

Justified by Faith — Part One

Galatians 2:15–21 (Part One: vs. 15–16)

Righteousness is the exclusive domain of God.

Isaiah 45:24–25 — “Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him.

²⁵ In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.”

Paul says, in **Romans 3:10–11** —

None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

Well, that’s just Paul. And he’s always so sharp and triggering. Why don’t you give us some beautiful, artful poetry. We love the beauty of the Psalms. To say Paul is not as inspired as any other portion of the Scripture is a bad argument to make against the Apostle any day of the week, but here he’s just quoting from **Psalm 14** and **Psalm 53**.

Well, the Psalms are poetry. We can’t take poetry literally, because poetry.

Jeremiah 17:9 — **The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick...**

In other words, the human heart — the seat of our wants and affections — is incurably evil and sinful.

There is no righteousness — no moral integrity, no moral uprightness, no blamelessness — there is no righteousness apart from him. The Lord is holy and just; he alone is righteous and all others are guilty and condemned according to his righteousness. He, himself, is the measure of holiness, of moral purity, justice and righteousness.

Someone may say, ***Ok, God has his standard. But He’s not me; I don’t accept his standard. So that doesn’t matter to me.*** I suppose if you had the option to reject his authority, his standard, and his judgments that it would be completely irrelevant to you. **But you don’t have that option:**

Hebrews 9:27 — ... it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

Judgement by whom? I didn’t give anyone permission to judge me.

Psalm 96:13 [speaking of the Lord] — ... for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

He is the LORD. He does all he pleases without consent. And we each have an inescapable appointment with this righteous God who is the Judge, and will judge us. ***How will he judge us?*** “He

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will judge the world in righteousness.” In righteousness. We begin to see the magnitude of the problem. **He will judge us in righteousness, but righteousness is exclusively his domain.**

Maybe on that day you can just blend into the crowd, keep your head down and God won't call on you. **“I mean, you said Psalm 96 says he will judge the world; that's a big crowd. So when the World's Trial begins, I'm wearing sunglasses and conservative, neutral clothing so I don't stick out He'll never notice me. Consider:**

Hebrews 4:13 — And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

We are in trouble; all of us. God, alone, is righteous. Each one of us will stand before him to give an account, and the accounting that we each give will simply underscore the fact that God, alone, is righteous, and we are unrighteous as Adam's race, and I am unrighteous as a son of Adam. That is the consistent message of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The Lord has made us for himself, to worship and serve and delight in him. But as **Isaiah 53** says,

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...

He calls us to life in himself, to know the fullness of his love, and to love him in return, but every one of us turns away in unbelief and rebellion. Unbelief and rebellion are aspects of the broad category called sin. The righteous judgment that the Righteous Judge will enter against sinners — which is all of us — is condemnation and death. That's the penalty we have earned.

This might be a good time to ask, **“Have you got any good news? It's Palm Sunday; Isn't this supposed to be a celebratory Sunday or Jesus being recognized by some as King?**

Answer: Let me finish **Isaiah 53:6**, the first in the middle of the stunning prophesy about what Jesus would do on the cross that we look back on this Thursday and Friday. **Isaiah 53:6** —

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

“The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” That is a brilliant ray of darkness-piercing, sin-conquering grace that bursts out of the blackness of iniquity and unrighteousness that is ours by nature. My iniquity is laid on another. What does that mean? That means I no longer bear the guilt and righteous penalty my sin has earned, but it is placed on the Lamb of God who loves me and gave himself for me.

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The remainder of the sermon will focus on the Gospel-saturated passage in **Galatians 2:15–21** that will tell us how it is, exactly, that my sin, and your sin, can be borne away by another: Jesus Christ.

PRAY: Help us, Lord, to hear, and understand, and believe. Even in the reading of this paragraph, help us to understand the argument that your Apostle makes, the statements of truth, and to respond in faith to Christ. Overcome our darkness and unbelief and give the gifts of faith and repentance.

Recall that the Judaizers are trying to impose Jewish ceremonial laws on the Gentiles in Galatia who are coming to faith in Christ. They've tried to impose circumcision. Last week we saw that dietary laws were being used to divide God's people along the lines of ethnic divisions. The Galatians had **compromised** the Gospel — the truth of the Gospel as described in **v. 14** — adding ritual works back in as necessary for salvation. That compromise lead to **corruption** of orthodox theology — that we are saved through faith alone in Christ alone — and *that corruption* lead to the **creep** of legalism: Cut this off. Don't eat that. Don't mix with those people. So we jump into the final part of Paul's confrontation concerning these Gospel distortions.

Galatians 2:15–21 — ¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

I. Faith = Justification

Vs. 15 is a challenging verse to deal with. It has language requires us to look carefully at the context of this surrounding verses and the flow of Paul's argument to understand it.

v. 15 — We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.

What does that mean? Is he saying Jews are less sinful than Gentiles? Is he saying that Gentiles are so much worse sinners than Jews that it makes Jews appear righteous in comparison?

No. In the context of Chapter 2, the Judaizers, these false brothers, were returning to the Mosaic law as a means of righteousness, and saying that Gentiles were unrighteous because they were not following the law.

Imagine if Paul were giving this as a public address he might put air quotes around "Gentile sinners," because that's how the Jews viewed with contempt all those who did not follow the law.

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“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’” — those who don’t keep the law and are therefore sinners. He is pressing in to this distortion of the Gospel that the Judaizers are promoting which suggests that righteousness can be obtained — we can be justified before God — by works of the law: circumcision, dietary laws.

I labored long on the introduction so that we could get to this very place and say, “But wait... Righteousness is the exclusive domain of Holy God. Only God is righteous, therefore no work of the law can ever make me righteous. Whether a Jew, who wrongly believes that keeping ceremonial makes him righteous, or a Gentile (that’s us) who does not keep the ceremonial law ... we are both sinners and unrighteous. We are lost on our own. If we are to be counted as righteous before God, we are going to have to have the righteous of another, or we will found guilty and unrighteous.

So, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not “Gentile sinners” —

v. 16 — yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law

That is a bright, clear, straightforward, easy to understand statement.

Judaizers, you who are trying to impose works. A person is not justified, or made righteous, by works.

Before we go further, let’s make sure we all understand what justified means. The words that come into English as *justified* and *righteous* share the same Greek root. In other words, *justified* and *righteous* both carry the meaning that one is not guilty of any wrong doing. To be justified is to be declared “Not Guilty.” Both words are rooted in the moral perfection that belongs to God. To be declared not guilty is to not have to pay the penalty of sin. This is the essence of our salvation: our sin is not counted against us, but against Christ. We do not pay sin’s penalty of death. He does.

When we say a person is not justified by works of the law, we are saying one is not made guiltless through works — innocence is not achieved by anything one can do. *Righteousness* — rooted in the same word as *justified* — is God’s exclusive domain; no one but God is righteous. So the first part of **v. 16** is perfectly logical. As we labored in the introduction, there is no person that is righteous; no not one. Unrighteous people cannot produce righteousness no matter how hard they work. By works of the law no one will be justified. (v. 16c)

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Since, as the beginning of v. 16 tells us, we are not made righteous through works... since I have no inherent righteousness, but only unrighteousness, in order to be justified I must have a righteousness that comes from outside of myself. The rest of v. 16 tells us how that occurs.

v. 16 — ... a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

The instrumental cause of justification is faith in Christ.

What's that term you used, Pastor — instrumental cause? I don't just regularly throw that phrase around a lot, and I'm not sure I know what it means. What's instrumental cause?

I think you know more than you think you know. Let's think about instrumental causes.

A surgeon removes a tumor. The surgeon takes the patient to OR, cuts the skin and opens the body to see the tumor, then cuts out the tumor. Think of the root word *instrument*. What is the instrument she uses to remove the tumor? A scalpel! The surgeon's skilled hands use the instrument of a knife to open the body and cut out the cancer. The scalpel is the instrumental cause of the tumor's removal.

Artist : Sculpture — An artist conceives of a sculpture or statue in his mind. Ultimately what is in his mind is carved out of a piece of marble or stone. What is the instrumental cause of the finished sculpture? What is the instrument through which the stone is conformed to the image he had in his mind? A chisel! What is the instrumental cause of the sculpture? A hammer and chisel.

A family drives from Wichita to Mount Rushmore. They are here today, and tomorrow they are standing at Mount Rushmore. What is the instrumental of their trip to Mount Rushmore? Their automobile! It is the instrument by which they moved from here to there.

According to Scripture, what is the instrumental cause of justification? How is one justified?

v. 16 — A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

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Faith in Christ is the divine instrument through which we are declared righteous. Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin for us — a people deeply stained by sin — that we might become the spotless righteousness of God. We are declared righteous instrumentally through faith in Christ.

Justification is through faith in Jesus Christ alone. I say, “alone,” because how many other instrumental causes of justification are listed? None. They are not listed here. They are not listed there. There are no other causes of justification. In fact, let’s carefully note what is expressly denied as an instrumental cause of justification: Works of the law. Meritorious works of any kind are excluded.

- Is circumcision an instrumental cause of justification?
- What about dietary laws?
- In the Call to Worship in Hebrews 10, we are reminded that the priests in the Old Testament offered sacrifices, and burnt offerings, and sin offerings? We they made righteous by these things? No. Those sacrifices simply reminded them of sin, and sin’s penalty: death. Sacrifices are not a cause of justification.
- Is baptism an instrumental cause of justification?
- Is saying a prayer an instrumental cause of justification?

Is anything listed as an instrumental cause of justification — remember we are talking about the essence of salvation, being declared righteous and guiltless — is anything listed as the instrumental cause of justification other than faith in Christ? Is there any reason you have to claim you are a Christian other than faith in Jesus Christ? My eternal destiny, and your eternal destiny rides on this one thing: Are you trusting Christ? Do you believe Jesus, the Lamb of God, paid fully for your sin?

What are you trusting in to be justified before God? What are you believing is going to make you righteous before a holy God, who alone is righteous? Are you trying to work off you sin? You would never deny that you are a sinner... Hey, man nobody’s perfect. I’m sure not. But I guess because of all my sin I know I need to get cleaned up before I come to Christ. I will trust him... I’m just gonna get my act cleaned up before I can come. He won’t take me like this.

Can the word of God be any clearer than it is? You cannot ever be justified by working to clean up.

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Are you putting your confidence in baptism to wash away sin? Will baptism justify you before God? Is baptism an instrumental cause of justification? Believe in Christ. Believe his word that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone. Put your faith in Christ and be saved — be justified before God.

Is your hope in some recited prayer? “I’m sure I’m right with God. I prayed the prayer that my pastor a long time ago told me to pray. I’m sure he gave me the right words... he’s a pastor, right? and knows this stuff. Is a prayer listed as a cause of justification? Prayer will certainly be part of saving faith, but it is not the prayer itself that saves, it is faith in Jesus Christ that justifies.

As we enter holy week and reflect on the cross, I want to simply close by reading a passage of Scripture that points us to the **finished work of Christ** on the cross.

Believer, let this wash your soul and mind and stir your heart to unhindered, unrestrained praise of your Savior.

Unbeliever, ask for God’s help fix your eyes on Jesus and see him as your sin-bearing substitute.

Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Isaiah 53, the prophesy of the cross of Christ 700 years before Christ came to die.

¹ Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

² For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered

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that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The just shall live by faith. “Faith in what?” Not what, but whom... Faith in the One who carried away your sorrows, who took on himself the punishment for your sin. God made him who knew no sin to be sin, so that we could become righteousness — the righteousness of God, in whom alone righteousness abides.

PRAY

GOSPEL THREAD