

May 7, 2006

The Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the Judaizing controversy of the 50's forced the doctrine of Justification rather clearly to the fore in some of St. Paul's epistles, this aspect of Christ's atonement is hardly the key to all Pauline theology that later Western polemics made it out to be. Indeed, the theme of Justification is hardly to be found in the Thessalonian letters, which were written prior to the Judaizing controversy, and even in some later epistles Justification does not rise to dominance. If Justification (*dikaiosis*) were the major topic of Paul's thought, we would surely expect him to use the word more than twice (Romans 4:25; 5:18, but also *dikaion* in 5:16). While the verb "to justify" (*dikaioo*) is used 15 times in Romans and 8 times in Galatians, it appears only 4 other times, in fact, in the rest of Paul's writings (1 Corinthians 4:4; 6:11; 1 Timothy 3:16; Titus 3:7).

To gain a more balanced sense of St. Paul's theological perspective, it is instructive to compare those numbers with the 62 times that Paul uses the noun "church" (*ekklesia*). Simply from the perspective of vocabulary frequency, it is obvious that Paul spent far more time and effort on ecclesiology than on Justification.

This is not to say, of course, that Justification is a minor theme in St. Paul. On the contrary, this aspect of the Christian's relationship with God pertains to the heart of Paul's theology of revelation. The revelation of God in Christ is the disclosure of the righteous God foretold in biblical prophecy.

All through the Bible, and not only in Paul, after all, it is the God of righteousness who brings deliverance to His people through His great deeds of mercy and fidelity to His covenant. The culminating work of His redemption is the act by which this righteous God makes man himself righteous, "because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier (*dikaon kai dikaiounta*) of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:25-26).

This divine deed, by which God justifies man, is entirely of grace; it is nothing that man can merit or deserve, because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). The sheer gratuity of God's justifying act is the basis of Paul's contention that those that are justified in Christ have no need to justify themselves by the observance of the Mosaic Law. Thus, the doctrine of justification, which Paul elaborated in response to the Judaizing controversy of the 50's, laid the basis for an essential step in the development of ecclesiology. It

enunciated the principle that would, in practice, separate Judaism from the Church. It is the trauma of that growing separation that we see in Paul's epistles and in the Acts of the Apostles.

The verb "to justify," *dikaioo*, when it is used in the Septuagint, normally means a declaration of righteousness. This is exactly what we would expect in the Old Testament, under a covenant that could not make men righteous, and with sacrifices of bulls and goats that could never take away sins.

This is not the case in the New Testament, however, where God's justification of man in Christ is not a mere pronouncement, as though somehow a guilty party has been declared "not guilty" by a forensic declaration. No, what the creating God says, He accomplishes. Justification in the New Testament is an ontological reality, not a legal fiction. What the creating God declares, He makes come to pass.

And how does God make man righteous? By identifying him with Christ, His own beloved Son, through the inner working of divine grace. It is man's identification with Christ that renders a man just before God, for Christ alone is the righteous One.

By Adam's sin, after all, we human beings were not simply "declared" sinners, but "made" sinners. So too, St. Paul reasons, in Christ we are "made" righteous: "For as by one man's disobedience many were made (*katestathesan*) sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made (*katastathesonatai*) righteous" (Romans 5:19).

Man, with no righteousness of his own, receives the righteousness of God. The believer is justified by receiving into his very being the revelation of God's righteousness in Christ: "I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:8-9).

This "righteousness which is from God" is an internal fact, an alteration of man's soul, the very action of justifying grace, by which the believer himself becomes righteous, because God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become (*genometha*) the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

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