

WHAT IS "JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH"?

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Justification

First, we must acknowledge that justification is a common and significant way of speaking about salvation in the Bible, especially the New Testament:

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will **justify** the many, As He will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:11 NAS)

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house **justified** rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Luke 18:13,14 KJV)

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are **justified** from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38,39 KJV)

Therefore we conclude that a man is **justified** by faith without the deeds of the law. (Rom. 3:28 KJV)

Therefore being **justified** by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: (Romans 5:1 KJV)

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be **justified** by faith. (Gal. 3:24 KJV)

Knowing that a man is not **justified** by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be **justified** by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Gal 2:16 KJV)

But if, while we seek to be **justified** by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. (Gal. 2:17 KJV)

But that no man is **justified** by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. (Gal 3:11 KJV)

Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are **justified** by the law; ye are fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. (Gal 5:4,5 KJV)

The word justification is a legal term. The whole Bible has a legal “cast” to it. It speaks about salvation in legal language. God is Lawgiver, Judge and finally Justifier. The word justification is connected to the court of law as it is used in the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament the word “justify” (*sadaq*) means to *declare righteous* (not make righteous):

Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not **justify** the wicked. (Exodus 23:7 KJV)

If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they **justify** the righteous and condemn the wicked, (Deuteronomy 25:1 NAS)

Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, because he **justified** himself rather than God. (Job 32:2 KJV)

He that **justifieth** the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD. (Proverbs 17:15 KJV)

Then hear Thou in heaven and act and judge Thy servants, condemning the wicked by bringing his way on his own head and **justifying** the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness. (1 Kings 8:32 NAS; Cp. 2 Chronicles 6:23 NAS)

Who **justify** the wicked for a bribe, And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right! (Isaiah 5:23 NAS)

In the New Testament the word “justify” (*dikaio*)¹ refers to an objective judgment or declaration. Because it was used in the Roman forum, it is called a *forensic* word or a word of the law-courts. “It has to do with acquittal, vindication, acceptance before a judgment seat.”² It does not mean to *make* one righteous, spiritual, pure, regenerate or holy. Justification is clearly a *verdict*. It is a *pronouncement* of God. It is God’s *Word*!

We can best begin to understand this word by considering its common usage. Usually, it is employed in reference to a position before a judge or jury. It means, fundamentally, to win a favorable verdict or a sentence of pardon. Justification does not mean to *make* one right or better. It means to receive a verdict of pardon. It does not mean *improvement*, it means to *vindicate*³:

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The word pardon or vindicate could be substituted for the word justify in these verses. (As it is in some translations.) *It does not mean to perfect, or*

¹The verb δικαιουν, “to justify,” designates God’s act of justification: Gal. 3:8, Rom. 3:26, 30; 4:5; 8:30, 33. The verb δικαιουσθαι, “to be justified,” means acceptance extended by God in judgment: Rom. 2:13; 3:20, 24, 28; Gal. 2:16-17; 3:11, 24. The infinitive λογιζεσθαιδικαιοσυνην, “to reckon as righteous,” means acknowledging righteous deeds in the final judgment by God: Gal. 3:6; Rom. 4:3-5.

²Moule, H. C. G., *Justification By Faith*, (London, John F. Shaw and Co., n.d.), p. 7.

³Ibid., p. 6.

improve. In Luke 7:39 it says that “they justified God.” This does not mean they made God righteous. It means that they declared or announced that God was just. Its basic meaning is *to win a verdict at the bar of judgment*. This is seen in how it is contrasted with the idea of condemnation:

For by thy words thou shalt be **justified**, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned. (Matthew 12:37 KJV)

And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto **justification**. (Romans 5:16 KJV)

Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that **justifieth**. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. (Romans 8:33-34 KJV)

The truth that justification is a *declaration* and not a *process* is all the difference between Paul and the Judaizers. It is what divides Rome from the Reformation. It is the difference between the Gospel and “another Gospel” about which Paul warned the Galatians:

In simple terms the issue boils down to this: Are we justified by a *process* by which we become *actually just* or are we justified by a *declarative* act by which we are *counted* or *reckoned* to be just by God? Are we *declared* just or are we *made* just by justification?⁴

When God justifies he declares or reckons one righteous. On what basis does God count one as righteous? How can God declare one who is a sinner by nature, to be right in His sight? Can't God only pronounce as righteous those who are righteous in themselves? Certainly God could render a verdict of “righteous” upon those who are righteous in themselves. The reason He doesn't is because the Bible says, “None is righteous, no, not one;” (ESV). Then how can he declare a sinner righteous? Are you saying that God justifies the wicked!? I am not saying it;

⁴R. C. Sproul, “The Forensic Nature of Justification,” *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by Which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls*, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications), 1995, p. 25.

the Bible says it: “However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” (Romans 4:5 NIV).

How can He do that? It is based upon the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:10; 4:15; 7:26, 28). Jesus became the substitute for sinners on the Cross (1 Peter 2:24). He could do this because he was the God-Man (John 1:1-14). He was fully man, therefore he could represent all Humanity (Hebrews 2:17). He was God, therefore His work on the Cross was efficacious (Hebrews 7:24,25). He took our sins away by paying the penalty for sin – death (Hebrews 2:9). This death sentence was executed by the Father when Jesus took His wrath for us (Romans 5:9; Ephesians 2:3-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 5:9). But because Jesus was just, the Father would not let death overcome Him (Acts 2:24), so Jesus was “justified in the Spirit” (1 Timothy 3:16) or raised from the dead. As our eternal High Priest, Jesus is presented on our behalf as the righteousness of God (Hebrews 7:26-27; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 2 Peter 1:1). Jesus’ righteousness is imputed or counted to all who trust in Him (Romans 3:21, 22).

Justification is that act of God whereby sinners (both religious and irreligious), though deserving of God’s wrath, are offered full pardon, acceptance, adoption into God’s family, and power in the Holy Spirit to live a new life. We have this solely and simply on the grounds of the death of Jesus and obtain this through faith in Jesus Christ and not on grounds of worth or achievement (Rom 4:3, 9, 22-23; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23). Through God’s gospel, Paul (and all other gospelled people) experience a *double exchange*: our sin is placed on Christ and dealt with finally on the cross; Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer (2 Cor 5:21). In this the “righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last: (Rom 1:17).⁵

By

The little word “by” in “justified by faith” (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 3:24; et. al) is important, both for what it means and for what it does not mean.

⁵R. Paul Stevens, “The Full Blessing of Christ’ (Romans 15:29): A Sermon,” *Romans & the People of God*, eds., Sven K. Soderlund & N. T. Wright, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 297.

First, it does not mean “on account of.” This would make justification a reward for how much faith we have or how intense it is. We know that justification is “by grace” (Rom. 3:24; 4:16; 11:6; Eph. 2:5, 8). If one is made right with God based on the quality of one’s faith, then one is not justified as a gift. Faith is not a work. We are not rewarded for our faith:

The *saving power* of faith resides . . . not in itself, but in the Almighty Saviour on whom it rests. It is never on account of its formal nature as a psychic act that faith is conceived in Scripture to be saving, – as if this frame of mind or attitude of heart were itself a virtue with claims on God for reward. . . . The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith;⁶

“By” means that *through* faith we are justified. Faith is the *instrument* through which justification comes to us. It is an attitude of receiving. It is “submitting ourselves to the righteousness of God.” (Romans 10:3) By illustration, the hostage does not rescue himself, but simply receives the rescue. Also, the banks of the river do not cause the waters to flow, but merely receive the waters. So faith does not cause salvation, but is simply an attitude of receiving or trusting in the work of Christ for our salvation. Why is it *by* faith? The direct answer is give by Paul:

Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (Romans 4:16 KJV)

God chose faith because he alone is the author of salvation. He gives salvation, not because we deserve it. It is not because we bring something to our salvation. We bring nothing, and as Luther said, “Nothing is not a little something.” Therefore, salvation is by grace, that no one may boast.

⁶Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 730. Quoting from B. B. Warfield, “Faith,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 424-25.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.
(Ephesians 2: 8,9 KJV)

Since salvation is by God alone, it is by grace alone. Since it is by grace alone it can only come by faith alone. Otherwise we would contribute something to our salvation. Instead, we trust solely in Jesus alone.

Faith

Paul informed the Philippians, “unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;” (Philippians 1:29 KJV) He reminded them that their faith was a gift. Paul spoke this way to those at Ephesus about faith: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:” (Ephesians 2:8 KJV). The word “that” refers back to faith because in Greek the pronoun (in this case “that”) almost always refers back to the closest noun (faith). In Acts 16: 14 we are told that Lydia, like those from Philippi and Ephesus, was a person “whose heart the Lord opened” to the Gospel Paul preached. *The pattern in the New Testament is to speak of faith as a gift.*

One way to understand faith is to recognize what it is not. In Romans four Paul contrast faith with works. We are not justified by works. We are justified by faith. What is the difference? Works refers to any action or conduct performed to comply with God’s will or keeping His law. Faith is constantly and specifically contrasted with law-keeping.

Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20 KJV)

But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. (Galatians 3:11 KJV)

And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: (Philippians 3:9 KJV)

One highly recognized Romans scholar equates justification through law-keeping as implying justification by anything done in obedience. Both are equally rejected as the means to justification:

As in [Romans] 3:20, what is meant is not certain kinds of works, or works viewed in a certain light, but anything a person does in obedience to the law and, by extrapolation, anything a person does. This being the case, Luther’s famous addition of *sola* (“alone”) to *fide* (“faith”) . . . brings out the true sense intended by Paul.⁷

Theologian Dr. Robert Reymond agrees:

Whereas the latter [law-keeping] relies on the human effort of the law-keeper *looking to himself* to render satisfaction before God, the former [faith] repudiates and *looks entirely away from all human effort* to the cross work of Jesus Christ, who alone by his sacrificial death rendered satisfaction before God for men.⁸

Roman Catholics strongly reject the use of “faith alone” (*sola fide*), misinterpreting James 2:24⁹ and saying that a person is not justified by faith alone. Their argument is that Paul does not mean faith *without* works. They don’t mean works of keeping the Mosaic law. But, they do see good works of charity as essential to justification. Many Protestants follow this theology and in essence equate justification with sanctification. This is blending faith and works in justification.

Is this how Paul intended us to understand faith. How else is one to understand Paul’s language of faith if he doesn’t mean faith alone. What *does* he mean? Reymond traces the logic of Paul’s teaching as he carefully laid it out in Romans:

⁷Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistles to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 250.

⁸Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 732.

⁹I address this verse in my article “Was Abraham Saved?” at <http://www.inchistalone.org/WasAbrahamSaved.htm>

I would insist, as the above citations indicate, that when Paul declares (1) that a man is justified “by faith apart from [χωρίς, *choris*] works of the law,” (2) that the man “who works not but believes in him who justifies the ungodly” is the man whom God regards as righteous, (3) that a man is “not justified by works of the law but through faith,” and (4) that “by the Law no man is justified before God . . . because ‘The righteous by faith shall live,’ ” he is asserting the “aloneness” of faith as the “alone” instrument of justification as surely as if he had used the word “alone,” and he is asserting it even more vigorously than if he had simply employed *μονος*, *monos* (“alone”) each time.¹⁰

John Calvin also questions any other conclusion. He queries how it can be by anything but faith alone if everything is taken away from works:

How will a free gift agree with works? . . . Does not he who takes everything from works firmly enough ascribe everything to faith alone. What, I pray, do these expressions mean: “His righteousness has been manifested apart from the law”; and, “Man is freely justified”; and, “Apart from the works of the law”?¹¹

For a further look at the objections and answers to the issue of “faith alone” read my article, “What is the Problem with ‘Faith Alone?’”¹²

Next, we need to know what faith means in its common biblical usage. First, it means far more than knowledge or mental assent. It means to have trust, confidence or reliance in someone. “Reliance upon a thing or person supposed to be trustworthy, this is Faith.”¹³ To have faith means more than to have an opinion, belief or conviction. Some make the mistake of faulting those who hold to “faith

¹⁰Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 732.

¹¹Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), p. 734., quoting from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.xi.19.

¹² <http://www.inchristalone.org/ProbFaithAlone1.htm>

¹³Moule, *Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

alone.” They claim it is “easy believism” or mere “mental assent.” This was the argument Romanists used frequently against the Reformers. The issue is not one of “easy believism” or “uneasy legalism.” The issue is the clear meaning of faith as presented in Scripture.

The phrase “easy believism” betrays the lack of understanding of what is meant throughout Scripture by saving faith. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 when speaking of saving faith in Romans chapter four. “Abraham believed God and it was counted (imputed, reckoned) unto him for righteousness.” This faith is an attitude of trust in the character of God. Some say it this way, “Abraham BELIEVED God,” with the emphasis on “believed.” However, it should be said, “Abraham believed GOD,” with the emphasis on God. *Faith is trust in the character of God!*

To have faith in a commander does not mean merely to entertain a conviction, a belief, however positive, that he is skillful and competent . . . No, to have faith in a commander implies a view of him in which we either actually do, or are quite ready to, trust ourselves and our cause to his command.¹⁴

For example, when one gets on a plane one does not simply hold an opinion as to the competence of the pilot. One literally entrust one’s life into his hands. This is faith as trust (fiducia) or reliance. Faith must have something worthy of trust as its object or end. In the Gospel, the object of faith is Jesus Christ. By faith we place our souls in His hands. This is why we say it is by faith alone, because when we trust in Jesus, we don’t need to trust in anything else. He is sufficient. It is by faith alone because it is in Jesus alone.

The whole of one’s relationship to God is a commitment of trust. Peter says that we entrust our souls to God because we believe Him to be a faithful Creator.

Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator. (1 Peter 4:19 KJV)

¹⁴Ibid., p. 12, 13.

Trust is the essence of faith. Those who challenge and question faith alone as being insufficient, easy believism or lacking in any way, are really *questioning the sufficiency of Christ and the grace of God*. They do not truly understand the effectiveness of the Cross, nor do they fully value the immense grace of God as they should. *The reason that it is by faith alone is because Christ is enough and God’s grace is sufficient.* “Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; . . .” (Romans 4:16 KJV)

We must be careful of our definitions of faith. Some have alluded to Hebrews 11:1 as a definition of faith. It is not a definition, but, a description of what happens because of faith. *Faith is not a power or faculty in itself* which “moves” or “compels” God. It is an attitude of confidence in God Himself. It always points to the One in whom it is placed.

Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, they all treated the hoped-for and the unseen as solid and certain because they all relied upon the faithful Promiser . . . It was reliance on the Promiser. It was taking God at His Word.¹⁵

We must always remember that the quality or power of our faith is based on what or in whom we trust and not in our faith itself. If our faith is in the omnipotent, eternal, living God, who became the man, Jesus Christ, then our faith is most excellently and wonderfully placed. Reliance upon the Maker of Heaven and Earth is the most powerful faith. Not because of the believer, but because of Whom the believer believes. Faith is so great, effective, and powerful for us because it is in Jesus Christ. His is the Glory, the Kingdom, the Power forever. It is faith in the One worthy of all “power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing.” He is the “Blessed and Only Potentate the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen.” (1 Tim 6:15,16 KJV)

¹⁵Ibid., p. 15.

This is why we are justified by faith alone. It is God who is the author of salvation. If we add any mixture of our obedience or self-righteousness with our faith, we take glory from God. The beauty of faith alone is that it makes Jesus Christ supreme - Savior alone - in the work of salvation.

Does Faith + Obedience = Justification?

Some may claim that we honor God through obedience as part of our salvation. The simplest answer to this is found in Romans. Paul received a new understanding of obedience that the Gospel teaches or makes possible. In Romans 1:5 Paul speaks of “the obedience of faith.” While some have attempted to say that Paul meant that true faith is obedience, THIS IS THE VERY OPPOSITE OF WHAT HE MEANT. Paul claims that TRUE OBEDIENCE is FAITH! We do not show true faith by obeying something, we show true obedience by rejecting our own actions and responses and trusting Christ for everything.

This is a radical transformation of the meaning of obedience for a one time Pharisee. Still, we can see that this is consistent with the claim for justification by faith. We can also marvel at the beauty of it. Throughout Romans and his other epistles, Paul declares and constantly argues for faith as the basis for salvation. The obedience of faith is that, by believing, we have reached or shown the highest form of obedience possible. By faith in God we have truly obeyed Him because we totally trust in Him to be God. We trust in God’s means of saving us - Jesus Christ alone! By faith in Jesus Christ we truly obey God’s call to, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. (Isaiah 45:22)

Some will say that obedience is obeying enabled by the “grace of God.” They may say that we are justified by grace in that “grace” or the “Holy Ghost” enables us to act righteously. They then conclude we are justified by the righteousness which God enables us to produce in our own lives. I must constantly remind us that this is exactly the Romanists argument against the Reformers and Protestants. The serious flaw in this interpretation is that our righteousness is never complete or perfect. This is what Paul is explaining in Romans chapter seven. The believer is

never righteous or holy enough in this life to merit God’s verdict or pronouncement of righteous.

It is true that righteousness is produced in cooperation with grace or the Spirit. But it is not SAVING RIGHTEOUSNESS. Only Jesus Christ’s righteousness is sufficient to save us! Our righteousness by the Spirit is a RESULT of salvation, not FOR our salvation. Justification is faith in Jesus’ obedience FOR us. It is not faith in Jesus’ obedience IN us. Also, it is HIS personal righteousness that justifies, and not OUR personal righteousness created by his help.

Neither is the baptism of the Holy Ghost a baptism of justifying righteousness. The Spirit is given to the one who *is* justified by faith. In Acts Peter explained to the counsel of elders that God had given the Holy Ghost to Cornelius’ household as a result of justifying faith.

And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. (Acts 15:8-11 KJV)

It is clear that, throughout the New Testament, God gave His Spirit to those who were justified by faith (Ephesians 1:13, 14). It was their faith in the work of Christ which made it possible for them to receive the GIFT of the Spirit. It is a “gift” because Jesus Christ earned it by His death, resurrection, and glorification. When He ascended He gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8-11). The gift of the Holy Ghost comes by Jesus’ work of justification (Galatians 3:2). All receive the Holy Spirit by believing in Jesus and not by seeking it directly (John 7:38.39). In all instances faith was first because it was the most important. Everything in the believer’s life is contingent and dependent on their justification by faith.

Does “Faith” Save Us or Does God?

It is good that we understand something else about faith. We cannot fall into Satan’s trap of making faith a “savior” or an idol. We must not trust in our faith!

If we emphasize the power of one person’s faith over another, we are in danger of making faith an idol. When we spend time being anxious over whether we trust enough or if we have enough faith to do this or that, we are in danger of trusting more in our ability to believe than in the power of Jesus Christ. To focus any attention on the power of one’s faith is to take away from the greatness and graciousness of Jesus Christ. When we truly believe we turn our eyes to Jesus and “faith forgets itself” in the presence of Him Who is Faithful.

Christ is the Rock. Our faith is not the Rock. Our feet (our faith) are standing on the Rock. We do not trust in our feet. We trust in the Rock on which our feet stand! If the Rock did not hold us, it would not matter how strong were our feet. Nevertheless, the weakest faith can find complete support from the Rock Christ Jesus!

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
my beauty are, my glorious dress;
‘Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
with joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in thy great day;
for who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am,
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.¹⁶

¹⁶Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf.