

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Christ once said: *"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"* [Lk.9:25]. The Lord gives a warning here. He is talking about each one of us having to face God some day and God is not going to be interested in our material assets, or in our personal development, nor in our achievements. God will want to know what we have done with Christ the Saviour. God *commands* all people everywhere to repent [Acts 17:30]. God said, *unless* you repent and believe you will perish [Lk.13:5].

The title of this sermon is – **WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?** We are familiar with such words. People today often want to know what's in it for them before committing themselves to something. Perhaps it's not the kind of title you would have expected for a sermon. We usually put God's glory and honour before any benefits to ourselves. However, the first question in Lord's Day 23 asks this: What good does it do you to believe all this? Yes, what's in it for you when you believe in the teachings of the Bible? What good does it do you when you repent and believe in God instead of trying to have whatever the world offers? We're asking about the benefits of spiritual things and not of material things.

1. What are we talking about?

We have been following the Catechism's exposition of the Apostles' Creed. Back in Lord's Day 7 it began with the question - What is true faith and what must a Christian believe? The Catechism began by saying that we believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. That landed us in Genesis and we came face to face with God the Creator. From there we moved on to God the Provider. God looks after what He has made. He cares for the earth and us and rules over everything in order to fulfil His plan of salvation. We call that God's providence. Then we looked at God's Son, Jesus Christ. And there were a whole range of things that dealt with salvation and it's many blessings. Then we looked at the Person of the Holy Spirit and saw how the Spirit works in the church and in the communion of saints. We dealt with that beautiful article about forgiveness of sins. We also looked ahead to the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

By themselves the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed, these twelve statements of what we believe, are fairly general. But when we examined their Scriptural support and applied them to us personally, as the Heidelberg Catechism does, then we are looking at wonderfully rich doctrines that bring much comfort to us.

The goal with preaching about these Scriptural teachings is always to have us believe the salvation that God provides in Jesus Christ. When we believe it then that salvation gives us peace of mind. A calm assurance that God is our heavenly Father always. That He always loves you and looks after you, even when you are in the midst of terrible difficulties.

It's all these things that we are talking about. But let's spell that out a bit further in our second point because we're asking about the benefits of believing all that.

2. In Christ I am right with God and have eternal life.

Now I can say that to a catechism class of young people and not a flicker of excitement may cross their faces. They have heard it before. If I were to suggest that we'll finish the class early and go to McDonalds then they'll come alive with interest. But adults mustn't think that this is typical of some church kids. Every Sunday we come to church to meet with almighty God and hear about His salvation plan in Christ but you may be one of those for whom going to church to hear about God has lost its appeal. Some might even say, 'I am really not interested. It doesn't do anything for me.'

But do you realise what you are saying? If the Christian faith doesn't say much to you then think about this. God has the right and the power to stop or continue your life, to give you heaven or hell. He can either save you or not save you.

Wanting to be right with God and being an heir to everlasting life only may become very interesting when the alternative dawns on you. Which is having to face God as the Judge without Christ appearing there with you on your behalf. But even that does not seem to bother some people because they do not believe there is a God or a hell. Or if there is a God, then they think He will probably let them into heaven because basically they have been good people. But they don't seem to know the biblical message that says that all people are sinners from birth and are lost forever unless God saves them through Christ.

But let's assume that you have repented and believed, so what made you interested? With some of you it may have been the fear of being forever cut off from God and the prospect of being thrown into hell. But whatever it was that turned you to God, once you know you are saved then your interest in the gospel grows. You are beginning to see more and more the beauty and wonder of God's grace who sacrificed His own Son so you could live forever. What makes you increasingly want to be near God is His love for you and all the riches of Christ. You want to walk with Christ, be near Him, and serve Him because having Christ is a treasure all on its own. The Christian's lifestyle, as God wants it, has become far more attractive to you than a worldly way of living. Yes, the more the Christian sees and understands Christ's church and the kingdom of God, the lonelier the emptiness of the world becomes.

So what's in it for the Christian believer? Well, the blessing of being right with God. That you, a sinful creature by nature, are saved from God's wrath on sin and declared right with Him. That is the most wonderful thing that can happen to you. God has your life in His hand. He is sovereign over all things and therefore determined when and where you were born. He is able to do anything with you He wishes. That this God has caused you to stand in a right relationship with Him by making Christ your Saviour, is the most incredible thing that could ever happen to you. Yes, that from the billions of people who live in the world God chose to save you also. And because of that choice, God therefore caused you to hear the gospel, called on you to repent and believe, granted you faith to do so, and now has reconciled you to Himself.

You are declared right with God on Christ's merits. Not on the basis of whatever good you have done in the past or because of some future good you might do. That does not work seeing that even your best works are imperfect. It is not a matter of God looking at you and saying that you are basically a nice person, notwithstanding a few wrong things in you. It just does not work that way. God is altogether holy and just and cannot stand any wrong. There are only two ways to be right with God. The first is if you are completely innocent. But no one is. So the second way is God taking all your sins away and transferring them on Christ and He dying for you on the cross. When that has happened, then and only then do you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ [Rom. 5:1]. Those of you who have received this blessing know exactly what I am talking about. You are deeply thankful about it, rejoice in it and worship God for it.

This is what the salvation message of the Bible is all about - being right with God and an heir to everlasting life. The word 'heir' is an interesting one in this connection. An heir has not worked for the inheritance he is receiving. It's just given to him by the goodness of the one who willed it to him. So also with God. He was under no obligation to save you. None whatsoever. Yet, He looked at you in His mercy and made you the object of His love. Then He went about saving you in Christ and so you were made just in His sight and given eternal life.

3. Right with God by faith in Christ.

What a simple thing faith is. It is nothing more than believing that God has made you right with Him through Christ, even though your conscience accuses you of terrible things done against God and your neighbour. Sometimes Christians remember some terrible thing they did in their youth or later on in life. They're are still deeply ashamed of it and from time to time the vividness of the deed is clearly back in their memory. May be it was some senseless cruelty to an animal or to some defenceless person. May be it was a relationship with someone that should not have gone as far as it did. May be it was the sin of not waiting with sex till marriage. May be it was theft or drugs or both. May be it was blasphemy and a lot of swearing. Yes, our conscience can accuse us of past sins and cause pain, remorse and regret all over again. We say to God what the psalmist said - Lord, do not hold the sins of my youth against me. Or do not hold against me my more recent sins.

Now the wonderful thing is that God doesn't hold our sins against us, provided we have repented and believe what Christ came to do. What's in it for me, this believing? This! My conscience may condemn me in all sorts of ways and make me feel terribly unworthy but God is greater than my conscience and He does not condemn me any more. For I have been declared right with Him. My faith does not cancel out my conscience and my faith will not deny what happened. But faith will look to Christ and say - You have forgiven me.

And even though I am still inclined toward all evil, God will continue this relationship I have with Him in Christ. Non-Christians often think that Christians see themselves as purer and holier than others. But it is often the other way round. Christians are forced to admit with shame that sometimes non-Christians are more decent than Christians. Here are you as a Christian wanting to be pure and holy but there is your ongoing struggle with lust. Here you are wanting to be calm and you find that your temper still gets the better of you. Here you are wanting to love your neighbour but you can't stand some of your fellow church members. Here you are singing about the church as a wonderful thing of God and then you are so critical of the church. Yes, the struggles of the Christian, saved and loved by God and still inclined toward all kinds of sins.

So what's the good of you believing the historic Christian faith? This! That in spite of the sin that still clings to you, you are still and remain a child of God. For He has declared you just through Christ. That act of God cannot be undone. You did not make yourself a Christian, God did. You did not save yourself, Christ did.

So this is why you and I continue to believe. Without our deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to us the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ. If we had *earned* all these things from Christ with our good works, then we are entitled to a reward and we don't need to have a faith. Faith only enters in to the picture because we, before God, have nothing to say and nothing to claim. Because we stand empty before God we can only believe and hope that He will look at in Christ.

So, it's all grace! Our sins and our sinful nature can time and again spoil things. We deserve God's anger and to be put out of His sight. But no, out of His grace God grants and credits to you the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ. Christ has *satisfied* God's justice on your behalf. Christ's perfect *righteousness* has been given to you and it's like wearing a whole new set of clothes instead of those old rags, stained and smelly with sin. When God looks at you then He does so through Christ and He sees Christ's *holiness* in you. All that is so wonderfully true, provided that you have done what God commands – repent and believe.

Oh, what wonderful answers keep on coming to the question - what's in it for me? How can anyone not be a Christian with so many benefits and blessings that are there forever and always. Anyone sitting on the fence with half-hearted repenting and believing should run to God and plead for mercy. Before it is too late.

What's the result of God granting and crediting you the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ? This! With you now being right over against God, through Christ, it is *as if* you have never sinned! Unbelievable! As if you have never sinned! Why, you and I have sinned heaps. But no, before God and through Christ our Saviour, your relationship with God is as if you have never sinned. Of course God knows you have sinned. But when you were pronounced righteous by God in Christ, then you were made holy in Christ. And that's why God the heavenly Judge can look at you in His court as if you are innocent. Christ has paid for you.

And not only as if you have never sinned but also *as if* you have not been a sinner! The Christian's standing before God is not – right with God but still a sinner. Yes, as we see each other, we are still sinners. And God knows we still sin. But in the court of heaven God looks at us through Christ who saved us and He sees us as saints. Look at the New Testament letters, they are addressed to the saints. Oh yes, the letters talk about the sins the saints do and they are called on to break with those sins. They must not live in them. Sin is not their master, Christ is. But in spite of these admonitions, God sees those who are right with Him through Christ as saints.

What's in it for me? Still more! It is *as if* I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me! Unbelievable and yet so believable. Christ's obedience to God's will was perfect. Not ninety percent, or ninety nine point nine percent, but one hundred percent. Christ was the perfect man who lived the perfect life. He fully upheld all the commandments and brought out the full purpose God had with each one of them. Yet He suffered and died for sin. For your sin too, if you have repented and believe. When that is so, then no longer are there sins against your name. It is as if you have been perfectly obedient. What a marvellous gospel! What a Saviour! It is almost too good to be true. But true it is. Just keep on looking at Christ. All we need to do is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart.

4. Why do we say 'by faith alone'?

Because even as Christians we have a tendency to think that God has given us all these wonderful things we have been talking about *because* we have committed our life to Him. It's so tempting for us to think of God as One who gives us a pat on the back when we show interest in Him. We think of God as having a list that shows all the good things Christians can do and giving us a tick of approval when we have done some of these good things. We imagine God looking at us, and yes, Ben attends church regularly, Tabitha visits the elderly, Peter reads the Bible every day, Mary prays regularly, and so on. Oh, it's not that we rush up to God and wave our Christian deeds in front of Him and hope that He notices. We know that our salvation is by grace alone. But if converted drunkards and prostitutes are welcomed by God equally much as we are, then we kind of feel that we deserve a little more recognition. We are inclined to see ourselves as having a few more runs on the board.

But whenever such feelings of self-righteousness, for that's what they are, creep into our souls, then we have to remember again that Christ has done everything for us in getting us to be right with God. Even our faith is nothing more than acknowledging that God has done all through Christ. God is not looking at us from heaven to say- what a wonderful faith that Noah has. And look at Rebecca over here. She too has a nice faith. They are so trusting of me. For that I will make them right with me and give them eternal life. You know God is not doing that because we know that our faith is imperfect. No, faith itself is never the reason why God makes us right with Him. It's always Christ only.

Faith is a gift from God anyway. Faith is just the means, the instrument, by which we accept God's gift of salvation. A beggar is given a gift not because of his outstretched arm is there to receive it but because the giver gives the gift. The beggar's arm is only the means. And let's not score a fine point by arguing that if the beggar didn't lift his hand he would not have got the gift. The beggar was made aware of the giver having a gift for him and saying, here take it. And all he needed to do was just to extend his hand and receive it. The emphasis is on the gift, not on the hand that receives it.

And let's also be careful that we do not add to faith. Remember, God has done everything through Christ. It's Christ alone! Now faith affirms that. We know from the history of the Christian church that some forget that. It became faith and being circumcised, or faith and Mary, or faith and speaking in tongues, and so on. We must not add our plusses to faith. Not faith and baptism. Not faith and being seen as a real Christian, not faith and being a founding father of the local congregation. No, it's faith alone. As soon as you start adding something extra to faith as a further requirement, then it is no longer Christ alone. That's why we often simply say – by faith alone.

Yes, we do say by faith and by turning away from sins and obeying God's commandments. For the Bible teaches that. However, repentance and obedience are not so much additional requirements to faith but more the *fruits* of faith. What comes first is a faith in Christ and that makes us right with God. And then we go about putting our life in order by turning away from sin and obeying God's commands. For that will show if our faith is genuine.

We have tried then to answer the question - What is there in the Christian faith that makes it worthwhile for me? When you know the answers then you are already a Christian, and a thankful one at that. Amen.

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