

GALATIANS 2:15-16, 21

November 6, 2022

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If you were to go on a road trip across the country you will come across all sorts of natural features: from the Appalachians to the Mississippi River, to the Great Plains, to the Rockies, and on to the Pacific Ocean. Some of it you simply see and appreciate as you drive by, you don't stop for hours at every natural wonder, at every landmark.

But then there are some places, like the Grand Canyon, where you can't simply throw a glance as you drive by. You *must* stop, and look, and linger before such incredible beauty.

Typically, as we preach through books of the Bible, take anything from a paragraph to a whole chapter at a time, seeking to understand its context, its doctrine, and its implications for us.

But occasionally during our study we come to a verse, or two, or three, that are so *rich*, so *breathhtaking*, so *vital* to our spiritual life, that we need to stop and linger over just a few words.

Today, our road trip is going stop and marvel and worship at the Grand Canyon of Galatians—just three verses—Galatians 2:15-16 and 21.

I mentioned last week that Galatians 2:11-21 is an important transition passage in the book, moving from Paul's defense of his apostolic authority to his defense of his gospel theology. But not only are these verses an important hinge point in the book, they are also the theological center of the whole letter. It is effectively Paul's grand thesis statement. It is here that Paul introduces this great centerpiece of his theology: the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

And so, while I had initially planned to do all of verses 15–21 this week, as I studied, I came to the conclusion that what is written here is so crucial that we need to take two sermons to unpack these verses.

This is not only because of how rich the verses are taken by themselves, but also because of how important they are to understanding the rest of the book. What Paul says to Peter in these verses sets the stage for the rest of the letter. Everything that comes after this is an explanation and expansion of what we read here.

In verses 15-21, Paul is basically answering two of the questions we read this morning from the Heidelberg Catechism: "How are we righteous before God?" (verses 15, 16, and 21) and "Doesn't this teaching make people indifferent and wicked?" (verses 17-20).

So this morning, we'll look at verses 15, 16, and 21 and consider that topic of how people are to be right with God.

At this point in Galatians, Paul has now introduced the key issue that is at stake in the Galatian churches. The false gospel that Paul's opponents were peddling among the Galatians focused on the claim that justification before God came through the works of the Law *in addition to faith in Christ*.

In response, the main point that Paul makes unequivocally clear in these verses, and which defends and expounds through the rest of the letter is this: *No one will be justified by works, but anyone can be justified by grace through faith in Christ alone*.

And as we unpack that this morning, we will consider it in two parts: 1) *What does it mean to be justified?* 2) *By what means are we to be justified?*

I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE JUSTIFIED?

First, what does it mean to be justified? It would be unhelpful for us to agree on how people become justified, while all the while thinking that justification means vastly different things. So, before we can discuss how someone can be justified, we need to establish what *justification* means. Which means we need to do a little bit of theology.

This might seem a bit cumbersome. But the question of justification—what it is and how it happens—is so central, so crucial to biblical Christianity, that we need to be crystal clear on it. And I have a great burden for you in this. If I ask you “How can you be righteous before God?” I desperately want you to be able to answer without hesitation “Not by works, but by grace through faith in Christ alone.” And I want you to be able to say that not simply because you've memorized it, but because you *know* what it means and why it matters, and because you *believe* it, *love* it, and *rejoice* in it.

A. The Basic Meaning of Justification

We'll begin with a few general comments on what justification means. Paul doesn't go into detail here about the definition of justification. Remember, he's recalling a conversation he had with Peter, and he didn't need to define justification for Peter so much as remind Peter about the implications of it. But we can draw from Paul's other writings, especially the book of Romans, to help us construct our understanding of what Paul means when he uses this term *justification*.

1. *Justification is a divine verdict of being in the right.*

First, Justification is a *divine verdict* of being righteous, or “*in the right*.” It is the opposite of condemnation. Paul makes that clear in Romans 5:18 when he says “just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.”

Condemnation is the legal verdict of guilt. It is the declaration that someone is *unrighteous*, and therefore under God's wrath. Justification, on the other hand, is the legal verdict that someone is *righteous*, and therefore in God's favor. So, to be *justified* means to be "right with God."

2. *Justification is a declaration, not a transformation.*

Second, justification is a *declaration*, not a *transformation*. That is, to be justified is not to *become* righteous, but to be *declared* or *counted* as righteous. This might be most easily explained by considering justification as the opposite of condemnation.

To condemn someone is not to *make them guilty*. If someone is condemned it does not mean that they suddenly *become* law-breakers. Rather to condemn someone is to *pronounce, recognize, and treat* them as law-breakers.

So too with justification. To justify someone is not to *make them righteous*, as if they suddenly stop sinning and only live in perfect obedience to God. Rather, to justify someone is to *pronounce, recognize, and treat* them as righteous.

3. *Justification is a change in status, not nature.*

Third, and closely related, justification is a change in *status*, not *nature*. Justification is not a *transformation* that changes our nature—the substance of who we are—but a *declaration* that changes our *status*—our standing before God.

In this way it is sort of like a wedding (and in fact, marriage was Martin Luther's preferred metaphor to describe the reality of justification). When Michelle and I got married, the pastor who married us said "by the power vested in me as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ and by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, I now declare you to be husband and wife."

In that moment, there was an immediate change in status—before God, before our friends and family, and before the state. There wasn't anything about our own personal *natures* that changed—Michelle's DNA didn't suddenly come Biegel DNA. And there wasn't anything about our personal character that changed—I didn't suddenly become more patient or loving. The change was real, but what changed wasn't our *substance*, it was our *standing*. We went from being unmarried, to married.

It is the same thing with justification. Justification doesn't change our nature or our character, but it does create a new reality in which our standing before God goes immediately and irreversibly from "condemned" to "righteous."

B. The "Twofold Counting" of Justification

In the Bible the way that justification works is by what we could call a "twofold counting." To be justified means that our sins are *not counted* against us, and that we are *counted* as righteous.

1. *In justification, our sins are not counted against us.*

To be justified, first, means that *our sins are not counted against us*. In justification, God declares our sins to be forgiven. We read this earlier in Psalm 32, a text that Paul also quotes in Romans 4 while explaining justification: “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered; Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them” (Romans 4:7-8).

Justification means that our sin is forgiven, covered, and not counted against us. And that right there might actually be the clearest explanation of *forgiveness*—our sins are *not counted against us*. We are no longer liable to the punishment our sins deserve. It’s not strictly speaking God ignoring the wrong done or pretending like it didn’t happen, but a determination not to count that wrong against us, not to charge it to our account.

But it’s not as if God just snaps his fingers and makes our sin disappear. That would actually *be unjust—unrighteous*. We would never consider a human judge just if he or she cleared all the charges against someone who was clearly guilty. How much less so God.

So, it’s not that God simply forgets about our sins and pretends like it didn’t happen. Instead, he counts our sin to Christ’s account.

God can justly *not count our sins against us* because he counts them as being punished in the death of Christ. Christ’s death is counted for the death we rightly deserve to die for our sin. And because Christ’s payment of our sin-debt was perfect and entirely sufficient, we are released from it.

To be justified means that *our sins are not counted against us*.

And this is actually where many people stop, and that’s a mistake. You may have heard it expressed like this before: “Justification means ‘just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned.’” Now that’s clever, but it’s only half correct.

Justification doesn’t only mean not having our sins counted against us, but also *being counted to be righteous*. It’s not only God looking upon you just-as-if-you’d-never sinned, but also just-as-if-you’d-always-been-righteous.

2. *In justification, sinners are counted as righteous before God.*

This is the second part of this “twofold counting” of justification. God declares that your sins *are not counted against you* and *God declares that you, a sinner, are to be counted as righteous*.

Again, we see this in

Romans 4: “For us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead...God will credit [or “count”] righteousness.” To those who trust in the Lord Jesus, God *doesn’t count* their sins against them, and he *does count* righteousness to them.

But God doesn't count you as righteous because of anything righteous in you anymore than he counts your sins as being paid because of any payment *you* made.

God counts you as righteous because he counts Christ's own righteousness—his perfect obedience—as counting for yours. This twofold counting, or to use the ten-dollar theological term, "double imputation," is sometimes called "the Great Exchange." Our the penalty for our sin is counted to Christ, and the reward for his righteousness is counted to us.

So justification is not merely *pardon for past sins*. It takes the divine verdict over you at the Final Judgment in the future, brings it forward, and declares it in the present. It is like an awards show. The winner's name has already been written on a card. The outcome is sure, fixed, established. The verdict is in.

Justification is like taking a sneak peek inside the envelope before the public announcement. The difference is that this sneak peek is something that God does for us. He doesn't want us to wonder, waiting in suspense and fear about whether our name is written in the Book of Life. By telling us that those who trust in the Lord Jesus are justified by grace, he tells us now that these are those whose names are written in the Book of Life, and we can be *certain* that God's verdict announced in our justification will precisely the same verdict that is announced publicly in the Final Judgment. *No suspense, only joy.*

So that's justification: a gracious, divine verdict and declaration that totally and permanently changes our status before God from *unrighteous* to righteous and brings us into God's favor. And this is accomplished by God not counting our sins against us, but rather counting them as punished in Christ's death, and counting us as righteous before Him because Christ's righteousness is counted as belonging to us.

And that's incredibly good news for sinners who cannot save themselves, isn't it?

Now, if that's what justification means, how does one actually *come to be* justified? Because that's really what Paul is focused on here. That's the core issue that is at stake both in his confrontation with Peter and his combat with the false teachers in Galatia. *How can you be right with God? By what means are we to be justified?*

II. BY WHAT MEANS ARE WE TO BE JUSTIFIED?

Paul answers this question in verses 15-16. Let's read it again.

"We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."

In case we weren't clear on Paul's answer, he repeats himself three times. Three times he indicates what will never justify anyone: the works of the Law. And three times he indicates the means by which *anyone* can be justified: faith in Jesus Christ.

So, verse 16 succinctly summarizes Paul's theology of justification: *No one will be justified by works, but anyone can be justified by grace through faith in Christ alone.*

We'll look at this statement in two parts: first, *how no one will be justified*, and second, *how anyone can be justified*.

A. Justification is Not by Works

First, how *no one* will be justified. Paul is quite clear here in verse 16: *no one will ever be justified by works*. In the context here, by "works" Paul is thinking specifically of the things that the false teacher are demanding, things like circumcision the observance of food laws. But the principle extends beyond that to reliance upon any human performance or obedience, whether to God's Law, or any other moral standard or religious code. *No human works can justify*. Nothing that *we do* can render us acceptable to God.

Paul will go on to explain more about why the works of the Law cannot justify in Galatians 3–4. He doesn't explain it in detail here, he does give us at least two of the negative implications of continuing to believe that we can be justified by works (both of which we see in verse 21).

"I do not set aside the grace of God, for if *righteousness* [and that's actually the same Greek word as "justification"] could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

1. To seek justification by works is to set aside God's grace as unnecessary.

First, *to seek justification by works is to set aside God's grace as insufficient*. To seek to be right with God by something we do is to say that God's gracious gift of a status of righteousness isn't enough, or that it is only enough if we contribute some of our own righteousness.

It is to set aside the gift of "unmerited favor" for the sake of pursuing a "merited favor." It is like refusing a birthday gift, and trying to buy it yourself. In our pride we think that something is worth more if we've paid for it, if we've earned it. We think earning God's favor as a reward for our work is better than receiving God's favor as a gift.

The problem is, as we will learn later in Galatians, no one will ever be able to merit God's favor by their works. *To seek justification by works is to set aside God's grace as insufficient.*

2. To seek justification by works is to say that Christ's death was unnecessary.

Second, *to seek to be justified by works is to say that Christ's death was unnecessary as well*. If right standing with God could come through our works, then Christ's death meaningless and needless. And

if Christ's death was needless and yet God still demanded it, what does that say about the character of God?

You may recall the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, mere hours before his death, full of sorrow, asking the Father, "If it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." God the Son asks God the Father if there is any other way for this redeeming work to be accomplished. And the answer is, of course, no. And so, he humbles himself to the point of death on the cross, because it was necessary.

But if there really are other ways to be reconciled to God—if, as some argue, all roads, or at least many roads, lead to God—then Christ's sacrificial death was unnecessary and therefore without purpose.

As it stands, however, that is not what the Bible teaches. Rather, Christ had to die because it was the only way, as Paul says in Romans 3, that God could both *be just* and *justify sinners*. It was the only way that God could both be righteous himself, and declare sinners to be righteous before him.

It was necessary because there is nothing we do, no works of any kind, can bring us into God's forgiveness and favor. This truth is so beautifully put in the words of the hymn "Rock of Ages" by Augustus Toplady:

*Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone.
Thou must save, and thou alone.*

And that brings us to what the Bible says about how people can be justified before God. How is it that God saves? How is it that God justifies?

b. Justification is Only by Grace through Faith in Christ

Again, three times verse 16 we read it: justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ. *No one will be justified by works, but anyone can be justified by grace through faith in Christ alone.* We'll take each part of that statement in order:

1. Justification is by grace (2:21)

First, *justification is by grace*. You might say, "Now it doesn't actually say that we are justified by grace in verse 16." And you'd be right. But we do see it in verse 21: "I do not set aside *the grace of God*, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

That is, to attempt to gain righteousness or justification through works is to “set aside the grace of God.” It is to say to God, “thank you for offering me the free, unmerited gift of your favor, but I’m going to go ahead and pass on that and try to do it myself.”

Being justified through faith in Christ, on the other hand, is not to set aside, but to *embrace* the grace of God. It is a recognition that there is no righteousness within us for God to reward, nothing in us that merits his favor. This status of righteousness before God is entirely a *gift*.

To say that justification is by grace is to say that *the way we get God’s favor is not through the merit of our works, but through the gift of God’s unmerited favor.*

2. *Justification is by grace through faith (2:16)*

Justification is by grace, the free gift of God. But how does that come into our possession? Paul says here three times that it is through *faith*. *Justification is by grace through faith*. So, just as we are not justified through the merit of our works, but by God’s grace, so too we are not justified by *means of our works, but through faith in Christ*.

Sometimes we magnify faith to make it into something great, something that requires a great deal of effort. But faith itself is not a work, it’s actually quite the opposite. Faith is *trust* or *reliance*. It is anything but a work—it is the cessation of work and the entrusting of yourself to the work of another. Faith is merely that which tethers us to Christ, the conduit by which God’s grace is applied to us.

Faith is resting upon Christ, leaning the weight of your soul upon him. Or, as Michael Horton so wonderfully puts, saving faith is “*clinging to Christ*.”¹

3. *Justification is by grace through faith in Christ (2:16)*

That brings us to the next part. Justification is by grace, through faith, but not faith in general. We are not justified because we are “people of faith.” There are lots of people who describe themselves as having faith. The Bible says that even demons have a form of faith.

What ultimately matters is not so much the quality or quantity, the strength or sincerity, of your faith, but the *object* of your faith. That’s why Paul specifies that it is not merely faith as an act or a virtue that saves us, but *faith in Christ*, that saves us.

Justification is by grace, through faith *in Christ*.

The question is not whether my faith is strong enough or sincere enough, but whether my faith has an object that is worthy of trust. It doesn’t matter how strongly or sincerely I believe that I can fly, that

1. Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 269.

faith will not save me if I jump off the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. The object of my faith is not worthy of trust.

In the same way, it doesn't matter how strongly or sincerely I trust in airplane's ability to fly me from, say, Washington to Chicago, as did I last week. My faith in the plane may be weak, but if it's a trustworthy plane, and if I have faith enough to place myself inside the plane—it will get me to my destination.

My weak faith and anxiety may prevent me from enjoying the ride, but it will not prevent the plane from carrying me to the final destination. Because it is not the strength of my faith in the plane that takes me where I'm going, but the plane itself. My faith in the plane's ability is simply that which leads me to get into it, to rest myself in it, and to benefit from its work.

So, it is not our faith that saves us, *per se*, but Christ who saves us, through faith. Faith is merely that *which connects us to Christ*.

So, *faith is not merely the general belief that in the end all will be well*. Biblical faith is more specifically a trusting *in Christ*, instead of our works, to justify us. Faith admits our own bankruptcy and inability and entrusts our salvation wholly to Christ.

4. Justification is by grace through faith in Christ alone (2:16)

Finally, and briefly, we find here as well *that justification is by grace through faith in Christ alone*.

Paul could have said that people are not justified by works of the law *only*, but *also by faith in Christ*. He could have said that faith in Christ is part of our justification, and works are another part of it. He could have said that both contribute something to our standing before God. This is, of course, what the false teachers in Galatia seem to have been saying. We are justified by some mixture of faith and works.

But that's not at all what Paul says here. He makes it clear that not only is justification by faith, but it is decidedly *not by works* at all. Justification is not by works alone. And it is not by faith plus works. It is by faith, and not works. That is, it is by faith alone.

Or, again in the words of Augustus Toplady:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling*

It is only by coming empty handed, bringing no works or merits of our own, and clinging to Christ and his cross by faith, that our sins will not be counted against us, and we will be counted righteous before God.

III. IMPLICATIONS

Now as we close, I want to highlight for us a few implications of these precious truths we've been discussing.

We must take care that we don't confuse the *declared verdict* of justification with the *transforming work* of sanctification.

These are distinct truths that cannot be mixed or confused. They are always connected—those who are justified *will be* sanctified. Those who are declared righteous before God in status will indeed become increasingly righteous in practice. *But they are distinct in what they mean and when they happen.* And it's imperative that we remember that.

Because we have a natural tendency, even as Christians, to base our *justification* on our *sanctification*—to base our confidence that God will accept us on the grounds of something within us. But this is altogether backwards.

Richard Lovelace puts it like this:

“Only a fraction of the body of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives....Many...have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the...righteousness of Christ as the only ground of acceptance, relaxing in the quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.”²

So we must be careful that we do not base our confidence about our justification on how we *feel* about ourselves, or about our sanctification. You may say, “I don't feel justified. I don't feel forgiven. I don't feel righteous.” Very well, but God never said you're justified by your feelings. He says you're justified by faith, apart from works, and apart from feelings. And that's good news.

We must also remember that *not only* is there nothing we do to *merit*, earn, or deserve our right standing with God—it's a gift—*but also* that there is no work that we can do that *conveys* that gift to us. It's simply received by faith alone.

It's possible that you may come from or have grown up in a religious tradition that has told you that God will save you by his grace, but that the way that grace comes to you, the pipe through which it

2. Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Expanded ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 101.

flows to your soul, is something you do, like penance, or rituals, or joining the right church, or perhaps even something commanded by Christ, like prayer, or baptism, or communion.

We're going to take communion together in a few moments, in obedience to the command of Christ and in celebration of his finished work. But make no mistake, eating the bread and drinking the cup *does not* justify you. It does not make you right with God. It does not place you in a state of grace. You are fully, freely, and finally justified by grace through trusting in Christ alone, and not by anything else. So, when you come to receive the bread and the cup, *don't trust in them to save*—let them point you to Jesus, and renew your trust in him.

And finally, friends, if you are trying to be justified before God by what you do, you need hear again what Paul has said so clearly, "no one will be justified by works." It is impossible. It is an endless treadmill of effort that will only leave you exhausted, and will never secure your forgiveness, never bring you into God's favor. And left to yourself you will die in your sins.

So friends, as God's ambassador I plead with you now, trust in Jesus Christ alone. Rely on nothing else to save you, and instead look to Jesus, who saves all who come to him by faith. Because while *no one* will be justified by works, *anyone* can be justified by grace through faith in Christ. And if you can hear the sound of my voice, that includes you.

And here's the good news. You don't need to be able to repeat all of these biblical truths and technical terms in order to be justified. Because, thanks be to God, justification is not by theological knowledge anymore than it is by works. Friend, all that is necessary for your justification is for you to trust wholly in the Lord Jesus. If you belong to him, you will grow and learn more what justification means and how it fuels a life of love and joy and gratitude and holiness.

But in order *to be justified*, you don't need to know anything more than those words from "Rock of Ages," looking to Jesus and saying:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to the cross I cling.*