

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 6: JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE

The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls

Lesson 17

The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness

An Alien Righteousness — Not Our Own, but His

The Most Glorious Truth in the Gospel: His Perfect Record Is Ours

“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”

Key Texts: Romans 4:1–8; 5:17–19; Philippians 3:8–9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:11; Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:6

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Philippians 3:9, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 16 established that justification is the forensic declaration of the divine Judge by which the believing sinner is pronounced righteous in His sight, on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness, received through faith alone, grounded entirely in grace. This lesson examines the mechanism at the heart of that declaration in much greater depth: imputation, the specific legal act by which one person's righteousness is credited to another's account. Imputation is the technical theological name for what the Reformation called "the great exchange," and it is not a secondary doctrinal refinement layered over the basic gospel but the very structure of the gospel itself. Without imputation, there is no intelligible account of how the righteousness of Christ reaches the sinner who did not produce it; and without that account, the whole doctrine of justification collapses into either moral transformation (Rome's infusion) or moral fiction (a declaration of righteousness that has no real basis in any real righteousness).

The word "imputation" derives from the Latin *imputare*, to reckon or credit to one's account, the same language used in commerce and law for the recording of transactions in a ledger. In its theological use, imputation refers to the divine legal act of crediting or charging something to a person's account that did not originate with that person: God charges the sinner's sin to Christ's account (imputing the guilt of transgression to the sinless substitute), and God credits Christ's righteousness to the sinner's account (imputing the perfect obedience of the Son to the person who did not produce it). The imputation is a legal transaction, not a moral transfer: Christ does not become sinful in His own nature when our sin is imputed to Him, nor does the justified sinner become intrinsically righteous in her own person when His righteousness is imputed to her. What changes is legal standing, not moral character; and the change of legal standing is real, decisive, and permanent.

This lesson will proceed through six major sections: imputation defined in its precise theological and biblical sense; the three great imputations of Scripture and their structural relationship; the alien righteousness and Luther's *iustitia aliena*; the biblical evidence for the imputation of Christ's righteousness, with special attention to Romans 4 and Philippians 3; the theological challenges to imputation from Rome's infusion doctrine and from the New Perspective on Paul, with the Reformed response to each; and the pastoral glory of imputed righteousness, the specific, deeply personal comfort that flows from knowing that one's standing before God depends not on the quality of one's own obedience but on the perfection of Another's.

A note on the relationship between this lesson and Lesson 16. Lesson 16 established the structure of justification (forensic declaration, double imputation, basis-instrument-ground); this lesson examines the imputation mechanism itself in greater depth, with more sustained exegetical engagement with the primary texts and more extended treatment of the theological challenges. The doctrinal content of the two lessons overlaps at several points, but the angle of approach is different: Lesson 16 asked "What is justification?" while this lesson asks "How precisely does the great exchange work, and on what exegetical and theological basis does it stand?" The answer to the second question deepens and grounds the answer to the first, providing the specific biblical and theological foundations on which the pastoral comfort of the imputed righteousness rests.

A pastoral orientation before we begin. The doctrine of imputation is not a speculative theological nicety; it is the specific answer to the most urgent question any human soul can ask: on what basis can I, who have done what I have done, stand before the God who sees everything? The answer is not "on the basis of your best efforts," nor "on the basis of your sincere intentions," nor "on the basis of your religious participation," but "on the basis of the perfect righteousness of the eternal Son of God, credited to your account through faith, by the free grace of

the God who justifies the ungodly.” This is the specific, personal, inexhaustibly comforting truth that imputation conveys, and the pastor who understands it deeply has in her hands the most powerful pastoral tool available for the anxious, the guilty, the failing, and the desperate souls in her care.

I. Imputation Defined

A Transfer of Legal Standing, Not of Moral Character

A. *The Precise Meaning of Imputation*

Imputation, in its theological usage, is the divine legal act of crediting or reckoning to a person's account something that did not originate with that person, specifically, a legal status (guilt or righteousness) that is transferred from one party to another by a sovereign divine act. The definition has two essential elements that must be held together. First, imputation is a legal act: it is the reckoning of a legal status, not the transfer of a moral quality. When God imputes the believer's sin to Christ, He does not make Christ morally corrupt; He charges the legal liability of the sin to Christ's account. When God imputes Christ's righteousness to the believer, He does not make the believer morally perfect; He credits the legal standing of righteousness to the believer's account. The transfer is of legal status, not of moral character.

Second, the imputation involves something that did not originate with the person to whom it is credited. This is the "alien" dimension that Luther so powerfully named with his term *iustitia aliena*: the righteousness that is imputed to the believer is foreign to her in its origin. She did not produce it, earn it, or contribute to it; it comes from outside her, from the eternal Son of God who lived the perfectly obedient life she failed to live. This alien character of the imputed righteousness is not a defect in the transaction; it is its glory. The righteousness that grounds the justified sinner's standing before God is not the best she could produce from within the resources of her fallen nature; it is the best that God Himself could produce from within the resources of the perfectly obedient humanity of His incarnate Son.

The biblical vocabulary of imputation centers on two Greek verb groups: *logizomai* (to reckon, credit, count, or account) and its cognates, and *elogisthē* (the aorist passive of *logizomai*, used repeatedly in Romans 4 in the citation of Genesis 15:6). The verb *logizomai* appears more than thirty times in the New Testament and carries consistently the sense of a deliberate, thoughtful reckoning, a counting of something as something else, a crediting of one thing to another's account. When Paul says in Romans 4:3 that Abraham's faith "was credited (*elogisthē*) to him as righteousness," the verb describes a divine accounting act: God reckoned the righteousness of faith to Abraham's account, not because Abraham's faith was itself a righteousness equivalent to law-keeping, but because through faith Abraham received and was credited with the righteousness of the One his faith anticipated, the Christ in whom all the divine promises would be fulfilled.

The non-transfer-of-moral-character aspect of imputation is what distinguishes the Reformed doctrine from both the Roman Catholic doctrine of infusion and certain forms of antinomian misunderstanding. Infusion means the actual communication of moral grace to the soul, making the person intrinsically more righteous in her own character. Imputation means the crediting of a legal status to a person's account, leaving her moral character to be transformed by sanctification. The two are related: the imputed righteousness of justification and the infused (in the sense of poured-in) love of the Spirit's sanctifying work both operate in the life of the justified believer, but they are not the same thing, and conflating them produces the Tridentine error of treating justification as a process of moral improvement rather than a declaration of legal standing. The antinomian misunderstanding is different: it treats imputed righteousness as if it meant that the believer's own moral life is irrelevant, since the

imputed righteousness has made her righteous in God's sight regardless. But imputation changes legal standing, not the moral obligation for sanctification; and the God who declares the sinner righteous has also commissioned the Spirit to produce the genuine holiness that is the fruit of the justified life.

B. Imputation Distinguished from Infusion

The distinction between imputed righteousness (the Reformation's account) and infused righteousness (Rome's account) is the most important technical distinction in the whole field of justification doctrine, and it deserves a precise formulation before the lesson proceeds. Infused righteousness, in the Tridentine account, is the actual communication of sanctifying grace to the soul of the justified person, making that person genuinely and intrinsically more righteous in her own moral character through the operation of the sacraments and the cooperation of the human will with the infused grace. The justification that infusion produces is a process, advancing as the person's moral character advances and declining when mortal sin destroys the infused grace.

Imputed righteousness, in the Reformation's account, is the legal crediting of Christ's righteousness to the believer's account, leaving the believer's moral character unchanged by the act of justification itself (though the Spirit's sanctifying work will progressively transform that character as justification's companion). The justification that imputation produces is a declaration, complete and irrevocable at the moment of faith, independent of the fluctuations of the believer's moral life. Two practical consequences distinguish the two accounts with devastating clarity. Under the infusion account, the certainty of one's justification is proportional to the degree of one's moral transformation, which can never, in this life, be declared complete. Under the imputation account, the certainty of one's justification rests on the perfection of the righteousness credited, which is absolutely complete because it is Christ's. Under infusion, justification is always in process and never fully certain; under imputation, justification is complete at the moment of faith and permanently certain because it rests on a righteousness that neither grows nor diminishes.

II. The Three Great Imputations

The Structural Framework of Redemptive History

A. The First Imputation: Adam's Sin to the Human Race

The doctrine of imputation does not originate with justification; it is woven into the structure of redemptive history from the beginning. The apostle Paul identifies three great imputations that together constitute the framework within which the whole human story is understood: the imputation of Adam's sin to the human race, the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. The three imputations are not isolated theological propositions; they form a coherent, architecturally unified account of how sin entered the human story and how righteousness re-enters it through the redemptive work of the second Adam.

The first imputation is the imputation of Adam's sin to all his natural descendants, described in Romans 5:12–19 with the most extensive and most careful treatment Paul gives to any single doctrine in the whole of the letter. "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (v. 12, NASB 1995). The "because all sinned" (eph' ho pantes hēmarton) is the

exegetically contested phrase: it can mean either “because all individually sinned” (a reference to each person’s own actual sins) or “in whom all sinned” (a reference to all humanity sinning in Adam as the federal head). The broader context of the passage, specifically verses 13–14, which note that death reigned even over those who did not sin “in the likeness of the offense of Adam” (i.e., those who did not commit the specific act of transgressing a specific divine command, as Adam did), strongly supports the federal interpretation: Adam’s sin is imputed to all his descendants by virtue of his representative headship, not merely because each person commits his or her own individual sins.

The first imputation establishes the principle of representative headship that the doctrine of imputation requires: one person can, by divine appointment and design, act representatively for many, and the legal consequences of that representative act are credited to the account of those for whom the representative acted. Adam acted representatively for the whole human race; his act of sin is imputed to every person born in Adam by virtue of that representative headship. This is not arbitrary or unjust, it reflects the organic and covenantal unity of the human race in its common head, but it is also, in the fallen order, the source of the universal condemnation that Romans 1:18–3:20 describes in its fullest dimensions. The first imputation is the bad news that makes the third imputation so staggeringly good.

B. The Second Imputation: The Believer’s Sin to Christ

The second great imputation is the imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ on the cross, the divine act by which the guilt and the condemnation of the sinner’s transgression is charged to the account of the sinless Son of God, who bears it in His body as the substitute for all those whose sin He carries. This is the imputation described in Isaiah 53:4–6: “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried... He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (NASB 1995). The language of the fourth Servant Song is the language of substitutionary imputation: the iniquity of the many is caused to fall upon the One, who bears what is not His by nature in the place of those for whom He bears it.

Isaiah 53:11 adds the specific language of the forensic dimension: “As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (NASB 1995). The Righteous One justifies the many by bearing their iniquities, the justification of the many is the direct consequence of the Servant’s bearing of their iniquities. The bearing and the justifying are inseparably connected: the many are declared righteous because the One has borne what stood against their righteousness. This is the logic of imputation: the guilt is charged to the substitute, borne by the substitute, and atoned by the substitute, so that those whose guilt He bore may receive the counter-verdict of righteousness.

Second Corinthians 5:21’s “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” restates the second imputation in its most compressed New Testament form. The specific phrase “to be sin” (hamartian epoiesen) has been interpreted in several ways: as referring to the sin offering (the Old Testament ‘asham), as referring to the condition of bearing sin’s penalty, or as the most direct possible statement of the imputation of sin to Christ. The most exegetically and theologically satisfying interpretation understands it as the most direct statement available: the sinless One was made, by divine appointment and imputation, to stand in the place of sin-bearing, legally charged with the guilt that was not His by nature, so that the penalty due to that guilt could be justly borne and justly discharged.

C. The Third Imputation: Christ's Righteousness to the Believer

The third great imputation is the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner, the divine act by which the perfect record of the Son of God's lifelong obedience is credited to the account of the sinner who did not produce it, received through the instrument of faith. This is the imputation of 2 Corinthians 5:21b ("so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"), of Romans 4:3 and 4:22–25 (Abraham's faith credited as righteousness, an account that Paul explicitly extends to the new covenant believer), and of Philippians 3:9 ("the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith").

The three imputations together constitute the full architecture of redemptive history: the first established the representative principle and produced the universal condemnation; the second reversed the direction of the representative principle by charging the human race's sin to the divine-human substitute who could bear it; the third completes the reversal by crediting the divine-human substitute's righteousness to those for whom He bore their sin. The movement of the three imputations is from Adam's sin to human condemnation, then from human sin to Christ's cross, then from Christ's righteousness to human justification. The architecture is complete, the movement is irreversible, and the result for the believing sinner is the most astonishing legal transformation in the history of the universe: from the condemned position of Adam's natural descendants to the accepted position of those who wear the righteousness of the eternal Son.

Romans 5:17–19 explicitly draws the architectural connection between the first and third imputations in the first and second Adam: "For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. 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 structure makes the architecture explicit: Adam's disobedience → condemnation of the many; Christ's obedience → justification and righteousness of the many. The same representative principle that made Adam's sin the source of universal condemnation makes Christ's righteousness the source of universal justification for all who are in Him by faith. The first Adam is the problem; the second Adam is the solution; and the solution works by the same principle that the problem exploited, now turned to its redemptive purpose.

III. The Alien Righteousness

Iustitia Aliena, Luther's Most Glorious Discovery

A. The Meaning of the Alien Righteousness

Martin Luther's discovery of the doctrine of imputation in his tower experience, his recognition that the "righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17 refers not to the attribute by which God judges sinners but to the righteousness He gives to sinners through faith in the gospel, was, by his own account, the moment when the gates of paradise opened to him. And the specific character of the righteousness he discovered is captured in the Latin phrase that he used to describe it: *iustitia aliena*, "alien righteousness." The righteousness that justifies is alien to the believer: it is not her own, not produced by her, not native to her character, not derived from any

quality or performance of her own. It comes from outside, from the person of the eternal Son of God, who lived the perfectly obedient life she failed to live and who offers the credit of that life to every sinner who comes to Him in faith.

Luther's sermon on "Two Kinds of Righteousness" (1519) develops the distinction with characteristic force and pastoral directness. The alien righteousness is the righteousness of Christ, infused or rather imputed to us through faith, a righteousness that is entirely external in its origin, entirely Christ's in its substance, and entirely ours in its application by the divine grace. It is ours not because we produced it, earned it, or deserved it, but because God in His sovereign grace has credited it to our account through the instrument of faith and by the union with Christ that faith effects. The proper righteousness, what Luther calls the second kind of righteousness, is the genuine, Spirit-produced righteousness of the sanctified life, the believer's own in the sense that it is genuinely produced in and through her by the Spirit's work. But the proper righteousness is the fruit of the alien righteousness; it does not contribute to it, supplement it, or replace it as the ground of the justified standing.

The alien character of the imputed righteousness is not a deficiency in the justified sinner's standing; it is its glory and its security. If the righteousness that grounded the justified standing were the believer's own, the best of her own sanctified performance, then the standing would be as variable as the performance, as uncertain as the sanctification, as provisional as the cooperation with grace that any given moment of the Christian life can produce. But because the righteousness that grounds the standing is Christ's, alien to the believer in its origin, perfect in its character, permanent in its stability, and irreversible in its imputation, the standing is as secure as the One whose righteousness it is. The believer who grasps the alien character of the righteousness on which she stands has discovered the specific, inexhaustible, personally stabilizing comfort that the Reformation recovered: the ground of my acceptance is not in me but in Him, and He does not change.

B. *Philippians 3:8–9 as the Most Personal Statement*

Philippians 3:8–9 is Paul's most personal and most explicit statement of the alien righteousness as the ground of his own standing before God, and it is made all the more powerful by the specific personal credentials that Paul has listed and renounced in the preceding verses. Paul had, by any standard of Jewish religious achievement, an impressive record: circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, "as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (v. 6, NASB 1995). These were genuine achievements by any human measure, the kind of religious credentials that might seem to constitute a genuine basis for confidence before God.

And Paul counts them all as loss: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish, so that I may gain Christ, and 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" (vv. 7–9, NASB 1995). The contrast in verse 9 is the most complete statement of the alien righteousness in the New Testament: "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law" versus "that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God."

The phrase "not having a righteousness of my own" is the most explicit possible statement of the alien character of justifying righteousness: Paul, who had the most impressive self-generated religious record available to a first-

century Jew, declares that he has none of his own, not “not enough of my own” but “not any of my own” as the ground of his standing before God. The righteousness he has is not his own; it comes from God; it is received through faith in Christ; and it is the sole ground on which he intends to be found when he stands before the divine Judge. The alien righteousness is not Paul’s consolation prize for having failed to achieve sufficient self-generated righteousness; it is the surpassing treasure that makes his impressive self-generated achievements look like rubbish in comparison to the infinite perfection of what Christ’s righteousness provides.

IV. The Biblical Evidence for Imputation

Romans 4 and the Crediting of Faith as Righteousness

A. Abraham’s Justification and the Logic of Imputation

Romans 4 is Paul’s most extended and most careful exegetical treatment of the doctrine of imputation, using the case of Abraham as the paradigmatic illustration of how the righteousness of God is credited to the believing sinner. The chapter is structured around Genesis 15:6, which Paul cites in verse 3: “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” The word “credited” (Greek: *elogisthē*, the aorist passive of *logizomai*) is the specific imputation vocabulary, and Paul uses it ten times across Romans 4, making the chapter the most concentrated treatment of imputation’s biblical basis in the entire New Testament.

Paul’s argument in Romans 4:4–5 establishes the precise character of the imputation through a contrast with ordinary economic exchange: “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” The economic analogy is exact: when someone earns a wage, the employer does not credit it as a gift or a favor; it is what is owed in exchange for the work done. But when someone receives something without working for it, receives it on the basis of faith rather than on the basis of performance, the crediting is pure gift, pure favor, pure grace. The righteousness credited to Abraham was not a wage he earned by believing; it was a gift God credited because Abraham trusted the promise.

The question that Paul’s use of Genesis 15:6 raises is: what exactly was credited to Abraham’s account when his faith was “credited as righteousness”? Was it Abraham’s faith itself, treated as a moral act equivalent to law-keeping? Was it some abstract condition of righteous standing without any specific content? Or was it the actual righteousness of Christ, the righteousness that Abraham’s faith anticipated and that was credited to his account in anticipation of the historical accomplishment of the atoning work his faith pointed toward? The Reformed tradition has consistently maintained the third interpretation: the faith was credited “as righteousness” not because the faith was itself a righteousness equivalent to law-keeping but because through faith Abraham received the credit of the righteousness of the One in whom all God’s promises would be fulfilled. The faith was the instrument through which the imputation was received; the righteousness imputed was Christ’s.

Romans 4:22–25 explicitly extends the Abraham account to the new covenant believer: “Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (NASB 1995). The crediting of righteousness to Abraham was not a unique historical event applicable only to the patriarch; it is the

pattern that applies to all who, across both Testaments, trust the God who raises the dead and who has raised Jesus for the justification of all who believe. The imputation mechanism of Genesis 15:6 is the eternal pattern of justification, operative from Abel through Abraham through Paul through the present day.

B. Isaiah 53:11 and the Suffering Servant's Justifying Work

Isaiah 53:11 provides the Old Testament's most explicit statement of the connection between the Servant's bearing of sin and the justification of the many: "As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities." Three elements of the verse deserve sustained attention. First, "the Righteous One": the Servant who justifies is Himself righteous, His own righteousness is not compromised by the bearing of others' sin, which is possible only because the bearing is by imputation rather than by moral transfer. He remains righteous in His own person while bearing the legal liability of others' iniquity.

Second, "will justify the many": the justification of the many is the direct purpose of the Servant's bearing of iniquity. The bearing and the justifying are causally connected: the many are justified because the Righteous One has borne their iniquities. This is the logic of imputation in both directions: their iniquities are imputed to Him (He bears them); His righteousness is imputed to them (they are justified). The connection between the two directions of the imputation is explicit in the verse: it is precisely because He bears their iniquities that they receive the justification.

Third, "the Righteous One" justifies by bearing: the mechanism of the justification is the bearing of iniquity. This is not the justification of the legally innocent (which requires no sacrifice) but the justification of the genuinely guilty through the substitutionary bearing of their guilt by the genuinely innocent. The Servant's own righteousness is the basis of the justification He extends: He justifies because He is the Righteous One, and the righteousness He extends to the many is the righteousness that is uniquely His as the perfectly obedient Servant of the Lord. Isaiah 53:11 is thus the Old Testament foundation of the New Testament's full account of imputation, the bearing of the second imputation (sin to Christ) producing the third imputation (Christ's righteousness to the many).

V. Theological Challenges to Imputation

Rome, the New Perspective, and the Reformed Response

A. The Roman Catholic Challenge: Infusion over Imputation

The most historically significant challenge to the doctrine of imputed righteousness has come from the Roman Catholic theological tradition, which teaches not imputation but infusion as the mechanism of justification. The Council of Trent's formal definition (Session VI, 1547) describes justification as involving not merely the remission of sins but the "sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unrighteous man becomes a righteous man." The key verb is "becomes": for Rome, the justified person actually becomes righteous in her own person through the infusion of sanctifying grace, she is not declared righteous on the basis of another's imputed righteousness but made righteous through the transformation of her own moral character by the infused grace of the sacraments.

The Tridentine canons make the rejection of imputation explicit. Canon 11: “If anyone says that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of grace and charity which is shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God; let him be anathema.” The “sole imputation” is precisely what the Reformation affirms and what Trent condemns. The Roman objection to imputation is that it produces a legal fiction: God declares righteous a person who is not actually righteous, based on a righteousness that is not actually the person’s own. For Rome, genuine justification must involve genuine moral transformation; a declaration of righteousness that does not correspond to an actual moral condition in the person is not justice but its violation.

The Reformed response to this Roman objection is threefold. First, the objection misunderstands the nature of legal representation and imputation: when God charges the believer’s sin to Christ, He is not pretending the sin does not exist; He is charging it to the account of the qualified representative who will actually bear its penalty. The charge is real; the bearing is real; the satisfaction is real. Similarly, when God credits Christ’s righteousness to the believer, He is not pretending the righteousness was produced by the believer; He is crediting the actual righteousness of the actual divine-human representative to the account of those He represents. The imputation is a real legal transaction with a real basis in the real righteousness of the real divine Son; it is not a fiction.

Second, the Roman account of infused righteousness cannot ground the certainty of the justified person’s standing, since infused grace can be lost through mortal sin and must be restored through the sacrament of penance, creating a system in which the certainty of one’s standing before God is perpetually contingent on the adequacy of one’s cooperation with grace. The Reformed account of imputed righteousness grounds the certainty of the standing in the perfection and permanence of Christ’s righteousness, which neither grows nor diminishes. Third, Paul’s own language in Romans 4 and Philippians 3 consistently describes the righteousness of justification as external to the believer (“not my own, but that which comes from God”), the alien character of the righteousness is not an unfortunate implication of the Reformation’s doctrine but the explicit Pauline description of what happens in justification.

B. The New Perspective on Paul and the Reformed Response

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a cluster of scholars associated with what has come to be called the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), most prominently E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, challenged the traditional Protestant understanding of justification and imputation on exegetical and historical grounds. The NPP’s central claim is that the traditional Reformation reading of Paul misunderstands both the Judaism Paul was opposing and the meaning of the key terms in Paul’s justification texts. On the NPP account, the “works of the law” that Paul excludes from justification in Romans and Galatians refer not to moral achievements that the legalist was attempting to offer as merit before God but to the specific “boundary markers” (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance) by which the Jewish community distinguished itself from the Gentiles. And the righteousness of God is not the righteousness credited to the individual believer but the covenant faithfulness of God displayed in the vindication of His people.

The Reformed response to the NPP is substantial and multi-faceted. First, on the historical claim: Sanders’s characterization of Second Temple Judaism as “covenantal nomism” (a system in which election by grace produces covenant membership, while the law’s role is to define the works of maintenance rather than the basis of entry) has been significantly challenged by subsequent scholarship, which has demonstrated that merit-based thinking was far more present in at least some strands of Second Temple Judaism than Sanders acknowledged. The

historical claim that Paul was not opposing merit-based justification is, at the very least, a contested historical thesis rather than the established consensus the NPP sometimes presents it as.

Second, on the exegetical claim: while it is true that “works of the law” does include the specific boundary markers in some Pauline contexts, Paul’s exclusion of “works” from the ground of justification is consistently broader than a mere exclusion of ethnic boundary markers. Romans 4:4–5’s contrast between the worker whose wage is owed and the believer whose faith is credited as righteousness is not about ethnic boundary markers; it is about the fundamental principle of grace versus merit in the reception of the divine verdict. Galatians 2:16’s exclusion of “works of the Law” from the ground of justification is grammatically and contextually more comprehensive than an exclusion of ethnic markers. And Romans 3:28’s “apart from works of the Law” stands in the context of the universal guilty verdict of 1:18–3:20, which is about the whole range of human moral failure before the divine standard, not merely about the ethnic identity markers of Jewish practice.

Third, on the imputation question specifically: N.T. Wright has argued that Paul does not teach the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer, that “righteousness” in Paul is not the kind of thing that can be transferred from one person to another, because it is a relational status rather than a commodity. The Reformed response is that while “righteousness” is indeed a relational and legal status rather than a substance, legal statuses can be and are transferred by sovereign legal acts, that is precisely what imputation describes. The legal crediting of Christ’s righteous status to the believer’s account does not require “righteousness” to be a quasi-material commodity; it requires the sovereign legal authority of the divine Judge to pronounce the verdict of righteousness over one who did not independently produce it. And that authority is precisely what Romans 3:26 ascribes to the God who is simultaneously “just and the justifier”, His justice is not violated by the imputation because the imputation is grounded in the actual bearing of actual guilt by an actual righteous substitute.

VI. The Pastoral Glory of Imputed Righteousness

The Most Comforting Truth in the Gospel

A. Standing Before God on Another’s Record

The doctrine of imputation, when it is received with the personal weight that the Reformation intended it to carry, produces a specific kind of pastoral comfort that no other doctrine can provide: the comfort of the person who knows that her standing before God does not depend on the quality of her own obedience but on the perfection of Another’s. This is not merely a consolation for those who are failing in their Christian life; it is the ground of the justified standing of every believer in every moment, including the moments of greatest spiritual progress and fruitfulness. The most sanctified saint’s standing before God is not grounded in the advanced quality of her sanctification; it is grounded in the same alien righteousness of Christ that grounded her standing in the first moment of faith.

Luther’s description of the comfort that the alien righteousness provides, when he first grasped it in his tower study, was the language of paradise opening: the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17 had previously terrified him, because he understood it as the attribute by which the righteous God judges sinful men. When he recognized it as the righteousness that God gives to the sinner through faith in the gospel, the terror became peace. The same doctrinal reversal is available to every believer who has been living under the weight of her own insufficient

performance: the righteousness that God requires is not the righteousness she has to produce; it is the righteousness He has already provided in the person and work of His Son, and it is fully credited to her account through faith.

The specific form of the comfort that imputation provides can be stated with the precision that doctrine allows but that no other form of pastoral address can achieve. It is not “Your failures don’t matter”, they do matter, they grieve the Spirit, they disrupt fellowship with God, and they require genuine repentance. It is not “You are really better than you think”, the honest account of the remaining sin is not flattering. It is not “God is more lenient than you think”, the divine standard has not been lowered. It is: “The righteousness that God requires is already provided, already credited, already permanently yours in Christ; your failures have been charged to His account and borne at the cross; His perfect obedience is charged to your account and credited to your standing; and nothing in your present spiritual state changes the standing that the divine Judge has declared on that basis.” This is the specific, doctrinal, exegetically grounded comfort that imputation delivers, and it is the most powerful pastoral tool available for the care of the anxious, the failing, and the desperate.

B. The Permanence of the Imputed Righteousness

The alien character of the imputed righteousness is precisely what guarantees its permanence. If the righteousness that grounded the justified standing were the believer’s own, even the Spirit-produced righteousness of the sanctified life, then the standing would fluctuate with the quality of the righteousness produced. On her best days, the standing would be stronger; on her worst days, it would be weaker; and the whole of the Christian life would be characterized by the anxiety of maintaining a standing that depends on a fluctuating personal performance. But the alien righteousness does not fluctuate: it is the righteousness of the eternal Son of God, whose obedience was perfect and complete across the whole of His incarnate life, and whose perfection neither grows nor diminishes with the passage of time or the variations of the believer’s spiritual condition.

Hebrews 7:25 provides the New Testament’s most direct statement of the permanence of the standing that Christ’s priestly ministry secures: “Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (NASB 1995). The “save forever” (Greek: *eis to panteles*, completely, fully, to the uttermost) is the eschatological completeness of the salvation that Christ’s eternal priesthood secures: the saving is as permanent as the priesthood, and the priesthood is as permanent as the eternal life of the High Priest who holds it. And the ground of the permanent saving is the same alien righteousness that the Priest offered in His incarnate life and death: the righteousness that is forever His, and therefore forever credited to those for whom He intercedes.

The practical pastoral consequence of the permanence of imputed righteousness is the specific, endurance-enabling, warfare-sustaining assurance that the Reformed tradition has consistently identified as one of the most important pastoral fruits of the Reformation’s recovery of justification. The believer who knows that her standing rests on the alien, alien, perfectly permanent righteousness of Christ can endure the worst that the present age offers, the accusations of the enemy, the failures of the flesh, the seasons of spiritual dryness, the loss of felt assurance, without losing the standing itself. The standing is not the believer’s to lose; it was never the believer’s to produce; it is the sovereign gift of the God who has imputed to her account a righteousness that will never diminish, fail, or be revoked. And on that foundation, the whole of the Christian life, including its most difficult

and most spiritually costly dimensions, can be lived with the settled, joy-producing, hope-sustaining confidence of those who know whose righteousness they are wearing.

“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.”

Romans 5:19, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Imputation	The divine legal act of crediting or reckoning to a person's account something that did not originate with that person, specifically, a legal status (guilt or righteousness) that is transferred from one party to another by sovereign divine appointment. Imputation transfers legal standing, not moral character: Christ does not become sinful in His own nature when sin is imputed to Him, nor does the believer become intrinsically righteous in her own person when Christ's righteousness is imputed to her. The transfer is a legal reckoning (<i>logizomai</i>), not a moral transformation. The three great imputations: Adam's sin to humanity (Romans 5:12–19), the believer's sin to Christ (Isaiah 53:4–6; 2 Corinthians 5:21), and Christ's righteousness to the believer (Romans 4:3–6; Philippians 3:9).
Iustitia Aliena	Latin: "alien righteousness." Luther's term for the righteousness that justifies, the righteousness of Christ that is foreign (alien) to the believer in its origin, since she did not produce, earn, or contribute to it. The alien character of the imputed righteousness is both its definition (it is not the believer's own) and its glory (precisely because it is not her own but Christ's, it is perfect, permanent, and independent of her fluctuating performance). Luther's tower discovery was the recognition that the "righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17 refers to this alien righteousness given to the sinner through faith, not the attribute by which God judges sinners but the righteousness by which God justifies them.
Logizomai	Greek: to reckon, count, credit, account, or impute. The primary biblical vocabulary of imputation, used ten times in Romans 4 in connection with the crediting of righteousness to Abraham's account (Genesis 15:6). The verb describes a deliberate, thoughtful accounting act, the divine crediting of one thing (righteousness) to a person's account (the believing sinner's). The consistent use of <i>logizomai</i> in the imputation texts (Romans 4:3–6, 8–11, 22–25; Galatians 3:6; Genesis 15:6 in the Septuagint) establishes the specific legal-accounting character of the imputation that is the mechanism of justification.
Federal Headship	The theological principle that one person acts representatively for many by divine appointment, so that the legal consequences of that representative's actions are credited (or charged) to the account of those he represents. Adam is the federal head of the human race: his sin is imputed to all his natural descendants by virtue of his representative headship (Romans 5:12–19). Christ is the federal head of the new humanity: His righteousness is imputed to all who are in Him by faith, by virtue of His representative headship as the second Adam. Federal headship is the theological principle that makes imputation intelligible: it is not arbitrary for one person's righteousness to be credited to another's account, because the divine appointment of representative headship is the basis of the crediting.
New Perspective on Paul	A cluster of scholarly proposals developed from the 1970s onward (principally by E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright) challenging the traditional Protestant reading of Paul's justification texts. The NPP argues that (1) Second Temple Judaism was not a merit-based religion but a "covenantal nomism" in which grace preceded law-observance; (2) the "works of the law" Paul excludes from justification refer primarily to ethnic boundary markers (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath) rather than moral merit; and (3) the "righteousness of God" in Paul refers to covenant faithfulness rather than an imputed status. The Reformed response affirms the importance of the NPP's historical work while contesting its exegetical conclusions, particularly its denial of imputation and its reduction of "works of the law" to ethnic markers.
Infused Righteousness	The Roman Catholic doctrine that justification involves the actual communication of sanctifying grace to the soul, making the person genuinely and intrinsically more righteous in her own moral character through the operation of the sacraments and the cooperation of the human will with grace. Infusion produces a justification that is a process (advancing as moral character advances, declining as mortal sin destroys the infused grace) rather than a once-for-

	all declaration. Formally distinguished from imputed righteousness (which is a legal declaration based on Christ's alien righteousness) by the Tridentine canons, which condemned imputation by name. The Reformed critique: infused righteousness cannot ground the certainty of the justified standing, since the infused grace can be lost; only imputed righteousness, grounded in the perfect, permanent righteousness of Christ, provides the basis for complete and permanent assurance.
Covenantal Nomism	E.P. Sanders' term for the pattern of religion he identifies in Second Temple Judaism: election and covenant membership are established by divine grace (covenantal), while the law provides the way of remaining within the covenant rather than the basis of entrance into it (nomism). Sanders argues that Paul was not opposing a merit-based system of righteousness by works but the boundary-marker exclusivism that the covenant identity markers represented. The Reformed critique: while covenantal nomism accurately describes some strands of Second Temple Judaism, it fails to account for the merit-based thinking present in other strands, and it does not adequately explain Paul's exclusion of "works" from justification in contexts (Romans 4:4–5) that are clearly about merit versus grace rather than about ethnic markers.
Propitiation	The satisfaction of God's holy wrath against sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, enabling God to be simultaneously just (having punished sin at the cross) and the justifier (declaring the believing sinner righteous). Translates the Greek <i>hilastērion</i> (Romans 3:25; Hebrews 2:17) and <i>hilasmos</i> (1 John 2:2; 4:10). Propitiation is the mechanism by which the second imputation (the believer's sin charged to Christ) is discharged: the penalty due to the imputed sin is fully satisfied in the propitiatory sacrifice, so that God's justice is not violated by the verdict of righteousness but fulfilled by it. The propitiation is the basis of Romans 3:26's resolution of the divine dilemma: He is just because the sin was punished; He is the justifier because the punishment was borne by the substitute.
Active Obedience	The dimension of Christ's atoning work consisting of His lifelong, perfect fulfillment of the law's positive demands, providing the positive righteousness that is credited to the believer in justification. The active obedience answers the question: what does the believer receive in justification beyond the removal of her guilt? Answer: the positive record of Christ's perfect obedience, credited to her account as her own righteousness before God. Without the active obedience, the justified sinner would be declared "not guilty" but would possess no positive righteousness before the law's positive demands. With the active obedience, she is not merely freed from condemnation but declared positively righteous, wearing the perfect record of Another's whole life of obedience as her own standing before God.
Sufficiency of Christ's Righteousness	The theological affirmation that the righteousness imputed to the believer in justification is not merely adequate or sufficient for the present but absolutely, completely, and permanently sufficient for every demand the divine law can make on the believing sinner, in every moment and across every dimension of her standing before God. The sufficiency is grounded in the perfection of Christ's righteousness: since the righteousness imputed is the righteousness of the eternal Son of God, whose obedience was absolute and whose offering was accepted by the Father (demonstrated in the resurrection), it admits no supplement and requires no addition. Hebrews 10:14 states the sufficiency in its most comprehensive form: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the righteousness that grounds our standing before God is not our own, not partially, not primarily, not in its best moments, but completely and exclusively not our own. This is the alien righteousness, the *iustitia aliena*, the specific and radical conviction that Luther recovered for the church: the righteousness God requires is the righteousness God provides, and the righteousness He provides is the righteousness of His own eternal Son, credited to the account of every sinner who receives it through faith. We must believe this not as a comforting supplement to a primarily self-reliant righteousness but as the total and exclusive account of the basis on which we stand. There is no righteousness of our own contributing to the standing, not our repentance, not our faith, not our love, not our growth in sanctification. The ground is Christ's righteousness alone.

We must also believe that the three great imputations form a coherent and necessary structure: that the first (Adam's sin to us) explains the universal condemnation from which we need rescue; that the second (our sin to Christ) is the divine act that made the rescue possible by charging to the qualified substitute the guilt we could not bear and survive; and that the third (Christ's righteousness to us) is the divine act that completes the rescue by crediting to our account the righteousness we could not produce and did not deserve. The three imputations together tell the story of the whole gospel, from the problem that the first imputation establishes, through the solution that the second imputation provides, to the standing that the third imputation secures. We must hold all three together, because the glory of the third is proportional to the darkness of the first, and the sufficiency of the second is what makes the third possible.

We must believe that the theological challenges to imputation, from Rome's infusion doctrine and from the New Perspective on Paul, are not simply different but equally valid ways of reading Paul. The exegetical and theological case for imputation is strong, specific, and rooted in the explicit vocabulary of the biblical text (*logizomai*, alien righteousness, not my own but that which comes from God). The challenges raise genuine questions about historical context and semantic range that must be engaged with intellectual seriousness; but the conclusion to which the careful engagement leads is that the Reformation's reading of Paul is the most exegetically defensible account of what the apostle actually teaches about the mechanism of justification.

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

The specific comfort that the doctrine of imputed righteousness is designed to produce is the comfort of the person who has understood that she is wearing Another's clothes before the divine tribunal, the perfect, permanent, alien righteousness of the Son of God, credited to her account and constituting her standing before God in a way that her own performance, however inconsistent, cannot alter. This is not the vague comfort of a generous deity who overlooks human failure; it is the specific, legally precise, theologically grounded comfort of a person who knows exactly what her standing rests on and why it is permanent. The standing rests on the righteous life of the eternal Son, who never failed in a single act of obedience, who fulfilled every demand the law makes, and who offers the credit of that perfect record to every person who comes to Him in faith. That record does not diminish when the believer fails; it does not grow when the believer succeeds; it is simply and completely and always and forever His, and therefore hers, by the grace of the God who imputed it.

Desire the specific, personal, first-person reception of Philippians 3:9 as the description of your own standing: “I am not resting on any righteousness of my own derived from anything I have done or will do, but entirely and exclusively on that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” Let the contrast that Paul draws, between the righteousness of his own impressive religious achievements and the righteousness that comes from God, land with the full personal force it carried for the apostle himself. Paul had more to offer from the “my own” category than most believers will ever accumulate; and he called it rubbish compared to the alien righteousness. Whatever you have in the “my own” category, however sincere, however sustained, however Spirit-empowered, it is not the ground. The ground is the alien righteousness. Desire to live on that ground with the full confidence it warrants.

Desire, for those in your pastoral care, the specific liberation that the alien character of the imputed righteousness produces. The person who is living under the performance anxiety of a works-based approach to her standing before God needs not encouragement to perform better but the theologically precise, personally directed declaration: the standing does not rest on your performance. It rests on His. And His will never diminish, never fail, never be revoked. Desire to be the pastor who can say that with the specific theological precision that makes it credible and the specific pastoral warmth that makes it receivable.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Romans 4 in its entirety as Paul’s most extended exegetical treatment of imputation. Count the number of times the verb *logizomai* (credited, reckoned, counted) appears in the chapter. Note what specifically is credited in each instance. Trace Paul’s argument from the case of Abraham (vv. 1–8) through the timing of the imputation relative to circumcision (vv. 9–12) through the connection between imputation and the promise (vv. 13–17) through the character of Abraham’s faith (vv. 18–22) through the extension of Abraham’s case to the new covenant believer (vv. 23–25). Ask: what is Paul’s specific point in each section? And how does the accumulation of the *logizomai* vocabulary across the chapter establish that imputation is not a peripheral Pauline theme but the central mechanism of the justification Paul is defending?
- Read Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (the fourth Servant Song) slowly and in its entirety as the Old Testament’s most extensive account of the second imputation, the imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ. Note every phrase that describes the Servant bearing what belongs to others (griefs, sorrows, transgression, iniquity, sin, chastening). Note especially 53:6 (“the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him”) and 53:11 (“the Righteous One... will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities”). Ask: how does the Isaiah account of the Servant’s bearing of the many’s iniquity illuminate the New Testament’s account of Christ’s atoning death? And how does Isaiah 53:11’s connection between the bearing and the justifying establish the imputation logic at the heart of the gospel?
- Read Philippians 3:4–9 as Paul’s personal account of the alien righteousness. List the specific credentials Paul names in verses 5–6 and evaluate them honestly: by any ordinary human religious standard, are these impressive? Do they represent genuine religious achievement? Then read verses 7–9 and note the specific verbs Paul uses to describe his re-evaluation of those credentials (counted as loss, count all things as loss, count them as rubbish). Why does Paul use such extreme language for the comparison, why not “not as good” or “insufficient” rather than “rubbish”? What does the extreme language reveal about the comparison between self-generated religious performance and the alien righteousness of Christ? And what is the specific thing Paul wants to gain (v. 8) and the specific condition in which he wants to be found (v. 9)?
- Evaluate the specific challenges to imputation from the New Perspective on Paul by reading carefully the following: (a) Romans 4:4–5, Is the contrast here between Jewish ethnic boundary markers and Gentile

inclusion, or between merit-based and grace-based reception of the divine verdict? (b) Galatians 2:15–16, Does the context of Jewish-Gentile relations in Antioch limit the meaning of “works of the Law” to ethnic markers, or does Paul’s argument extend to the broader question of what grounds the sinner’s standing before God? (c) Philippians 3:9, Is the “righteousness which comes from God” a covenant status (NPP reading) or the alien righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer (Reformed reading)? How does the specific language of “not my own” support the Reformed reading?

- Practice the specific pastoral application of the alien righteousness in a role-play exercise with your study group. One person plays the role of the anxious believer who is troubled by her ongoing sin and inconsistent performance; the other plays the pastor who is applying the doctrine of imputed righteousness to her specific situation. The pastor’s task is not to reassure generally (“God is gracious”) but to direct specifically (“Your standing before God rests on this specific righteousness, credited to your account by this specific divine act, permanent for this specific reason”). Then reverse roles. After both exercises, discuss: what is the specific pastoral content that the doctrine of imputed righteousness contributes that no other pastoral approach can provide?

Key Texts: *Romans 4:1–25; 5:12–19; Philippians 3:4–9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:4–6, 11; Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:6; Hebrews 7:25; 10:14; Romans 3:25–26*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how did you understand the specific mechanism by which the righteousness of Christ reaches the believing sinner? Did you think primarily in terms of forgiveness (the removal of sin), in terms of moral transformation (the improvement of the inner person), or in terms of the specific legal crediting described by the doctrine of imputation? And how does the lesson's definition of imputation as "a transfer of legal standing, not of moral character" either confirm or reorient your prior understanding? What is the specific difference between having your sins forgiven (the removal of guilt) and having Christ's righteousness imputed to your account (the crediting of positive righteousness)?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 4:1–25. List every instance of the verb *logizomai* (credited, reckoned, counted) in the passage and note what is credited in each. In verses 4–5, what is the economic analogy Paul uses, and what contrast does it establish between the worker's wage and the believer's credited righteousness? In verses 9–12, what is the significance of the timing of the crediting (before or after circumcision) for Paul's argument? In verses 18–22, what is the specific character of Abraham's faith, and what does the imperfect tense of verse 20 ("grew strong in faith", *enduiromenos*) suggest about the progressive development of the faith that was credited? And in verses 23–25, how does Paul extend the Abraham case to the new covenant believer?
- Read Romans 5:12–19. What is the structure of the passage, how does Paul use the phrase "as... even so" (vv. 18–19) to establish the parallel between Adam and Christ? In verse 12, what is the scope of the effect of Adam's sin ("death spread to all men, because all sinned")? In verses 15–17, what is the contrast between the effect of Adam's transgression and the effect of Christ's gift? In verse 18, what two events produce what two results (one transgression → condemnation to all men; one act of righteousness → justification of life to all men)? And in verse 19, how does the language of "obedience" and being "made righteous" through the One's obedience support the doctrine of the active obedience and its imputation?
- Read Isaiah 53:1–12. Identify every phrase that describes the Servant bearing what belongs to others rather than to Himself. What is the specific language of verse 6 ("the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to...") and what does the causative force of the verb ("caused to fall") establish about the divine initiative in the second imputation? In verse 11, what is the connection between the Servant bearing iniquities and the many being justified, is it coincidental or causal? What is the specific description of the Servant in verse 11 ("the Righteous One") and why is it significant for the doctrine of imputation that the One who bears iniquity is Himself righteous?
- Read Philippians 3:4–9. List Paul's specific credentials in verses 5–6 and evaluate each: what does each represent in terms of Jewish religious life? Why does Paul describe these as things "in which he might have confidence in the flesh"? What specific terms does Paul use in verses 7–8 to describe his re-evaluation of these credentials (counted as..., count as..., count as...)? What is the specific Greek word translated "rubbish" (*skubalon*) in verse 8, and what does the choice of such a strong word suggest about the comparison? In verse 9, what is the precise formulation of the two kinds of righteousness, and what does the phrase "not having a righteousness of my own" establish about the exclusive character of the alien righteousness?

- Read Hebrews 10:10–14. In verse 10, what is the basis of the sanctification described (“by this will... through the offering of...”) and what is the temporal character of the offering (“one for all time”)? In verse 11, what is the contrast between the Levitical priests’ repeated sacrifices and their inability to take away sin, and in verses 12–14, what is the contrast with Christ’s one sacrifice? In verse 14, what does “for all time” (Greek: *eis to diēnekēs*) establish about the sufficiency of Christ’s offering? And how does the phrase “those who are sanctified” connect the permanent sufficiency of the offering to the permanent standing of those for whom it was made?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that imputation is “a transfer of legal standing, not of moral character” and that this distinction is essential to the doctrine. Evaluate the clarity and the sufficiency of this distinction. Does it adequately capture what the biblical texts say happens when sin is imputed to Christ and righteousness is imputed to the believer? Is there any sense in which the imputation produces a genuine change in the imputed party (not of moral character, but of something else)? And how does the legal character of the imputation guard against both the Roman Catholic error (treating justification as moral transformation) and the antinomian error (treating imputed righteousness as irrelevant to moral obligation)?
- The lesson presents three great imputations (Adam’s sin to the human race, the believer’s sin to Christ, Christ’s righteousness to the believer) and argues that they form a coherent architectural unity based on the principle of federal headship. Evaluate the coherence of this architecture. Is the federal headship principle the same in all three imputations, or are there significant differences? Specifically: is the mechanism by which Adam’s sin is imputed to his natural descendants the same as the mechanism by which Christ’s righteousness is imputed to those who are in Him by faith? If not, what are the differences, and do the differences undermine the architectural unity the lesson claims?
- The lesson presents the NPP’s challenge to imputation and the Reformed response. Evaluate the response. Is the Reformed critique of the NPP’s reduction of “works of the law” to ethnic boundary markers exegetically compelling, particularly in the context of Romans 4:4–5? Is the Reformed critique of N.T. Wright’s denial of imputation (that righteousness is not the kind of thing that can be transferred from one person to another) an adequate response to the argument, or does it miss Wright’s specific point? And what is the strongest NPP argument against imputation that the Reformed tradition must engage, and what is the strongest Reformed response to that argument?
- The lesson argues that the alien character of the imputed righteousness is both the doctrine’s defining feature (it is not the believer’s own) and its pastoral glory (precisely because it is not the believer’s own, it is permanent and independent of her fluctuating performance). Evaluate the pastoral claim. Is the alien character of the righteousness genuinely the ground of the assurance it is claimed to produce? Or does the alienness of the righteousness create a different pastoral problem, the difficulty of actually appropriating as one’s own a righteousness that is not one’s own? How does the doctrine of union with Christ (Lessons 8–9) address the potential alienation-of-the-alien-righteousness problem, how does the union with Christ make His alien righteousness genuinely and personally the believer’s own in experience?
- The lesson argues that the infusion/imputation distinction carries immediate and decisive practical consequences for assurance: infused righteousness cannot ground certain assurance (since it can be lost through mortal sin), while imputed righteousness grounds permanent assurance (since Christ’s righteousness neither grows nor diminishes). Evaluate this argument. Is it fair to the Roman Catholic position to say that it cannot ground assurance? Does Trent’s account of the role of the sacrament of penance in

restoring lost grace provide any basis for assurance within the Roman system? And how does the specific exegetical basis of the assurance claim (that the righteousness grounding the standing is Christ's and therefore permanent) make the Reformed account more than merely a preferable pastoral strategy?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson's pastoral section describes the specific comfort of imputed righteousness as: "The ground of my acceptance is not in me but in Him, and He does not change." Is this actually the specific ground of your assurance in the Christian life? Or is your assurance primarily grounded in your sense of your own sincerity, the consistency of your spiritual disciplines, the quality of your love for God, or some other subjective dimension of your Christian experience? If the latter: what would change in your experience of assurance if you consistently re-grounded it in the specific, objective, external, alien righteousness of Christ that is credited to your account through faith?
- The lesson identifies the pastoral application of the alien righteousness as the most powerful tool available for the care of "the anxious, the guilty, the failing, and the desperate." Think of a specific person in your pastoral or relational sphere who fits one or more of those categories. What is the specific pastoral word that the doctrine of imputed righteousness provides for that person's specific situation? Not "Try harder" (which misunderstands the ground of the standing) and not "God is forgiving" (which is true but too general), but the specific, imputation-grounded, forensically precise, personally directed declaration: "Your standing before God rests on this specific righteousness, credited to your account by this specific divine act, permanent for this specific reason." Write out that specific pastoral word for that specific person.
- The lesson describes the first imputation (Adam's sin to the human race) as "the bad news that makes the third imputation so staggeringly good." Reflect on whether you actually feel the first imputation's weight. Do you have a clear, honest, non-minimizing sense of what it means that you are born into the human race as Adam's natural descendant, with the legal liability of his transgression charged to your account before you have committed a single personal sin? And how does a clearer grasp of the first imputation (the depth of the problem) deepen the gratitude with which you receive the third (the completeness of the solution)? What specific aspects of the first imputation, the universality, the federalism, the irreversibility, do you most need to bring into clearer focus in order to receive the third with the fullest possible gratitude?
- The lesson treats the NPP as a theological and exegetical challenge that the church must engage with intellectual seriousness rather than defensive dismissal. In the context of your specific teaching and pastoral ministry, what is the most effective way to engage the NPP's challenges to imputation? What NPP arguments are most likely to be raised in the contexts in which you minister (seminary-educated laity, skeptical younger Christians, ecumenically-oriented fellow pastors)? And what specific exegetical and theological resources, from this lesson and from the broader Reformed tradition, would you draw on to engage those specific arguments in those specific contexts?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a meditative reading of Isaiah 53:1–12, the Old Testament's most extended and most profound account of the second imputation, the bearing of the many's iniquity by the Righteous One who will justify them. Read it slowly enough to let the specific, costly, substitutionary language press into your imagination and your theology simultaneously. "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed." These are not abstract theological propositions; they are the specific description of the bearing by which the second imputation was discharged, the specific cost at which the guilty verdict against you was charged to another's account and paid in full. Let the reading be a personal meditation on the cost of your justification.

From Isaiah 53, move to 2 Corinthians 5:21 as the New Testament's compressed restatement of the same reality: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Pray the verse in the first person, with the specific personal accountability that the doctrine of imputation demands: the sin He was made is my sin, named and specific and real. The righteousness I become is His righteousness, perfect and alien and permanently credited. Receive the exchange as the completed, irrevocable, sufficient transaction it is, and offer back to the God who made it the specific, named, theology-informed gratitude that such a transaction deserves.

Pray Philippians 3:7–9 as your own personal statement, identifying the specific items in your own "my own righteousness" category that you are most tempted to treat as contributing to your standing before God. These are not necessarily the most impressive religious achievements; they may be the most subtly relied-upon: the consistency of your prayer life, the quality of your theological understanding, the earnestness of your repentance, the genuineness of your love for God. Name them specifically, count them as loss alongside Paul, and then receive again, specifically, personally, with the full theological weight the doctrine provides, the alien righteousness that replaces every item of the self-generated list as the ground of your standing before God.

Pray for the church, for the whole body of Christ across every denomination and tradition, with the specific theological burden that this lesson has created. Pray for those parts of the church that are living under the pastoral burden of an infusion-based account of justification, where the certainty of one's standing before God is perpetually contingent on the quality of one's cooperation with grace. Ask the Spirit to do in those communities what He has always done: to bring the light of the alien righteousness, the specific, named, personally applied, permanently secure righteousness of Christ, into the hearts and lives of people who have been laboring under the weight of self-justification. And ask for the wisdom, the charity, and the theological precision to engage the ongoing ecumenical conversation about justification with both the full conviction of the Reformation's gospel and the full love for Christ's whole church that the same gospel requires.

Close with Romans 5:19 as the corporate declaration of those who have received the third imputation in all its glory: "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." Speak it as the statement of those who know themselves to stand in the second category: made righteous through the obedience of the One, wearing His alien righteousness as their permanent standing before the divine Judge, citizens of the kingdom of the second Adam, whose obedience has been charged to their account and whose righteousness has replaced the condemnation that Adam's disobedience would have left as their eternal inheritance. This is the gospel. This is the great exchange. This is

what imputation means and what it produces in the hearts and lives of those who receive it with faith and gratitude and wonder.

“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.”

Romans 5:19, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 4:1–25; 5:12–19; Philippians 3:4–9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:1–12; Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:6; Hebrews 7:25; 10:10–14

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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