

## **Module 310: William Tyndale**

*A Lively Description of Our Justification from An Answer Unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* by William Tyndale. Introduced by Stephen Tomkins. Modernized and edited for the web by Dan Graves.

**“The same Spirit produces in my heart, trust, and confidence to receive the mercy of God and his truth, that he will do as he has promised, which belief saves me.”**

**William Tyndale was an early Protestant teacher in the Catholic England of Henry VIII. His mission was to translate the Bible into English, and as this was illegal in his native land, moved to Germany in 1524. He is best known for this work, on which the Authorized Version in the following century was closely based. But he also wrote Protestant theology for his countrymen which was very influential.**

**He had a theological print-battle with Sir Thomas More, the Chancellor and persecutor of Protestants, who called him “the captain of English heretics.” The following passage is taken from one book in that debate, in which Tyndale replies to More’s attack on the Protestant understanding of justification by faith.**

**Tyndale was by no means the most original Protestant thinker of the Reformation; his ideas are almost wholly dependent upon Luther. But he was a lively and persuasive writer, and such tracts as this encouraged the first growth of the Protestant faith in England.**

Note therefore, that the way toward justification, or forgiveness of sin, is the law. God causes the law to be preached unto us and writes it in our hearts, and makes us feel by good reasons that the law is good, and ought to be kept, and that those who don’t keep it are worthy to be damned. And on the other side, I feel that there is no power in me to keep the law, and as a result it would logically follow that I should despair, if I were not helped quickly. But God, who has begun to cure me, and has laid corrosive in my sores, goes forth in his cure and sets his Son Jesus

before me, and all his passion and death, and says to me, "This is my dear Son, and he has prayed for you, and has suffered all this to me, and for his sake I will forgive you all that you have done against this good law; and I will heal your flesh and help you to keep this law, if you will learn. And I will bear with you and take in good part all that you do, till you can do better. And in the mean time, in spite of your weakness, I will still love you no less than I do the angels in heaven, so that you will be diligent to learn. And I will assist you, and defend you, and be your shield, and care for you."

And the heart here begins to relent and soften, and to receive health, and believes the mercy of God, and, in believing, is saved from the fear of everlasting death, and is made sure of everlasting life, and then, being overwhelmed with this kindness, begins to love again, and to submit herself unto the laws of God, to learn them and to walk in them.

Note now the order: first God gives me light to see the goodness and righteousness of the law, and my own sin and unrighteousness, out of which knowledge springs repentance. Now repentance does not teach me that the law is good and I am evil, but repentance springs out of a light which the Spirit of God has given me.

Then the same Spirit produces in my heart, trust, and confidence to receive the mercy of God and his truth, that he will do as he has promised, which belief saves me. And immediately out of that trust springs love toward the law of God again. And whatever a man accomplishes out of any other love than this, does not please God, nor is it godly love.

Now love does not receive his mercy, but faith only; out of which faith love springs, by which love I pour out again upon my neighbor that goodness that I have received of God by

faith. From this you see that I cannot be justified without repentance, and yet repentance does not justify me. And from this you see that I cannot have a faith to be justified and saved, unless love springs from it immediately, and yet love does not justify me before God. For my natural love to God again, does not make me see and feel the kindness of God in Christ, but faith through preaching. For we don't love God first and so compel him to love us again; but he loved us first, and gave his Son for us, that we might see love, and love in return, says St. John in his first epistle; which love of God toward us we receive by Christ through faith, says Paul.

And this example I have set out for them [my opponents] in various places, but their blind eyes have no power to see it, covetousness has so blinded them. And when we say, "Faith alone justifies us," that is to say, faith alone receives the mercy by which God justifies us and forgives us; we don't mean faith without repentance, and faith without love for the laws of God, and unto good works, as wicked hypocrites falsely accuse us.

For why then do we suffer, as we do, so much misery in our efforts to call the blind and ignorant unto repentance, and good works—those who now consent unto all evil, and study mischief all day long, despite all their preaching their justification by good works? Let Mr. More improve this with his sophistry, and set forth his own doctrine, that we may see the reason of it and walk in light.

In this you see what faith it is that justifies us: The faith in Christ's blood, of a repenting heart toward the law alone justifies us, and not just any kind of faith. You must understand this therefore, so that you may see to come out of More's blind maze: that there are many faiths and all faiths are not the same faith. There is a historical faith, without feeling in the heart, through which I may believe the whole history of the Bible, and yet not set my heart

earnestly to apply it.... And the faith through which a man does miracles is different than the faith of a repenting heart, to be saved through Christ's blood, and the one is no relation to the other, though Mr. More would have them seem so. Neither is the devil's faith, or the pope's faith (by which they believe there is a God, and that Christ exists, and all the story of the Bible, and yet stand with all wickedness and full consent to evil) related to the faith of those who hate evil, and repent of their misdeeds, and acknowledge their sins, and flee with full hope and trust of mercy unto the blood of Christ.

And when he says, "If faith assures our hearts that we are in favor with God, and our sins forgiven, and become good, before we do good works; as the tree must be good first, before it can bring forth good fruit, by Christ's doctrine, then we make good works but a shadow by which a man is never the better."

No, sir, we make good works fruits, by which our neighbor is the better, and by which God is honored, and our flesh tamed. And we make of them sure signs by which we know that our faith is no trick of imagination and dead opinion, made by chaining our understanding to the pope's traditions, but a living thing produced by the Holy Spirit.

And when he argues that "If those who have faith, have love for the law, and purpose to fulfill it, then faith alone does not justify," how will he prove that argument? He juggles this word "alone," and would make the people believe that we said a bare faith that is unaccompanied by repentance, love, and other virtues, yes, and without God's Spirit too, justifies us, so that we should not be inclined to do good.

But the scripture does not take "alone" in that sense, nor do we mean it that way, as Mr. More knows well enough. When a horse bears a saddle and a man is in it, we may well say, that the horse only and alone bears the saddle, and the man

does not help bear it. But he would make men understand that we meant, the horse bore the saddle empty, with no man in it; let him pay attention to this, to see his ignorance, which I wish was not coupled with malice.

...

When he brings up St. James, I have already answered him in the *Mammon* [Tyndale's *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*], and for that matter, Augustine answers him. And St. James explains himself. For he says in the first chapter, "God, who begat us of his own will with the word of truth," which word of truth is his promise of mercy and forgiveness in our Savior Jesus, by which he begat us, gave us life, and made us a new creature through a firm faith. And James goes on and rebukes the opinion and false faith of those who think it enough to be saved by believing that there is but one God, and that Christ was born of a virgin, and a thousand things that a man may believe, and yet not believe in Christ, to be saved from sin through him. And that James speaks [here] of another faith than at the beginning, appears by this example. "The devils have faith," says he; yes, but the devils have no faith that can repent of evil, or believe in Christ to be saved through him, or that can love God and work his will out of love. Now Paul speaks of a faith that is in Christ's blood by which to be saved, which works immediately through love of the benefit received. And James at the beginning speaks of a faith that endures trial, saying, "The trying of your faith works, or causes, patience." But the faith of the devils will stand no test, for they will not work God's will for they don't love him. And the faith of those who will not repent, or who think themselves without sin is of the same kind. For unless a man feels out of what danger Christ has delivered him, he cannot love the work. And therefore James is right to say, that no faith that will not work, can justify a man.

### **Discussion Starters:**

What order do faith, law and love come in, according to Tyndale? Why is the order important?

“Whatsoever a man works of any other love than this, it does not please God.” What love is this, and what others are there? What makes one kind of love pleasing to God and other not? Do you agree with Tyndale’s statement here?

How does Tyndale say love and repentance differ from faith, where justification is concerned? What is so special about faith?

How does Tyndale account for the fact that many people disagree with him about justification by faith? Do you think his explanation is reasonable, or right?

How is the doctrine of justification by faith misunderstood by his opponents, and how does he try to put them right?

What different kinds of faith are there, according to Tyndale? What makes all but one of them ineffective in justifying us?

Thomas More argues that the idea we are saved by faith alone, without good works, removes our motivation to do good works. Do you think he has a point? How does Tyndale answer him?

More also cites James 2:24 — “A person is a justified by works, not by faith alone.” How does Tyndale answer that tricky text? Do you think he succeeds?

“No faith that will not work, can justify a man.” How can we ensure that our faith works?

## **Bible Verses**

**James 2:14-26**

**Romans 3:21-31**

**Romans 6:15-18**

**Galatians 3:1-14**