

# Enemies of the Cross of Christ

by Martin Luther

*Human righteousness, even at its best, is idolatrous and opposed to the cross of Christ.*

**Scripture:** Luke 18:11, Romans 3:27, Romans 4:2, 1 Corinthians 15:42, Philippians 3:17, Philippians 4:8

**Topics:** "Righteousness By Faith", "Heavenly Citizenship"

## Description

Martin Luther preaches about the enemies of the cross of Christ and the righteousness of faith in Christ. He emphasizes the dangers of relying on human righteousness, which leads to pride, idolatry, and ultimately condemnation, contrasting it with the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ alone. Luther urges believers to focus on heavenly citizenship, awaiting the Savior who will transform their lowly bodies into glorious ones, by the power of Christ who is able to subject all things to Himself.

## Transcript

ENEMIES OF THE CROSS OF CHRIST & THE CHRISTIAN'S CITIZENSHIP IN HEAVEN.

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21: Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.

1. Paul immeasurably extols the Philippians for having made a good beginning in the holy Gospel and for having acquitted themselves commendably, like men in earnest, as manifest by their fruits of faith. The reason he shows this sincere and strong concern for them is his desire that they remain steadfast, not being led astray by false teachers among the roaming Jews. For at that time many Jews went about with the intent of perverting Paul's converts, pretending they taught something far better; while they drew the people away from Christ and back to the Law, for the purpose of establishing and extending their Jewish doctrines.

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Paul, contemplating with special interest and pleasure his Church of the Philippians, is moved by parental care to admonish them--lest they sometime be misled by such teachers--to hold steadily to what they have received, not seeking anything else and not imagining, like self-secure, besotted souls who allow themselves to be deceived by the devil--not imagining themselves perfect and with complete understanding in all things. In the verses just preceding our text he speaks of himself as having not yet attained to full knowledge.

#### PURITY OF DOCTRINE ENJOINED.

2. He particularly admonishes them to follow him and to mark those ministers who walk as he does; also to shape their belief and conduct by the pattern they have received from him. Not only of himself does he make an example, but introduces them who similarly walk, several of whom he mentions in this letter to the Philippians. The individuals whom he bids them observe and follow must have been persons of special eminence. But it is particularly the doctrine the apostle would have the Philippians pattern after. Therefore we should be chiefly concerned about preserving the purity of the office of the ministry and the genuineness of faith. When these are kept unsullied, doctrine will be right, and good works spontaneous. Later on, in chapter 4, verse 8, Paul admonishes, with reference to the same subject: "If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

3. Apparently Paul is a rash man to dare boast himself a pattern for all. Other ministers might well accuse him of desiring to exalt his individual self above others. "Think you," our wise ones would say to him, "that you alone have the Holy Spirit, or that no one else is as eager for honor as yourself?" Just so did Miriam and Aaron murmur against Moses, their own brother, saying: "Hath Jehovah indeed spoken only with Moses, hath he not spoken also with us?" (Num. 12:2). And it would seem as if Paul had too high an appreciation of his own character did he hold up his individual self as a pattern, intimating that no one was to be noted

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as worthy unless he walked as he did; though there might be some who apparently gave greater evidence of the Spirit, of holiness, humility and other graces, than himself, and yet walked not in his way.

4. But he does not say "I, Paul, alone." He says, "as ye have us for an example," that does not exclude other true apostles and teachers. He is admonishing his Church, as he everywhere does, to hold fast to the one true doctrine received from him in the beginning. They are not to be too confident of their own wisdom in the matter, or to presume they have independent authority; but rather to guard against pretenders to a superior doctrine, for so had some been misled.

#### RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE LAW IS VAIN.

5. In what respect he was a pattern or example to them, he has made plain; for instance, in the beginning of this chapter, in the third verse and following, he says: "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh: though I myself might have confidence even in the flesh: if any other man thinketh to have confidence in the flesh, I yet more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews." That is, he commands the highest honor a Jew can boast. "As touching the law," he goes on, "a Pharisee; as

touching zeal, persecuting the Church, as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless. Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for who I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith."

6. "Behold, this is the picture or pattern," he would say, "which we hold up for you to follow, that remembering how you obtained righteousness you may hold to it--a righteousness

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not of the Law." So far as the righteousness of the Law is concerned, Paul dares to say he regards it as filth and refuse (that proceeds from the human body); notwithstanding in its beautiful and blameless form it may be unsurpassed by anything in the world--such righteousness as was manifest in sincere Jews, and in Paul himself before his conversion; for these in their great holiness, regarded Christians as knaves and meriting damnation, and consequently took delight in being party to the persecution and murder of Christians.

7. "Yet," Paul would say, "I who am a Jew by birth have counted all this merit as simply loss that I might be found in 'the righteousness which is from God by faith.'" Only the righteousness of faith teaches us how to apprehend God--how to confidently console ourselves with his grace and await a future life, expecting to approach Christ in the resurrection. By "approaching" him we mean to meet him in death and at the judgment day without terror, not fleeing but gladly drawing near and hailing him with joy as one waited for with intense longing.

Now, the righteousness of the Law cannot effect such confidence of mind. Hence, for me it avails nothing before God; rather it is a detriment. What does avail is God's imputation of righteousness for Christ's sake, through faith. God declares to us in his Word that the believer in his Son shall, for Christ's own sake, have God's grace and eternal life. He who knows this is able to wait in hope for the last day, having no fear, no disposition to flee.

8. But is it not treating the righteousness of the Law with irreverence and contempt to regard it--and so teach as something not only useless and even obstructive, but injurious, loathsome and abominable? Who would have been able to make such a bold statement, and to censure a life so faultless and conforming so closely to the Law as Paul's, without being pronounced by all men a minion of the devil, had not the apostle made that estimation of it himself? And who is to have any more respect for the righteousness of the Law if we are to preach in that strain?

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9. Had Paul confined his denunciations to the righteousness of the world or of the heathen--the righteousness dependent upon reason and controlled by secular government, by laws and regulations--his teaching would not have seemed so irreverent. But he distinctly specifies the righteousness of God's Law, or the Ten Commandments, to which we owe an obligation far above what is due temporal powers, for

they teach how to live before God--something no heathenish court of justice, no temporal authority, knows anything about. Should we not condemn as a heretic this preacher who goes beyond his prerogative and dares find fault with the Law of God? who also warns us to shun such as observe it, such as trust in its righteousness, and exalts to sainthood "enemies of the cross of Christ whose God is the belly"--who serve the appetites instead of God?

10. Paul would say of himself: "I, too, was such a one. In my most perfect righteousness of the Law I was an enemy to and persecutor of the congregation, or Church, of Christ. It was the legitimate fruit of my righteousness that I though I must be party to the most horrible persecution of Christ and his Christians. Thus my holiness made me an actual enemy of Christ and a murderer of his followers. The disposition to injure is a natural result of the righteousness of the Law, as all Scripture history from Cain down testifies, and as we see even in the best of the world who have not come to the knowledge of Christ. Princes, civil authorities in proportion to their wisdom, their godliness and honor are the bitter and intolerant enemies of the Gospel.

11. Of the sensual papistical dolts at Rome, cardinals, bishops, priests and the like, it is not necessary to speak here. Their works are manifest. All honorable secular authorities must confess they are simply abandoned knaves, living shameless lives of open scandal, avarice, arrogance, unchastity, vanity, robbery and wickedness of every kind. Not only are they guilty of such living, but shamelessly endeavor to defend their conduct. They must, then, be regarded

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enemies of Christ and of all honesty and virtue. Hence every respectable man is justly antagonistic toward them. But, as before said, Paul is not here referring to this class, but to eminent, godly individuals, whose lives are beyond reproach. These very ones, when Christians are encountered, are hostile and heinous enough to be able to forget all their own faults in the sight of God, and to magnify to huge beams the motes we Christians have. In fact, they must style the Gospel heresy and satanic doctrine for the purpose of exalting their own holiness and zeal for God.

RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE LAW OPPOSES THE CROSS.

12. The thing seems incredible, and I would not have believed it myself, nor have understood Paul's words here, had I not witnessed it with my own eyes and experienced it. Were the apostle to repeat the charge today, who could conceive that our first, noblest, most respectable, godly and holy people, those whom we might expect, above all others, to accept the Word of God--that they, I say, should be enemies to the Christian doctrine? But the examples before us testify very plainly that the "enemies" the apostle refers to must be the individuals styled godly and worthy princes and noblemen, honorable citizens, learned, wise, intelligent individuals. Yet if these could devour at one bite the "Evangelicals," as they are now called, they would do it.

13. If you ask, Whence such a disposition? I answer, it naturally springs from human righteousness. For every individual who professes human righteousness, and knows nothing of Christ, holds that efficacious before God. He relies upon it and gratifies himself with it, presuming thereby to present a flattering appearance in God's sight and to render himself peculiarly acceptable to him. From being proud and arrogant toward God, he comes to reject them who are not righteous according to the Law; as illustrated in

the instance of the Pharisee (Lk. 18:11-12). But greater is his enmity and more bitter his hatred toward the preaching that dares to censure such righteousness and assert its futility to merit God's grace and eternal life.

14. I myself, and others with me, were dominated by

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such feelings when, under popery, we claimed to be holy and pious; we must confess the fact. If thirty years ago, when I was a devout, holy monk, holding mass every day and having no thought but that I was in the road leading directly to heaven--if then anyone had accused me--had preached to me the things of this text and pronounced our righteousness--which accorded not strictly with the Law of God, but conformed to human doctrine and was manifestly idolatrous--pronounced it without efficacy and said I was an enemy to the cross of Christ, serving my own sensual appetites, I would immediately have at least helped to find stones for putting to death such a Stephen, or to gather wood for the burning of this worst of heretics.

15. So human nature ever does. The world cannot conduct itself in any other way, when the declaration comes from heaven saying: "True you are a holy man, a great and learned jurist, a conscientious regent, a worthy prince, an honorable citizen, and so on, but with all your authority and your upright character you are going to hell; your every act is offensive and condemned in God's sight. If you would be saved you must become an altogether different man; your mind and heart must be changed." Let this be announced and the fire rises, the Rhine is all ablaze; for the self-righteous regard it an intolerable idea that lives so beautiful, lives devoted to praiseworthy callings, should be publicly censured and condemned by the objectionable preaching of a few insignificant individuals regarded as even pernicious, and according to Paul, as filthy refuse, actual obstacles to eternal life.

16. But you may say: "What? Do you forbid good works? Is it not right to lead an honorable, virtuous life? Do you not acknowledge the necessity of political laws, of civil governments? that upon obedience to them depends the maintenance of discipline, peace and honor? Indeed, do you not admit that God himself commands such institutions and wills their observance, punishing where they are disregarded? Much more would he have his own Law and the Ten Commandments honored, not rejected. How dare

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you then assert that such righteousness is misleading, and obstructive to eternal life? What consistence is there in teaching people to observe the things of the Law, to be righteous in that respect, and at the same time censuring those things as condemned before God? How can the works of the Law be good and precious, and yet repulsive and productive of evil?"

17. I answer, Paul well knows the world takes its stand on this point of righteousness by the Law, and hence would contradict him. But let him who will, consult the apostle as to why he makes such bold assertions here. For indeed the words of the text are not our words, but his. True, law and government are essential in temporal life, as Paul himself confesses, and God would have everyone honor and obey them. Indeed, he has ordained their observance among Turks and heathen. Yet it is a fact that these people,

even the best and most upright of them, they who lead honorable lives, are naturally in their hearts enemies to Christ, and devote their intellectual powers to exterminating God's people.

It must be universally admitted that the Turks, with all the restrictions and austerity of life imposed upon them by the Koran, a life more rigorous even than that of Christians--it must be admitted they belong to the devil. In other words, we adjudge them condemned with all their righteousness, but at the same time say they do right in punishing thieves, robbers, murderers, drunkards and other offenders; more, that Christians living within their jurisdiction are under obligation to pay tribute, and to serve them with person and property. Precisely the same thing is true respecting our princes who persecute the Gospel and are open enemies to Christ: we must be obedient to them, paying the tribute and rendering the service imposed; yet they, and all obedient followers willingly consenting to the persecution of the Gospel, must be looked upon as condemned before God.

18. Similarly does Paul speak concerning the righteousness of all the Jews and pious saints who are not Christians.

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His utterance is bold and of certain sound. He censures them and, weeping, deprecatingly refers to certain who direct the people to the righteousness of the law with the sole result of making "enemies to the cross of Christ."

19. Again, all the praise he has for them is to say that their "end is perdition"; they are condemned in spite of strenuous efforts all their lives to teach and enforce the righteousness of works. Here on earth it is truly a priceless distinction, an admirable and noble treasure, a praiseworthy honor, to have the name of being a godly and upright prince, ruler or citizen; a pious, virtuous wife or virgin. Who would not praise and exalt such virtue? It is indeed a rare and valuable thing in the world. But however beautiful, priceless and admirable an honor it is, Paul tells us, it is ultimately condemned and pertains not to heaven.

#### HUMAN RIGHTEOUSNESS IDOLATROUS.

20. The apostle makes his accusation yet more galling with the words "whose god is their belly." Thus you hear how human righteousness, even at its best, extends no higher than to service of the sensual appetites. Take all the wisdom, justice, jurisprudence, artifice, even the highest virtues the world affords, and what are they? They minister only to that god, carnal appetite. They can go no farther than the needs of this life, their whole purpose being to satisfy physical cravings. When the physical appetites of the worldly pass, they pass likewise, and the gifts and virtues we have mentioned can no longer serve them. All perish and go to destruction together--righteousness, virtues, laws and physical appetites which they have served as their god. For they are wholly ignorant of the true and eternal God; they know not how to serve him and receive eternal life. So then in its essential features such a life is merely idolatrous, having no greater object than the preservation of this perishable body and its enjoyment of peace and honor.

21. The fourth accusation is, "whose glory is in their shame." That is all their glory amounts to. Let wise philosophers, scrupulous heathen, keen jurists, receive the acme

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of praise and honor--it is yet but shame. True, their motto is "Love of Virtue"; they boast strong love of virtue and righteousness and may even think themselves sincere. But judged by final results, their boast is without foundation and ends in shame. For the utmost their righteousness can effect is the applause of the world--here on earth. Before God it avails nothing. It cannot touch the life to come. Ultimately it leaves its possessor a captive in shame. Death devours and hell clutches him.

22. You may again object, "If what you say it true, why observe temporal restrictions? Let us live in indulgent carelessness following our inclinations. Let pass the godly, honorable man; the virtuous, upright wife or virgin." I answer, By no means; that is not the design. You have heard it is God's command and will that there be temporal righteousness even among Turks and heathen. And later on (ch. 4, 8) Paul admonishes Christians to "think on these things," that is, on what is true. He says: "Whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." And continuing, in verse 9, he refers them to his own example, saying, "which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me."

#### FRUITS OF FAITH.

23. With the believers in Christ, them who have their righteousness in him, there should follow in this life on earth the fruits of upright living, in obedience to God. These fruits constitute the good works acceptable to God, which, being works of faith and wrought in Christ, will be rewarded in the life to come. But Paul has in mind the individuals who, rejecting faith in Christ, regard their self-directed lives, their humanly-wrought works, which conform to the Law, as righteousness availing in the sight of God. His reference is to them who so trust, though wholly ignorant of Christ, for whose sake, without any merit on our part, righteousness is imputed to us by God. The only condition

is we must believe in Christ; for he became man, died for our sins and rose from the dead, for the very purpose of liberating us from our sins and granting us his resurrection and life. Toward the heavenly life we should tend, in our life here walking in harmony with it; as Paul says in conclusion: "Our citizenship is in heaven [not earthly and not confined to this temporal life only]; whence also we wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."

If we have no knowledge, no consciousness, of this fact, it matters not how beautiful and praiseworthy our human, earthly righteousness may be, it is merely a hindrance and an injury. For flesh and blood cannot help relying on its own righteousness and arrogantly boasting in this strain: "We are better, more honorable, more godly, than others. We Jews are the people of God and keep his Law." Even Christians are not wholly free from the pernicious influence of human holiness. They ever seek to bring their own works and merits before God. I know for myself what pains are inflicted by this godless wisdom, this figment of righteousness, and what effort must be made before the serpent's head is bruised.

24. Now, this is the situation and there is no alternative: Either suffer hell or regard your human righteousness as loss and filth and endeavor not to be found relying on it at your last hour, in the presence

of God and judgment, but rather stand in the righteousness of Christ. In the garment of Christ's righteousness and reared in him you may, in the resurrection from sin and death, meet Christ and exclaim: "Hail, beloved Lord and Saviour, thou who hast redeemed me from the wretched body of sin and death, and fashioned me like unto thy holy, pure and glorious body!"

#### GOD'S PATIENCE WITH HUMAN RIGHTEOUSNESS.

25. Meantime, while we walk in the faith of his righteousness, he has patience with the poor, frail righteousness of this earthly life, which otherwise is but filth in his sight. He honors our human holiness by supporting and protecting it during the time we live on earth; just as we honor our corrupt, filthy bodies, adorning them with beautiful,

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costly garments and golden ornaments, and reposing them on cushions and beds of luxury. Though but stench and filth encased in flesh, they are honored above everything else on earth. For their sake are all things performed--the ordering and ruling, building and laboring; and God himself permits sun and moon to shine that they may receive light and heat, and everything to grow on earth for their benefit. What is the human body but a beautiful pyx containing that filthy, repulsive object of reverence, the digestive organs, which the body must always patiently carry about; yes, which we must even nourish and minister to, glad if only they perform their functions properly?

26. Similarly God deals with us. Because he would confer eternal life upon man, he patiently endures the filthy righteousness of this life wherein we must dwell until the last day, for the sake of his chosen people and until the number is complete. For so long as the final day is deferred, not all to have eternal life are yet born. When the time shall be fulfilled, the number completed, God will suddenly bring to an end the world with its governments, its jurists and authorities, its conditions of life; in short, he will utterly abolish earthly righteousness, destroying physical appetites and all else together. For every form of human holiness is condemned to destruction; yet for the sake of Christians, to whom eternal life is appointed, and for their sake only, all these must be perpetuated until the last saint is born and has attained life everlasting. Were there but one saint yet to be born, for the sake of that one the world must remain. For God regards not the world nor has he need for it, except for the sake of his Christians.

27. Therefore, when God enjoins upon us obedience to the emperor, and godly, honest lives on earth, it is no warrant that our subjection to temporal authority is to continue forever. Instead, God necessarily will minister to, adorn and honor this wretched body--vile body, as Paul here has it--with power and dominion. Yet the apostle terms human righteousness "filth," and says it is not necessary to God's kingdom; indeed, that it is condemned in the

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sight of God with all its honor and glory, and all the world must be ashamed of it in his presence, confessing themselves guilty. Paul in Romans 3:27 and 4:2 testifies to this fact when he tells how even the exalted, holy fathers--Abraham, and others--though having glory before the world because of their righteous works, could not make them serve to obtain honor before God. Much less will worldly honor avail

with God in the case of individuals who, being called honorable, pious, honest, virtuous--lords and princes, wives and husbands--boast of such righteousness.

28. Outwardly, then, though your righteousness may appear dazzlingly beautiful before the world, inwardly you are but filth. Illustrative of this point is the story told of a certain nun regarded holy above all others. She would not fellowship with anyone else, but sat alone in her cell in wrapt devotion, praying unceasingly. She boasted special revelations and visions and had no consciousness of anything but that beloved angels hovered about and adorned her with a golden crown. But some outside, ardently desiring to behold such sights, peeped through holes and crevices, and seeing her head but defiled with filth, laughed at her.

29. Notice, the reason Paul calls the righteousness of the Law filth and pollution, is his desire to denounce the honor and glory claimed for it in God's sight; notwithstanding he honors before the world the observance of the Law by styling it "righteousness." But if you ostentatiously boast of such righteousness to him, he pronounces his sentence of judgment making you an abomination, an enemy of the cross of Christ, and shaming your boasted honor and finally casting you into hell. Concerning the righteousness of faith, however, which in Christ avails before God, he says: "Our citizenship [conversation] is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body."

30. We who are baptized and believe in Christ, Paul's thought is, do not base our works and our hope on the righteousness

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of this temporal life. Through faith in Christ, we have a righteousness that holds in heaven. It abides in Christ alone; otherwise it would avail naught before God. And our whole concern is to be eternally in Christ; to have our earthly existence culminate in yonder life when Christ shall come and change this life into another, altogether new, pure, holy and like unto his own, with a life and a body having the nature of his.

THE CHRISTIAN A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN.

31. Therefore we are no longer citizens of earth. The baptized Christian is born a citizen of heaven through baptism. We should be mindful of this fact and walk here as if native there. We are to console ourselves with the fact that God thus accepts us and will transplant us there. Meantime we must await the coming again of the Saviour, who is to bring from heaven to us eternal righteousness, life, honor and glory.

32. We are baptized and made Christians, not to the end that we may have great honor, or renown of righteousness, or earthly dominion, power and possessions. Notwithstanding we do have these because they are requisite to our physical life, yet we are to regard them as mere filth, wherewith we minister to our bodily welfare as best we can for the benefit of posterity. We Christians, however, are expectantly to await the coming of the Saviour. His coming will not be to our injury or shame as it may be in the case of others. He comes for the salvation of our unprofitable, impotent bodies. Wretchedly worthless as they are in this life, they are much more unprofitable when lifeless and perishing in the earth.

33. But, however miserable, powerless and contemptible in life and death, Christ will at his coming render our bodies beautiful, pure, shining and worthy of honor, until they correspond to his own immortal, glorious body. Not like it as it hung on the cross or lay in the grave, bloodstained, livid and disgraced; but as it is now, glorified at the Father's right hand. We need not, then, be alarmed at the necessity of laying aside our earthly bodies; at being despoiled

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of the honor, righteousness and life adhering in them, to deliver it to the devouring power of death and the grave--something well calculated to terrify the enemies of Christ: but we may joyfully hope for and await his speedy coming to deliver us from this miserable, filthy pollution.

"According to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself."

THE GLORIFIED BODY OF THE CHRISTIAN.

34. Think of the honor and the glory Christ's righteousness brings even to our bodies! How can this poor, sinful, miserable, filthy, polluted body become like unto that of the Son of God, the Lord of Glory? What are you--your powers and abilities, or those of all men, to effect this glorious thing? But Paul says human righteousness, merit, glory and power have nothing to do with it. They are mere filth and pollution, and condemned as well. Another force intervenes, the power of Christ the Lord, who is able to bring all things into subjection to himself. Now, if he has power to subject all things unto himself at will, he is also able to glorify the pollution and filth of this wretched body, even when it has become worms and dust. In his hands it is as clay in the hands of the potter, and from the polluted lump of clay he can make a vessel that shall be a beautiful, new, pure, glorious body, surpassing the sun in its brilliance and beauty.

35. Through baptism Christ has taken us into his hands, actually that he may exchange our sinful, condemned, perishable, physical lives for the new, imperishable righteousness and life he prepares for body and soul. Such is the power and the agency exalting us to marvelous glory--something no earthly righteousness of the Law could accomplish. The righteousness of the Law leaves our bodies to shame and destruction; it reaches not beyond physical existence. But the righteousness of Christ inspires with power, making evident that we worship not the body but the true and living God, who does not leave us to shame and destruction, but delivers from sin, death and condemnation, and exalts this perishable body to eternal honor and glory.

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