

BEING RIGHT WITH GOD – WHAT DOES FAITH DO?

By Rev. Leo Douma
6th July 2008

Last Sunday we said that World Youth Day was a good opportunity to talk to a Catholic friend about faith. In fact it's a good time to talk to anyone about Jesus. We said that when you witness to a friend or family member, at some stage you will need to tell them about faith, about faith in Jesus. So we set about defining what faith is. Do you remember how we summarized it from the Belgic Confession? "*Faith is the instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness.*" Faith is coming to Jesus with empty hands and hugging Jesus and hanging on in deep trust and love. Now today I want to ask a little further: "What does faith do?" The simple answer to the question is that through faith we are right with God. That's what we see in Romans 3:22: "*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*" The context here is that Paul outlines the sin of "Jews and Gentiles alike" (3:9). Then in very strong language he points out what we are all like and concludes (3:20) "*Now we know that whatever the Law says it says to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one shall be held righteous in God's sight by observing the law.*" So, in other words, a very damning report on our sin and a complete wipe off of any one wanting to be right with God by doing good works. And then we see a very surprising "*But now*" in verse 21, an amazing switch over. "*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law has been made known...*" In other words Paul says by faith, we who have failed God in everything, are now as righteous as God himself. That is what faith does! More accurately it is what God does through faith.

Turn with me to the Heidelberg Catechism, Lords Day 23 Q60 where we have a beautiful summary of this biblical teaching. As we read it note three things 1. The damning report on our sin; 2. The amazing switchover (*but now; nevertheless*) and then 3. What we are, what we have through faith. Read Q60 (Book of Forms p. 84) When we look at Q60 "*How are you right with God?*" we sense in it lots of amazement; how is it possible that we are right with God!? I mean, think of it this way: we can still appear reasonably good to each other. We have so many new people in our congregation that we don't really know all that well. So we still appear quite 'good' to each other; although eventually we will get to know more of each other's short comings! Maybe we even think highly of ourselves, but there are times on a sleepless night our guilt can tear at us. But we are talking here about God. How is it possible? How can it be that the all knowing judge says I am 'right' with him? Because if we are '*right with God*' it means that he says 'I see no sin in you. You are not guilty. You are perfect in my sight'. That is the confession that draws the amazement in this question. While our '*consciences*' shout that we '*...have grievously sinned against all God's commands...*' God said I find no fault in this person'. That is absurd; but it is wonderful! Now that is the wonder in this question. It is the wonder of grace.

Now the answer in response to this question says very simply: "Only by true faith in Jesus Christ." Note it "*Only...by true faith in JESUS.*" No one is '*right with God*' on their own. Without 'faith in Jesus' you are lost, damned, out of God's grace. That may sound arrogant in our postmodern world, which says all opinions and all religions are valid. But Jesus said "*I am the way, the truth and the life, No one comes to the father but by me.*" That implies that faith in Jesus is the most important thing to have. Without it hell stares you in the face. That is why the Catechism emphasizes '*only by TRUE faith...*' It is a warning: Look out for imitations! Look out for a lot of religious activity or lots of head knowledge but no true relationship with Jesus. This is a serious issue for those who have come from an insular Christian culture, from large churches with thousands of members where everyone just did the same thing, followed the same church lifestyle. It may be that some of us here need a good shakeup. Others may need to be reassured.

So how can you tell if it is true faith? How can I be assured that I am '*right with God*'? In other words; what does faith do? Well the catechism answer goes on to explain that first we must admit we are failures before God. It says, in effect, true faith reveals itself in the working of your conscience. Is your conscience finely tuned? Does it accuse you of '*...having grievously sinned against all God's commandments?*' That language of self accusation ('*my conscience accuses me...*') can not be spoken by those with no faith. Because, you see, it is the Holy Spirit who opens up the conscience of true faith. An unbeliever might say 'I suppose I may have done some things wrong'. As a depressed person he might even admit to being a complete failure, according to the standards of his parents who said he 'was never good enough'. But he would never say that in terms of the law of God. But the language of true faith is that '*I have grievously sinned against all GODS commands.*' I acknowledge God. It is him I have failed. True faith is not satisfied with a vague – I guess I have sinned. It does not say: look I don't know that I really do all that much wrong, but then who cares about detail anyway? True faith says 'I care about detail; because each sin is an offence against God. It hurts my Lord.' The believer says "When I am honest and look at my life carefully I realize I '*have sinned against all Gods' commands.*" In fact, "*I have never kept any of them.*" Not really; outwardly perhaps. True faith is honest enough to look behind the outward 'good' behaviour to our inner heart's desire. Enlightened by the Spirit it is sensitive enough to realize, that according to what God requires we are total failures (Take a look at Q105 Book of Forms p.105). And it's not just a thing of the past; you know, before I was terrible but now it's all good. Rather, total honesty must admit that we are "*...still inclined toward all evil!*" Note how the Catechism puts that. There is nothing in this world, no sin so terrible for which I do not also find an inclination in my own heart. All the sin in our corrupt and violent world: the violence, the blasphemy, perversion, murder, adultery, lying, cheating, slander...Admits faith "I am part of it"! That does not sit easy with middle class Christianity that ends towards Pharisaism and sees itself as better than others. We may not actually do as bad as others. The Spirit is at work and restrains us: "there but by the grace of God go I". But that inclination is still there. From where God judges us, looking at the hidden depths of our hearts, we are no better than the worst in the world. This admission of failure is part of the faith language of the church. It is the faithful response to God's revelation: "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...every mouth is silenced and the whole world is held accountable to God.*" The word of God convinces us of the impossibility of getting right with God on our own.

Being so blunt and honest about our failure before God is not to make us depressed and kick us while we are down. Rather, by cutting off every other way we might try we are urged to go the 'way' God has opened. By seeing how completely we fail God it is utterly ridiculous to think: 'I'll go to heaven because I am good, I'm OK.' The Spirit destroys our spiritual pride and self confidence so that we are made to look at the cross; so that we place our confidence in Christ alone. It is only when we accept this, we might say very negative teaching, that we are ready to receive the gospel. You know the story of the boy with his hand stuck in the cookie jar; unless he lets go of the handful of biscuits he won't get his hand out. Unless we let go of our spiritual pride we will never be free to receive God's grace. Unless our hands are emptied they cannot be filled. Think of a woman, her hands full of rubbish. A neighbor wants to give her a gift, a fresh cake. The woman needs to put down the rubbish to receive the cake. Unless we put down all our baggage our hands are not free to embrace Christ in faith, to hug Jesus. So in faith our hands must be emptied.

But, secondly, they must also be open to receive. True faith confesses not only its sin. It also confesses and openly accepts its perfection in Christ. There are too many folk who have more than a 'healthy' guilt; they have a neurotic guilt and refuse to accept God's grace. But true faith says 'A sinner is what I really am. Yet, nevertheless, I am right with God. I fully accept both.' The word '*nevertheless*' in the middle of the catechism answer is crucial. The good news of the gospel is an impossible possibility. It is something that happens, in spite of all reasonable expectations. It is the '*nevertheless*' of grace. It is God's great surprise; unveiled in the fullness of time. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:21ff: "*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known...This*

righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Here the good news! A sinner – right with God! It seems impossible; humanly it is impossible, Yet, ‘nevertheless’ it is so! It is here that faith makes a leap; a jump into the safe arms of God. Imagine a woman on the ledge of a high rise apartment that is on fire. She hears the firemen yell ‘Jump we will catch you’. In her fear she would rather crawl down the down pipe than jump. But the way to safety is to trust the firemen and their net and jump! So with faith. It trusts God- and jumps. It accepts the impossible- *‘I am right with God’*. Says the catechism *“nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, our of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction and righteousness and holiness of Christ.”* Two words in that part of the Catechism answer explain how the impossible happens. The key to it all is in the words *‘grants and credits’*. A *‘credit’* is to have a balance in your favour. A *‘grant’* is a gift received. Imagine you have gone crazy with your credit card. Let’s say you have gone on a shopping spree and spent \$2000. And now you can’t repay it. A friend comes along and decides to help you out. They go to the bank and give \$2000 which they ask is credited to your account. So now you have not paid a cent. Yet, nevertheless, your account is back in the black. (I think there are far too many in Australia who would love such a friend.) God in his grace, and it is totally by grace because we do not deserve it, says to those who believe *‘I credit to your account the...perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ.’* To our debt of *‘...having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments and never having kept any of them...’* God credits to us Christ’s *‘...perfect satisfaction and righteousness.’* Jesus obeyed God perfectly. And he paid the penalty for sin. God’s justice was satisfied. That is credited to the believer. And for our debt of *“still inclining towards all evil...”* God grants the *‘holiness of Christ.’* So our debt of sin now has that beautiful statement stamped across it: *‘Paid in full’*. We are *‘right with God’*. We do not owe God anything for our sin and failure. Christ has done it all! As Jesus Himself said on the cross *“tetelestai- paid in full.”* So now God looks at us who believe and says *‘I find no fault. You are my child, perfect in my eyes.’* Says the catechism God sees us *‘...as if we had never sinned nor been a sinner...as if we had been as perfectly obedient and Christ was for us.’* Now note that; God sees us, who have true faith, as if we were Jesus himself; we who have failed God and still inclined to all evil as if we were the perfect one. I am right with God because God sees me as his own obedient son.

Now we are granted this credit of Christ just be accepting it. As the Catechism says *‘All I need to do is accept this gift of God with a believing heart.’* We do not have to do anything to receive this gift of God, just to accept it. You just have to reach out your empty hand and take it *‘...accept it with a believing heart.’* The believing heart says *‘I deserve nothing but damnation. I am a sinner. I can only offer an empty hand with no merit. Yet you fill is with your righteousness. And I gratefully accept it.’* This is the wonderful gospel the church has the privilege to proclaim; the *‘nevertheless’* of grace. It is the message we must repeat to our friends, even to our catholic friends. And we must learn to repeat it to ourselves against the accusations of Satan or our own conscience. Yes I have screwed up badly; *‘nevertheless’* I am righteous; *‘as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner...’* We through faith can triumph over our failures as long as we know the *‘nevertheless’* of justification by faith. Everyone who humbles himself and cries *‘God have mercy on me a sinner’* will go home justified. Have you experienced God’s grace in Christ? Perhaps you hesitate. You are still wondering if you are good enough, successful enough, or that what you have done is too awful to forgive. Just reach out your hand and receive what God freely gives. Repent and empty your hands. Reach out and accept God’s grace and see God make possible the impossible- a sinner right with God. Yes, you, right with your Lord!