

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH—WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- (Galatians 2:16 ESV) Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Justification remains a vital doctrine to this day, even if many evangelical Christians are not sure what it means or if it matters.

The situation is reminiscent of the man who when asked to explain the difference between ignorance and apathy said, “I don’t know and I don’t care!” “Precisely!” came the reply. And ignorance and apathy are precisely the words to describe the church’s present attitude. Christians do not know and do not care to know the doctrine of justification by faith. Yet there is no true Christianity without it. [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 67). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]

An even fuller explanation comes from the Heidelberg Catechism, which asks, “How art thou righteous before God?” The answer is:

Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me that I have grossly transgressed all the commands of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect

satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ hath accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart. [Ibid.]

The heart of man’s spiritual dilemma is that he is incapable of overcoming the total sinfulness that separates him from the holy God. ... The provision of justification by faith is God’s answer to that dilemma and need. [MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1983). *Galatians* (p. 55). Chicago: Moody Press.]

Paul’s rebuke of Peter culminated in one of the most forceful statements in the New Testament on the doctrine of justification—the very doctrine that Peter and the others were in effect renouncing by their hypocritical separation from Gentile believers. [Ibid.]

The basic term was originally used forensically of a judge’s declaring an accused person not guilty and right before the law. It was the opposite of being declared guilty and condemned. Throughout Scripture justification refers to God’s declaring a sinner to be guiltless on the basis of faith in Him. It is the free and gracious act by which God declares a sinner right with Himself—forgiving, pardoning, restoring, and accepting him on the basis of nothing but trust in the Person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. [Ibid.]

“Justification” is a legal term that refers

to a person’s standing before the bar of God’s justice. In order to be declared right with God, I must be righteous. But I am not righteous; I am a sinner. How, then, can I justify myself to God? This is the question that the doctrine of justification answers. [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (p. 66). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]

This is the famous doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. “Justification” is a legal term, a word used in a court of law. It means to be proclaimed innocent, to be acquitted, to be cleared of all charges. In its biblical sense, to be justified means to be declared righteous before the bar of God’s justice. [Ibid.]

Justification. In its most basic meaning, justification is the declaration that somebody is in the right. A. E. McGrath observes that in Pauline vocabulary the verb *dikaio* “denotes God’s powerful, cosmic and universal action in effecting a change in the situation between sinful humanity and God, by which God is able to acquit and vindicate believers, setting them in a right and faithful relation to himself.” ... it is the favorable verdict of God, the righteous Judge, that one who formerly stood condemned has now been granted a new status at the bar of divine justice. [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, pp. 189–190). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

Paul did not contrast faith to legalism but rather faith to works. His point was that no human deeds, however well motivated and sincerely performed, can ever achieve the kind of standing before God that results in the verdict of justification. [Ibid.]

According to this definition, justification

is by imputation, that is, the righteousness of Christ is counted or reckoned to the sinners so that their standing before God is “as if” they possessed the kind of standing before the Father that would allow him to say of them, as he did of Christ, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” [Ibid.]

Paul’s critics argued like this: ‘Your doctrine of justification through faith in Christ only, apart from the works of the law, is a highly dangerous doctrine. It fatally weakens a man’s sense of moral responsibility. If he can be accepted through trusting in Christ, without any necessity to do good works, you are actually encouraging him to break the law, which is the vile heresy of “antinomianism.”’ People still argue like this today: ‘If God justifies bad people, what is the point of being good? Can’t we do as we like and live as we please?’ [Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The message of Galatians: Only one way* (p. 64). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.]

RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH: It would be hard to think of a more important issue than how to be accepted by God. Certainly it was important during the Reformation, when Protestants defended the doctrine of justification by faith alone over against the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification by faith plus works. Martin Luther claimed that “if the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost.” [Ryken, P. G. (2005). *Galatians*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (pp. 66–67). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.]