

Justification *by* Faith Alone



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 2:15–21; Eph. 2:12; Phil. 3:9; Rom. 3:10–20; Gen. 15:5, 6; Rom. 3:8.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Galatians 2:20, ESV*).

As we saw last week, Paul publicly confronted Peter in Antioch for the lack of consistency between the faith he advocated and the behavior he displayed. Peter's decision not to eat with former pagans suggested that they were second-rate Christians at best. His actions implied that if they really wanted to be part of the family of God and enjoy the blessings of full table fellowship, they must first submit to the rite of circumcision.

What did Paul actually say to Peter on that tense occasion? In this week's lesson, we will study what is likely a summary of what went on. This passage contains some of the most compressed wording in the New Testament, and it is extremely significant, because it introduces us for the first time to several words and phrases that are foundational both to understanding the gospel and the rest of Paul's letter to the Galatians. These key words include *justification*, *righteousness*, *works of law*, *belief*, and not only *faith* but *the faith of Jesus*.

What does Paul mean by these terms, and what do they teach us about the plan of salvation?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 22.

The Question of “Justification” (*Gal. 2:15, 16*)

In Galatians 2:15, Paul writes, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (*ESV*). What point do you think he was making?

Paul’s words need to be understood in their context. In an attempt to win over his fellow Jewish Christians to his position, Paul starts with something they would agree with—the traditional distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Jews were the elect of God, entrusted with His law, and they enjoyed the benefits of the covenant relationship with Him. Gentiles, however, were sinners; God’s law did not restrain their behavior, and they were outside the covenants of promise (*Eph. 2:12, Rom. 2:14*). However, while Gentiles were obviously “sinners,” in verse 16 Paul warns the Jewish Christians that their spiritual privileges do not make them any more acceptable to God, because no one is justified by “works of the law.”

Paul uses the word *justified* four times in Galatians 2:16, 17. What does he mean by “justification”? Consider *Exod. 23:7* and *Deut. 25:1*.

The verb *to justify* is a key term for Paul. Of the 39 times it occurs in the New Testament, 27 are in Paul’s letters. He uses it eight times in Galatians, including four references in Galatians 2:16, 17 alone. *Justification*, though, is a legal term. It deals with the verdict a judge pronounces when a person is declared innocent of the charges brought against him or her. It is the opposite of *condemnation*. Additionally, because the words *just* and *righteous* come from the same Greek word, for a person “to be justified” means that the person also is counted as “righteous.” Thus, justification involves more than simply pardon or forgiveness; it is the positive declaration that a person is righteous.

For some of the Jewish believers, however, justification also was relational. It revolved around their relationship with God and His covenant. To be “justified” also meant that a person was counted as a faithful member of God’s covenantal community, the family of Abraham.

Read Galatians 2:15–17. What is Paul saying to you here, and how can you apply these words to your own Christian experience?

Works of the Law

Paul says three times in Galatians 2:16 that a person is not justified by “the works of the law.” What does he mean by the expression “the works of the law”? How do these texts (*Gal. 2:16, 17; 3:2, 5, 10; Rom. 3:20, 28*) help us understand his meaning?

Before we can understand the phrase “the works of the law,” we first need to understand what Paul means by the word *law*. The word *law* (*nomos* in Greek) is found 121 times in Paul’s letters. It can refer to a number of different things, including God’s will for His people, the first five books of Moses, the entire Old Testament, or even just a general principle. However, the primary way Paul uses it is to refer to the entire collection of God’s commandments given to His people through Moses.

The phrase “the works of the law” likely involves, therefore, all the requirements found in the commandments given by God through Moses, whether moral or ceremonial. Paul’s point is that no matter how hard we try to follow and obey God’s law, our obedience never will be good enough for God to justify us, to have us declared righteous before God. That’s because His law requires absolute faithfulness in thought and action—not just some of the time but all of the time, and not just for some of His commandments but for all of them.

Although the phrase “the works of the law” does not occur in the Old Testament and is not found in the New Testament outside of Paul, stunning confirmation of its meaning emerged in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of writings copied by a group of Jews, called Essenes, who lived at the time of Jesus. Although written in Hebrew, one of the scrolls contains this exact phrase. The scroll’s title is *Miqsat Ma’as Ha-Torah*, which can be translated, “Important Works of the Law.” The scroll describes a number of issues concerning the biblical laws regarding the prevention of the desecration of holy things, including several laws that marked the Jews out as separate from the Gentiles. At the end the author writes that if these “works of the law” are followed, “you will be reckoned righteous” before God. Unlike Paul, the author does not offer his reader righteousness on the basis of faith but on the basis of behavior.

In your experience, how well do you keep God’s law? Do you really sense that you keep it so well that you can be justified before God on the basis of your law-keeping? (See Rom. 3:10–20.) If not, why not—and how does your answer help you understand Paul’s point here?

The Basis of Our Justification

“And be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:9, NKJV).

We should not assume Jewish Christians were suggesting that faith in Christ was not important; after all, they were all believers in Jesus. They all had faith in Him. Their behavior showed, however, that they felt faith was not sufficient by itself; it must be *supplemented* with obedience, as if our obedience adds something to the act of justification itself. Justification, they would have argued, was by both faith *and* works. The way that Paul repeatedly contrasts faith in Christ with the works of the law indicates his strong opposition to this kind of “both and” approach. Faith, and faith alone, is the basis of justification.

For Paul, too, faith is not just an abstract concept; it is inseparably connected to Jesus. In fact, the phrase translated twice as “faith in Christ” in Galatians 2:16 is far richer than any translation can really encompass. The phrase in Greek is translated literally as “the faith” or “the faithfulness” of Jesus. This literal translation reveals the powerful contrast Paul is making between the works of the law that we do and the *work* of Christ accomplished in our behalf: the works that He, through His faithfulness (hence, the “faithfulness of Jesus”), has done for us.

It’s important to remember that faith itself doesn’t add to justification, as if faith were meritorious in and of itself. Faith is, instead, the means by which we take hold of Christ and His works in our behalf. We are not justified on the basis of *our faith* but on the basis of Christ’s faithfulness for us, which we claim for ourselves through faith.

Christ did what every individual has failed to do: He alone was faithful to God in everything He did. Our hope is in Christ’s faithfulness, not our own. This is the great and important truth that, among others, ignited the Protestant Reformation. It is a truth that remains as crucial today as it was when Martin Luther began preaching it centuries ago.

An early Syriac translation of Galatians 2:16 conveys Paul’s meaning well: “Therefore we know that a man is not justified from the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus the Messiah, and we believe in him, in Jesus the Messiah, that from his faith, that of the Messiah, we might be justified, and not from the works of the law.”

Read Romans 3:22, 26; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; and Philippians 3:9. How do these texts, and what we read above, help us understand the amazing truth that Christ’s faithfulness for us, His perfect obedience to God, is the only basis of our salvation?

The Obedience of Faith

Paul makes it clear that faith absolutely is foundational to the Christian life. It is the means by which we lay hold of the promises we have in Christ. But what is faith exactly? What does it involve?

What do the following texts teach us about the origin of faith? *Gen. 15:5, 6; John 3:14–16; 2 Cor. 5:14, 15; Gal. 5:6.*

Genuine biblical faith is always a response to God. Faith is not some kind of feeling or attitude that humans one day decide to have because God requires it. On the contrary, true faith originates in a heart touched with a sense of gratitude and love for God's goodness. That is why when the Bible talks about faith, that faith always follows initiatives that God has taken. In the case of Abraham, for example, faith is his response to the amazing promises God makes to him (*Gen. 15:5, 6*), while in the New Testament Paul says that faith is ultimately rooted in our realization of what Christ did for us on the cross.

If faith is a response to God, what should that response include? Consider what the following texts say about the nature of faith. *John 8:32, 36; Acts 10:43; Rom. 1:5, 8; 6:17; Heb. 11:6; James 2:19.*

Many people define faith as "belief." This definition is problematic, because in Greek the word for "faith" is simply the noun form of the verb "to believe." To use one form to define the other is like saying "faith is to have faith." It tells us nothing.

A careful examination of Scripture reveals that faith involves not only knowledge about God but a mental consent or acceptance of that knowledge. This is one reason why having an accurate picture of God is so important. Distorted ideas about the character of God actually can make it more difficult to have faith. But an intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel is not enough, for in that sense "even the demons believe." True faith also affects the way a person lives. In Romans 1:5, Paul writes about the "obedience of faith." Paul is not saying that obedience is the same as faith. He means true faith affects the whole of a person's life, not just the mind. It involves commitment to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as opposed to just a list of rules. In other words, faith is as much what we do, how we live, and in whom we trust, as it is what we believe.

Does Faith Promote Sin?

One of the main accusations against Paul was that his gospel of justification by faith alone encouraged people to sin (*see Rom. 3:8, 6:1*). No doubt the accusers reasoned that if people do not have to keep the law to be accepted by God, why should they be concerned with how they live? Luther, too, faced similar charges.

How does Paul respond to the accusation that a doctrine of justification by faith alone encourages sinful behavior? *Gal. 2:17, 18.*

Paul responds to his opponents' charges in the strongest terms possible: "God forbid!" While it is possible that a person might fall into sin after coming to Christ, the responsibility would certainly not belong to Christ. If we break the law, we ourselves are the lawbreakers.

How does Paul describe his union with Jesus Christ? In what way does this answer refute the objections raised by his opponents? *Gal. 2:19–21.*

Paul finds the reasoning of his opponents simply preposterous. Accepting Christ by faith is not something trivial; it is not a game of heavenly make-believe in which God counts a person as righteous while there is no real change in how that person lives. On the contrary, to accept Christ by faith is extremely radical. It involves a complete union with Christ—a union in both His death and His resurrection. Spiritually speaking, Paul says we are crucified with Christ, and our old sinful ways rooted in selfishness are finished (*Rom. 6:5–14*). We have made a radical break with the past. Everything is new (*2 Cor. 5:17*). We have been raised to a new life in Christ, and the resurrected Christ lives within us, making us more and more like Himself every day.

Faith in Christ, therefore, is not a pretext for sin but a call to a much deeper, richer relationship with Christ than could ever be found in a law-based religion.

How do you relate to the concept of salvation by faith alone without the deeds of the law? Does it, perhaps, scare you a little, making you think that it can be an excuse for sin—or do you rejoice in it? What does your answer say about your understanding of salvation?

Further Thought: “The danger has been presented to me again and again of entertaining, as a people, false ideas of justification by faith. I have been shown for years that Satan would work in a special manner to confuse the mind on this point. The law of God has been largely dwelt upon and has been presented to congregations, almost as destitute of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and His relation to the law as was the offering of Cain. I have been shown that many have been kept from the faith because of the mixed, confused ideas of salvation, because the ministers have worked in a wrong manner to reach hearts. The point that has been urged upon my mind for years is the imputed righteousness of Christ. . . .

“There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, pp. 18, 19.

“The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account. Christ’s righteousness is accepted in place of man’s failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 367.

Discussion Questions:

- ① In the first passage quoted above, Ellen G. White says no subject needs to be emphasized more than justification by faith. As a class, discuss whether her comments are as applicable for us today as they were when she wrote them more than a hundred years ago, and, if so, why.
- ② Think about the Protestant Reformation and Luther. However different the time and place and circumstance, why was the truth that Paul presented here so crucial a factor in freeing millions from the spiritual bondage of Rome?

Summary: Peter’s behavior in Antioch suggested that ex-pagans could not be true Christians unless they were first circumcised. Paul pointed out the fallacy of such thinking. God cannot pronounce anyone righteous on the basis of that person’s behavior, for even the best humans are not perfect. It is only by accepting what God has done for us in Christ that we sinners can be justified in His sight.