

“Justified by Faith”

January 9, 2011

Text: Galatians 2:15-19

Our subject today is “Justification by Faith.”

This is man’s greatest need in life, because his sin has made him the object of God’s disapproval/wrath.

The NT calls natural man “[a child] of wrath” because he lives his life in rebellion to God’s will, according to his own sinful lusts/desires, & in obedience to Satan, the “*prince of the power of the air*” (Eph 2:1-3).

Justification is the remedy for this enormous problem, because it means being made right with God—eliminating His disapproval towards us, and receiving His love/grace instead.

Justification relieves a person’s guilt due to his sin against God.

Until man becomes justified before God, he can have no peace in this world.

God is absolutely righteous, man is unrighteous, and that is the crux of the problem between them.

It is also the ultimate source of all man’s troubles—physical, sociological, psychological, spiritual, a/w/a every other dimension of human existence.

It all goes back to the central fact that there is something wrong between God/man, so that God’s judgment hangs over man’s head like Damocles’ sword.

Every man longs for justification—some consciously, others subconsciously (they know there's something wrong with their lives, but don't know what it is).

In many different ways, men seek peace from the insecurity that comes from lacking justification=>

Psychoanalysis, various forms of escapism, asceticism, humanitarianism; attention to religious duties; religious sacrifices to appease gods (among primitive peoples); the invocation of angels/saints; purchase of indulgences; social-action/political-involvement; etc./etc./etc... all these being attempts to compensate for one's intuitive sense of need to be made right with his Creator.

One of the most common means of seeking justification and peace with God is obedience to law.

Whether it's God's Law or human law doesn't matter, as long as it gives a sense of confidence that one is trying to get along with the cosmic powers that be; As long as it produces the security of a clear conscience, because one is doing his part to be at peace with God.

This is the essence of all human religion, and it's the instinctive choice of ordinary man.

It's popular because it's flattering, telling man that, with a little effort, he can make the grade, & save himself.

But it's a delusion, because no man has ever kept the only Law that really matters in terms of justification before God=> God's own Law—the Mosaic Law of the OT.

Its standards are so high, they're inhuman—beyond our human abilities.

If you don't believe it, try keeping the Law for a week.

Make it your New Year's resolution to not covet at all (which means no watching TV advertisements).

Also no lying/stealing/adultery/murder.

No dishonoring parents, missing church, taking the Lord's name in vain, or worshiping idols.

And just when you think you've kept the Law, remember that God's real test/concern is the heart.

So Jesus said that hating someone is murder, and lusting after someone is adultery.

As we have seen in *Galatians*, Paul was dealing with some Judaizers who were teaching that justification before God is found in obeying God's Law, including its ceremonial commands.

Paul has confronted Peter for allowing these Judaizers to intimidate him into observing the ceremonial Law, as if that were a necessity for justification/salvation.

Peter knew good/well that faith in Jesus X is God's only prerequisite for justification.

Man is saved/justified by God's grace, plus nothing.

The addition of righteous deeds to supplement grace, nullifies grace and destroys the gospel.

And yet, human pride desperately wants to have a hand in accomplishing its own salvation, so it instinctively adds good human deeds, rather than trusting in God's grace alone.

Believing that God (whom we have never seen) is so gracious that He would justify us, without our doing anything at all to earn our justification, is difficult for anyone to believe. Esp. knowing one's whole eternal destiny depends on it.

In Gal 2:15-19, we see that it was especially difficult for Jews to switch from trusting the Law to trusting God's grace.

Paul documents this difficult journey in 4 steps, using the pronoun "we" to include himself, as a Jewish convert...

*** Step 1—We once trusted the Law to save us.**

Paul a/w/a Peter and all the other Jewish Xns at Antioch had been born—and grew up—as Jews.

They had lived their lives by the Mosaic Law, so they knew exactly what it could/could-not do for them spiritually.

[Galatians 2:15]=> "We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles;"

They were all "Jews by nature"—not Gentiles, and not even Gentile proselytes to Judaism.

They had grown up with all the advantages of Jewishness, the main advantage being God's revealed will in His Law.

They had spent their whole lives thinking that, if they proved to God that they were serious/sincere about their Judaism, by obeying His commands and performing all the ceremonial laws He'd given to their forefathers, He would accept them & declare them "acceptable."

They viewed Gentiles as "*sinnners*" because they didn't have the Mosaic Law as the Jews did to train them from childhood how to live their lives in a way that would please God.

If anyone knew the benefits of living according to God's Law as a way of life, it was these people who were "Jews by nature."

So step one in these Jews' journey to justification was living in obedience to the Law of God as conscientious Jews, believing that would save their souls.

*** Step 2—Then we trusted Jesus to save us.**

The "we" Paul mentioned in vs 15 included only those Jews who had professed to believe in Jesus & had become Xns.

I.e., Jews who had realized that all their obedience to the Law had never justified them, and never would.

They knew from firsthand experience that the only viable means of justification was faith in X.

Their own conversion to faith in Him testified to their realization that performing the righteous deeds of the

Law was worthless for salvation, because no flesh can ever be justified by the works of the Law.

Knowing the Law hadn't saved them, these Jews decided to change course and trust in Jesus instead, for their justification.

[Verse 16]=> “*nevertheless **knowing** [oida—perceiving or understanding] that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, **even we** [Jews] have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.*”

Paul says “*even we*”—not Gentile sinners—but we Jews who have enjoyed the moral benefits of the Law all our lives; “Even we” abandoned faith in the Law, for faith in Jesus.

And why did they change their beliefs like this?

So that they could be “*justified*”—made right with God.

At this point we need to explain/define “justification.”

It's a legal term that was used in courts of law.

It meant to be declared righteous in the eyes of the law.

It's the opposite of “condemnation”—which means to be declared guilty by the law.

Theologically, justification is God's declaring the sinner righteous, not because he is righteous, but because Jesus X has closed the books on his condemnation, by paying the penalty for his sin.

Justification is a gracious act of God, by which the sinner is declared right w/ God, on the basis of X's atoning work on the cross.

Paul says man is justified "*through faith in Christ Jesus,*" and he then adds "*we have believed in [lit. "into"] Christ.*"

Faith is the hand that reaches out to X for its justification.

It's not merely agreeing that a man named Jesus lived/died and was resurrected.

Rather, it's forming a personal/loving commitment-to/trust-in Him, who is alive from the dead.

It's "believing into X"—identifying with Him by faith, rejecting one's own sinfulness, trusting His merits rather than our own merits/abilities, for salvation.

The Jewish Xns in Antioch had trusted/obeyed the Law, but knew they hadn't been justified by it.

The Law had served as a spiritual mirror for them, reflecting their sinfulness, but doing nothing to correct/remove it.

It set up a standard so high, it was impossible for them to attain it, but it condemned them for failing to do so.

In Col 2:14, Paul describes the Law as=> "*a certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us;*"

If anything, the Law actually makes man's sin-problem worse.

In Rom 7:7, Paul wrote=> "*I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'YOU*

SHALL NOT COVET.’ / But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.”

The Law provokes sinners to sin, because its prohibitions incite their rebellious nature to resist its commands. Exercising their willfulness, men’s rebellious spirits sin against the Law all the more.

Does this mean that the Law is a bad thing?

No, Rom 7:12 says=> *“The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”*
In Rom 7:22, Paul says=> *“I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.”*

The Law is a good thing, but our sinfulness reacts against its authority, turning it into a deadly weapon by which man commits spiritual suicide.

If the Jews had learned anything from the Law, it was that they could never justify themselves by obedience to it.

Or, as Paul says it in verse 16=> *“By the works of the Law shall no flesh [ever] be justified.”*

So the 2nd step in the Xn Jews’ journey to justification was trusting Jesus to justify/save them, realizing the Law never could, and never would, do so.

*** Step 3--We found the transition from Law to faith in Jesus difficult.**

Some people make justification sound easy—just believe, say a certain little prayer, and you’ll be saved.

Physical-birth is traumatic for babies, so we should expect spiritual-rebirth to be just as traumatic, if not more so.

That's because we're turning loose of an old strategy for dealing with sin, and falling headlong into the arms of Someone we have never known before to save us from our sin.

In the process, we come under a weight of guilt/conviction for our sinfulness, such as we have never experienced.

That freefall into the unknown was so difficult for the Jews in our text that they were tempted to turn back to the Law.

[Verse 17]=> *“But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been **found** sinners [this word suggests surprise], is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!”*

Justification is a judicial process by which God declares a person no-longer guilty, but righteous.

It's not something you feel, any more than you feel a verdict being handed in some court on the opposite side of the world.

Regeneration, however, can involve powerful feelings—of guilt.

1st, our experience with the Law has shown us how far short of God's glory we fall, so we feel guilty.

2nd, Jn 16:8 says the H.S. convicts us of our sin, enabling us to see it in the light of God's perfect holiness.

It's a frightening and humbling discovery.

As a result, we mourn over our sin, but as Jesus said
in

Mt 5:4=> *“Blessed are those who **mourn**, for
they shall be comforted.”*

3rd, our mourning produces repentance (a form of self-
rejection), which goes beyond mere sorrow for sin, to
really grieving over it, and repudiating it in our lives.

2 Cor 7:10=> *“The sorrow that is according to the
will of God produces a **repentance** without
regret, leading to salvation.”*

**The Jews who had believed in Jesus might have expected to
receive immediate/painless relief/blessedness, for doing
so.**

But to their surprise, they became even more acutely aware of
their sinfulness.

They were no better than the Gentile sinners, whom they’d
always considered to be spiritually inferior to
themselves.

Their self-righteousness had been stripped away, exposing
their true sinfulness.

And now they felt more condemned than ever.

They were asking themselves, *“Is Christ then a minister of sin?”*

I.e., “I’ve decided to entrust my heart/soul to Jesus so I’ll
feel saved/justified, and now instead of feeling
sinless, I feel super-sinful.

“Moreover, I’ve disregarded the Law of God, and
I’m starting to feel guilty about that again too.
“Has following X led me into deeper depths of
sinfulness?”

This is the feeling you get just before the light of God’s
grace/forgiveness dawns in your heart.

The night is darkest just before the light of dawn
breaks through.

**In Lk 5:32, Jesus said=> “*I have not come to call the righteous
but sinners, to repentance.*”**

- * Until a man knows he’s truly a sinner, he doesn’t really sense his need for a Savior, nor his need to repent.
- * Until he’s like the tax-gatherer in Lk 18:13 crying, “*God, be merciful to me, the sinner,*” he’s like the Pharisee beside him who prayed=> “*I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer.*”
- * Until he becomes a prodigal son, the self-righteous sinner is like the prodigal son’s older brother, saying bitterly to his father, “*For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends*” (Lk 15:29).

When people are being convicted of their sin by the H.S., we do them a disservice by just giving them a quick little prayer to pray in order to become saved.

We need to tell them simply, “Seek the Lord, seek His face and His righteousness, seek His justification; respond to His Spirit w/ humble/contrite faith & a broken heart.

“He will comfort your soul in His good time.”

Was X a minister of sin to the Jew whom Paul was describing?

His answer is immediate/emphatic=> “*May it never be!*”

Such a blasphemous thought is abhorrent to the apostle.

Jesus is man’s Savior/Comforter, not a minister of sin to him.

The Jews were standing on the threshold of decision, and from man’s p.o.v., it could have gone either way.

They had turned loose of their old reliance on the Law for their righteousness, since it had always/only condemned them;

They had experienced the freefall of trusting in X alone, and that had made them feel guiltier than ever.

Should they go back to the Law, which was at least a familiar form of guilt/misery?

Paul explains why returning to the Law was out of the question.

[Verse 18]=> “*For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed [my trust in the Law to save me], I prove myself to be a transgressor.*”

Notice that Paul switches from “we” to “I.”

* He does this, 1st, because he’s pointing out that Peter has indeed become a transgressor, and he wants to graciously soften the blow of that accusation.

So Paul speaks in hypothetical terms about himself, leaving Peter to make the application to himself.

- * But he does this also, because the truth he's going to explain is so intensely personal to him, he must speak from his own experience.

He'll continue using "I" in the next 3 verses for that same reason.

Paul's point in verse 18 is that, anyone who tries to rebuild his old strategy of justification-through-Law, which he once tore down by believing in justification-by-faith, proves himself—not X—a transgressor.

- * He condemns himself for having repudiated/destroyed the Law, when he believed in X.
- * And he condemns himself a 2nd time for having turned back from faith in Jesus to the Law, declaring that X's death didn't pay for his sin after all.

So now he is doubly condemned, having abandoned both Law/grace, leaving him in a frightening limbo.

This was the difficult transition experienced by many Jews.

Ironically, the Gentile Xns of Galatia had gotten caught up in it, by following the Judaizers into their faith in the Law.

- * **Step 4—We died to the Law and found life in Christ.**

Finally, Paul says, I yielded to the Law's condemnation and died, giving up the old delusion that I could ever save my own soul through obedience to the Law.

[Verse 19]=> *“For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God.”*

We all want to assume that if we ever really put our minds to it, we can obey the Law;

That we could please God on our own, with our obedience, & that He would be obliged to accept us for such an achievement.

But that was never God's intent, in giving us His Law in the first place.

In Gal 3:24 we discover what His intent actually was=>

“The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.”

God gave us the Law as a very strict tutor that would teach us we can never obey it perfectly, try as we might.

Having given up the notion that we can be justified by obedience to the Law, we would then come to X, seeking forgiveness from Him for our disobedience.

“Giving up” sounds so negative to us—like defeat/failure.

But God won't save us by His grace until we've given up every proud effort to save ourselves through the Law.

* Until then, we're humanists, trusting in our own moral strength as humans to find justification before God.

* Until then, we're like that Pharisee in the Temple,
praying, "God, I thank Thee that I'm not like other
men."

* Until we are willing to let our old self die, going into spiritual
freefall, we can never experience real life—God's life,
eternal life.

What ultimately made the transition from Law to grace so
difficult for the Jews was death (a painful thought).

They had to humbly let their old confidence in the Law (&
in their own ability to keep the Law) die, & that was
hard/fearful.

Regeneration is at heart a process of death/resurrection.

Something old/proud/corrupt in us dies; something new is
born and given new life.

There's a double blessing in this truth=>

1st, our death gets us out from under the Law's
condemnation.

If you're a believer, who has identified w/ X by faith,
you died with Him on the cross.

When He (your Substitute) died, you died, in
the view of God/God's-Law.

Rom 7:4=> *"My brethren, you also were made to die
to the Law through the body of Christ [on the
cross], that you might be joined to another, to
Him who was raised from the dead."*

If a person commits a crime for which the penalty is death, the law can only impose that penalty once.

Though God's Law imposes the death penalty for sin, we died with X, & His death paid the penalty for our sin, so the Law no longer condemns us. Its just demand for our punishment has been fully satisfied.

2nd, because of our spiritual death with X, we gain spiritual resurrection, which means new life with-Him/in-Him. When Jesus was resurrected physically, we were resurrected spiritually.

And now we live to God—to glorify Him with our lives.

The Law was once our master and we served it, but now God is our Master, and we gratefully serve Him with our new life.

Application (2 truths of great importance)

***Truth #1—We sinners pass thru 3 stages on our way to justification=>**

* Prior to our becoming aware of the Law, we were sinful & under the wrath of God, but we didn't know it.

We were like the "sinful Gentiles" whom the Jews talked about as being spiritually ignorant.

* Once we learned about the Law, we became conscious of our sin, & yearned for something better, but couldn't achieve it.

Now we were in the same predicament as the OT Jews.

- * When we believed in Jesus, seeking His forgiveness/renewal, we were freed from the Law's condemnation, we found new life in Him, and we now live our lives for His glory, grateful for His grace towards us.
- * **Truth #2—We become justified before God by faith in Jesus X.**
- * Justification, as we have seen, is a legal term, referring to a person's being declared righteous by the law, either because he can prove the accusation against him is false; or he did what he's been accused of doing, but he can show he had a right to do it.
- * Man is charged with serious crimes against God=> violating His Law; not loving Him, but instead, rebelling against Him, w/ sin.
- * Man can neither prove the charges are false, nor that he had a right to be/do those things the Law declares to be violations of God's holy will.
The evidence is overwhelming, & denying it is useless.
When X was here on earth, He didn't take the sinner's side against God/His-Law, claiming the sinner isn't really guilty.
We had to come to grips with the true reality of our sin, repudiating it and repenting of it.

* The only way for man to be justified, and thus relieved from condemnation, is to pay the Law's penalty—which is death. But the gospel proclaims that X died to pay the penalty for the sins of God's elect, going to the cross as their Substitute.

He did that for believers, & He did it unconditionally, not even seeking a promise that they'd never again sin. We have no claim on X, by which He is obliged to save us. He has done this for us simply out of His love/grace, and we will never deserve it, even when we are entering heaven in our glorified state.

* Justification is God's graciously declaring us sinners to be righteous, & treating us as if we were righteous, because Jesus graciously took our place on the cross, dying for our sin to satisfy the Law.

We have formed a personal relationship w/ Jesus by faith, so that God identifies us w/ Him/His-death-for-sin.

With that, the greatest need in this life has been met.

I hope that is true of you.

If it isn't, I wish you would seek Jesus and become justified by faith in Him.