

# Justification: Freedom!

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Justification is about human freedom. And it's the best kind of freedom—eternal. It's eternal freedom *from* condemnation and freedom *to* know, love, and serve God forever.

But future freedom is not the only kind of freedom justification provides. Justification is also about freedom in the here and now. I'm learning this is my own life and how I see myself. What is my real justification—Christ or being a pastor? Christ or serving here at Bethel Church? Christ or anything else? What is my real justification and where am I actually looking to find my hope?

My prayer in this series has been that God would implant this doctrine in my soul and shape the way I actually do my life, marriage, parenting, friendship, pastoring, etc. I hope the same for you too.

This is the last message in our justification series. Let's review. At its root, justification addresses that most basic impulse in the human heart—that something is not right between us and God. Our conscience tells us that and Scripture tells us that. Romans 3:10 says, "*None is righteous, no, not one.*" God is holy and righteous, we are not. Does it feel this way in normal society? No. Like the citizens of the Roman city of Pompeii, we go about our daily lives largely oblivious to the burning, churning wrath of the divine Mt. Vesuvius. Life feels normal but one millisecond after we die, there God is. We will see him in all his awesome glory and will feel the weight of his holiness. In that moment, the only thing that will matter is whether we are righteous in his eyes or not, under grace or under judgment, facing heaven or facing hell.

Where do we get righteousness that allows us to stand before a holy God forever? Not our good works. Not religion. Not being better than others. "*And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.*" (Romans 4:5)

Justification is the grace of God toward sinners in which God declares guilty sinners to be legally righteous in his eyes. He can justly do this as Jesus' death on the cross was the legal ransom payment our sins required. When Jesus died, God imputed our sins to Jesus' moral account and when we believe in Jesus, God imputes Jesus' righteousness to our moral account and promises to see us as perfectly moral human beings and to do so forever. Are we righteous actually? No. As all who know us can attest, we are still sinners. In justification, God declares us righteous forever. This is by his grace through faith in Jesus. It is all of God so that no man can boast. The result is that we are free from condemnation and forever will be.

It certainly means freedom in eternity future, but what freedoms does justification provide for us today?

## Freedom

### From legalism/performance

Other than the book of Romans, the next clearest teaching on justification is the book of Galatians. In a summary statement, Paul writes, *"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."* (Galatians 5:1)

Some teachers had come to Galatia and were saying that salvation is by faith AND by obeying the law. Grace + works = salvation. Paul called them out as false teachers and said their gospel was no gospel at all.

Paul wrote the letter deeply concerned that the Galatian Christians would revert back to their pre-gospel attempts to save themselves by obeying the Law. He asked a series of probing questions:

- *"Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?"* (Galatians 3:2)
- *"Having begun by the Spirit, are you not being perfected by the flesh?"* (Galatians 3:3)
- *"You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"* (Galatians 5:7)

Why was Paul so concerned? They believed in Jesus, right? Yes. They weren't in danger of subtracting from Jesus but adding to him. If you believe in Jesus for your justification but then try to obey the Law or man's rules in order to self-justify, that is another gospel; not one that saves. Was Jesus' death enough? Or do we need to add a little something?

This is commonly known as legalism. Legalism is requiring human righteousness either before or after justification; obeying some legal code as a condition to be justified or in order to remain so. Both are adding human merit to salvation by grace. Jesus came to set us free from both the requirement to obey the Law to be saved and the requirement to obey the Law to stay saved. The early church dealt with this in Acts 15 with Gentile Christians entering the church and the Jewish Christians already there freaking out because their lifestyle wasn't shaped at all by Jewish religious customs. The Apostles and the Holy Spirit said that our forefathers couldn't obey this Law and salvation comes apart from it. Indeed, legalism is the antithesis of salvation by grace. Grace means freedom in a way the law never could.

*"Run, John, and work, the law commands,  
Yet finds me neither feet nor hands;  
But sweeter news the gospel brings,  
It bids me fly and lends me wings."  
(John Berridge)*

We like it. Yet how many Christians somehow are not trusting in their justification but in their sanctification? That's legalism—adding to grace man's human effort. I know that our church has many people from backgrounds like mine where there was a strange mixture of gospel grace and man-made rules. We didn't have to obey God's law to be saved but after we are saved, there was an unwritten list of extra-biblical rules that you'd just better conform to. These weren't God's laws, they were man-made rules. Rules without grace. Rules without gospel. Rules enslave us. The gospel sets us free. It bids us fly and lends us wings.

*Pastor, you can't say that! People will hear this as freedom to sin! Paul anticipated this response in Romans 6 and wrote in verses 1-2, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"*

Below is a recent photo from Liberia. The man in the photo thought he had Ebola but was just declared free from Ebola contamination. Imagine the sense of relief! Does he immediately go drink from a contaminated fountain? Does he carelessly handle contaminated materials? How does a guy live in Liberia who has just been declared free from Ebola?



Sin is like Ebola. Sin is deadly. Being declared by God uncontaminated by sin (justification) doesn't embolden us to go back to sin. Now we want to stay away from it—not to be saved—but out of joy and gratitude at being declared forever uncontaminated by it.

These are sins Jesus died for. Sins Jesus bore our guilt for. You say, "The stuff before I was saved, not so much. But more recently, yeah. I can't quite shake it." Justification is shaking it. Jesus didn't just die for the sins we commit before we are saved, he died for all our sins. Justification is God's declaration of righteousness over our entire lives; our entire resume of sin. All of it.

This is true freedom. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from sin. It's like the guy walking out of the contamination unit—freedom to live again. For the analogy to actually work, while he was in there, let's say he did have Ebola. But the King of Liberia, who had been given an antidote to Ebola, says, "Hook us up. Transfuse his Ebola blood into me and my perfect blood into him." Now how does he walk out? Now how does he feel about the king? How does he use his freedom which came to him at such an incredible price?

### **From the fear of man/obsessive need for approval from others**

*"For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)*  
To be justified is to be accepted by the only opinion that matters—God's. It was the Pharisees who Jesus said, *"You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts."* (Luke 16:15)

Fearing man is not being afraid of them, it is craving their approval—the need to be accepted by others or considered a good person or smart or successful or beautiful or accomplished. The obsession with how I am viewed by others. My carefully marketed and controlled image to my family or social media or even in the church. Sound familiar? This is especially true in a culture like ours that obsesses in being like everyone else, jumping on the latest bandwagon, trend, fad, fashion. What really is at the core of this? We want to be accepted/justified in the eyes of others. How many still seeking men's or God's approval would be set free by justification?

We, of course, see this in young people and can easily roll our eyes. They absolutely must fit in at all costs. They care so deeply that their hairstyle, clothes, even language and talk, are what others will accept. They obsess over approval. We very mature and wise adults see that, and are so glad that we are totally beyond it and above these immature obsessions. Or are we?

What lies behind our fear of sharing Christ with those around us? What lies behind our reticence to be identified as a Christian? Why does Christian culture follow popular culture so closely? Do we jump on bandwagons? Do we leap for the latest fad? Are we obsessed with what others think of us?

*"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Romans 5:1) There's only one opinion that matters and that is God's. And God's acceptance isn't based on performance, looks, body shape, cultural hipness, popularity, accomplishment, or anything related to us. It is entirely by his grace. When I understand I am accepted by Almighty God, my need for some human being to accept me is crushed. I see myself through the love of God for me. This changes my self-identity.

It changes how I see others too. If God accepts me on the basis of grace, do I accept others that way too? Are my friendships dependent on their performance? How about my marriage? Husband, where do you go with your critiques of your wife? Her this, her that. How she's not the way you want her to be. Wives, does your husband have to justify himself to be accepted by you? ***Justification by grace through faith frees Christian relationships from accepting others based on law.*** The church should be a place of acceptance and grace, shouldn't it? Romans 15:7 says, *"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

I think you know where I am going here. Let me share one great quote and then we'll move on:

*"There are those who are concerned with the question of their standing before men but never with the question of their standing before God; there are those who are interested in what "people say" but not in the question of what God says. Such men, however, are not those who move the world; they are apt to go with the current; they are apt to do as others do; they are not the heroes who change the destinies of the race. The beginning of true nobility comes when a man ceases to be interested in the judgment of men and becomes interested in the judgment of God."* (J. Gresham Machen)

### **From fear of future judgment**

Freedom from legalism. Freedom from obsession with the opinion of others. Finally, freedom from *Anfechtung*. What? Remember that word from the first message? It's the German word Luther used to describe what he felt inside before discovering justification. It means, "holy

*terror.*" Throughout his schooling and even his early days as a monk, his heart was ravaged by terror of God. Luther realized that man's biggest problem is God and the holy nature of his character and the intensity of his anger against sin and sinners. He knew from careful study of Scripture what awaited him one millisecond after he died. He searched for relief and found it in justification by faith.

What about you? What do you think of the future? Or have you bought into the approach of our secular age that the only life that matters is the present one? The only world that matters is this one? The only place worthy of thought and attention is this one?

Jesus called that approach foolishness. How many must step into eternity and into the presence of Almighty God in shock having never given eternity any serious thought? That moment is coming. You will die. Are you and I ready for what awaits on the other side?

Justification is certainly about this life, as we have seen today. But it saves the best for last.

Some time ago I was on an international trip to a country different from ours. Different language. Different currency. Different culture. Plans had been made and someone was going to pick me up at the airport. I landed. The plane taxied to the gate. I got my luggage. I went through Customs. Then came the moment. There were a set of doors. On the other side I could see commotion and I could hear voices and people. I wondered what awaited on the other side of the doors. I went through and this is what I saw:



People were there with signs. Porters and shuttles were holding this person's name; that person's name. Maybe you have seen this at airports. It is a way for travelers to know who is there to welcome them and take them to their final destination.

What a relief to see your name. *"Ah...greetings! Welcome! I'm here to take care of you. All the arrangements have been made. Right this way. We will get you to your place ASAP. How was the flight?"*

What happened to me on this trip? I came through and began searching the signs for my name. Not here. Not there. I was sure arrangements had been made, but where is my welcome? I began to scour the airport. Maybe they mistakenly went to a different door? Nobody. I began to panic. I ran around here and there hoping to find someone to help me. I went outside the airport to the line of cars. Nothing. I had arrived at night. I didn't have a phone. I didn't have any help at all. I got this panicky and helpless feeling that went on for

an hour or two as I waited. Finally, out of nowhere, there was my guy, "Welcome, so glad you are here!" And off we went.

When you go to a faraway land, where you don't know what is coming, what it's like, what awaits, nothing is better than finding someone who knows you, welcomes you, and meets your needs.

Someday, soon or in awhile, every one of us is going to take a trip. It will happen in a millisecond. Suddenly we will be transported to a new country—the eternal one. What will be our feelings as this happens? Whether there is a door or not, I don't know. But we may have a moment of thought to anticipate what's on the other side of that door. What awaits me? This will be no airport; this is eternity. What happens on the other side of the door determines my personal experience for all eternity. Will it be heaven or will it be hell forever?

When I step through that door to the other side, is there a welcome? Some indication that someone there cares about me? Will I see my name on a sign? Might someone shout, "Hey Steve! Over here!" And if not, what panicky holy dread might arise within me that I may spend eternity without welcome, without identity, without righteousness?

Justification is God's personal guarantee that on the other side of that door, he will be there and what I am going to see is him holding a sign that says, "Steve DeWitt, Welcome to heaven!". His promise about that moment is what allows me to live today without fear and face death without dread. "Therefore, having been justified by his grace, we **have** peace with God."

Do you? If not, why not put your faith and trust in Jesus today and be ready for that day?

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