

Justified by Faith **Galatians 2:15-21**

We are going to continue in our series through Galatians and just as a brief review, Paul is writing to a church that has been troubled by false teachers with a false message. And the message they have brought doesn't touch on peripheral issues or unimportant topics, they are, according to Paul, destroying the very message of the gospel.

So, in the first two chapters, Paul has defended himself and the gospel message that he has preached, saying he didn't receive it from anyone other than the resurrected Jesus himself, and he even confronted Peter, one of the leading apostles in Jerusalem, for not living in step with the truth of the gospel.

Well, this morning we are going to finish chapter two and this passage is a great summary of the heart of the issue and will be worked out over the rest of the letter, and in it Paul seeks to clarify the issue by answering the ever important question, How can man be made right with God?

Galatians 2:15-18

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.

17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! **18** For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

Now, there is a lot going on there so let me try to walk through this.

First of all, in verse 15, it kind of sounds like Paul is being really rude here when he says that we are Jews and not like those Gentile "sinners." It almost sounds like he's being a hypocrite after just confronting Peter for treating Gentiles differently than other Jews. He's not being rude or hypocritical, he is speaking from the perspective of the opposition, almost being kind of sarcastic. "We know we aren't like them - however, we still know that no one is justified by the works of the law."

We will come back to this in a moment, but then he says in verse 17, "But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?..."

The idea here is that, in the eyes of the Judaizers, Paul has discarded the law of God. Those who are outside the law are considered sinners, they are literally “outlaws.” And since Paul has followed Christ he finds himself outside of the law too. And the objection for these teachers was, it seems that to be justified by faith is causing people to sin in the name of Christ. In effect, Christ is promoting sin because they no longer need to follow the law.

So, does Christ promote sin, then? Paul argues, No! Christ does not promote sin!

“Certainly not!” A phrase that he uses many times in his letter. He uses it ten times in Romans and few times in Galatians, and it carries with it the idea of “that is laughable! That is so ridiculous, I can’t even entertain the idea!”

In fact, Paul says, that to rebuild the law is to simply break it again. Understand that the law’s purpose was to show people that they are sinners, that they cannot live up to the holy requirements of God and that truth would help them realize their need for a Savior.

In other words, it would be silly to go back to the law, because all it does is show me I’m a sinner...and this is true not just of the Jewish law but of any religious striving for God’s love. If God is holy and that is His standard of heaven, any striving I do to reach that standard will always leave me depressed, because I know that I can’t make it.

Plus, because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, the law has been fulfilled and now we are under the New Covenant. So, to rebuild the law would be to walk backwards in redemptive history.

The weight of these verses is in realizing that Paul is not trying to convince anyone that God is against their *wickedness*, but God cannot and will not accept anyone’s *goodness*.

Now, if that is true, the question becomes, How can anyone be made right with God? This is the question behind the term “justified.” And even though the concept of justification is what Paul has been addressing since the beginning of the letter, this is the first time he uses that term in the letter, so it is important that we understand what that word means and why it is so important for the Galatians to understand and why it is so important for us to understand today.

WHAT IS “JUSTIFICATION”?

Reformed, Evangelical understanding of justification is the act of being declared righteous before God on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus, given to us when we believe.¹

Justification is important to grasp because confusion surrounding this term was not limited to the Galatian church. Many people, groups, and denominations throughout history, including still today, have embraced an unbiblical understanding of justification and, as Paul argues here, brings tragic results.

WRONG IDEAS IN HISTORY²

For example, historically a group called **Pelagians and modern liberal theologies** have believed and taught that man is basically good, and that God is not a judge or a moral lawgiver, but he is only a loving Father who wants his prodigal children to come home. So, justification is when basically good people, who are inspired by the life of Jesus, improve themselves morally.

Another example is what has been called **Liberation Theology**. This theology believes and teaches that salvation is mainly about the corporate structure of our world here and now, more than the individual, spiritual condition of man with God. Specifically, justification is when justice is realized in society through political action and confrontation. The ultimate outcome of justification is when a "utopia" is realized at the end of human history marked by love and social justice. Ultimately, justification is God's "deliverance of the oppressed from socio-political bondage."³

Another example in history is the **Remonstrants and many Arminians**, such as John Wesley & Charles Finney. They taught that justification is when God accepts believers as free from guilt and sin as well as the renovation of their character. In other words, we are justified by faith but that it also necessitates our sanctification, that we must also live holy, upright lives. And, if we willfully sin, we can lose our justification, therefore, assurance of salvation is impossible. Again, God will only accept us as righteous, if we actually are.

A final example is the teaching of **Roman Catholicism**. For the Catholic Church, justification is a process whereby we are made righteous through the sacraments, beginning with baptism, and the infusion of grace which lead someone to live a life of virtue. Therefore, justification can actually increase and decrease by the way we live,

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: What the Reformers Taught...and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 25-26.

² Much of this section comes from Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 347-362.

³ *Ibid.*, 356.

and if the process of becoming righteous is not completed in this life we go to purgatory to endure further purifying.

PROTESTANT REFORMATION AS REDISCOVERY OF JUSTIFICATION

And it was mainly in that specific context that the Protestant Reformation sprouted, with the debate over justification being a central tenet of the movement. Many of you are familiar with what came to be known as the five solas of the Reformation. It was a summary of the main points of contention the Reformers had with the Church. “Sola” is the Latin word for “alone” and the five points were that we are saved by Grace Alone, through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone, according to Scripture Alone, all to the Glory of God Alone. “Sola Fide” or “Faith Alone” was the call of the Reformers to recapture the biblical teaching that we are justified by faith alone.

And to be more specific, they argued justification is not a *process* in which God *makes* us righteous. Justification is an *event* in which God *declares* us righteous. And those are two vastly different statements.

To use a modern legal example, the argument was over whether our salvation was accomplished by us taking a plea deal in which we admit our guilt and then perform a certain amount of hours of religious community service to make up for what we did - OR, is salvation granted to us by the judge declaring us innocent as someone else takes our place?

And it is the latter that the Reformers passionately defended, it is what Paul passionately is arguing for here in Galatians, and it is the collective teaching of Scripture on the matter.

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THIS UNDERSTANDING OF JUSTIFICATION

The Bible teaches plainly:

1. No one is justified on the basis of their worth or works

Ps. 143:2

Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.

Ps. 14:3

They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

Ps. 130:3

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

Gal. 3:10

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

Again, no is justified on the basis of their worth or works. And that is true whether their works are performed in their own strength or with the aid of God's grace.

2. We are justified on the basis of Christ's merits

Bible teaches Jesus lived the perfect, virtuous life that we have not.

Heb. 7:26

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

So, the only hope we have is to be justified on the grounds of Christ's obedient life and his obedient death.

Rom. 5:9

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

Rom. 5:18-19

18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. **19** For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Again, the Bible teaches that we are justified, we are declared righteous, not because we have any righteousness, but through the means of our faith we receive Christ's righteousness.

Paul would describe this process most clearly in 2 Cor. 5:21...

2 Cor. 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

God declares us righteous, not because we have some righteousness in us worth beholding and accepting. But we are accepted on the basis of Christ's righteousness

that was given to us, or imputed to us, or credited to us. The Reformers said that we have an “alien righteousness,” a righteousness that comes from outside of us and not one that comes from within us.

DOES JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE + WORKS CHANGE MUCH?

It might be tempting to hear some of the other ideas of justification and think they sound pretty similar, they seem close, are we making too big of deal out of this. Is this really all that important. In other words, does adding works alongside grace as the grounds of our justification change much?

Look at what Paul says in verse 21 in our passage in Galatians...

Galatians 2:21

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Paul says, if we could be saved by the works of the law, then Jesus didn't need to die. This would prove Jesus to be a false Messiah and common criminal. How could any Christian suggest something like that? Well, when we attempt to build back up what Jesus tore down, when we try to justify ourselves by some other way than faith in the finished work of Christ, “we make a mockery of Jesus' death just as the soldiers who spat upon him, the thieves who hurled insults at him, and the rabble who shouted, “Come down from the cross!”⁴

Understand, the battle for justification is more than just semantics, more than just nuance, this is really, really important.

Luther said that justification is the article on which the church stands or falls and rightly observed that if we lose justification, we lose everything. Another Reformer called justification the soul and pillar of Christianity.⁵

So, to deny the biblical understanding of justification is to lose the gospel's soul and destroy the pillar on which it is entirely constructed.

JUSTIFIED AND TRANSFORMED

⁴ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 201.

⁵ Anthony Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification Asserted and Vindicated* (London: Thomas Underhill, 1651), 3.

Now, if justification by faith alone without any religious works is true, a common argument was, then people will just live a life of sin and self-indulgence. If there aren't any more rules to follow, if there isn't anything else to strive for, then people will not live for God, they will live for self.

It's like if you were in school and your teacher said, "I won't give any A's in this class because if I do, then you won't put any effort into your studies."

But look at what Paul says in verse 19...

Galatians 2:19

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

Paul's opponents argued the grace *cripples* us from pleasing God, Paul says it *frees* us to please God. And that is because not only does the gospel justify us it transforms us through our union with Christ.

Listen to how Paul describes this in verse 20...

Galatians 2:20

20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I want us to see in the time we have remaining, four truths about the life lived for God, all from verse 20...

The transformed life...

1. Begins with Death

"I have been crucified with Christ"

In our salvation we are united to Christ, so much so that we share in His death, burial and resurrection. And so, we have died with Him.

We have died to a few things...

-to sin: we have died to sin's penalty, sin's power, and sin's dominion.

-to self: *"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live"*

The world no longer revolves around me, I'm no longer obsessed with self: self-esteem, self-improvement, self-fulfillment, self-indulgence. Any life that I have is the life that Christ lives in me.

2. is Empowered by Christ

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

At salvation, and for the rest of your life, you are indwelt by Christ. He now lives in you and through you. This is important to understand, because striving after law is relying on your own righteousness, but walking in the freedom of grace is relying on Christ's righteousness, and it is completely yours!

God's pleasure in you is based on Christ's performance for you.

You might object to this..."Aren't I responsible for anything good? Can I not please Him?"

Yes, you are responsible to live holy lives, walk worthy of the gospel. BUT, remember, any good work that is in your life is a result of Christ's good work in you and through you.

3. Continues by Faith

"The life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God"

Not only are we justified by faith, but we live by faith.

"This is the key to Christian life: faith in Christ - not just the Christ who died on the cross for you, but the Christ who lives in you. We live by faith when we believe Christ every moment of every day. We believe Him to be our sustenance and our strength. We believe Him to be our love and joy and peace. We believe Him to be our satisfaction - more than money and houses and cars and stuff. We believe Christ to be our purity and our holiness and our power over sin. This is Christianity: believing in Christ to be everything you need for every moment you live. You live by faith in the Son of God."
(CCE)

This is pleasing to God.

4. is Motivated by the Sacrificial Love of Christ

"who loved me and gave himself for me."

This is what it means to be gospel driven. To be pushed along in life not for salvation but because of your salvation. Living without trying to repay Christ but rather to rejoice in Christ.

And it comes from realizing this incredibly humbling truth: Christ loves *you* and gave himself for *you*, specifically and individually.

Not the photoshopped you. Not the instagrammed version of you with some kind of religious filter you have put on to make yourself look better or more impressive. Just the plain, old, law breaking you.

How can realizing that not motivate you to live for Him?

Again, Paul's makes clear in this passage we are justified, we are made right with God, by faith alone in Christ alone, and the result of that is a transformed life that lives *out of* our justification and not *for* our justification.

Again, don't miss what this means for you and me. Because we are justified on the basis of Christ's merits and not our own:

1. **You can have real assurance.** Did Jesus really live a holy life? Did Jesus really die on the cross for sins? Did Jesus really raise from the grave over sin, Satan, and death? If yes, then our salvation is secure.
2. **You can be delivered from feelings of guilt.** Sometimes, feelings of guilt come from a healthy recognition of God's holiness and our sinfulness. Sometime, feelings of guilt come from unconfessed sin, so the conviction actually serves us well, calling us to repent. But sometimes, we suffer from guilt because we are too severe on ourselves. What I mean by that is, some Christians might have religious roots that were overly stern and even legalistic. Maybe you sat under teaching that gave little attention to the grace that is found in the gospel and overly emphasized your personal wretchedness. Maybe you have been influenced by a message that has placed the unrealistic burden of sinless perfection. If that is you, recognize that the Holy Judge has declared you "not guilty" and has clothed you with the righteousness of Christ. Even more than that, he has adopted you into his family for all eternity.
3. **And since that is true, because you are justified on the basis of Christ's merits and not your own, you can cast off the burden of perfection.** Again, your justification does not increase on your good days and it does not decrease on your bad days. Because you are accepted on the basis of Christ, you are not more justified when you are faithful to read your Bible and pray, when you are the perfect mom or dad, wife or husband, prove yourself to be patient, joyful, or loving. You are not less justified when you give into temptation and sin, when you are impatient, when you lack joy, or when you are unloving to those around you.

Because your standing before God is based on Christ, you are as secure before God the Father as God the Son is.

COMMUNION

And to commemorate this great exchange where Jesus takes our sin and gives us his righteousness, he gave the church the gift of communion. When we eat the bread we remember the flesh in which Jesus perfectly walked this earth and offered as a sacrifice on the cross. When we drink the juice we remember the blood that he shed as punishment for our sins. And by observing communion we are saying once again, we have nothing to offer God but what Jesus has done for us.

So, communion is for Christians only, those who have seen their need for forgiveness and for a Savior, have believed in Jesus and put their faith in him.

As usual let's have a moment of silent confession, and then I will pray for us, then you are welcome to take the elements anytime during our final two songs...

CONFESSION

PRAYER

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

John 8:36

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Free from your sin, free from proving yourself, free from the burden of perfection. By faith in the finished work of Christ we are clothed with his righteousness and declared innocent before God.

So, let's stand and worship this morning in response to this incomparable news...

VERSES

Galatians 2:15-18
Psalm 143:2
Psalm 14:3
Psalm 130:3
Galatians 3:10
Hebrews 7:26
Romans 5:9
Romans 5:18-19
2 Corinthians 5:21
Galatians 2:21
Galatians 2:19
Galatians 2:20
John 8:36

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, define the ever-important doctrine of justification.
2. What are some of the distortions of this doctrine in history and today?
3. What did the Reformers mean when they said we have an “alien righteousness?”
Why is that important?
4. Read Galatians 2:20. In what ways does this verse inform the Christian life?
5. What should the biblical understanding of justification produce in us today?