

Scriptures and Doctrine :: Justification by Faith: The Grounds of Our Justification

Justification by Faith: The Grounds of Our Justification - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2009/11/15 9:11

In light of the frequent discussions we've had on Sermon Index recently about issues surrounding justification by faith, I thought it fitting to put together a rather detailed and systematic exploration of this topic in light of the first five chapters of Romans. I hope you are edified in this. It is somewhat lengthy, but, I believe it will be a source of revelation for many.

Originally posted at:

http://www.iamadisciple.com/articles/grounds_for_justification.php

Justification by Faith: The Grounds for Our Justification

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is not only important to understand the fact that we are justified before God on the basis of faith, but it is also important to understand the Divine reasoning behind this doctrine, and what makes our justification possible. I believe when properly understood, this doctrine will not only cause us to realize just how sweet and awesome the grace of God is towards us who believe, but, I believe when one gets a revelation of this doctrine, it will forever change the way we live our lives as Christians. It will bring us closer to God.

In the opening chapters of the book of Romans, the apostle Paul immediately sets out to explain the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is often noted by scholars that Romans chapters 1 through 11 are the most systematic presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ contained within the Scriptures. As important as the whole counsel of God's word is, you will find fewer chapters more crucial to understanding the gospel than these right here. In these chapters, Paul takes us by the hand and walks us point by point through what the gospel is, what God's eternal purposes are through the gospel, and how it relates to all of mankind. By God's grace I hope to have the opportunity one day to explain these things in greater detail, but for the purposes of this article, I want to focus on what the apostle Paul sees as the grounds by which we can be justified by God on the basis of faith.

To do this, we will need to survey Paul's argument as far as the end of Romans 5. In chapter 1 we will read about Paul's desire to preach the gospel to a lost and fallen humanity. In chapters 2-3, we will read about the impartiality of God towards humanity in regard to His judgments, and even though all humanity has sinned and is guilty before God, He has provided a means by which man can be saved. In chapter 4, we will read Paul's argument for justification by faith based off the lives of two Old Testament saints. Finally, in chapter 5 we will read about how the death of Jesus Christ on the cross serves as the grounds by which God justifies us on the basis of faith alone.

Romans 1: The Gospel is For a Lost Humanity

In the opening verses of this chapter, Paul tells the church of Rome that he is eager to visit them and preach the gospel in their part of the world, so that they might be blessed by his ministry, and so that he might obtain some fruit amongst the Gentiles in that region. (1:1-15) Indeed, Paul in his understanding of the faith and his own calling as an apostle, feels he is "under obligation" (1:14) to unashamedly preach the gospel to the Gentiles, no matter where or who they are. The gospel he preaches is a powerful gospel, saving "everyone who believes." (1:16)

It is no wonder Paul feels this obligation, because it turns out that everyone is in need of the gospel, because all of humanity has become the object of God's wrath and anger. (1:18-19) For even though God has clearly revealed Himself through creation, man in his wisdom became foolish, and exchanged the glory and worship of God for the glory and worship of idols—the very thing God created. (1:19-25) For this, God has given humanity over to an impure heart and mind that is full of corruption, so that as part of His judgment and wrath, man might enter an inescapable cycle of sin that drags him further and further down in his depravity, causing him to sin with greater frequency and degree. (1:24-31) And though engrained into humanity is the knowledge that such sin is "worthy of death," man continues on in such sin, and encourages others to do the same. (1:32)

Romans 2: God Is Impartial

With man having entered into such a vicious cycle of sinful depravity, Paul kills the idea that a moral and ethical man who considers himself somehow superior can raise his head above the crowd of lost humanity. "You condemn yourself," Paul says, "for you who judge practice the same things." (2:1) Such men have failed to notice that though they may not sin in some of the other ways people sin, they have still sinned just the same, and the God who will "render to each person according to his deeds" has wrath stored up for such individuals in the day of judgment. (2:5-6), for such people will be found guilty for the sinful deeds they have done.

The apostle Paul says there are some who think they will fare well on the day of judgment because of who they, being law observing Jews (2:17). But Paul reminds such people that because of God's covenant dealings, though the Jews have priority in regard to the eternal blessings of God, they also have priority in regard to the wrath and judgments of God. "There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (2:9-10) Therefore, no man has an advantage over any other man, "for there is no partiality with God." (2:11) Both will be judged!

Indeed, for those who boast on their ability to keep the Law as affording them privilege with God, Paul shows such is nonsense. Circumcision is valuable if you actually "practice" the Law, (2:25) but if you have transgressed that Law and broken even one commandment, where will that get you? The fact that you have not kept all the Law in all its points all of your life shows you have not really practiced the Law like you think. Your Jewish nationality and your circumcision become worthless then, and give you no room for confidence or room to boast.

Such Jews put the Lord to shame (2:24), Paul says, because there are Gentiles out there who "do not have the Law" yet "do instinctively the things of the Law" (2:14) And though such Gentiles haven't had the foreskins of their male organ removed, the uncircumcised Gentile through the mere following of his conscience is in a better place to judge those who boast in their having the letter of the Law. Indeed, such men can be regarded as circumcised in heart, though they are not circumcised in their flesh. (2:26-27) As far as God is concerned, being a Jew is not about who one is outwardly, as the circumcision of the flesh ultimately avails nothing, because whoever is truly Jewish, no matter their ethnic origins, must be "a Jew inwardly," from the inner working of the Holy Spirit to circumcise a man from the heart. (2:28-29)

It's ultimately the corrupt heart of mankind that God wants to perform surgery on. It is ultimately upon the heart that God wants His sign of His covenant to be made. The reason it must be the heart that is worked upon? Because as we saw in Romans 1, all of humanity has rebelled against God, and God in His judgment gave man over to an inward depravity that caused him to think foolishly and spin out of control in his sin. "The doers of the Law" that will be justified before God that we read about in Romans 2:13, is not merely the natural man who has decided to act morally according to whatever law he is under (whether it be natural law or the Law of Moses). Rather, the doer of the law is the man whom the circumcision of the heart has been performed upon, as a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. It is the "doing" of the Holy Spirit that turns a sinful man into a justified "doer."

Romans 3: The Gift Giver

Even though there is in fact this inward Jewish work God does upon the heart of even Gentile men, this does not remove and invalidate the covenant relationship God established through Abraham. Paul says here (and elsewhere) that the natural born Jew does in fact have an advantage and benefit of being a son of the covenant made with Abraham. Indeed, they are children of the covenant and the people whom were entrusted with the very oracles of God. (3:1-3) Those are great blessings indeed.

But those blessings, as great as they are, do not make one automatically in right relationship with God. Indeed, all of humanity is fallen from birth, and the Jew, in spite of his covenant relationship with God, is ultimately grouped together with the Gentile in his unenlightened, depraved, and sinful mind, because, as Paul notes, "we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." (3:9) In making "all" under sin, Paul puts all of humanity on the same chopping block. Here, Paul declares that all of humanity, whether it is Law observing or wildly pagan, is equally under sin, and ultimately the target of God's wrath and anger.

Paul goes on to make some very bold statements, quoting a variety of Scriptures. He says, "There is none righteous, not even one; there none who understands; there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside... there is none who does good, there is not even one." (3:9-18) This passage serves as the climax and main point that Paul has been attempting to get his reader to understand all along. All of humanity is under the same fundamental problem: God is angry with all of the world. The law, both natural and Mosaic, has been given not to justify men, rather, it has been given so "that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God." (3:19)

In Paul's theology, there is simply no room for any man to open up his mouth and boast about what a good boy he has been before God. Indeed, when such a man looks at himself through the law, whether Jew or Gentile, such a man can find no room to boast, because each and every man born into this world has turned aside from the Lord, and is wicked in His sight. There is not one man in this world who is free from the condemnation of that the law brings against him because of his sin. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23) And though such men might indeed keep many of the laws of God, and have "works of the Law" (3:20) that they have performed, as Paul made clear in Romans 2:23-25, one's transgression of the law invalidates whatever law one has kept.

Indeed, all the law keeping in the world will never undo the guilt one has as a lawbreaker before God for the laws he has not managed to keep. God must punish such an individual just the same. Many in society today will boast that they are pretty good people. And indeed, they might be nice and respectable neighbors and citizens. Many people wrongly think that all the good deeds they have done will somehow cancel out all the bad things they have done when they stand before God. Our own human courts don't think this way, and neither does God. If you go on trial for theft or murder in this country, you will be prosecuted and punished accordingly. The amount of good things you have done will not undo the bad things that you have done and stand on trial for. You will be punished for the bad things you have done and the laws you have broken. If it is this way with a human court, how much more is it with God?

Now that all of humanity finds itself before God as guilty sinners that deserve to be punished, in spite of whatever "good deeds" it has done, we find ourselves at the "crux" of Paul's gospel. How can there ever be any hope for humanity before God? After all, if your good deeds can't cancel out your bad, what can you possibly do so as to escape the judgment to come? Is there no hope for humanity? What must a man do to be saved? Such is the logical end Paul wanted to bring us to at this point in Romans. All have sinned and all are guilty before God under the law. It turns out that the law, instead of being something that justifies one before God, is something that does nothing but point out one's own sin and condemns the guilty to death. (3:20)

Paul has shown that there simply is no hope for salvation to be found in obeying of the law of God. In doing this, he brings a man to the end of himself. In doing this, he shows there is nothing he can do to merit being justified before God. Man has nothing in his hand that he can possibly give God that would make him righteous. Rather, the only one in this situation who has something to give is God. Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, the sinner must be "justified as a gift" by God in His grace working through nothing but faith in Jesus Christ. (3:22-24) This faith is not a mere "easy-believe-ism" or mental assent, rather it is a faith that brings an end to self, and all that self represents. It's a faith that says there is nothing else but God!

No amount of works will justify a man before God. Circumcision will not justify. Being baptized in the right formula by the right church will not justify. Telling God you are sorry for your sins and sincerely saying the sinners' prayer will not justify. Rather, nothing less and nothing more than faith in Jesus Christ will justify. For in justifying you by faith in Christ, God has in His kindness and mercy chosen to overlook your sins because of what Jesus did for you on the cross. (3:25) Paul is adamant about this, faith in Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross is what justifies us before God. He concludes this point by saying, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law." (3:28) In other words, man has nothing he can contribute to be justified by God. His justification is "apart" from whatever works of the Law he may accomplish.

Paul has much more to say on the subject of what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross, and how such made it possible for us to be justified by faith. But he doesn't pick up this subject again until Romans 5. Instead, he lays the groundwork for the next chapter, and seeks to show convincingly from the Old Testament that God justifies the Jew and the Gentile, the circumcised and the uncircumcised alike, irrespective of the Law, all on the basis of faith. (3:29-30)

Romans 4: Abraham and David

Looking to show that his view of justification by faith is grounded in the Scriptures, the apostle Paul picks two individuals to examine in order to understand how they entered into a righteous relationship with the Lord on nothing other than faith. The two individuals he picks for his case study are Abraham and David. Abraham, interestingly enough, is used by Paul to represent the Gentiles. David is used to represent a Jew living under the Law of Moses. Both however, represent those who are ungodly.

Paul says that we read from Genesis that Abraham believed God, and God credited that faith to him as righteousness. If Abraham was justified on the basis of works, a problem exists. If righteousness is bestowed on Abraham on the basis of

what Abraham did, then righteousness being credited to him is not a favor, but rather, it is merely God giving Abraham what he has earned. Instead of being favor, Abraham is merely cashing in on a paycheck. (4:3-4). But we know from the Scripture that Abraham wasn't merely cashing in on a paycheck. How do we know that? We know this because Abraham hadn't done anything yet to deserve the status he had received as a gift from God. He received this favor while being uncircumcised. He received this favor while being no different than a pagan Gentile! The only means by which he was credited righteousness was on the basis of faith, and faith alone. (4:9-11)

Likewise, what of David? Paul says we read about David speaking about the blessing of righteousness existing upon the man who has sinned. (4:6-8) This likewise causes a problem for those who think they are righteous because of how good they are, and how well they live up to the demands of the Law. David was a man born under the jurisdiction of the Law of Moses, and sin could be charged to his account through it. According to the reasoning of the Law, the soul who sins should die. But to our astonishment, what do we read about? Instead of reading about a man who is cursed and dead, David speaks of finding favor with God!

What is the thrust of Paul's argument here? Works have nothing to do with one's standing before God. Why? Because God is "who justifies the ungodly" and credits the righteousness to the uncircumcised and to sinners! (4:5) Indeed, God can do nothing but justify sinners, because sinners are the only people that exist for God to justify! Remember, Paul's previous arguments. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is not one good person alive who could ever do anything to make themselves right with God on the basis of anything they do. All of humanity has entered into a depraved state in heart and mind that God in His wrath must enter into judgment against, in spite of whatever good works he might attempt to lay claim to. Yet in this state, man is able to find favor with God on the basis of faith, and in this chapter we read about two men who serve as paradigms (4:23-24) for all of humanity on how it is possible that man can be reconciled in his relationship with God, on nothing but the basis of faith in God.

Romans 5: The Only Obedience that Matters

In this chapter, Paul returns to a theme he only briefly spoke about in Romans 3. In Romans 3 Paul spoke about how it was possible that God could remain "just," yet at the same time as the "justifier" of the ungodly. He said that the grace we received through faith was made possible by the price of redemption that Christ paid for us by His blood, in order to satisfy God's justice. (3:22-26) You see, God isn't merely having mercy on us and forgiving us of our sins because He's such a great guy. Rather, our ability to receive forgiveness for the debt our sin created is because Jesus Christ paid our debt in full, by suffering the wrath of God on the cross in our place.

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrated His own love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (5:6,8) We were helplessly lost in the depravity and darkness of our sin. We were nothing but ungodly, and deserving the full wrath of God for our sin. Yet, Jesus Christ loved you and me, and shed His blood for us on the cross, and accepted the wrath of God in our place.

It was of Divine necessity that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins on the cross. If it were not for this, God could not show mercy towards us, because of His perfect just and holy nature demands that all sin be punished. He cannot simply let sin go unpunished, as He would be acting contrary to His nature if He did such. His nature hates sin, and "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness." (1:18) Yet, God who is willing that none should perish, but that all would have eternal life, sent His son in the likeness of sinful flesh to die the death due to us. He knew no sin, yet was made sin on our behalf. And in doing such, the wrath of God from heaven was unleashed against the perfect and blameless Lamb of God. As a result, we are "justified by His blood...and saved from the wrath of God through Him." (5:9)

With this in mind, the apostle Paul boldly declares: "...through one transgression there resulted in condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous." (5:18-19) The obedience of Jesus Christ and His death on the cross is the only action in all of history that makes it possible for one to be made right with God. Did not the apostle Paul make it clear in Romans 1-3 that man has no hope in his ability to do something to earn favor with God? No amount of obedience will ever make up for all his disobedience. The only obedience that will ever make up for our disobedience is the obedience of Jesus Christ. For in Adam, we are all sinners by birth. Because we were in the loins of Adam when Adam fell, the sinful corruption that entered his very body in his disobedience entered us as well. His one act of disobedience brought about our corrupt, fallen, and sinful state that we are born with. And in such a state, what could we possibly do that could earn God's favor?

Many people through the course of history have tried to find favor with God by obeying God and keeping His command

ments. They have thought such was the means by which they could obtain eternal life. If they could just be good enough by some measure, then they could have eternal life. But the apostle Paul reminds us that no amount of performance ultimately matters when it comes to being in right relationship with God. What you do or don't do doesn't mean a hill of beans. What ultimately matters? Your obedience to God? No. What ultimately matters and acts as the grounds by which you and I can be justified before God on the basis of faith is the "obedience of the One." The obedience of the One is all that matters in the eyes of God.

Conclusions

In this essay I have attempted to trace carefully Paul's rather systematic explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the first five chapters of Romans. In doing so, I believe I have carefully shown what Paul believed humanity had entered into a hopeless state in which it would suffer the wrath of God, and could do nothing to escape from the judgment that was surely coming its way. Yet even in this state, because God is rich in mercy and willing that none should perish provided a way for man to escape the sentence of death and hell. There is indeed good news in the gospel of Jesus Christ. What humanity cannot do to save itself, God did in Jesus Christ, by dying for us so that we might be made right with God, not on the basis of our own human achievement, but rather, in nothing other than faith in Him.

Many might fear that such a doctrine of justification by faith alone might create a cheap grace or easy-believe-ism which frees man to do anything he wants to do after being saved. But any who do such clearly do not understand the practical implications of this doctrine. In Romans 6-8, the apostle Paul makes it clear that after being made right with God, that to continue living on in sin, and thinking one has the ability to do so without eternal ramifications is to misunderstand his teaching of the gospel message. Indeed, after having been saved from the wrath of God and the power of sin, one has entered into a new relationship with God where the idea of living in sin is totally incompatible with the life of somebody who has died to self and lives for God, after coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The saving faith a man exercises in Christ is a faith that brings an end to self, and leaves room for nothing but God.

Re: Justification by Faith: The Grounds of Our Justification - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2009/11/15 15:58

A long read, but any thoughts?

Re: - posted by TaylorOtwell (), on: 2009/11/15 16:17

I read through it and think it is a good overview of those chapters. Thanks for posting it!

The only constructive criticism I may have is that this statement is just a little ambiguous: "This faith is not a mere "easy-believe-ism" or mental assent, rather it is a faith that brings an end to self, and all that self represents. It's a faith that says there is nothing else but God!"

Is what you are trying to say is that the faith that saves denies all moral virtue that a man may claim to have? In other words, we say there is "nothing else but God" in terms of how we are justified? "The Lord our righteousness", as the Scriptures say. Or, are you talking about self-denial in a sanctification sense, like the only faith that saves is the faith that brings forth good works, mortification of sin, etc.?

With care in Christ...

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2009/11/15 16:19

Quote:

Is what you are trying to say is that the faith that saves denies all moral virtue that a man may claim to have? In other words, we say there is "nothing else but God" in terms of how we are justified? "The Lord our righteousness", as the Scriptures say

Yes. :-)

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Re: - posted by TaylorOtwell (), on: 2009/11/15 16:23

Quote:

KingJimmy wrote:

Quote:

Is what you are trying to say is that the faith that saves denies all moral virtue that a man may claim to have? In other words, we say there is "nothing else but God" in terms of how we are justified? "The Lord our righteousness", as the Scriptures say

Yes. :-)

Thanks for clarifying! :-)

Re: Justification by Faith: The Grounds of Our Justification - posted by Leo_Grace, on: 2009/11/15 17:50

Excellent essay, Jimmy. It is well-written, comprehensive, and accurate. It is refreshing to see a long post that was actually composed by the poster rather than just copy/paste from others -- I wish there were more "homemade" posts like this in sermonindex.

Just one thing, please check the sentence below from Paragraph 2 of the Romans 2 section, it might need editing (word missing?):

"The apostle Paul says there are some who think they will fare well on the day of judgment because of who they {are}, being law observing Jews (2:17)."

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2009/11/15 18:06

Quote:

Excellent essay, Jimmy. It is well-written, comprehensive, and accurate. It is refreshing to see a long post that was actually composed by the poster rather than just copy/paste from others -- I wish there were more "homemade" posts like this in sermonindex.

I am glad you enjoyed it. I think people would do well to truly flesh out things themselves, instead of simply copying and pasting the works of other men. Granted, some people are not gifted as teachers, or simply lack the time, so I can understand them doing such. But, I think it is best as a community here on the internet that we bring our unique perspectives to the table and try to express those things, so that we might personally grow while attempting to grow others.

Thanks for the grammar check. I fixed it in the original copy :-)