worketh by love, which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word.” We are not justified by faith, but faith—which looks to and lives out of Jesus Christ—is excited, spurred on, or energized by love. One who understands what Christ has done, and who truly believes and embraces Christ as his own hope, will love God and keep His commandments. One who has no appreciation for what Christ has done really has no faith, and he will have no motivation for avoiding sin and obedience to God but self-love and fear. Third, and most importantly, good works flow from faith because true faith is a root which is embedded deeply into Christ. A tree rooted in the ground will produce fruit. A Christian rooted in Jesus Christ will produce the fruit of good works. “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him: Rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving” (Col. 2:6-7).

Therefore, good works are not only necessary in the Christian life: they are inevitable. There is not, and never shall be, a Christian anywhere in the history of the world who has not produced good fruit. Some produce more, and better, fruit than others, but none is entirely fruitless. Remember also what the *Heidelberg Catechism* teaches, “It is *impossible* that those, who are implanted into Christ by a true faith, should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness” (LD 24 Q&A64). Are you thankful for gracious salvation? You *shall* produce fruit!

August 23 – Genuinely Good But Not Perfect Fruit
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 7:17, “Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.”

There are only two kinds of people in the world—one kind, as represented by good trees which bring forth good fruit; and the other kind, as represented by evil trees which bring forth evil fruit. By nature, we are all evil trees but God transforms us into good trees when He saves us. We have also seen that every believer must bring forth good fruit because he is united to Jesus Christ; and no unbeliever can bring forth good fruit because he is not united to Jesus Christ by faith. There are also others—hypocrites—whose profession of faith is false. The counterfeit nature of their dead faith is seen in its fruitlessness. One whom God justifies freely by His grace, God also sanctifies by producing in him good fruit unto God’s own glory. Jesus said, “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit;...” (John 15:8).

The best description of this fruit is found in Gal. 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.” This fruit may not seem spectacular, and it will not bring the praise of men, but this fruit—of the Spirit, because the Spirit produces it in us—is, in the sight of God, of great value and worth, and is well pleasing to Him. The works of faith “are good and acceptable in the sight of God,” says Art. 24. We stress this point because there are some, who in misplaced zeal to protect the doctrine of total depravity and man’s inability to do good, deny that the believer ever produces genuinely good works. All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags is the cry of such people. Our “righteousnesses” are as filthy rags, but our good works as fruit of our justification are not to be placed in the same category as our “righteousnesses.” Remember that righteousness pertains to justification. Righteousness is perfect conformity to God’s Law. The believer in his best works never conforms perfectly to God’s Law, but that does not mean that he never does a genuinely good work.

Art. 24 puts works in the right perspective. Our good works are something He, as our Father delights in; yet they could not withstand His scrutiny as Judge. “They are of no account to our justification. For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works.” In fact, says Art. 24, “we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them.” We produce, by the Spirit, genuinely good fruit but not fruit able to withstand the strict Judgment of God. This is not because there is something wrong with the fruit the Spirit produces. There is something wrong *with us*. We pollute our good works by the sinfulness of the flesh. That is why the Spirit must *sanctify* our good works.

By way of illustration, imagine a little girl who sincerely loves her mother. She desires to please her mother by making her a bouquet of flowers. She lovingly arranges some weeds, wilted blossoms and a variety of leaves and places them into a plastic cup. The mother is genuinely pleased with the child’s efforts to please her, and does not chide her daughter for the many imperfections in the bouquet. But, bring that bouquet under the scrutiny of the judge of a formal flower show, and the result will be very different!

Similarly, our good works are genuinely good, but they could never withstand the judgment of God. Our Father accepts them in His goodness as tokens of our gratitude, only *after* His justice has been satisfied, and we are justified by the finished work of Christ.

August 24 – No Merit In Our Good Works
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Luke 17:10, “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”

“We do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?) nay, we are beholden to God for the good works we do.” With that sentence, Art. 24 condemns and denies all possibility of mere creatures to merit with God. Merit is something earned or deserved. It was part of the whole scheme of medieval salvation—and still part of Roman Catholicism today—that sinners could merit with God.

Merit is only possible for one who can give God more than he already owes God. Therefore, merit is impossible for a mere creature. Adam could not merit with God—every moment of his existence, he owed to God. Imagine that Adam comes to God at the end of the first day of his service in the Garden of Eden, saying, “God, Thou owest me!” How absurd and wicked that would be! Rather, Adam’s attitude was this: “God, Thou art my Creator. I owe everything to Thee. Everything I have is Thine already. I have nothing to give. I live only to serve Thee in love. It is my joy and my privilege to serve Thee!”

If Adam—before he fell—could not merit with God, how much more impossible it is for fallen sinners to merit with God. Jesus illustrates this with a little parable in Luke 17. A slave has worked all day in the fields of his master. He comes home, hungry and weary, but his time of service is not finished. All his time belongs to his master. Will the master say to his slave, “Go and sit down to meat” (vs 7)? Of course not! Before the slave can have his dinner, he must prepare a meal for his master—he must wait upon his master, filling either his plate or cup as is required, and then clear the table and wash the dishes. Only then —after he has completed all the work—may the slave sit down and attend to his own supper. The entire time that the slave has been working, he has simply been doing his duty. He deserves no credit, no reward, not even a thankful acknowledgment from his master: “Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow [think] not” (vs 9). The application to us is clear: we must never be tempted to think that our good works somehow make God our debtor, so that we have a claim on God, a right to His favour. Even if we have done everything which is commanded us—and we have not—we would be “unprofitable servants.” Unprofitable servants are useless, good-for-nothing servants! Our good works add nothing to God; they give nothing to God which He needs; they never make God indebted to us! Martin Luther said it well: “Away with that profane, impious word ‘merit’”. Instead of seeking to merit with God, we need to be in prayer, “Father, bear with our infirmities. Forgive the impurities of our best works. Do not impute to us our endless imperfections, but receive us in mercy and receive our good works as a genuine expression of our love for Thee. Look upon us in Thy favour for Jesus’ sake.”

Instead of our good works meriting with God, Art. 24 reminds us that we are “beholden to God for the good works we do.” Why? Because He works them in us by His grace; and He purifies them by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

In our best work, there is enough sin to damn us, but yet, God receives us in mercy for the sake of Christ. What a wonder of grace our salvation is!

August 25 – Beholden to God for Our Good Works
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Philippians 2:13, “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

What is the place of good works in our salvation? That has been the theme of Art. 24. They are “of no account towards our justification.” We have seen several reasons for this. First, we cannot do any good works before we are justified. The only works performed, before justification, are dead, damnable works—the evil fruit of an evil tree! They are evil because they do not flow out of faith, and are not to the glory of God out of gratitude, but only out of the evil motives of self-love and the fear of damnation. Second, even the best works that we—as believers—perform are imperfect, “polluted by our flesh and also punishable.” They can never withstand the scrutiny of the righteous Judge—“the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them.” Indeed, such are our best works that they must be “all sanctified by His grace.” Third, we can never merit any part of justification, because we can never merit at all. We can never give to God something He does not already have. All we have, we already owe to Him.

Perhaps, then, we might be able to say—as many who are otherwise orthodox in their doctrine of justification do say—that we contribute something to our sanctification. Perhaps by our good works we sanctify ourselves, we make ourselves holy. Not so, says the *Belgic Confession*! On the contrary! “We are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us.” “Beholden” means “indebted.” We are indebted to God for our good works. We owe God a debt of gratitude we cannot even begin to pay; and on top of that we owe God a debt of gratitude even for the good works which we do.

Consider Christ the Vine. Do the branches in Christ boast that they have produced fruit by their own efforts? The only reason we can produce any fruit at all, is that we are in Christ the Vine. The only reason we are in the Vine is the gracious work of God in engrafting us into the Vine. The sap and fatness from Christ the Vine flow to us through the bond of faith—and that bond is not our work either! No wonder, then, Art. 24 teaches that we are “beholden to God” for our good works!

Paul makes a very profound point in Philippians 2, a passage quoted in Art. 24. Paul exhorts the Philippians to “work out” their salvation (vs 12). But how and why? “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (vs 13). God works the willing in our hearts, causing us to have the desire to do good works. That sigh of repentance, that sorrow over sin, that hunger and thirst after righteousness, that desire to meet your Saviour in prayer—all of that is from God! How absurd, then, to teach that man, by his own freewill, can bring himself into a state of salvation. Not even the believer—who is already justified—is able even to will a good thought without the working of God’s grace! God also works the doing in our lives. He gives us the opportunity, the ability, and the gifts necessary to perform the good works. And when we do the good works which God has worked in us—and we do indeed perform them and produce fruit—we do not congratulate ourselves, but we return thanks to God: “Lord, Thou hast willed and performed these good works in me by Thy Holy Spirit. Receive them as tokens of my love and gratitude, and forgive the many imperfections and pollutions of my flesh.”

Thus all the glory—both for justification and sanctification—is given to God alone

August 26 – God’s Gracious Reward of Our Good Works
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Revelation 22:12, “And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.”

God promises to reward His people for their good works. In the Last Judgment we see Jesus Christ rewarding Christians for the good works of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and prisoners (Matt. 25:34-36). Some have concluded that our good works do indeed merit with God, and that they are part of our justification. Art. 24 has a very different explanation of reward: “In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards our good works, *but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts.*”

Grace upon grace upon grace! That is Scripture’s message of salvation. How it offends the self-righteous, but what a thrill it is to the believer! Graciously, God gives us His Son to die on the cross and to work a perfect righteousness for us. Graciously, God works faith in us, uniting us to Jesus Christ. Graciously, God imputes, through that instrument of faith He worked in us, the perfect righteousness of Christ. Graciously, God works in us by the Holy Spirit, both to will and to do of His good pleasure, so that we produce—by His grace—the fruit of good works which He has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10). Graciously, God rewards the works He has produced in us with more grace!

Notice how Art. 24 describes our good works—“His gifts.” Now notice what the gracious God does—“through His grace He crowns His gifts.” The *Heidelberg Catechism* so succinctly expresses it: “This reward is not of merit, but of grace.” (LD 24 Q&A63)

Recall the little girl who made a bouquet of flowers for her mother. She went out into the mother’s garden, picked the mother’s flowers, mixed the flowers with weeds and gave the finished product to her mother. As a reward, the mother graciously gives the child a treat. Did the child merit that treat? Is the bouquet—a mixture of weeds, wilted blossoms and badly arranged flowers—worth anything? Is the mother obligated to reward the child? No. That bouquet, in no way, makes up for the huge amount of money and time the mother has invested in bringing up her little girl from infancy. Consider the servants in Luke 17:10—their master might in his generosity give a reward, but the master does not owe the servants a reward. If the master gives a reward it will only be a further display of his generosity.

Thus it is with us, and our relationship to our heavenly Father. The paltry works we perform are nothing in comparison with the great salvation He has bestowed upon us. We would be embarrassed to mention our good works in the Day of Judgment. Look at the reaction of the justified saints on that Day—“...Lord, when ...?” (Matt. 25:37-39). When we shall look back on our life, we shall exclaim, “But, Lord, I do not deserve a reward. The reward is too much. I am overwhelmed by it.” And the Lord shall answer, “I know you do not deserve it, but I am pleased to give it. You may have forgotten the services you rendered to me, but I have not forgotten. Come, ye blessed of my Father, into the kingdom prepared for you. You did not merit it. I merited it for you. I washed you in my blood, and I justified you by my righteousness. And I worked grace in you so that you bore good fruit, and now I crown my grace with more grace and with glory.”

An eternal weight of glory, an everlasting crown of righteousness and life—these are the rewards of grace which God bestows upon His people. What wondrous grace!

August 27 – Our Consciences Neither Tossed Nor Vexed
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Hebrews 10:22, “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience...”

In its treatment of faith, justification, sanctification and good works, Art. 24 ends with an appeal to the conscience. What effect does the teaching of gracious justification without works—and what effect does the opposite doctrine of justification partly or wholly by works—have upon the conscience? What effect does this doctrine have upon your *conscience*?

Lack of assurance in the one not trusting in Christ is devastating: “Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Saviour.”

Always in doubt! Tossed to and fro! Our consciences continually vexed! What an awful description of a sinner who does not know the peace through believing in Christ! The image is of one lying on a bed, tossing and turning, unable to get to sleep because of the many doubts which assail his conscience. The image is of a troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt (Isa. 57:20). The image is of one who is tormented—vexed—with the awful possibility that he will be cast into hell by an angry God. Such a person has no joy in living and cannot serve God, but dare not die.

Irreligious people try to drown the conscience in alcohol, drug use and wanton pleasure. They even try to convince themselves that there is no God, or if there is a God, He does not care how they live. Religious people try to silence their accusing conscience by fervent religious exercises—performed, as we have seen, out of the fear of damnation. But none of these things give peace. God will not give peace through these things.

Doubts and fears are to be expected as the bitter fruit of unbelief. No person can know that he has performed enough works of sufficient quality to merit a justifying verdict today and on the Last Day. When his own conscience accuses him that he has broken God’s Law, he has no plea. Perhaps he might say that he has tried his best. But our best is not good enough, and besides, we have not tried our best. We could have tried harder; we could have sacrificed more; we could have been more diligent. Perhaps he might say that he will try harder tomorrow, but God’s Law will not be satisfied with a promise of a better tomorrow. No judge will accept that: “Your honour, I know that I have broken the law, but I will try harder tomorrow.” The judge will answer, “But you have broken the law, and must be punished.” Perhaps he might even say that his good works will cancel out his bad works. But, that is impossible too. Even if we could do good works—and we have seen that outside of Christ, we cannot—our “good works” would not cancel out our sins. No judge will accept that: “Your honour, I know that I have broken the law, but I would like to mention the many years of faithful service I have given to the community.” The judge will answer: “This is irrelevant! You must answer for the crimes you have committed!”

But all doubt and vexation of conscience disappear, when we approach God clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Have we done enough? No, but Christ has! Have we answered for our sins? No, but Christ has! The knowledge that Christ has done everything to secure our justification, frees our conscience from fear, and frees us to serve God in gratitude. The unbeliever will scoff at this free justification, and the hypocrite will abuse it, but the believer rejoices in it. Christ is the end of a vexed conscience: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, (Heb. 10:22).

Sprinkled from an evil conscience, by the blood of Christ!

Article 25: The Abolishing of the Ceremonial Law.

We believe that the ceremonies and figures of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished amongst Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets, to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honesty to the glory of God, according to His will.

August 28 - The Threefold Law Given to Israel
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Psalms 147:19, “He sheweth His word unto Jacob, His statutes and His judgments unto Israel.”

Art. 22-24 have dealt with faith, justification, sanctification and good works. The question naturally arises—what about the law? In Reformed theology, the law of God has an important place and role to play in the life of the church and of the Christian. The law, although as we have seen in no way contributes to our justification or righteousness before God, remains binding upon all sinners, and remains the rule by which Christians are called to live. “As many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law” (Rom. 2:12). Paul quotes many of the Ten Commandments as binding upon New Testament believers (Rom. 13:9-10; Eph. 4:25,28, 6:1-3).

But we need to understand what the law is. First, the law refers to the Torah, the first five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Second, the law refers to all the commandments, statutes and ordinances contained in the Old Testament. Third, the law refers to the threefold division of the Law—the moral law, the civil law and the ceremonial law. All of these laws were received while Israel camped at Mount Sinai. It is especially the ceremonial law which is the focus of Art. 25.

Israel’s sojourn at Mount Sinai was memorable. Who could forget the smoke, the fire, the thunderings, the lightnings, the terrible quaking of the entire mountain and the awe inspiring voice of the Almighty which sounded like a long trumpet blast? (Exo. 19:18-19, 20:18). Even Moses confessed, “I exceedingly fear and quake” (Heb. 12:21). At the same time, Israel sinned grievously at Sinai by making and worshipping a golden calf. But the highlight of Sinai was the giving of the law. To no other nation did God give such a righteous law. This law was designed to regulate every aspect of Israel’s life, to teach her how God was to be worshipped and what a life of thankfulness should look like.

Two parts of the law have passed away. The first is the civil law. These are the laws which pertained to Israel as a *nation*. For example, God legislated through Moses how the Israelites should do farming—do not sow fields with mingled seed; do not crossbreed cattle (Deu. 22:9-10; Lev. 19:19). God legislated concerning property rights and laws of indemnity—if your animal causes damage to another man’s property or destroys his life you must make restoration (Exo. 21:28-36). God gave laws concerning punishment for various crimes—including the death penalty (Lev. 20:8-22). The second is the ceremonial law. These are the laws which pertained to Israel’s *worship*. There were instructions on constructing the tabernacle (Exo. 25-31); there were detailed instructions on the different kinds of sacrifices, apparel for the priests, laws concerning cleanness and uncleanness, and laws concerning the special feast days. Most of these laws are detailed in the book of Leviticus—a book which impresses upon us the *holiness* of God.

New Testament believers do not need to—indeed they may not—observe these Old Testament ceremonial laws. They were all fulfilled in the coming of Christ of whom these laws were but a shadow.

We live in full gospel light. We have no need to keep those laws.

August 29 – The Perpetual, Binding, Moral Law
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Exodus 31:18, “And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.”

Since the nation of Israel no longer exists, the detailed civil laws which governed the Old Testament saints have passed away. God no longer regulates our farming methods or determines death by stoning for certain gross offences. The New Testament church is catholic or universal, gathered from all nations. The church and state are no longer intertwined. Therefore, the Christian must live in the world, and obey the laws of the nation in which he lives. Moreover, since the religion of Israel has been fulfilled in the coming of Christ, the ceremonial law—with the sacrifices, the priesthood, the festivals and stated solemnities, the food laws and many other ordinances—has passed away also. The Christian may eat pork or shellfish, indeed all things are clean unto us (I Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:15; Col. 2:16,20-22). This is the freedom of the Christian, which the Old Testament saints did not enjoy.

But this does not mean that God’s moral law has passed away.

The moral law belongs to a different category. It is altogether unique. First, the moral law—as it is summarised in the Ten Commandments, which in turn are summarised in Christ’s command to love God and the neighbor—is the revelation of the unchanging will of God for His creatures. We may eat pork—which was abomination in the Old Testament. We may wear a garment of mixed fabrics—forbidden in the Old Testament. We may approach God without a Levitical priesthood—unthinkable in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the commandment to love God and the neighbor has not been abrogated. Murder, adultery, theft, lying, idolatry, blasphemy and covetousness are still sins. The Sabbath day—now the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week—is still the day God requires for public worship, although the Sabbath days (i.e. rest days; different from the weekly Sabbath which is now our Lord’s day), the new moons and the seven Levitical feasts (see Lev. 23) are no longer to be observed. Second, the moral law is set apart as unique in the Pentateuch itself. God spoke the words of the Ten Commandments personally to the people. The rest of the law God gave through the mediator Moses (Exo. 20:1). God wrote these Ten Commandments on two tables of stone with His own finger (Exo. 31:18). The number ten signifies their completeness and perfection; the finger of God signifies their binding authority; and the tablets of stone signify their perpetuity. Third, of the laws, only the Ten Commandments—the two tables—were placed inside the ark of the covenant. Everything in Scripture points to the unique importance of the Ten Commandments—the Decalogue or “ten words,” or the moral law.

How do we show love for God and the neighbour? Not by abstaining from pork; not by offering sacrifices; not by keeping the Feast of Tabernacles. We show love by keeping the commandments of God’s moral law (John 14:15). Which commandments? The Ten Commandments, as Paul summarises them in Rom. 13: “... he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal ... and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Rom. 13:8b-9).

How will you show your love for Christ who has given such a great salvation?

Keep the Ten Commandments!

August 30 – Not Under the Law
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 6:14, “...for ye are not under the law, but under grace.”

Invariably, when someone raises the question of the law as a rule of gratitude in the Christian life, the objection is heard, “But we are not under the law, but under grace.” Therefore, it is vital that we understand the role of the law in the New Testament.

First, the law reveals our sin. “By the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). It is true that we all have a conscience and we all have some idea of right and wrong because God has written the work of the law—not the law itself—in the hearts of even the heathen (Rom. 2:15). Nevertheless, the law increases our knowledge of sin. Paul experienced this himself when the law began to work upon him. “I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Rom. 7:7).

Second, the law increases our sin. This does not mean that the law is sinful or that the law promotes sin. But the sinful flesh of man hates God’s law—and cannot be subject to it (Rom. 8:7). Therefore, when God reveals His law to us, we are incited to sin even more. “Sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence ... when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died ... sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me” (Rom. 7:8-9,11). This is because the law is “weak through the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).

Third, the law reveals to us our need for a Saviour, and in that way the law was “our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24). The law reveals to us what God’s requirements are, but the law does not give us any strength to obey the commandments of God. The only thing that the law can do is condemn and curse the transgressor of the law. Therefore, we need a Saviour who delivers us from the condemnation and curse of the law. That Saviour is Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:13).

Fourth, the law is the guide of our thankfulness. We do not know—without the revelation of God’s law—how we ought to show our gratitude to God for the salvation He has given us. Sometimes we think that we know, but we discover that our so-called good work of thankfulness’ has no warrant from the Word of God because God has not commanded it. Unbelievers might have a “zeal of God” but if it is “not according to knowledge,” what value is it (Rom. 10:2)? Indeed, some men have even committed great sins because they believed that in so doing, they were serving God (Joh.16:2). Paul was an example of this when he was a persecutor of God’s people.

So, in what sense are we not under the law, but under grace? This phrase comes from Rom. 6:14. Often it is quoted only in part without considering the context. Paul mentions our not being under the law as a reason for our not serving sin! First, we are not under the law, for condemnation. The law cannot curse or damn Christians because Christ was cursed in our place. We are not under the law, second, in the sense that sin does not have dominion over us. We have been delivered from the power of sin, and therefore are free to serve God—by keeping His commandments with a new heart and a purified conscience.

The liberty of the Christian is not lawlessness, but freedom from condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Lawlessness is a spiritual bondage. “Ye were the servants of sin” (Rom. 6:17); “Ye became the servants of righteousness” (Rom. 6:18).

What a privilege is ours—to serve the Lord Jesus Christ with the perfect law of liberty, the royal law of the King of kings (Jam. 1:25, 2:8)!

August 31 – The Figures or Shadows of the Law
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Hebrews 10:1, “For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.”

The Old Testament saints lived in the days of types and shadows.

A type is an Old Testament person, thing or event which points to a higher, spiritual reality in the New Testament. David was a type of Christ. In a certain sense he resembled and pointed to Christ—he was a mighty warrior; he was a man after God’s own heart; he had a zeal for God’s worship—but he was not Christ. When the Old Testament saint studied him and his life, they could see something of Christ in him, but the real Christ was always future. The land of Canaan was a type of heaven. It had some similarities to heaven—it was freely given to Israel as her inheritance; it was the land which God set apart as holy; it was the place where God dwelled with His people—but it was not heaven. The Old Testament saints understood that the real land promised to them was heavenly (Heb. 11:10,16). The Exodus from Egypt and the passing through the Red Sea were types of redemption—it was deliverance from bondage by a mediator; it separated Israel from the Egyptians; it consecrated them to God and to Moses (1 Cor. 10:2)—but this was not redemption in the blood of Jesus.

We must be careful, however, not to overanalyze the Old Testament and find types where God has not placed types. A type will be indicated by Scripture; there will be clear points of comparison between the type and the reality (the antitype); and there will be a point where the type fails to be the reality. There are too many speculative Christians whose overactive imagination leads them to make the Bible into a collection of fanciful pictures. This dishonors the Word of God and makes the Bible mean whatever we want it to mean.

A shadow is a shape produced by an object when light shines upon it. That shadow, however, is not real. We have all seen shadows. Perhaps as children we have even chased shadows. The object (or body) is real, but the shadow itself is not real. In the Old Testament, Christ was casting many shadows, but those shadows were never the reality. Christ, who stood behind the shadows, was the reality. God’s people saw the shadows, but they longed to get behind the shadows to the reality. Heb. 10:1 says, “The law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.”

Art. 25 addresses this subject in these words: “We believe that the ceremonies and figures of the law ceased at the coming of Christ.” What, then, were the tabernacle, the temple, the ark of the covenant, the incense, the priesthood, the day of atonement and the Passover feast? Shadows, types, pictures, images, but not the reality.

And, if you look very carefully at those shadows, you will see Christ, rejoice that Christ’s coming has dispelled the shadows, and that you walk in His light.

September 1 – All the Shadows Are Accomplished
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Colossians 2:17, “Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

In Gal. 3-4 Paul develops the truth that God has one people—Israel or the church—and that this one people has reached her maturity in the New Testament age. In Gal. 3:23 Paul describes the strict confinement of Old Testament Israel—“before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.” That “shutting up” meant Israel’s entire life was controlled by the boundaries of the law of God.

Parents understand this. When your children are small, you determine everything for them. You set the boundaries—and this is good for children. Parents determine their children’s food, what they wear, where and when they sleep, where, when and with whom they go. Parents hedge in their children for their own good—childproof locks, fences, gates are all necessary when children are small. Israel in the Old Testament was such a child. She needed to be told what to eat, what to wear and she needed regulations for every aspect of her existence. “The heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father” (Gal. 4:1-2). But the New Testament church does not need such rules—she has matured; she has inherited the inheritance; she enjoys the full freedom of gospel privileges.

Moreover, a little child cannot be taught in the same way as a mature adult. A child needs illustrations and pictures. God gave Israel a beautiful picture book called the Old Testament—Canaan was a picture of heaven; food laws and laws concerning cleanness and uncleanness were pictures of the defilement of sin; the temple was a picture of fellowship with God. This truth ought to give us pause when we are tempted to read Old Testament prophecy too literally. Israel always needed to be taught in terms of pictures with which she was familiar. To attempt to teach her about the full realities of gospel truth would have confused her—as if you would attempt to teach a three year old with an encyclopedia.

What changed? The answer is that Christ came. Gal. 4:2 speaks of “the time appointed of the father.” That time was the coming of Christ, His death, resurrection and outpouring of His Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:4-7). The coming of Christ marked the church’s coming of age.

The transition from Old Testament to New Testament was painful. Most Jews remained unbelieving and rejected Christ altogether. They clung to their beautiful picture book but refused to believe that Christ had fulfilled every picture therein. Even believing Jews were reluctant to come out of the shadows—they had never known anything else. Through patient instruction, the apostles encouraged them to embrace the promises of Christ.

Art. 25 is clear, “all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished amongst Christians.”

Are you still chasing shadows? The substance is Christ!

September 2 – The Truth And Substance Remain
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 5:17, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”

The truth that the Old Testament law—especially with respect to the ceremonial or civil law—was a shadow which has now been fulfilled, must not cause us to despise the Old Testament. What we have is better, richer and more glorious than anything the Old Testament saints ever knew, but what they had was good, necessary and still profitable for us. Art. 25 reminds us, “yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion.”

There are many in the church who despise the Old Testament. “Oh, that’s just the Old Testament!” they cry. “We live in the New Testament.” Perhaps ministers are reluctant to preach the Old Testament for this reason. Modern Christians are woefully ignorant of the Old Testament Scriptures. But, remember, that for Christ and the Apostles the Old Testament was the *only* Bible they knew. When Paul urged the inspired, God-breathed Scriptures upon Timothy (II Tim. 3:16) he meant the Old Testament. When Christ quoted, “it is written,” and “Have ye not read,” to His enemies, He wielded the Old Testament (Matt. 4:4, 19:4). Indeed, without the Old Testament, our understanding of the Gospel would be greatly impoverished. Much of the New Testament presupposes the Old Testament. Christians must be familiar with creation, the fall, the flood, the exodus, the passage through the Red Sea, the wilderness wanderings, the psalms, the prophets and so much more to understand the New Testament Gospel of Jesus Christ. Think of only one chapter: Hebrews 11!

The truth and substance of the ceremonies remain. Take circumcision. We do not—we must not—circumcise our children. But the truth of original sin, sanctification, the covenant and the forgiveness of sins in the blood of Christ remains. Take the sacrifices of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood. We must not offer animal sacrifices today, but Jesus is the Lamb of God. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission, and Christ is our great High Priest. Take the law against eating the meat of pigs or other unclean animals. We are not so restricted today, but the truth and substance of God’s holiness and our spiritual separation from the world remain. The truth and substance remain in every Old Testament ordinance, although the shadow has been dispelled by the appearance of Christ. And when we search the Scriptures diligently we will find Jesus Christ there to the comfort of our souls. Jesus expects us to find Him there. “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself,” “These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets and in the psalms concerning me” (Luke 24:27, 44).

Consider the picture book illustration. As the church in its maturity, we no longer need to be taught exclusively by means of pictures, but pictures are even useful for adult believers. It is true that we have the reality, but the pictures of the Old Testament can still teach us much about our Saviour. And we can understand those pictures better than the Old Testament saints ever could.

We have a saying—do not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Do not throw away the Old Testament with the coming of the New Testament. Both are God’s precious word to us.

September 3 – Using the Testimonies of the Law to Confirm Us in the Doctrine of the Gospel
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Rom. 3:1-2, “What advantage then hath the Jew? ... Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.”

One final use of the law is to “confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honesty to the glory of God, according to His will.”

When we look at many of the laws contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we might wonder, what possible relevance do they have for us? Perhaps it would help to look at a few examples of how specific laws do have relevance to us today.

In Lev. 16, the great Day of atonement is described. We know from the New Testament that “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). This does not mean that the Day of atonement can be cut out of our Bibles. Without an understanding of the Day of atonement, the different sacrifices, the scapegoat in the wilderness, and the sprinkling of the blood on the mercy seat, our appreciation of the real atonement of Christ is greatly impoverished. The same is true of the awesome account of the Passover in Exo. 12. How would we appreciate the Last Supper (and therefore the Lord’s Supper) and the cross itself without understanding the historical and religious significance of the Passover? “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Take the laws concerning leprosy in Lev. 13. This rich instruction gives us a very profound understanding of the filthiness and defiling nature of sin. Cleanness and uncleanness were very important concepts to the Old Testament saint. We are no longer to think of cleanness and uncleanness in terms of eating, drinking, wearing different clothes or various diseases, but the concept of sin is still one which must profoundly affect us. Do you need a vivid picture of sin which you and your children can understand? Go to Isa. 1:6, “From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds and bruises, and putrefying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.” Then turn to Psa. 51:7, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” The hyssop is a reference to Lev. 14:4, 51-52!

Would you know how serious sin is? Examine the many offences in the Old Testament punishable by death—even the picking up of sticks on the Sabbath day (Num. 15: 32-36). And having seen how serious your sin is, flee to Christ who has borne the sins of His people.

There are many other laws in the Old Testament, which—although they do not apply to our lives today—apply in a general sense. A Presbyterian creed, the *Westminster Confession*, explains the applicability this way: “To them [the Jews] also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.” General equity is general justice or honesty, something Art. 25 mentions. The general principles of merciful provision for the poor, protection of one’s neighbour from injury, restoration of goods when lost or damaged and such like can be derived from the Old Testament. Read the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy in that light!

When the Law of God is properly understood, every Christian can surely sing, “O, how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psa. 119:97).

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