

3. Perfectly Legal

“Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is heaven is perfect.” Matthew 5:48. This statement from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount clearly tells us that God’s plan for man has never changed. He created man perfect.

When Adam fell from that state of perfection, the human family inherited his guilt. Nevertheless, man’s fallen condition has not lessened one bit the perfection requirement that Jesus clearly states in Matthew 5:48.

However, God has a plan through which man can meet His requirements. That plan is simple enough to be understood by man, yet it is so comprehensive that only God can ever probe its depths. John 3:16.

Satan, by misrepresenting God’s character to man, has caused that plan to be misunderstood. As a result, man has devised many methods to reach perfection. We feel sorry for the Hindu who might roll on a bed of spikes. Yet, we try to reach that same goal by doing good things that we are led to believe a good Christian should do if he expects to reach heaven.

It doesn’t matter how close to the genuine a counterfeit is. A counterfeit is still a counterfeit. The closer it looks to the genuine, the more deceptive it becomes which is why “The strongest bulwark of vice in our world is not the . . . life of the abandoned sinner or the degraded outcast; it is that life which otherwise appears virtuous, honorable, and noble, but in which one sin is fostered, one vice indulged.”¹

That sin may be small. But it is not the size of the sin that is so important as is the refusal to recognize sin’s malignant nature and surrender our rebellion to Jesus. It is resistance to His work in our lives that grieves His heart, for there is nothing He can do until we are willing to be yielded as the clay in the potter’s hands.

God’s plan is succinctly stated in [Steps to Christ](#).

“It was possible for Adam, before the fall, to form a righteous character by obedience to God’s law. But he failed to do this, and because of his sin our natures are fallen and we cannot make ourselves righteous. Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted of God just as if you had not sinned.”²

Here we have God’s marvelous plan in one passage. This plan, however, is more comprehensive than we see at first glance. Paul tells us, “He, (God) has made known to us His hidden purpose—such was His will and pleasure determined beforehand in Christ—to be put into effect when the time was ripe: namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.” Ephesians 1:10, NEB.

Think of it! The entire universe all drawn together in perfect harmony by the magnetic force of the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

But this is not all. We obtain an inheritance “. . . being predestinated (pre-planned for) according to the purpose of Him (God) who worketh all things after the counsel of His (God’s) own will.” Ephesians 1:11. Can you imagine what is involved when we become inheritors? This means that we are actual members of His family—His flesh and bones. We are more than adopted; we are grafted into the true vine. We shall speak more of this in a later chapter.

Now since in God's plan Jesus is the cohesive power around which the entire universe revolves, and every being is bound to Him with cords of love, we can see that Christ's character of love (His robe of righteousness) given to me—a sinner, would be the only way that angels, inhabitants of other worlds and men and women of all countries of earth could agree without question that we are safe for eternity. Only as we become like Him in character can we reveal stability that cannot be shaken.

I am certain that by now we have discovered that the only way to perfection is through justification—just as if I had never sinned. I hope that it is equally clear that justification is the crediting of Christ's perfect character to an imperfect and helpless sinner.

“What is justification by faith? It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which is not in his power to do for himself. When men see their own nothingness, they are prepared to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.”³

Let us now look at the *process* of justification. The Bible says it well in one sentence. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 5:1. In other words, Christ's death enables Him to justify everyone who wishes to be justified. “On the cross of Calvary He paid the redemption price of the race. And thus He gained the right to rescue the captives from the grasp of the great deceiver.”⁴ We can readily see that faith is only the *means* and *not the basis* of justification. We do not stand on the ground of faith, but faith enables me to stand, trusting God's word. Faith is more real than any or all of our five senses. (See The SDA Bible Commentary, vol 6, p. 1073.)

Now there is another side to look at when we consider this matter of faith. Paul states, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of

Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” Galatians 2:16.

Let us examine a statement from the Review & Herald, April 24, 1888:

“We should study the life of our Redeemer, for He is the only perfect example for men. We should contemplate the infinite sacrifice of Calvary, and behold the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the righteousness of the law. You will come from a concentrated study of the theme of redemption strengthened and ennobled. Your comprehension of the character of God will be deepened; and with the whole plan of salvation clearly defined in your mind, you will be better able to fulfill your divine commission. From a sense of thorough conviction, you can then testify to men of the immutable character of the law manifested by the death of Christ on the cross, the malignant nature of sin, and the righteousness of God in justifying the believer in Jesus on condition of his future obedience to the statutes of God’s government in heaven and earth.”⁵

Please read again the last sentence of the foregoing paragraph and notice upon which condition God justifies men.

We cannot understand this kind of faith. This is God’s wonderful faith in His own plan of salvation as it applies to me—a sinner. All we can say is, “Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief.”

I am so glad that God has given to every man the measure of faith. And how much faith is that? Just enough faith to reach out like the poor father with the demon-possessed son. Our faith simply opens the door for Christ to help us according to our need and His glory. Jesus is not only the author but also the finisher of our faith. Hebrews 12:2.

The process of justification is therefore a legal one. When we have a legal work to be done we must find someone qualified to do it. Jesus is the only One qualified to do our legal work. “On the cross of Calvary He paid the redemption price of the race. And thus He gained the right to rescue the captives from the grasp of the great deceiver.”⁶

As the soldiers were driving the nails through the Saviour’s hands, “Jesus was earning the right to become our attorney in the Father’s presence.”⁷ Justification, being a legal work, can only deal with our legal standing (our record) and not with us personally. When a criminal is pardoned by the legal process of law, his standing before the law is changed but his character is unaffected.

For this same reason, justification is credited righteousness. This is in no way an inferior or incomplete righteousness. There is nothing that time, experience, talent or effort can add to this marvelous gift. Jesus lived in this world for thirty-three and one-half years and developed a perfect character. This is His unspeakable gift to us.

Let your imagination stretch to its utmost limits and still it is impossible to conceive of anything that you could add to that unseakable gift of His perfection credited to us.

Here is where the human nature is tempted to believe that perfection cannot be ours in reality unless we do some of the work of developing it. There is a work, of course, a most trying and painstaking work, for us to do which we will soon see clearly. However, we must keep in mind that only God can do His work and only man can do his work. It is as impossible for God to do man’s work, and be consistent with His own laws, as it is for man to do God’s work which he has no power to do anyway.

Sanctification—the imparted righteousness of God—is the process which clearly defines and clarifies our work from His. We will discuss sanctification in another chapter.

It is through justification that we are credited as obeying God's commandments. (See Christ Our Righteousness, p. 99, Review & Herald, August 22, 1893.)

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 5:1. Jesus not only justifies me but also makes peace between me, the sinner, and God, my Maker whom I have been rebelling against. "The believer is not called upon to make his peace with God; he never has nor ever can do this. He is to accept Christ as his peace, for with Christ is God and peace."⁸

". . . the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God." Romans 8:7-8. Carnality is term that should shock every church member into action. Contrary to common belief, carnality does not refer to the man of the world who does not know God, but rather to them man of the church who knows God but does not follow on to know Him better.

Paul refers to three levels of life of human beings: the natural man, the carnal man, and the spiritual man. 1 Corinthians 2:14, 15 & 3:1. We are all living on one of these levels. The natural is the nature we inherited from birth. The spiritual is the nature given by God when we are born again and when we continue to grow in Christ. The carnal nature is between the two. It is that new nature given to man when he is born of the Spirit and not of the flesh, but which did not grow ". . . unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Ephesians 4:13.

This is the condition of man as described by John in Revelation 3:14-22 ". . . neither cold nor hot . . . lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot . . . I will spew thee out of my mouth . . ."

"The figure of spewing out of His mouth means that He cannot offer up your prayers or your expressions of love to God. He cannot endorse your teaching of

His word or your spiritual work in anywise. He cannot present your religious exercises with the request that grace be given you.”⁹

We are well aware of the fact that unless our prayers are anointed with the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, God does not hear us. “. . . no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.” said Jesus in John 14:6. This leaves us in a position where we must make a decision. This is why Jesus said, “. . . I would thou wert cold or hot.” Revelation 3:15. Revelation 3:18 carefully follows with, “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire . . .” We must keep in mind that man makes this purchase without money and without price. Isaiah 55:1.

Someone has said “victory is born out of crisis.” Our crisis is to see the utter foolishness of the lukewarm condition and sense our real need of the gold God advises us to obtain. Here we need special wisdom for many have come to this point but followed Satan’s plan. They think they are walking out of their problems when he is only leading them into deeper problems.

To “turn over a new leaf,” to “determine to do better,” to “be more faithful” are good ideas but they are powerless to change the life.

“As the leaven, when mingled with the meal, works from within outward, so it is by the renewing of the heart that the grace of God works to transform the life. No mere external change is sufficient to bring us into harmony with God. There are many who try to reform by correcting this or that bad habit, and they hope in this way to become Christians, but they are beginning in the wrong place. Our first work is with the heart.”¹⁰ (See also Selected Messages, book 1, p. 353.)

The decision we must make is to allow the mind of Christ to become ours. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:5.

“God has made provision that we may become like Him, and He will accomplish this for all who do not interpose a perverse will and thus frustrate His grace. With untold love our God has loved us, and our love awakens toward Him as we comprehend something of the length and breadth and depth and height of this love that passeth knowledge. By the revelation of the attractive loveliness of Christ, by the knowledge of His love expressed to us while we were yet sinners, the stubborn heart is melted and subdued, and the sinner is transformed and becomes a child of heaven. God does not employ compulsory measures; love is the agent which He uses to expel sin from the heart. By it He changes pride into humility, and enmity and unbelief into love and faith.”¹¹

With faith as the vehicle and love as the power, each originating with and coming from Christ, we can easily see that the process must be His also. Praise God! It is His by right of His own purchase through His willing death upon the cross. “On the cross of Calvary He paid the redemption price of the race. And thus He gained the right to rescue the captives from the grasp of the great deceiver.”¹²

This makes it clear that Christ took care of every conceivable legal consideration that God’s holy law demanded before He attempted to rescue man from the pit of sin into which he had fallen. For Christ is “. . . the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” Revelation 13:8.

Now, of course, we recognize that God’s plan effectively silences Satan’s charges that since man had sinned, he belonged to him. Oh the blessedness of the most precious gift God gives to man when He gives back the will that Adam surrendered at the time when he fell! This gift of a returned will enables us to choose to love, serve, and obey another master even if we know that we do not have power to accomplish that which we have chosen to do.

That choice freed God to carry out His plan to legally justify and credit to me, a sinner, His perfect character that He developed here on this earth while buffeted by the most severe temptations of Satan. That is why our record reads “just as if I’d never sinned,” and Satan can do nothing about it. That is the reason why when “the Son makes you free you are free indeed.”

Let me repeat: The vehicle is faith, the power is love, the process is the plan of redemption, and praise His holy name, it’s legal anywhere in the entire world. It is not only legal, but it also constitutes the only source of real joy and happiness for the entire world.

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- 1 Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, p. 94.
 - 2 Steps to Christ, p. 62.
 - 3 The Review and Herald, September 16, 1902, Christ Our Righteousness, p. 104.
 - 4 Questions on Doctrine, p. 672.
 - 5 Christ Our Righteousness, p. 35.
 - 6 Questions on Doctrine, p. 672.
 - 7 The Desire of Ages, p. 744.
 - 8 Selected Messages, book 1, p. 395.
 - 9 Testimonies, vol. 6, p. 408.
 - 10 Christ's Object Lessons, p. 97.
 - 11 Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, pp. 76, 77.
 - 12 Questions on Doctrine, p. 672.