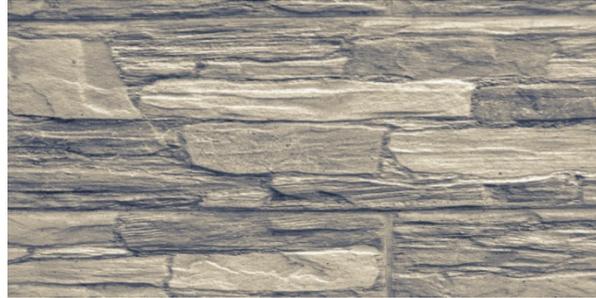


No Blank Slate Christianity

- Jared C. Wilson -

<https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/no-blank-slate-christianity/>



The Daily Blessing of Imputation

One of the saddest phenomena in the evangelical church is the generations-long subscription among many to a kind of half-gospel. A sinner hears the good news of the forgiveness of sins through the saving work of Jesus Christ and they come to faith without knowing the other half of it.

Now, I am *not* saying those who legitimately repent and believe in Jesus are only half-saved! No one's faith must be perfect, nor must every convert know everything there is to know about the fullness of the gospel, in order for the whole gospel to save them. What is in play is a kind of half-understanding. A whole gospel can save a sinner with a half-understanding of it, because it's not a perfect faith that saves, but a perfect Savior! Indeed, none of us justified sinners will perfectly understand the total fullness of the gospel until the day our blessed hope is fulfilled, when we finally see our Savior face to face and finally know him as he knows us (1 Cor. 13:12). But it's worth exploring more and more of this fullness on this side, isn't it? Especially since knowing more and more of the glory of Christ in his gospel is actually how we grow more and more into his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18).

Here's what usually happens: We hear the announcement that God loves sinners so much that he sent his Son to take at the cross the punishment of death owed to them for that sin and then to rise again after three days to secure the blessing of everlasting life. We repent of our sin and place our faith in Christ. We are legitimately and eternally justified. We've heard the fine point of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4) and it is more than enough to save us. But then we begin going about our new life in Christ without some very important information.

Here's the problem: When Christians know *only* the news of the forgiveness of sins at conversion, they start their Christian walk believing they must maintain as much sinlessness as possible to remain in the grace that saved them. They may not necessarily believe that intellectually, but without some more key facts about the gospel of Jesus Christ, they may spiritually and emotionally drift into that defeated way of thinking.

Here's what's missing: Christians do not simply receive forgiveness of sins at their conversion—as wonderful as that is!—but also the imputed righteousness of Christ. This means that God doesn't just reckon us guiltless; God also considers us innocent. Not just innocent, however. As innocent as Christ! In fact, the doctrine of imputed righteousness means that God considers Jesus' perfect obedience *our* perfect obedience.

“He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us,” Paul writes, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). This verse teaches a double imputation. At the cross, our sin is imputed to Christ, as if it were his. He was made to be sin for us. But also at the cross, his righteousness is imputed to us, as if it were ours. In him, we become the righteousness of God.

This is why we are told that Abraham's faith was “credited to him” as righteousness (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3). So God doesn't just wipe our sinful slate clean when we are saved. No, he wipes it clean and then inscribes on it eternally the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. **Maybe you've heard that to be justified means “just-as-if-I'd never sinned.” Well, it also means “just-as-if-I'd always obeyed!”**

Remember when the Lord called Adam and Eve to account. They had covered themselves in fig leaves to hide their shame (Gen. 3:7). God said that wasn't good enough. But he did not leave them naked, vulnerable, exposed. No, he himself covered their shame with his own sacrifice (3:21). Similarly, God doesn't just wipe away our self-righteous sin; he covers us with the sinlessness of his sacrificed Son.

Here's why this matters, day to day: A “blank slate” kind of Christianity, as I said, can inadvertently lead to a tenuous faith built around our own good works. Our obedience is important—necessary, in fact—for glorifying God and becoming more conformed to the image of Christ. But if we wake up each day thinking this work hangs on our efforts, we will be setting ourselves up for discouragement at best, despair at worst. Here's how Paul details this issue in his letter to the Galatians:

I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing—if in fact it was for nothing? So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law? Or is it by believing what you heard— just like Abraham who believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness? (Gal. 3:2-6)

The false teaching infiltrating Galatia amounted to the most insidious kind of legalism—the kind that claims it's all about grace. They had created a “yes-but” gospel. “Yes, you are saved by faith,” they'd say, “but also circumcision is required.” By insisting on a kind of grace-*plus* for justification, the Judaizers had effectively gutted the gospel by adding to it.

“Did you begin by the Spirit,” Paul asks, “only to be perfected by yourself?” This is what we try to do when we see justification as only about pardon and not about imputation. We live as though we can perfect the work Jesus has begun, when only he is able to do that (Phil. 1:6). So Paul reminds the Galatians of Abraham's belief being “credited to him for righteousness” (Gal. 3:6).

The doctrine of imputation gives the Christian the right kind of confidence. Because your faith is counted as righteousness (Rom. 4:5), you don't have to "pay back" what Christ purchased for me (as if you ever could anyway!). You don't have to earn credit with God. He has freely given Jesus' sinless perfection to you as if it was your own. Now you can obey God freely and with joy, knowing you've been set free from the condemnation of the law. This is hugely confidence-building, as it destroys any pride we might have in our own obedience and strengthens our reliance on Christ's obedience on our behalf.

The doctrine of imputation gives the Christian the right kind of assurance. We are commanded to obey, and the Lord takes delight in our obedience. But compared to God's three-times perfect holiness, the best we can muster up is still filthy rags (Is. 64:6, KJV). Paul puts it this way:

But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith. (Phil. 3:7-9)

Paul's assurance is not found in his own obedience, as great as that undoubtedly was. No, he reckoned his own best efforts to be "dung" compared to Christ's efforts on his behalf. The righteousness he knows we all need is the kind that cannot come from our obedience—for that would be the best grounds for a *lack* of assurance—but from Christ's.

The doctrine of imputation also sets the Christian free from needing to impress others. Blank slate Christianity keeps seeking something to fill in the blank. This usually consists of the approval of or validation from others. But if you know your slate is engraved with Christ's goodness, you know the Person's approval who matters most is eternally yours because of it. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we really have nothing left to prove and nothing left to hide. Your knowledge of imputed righteousness can kill your fear of man.

These are just some of the implications of the doctrine of imputation for the Christian life. There are many, many more. Perhaps as many blessings for us to discover as there are jewels in the crown of Christ himself. A Christian's subscription to a half-gospel robs himself of enjoying these blessings. So search well into the doctrine of imputation and you will be diving deeper into the glories of your salvation.