

Apology IV. Justification

LOVE AND THE KEEPING OF THE LAW

¹²² Here our opponents urge against us the texts, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17), “The doers of the law will be justified” (Rom. 2:13), and many similar passages regarding the law and works. Before answering these, we must say what we believe about love and the keeping of the law.

¹²³ It is written in the prophet (Jer. 31:33), “I will put my law upon their hearts.” In Rom. 3:31 Paul says that faith does not overthrow but upholds the law. Christ says (Matt. 19:17), “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” And again, “If I have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). ¹²⁴ These and similar passages assert that we should begin to keep the law ever more and more. We are not speaking of ceremonies, but of Decalogue, the law that deals with the thoughts of the heart. ¹²⁵ Since faith brings the Holy Spirit and produces a new life in our hearts, it must also produce spiritual impulses in our hearts. What these impulses are, the prophet shows when he says (Jer. 31:33), “I will put my law upon their hearts.” After we have been justified and regenerated by faith, therefore, we begin to fear and love God, to pray and expect help from him, to thank and praise him, and to submit to him in our afflictions. Then we also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses.

¹²⁶ This cannot happen until, being justified and regenerated, we receive the Holy Spirit. First, **it is impossible to keep the law without Christ; it is impossible to keep the law without the Holy Spirit.** ¹²⁷ But the Spirit is received by faith, according to Paul’s word (Gal. 3:14), “That we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” ¹²⁸ **Then, too, how can the human heart love God while it knows that in his terrible wrath he is overwhelming us with temporal and eternal calamities?** The law always accuses us, it always shows that God is wrathful. ¹²⁹ **We cannot love God until we have grasped his mercy by faith. Only then does he become an object that can be loved.**

¹³⁰ Although it is somewhat possible to do civil works, that is, the outward works of the law, without Christ and the Holy Spirit, **still the impulses of the heart toward God, belonging to the essence of the divine law, are impossible without the Holy Spirit;** this is evident from what we have already said. ¹³¹ But our opponents are fine theologians! They look at the second table and political works; about the first table they care nothing, as though it were irrelevant, or at best they require only outward acts of worship. **They utterly overlook that eternal law, far beyond the senses and understanding of all creatures: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6:5).**

¹³² But Christ was given so that for his sake we might receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, to bring forth in us eternal righteousness and a new and eternal life. Therefore we cannot correctly keep the law unless by faith we have received the Holy Spirit. Paul says that **faith does not overthrow but upholds the law** (Rom. 3:31) because the law can be kept only when the Holy Spirit is given.

²⁴⁴ From James they quote the text, **“You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone”** (James 2:24). No other passage is supposed to contradict our position more, but the answer is easy and clear. The words of James will cause no trouble if our opponents do not read into them their opinion about the merit of works. **Wherever works are**

James 2:20, 24 “But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? ... You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

mentioned, our opponents falsely add **their wicked opinions** that by good works we merit the forgiveness of sins; that good works are a propitiation and price that reconciles God to us; that good works conquer the terrors of sin and death; that good works are accepted before God because of their intrinsic excellence; that we do not need mercy and Christ, the propitiator. None of this ever entered into James's mind, though our opponents uphold it under the pretext that this is what James meant.

²⁴⁵ **First**, we must note that this text is more against our opponents than against us. **They teach that a man is justified by love and works but say nothing about the faith** by which we take hold of Christ, the propitiator. Not only do they condemn this faith in statements and writings, but they also try to wipe it out with sword and torture. How much better is James's teaching! **For he does not omit faith nor exalt love in preference to it, but keeps it**, lest Christ, the propitiator, be excluded from justification. Just so Paul includes **faith and love in presenting a summary of the Christian life** (1 Tim. 1:5), "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith."

1 Timothy 1:5 Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,

²⁴⁶ **Second**, the context demonstrates that **the works spoken of here are those that follow faith** and show that it is not dead but living and active in the heart. James did not hold that **by our good works we merit grace and the forgiveness of sins**. He is talking about **the works of the justified, who have already been reconciled and accepted and have obtained the forgiveness of sins**. It is therefore fallacious for our opponents to argue from this text that James teaches **we merit grace and forgiveness of sins by good works and that by our works we have access to God without Christ, the propitiator**.

²⁴⁷ **Third**, James has just said that **regeneration takes place through the Gospel**. He says (James 1:18), "Of his own will he brought us forth **by the word of truth** that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." When he says that we have been regenerated by the Gospel, he teaches that we are regenerated and justified by faith. For it is only faith that takes hold of **the promise of Christ when we set it against the terrors of sin and death**. Thus James does not hold that **we are regenerated by our works**.

²⁴⁸ From this it is clear that James is not against us when **he distinguishes between dead and living faith** and condemns the idle and smug minds who dream they have faith but do not. ²⁴⁹ He says that **a faith which does not produce good works is dead, but it is alive when it brings forth good works**. We have already shown often enough what we mean by faith. We are not talking about idle knowledge, such as even the demons have, but about a faith that resists the terrors of conscience and encourages and consoles terrified hearts. ²⁵⁰ Such a faith is not an easy thing, as our opponents imagine; nor is it a human power, but a divine power that makes us alive and enables us to overcome death and the devil. Just so Paul says that through the power of God **faith is efficacious and overcomes death** (Col. 2:12), "in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God." Since this faith is a new life, it necessarily produces **new impulses and new works**. **Accordingly, James is correct in denying that we are justified by a faith without works**.

²⁵¹ When he says we are justified by faith and works, he certainly does not mean that we are **regenerated by works**. Nor does he say that our propitiation is due in part to Christ and in

part to our works. Nor does he describe the manner of justification, but only the nature of the just who have already been justified and reborn.

²⁵² “To be justified” here **does not mean that a wicked man is made righteous** but that he is **pronounced righteous in a forensic way**, just as in the passage (Rom. 2:13), **“the doers of the law will be justified.”** As these words, “the doers of the law will be justified,” contain nothing contrary to our position, so we maintain the same about James’s words, “A man is justified by works and not by faith alone,” for men who have faith and good works are certainly pronounced righteous. As we have said, the good works of the saints are righteous and please God because of faith. James preaches only **the works that faith produces**, as he shows when he says of Abraham, “Faith was active along with his works” (2:22). In this sense it is said, **“The doers of the law will be justified”**; that is, **God pronounces righteous those who believe him from their heart and then have good fruits, which please him because of faith and therefore are a keeping of the law.** ²⁵³ **These words, spoken so simply, contain no error,** but our opponents twist them by reading into them their own wicked opinions. They do not warrant any of these conclusions: **that works merit the forgiveness of sins; that works regenerate our hearts; that works are a propitiation; that works please God without Christ, the propitiator; that works do not need Christ, the propitiator.** James says none of this, which our opponents shamelessly infer from his words....

Romans 2:12-13, “For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law 13(for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified;”

James 2:22, “Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect (ἐτελειώθη)?”

²⁵⁶ In the preaching of the law there are **two things we must always keep in mind.** **First, we cannot keep the law unless we have been reborn by faith in Christ,** as Christ says (John 15:5), “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

Secondly, though men can at most do certain outward works, this universal statement must be permitted to interpret the entire law (Heb. 11:6), **“Without faith it is impossible to please God.” We must keep the Gospel promise** that through Christ we have access to the Father (Rom. 5:2). ²⁵⁷ It is clear that **we are not justified by the law.** Otherwise, if the preaching of the law were enough by itself, why would Christ and the Gospel be necessary? **Thus in the preaching of penitence it is not enough to preach the law,** the Word that convicts of sin. **For the law works wrath; it only accuses; it only terrifies consciences.** Consciences cannot find peace unless they hear the voice of God, clearly promising the forgiveness of sins. **Therefore it is**

John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

Hebrews 11:6, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him...

Romans 5:1-2, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

necessary to add the Gospel promise, that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven and that by faith in Christ we obtain the forgiveness of sins. If our opponents exclude the Gospel of Christ from the preaching of penitence, they deserve to be regarded as blasphemers against Christ.

...Everywhere our opponents omit the promises and look only at the commandments, adding to them the human theory that forgiveness depends upon works. The text does not say this, but rather requires faith. **Wherever there is a promise, there faith is required. Only faith can accept a promise....**

²⁶⁹ **Whenever good works are praised and the law preached, therefore, we must hold fast to these rules:** that the law is not kept without Christ — as he himself has said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5) — and that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6). The teaching of the law is certainly not intended to abolish the Gospel of Christ, the propitiator. Cursed be our opponents, those Pharisees, who interpret the law in such a way that they attribute Christ's glory to works and make of them a propitiation that merits the forgiveness of sins. It follows, therefore, that **works are praised for pleasing God on account of faith**, since they do not please him without Christ, the propitiator. “Through him we have obtained access” to the Father (Rom. 5:2), not by works without Christ, the mediator.

²⁷⁰ In the statement, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17), we must realize that no one can keep the commandments or please God without Christ. So the First Commandment of the Decalogue itself states, “Showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Ex. 20:6), setting forth the most ample promise of the law. **But without Christ this law is not kept. It always accuses the conscience, which does not satisfy the law** and therefore flees in terror before the judgment and punishment of the law, “for the law brings wrath” (Rom. 4:15). **But a man keeps the law as soon as he hears that God is reconciled to us for Christ's sake even though we cannot satisfy the law. When faith takes hold of Christ, the mediator, the heart is at peace and begins to love God and to keep the law.** It knows that now it is pleasing to God for the sake of Christ, the mediator, **even though its incipient keeping of the law is impure and far from perfect....**

²⁷⁵ Nevertheless, **Christ frequently connects the promise of forgiveness of sins with good works.** He does not mean that good works are a propitiation — for they follow reconciliation — but he does so for **two reasons**. **One is that good fruits ought to follow of necessity**, and so he warns that penitence is hypocritical and false if they do not follow. **The other reason is that we need external signs of this exceedingly great promise**, since a terrified conscience needs manifold consolations. ²⁷⁶ Baptism and the Lord's Supper, for example, are signs that constantly admonish, cheer, and confirm terrified minds to believe more firmly that their sins are forgiven. This same promise is written and pictured in good works, which thus urge us to believe more firmly. Those who fail to do good, do not arouse themselves to believe but despise these promises. But the faithful embrace them and are glad to have signs and testimonies of this great promise. **Hence they exercise themselves in these signs and testimonies.** Just as the Lord's Supper does not justify *ex opere operato* without faith, so almsgiving does not justify *ex opere operato* without faith.