

Justification by Faith — *The Foundational Doctrine*

A gracious work of God whereby He pardons a sinner & judicially declares him to be perfect righteous because of Christ's righteousness credited to the sinner by faith alone.

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The church stands or falls based on its definition of, biblical fidelity to, and commitment to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If a person gets this doctrine right and believes in Christ alone then he is justified. If the doctrine of justification is corrupted in his mind and heart and he does not cling to Christ alone then his soul is lost and still dead in sin.

Because we must understand justification by faith alone, this paper serves to help in providing a number of helpful points that biblically define *what* the biblical doctrine of justification entails.

1. It is a *declaration* that we are righteous. It does not mean that we are *made* righteous.

Jesus told a story of a man who prayed in the Temple and begged God to “be merciful to me, the sinner.” The text then says that he went home “justified” (δεδικαιωμένος) (Luke 18:14). Romans 5:1 pronounces that a sinner is justified by faith thus resulting in peace with God. In the following verses, however, the person still grows in sanctification and Christlikeness. Thus, justification is a *declaration* of righteousness rather than a *making* of one righteous. Put similarly, justification is an *instantaneous* act of God rather than a *continuing, ongoing work* of God and/or man.

2. Justification by faith means that we are justified *by the righteousness of another*, not our own righteousness.

No man is justified by works of the Law (Gal 2:16). By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified (Rom 3:20). In other words, no sinner can ever be justified before God *because of* his own works, merit, religion, ethics, morals, traditions, or knowledge. No one can ever *do* anything good enough to bring about his own justification. Rather, the sinner is justified by God not by his own righteousness *but by the righteousness of another* — namely, Jesus Christ. Paul says that he does not have his own righteousness but rather his righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ (Phil 3:9). The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (Rom 1:17) and this righteousness of Christ is credited to the believer who has faith in Christ (2 Cor 5:21; 2 Pet 1:1).

3. No man is justified *because of* his faith or *on account of* his faith. The Bible no where attests to this. Rather, faith is the *instrument*, the *means*, or the *channel* through which God declares us righteous.

A person is justified *through* faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16). A person is saved *by* faith (Gal 2:20). The Bible says that we are saved by grace *through* faith (Eph 2:8). The Bible never says that a person is saved “on account of” or “because of” his faith. This would mean that a person must *initiate* his own faith and *then* God would save him. That would make man the savior of himself and the initiator of his own salvation. The Bible, however, clearly says that even faith is a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 2:25).

4. Justification by faith powerfully and instantaneously saves the sinner *not* because of his own faith but because of the *sufficiency* of the object of the One in whom he believed — namely, Jesus Christ.

Everyone who has been saved and has been given a faith receives it by the righteousness *not* of himself (or of any other mere man) but by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:1). The one who has repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ will be saved (Acts 20:21). The righteousness of God comes to the sinner fully, gloriously, graciously, and eternally only through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith cannot save. It is not the *faith itself* that saves. The saving work of God comes when that powerful faith is in *Jesus Christ*. Many people have faith. Many people believe strongly in their religion, morals, mass, religiosity, or knowledge. But this faith cannot save — no matter how strong it may be. But the object of true, saving faith that justifies *must be* Jesus Christ alone. You are all sons of God through faith *in Jesus Christ* (Gal 3:26).

5. Justification by faith announces that no man is justified *by his own works*. A sinner is justified by God’s grace *not* because of our works but *because of Christ’s work*. Our works cannot save us. But Christ’s work does save us.

It is the righteousness of God that saves. It is God’s perfection that must be credited to the sinner’s account to deliver the sinner. No religious act however passionate or sincere it may be can save a soul. One must be perfect (Matt 5:48) and never sin (Ezek 18:4). All are convicted before God (Rom 3:19-20) and have fallen short of God’s perfect glory and standard (Rom 3:23). The only work that can save is the work of Jesus Christ that is credited to sinners who believe. It is Christ who becomes for the sinner “righteousness” (1 Cor 1:30). It is one act of righteousness that leads to justification and life to all men (Rom 5:18). And in the following verse, by the obedience of one man — Jesus — many will be made righteous (Rom 5:19). Thus, a sinner must become perfect in order to be justified. But that sinner cannot be perfect on his own. The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ (his active obedience and passive obedience) are credited, imputed, transferred, reckoned to the sinner who has faith so that God forensically declares that sinner to be perfectly righteous because of the work of Christ (Rom 8:33)!

6. God justifies a sinner only once. There is no need for a second regeneration, a later ‘re-justification’ or another salvation. When God justifies someone, He sovereignly, eternally, graciously, and judicially justifies him. In other words, justification is a *monergistic act*.

Titus 3 says that when the lovingkindness of God appeared, *He* saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness but according to his own mercy ... so that we are justified by His grace and thus made heirs of the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7). God justifies His elect and no one can ever bring a charge against them ever again (Rom 8:33);

cf. 8:34-39). He who begins a work in His elect will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6). God confirms His people to the end (1 Cor 1:8). All this shows that God does not justify someone and then that sinner falls away or becomes 'unsaved' or 'unjustified' at a later point. When God saves, he saves to the uttermost; those whom God savingly loves, he savingly loves to the uttermost (John 13:1). The text of Scripture simply says: "he saved us" (2 Tim 1:9). The verb only has one person as the subject, "he", and that's God *alone*. Man contributes nothing to his justification. Man brings nothing to the court-room table in order to produce his justified status before Heaven's Judge. It is all of grace! It is all God's action and doing. "But by God's doing you are in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30).

7. Justification by faith does not mean that a person can be saved *and never produce any good works of any kind.*

When God justifies a sinner, He does so by His grace alone. No work, religion, deed, tradition, rite, or ritual can ever cooperate with God's saving work. Justification is by God's grace and totally apart from man's contributing work. With all that said, however, justification by faith alone will *never* be alone. Justification will *always* be followed by sanctification. Justification is a work of God whereby He sovereignly declares a sinner righteous by faith apart from the sinner's work. Sanctification is a work of both God and the saint whereby the sinner progressively grows in Christlikeness, holiness, and purity until that process is ultimately perfected in glory. Those whom God saves he washes (1 Cor 6:11). Those whom he justifies he will glorify (Rom 8:29). And without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). Even though a person is saved by grace through faith in Christ alone (Eph 2:8-9) that justified sinner realizes that he is God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand for him to do (Eph 2:10). Sinners who are justified will abide in Christ (John 15:1-8). If someone claims to be justified by faith but has no works (=sanctification) to validate that profession, he is a liar and is not truly converted (James 2:14-26). God clearly says that faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:17). In other words, a faith that is truly genuine *will* most certainly manifest its validity in a life of holiness, sanctification, and good works (James 2:26).

We can conclude with the helpful words from John Calvin:

Justified by faith is the person who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.

*"The moment a sinner believes,
And trusts in his crucified God,
His pardon at once he receives;
Salvation in full, through his blood."*

— Charles Spurgeon