



JUSTIFICATION.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED DECEMBER 13, 1846.

BY THOMAS T. STONE,

Minister of the First Church in Salem

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

SALEM:

PRINTED AT THE OBSERVER OFFICE.

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TESTIFICATION.

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PREACHED DECEMBER 13 1816.

BY THOMAS T. STONE,

Minister of the First Church in Salem.

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JUSTIFICATION.

ROMANS I. 17.

THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.

Otherwise—

THE JUST BY FAITH, SHALL LIVE.

In announcing Justification as the subject of my present discourse, I confess myself aware of certain difficulties by which it is embarrassed. To most minds it may seem a matter of abstruse Dogmatic Theology, associated with whatever is most offensive in such dogmatism. In addition to this, I am aware how difficult it is to define the word itself. All language is of volatile character,—a Protean form which, like the old Egyptian god, can scarce be held to any permanent shape: now creeping serpentine on the earth, it shall soon spread and flow like water; seek to confine it within its channels, it shall flame up as fire; restrain it, and it shall become instinct with life; surprising us continually by the new aspects and movements with which it overlooks and outstrips all our definitions. With these difficulties before me, I venture to assay the task, in hope that we may find after all some definite form, some articulate response.

The language which has been read, is found also without change in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In both places it is quoted from Habakkuk. Its original application was to the Hebrew nation in the age of the prophet. Amid evils overwhelming the proud and unjust, be it Chaldean, or be it Hebrew, a better destiny awaits the just man; in his truthfulness, his uprightness, his integrity, he shall obtain a higher life. From this older and more national application, the language is transferred in the Epistles to the form of truth or faith, which develops itself from the history of Jesus Christ. I have now selected it, not only as suggesting, with many other passages, the great idea of Justification, but especially as furnishing the key to the whole Epistle from which it is taken. To transfer to so early a period our modern language, we might say that it is the Text to the Epistle which, as Sermon, Paul addresses to the Christian Romans. We see him approaching by scarcely sensible gradations to his precise subject. At length he exclaims, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first,"—not first in worth or in God's esteem, but first in reception of the message,— "and also to the Greek. For," he subjoins as more definite expression of the gospel in which he exults, "therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith,"—the true righteousness proceeding from God as its archetype and its source, approved of him as divine in its character and its worth, and on man's part evolving itself from the faith within which it is embosomed, and by which it is perpetually aided in its development. The thought is most sentimentiously expressed in the prophetic words.

At this point I would venture, in conformity, I believe, with a common view of editors and interpreters of the original scriptures, to suggest that, both in the Prophecy and in the Epistles, our English Version here presents something of mistranslation. The thought is not that of living by faith, but that of being just by faith. 'The man just in his truth, in his faithfulness, shall live,' exclaims the ancient Prophet. 'The man becoming just from the power of Christian faith, shall live,' responds the disciple of Jesus. Hence Paul proceeds in his peculiar manner to evolve and confirm the principle.

Detaching Justification as far as possible from its adjuncts and from other collateral topics, let us endeavor to ascertain the true idea which it designates. This idea we may perhaps attain through such illustrations and contrasts as are furnished by certain prominent forms of its doctrinal development. The modifications which it has received from different sects and formulas, cannot indeed be fully enumerated; but the great outlines of its successive aspects may be reduced to few. Of primitive christians it may be said, that their conception, as well as language, was simple and popular, neither dogmatic nor technical. They limited it by no definitions. They narrowed it by no theory. They fixed it by no decree. They suffered it to grow and expand according to its intrinsic nature and its essential laws. Always, however, it seems to have presented to their minds these elements; justice, or righteousness, presupposed in the individual; and approbation, real and declared, of the individual as just, on the part of God. No thought as yet, I apprehend, of the man actually unjust, recognized as just, more than of the man truly just

condemned as unjust. No intimation, in one word, of man regarded and treated as other than he really and in himself is, by the Being to whom the whole fact is open and luminous. Imputation of another's qualities and destinies, whether good or evil, is offspring of another period. Its origin is other than the ideas of Jesus and his first disciples. It proceeds not unnaturally from views taken in certain states of the internal experience, of a third qualification of the idea: Man is perceived and felt to be unjust, unrighteous. Fact demonstrates it. Consciousness reveals it. Christianity assumes it, in its whole redemptive character. The argument by which Paul sustains his doctrine of justice proceeding from faith, is begun and carried on by demonstrations of universal apostacy and guilt. So soon as the intellect approaches to the investigation of man's relations to the Divinity, it reads this as the great problem,—Justification of the Unjust. A paradoxical problem! How shall it be solved? A natural solution, agreeing both with the analogies of language and with the moral relations of the idea, would appear to be this:—The unjust man must be raised from his present character and condition. Through some power adequate to the effect, he must become just. Were he thoroughly just already, this fact would constitute his justification; but as he is not, he must first of all be rendered such. Only so can he be approved of God. All else were to himself but fictitious covering of real deformity, and to God but an unreality by which it is impossible he should be deceived. Such in its spirit the earlier, we may term it the catholic, solution. It affirms, we observe, the justice, the actual and inherent justice, of the individual; and with this only does it connect the Divine

approbation. But the essence of justification it refers to the internal and effective agency whereby man from unjust is really made just ; whereby the divine life in the soul is developed from its inmost germ through its whole growth toward perfection.

A collateral notion appears. There is an intrinsic and immutable worth in Justice. Such its true loveliness, that, as the ancient Aristotle fervently exclaimed, neither the evening-star nor the morning is so beautiful. As the spiritual consciousness becomes obscure ; as the vital power of truth recedes with the influx of sensuality and worldliness ; this idea of worth becomes shadowy and external, until it disappears in the lower form of value. Righteousness, from a living energy, has now passed into lifeless work. But, according to the analogy of labor performed by compact, work connects itself with payment. It is regarded as merit, to which reward is legally due. Still farther, as labor may surpass contract ; as merit may be greater than promised reward ; so may justice or righteousness exceed imperious exaction, and attain to something like a surplus, in theological language, supererogation.— Whether or not this naked statement might be accepted as correct logical expression of any defined theory, there can be no doubt that the mode of thinking it indicates entered early into the church, and has given its peculiar hue in men's minds and discourse to the doctrine of Merit. From a treasure, as it is often represented, of merit in Jesus Christ, conjoining to itself also the merit of saints succeeding him, men have seemed to think they might draw, through certain intermediate channels, supplies for their own deficiencies, a merit to compensate for their own unworthiness.

Protestantism derived, not its existence perhaps, but at least the peculiar character of its origin and its earlier history, from the conviction which Catholicism had produced of the sinfulness, the impotence, the wretchedness of man. So deep in some instances this conviction, so universal, so absorbing, as to exclude from the view of man all but his depravity, his whole nature seeming to him penetrated, defiled, informed by the perpetual presence of sin. Man thus incapable through his very organism, of rising to pure and complete justice, how shall he be justified at all? The earlier Protestant answer to this great inquiry concurs to a certain extent with the Catholic. It affirms as elements a righteousness attached to the individual, and Divine approbation of this righteousness. It retains also the conception of merit. It announces also, what seems always involved in justification of the sinful, forgiveness; limiting this, however, chiefly if not wholly, to remission of the penalty. Protestantism, on the other hand, from its very outset, diverges from the ecclesiastical doctrine at such points as these:—It separates from Justification, as generically distinct, the divine efficiency which produces in man the life itself of justice. The righteousness which it ascribes to him, it detaches from his individual character. It wraps righteousness about him as a robe; it does not inbreathe it as a spirit. It binds it to him as a shield protecting him from wrath; it does not impart it as a power victorious over sin, penetrating the whole man with its regenerative energies. It declares justice imputative, and denies it infused; the very imputation, it denies, of any quality, as worth, of the individual, even of the faith by which he is justified; and refers it exclusively to the righteousness and

merit, the obedience and satisfaction of Jesus Christ. Thus is Justification extrinsic and foreign, not intrinsic, not indigenous, not dwelling and operating immediately within the soul. An individual regeneration unfolding itself into a perpetual process of sanctification, is confessed indeed to accompany it,—to accompany it, not to be one with it. The two processes are separated, I repeat, as generically and essentially distinct in themselves. Justification as such has nothing to do with our own virtue, but only with Christ's righteousness. Melancthon in one of his discourses proposes the question, "What is justice before God?" To which he replies, "The justice of the Son of God, which is imparted to those who receive it by faith." Similar statements might be multiplied indefinitely. It may need withal to be observed in our day, that from the Faith thus receiving the justice of Jesus Christ, all works, those of true morality no less than those of false pretence, of charity as well as form, and even the principle itself of Love, are expressly secluded, so far as any co-operation in justification is concerned. Justification is supposed to precede all these, not to regard them as at all its conditions. To which we may likewise add, that this interpretation supposes the new limitation of merit. The notion itself of merit, Protestantism accepted as fully as Catholicism. But while the older dogma extended it to saints as well as to Christ, the later opinion presents it as a grand distinction, that, saints excluded, to Christ alone all merit is attached. Thus imputation, as distinguished from infusion; faith, as distinguished from virtue; merit of Christ, as opposed to

all human worth; form the precise points of separation from the catholic doctrine.

This conception, I have said, is not unnatural in a certain state of the internal experience. Its historical origin is no other than a form of religious character, which became definite and effective in Luther. Images of Divine Wrath, infernal fires, depicted by Catholicism, had early filled his mind with horror. To him the heavens were black above, the earth trembled beneath. God appeared, not as Father, but as Thunderer; and even Jesus, whom Theology has so often interposed between man and God as the benign form mitigating the sterner aspect of justice, stood forth as angry and awful Judge. Luther is overwhelmed with dread of wrath! How can he be saved? "I believe in the remission of sins; the just by faith, shall live;" such words suggested to him from without, appropriated by himself, answer the tremendous doubt. It is fear, however, from which he is saved, not sin. Of sin, he is still conscious. Sin remains, unsubdued, inherent, wrought into his very essence. But yet sin is remitted, the sinner justified. How is this? Let us suppose the young Catholic, all his conceptions of merit mingling with his individual consciousness, giving answer to the question:—"I have no righteousness in myself, yet am I righteous before God. I have no virtue in his pure eye, yet am I enrobed with holiness. I have no worth, yet am I reputed infinitely worthy. Christ is my Righteousness; my faith receives him with all his merit; my God imputes it to me. I am a mass of sin; but in this faith all wrath passes away like the dissolving cloud, all fear recedes from my spirit as darkness from the eye opening in daylight. I deserve nothing

but condemnation for my best works; yet sure as is the worthiness of Christ, so sure is my title to highest reward.' In such a way Luther might—as virtually indeed he did—interpret the long and bitter experience through which he passed; as, without either such perception of the form or such logical expression of the silent idea, others before him had passed, from fear to hope. The individual consciousness of Luther becomes now interpreter to the christian promise of Justification. Melancthon receives and repeats it from his master's lips. Imputation of extrinsic righteousness becomes the symbol of a religious revolution.

By degrees, silently, unconsciously at first, afterward with clearer consciousness, the theory of imputation is sliding out of the mind. The conviction of an essential impotence, a complete inability to good, in human nature,—of the antithesis in which our whole nature is supposed to stand to the law of righteousness,—still remains. A dimmer notion of merit,—dimmer, yet actual,—still cleaves to the thought. A corresponding change in the idea of Justification naturally succeeds. From imputation in its absolute and entire form, it comes forth as simply forgiveness or remission of sins; forgiveness granted as consequence of Christ's suffering, and limited to removal of the penalty connected with sin. The theory briefly stated is this: Sin deserves everlasting punishment. Nay, the sinner must endure this punishment, either in himself or in a real or virtual substitute. Nothing else can either exhibit the justice, or vindicate the law, of the Divinity. But to the divine justice and law, the death of Jesus Christ sustains substantially the same relation as the death, in other

words, the final punishment, of the actual sinner. Whoever looks in faith of this redemption to Jesus Christ, is therewith justified; that is, he is forgiven, he is saved from the punishment to which in unbelief he is exposed. The analogy by which this conception is illustrated, is that of a judicial process, in which the accused individual is acquitted, and so secured from the penalty connected with the deed which is charged upon him. The analogy, however, fails at this point. The accused man is presumed innocent, when acquitted; whereas the forgiven sinner is perfectly understood to be guilty,—to be guilty of the offences with which punishment is connected, and to retain a character polluted with present sin, still exempt from condemnation; in short, sin partially retained, punishment wholly remitted. Like imputation, this process is extrinsic, not intrinsic; and, like that, it refers justification, not to the justice of the character, but to the mediation of another, all virtue succeeding it as effect of the faith by which it is received, not preceding it as condition.

Such are the prominent forms of development which the idea has presented in its historical progress. Let us now pass to some estimate of their characters, severing, if we can, the true from the false, and endeavoring to re-integrate the truth of which we find fragmentary intimations. The Catholic conception of intrinsic efficiency has its truth and worth in identifying individual justice with the subjective process of justification, its error in failing to present justice in its perfection,—a failure which appears in the perpetual tendency to convert righteousness into dead work. The Protestant imputation has its truth in the higher Ideal of an infinite righteousness, its error in disjoining

this righteousness from the individual character, not to speak of the contradiction there is in the very thought of imputation, to all our conceptions of justice and of individual responsibility. The former blesses us with the promise of inherent righteousness; but the righteousness it gives is imperfect. The latter curses us with denial of infused righteousness: but the righteousness to which it points us is no less than divine. The one reveals a luminary shining in the heart; but it is dim after all. The other leaves nothing save darkness to the man; but it points to brighter orb in the heavens above us. With each, the illumination is of God; but the one discovers a radiance penetrating our whole nature, and making it sunlike,—alas, that its very sun should be so dim! The other finds in us but a cold midnight moon, on which, as on polar frost, rays fall and are mirrored,—well, that it yet reflects the glorious sun! Nor is the defect of either remedied by that modification of the idea, which may be called forensic or judicial. This promises indeed salvation; but the true soul asks for purity as well as impunity, for holiness as well as safety. Its great defect, to say nothing of the principles of divine government, by which it seems to me to set aside the true atonement and substitute a deceptive shadow,—after this, its great defect is its mere outwardness. Its worth is found in its recession from the imputative theory; it clears the ground of errors which overlaid it, and opens the way to less embarrassed vision of truth.

Through these successive developments, let me remark more distinctly the conception of merit. Protestantism abjured it so far as saints are concerned. It has never ceased however, in its more prevalent forms, to retain the primal

error. That error is found in the notion itself. In what is generally understood as the ecclesiastical sense, there is no such thing; none in the individual believer, none in the saints, none in Jesus Christ. Merit there surely is, as worth, as moral and spiritual excellence. As value to which payment is due; as correlative and equivalent to debt; there is no such merit of righteousness in the universe. Nor do we anywhere in the Scriptures find our justification set forth in such a manner. Jesus Christ is indeed presented as the medium of its communication, as our life, our wisdom, our redemption, our sanctification, our righteousness, but never as source or ground of merit. The scriptures say nothing of his merits; they contain no suggestion of prayer offered on condition of his merits. The passage in our translation which comes as near to it as any other, adds a thought not contained in the original: For-giving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. The true version is different: As God in Christ hath forgiven you; not unlike another declaration, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. I would not by this lower, but rather exalt the worth of Jesus Christ and of his relation to mankind. He stands before us, not as compensating for our defects and our ill desert, by attaching to us an extrinsic merit: he raises us to vital and effective participation of a divine nature. His salvation is actual freedom from sin. His gift is holiness, God's own life in the soul. His is manifestation of the righteousness of God, the essence of law and of prophecy. All have sinned; they become just and holy through the redemption in Christ Jesus. In him God hath showed the righteousness which is perfection of his own character,

and in which all true virtue is comprised ; so that as God is righteous in himself, he elevates to a kindred character the man, whoever he be, that in faith accepts and obeys the revelation of Jesus. Thus is the word of Paul verified ; Jesus Christ is of God made unto us Righteousness. Nor is he such barely as the Ideal, the archetype, but as the communicative Power. Through him, as revealer of Divine Truth, and as medium of Divine Influences and attractions, the new creation of all things continually proceeds. The very notion of imputation is residuum and shadow of a diviner thought,—the vital connexion of the obedient soul with the Saviour, in virtue of which, according to universal laws of spiritual influence, the elements of his character penetrate the man and assimilate him to God. By a most significant metaphor, of which the precise idea is realized in all forms of life and growth, Jesus himself has expressed this to his disciples :—I am the Vine, ye are the branches. Be not deceived ; nothing can make us just before the eye which seeth all, but the becoming truly just ; and through such communion with the Redeemer we attain, not to the shadowy imputation, but to the substantial and living reality, and become in very fact partakers of a divine nature.

This view of Justification goes far to introduce clearness and simplicity, we might say into not a few portions of the Scripture, in particular we may now say into the Epistle before us. Not unfrequently has this Epistle been regarded as a systematic outline of Christian doctrine, a body of Theology. It has been supposed, especially in the first half of it, to treat of two great topics, justification and sanctification. All such modes of interpretation seem to

me to mistake altogether both the thought of Paul and the character of his age. They transfer, to a period anterior to the dogmatic development, distinctions, definitions, dogmas, which grew up at a later date, and constitute ecclesiastical Theology, not the simple conceptions of the New Testament. Let us divest ourselves, as far as possible, of these later accretions, and recur to the primitive germ. Christianity is just beginning to go forth on its great work of redeeming mankind from sin, of elevating a depressed race to the heavenly state. Its first difficulty is, of course, to gain entrance into the conviction and the life. This difficulty surmounted, the next obstacle which history presents to its full effect, is the Judaistic feeling. The Righteousness of God revealed in Jesus, seems insufficient. The ordinances of Moses and the fathers must be conjoined with it. This feeling, it is the peculiar mission of Paul to combat. And his great idea is, that man is made just before God, not through such ordinances at all, but exclusively through the universal righteousness which Christianity at once reveals and produces. "Except ye be circumcised, and keep the law, ye cannot be saved," is the limitation. "By him all that believe are justified from all things from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses," is the boundless promise. In all this is no suggestion of a narrow imputative justice, or of a forgiveness confined to removal of penalty. It comprehends the whole moral effect of Christianity. Truly received, it elevates man to universal righteousness. It saves from sin. It sanctifies. It justifies. No generic distinction is suggested between these words. They simply describe our essential state, viewed in different aspects.

With this thought before us, let us come to the Epistle in question. Elevation of man to true virtue through influence of the Christian Faith; this is its central idea. In the instant of announcing it, the writer passes to the other side, and depicts with great vividness the state of mankind involved in sin. Not approbation of men as just, but condemnation of them as unjust,—this the sad historical fact. From this depression, the institution of Moses has entirely failed of raising them. Nay, whoever has become just in past ages, has attained this state, not by the Hebrew law and its works, but by the same principle which Jesus has proclaimed and embodied. Christianity is indeed clear revelation of universal righteousness, presenting God as its ideal and its source, and making us like him through its recuperative energies. The law meantime only developed and aggravated the power of sin within the human consciousness. At length he contrasts with the multiplication of sins, the abounding of divine grace over all. Thence he has been thought to pass into the other topic, and to set forth the doctrine of sanctification. Not so. According to his manner Paul anticipates and answers an objection. "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" His reply supposes the moral power which all along he had ascribed to Christianity, affirming, that the disciple of Jesus—such his strong metaphor—is dead to sin, alive to good. No new topic; simply another aspect of the one. As near as sanctity to justice, so near is sanctification to justification. Thence through the Epistle, nowhere disintegrating the process of salvation, but always presenting it as integral, from whatever point he approaches it. Negatively, this Epistle is a logical protest against the incorpo-

ration of the Judaical element into the Christian Idea. Affirmatively, it is annunciation of genuine righteousness as the full and perfect fruit of the Christian Faith.

Into the consciousness and peace of this state, we can enter no otherwise than by co-operation with its true nature and ends. We must begin with self-renunciation. We must seek perpetual approach to the great ideal. We must strive, with earnest and unceasing effort, for no narrow virtue, but for a righteousness which is the comprehension and perfection of all virtue. As regards ourselves, we must cherish a full harmony of all the affections, thoughts and powers of the soul; as regards others, we must, in oblivion of selfishness, recognize their equal worth and fulfil every demand of the human relation. Justice is too often considered in contrast with benevolence and mercy; ours must be one with both. Severed altogether from wrath and revenge, let it remain always meek and forgiving. Flowing from true Love, let it forever embody love in equitable action. It is justice, not pity alone, which blesses all, and curses none; which does good, never ill; which embraces enemies, though it forgets not friends; which, in a word, renders to each his due, and honors all men with sincere reverence. It accepts the personal want, not as rule or impulse of action, but as interpreter of the universal claim, doing to others that which is naturally sought of others. It reaches forth toward the highest Being, and welcomes all souls to its bosom, its kindred and its service. It is effluence of the Father, and flows forth evermore to penetrate mankind with its spirit, and to bear them onward to an entire and everlasting communion. In the culture of such a character, are we to attain justice

in the sight of God. Deriving it from above, we must implore it forever in openness of heart to every celestial influence; we must perfect it through the activity by which it grows toward its maturity. Discordant passions, partial sympathies and antipathies, seeking of outward interest for itself, selfishness, wrath, unkindness, enmity, all our sins, all our errors, we must search out, and confess to ourselves, and abandon forthwith and forever. These dæmons must be cast out, before the divine spirit can enter and possess us. These infernal powers must be overthrown, that the kingdom of heaven may reveal its righteousness, and therein its peace and its joy. This is the irreversible law. Only by renunciation of evil in himself, can man become just to God. Only by co-operation with the recreative influence, can he attain consciousness of the Lord as our Righteousness. And as the source of all is Divine Goodness, its end human blessedness; so must we forever lift our eye with reverence and trust to the Father, and open our arms and our bosoms to every living man.

The first of these is the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the doctrine of one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is a doctrine which is not only central to the Christian faith, but also one of the most mysterious and profound. It is a doctrine which has been the subject of much speculation and controversy, and which has led to the development of many different theological systems. The doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine which is not only central to the Christian faith, but also one of the most mysterious and profound. It is a doctrine which has been the subject of much speculation and controversy, and which has led to the development of many different theological systems.



