

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 5: THE SINLESS LIFE AND ACTIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST

Lesson 15

The Active Obedience of Christ

A Righteousness Earned for Us

Christ's Perfect Law-Keeping as the Positive Ground of Our Justification

Key Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:18–19; Galatians 4:4–5; Philippians 3:9; Romans 10:4

“That I May Be Found in Him, Not Having a Righteousness of My Own”

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author
faithfultotheword.com

SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the active obedience of Christ is the theological culmination of everything that Units 3, 4, and 5 have been building toward. The Person established in Units 3 and 4, truly God and truly man, two natures in one Person, impeccable in His holiness, with a genuine human will that freely and consistently chose the Father's will through the entire incarnate life, is the Person who performs, through that incarnate life, the specific redemptive work that this lesson addresses. And the work of the active obedience is not peripheral to the gospel; it is, as generations of Reformed theologians have rightly insisted, one of the two indispensable pillars on which the doctrine of justification rests.

The active obedience of Christ refers to His lifelong, perfect, personal obedience to the law of God on behalf of His people, the comprehensive pattern of law-keeping that He rendered as the Last Adam and the true Israel across the entire span of His incarnate life, from His circumcision on the eighth day to His final breath on the cross. It is distinguished from the passive obedience, His bearing of the penalty of the law in the atoning death, not as two separate acts but as two analytically distinguishable dimensions of the single comprehensive work of atonement. The passive obedience addresses the negative problem of sin: it removes the guilt and the penalty that sinners have accumulated through their violations of the law. The active obedience addresses the positive problem: it supplies the righteousness that sinners must possess if they are to stand before the holy God, not merely as forgiven but as positively righteous in His sight.

This distinction is one of the most important in the entire structure of Reformed soteriology, and it is one that is frequently underappreciated even in evangelical circles. Many believers understand justification as forgiveness, the cancellation of the debt of sin through the atoning blood of Christ. Fewer understand the second dimension: the positive crediting of a perfect righteousness to their account through the imputation of Christ's active obedience. Yet without the active obedience and its imputation, justification is incomplete. A debtor whose debt has been cancelled but who has no assets of his own is better off than before, but he is not wealthy. The gospel does not merely cancel the debt of sin; it credits to the believer's account the vast, inexhaustible, positively righteous wealth of Christ's perfect law-keeping, a righteousness not their own, but credited to them as fully and as irrevocably as if they had earned it themselves.

I. DEFINING THE ACTIVE OBEDIENCE: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

The Critical Distinction Between the Preceptive and Penal Dimensions of Christ's Work

A. The Classical Definition

The active obedience of Christ is His lifelong, comprehensive, perfect obedience to every precept and requirement of the law of God, rendered in His genuine human nature, on behalf of those whom the Father gave Him. The word “active” designates the preceptive dimension of the obedience, the dimension in which Christ actively keeps the commands of the law, fulfills every positive requirement, and renders to God the perfect human obedience that the law demands. This is distinguished from the “passive” obedience, in which Christ passively bears the penalty that the law prescribes for sin. The active obedience is about what Christ does in fulfillment of the law’s positive demands; the passive obedience is about what Christ undergoes in satisfaction of the law’s penal demands.

The distinction is theological and analytical rather than chronological or experiential. In the actual life of Christ, the active and passive obedience are not two sequential phases; they are two dimensions of every moment of the incarnate life. When Christ submitted to circumcision on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), He was rendering active obedience to the Mosaic law and simultaneously beginning the passive obedience that would culminate in the shedding of blood on the cross. When He submitted to the baptism of John (Matthew 3:13–17), He was both fulfilling all righteousness (active) and identifying with sinners on whom judgment would fall (passive). The two dimensions are analytically separable but experientially and historically inseparable. Yet the analytical distinction matters: it identifies two different problems that the two dimensions address, and two different benefits that each provides to those for whom He obeyed.

B. The Scope of the Active Obedience

The active obedience is not confined to any particular period of Christ’s life or to any particular category of His actions. It encompasses the entire span of the incarnate life: the circumcision, the presentation at the temple, the subjection to His parents, the wilderness victory over temptation, the fulfillment of the Sabbath law, the observance of the Passover, the whole pattern of a life perfectly ordered in obedience to every command of God in every circumstance of human life. It includes not merely the dramatic moments of crisis and temptation examined in Lesson 14 but the ordinary, hidden, daily obedience of a genuinely human life lived in perfect conformity to the will of the Father across thirty-three years. The forty days in the wilderness and the agony of Gethsemane are among the most visible expressions of the active obedience; but the ten thousand acts of daily obedience in the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth are equally part of the law-keeping that is credited to the believer’s account.

Galatians 4:4–5 frames the scope precisely: the Son was “born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law” (NASB 1995). Being born under the law means being subject to its full range of demands, ceremonial, moral, and civil, throughout the entire course of the covenant life. The active obedience is the fulfillment of every one of those demands, in their full breadth and their full depth, by the one who placed Himself under the law so that He could render the comprehensive obedience that those under the law were required but unable to render.

II. WHY THE ACTIVE OBEDIENCE IS NECESSARY: THE DOUBLE PROBLEM OF SIN

Sinners Need More Than Forgiveness, They Need a Positive Righteousness Credited to Their Account

A. The Negative Problem: Guilt and the Need for Forgiveness

Every human being who has ever lived, with the single exception of the incarnate Son of God, has sinned, has violated the law of God in thought, word, or deed, has failed to render to God the love, worship, and obedience that the law requires, and has thereby accumulated a debt of guilt that must be addressed before they can stand in the presence of the holy God. The passive obedience of Christ addresses this problem directly and definitively: on the cross, Christ bore the penalty that the law prescribes for sin, exhausted the divine wrath against the sin of the elect, removed the guilt that separated them from God, and secured the forgiveness of every sin that every person who is in Christ has committed or will commit. “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB 1995), the sin of those He represented was imputed to Christ on the cross, and He bore its penalty in full. The negative problem, the accumulated guilt of a sinful life, is addressed by the passive obedience. The debt is cancelled; the penalty is paid; the guilt is removed.

B. The Positive Problem: The Absence of Righteousness

But the cancellation of guilt, as immense a gift as it is, does not by itself constitute the full blessing that the gospel declares. A person whose debt of sin has been cancelled is not in the same position as a person who has never sinned, who has rendered to God, throughout the entire course of life, the perfect obedience that the law requires. The forgiven sinner has had the negative removed; the positively righteous person has the positive present. And the standard for standing before the holy God is not merely the absence of sin but the presence of righteousness, positive, active, comprehensive conformity to the law of God.

This is the positive problem that the active obedience addresses: not what must be removed (guilt) but what must be present (righteousness). The holy God, before whose judgment seat every human being will stand, does not merely ask “Have your sins been forgiven?” He asks the prior question: “Are you righteous?” The answer that the forgiven sinner can give on the basis of the passive obedience alone is “I am not guilty.” The answer that the same sinner gives on the basis of the full imputed righteousness of Christ, passive and active obedience together, is “I am righteous in Christ.” The difference is the difference between acquittal and adoption, between the removal of condemnation and the positive declaration of righteous standing, between being not-guilty and being found-in-Him.

Charles Hodge’s analogy is illuminating: a servant who has broken the law of his master and has been forgiven is better off than before the forgiveness, but he is not in the same position as a servant who has perfectly kept the law throughout the entire term of service. The forgiven servant has had the penalty remitted; the obedient servant has earned the reward of faithful service. The gospel declares that those who are in Christ receive both: the penalty remitted through the passive obedience, and the reward of perfect obedience credited through the active obedience. In Christ, the forgiven sinner stands before God not merely as not-guilty but as positively, perfectly, permanently righteous.

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21, NASB 1995

III. THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: KEY TEXTS FOR THE ACTIVE OBEDIENCE

The New Testament’s Comprehensive Case for the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness

A. 2 Corinthians 5:21: The Double Imputation

The most theologically compressed statement of the active obedience and its imputation is 2 Corinthians 5:21: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (NASB 1995). The verse describes a double movement of imputation: the sin of those He represents is imputed to Christ (“made Him... to be sin”), and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to those He represents (“so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”). The righteousness that believers “become” in Christ is the righteousness of God, not a human approximation or a relative righteousness measured by human standards, but the righteousness that meets the absolute standard of the divine holiness.

The phrase “the righteousness of God in Him” is not a description of an internal moral transformation; it is a description of a legal status received by virtue of union with Christ. The righteousness is not produced in the believer by spiritual development; it is credited to the believer by divine declaration, grounded in the representative law-keeping of the one in whom they stand. The active obedience, the “knew no sin” of the one made sin on their behalf, is the content of the righteousness they receive. They become the righteousness of God in Him because He, as the one who knew no sin, renders the perfect righteousness that is now credited to their account.

B. Romans 5:18–19: The Obedience of the One

Romans 5:18–19 provides the most direct statement of the active obedience in terms of its representational structure: “So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (NASB 1995). The parallel and contrast between Adam and Christ is the governing structure: Adam’s disobedience makes the many sinners; Christ’s obedience makes the many righteous.

The “obedience” (ὕπακοή, hypakoe) of verse 19 is comprehensive: it is not merely the passive obedience of the cross but the full active obedience of the entire incarnate life. The word hypakoe is the same word used in Hebrews 5:8 for the obedience that Christ “learned from the things which He suffered”, the comprehensive pattern of law-keeping formed through the entire discipline of the incarnate life and expressed most fully in the submission of Gethsemane and the endurance of the cross. The “obedience of the One” that makes the many righteous is the total obedience of the total Christ: the active law-keeping and the passive penalty-bearing together, with the active obedience providing the positive righteousness that the declaration of justification requires.

C. Galatians 4:4–5: Born Under the Law

Galatians 4:4–5 provides one of the most concise statements of the purpose of the active obedience: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (NASB 1995). The double statement of the incarnational conditions, “born of a woman, born under the Law”, is theologically essential. The Son was not merely born into the human race in a general sense; He was born specifically under the Law, subject to its precepts, its obligations, and its penalties, so that He could fulfill its demands on behalf of those who were also under it but unable to fulfill them.

The specific purpose of the active obedience is stated explicitly: “so that He might redeem those who were under the Law.” This redemption accomplished not merely bearing the penalty of the Law’s condemnation (passive obedience, Galatians 3:13) but also fulfilling the Law’s positive demands on behalf of those who had not fulfilled them. And the result of this comprehensive redemption, both dimensions together, is the reception of “the adoption as sons” (v. 5): the positive, filial standing before God that requires a positive righteousness as its basis.

D. Philippians 3:9 and Romans 10:4

Philippians 3:9 provides the most personally expressed statement of the active obedience and its imputation in all of Paul’s letters. He desires “that I may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (NASB 1995). The contrast between “a righteousness of my own” and “the righteousness which comes from God” is the contrast between self-generated

righteousness and imputed righteousness. The righteousness Paul desires is alien to him by nature, it is not produced by his own moral achievements; it comes from outside him, from God, received through faith in Christ.

Romans 10:4 provides the comprehensive theological summary: “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (NASB 1995). The phrase “end of the law” (νόμου τέλος, nomou telos) carries a double meaning in which both senses are true: Christ is the termination of the law as a way of righteousness (the law as a means of earning standing before God ends for those in Christ, because He has fulfilled it on their behalf) and the fulfillment or goal of the law (the law was always pointing toward the one who would fulfill its demands perfectly). Christ is “the end of the law for righteousness” in the sense that His perfect law-keeping provides the righteousness that the law requires, credited to all who believe.

“That I may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

PHILIPPIANS 3:9, NASB 1995

IV. THE MECHANISM: UNION WITH CHRIST AND THE IMPUTATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

How the Righteousness Christ Earned Becomes the Righteousness the Believer Possesses

A. Union with Christ as the Ground of Imputation

The mechanism by which Christ’s righteousness becomes the believer’s righteousness is union with Christ, the vital, organic, covenantal solidarity between the Mediator and those He represents, established by regeneration and expressed through faith. The imputation of righteousness is not a legal fiction in which the judge pretends that the defendant did something they did not do; it is a legal reality grounded in a genuine solidarity between Christ and those He represents. The righteousness of Christ is credited to the believer because the believer is genuinely united to Christ, incorporated into Him by the Spirit, standing in Him before the Father, sharing in His legal status as the one who has perfectly fulfilled the law.

John Murray’s formulation is precise: the imputation of Christ’s righteousness does not mean that the righteousness which Christ wrought is infused into the believer or made to inhere in the believer; it means that the righteousness which Christ wrought is reckoned to the believer’s account. The distinction between imputation (the external, legal reckoning of a righteousness to the believer’s account) and infusion (the internal, moral communication of righteousness as a quality of the believer’s character) is among the most important in Protestant soteriology. Rome confounds the two;

the Reformation distinguishes them. Justification is entirely a matter of imputation, the declaration of righteous standing on the basis of an alien righteousness reckoned to the account, while sanctification is the progressive work of inherent righteousness through the Spirit's transforming work. Both are genuine gifts of grace; neither is reduced to the other.

B. Faith as the Instrument of Reception

The imputed righteousness of Christ is received through faith alone, not as a meritorious act that earns the gift, but as the empty hand that receives what Christ has provided. Romans 3:21–22 confirms the pattern: “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested... even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe” (NASB 1995). The righteousness of God is manifested and received through faith in Jesus Christ, faith that is directed not at a moral program but at a Person, the one whose law-keeping is the content of the righteousness being received.

Luther's description of this righteousness as “alien” (*aliena iustitia*), a righteousness that is not native to the believer but comes from outside them, from Christ, received through faith, captures the essential character of the doctrine. It is not the believer's own righteousness; it is Christ's righteousness, credited to the believer's account as fully as if the believer had personally rendered every act of obedience that Christ rendered on their behalf. The *sola fide* of the Reformation reasserted both dimensions of justification: the imputation of guilt to Christ (passive obedience) and the imputation of righteousness from Christ (active obedience). To proclaim only one dimension is to preach a truncated gospel.

V. HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO THE DOCTRINE

Engaging Those Who Deny or Diminish the Active Obedience and Its Imputation

A. The Socinian Objection and the Reformed Response

The doctrine of the active obedience and its imputation has been contested throughout the history of Protestant theology. The earliest and most systematic denial came from the Socinian tradition: Fausto Sozzini argued that Christ's obedience to the law was necessary for His own sake, as a genuine human being under the law's obligations, He had to obey it, and therefore could not be surplus obedience credited to others' accounts. The obedience was His own duty, not a transferable merit. The Arminian tradition, while not uniformly rejecting the active obedience, has often been suspicious of it on similar grounds: if Christ's obedience fulfills the law on behalf of believers, does this not render the believers' own obedience redundant or irrelevant?

The Reformed response to both objections is exegetically grounded and theologically precise. The fact that Christ was under the law's obligations does not prevent His law-keeping from being credited to others, because the question of whose obedience is credited to whom is not determined by the nature of the obligation but by the representative relationship between the obedient one and those he represents. Adam's transgression is credited to all in him not because Adam was not himself obligated to obey, but because he was the representative head of the human race. Similarly, Christ's obedience is credited to those in Him not because He was exempt from the law's obligations, but because He was their representative head. The representational structure is what makes the imputation possible.

B. The New Perspective on Paul

The most significant contemporary challenge to the doctrine of the active obedience comes from the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), the exegetical movement associated with E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright, which reinterprets the Pauline language of "justification" and "righteousness" in ways that significantly modify or eliminate the traditional Protestant understanding. On the NPP account, the "righteousness of God" in Paul is not primarily about the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the individual believer but about the covenant faithfulness of God displayed in the gospel. Justification, on this account, is primarily about being declared a member of the covenant community rather than about being declared righteous on the basis of an imputed righteousness.

The Reformed response (Carson, Stuhlmacher, Schreiner, Piper) argues that the NPP's exegetical conclusions do not arise naturally from the relevant texts but are imposed by prior hermeneutical decisions. 2 Corinthians 5:21 ("we might become the righteousness of God in Him"), Romans 5:19 ("through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous"), and Philippians 3:9 ("a righteousness... which comes from God on the basis of faith") are most naturally read as descriptions of a righteousness credited to the individual believer on the basis of Christ's representative obedience. The covenant-membership interpretation requires exegetical moves that do not arise naturally from the texts themselves.

C. The Pastoral Danger of Neglect

Beyond explicit theological challenges, the active obedience faces a practical danger that may be the most widespread in evangelical preaching and teaching: not systematic denial but practical neglect. Many sermons on justification and the atonement present the passive obedience, the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ, with great power and clarity, but omit or underemphasize the positive dimension: the imputed righteousness of Christ's active obedience. The result is a congregation that understands themselves as forgiven sinners before God but not as positively righteous in Christ, as not-guilty but not as righteous, as acquitted but not as adopted.

The pastoral consequence of this neglect is significant: it produces a form of Christian experience in which the believer's relationship with God is perpetually haunted by a vague sense of insufficiency,

a sense that forgiveness is real but righteousness is still to be achieved, that the account has been cleared but not filled. The doctrine of the active obedience is the antidote to this spiritual poverty: it declares that the believer's standing before God rests not on the imperfect, incomplete, inconsistent record of their own moral performance but on the perfect, complete, consistent, and irrevocable law-keeping of the Last Adam, credited to their account as fully as if they had rendered it themselves.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: FOUND IN HIM

The doctrine of the active obedience and its imputation is, in the end, a doctrine about where the believer's standing before God is located: not in themselves, not in their own moral performance, not in their spiritual attainments or their degree of sanctification, but in Christ, in the one whose perfect, comprehensive, irrevocable law-keeping now stands credited to their account as their own. Paul's personal expression of this reality in Philippians 3:9 is not merely a theological proposition; it is the doxological confession of a person who has understood where genuine righteousness is found and who has staked his eternal standing on that location with the confidence of one who knows it is unshakeable.

Martin Luther described the imputed righteousness of Christ as the "greatest comfort for Christians," and the description is exactly right. In every moment of the believer's encounter with the holiness of God, in prayer, in worship, at the Lord's Table, in the approach of death, in the prospect of the final judgment, the comfort of the active obedience is the comfort of knowing that the righteousness with which they stand before the thrice-holy God is not their own. It is Christ's. It is perfect because He is perfect; it is comprehensive because He kept the whole law; it is permanent because His law-keeping cannot be undone; and it is freely given to all who are in Him, received through faith, held through the Spirit's preserving work, and presented before the Father by the one who rendered it and who now intercedes on the basis of it at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the church stands or falls, is not merely the doctrine of forensic forgiveness. It is the full doctrine of justification: the imputation of guilt to Christ (passive obedience) and the imputation of righteousness from Christ (active obedience) in the double transaction of grace that places the forgiven sinner before God not merely as innocent but as righteous. This is the gospel in its most comprehensive christological form. This is what it means to be found in Him. And the doxological response to this reality is not the quiet satisfaction of a theological problem resolved, but the eruption of gratitude, wonder, and adoration that Paul cannot contain when he writes of it, "blameless" in Christ, "holy and beyond reproach before Him" (Colossians 1:22, NASB 1995), "made the righteousness of God in Him." To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Key Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:18–19; Romans 10:4; Galatians 4:4–5; Philippians 3:9; Romans 3:21–22; Galatians 3:13; Hebrews 5:8; Colossians 1:22

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Active Obedience	The lifelong, comprehensive, perfect obedience of Jesus Christ to every precept and requirement of the law of God, rendered in His genuine human nature on behalf of those He represents. Distinguished analytically from the passive obedience (His bearing of the law’s penal demands in the atoning death) as the preceptive dimension of His work, the positive fulfillment of the law’s demands. The active obedience provides the positive righteousness imputed to the believer in justification; the passive obedience removes the negative guilt separating the sinner from God. Together they constitute the comprehensive work of atonement: penalty borne and righteousness earned.
Passive Obedience	The bearing by Jesus Christ of the penal demands of the law, the punishment that sin deserves, in His atoning death on the cross. Distinguished from the active obedience as the penal dimension of His work: where the active obedience fulfills the law’s positive precepts, the passive obedience satisfies the law’s negative penalty. The passive obedience removes the guilt of sin (addresses the negative problem) while the active obedience provides the positive righteousness required for standing before God (addresses the positive problem). Both dimensions are necessary for the complete atonement.
Imputation	The legal act by which righteousness or guilt is reckoned or credited to another’s account, not infused into their character. In Protestant soteriology, imputation operates in two directions: (1) The imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ on the cross, their guilt is reckoned to His account and He bears its penalty. (2) The imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer in justification, His perfect law-keeping is reckoned to their account and they receive its benefit. Distinguished from infusion (the internal communication of righteousness as a quality of character, which belongs to sanctification). Justification is entirely a matter of imputation.
Alien Righteousness	Luther’s term (Latin: <i>aliena iustitia</i>) for the imputed righteousness of Christ’s active obedience, a righteousness ‘alien’ to the believer in the sense of not being native to them or produced by their own moral achievements, but coming from outside them (from Christ), credited to their account through faith. The alien character of the righteousness is not a weakness but its greatest strength: because it is Christ’s righteousness and not the believer’s own, it is perfect, complete, and immutable. It cannot be diminished by subsequent sin, forfeited through moral failure, or withdrawn by divine displeasure.

Term	Definition
Justification	The forensic act of God by which the ungodly sinner is declared righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ, received through faith alone. Justification is a declaration of righteous status, not a process of moral improvement. The Reformed doctrine of justification includes two dimensions: the non-imputation of sin (through the passive obedience, forgiveness of sins) and the imputation of righteousness (through the active obedience, crediting of Christ's law-keeping). Both dimensions are necessary for the full biblical account of justification: the sinner is declared not merely not-guilty but positively righteous in Christ.
Double Imputation	The theological description of the twofold exchange in justification: (1) the sinner's guilt is imputed to Christ, who bears its penalty; and (2) Christ's righteousness is imputed to the sinner, who receives its benefit. The most compressed biblical statement of the double imputation is 2 Corinthians 5:21: 'He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.' The double imputation ensures that justification is fully symmetrical: exactly as the believer's sin is reckoned to Christ and borne by Him, Christ's righteousness is reckoned to the believer and enjoyed by them.
Sola Fide	Latin: 'by faith alone.' The Reformation's formulation of the instrumental cause of justification: the believer is justified by faith alone, not by faith plus works of any kind. Faith is the instrument by which the righteousness of Christ is received, not as a meritorious act that earns the gift, but as the empty hand that receives what Christ has provided. The 'alone' of sola fide excludes every contribution of human performance to the basis of justification, including the believer's own moral attainments or works of law. The basis of justification is entirely the imputed righteousness of Christ; faith is the means of receiving it.
Articulus Stantis et Cadentis	Latin: 'the article by which the church stands or falls.' Luther's description of the doctrine of justification as the central, irreplaceable article of Christian faith. In its fullest form, the articulus includes both the passive obedience (the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ) and the active obedience (the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the positive ground of the believer's standing). To deny either dimension is to collapse the full structure of the doctrine of justification and to leave sinners with less than the gospel declares.
New Perspective on Paul	An exegetical movement in New Testament scholarship (associated with E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, and N.T. Wright) that reinterprets the Pauline language of 'righteousness' and 'justification' in ways that significantly modify or eliminate the traditional Protestant understanding. The NPP reads 'justification' primarily as declaration of covenant membership rather than forensic declaration of righteous standing, and 'the righteousness of God' primarily as divine covenant faithfulness rather than a righteousness imputed to the individual believer. The Reformed response (Carson, Stuhlmacher,

Term	Definition
	Schreiner, Piper) argues that the NPP's conclusions are imposed on the texts by prior hermeneutical decisions rather than arising naturally from them.
Telos (Romans 10:4)	Greek: 'end,' 'goal,' 'fulfillment.' Used in Romans 10:4 ('Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes'). The word carries a double meaning: (1) Termination: Christ is the end of the law as a means of earning righteousness before God, for those in Christ, the law no longer functions as a standard to be met by their own performance, because He has met it on their behalf. (2) Fulfillment: Christ is the goal and culmination of the law, the one toward whom the entire Old Testament legal structure was pointing. Both meanings are present and complementary in Paul's use of telos at Romans 10:4.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that justification is not merely forgiveness, not merely the cancellation of the debt of sin through the passive obedience of Christ on the cross, but the full, two-dimensional declaration of righteous standing that includes the positive crediting of Christ's active obedience to the believer's account. A gospel that declares only forgiveness but not imputed righteousness is a gospel that leaves the believer better off than before but not as well off as the gospel actually provides. The full gospel declares both, and the full confidence of the believer before God rests on both. To omit the active obedience from the gospel is to leave the congregation with half of what they have been given.

We must also believe that the imputed righteousness of Christ is genuinely and fully the believer's own, not in the sense of having been produced by them, but in the sense of having been credited to them with the same legal finality as if they had rendered every act of obedience themselves. The alien character of the righteousness is not a qualification of its possession but the source of its security. Because it is Christ's righteousness and not the believer's own, it is perfect, comprehensive, and immutable. The righteousness in which the believer stands before God is exactly as secure as the Person whose righteousness it is, and that Person sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high, "always lives to make intercession" (Hebrews 7:25, NASB 1995), and cannot fail.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the active obedience of Christ be the specific ground of your confidence in every encounter with the holiness of God, in prayer, in worship, at the Lord's Table, in the approach of death, in the prospect of the final judgment. The question you face at every such moment is not "Have I been good enough?" but "In whom am I found?" And the answer that the gospel provides is: in Christ, in the

one whose perfect, comprehensive, irrevocable law-keeping now stands credited to your account as your own. You are not approaching the holy God on the basis of your own moral performance. You are approaching Him on the basis of the active obedience of the Last Adam, and the Last Adam's obedience is exactly sufficient.

Desire a congregation that knows the specific content of the righteousness in which they stand: not a general sense of divine acceptance, not a vague confidence that God is pleased with them, but the precise, doctrinal knowledge that the righteousness which is theirs in Christ is the righteousness of a Person who lived thirty-three years in perfect conformity to every requirement of the law of God, who resisted every temptation the adversary could devise, who submitted His human will to the Father's will in every circumstance of difficulty, and who finally gave Himself up on the cross as the culmination and consummation of the active obedience. That is what they have in Christ.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Preach the active obedience explicitly in every sermon on justification. Do not assume that your congregation already understands the distinction between the passive obedience (forgiveness) and the active obedience (imputed righteousness). In most evangelical contexts, the passive obedience is well understood and powerfully preached; the active obedience is underemphasized or absent. Every time you preach justification, preach both dimensions: the debt cancelled through the passive obedience, and the positive righteousness credited through the active obedience. Use the balance of 2 Corinthians 5:21 as your model: both 'made Him to be sin' (passive) and 'become the righteousness of God in Him' (active).
- Connect the active obedience to the specific life narratives of Christ in your preaching. The active obedience is not an abstraction; it is thirty-three years of historical law-keeping. When you preach the circumcision of Jesus (Luke 2:21), connect it to the active obedience. When you preach the baptism (Matthew 3:13–17), connect it to the active obedience, He 'fulfilled all righteousness' (v. 15, NASB 1995). When you preach the wilderness temptation (Lesson 14), connect it to the active obedience. When you preach Gethsemane, connect it to the active obedience. Every episode of the incarnate life is an episode in the cumulative pattern of law-keeping that is credited to the believer's account.
- Use the Heidelberg Catechism's account of justification (Q&A 60–61) as a teaching resource for your congregation. The Heidelberg's formulation is among the most pastorally accessible and theologically precise statements of the active obedience and its imputation in the entire Reformed confessional tradition: 'God, without any merit of mine, out of pure grace, grants me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me.' The phrase 'as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me' is the most precise pastoral formulation of the active obedience available in the confessional tradition.

- Address the New Perspective on Paul in your teaching context. The NPP has moved from the academy into the pulpit, and congregations have been exposed to its conclusions through popular-level books and teaching. Know the central claims of the NPP and know the exegetical responses that the Reformed tradition has developed. The most accessible resources: D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo's *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Brian Vickers' *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness*, and John Piper's *The Future of Justification*.
- Preach the positive dimension of the believer's standing: not merely not-guilty, but righteous. A sermon series on justification that moves from the problem of sin through the passive obedience (forgiveness) to the active obedience (imputed righteousness) to the assurance that results has the potential to transform the spiritual posture of an entire congregation from vague anxiety about their standing before God to specific, grounded, christologically-rooted confidence. The congregation that knows they are not merely forgiven but righteous, with the righteousness of the Last Adam, will pray differently, worship differently, face death differently, and live with a freedom and a boldness that only the alien righteousness of Christ can produce.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Before studying this lesson, how clearly did you understand the distinction between the passive obedience of Christ (His bearing of the law's penal demands on the cross) and the active obedience (His fulfillment of the law's positive precepts throughout the incarnate life)? Had you been taught both dimensions of justification, the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of righteousness, as equally essential? If not, which dimension was more emphasized in your theological education and preaching formation, and what practical consequences did the neglect of the other dimension produce in your spiritual life or ministry?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:14–21. Identify the two movements of imputation in verse 21: what is imputed to Christ, and what is credited to believers? What does the phrase 'knew no sin' describe about the nature of Christ's sinlessness, is it merely a record of sinless behavior, or something deeper about His Person? What does the phrase 'become the righteousness of God in Him' describe about the nature of the righteousness believers receive: is it an internal quality they develop, or an external status they receive? How does the phrase 'in Him' indicate the mechanism by which this righteousness is received?

3. Read Romans 5:12–21, with particular attention to verses 18–19. Identify the four parallel pairs that Paul draws between Adam and Christ: one transgression/one act of righteousness; condemnation/justification of life; disobedience/obedience of the One; made sinners/made righteous. What is the scope of the ‘obedience’ (hypakoe) in verse 19, does it refer to the passive obedience of the cross alone, or to the comprehensive obedience of the entire incarnate life? How does the Adam-Christ parallel in these verses establish the representational structure that makes the imputation of Christ’s obedience possible?
4. Read Galatians 4:1–5:1. In 4:4–5, what is the significance of the double statement ‘born of a woman, born under the Law’? What specific purpose does Paul assign to Christ’s being ‘born under the Law’? How does the statement ‘so that He might redeem those who were under the Law’ describe both the passive dimension (redemption from the curse, 3:13) and the active dimension (receiving the adoption, 4:5) of Christ’s work? Why does the reception of ‘the adoption as sons’ require the active obedience rather than merely the passive?
5. Read Philippians 3:1–11. What are the credentials Paul lists in verses 4–6, and why does he list them? What does he say about their value in verses 7–8? What specifically is the righteousness Paul desires in verse 9, how does he describe its source, its content, and its reception? What is the contrast between ‘a righteousness of my own derived from the Law’ and ‘the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith’? How does the language of ‘alien’ righteousness capture the essential character of the imputed righteousness of Christ’s active obedience?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson argues that the passive obedience alone (forgiveness) is insufficient for a complete justification, because the standard for standing before God is not merely the absence of sin but the presence of positive righteousness. Evaluate this argument. Is the distinction between ‘not guilty’ and ‘positively righteous’ a genuine biblical distinction? What specific biblical texts support the claim that positive righteousness (not merely forgiveness) is required for standing before God? How does the righteousness required of Adam in the garden illuminate the positive dimension of the standing required?
7. The lesson presents Charles Hodge’s analogy of the master and servant: a servant whose debt has been forgiven is better off than before, but not in the same position as a servant who has faithfully served the entire term and earned the reward. Evaluate this analogy. What are its strengths in illuminating the distinction between passive and active obedience? What are its limitations? What does the language of ‘inheritance’ and ‘adoption’ in Paul (Romans 8:17; Galatians 4:5–7) contribute to the biblical picture of the positive dimension of justification?
8. The lesson distinguishes between imputation (the external, legal reckoning of righteousness to the believer’s account) and infusion (the internal, moral communication of righteousness as a quality of

character). How does this distinction relate to the Protestant-Catholic debate on justification? What specifically does the Council of Trent teach about the nature of justification that the Reformed tradition rejects? Why does the distinction matter pastorally, what specific consequences follow from confusing imputation with infusion, and what benefits follow from maintaining the distinction clearly?

9. The lesson presents and responds to both the Socinian objection (Christ's obedience to the law was His own personal duty, not a surplus merit transferable to others) and the New Perspective on Paul (justification is primarily about covenant membership, not the imputation of individual righteousness). Evaluate each challenge and the Reformed response. Which challenge do you find more exegetically serious? Which response do you find most persuasive? Are there dimensions of either challenge that the traditional Reformed response has not fully addressed?

10. The lesson identifies the practical neglect of the active obedience in evangelical preaching as producing a form of Christian experience 'perpetually haunted by a vague sense of insufficiency.' Reflect on your own experience and the experience of your congregation. Do you observe this spiritual pattern, the sense that forgiveness is real but positive righteousness is still to be achieved? What specific pastoral and preaching practices would most effectively address this pattern? How does the explicit teaching of the active obedience change the emotional and spiritual posture of the believer before God?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

11. The lesson recommends preaching the active obedience explicitly in every sermon on justification, using 2 Corinthians 5:21 as a model that includes both dimensions. Take a sermon on justification that you have preached or plan to preach and evaluate it against this standard. Does the sermon include both the passive obedience (forgiveness through the blood of Christ) and the active obedience (the imputed righteousness of Christ's law-keeping)? If the active obedience is absent or underemphasized, what would you add? What specific texts, illustrations, or pastoral applications would you use to bring the positive dimension of justification into the sermon with the same power and clarity as the forgiveness dimension?

12. The lesson recommends the Heidelberg Catechism's Q&A 60–61 as a teaching resource for the congregation. If you were to teach a single session on the active obedience using the Heidelberg as your primary text, what would your three or four main teaching points be? How would you illustrate the concept of the alien righteousness in a way that is theologically precise and personally accessible to ordinary believers? What questions do you anticipate your congregation would raise, and how would you respond to them?

13. The lesson argues that the alien character of the imputed righteousness is not a weakness but its greatest strength: because it is Christ's righteousness and not the believer's own, it is perfect,

comprehensive, and immutable. How would you bring this argument to bear in a pastoral conversation with a believer who is troubled by their own ongoing sinfulness and who struggles to believe that they are truly righteous before God? What specific christological content, the specific acts of obedience that constitute the active obedience, would you point to as the content of the righteousness being offered?

14. This lesson completes Unit 5 on the Sinless Life and Active Obedience of Christ, and with it the first fifteen lessons of this Christology series. Looking back over the entire arc of Units 1–5, from the christological foundations through the incarnation, hypostatic union, and sinless life, identify the single most significant christological truth that has most deepened your understanding of the Person and Work of Christ. How has this lesson specifically shown you that who Christ is (truly God and truly man, impeccable, with a genuine human will) is the direct ground of what He does (active obedience, passive obedience, intercession)? And what do you most anticipate in the remaining units of this series?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, meditative reading of Philippians 3:1–11, the most personally expressed account of the active obedience and its imputation in all of Paul's letters. Read it as a personal testimony: the apostle who had every human credential, who by his own account was 'blameless' under the righteousness of the law (v. 6), regards all of it as 'rubbish' (σκύβαλα, *skybala*) in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. What he desires above all is to 'be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.'

Let the group sit with the weight of Paul's testimony and its implications for their own posture before God. The righteousness Paul describes desiring is not a righteousness that awaits development, not a righteousness that will be his when he has prayed enough, served enough, grown enough in holiness. It is a righteousness already his in Christ, already credited to his account, already fully present in the one in whom he is found. The question for each believer is not 'Am I righteous enough?' but 'Am I in Him?' And for everyone who is in Him by faith, the answer to the question of righteousness is Paul's own answer: the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, perfect, complete, and credited without remainder.

Spend time in thanksgiving for the specific content of the active obedience, the specific acts of law-keeping that constitute the righteousness credited to the believer's account. Give thanks for the circumcision of Jesus on the eighth day. Give thanks for the baptism and the fulfillment of all righteousness. Give thanks for forty days in the wilderness and the defeat of every temptation the

adversary brought. Give thanks for three decades of daily obedience in Nazareth, the hidden, ordinary, unremarkable obedience that is as much a part of the active obedience as the dramatic public moments. Give thanks for Gethsemane, the 'not My will but Yours' that sealed and completed the active obedience that was always the believer's from the first moment of the incarnation.

Close with Paul's desire from Philippians 3:9, spoken together as a corporate confession and a personal prayer, the prayer of every soul who has understood where genuine righteousness is found and who rests their eternal standing on the alien, perfect, irrevocable righteousness of the Last Adam:

"That I may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith."

PHILIPPIANS 3:9, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com