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### Legalism and Righteousness By Faith Part 2

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# Legalism and “righteousness by faith”

## Part two of a two-part series

Roy Gane



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*Editor’s note: In part one that appeared in January 2008, the author affirmed that salvation is by grace through faith alone and not by works of the law. While keeping God’s law cannot save one who has already broken it, a sinner who is saved by faith in Christ will bear fruits of obedience in his or her life. Such obedience is not legalism. Legalism is misuse of the law. One type of misuse prevalent today treats God’s Old Testament moral law as legalistic and denies accountability to it on the grounds that it cannot be kept and need not be kept by “new covenant” Christians who believe in Christ’s legal work for them. The misuse employs at least five different arguments. In part one, the author considered the first two—domineering depravity and the impossibility of full obedience. The second part deals with the other three arguments.*

### 3. Justification

*Is justification by faith only a declaration that by faith a sinner stands just before God, or does it involve something more?*

The terms *justify* and *justification*, as used in the Bible, are legal metaphors. These and accounting metaphors, such as *impute* and *reckon*, describe a real gift from God that is free to all who accept it: Christ’s righteousness in place of our sinfulness (Rom. 3:21–24; 2 Cor. 5:21). Just because salvation transactions are described and illustrated through legal and accounting metaphors does not mean that the transactions themselves are unreal. Christ has really gained righteousness for us by bearing the

culpability for our sins as our Mediator and Priest and (unlike Old Testament priests, who only bore “culpability”; Lev. 10:17) dying for those sins as the ultimate sacrificial victim (Heb. 7:25–27; 9:6–10:22; cf. Isa. 53).

Fusion of the priestly and victim roles in Christ provides substitutionary atonement, which is the basis of our salvation. Because He has died in this way for us, the deadly wages of sin (Rom. 6:23) have reached their target in Him. So if by faith we identify with His death by accepting Him as our Substitute, we have died to the claims of sin that have enslaved our lives and condemned us to death, and as He rose again, we are raised to new lives (Rom. 6:1–11; cf. 2 Cor. 5:14, 15). Christ’s substitution for us is not at all unjust because He has a perfect right to grant us a gift, in this case the gift of voluntarily dying in our place.

Christ the sinless was treated *as if* He was a sinner that sinners may be treated *as if* they had never sinned. But the substitution is not “as if”: Christ is actually our Substitute on the basis of an accomplished historical event. Therefore, the results of His substitution are not “as if”: those who believe are actually treated as righteous. This is not sterile legal fiction divorced from reality; it is a real, dynamic gift of mercy and grace in real life. When God regards those who have faith as righteous (Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17) or, in other words, reckons their faith as righteousness belonging to them (Gen. 15:6), His declaration is so because His creative Word has made it so on the basis of Christ’s substitution for us.

When God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5), it is not because He is an unjust or deluded judge who declares sinners to be something they are not (Isa. 5:23; Prov. 17:15; contrast Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings. 8:32). Rather, the ungodly who believe (Rom. 4:5) in the sacrifice He has accomplished for all sinners are changed by His justifying, so that they are reconciled to Him and are no longer ungodly (cf. Rom. 5:1–11). Therefore, through Christ’s sacrifice, God is just when He justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

The righteousness that God gives on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice originates with Him alone, apart from any human works, but when the believers receive this gift, its benefits belong to them. This justification does not mean that the believers are instantly perfected and matured in character, but that they are forgiven, have turned around to journey with Christ, and possess assurance of salvation through having Christ (1 John 5:11–13).

Receiving Christ’s justification and forgiveness, with its spiritual death to sin and resurrection to

new life in harmony with God (Rom. 6:1–11; cf. 2 Kings 5:14), has a transforming effect on the human heart. The ruling power of sin is broken and the Christian serves another, divine Master. The transforming effect is partly due to overwhelming gratitude when we, who are so unworthy, are pardoned and accepted by God (see Ps. 32:1; Luke 19:5–10). But the transforming effect also flows from a new, dynamic connection to the spiritually healing presence of Christ (Gal. 2:20), who brings “the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).<sup>1</sup> Justification is received by faith, apart from works. But it inevitably affects works because the holy divine nature is love (1 John 4:8), and therefore, faith works through love (Gal. 5:6).<sup>2</sup>

Having spiritually died to sin and risen to newness of life in Christ, justified Christians, who keep on receiving justification as they need it day by day, become sanctified servants of righteousness because they are under grace rather than the condemnation of the law (verses 12–23). Sanctification is the experience of holiness that begins with belonging to God at conversion (1 Cor. 6:11), and this holiness grows in love as the character is transformed throughout one’s lifetime (1 Thess. 3:12, 13), always powered by God through His Spirit (Rom. 5:5; cf. 8:4–27).<sup>3</sup>

While justification and sanctification are theologically distinct, they are experientially interlinked from the time of conversion. Both have ongoing aspects, are essential aspects of salvation, and are gifts of God’s grace.<sup>4</sup> Like justification, sanctification is always, at every stage, dependent upon God. This growth in holiness and love does not mean that Christians need Christ less and less as they become better persons in and of themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars are recognizing that while Martin Luther emphasized the depth of human depravity and denied that human beings can do anything to

merit salvation,<sup>6</sup> making “sin great is inseparably connected with exalting and praising grace.”<sup>7</sup> Thus Luther taught that depravity is remedied by the powerful reality of the justification transaction: “When a human being is united with God, he or she becomes a participant not only in the human but also in the divine nature of Christ. . . .

“Faith, in turn, justifies precisely because it ‘takes hold of and possesses’ the present Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

“According to the Reformer, justifying faith does not merely signify a reception of the forgiveness imputed to a human being for the sake of the merit of Christ, which is the aspect emphasized by the Formula of Concord.

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Faith as real participation in Christ means participation in the institution of ‘blessing, righteousness, and life’ which has taken place in Christ. Christ Himself is life, righteousness, and blessing, because God is all this ‘by nature and in substance.’<sup>9</sup>

Ellen G. White agreed with Luther when she wrote: “A soul that depends on Christ with the simplicity that a child depends upon its mother is justified, for it becomes one with the Substitute, who was justification and redemption. Herein is love, that the heart and will are knit together in Christ Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

On the dynamic and inseparable experiential relationship between justifying faith and resultant works (which are

never part of the basis for justification), Luther wrote in his “Preface to the Epistle to the Romans”: “Faith . . . is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1 [:12, 13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit.

“Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. . . .

“And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to

God, who has shown him this grace.

“Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.”<sup>11</sup>

However, from the Formula of Concord on, subsequent revisionists lost Luther’s crucial cluster of interlinked concepts and settled for a weaker “gospel” in which justification does not lay an adequate foundation for a life of sanctification. John MacArthur reacts to

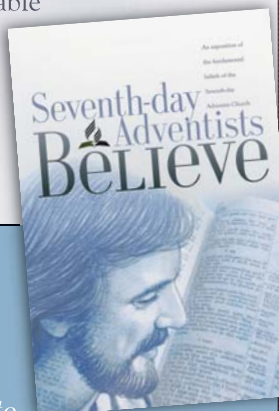
the result that flourishes today:

“Biblical justification must be earnestly defended on two fronts. Many today misuse the doctrine to support the view that obedience to God’s moral law is optional. This teaching attempts to reduce the whole of God’s saving work to the declarative act of justification. It downplays the spiritual rebirth of regeneration (2 Cor. 5:17); it discounts the moral effects of the believer’s new heart (Eze. 36:26–27); and it makes sanctification hinge on the believer’s own efforts. It tends to treat the forensic element of justification—God’s act of declaring the believing sinner righteous—as if this were the only essential aspect of salvation. The inevitable effect of this

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approach is to turn the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 4). Such a view is called *antinomianism*.<sup>12</sup>

## 4. Old Testament law

*Does justification by faith nullify the Ten Commandment law of the Old Testament and establish a new law of love?*

Mistakenly viewing God's Old Testament moral law (including, but not limited to, the Ten Commandments) as legalistic, many Christians have thrown off their need for accountability to this law because they think that adequately keeping it is impossible anyway.<sup>13</sup> Such an approach is attractive because it brings an exhilarating feeling of liberation. However, such a position results in cheap grace and practical antinomianism masquerading as "righteousness by faith" and winds up undermining a genuine life of faith. The consequences in real lives can be devastating, as many can testify.

While Paul clearly separates salvation by grace through faith from the invalid attempt to gain salvation by one's own works (see Rom. 3:20–28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8, 9), he by no means establishes a parallel dichotomy between faith working through love (Gal. 5:6) and an invalidated body of Old Testament moral and ethical law. Rather than voiding the OT law through faith, Paul establishes the law (Rom. 3:31) and finds it indispensable as a holy, just, and good standard of righteousness and revealer of unrighteousness (Rom. 7:7–13; with v. 7 citing the OT law of Exod. 20:17). Echoing Christ's affirmation that all of God's Old Testament revelation is based on the principles of love for God and other human beings (Matt. 22:37–40), Paul expresses the essential unity between OT moral law (as exemplified by some of the Ten Commandments, which he quotes) and love (Rom. 13:8–10).<sup>14</sup>

Many Christians today nurture the notion that God's Old Testament commandments are opposed to our assurance of salvation. But although these laws can never provide assurance for those who have broken them, they are an essential part of the process that leads to assurance of salvation because they reveal God's will and thereby point

out the sinner's need for forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice. Lack of knowledge regarding God's will does not enhance solid assurance. Imagine how you would feel if you did not have the divine law to show what God expects of you. Would your ignorance give you greater confidence? Hardly!

While we have assurance of salvation through having Christ (1 John 5:12), it is also true that Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15, NRSV). It is impossible to separate our relationship to Christ from obedience to Him because the only saving relationship with Him is to have Him as our Lord and Master. As our Lord, Jesus commands us to "love one another" (John 13:34, NRSV). While He renewed this command for New Testament Christians and (in the same verse) amplified its significance by His incomparable example of self-sacrificing love ("just as I have loved you"), this principle was at the heart of His Old Testament law (Lev. 19:18) and summarized many of the more specific laws (see Matt. 22:39, 40).<sup>15</sup>

Love as a summary by no means invalidates what was being summarized, namely, instructions that show how the principle of love is worked out in various life circumstances. It is true that many examples and applications of love in Old Testament laws are culturally conditioned to meet the needs of an ancient agricultural people, but through these examples we can see moral subprinciples of love that can help us too.<sup>16</sup> To disregard these subprinciples by considering them as obsolete is to willfully compromise Christ's overall principle of love and to arrogantly assume that we know how to fulfill divine love in various situations of life without further divine guidance. Can love provide an adequate moral compass if it is defined by modern or postmodern subjectivity rather than divinely revealed subprinciples?<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Judgment

*Finally, does a pre-Advent judgment negate salvation by grace through faith?*

God's judgment by no means neutralizes salvation by grace through faith.



The pre-Advent, demonstrative phase of the judgment process is not about who has sinned, for all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Rather, it is about those who have been and remain forgiven, “securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard” (Col. 1:23, NRSV). The judgment is investigative, but not in the sense that it is for God’s own information, for He already knows everything (Isa. 46:9, 10; Luke 16:15). Rather, records of works (e.g., Dan. 7:10) serve as evidence of human faith (or lack thereof) that can be investigated and witnessed by God’s created beings, who cannot read thoughts of faith.<sup>18</sup> For God’s faithful people, the judgment is for their benefit (v. 22) as an essential and concluding part of their salvation. It vindicates them as the ones who are truly loyal to God and the rightful heirs of His kingdom, against the claims of rebels who oppress them (see the larger context of Daniel 7). The judgment demonstrates that God is just when He justifies the right people: those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

A faithful Christian who has made a covenant with God by Christ’s sacrifice (cf. Ps. 50:3–6) and has a balanced, biblical view of sin, justification, and obedience will not have an unhealthy fear of the demonstrative phase of God’s judgment before Christ’s second advent, which involves consideration of works (Eccles. 12:14) as evidence for living faith that is “working through love” (Gal. 5:6, NRSV; cf. James 2:26).<sup>19</sup>

For those who think they must or can go on continually sinning until the second coming of Christ, salvation and accountability to God for victory over committing sins are mutually exclusive. So to retain assurance of salvation, they must deny the judgment and the time prophecies of Daniel 7–9 that support its pre-Advent context.<sup>20</sup> Because Ellen G. White strongly believed in the pre-Advent judgment as a pillar of distinctive Seventh-day Adventist teaching,<sup>21</sup> they must also deny the special nature of her ministry.<sup>22</sup>

The true gospel and the pre-Advent judgment are inextricably linked (cf. Rev. 14:6, 7, NRSV: “an eternal

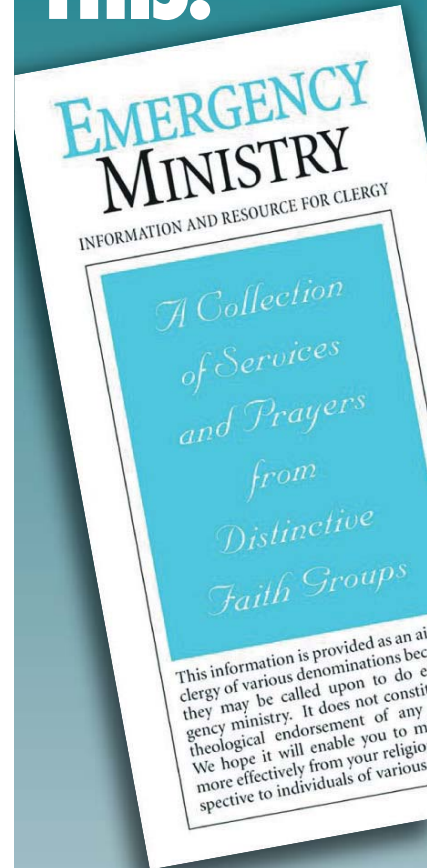
gospel . . . ‘the hour of his judgment has come’”).<sup>23</sup> Throwing out the judgment and accountability to God’s law is not a sign of a higher level of faith and gospel assurance; it is symptomatic of a perversion of the gospel. Paul spoke of “the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all” (Rom. 2:16, NRSV). Lest anyone think this doesn’t apply to born-again Christians, he affirmed that “we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Rom. 14:10, NRSV).<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

Salvation by grace through faith in Christ and His once-for-all sacrifice is the greatest gift we can ever receive. However, we have found that an unbalanced, unbiblical approach to “righteousness by faith” is based on a legalistic approach to God’s law and has a theological domino effect with far-reaching implications. By accepting all of the biblical evidence, we can enjoy a balanced understanding and solid assurance based on Christ, our Lord. **M**

- 1 See Carl Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). “The forgiveness of sins is the actualization of the divine presence in the living Christ in the midst of human beings who cannot on their own cross the bridge that leads to fellowship with God,” 83. “Regeneration and new obedience result from the justifying work of God,” 98. Cf. Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1955), 114. “God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness for sin, but reclaiming from sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart.”
- 2 “Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned. More than this, Christ changes the heart. He abides in your heart by faith. You are to maintain this connection with Christ by faith and the continual surrender of your will to Him; and so long as you do this, He will work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. . . . Then with Christ working in you, you will manifest the same spirit and do the same good works—works of righteousness, obedience.” Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1908), 62, 63.
- 3 On sanctification as both (1) a new relationship and status and (2) as moral growth in goodness, see Ivan Blazen, “Salvation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary

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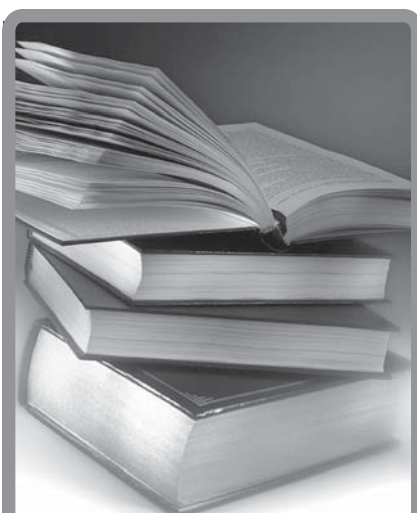
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- Reference Series 12, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), 295–298. On sanctification as growth in love, see George Knight, *I Used to be Perfect: An Ex-Legalist Looks at Law, Sin, and Grace* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1994), 46, 92.
- 4 Knight, *Perfect*, 37–51.
  - 5 As some Seventh-day Adventists have mistakenly taught, with damaging consequences, as pointed out by Colleen Tinker, “In Adam or in Christ: Where are you?” *Proclamation!* 7/4 (2006): 11.
  - 6 Robin Leaver, *Luther on Justification* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 44–52; Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 142–153.
  - 7 Althaus, *Martin Luther*, 142.
  - 8 Tuoma Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 8; cf. Leaver, *Luther Justification*, 62: “Christ dwells in believers through faith. For Luther, justification is not a naked imputation nor a simple declaration that the sinner is accounted righteous. Rather, a man is justified in, through, and because of a union with Christ that comes about by faith. Christ and the believer are united as Bridegroom and bride becoming ‘one flesh,’ or ‘one cake.’ The believer does not live by his own spirit but by the Spirit of Christ, who dwells within him. . . . Luther’s classic statement is to be found in his larger commentary on Galatians: ‘Living in me as He does, Christ abolishes the Law, damns sin, and kills death; for at His presence all these cannot help disappearing. Christ is eternal Peace, Comfort, Righteousness, and Life. . . . Abiding and living in me, Christ removes and absorbs all the evils that torment and afflict me. This attachment to Him causes me to be liberated from the terror of the Law and of sin, pulled out of my own skin, and transferred into Christ. . . . Since I am in Him, no evil can harm me’ ” (citing *Luther’s Works* American ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress and Concordia, 1957], XXVI, 167 “*Lectures on Galatians*,” 1535).
  - 9 Mannermaa, *Christ Faith*, 16, 17.
  - 10 Ellen G. White, *Daughters of God: Messages Especially for Women* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1998), 185.
  - 11 Leaver, *Luther Justification*, 55, citing *Luther’s Works*, XXXV, 371 “*Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*,” 1522; cf. Althaus, *Martin Luther*, 246–250.
  - 12 J. F. MacArthur Jr., “Long before Luther (Jesus and the Doctrine of Justification),” in *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by Which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls*, ed. Don Kistler; rev. ed. (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2003), 2, 3 (emphasis added).
  - 13 Dale Ratzlaff writes, “The old or first covenant which included the Ten Commandments was in force only until the death of Christ.” “The Continental Divide of Biblical Interpretation,” *Proclamation!* 6/3 [2005]: 10. “*Christians are released from the law as a guide for Christian service.*” Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis*, rev. ed. (Glendale, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 1995), 201. Ratzlaff argues that the standard of morality called for in the “new covenant” is higher than and supersedes

- that of the “old covenant” and that “the moral principles of the new covenant cover all the moral laws of the old,” 231; cf. 232–234. So “The freedom of the Gospel does not give Christians the liberty to sin,” 234. Christians live a moral life for Christ in harmony with the overarching principle of love. But because Christ fulfilled the moral requirements of the “old covenant” law for us, it is no longer binding on Christians, 233, 234. Regarding the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, Ratzlaff concludes that God does not require Christians to observe seventh-day Sabbath rest, which is too difficult anyway because of all the rules involved with it, 307–309.
- 14 Regarding the ongoing relevance of Old Testament law for Christians and compatibility between the law and grace, see Daniel Block’s clear and penetrating three-part series, “Preaching Old Testament Law to New Testament Christians,” *Ministry* 78, no. 5 (May 2006): 5–11; *Ministry* 78, no. 7 (July 2006): 12–16; *Ministry* 78, no. 9 (September 2006): 15–18.
  - 15 On Leviticus 19:18 at the heart of the Pentateuch, see Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 34, 35; cf. 343–348.
  - 16 On modern applicability of biblical laws, see *ibid.*, 305–310.
  - 17 On absolute moral compass versus postmodern subjectivity, see *ibid.*, 312–314.
  - 18 Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, MI: Diadem, 1999), 245; Roy Gane, *Who’s Afraid of the Judgment?* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2006), 105.
  - 19 For a balanced, biblical view of justification by faith in relation to the judgment, see Ivan Blazen, “Justification by Faith and Judgment According to Works,” Biblical Research Institute, <http://www.adventistbiblicalsearch.org/documents/justification%20by%20faith.htm>; cf. Ivan Blazen, “Salvation,” 290–292. “In the judgment God looks for justification with its fruit, not in the sense of ‘faith plus works saves,’ but of justification as the source of sanctified living,” 291.
  - 20 Dale Ratzlaff, *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-Day Adventists* (Glendale, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 1996), 167–182, 215, 216, 225, 226, 235–240.
  - 21 See, e.g., Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1950), 409–411, 417–433, 479–491. For this judgment as a basic Seventh-day Adventist teaching, see Fundamental Belief statement 23.
  - 22 Dale Ratzlaff, *The Cultic Doctrine*, e.g., 355.
  - 23 On the relationship between the gospel and the judgment, including answers to objections raised by Ratzlaff, see Gane, *Who’s Afraid of the Judgment?*, 103–114.
  - 24 John 3:18 says literally, “He who believes in Him is not judged” (NASB; cf. NJB). However, several English translations recognize that in this context “judged” refers to the condemnation part of the judgment process: “He who believes in Him is not condemned” (NKJV; cf. NRSV, NIV).

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