

A SERMON ON THE SALVATION OF MANKIND BY ONLY CHRIST OUR SAVIOR FROM SIN AND DEATH EVERLASTING

Part II

In the first part of this homily, you heard from whom all men ought to seek their justification and righteousness, and how also this righteousness comes unto men by Christ's death and merits. You also heard that three things are required to obtain our righteousness; that is, God's mercy, Christ's justice, and a true and a lively faith from which springs good works. It has also been declared that no man can be justified by his own good works, because no man fulfills all the requirements of the law. As St. Paul declares to the Galatians, "For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law."¹ And again he says, "If righteousness comes by the law, then Christ died in vain."² And again he says, "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."³ And furthermore he writes to the Ephesians as follows, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."⁴ The sum of Paul's argument is this: if justice comes of works, then it does not come of grace; and, if it comes of grace, then it does not come of works. And to this end all the Prophets preached, as St. Peter says: "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."⁵

Furthermore, all the ancient authors, both Greek and Latin, spoke of justification by true and lively faith in Christ. Let us look at three of these: Hilary, Basil, and Ambrose. St. Hilary says these words plainly in the ninth Canon on Matthew: "Faith only justifies." And St. Basil, a Greek author, writes thus: "This is a perfect and a whole rejoicing in God, when a man does not boast in his own righteousness, but acknowledges himself to lack true justice and righteousness, and to be justified only by faith in Christ."⁶ He continues, "Paul⁷ glories in contempt of his own righteousness, and looks for the righteousness of God by faith." And St. Ambrose, a Latin author, says these words: "This is the ordinance of God, that he which believeth in Christ should be saved without works, by faith only, freely receiving remission of his sins." Consider these words carefully. Without works, by faith only, freely we receive remission of our sins. What can be spoken more plainly than to say that freely, without works, by faith only, we obtain remission of our sins?

¹ Galatians 3:21

² Galatians 2:21

³ Galatians 5:4

⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁵ Acts 10:43

⁶ From St. Basil's Homily on Humility

⁷ Philippians 3:9

These and similar statements are found often in the best and ancient writers. Besides the passages quoted from Hilary, Basil, and St. Ambrose, we read the same in Origen, St. Chrysostom, St. Cyprian, St. Augustine, Prosper, Oecumenius, Photius, Bernardus, Anselm, and many other authors, Greek and Latin.

Nevertheless, when the ancient authors say that we are justified by faith only, they do not mean that justifying faith is alone in man without true repentance, hope, charity, dread, and fear of God, at any time or season. And when they say that we are justified freely, they do not mean that we should afterward be idle, with nothing else required of us. They certainly do not mean that being justified without our good works means that we should do no good works. Saying that we are justified by faith only, freely, and without works takes away all merit of our works, which are unable to deserve our justification at God's hands, and it plainly expresses the weakness of man and the goodness of God, our great infirmity and God's might and power, and the imperfectness of our own works and the most abundant grace of our Savior Christ. The merit and deserving of our justification is attributed to Christ only and His most precious bloodshedding. Holy Scripture teaches this faith, and this is the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion. All of the ancient authors of Christ's Church approve this doctrine, which advances and sets forth the true glory of Christ, and beats down the vainglory of man, and whoever denies this doctrine is not to be counted for a true Christian man, nor for a promoter of Christ's glory, but for an adversary of Christ and his Gospel, and for a promoter of men's vainglory.

True indeed is this doctrine that we are justified freely without all merit of our own good works (as St. Paul states), and freely by this lively and perfect faith in Christ only (as the ancient authors wrote), yet this true doctrine must be also truly understood and most plainly declared, or else carnal men would unjustly take occasion to use this doctrine as an excuse to live carnally after the appetite and will of the world, the flesh, and the devil. To prevent this mistaken view of justification, the third part of this homily will set for a right understanding of this doctrine so that no man shall use it as an occasion of carnal liberty to follow the desires of the flesh or as an excuse to fall into greater sin or an ungodly lifestyle.

The first thing to note is that in our justification by Christ, it is not all one thing, the office of God unto man, and the office of man unto God. Justification is not the office of man, but of God, for man cannot make himself righteous by his own works, neither in part, nor in the whole; for it would be the greatest arrogance and presumption of man that Antichrist could devise, to affirm that a man might by his own works take away and purge his own sins, and so justify himself. Justification is the office of God only; and is not something we offer Him, but which we receive of Him; not which we give to him, but which we take of him, by his free mercy, and by the only merits of his most dearly beloved Son, our only Redeemer, Savior, and Justifier, Jesus Christ.

The doctrine that we are justified freely by faith without works—or that we are justified by faith in Christ only—does not mean that our own act of believing in Christ, or even the faith in Christ that is within us, is what justifies us or causes us to deserve justification. If that were the case, we could count ourselves to be justified by some act or

virtue that is within ourselves. What it means is that, although we hear God's Word and believe it, although we have faith, hope, charity, repentance, dread, and fear of God within us and do many good works, yet we must renounce the merit of all our virtues and good deeds that we have done, shall do, or can do, recognizing them as being far too weak, insufficient, and imperfect to deserve remission of our sins and our justification.

Therefore we must trust only in God's mercy and in that sacrifice which our High Priest and Savior Christ Jesus, the Son of God, once offered for us upon the cross, to obtain thereby God's grace and the remission of our original sin in baptism, as well as of all actual sin committed by us after our baptism, if we truly repent and turn unfeignedly to Him again. Although St. John Baptist was a virtuous and godly a man, yet in this matter of forgiving of sin he turned the people from himself and pointed them unto Christ, saying, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."⁸ Even so, as great and as godly a virtue as the lively faith is, it turns from itself, and points us unto Christ, for only by Him do we have remission of our sins or justification. So that our faith in Christ, as it were, says unto us thus: It is not I that take away your sins, but it is Christ only; and to Him only I send you for that purpose, forsaking all your good virtues, words, thoughts, and works, and only putting your trust in Christ.

Even so, as great and as godly a virtue as the lively faith is, it turns from itself, and points us unto Christ, for only by Him do we have remission of our sins or justification. So that our faith in Christ, as it were, says unto us thus: It is not I that take away your sins, but it is Christ only; and to Him only I send you for that purpose, forsaking all your good virtues, words, thoughts, and works, and only putting your trust in Christ.

⁸ John 1:29