



Leader Guide
Sunday, May 12, 2019

The Cure for Spiritual Depression

Sermon Text: Psalm 42-43

Study Texts: Romans 3:21-28

Sermon Recap: The main idea of this week's sermon is: The cure for spiritual depression lies in trusting the LORD and proclaiming the gospel to yourself instead of listening to yourself. Take time before your growth group to review the key points you noted from today's sermon.

Sermon Connection: Last week we considered a number of causes of spiritual depression. At the core of each is unbelief; perhaps not expressed and outright, but unbelief or failure to fully believe the gospel lies behind all spiritual depression. We begin to look to things other than God to provide satisfaction, fulfillment, offer rescue, or to make sense of things. We often forget foundational theological truth when we fall into spiritual depression. It is important to make sure we have these foundational pieces in place for a number of reasons, but one in particular is that it guards us from spiritual depression. The doctrine of justification is one such foundational piece. Knowing that our standing in Christ has nothing to do with our own merit is an essential aspect of the Christian faith. My spiritual hope and joy are not found in my own efforts or merit but in Jesus' perfect obedience and His eternal merit. The doctrine of justification holds fast our spiritual hope and joy. In Romans 3, Paul helpfully teaches on this very doctrine and its importance in the life of the Church. When we misunderstand or misapply foundational doctrinal truths, we set ourselves up for unnecessary hardship.

Lesson Plan

Lesson Goal: To see how the doctrine of justification is the foundation for spiritual hope and joy

Lesson Points:

Point 1: Justification Comes Through Faith in Jesus Christ, Not Through Keeping the Law. (vv. 21-26)

Point 2: Justification Helps Us to Rightly Understand Ourselves. (vv. 27-28)

Defining the Doctrine of Justification: The definition of justification is this: The act of pronouncing righteous, justification, acquittal; it signifies the establishment of a person as just by acquittal from guilt.¹ The New Testament goes on to add a second dimension which is, “to consider or to declare *to be* righteous.”

The doctrine of Justification, then, is that act of God whereby He declares sinners as righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that through justification we are made fully righteous in the moment of declaration. Rather, *God changes how He regards/treats us on the basis of Jesus’ atoning work* which is ours through faith. Through justification, God treats us on the basis of already having the full righteousness of Jesus even though we are still in the process of sanctification (Rm. 7:22). This reality led Martin Luther to this point: Justification “has nothing to do with my condition; It is my status! ... though I am black, and dark and still sinful, God *regards* me as righteous!”

Transition Statement: As we consider the doctrine of justification, we want to continue on and look at how this doctrine affects our spiritual hope and joy, how it affects our daily lives.

Point 1- Justification Comes Through Faith in Jesus Christ, Not Through Keeping the Law. (vv. 21-26)

In v. 21, Paul notes, “*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...*” What is he saying about how God’s people obtain right standing with God?

When Paul says the phrase, “*But now...*,” he is indicating that something has changed or calling attention to something that has (in the past) changed. The change that Paul is referring to is the saving work that Christ accomplished through the cross and resurrection. As Paul has shown in Romans 1:18-3:20, mankind can never be justified through keeping the law; he can only condemn himself. Knowing this, Paul calls attention to the saving work of God through Jesus Christ as “the change” that has taken place. So, what Paul is saying is that our right standing with God is entirely dependent on God and His work, not on us or our work.

He adds the phrase, “*...although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it...*” What does this mean? How does it highlight the importance of the biblical story as it concerns spiritual joy and hope?

The gospel of Jesus Christ does not start with the dawn of the New Testament. On the contrary, the Bible is clear that salvation through Jesus was God’s plan from before the creation of the world (2 Tim. 1:9-10). When Paul references “*the Law and the Prophets,*” this is a way of summarizing the entire Old Testament. Paul is saying that salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ is the message of the Bible; any other message is false.

¹ *The Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 338.

Pastor mentioned a few weeks ago the importance of telling the biblical story. As we consider the place and role of justification in dealing with spiritual depression, it is important to look back through the Bible and see how God has faithfully sustained His people. Not because of anything they did or any merit within them, but because He is good and had promised to justify them. The Biblical story reminds us that God alone saves. Our hope and joy are in this reality and no other.

Verse 22 highlights Jesus' place in salvation as the only One able to save sinners. Why is this important when understanding justification?

Paul here shows how the righteousness of God comes to the Christian. The phrase "*righteousness of God*" signifies the requirement that each person must meet in order to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God. And in this verse, Paul shows that this comes through no other way than Jesus Christ. We become righteous not by our actions, not by choosing to believe, not by attending church and/or a growth group, but only in and through Jesus Christ.

Verse 23 highlights the sinfulness of mankind and his need for salvation. Why is having a right view of our own sin essential to having spiritual hope and joy?

Pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes, "...the only thing which is going to drive a man to Christ and make him rely upon Christ alone, is a true conviction of sin. We go astray because we are not truly convicted of sin."² When we do not truly understand our sin—how it separates us from God, how it demands His wrath, how it leaves us hopeless and damned for hell—we will never truly understand our need for the gospel. In addition, until we have looked upon our sin and say with Paul, "*Wretched man that I am!*" we will never know the peace, hope, and joy of the gospel.

Verses 24-45 explain that salvation comes as a gift through Jesus Christ. What does *propitiation* mean and what role does it play in securing the eternal hope and joy of God's people?

The term "propitiation" carries the idea of appeasing the wrath of God by offering a proper atoning sacrifice. Mankind could never have offered a right sacrifice of atonement, thus God sent Jesus for us. Not only did Jesus atone for our sin—satisfying the righteous wrath of God against us—propitiation also includes the idea that He has removed (expiation) even the guilt of our sin from our consciences (Heb. 9:14). Therefore, as we consider how to have spiritual hope and joy, it is by recognizing that Christ died for both our atonement before God, and for the cleansing of our consciences (which so often plague us with spiritual depression). His death deals with both.

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression, Its Causes and Cure*, 28.

Verse 26 shows that God is both just and the justifier of those who trust in Christ. What does this mean?

For sinful mankind to have a relationship with God, an atoning sacrifice had to be made; the sin of man had to be dealt with. Because God is holy, He could not simply overlook sin or wipe it away without sacrifice; to do that would have been to sacrifice His justice. At the same time, God's desire to save His people from sin demanded a sacrifice. And so, in Jesus Christ, the eternal God steps into the place of His Own wrath by assuming the guilt of mankind's sin (impartation). In the death of Christ, God maintains His justice by punishing sin and His role as the justifier of mankind because He Himself made our justification possible. Therefore, as we consider that our spiritual hope and joy come only through Jesus, we praise our great God for accomplishing salvation for us!

Transition Statement: A right view of justification helps us to better understand our own selves...

Point 2 - Justification Helps Us to Rightly Understand Ourselves. (vv. 27-28)

As noted in last week's study guide, when we depart from clear biblical teaching, we invite spiritual depression into our lives. How does v.27 help us to understand the doctrine of justification and its role in our spiritual joy?

A right understanding of the doctrine of justification gives us a right view of ourselves. Paul asks the question, "*Then what becomes of our boasting?*" His answer is right and insightful, "*It is excluded.*" The boastful Christian is as much an oxymoron as the depressed Christian. There is no place for boasting when we consider the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul clearly shows that our standing before the Lord comes only through God's work of justifying us on the basis of Jesus Christ and His atoning work on the cross.

Why does spiritual boasting lead to spiritual depression?

When we boast spiritually, we are denying God and the gospel. And spiritual boasting does not only mean the outward, pompous boasting that tends to come to mind. Spiritual boasting means acting as if the gospel is not enough, as if God demands the gospel plus something I need to do or give. This is far more subtle than we might expect and far more harmful than we might think.

Why is treasuring a "boast-free gospel" the path to spiritual hope and joy?

When we understand that our standing with God relies on no one except Jesus Christ, we are free to enjoy Him forever. We see that Christ has dealt with our sin, that He has cleansed us, even to our consciences, and that our hope is assured because it is in Him alone. We are freed to live a life of faith without worry. Our boast is not in what we have done for God but in what God has done for us (Gal. 6:14). The path out of spiritual depression is the path of spiritual joy.

The Big Picture - A Boast-Free Gospel

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for salvation for sinful man. The Bible is clear about this, and it is indeed, its central message. But, as we have seen, the gospel is also the only path to true hope and joy. Spiritual depression is a failure to rightly understand and live out the gospel promises of God in Jesus Christ. As pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones stated, “spiritually depressed people are very poor representatives of the Christian faith.”³

Through the gospel, we come to see that God has acted on behalf through the sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection of His Son. And this has been done apart from the Law so that mankind might have the hope of salvation. When we neglect this truth (either willfully or ignorantly), we set ourselves against God and His Word, and it is when we are against God and His Word that spiritual depression enters our lives and shipwrecks our faith. It is only through rightly knowing God and His gospel that we come to find true and lasting spiritual joy. When we rightly know God, we become right representatives of the Christian faith for His glory.

Application Questions

- How does justification serve to give me hope and joy in Jesus Christ?
- How, specifically, does this doctrine apply to your areas of spiritual depression?
- In what things have you been trusting that are not Jesus?
- How might you share your struggles with spiritual depression with your growth group?
- Ask God to give you courage to confess and seek the discipleship of your growth group.

³ Lloyd-Jones, 23.