Title: Justification by Faith Alone

Text: Romans 4:5

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One of the most basic questions that must be addressed by any religion is this: “How can man be right with God?” How can man be right with God? This question is the very center of any system of religious thought.

Indeed, this question is the very heart of Christianity. To answer this question is to wrestle with the biblical doctrine of justification. Justification deals with how a man is declared just, or righteous, in the eyes of God. How are we declared good enough, right enough, just enough, to meet the standard of God? Justification.

You can see how important our answer to this question really is: how are we made right with God? It is no wonder that this doctrine has been called the very hinge upon which Christianity turns. Consider the stakes: if we answer the question wrongly, we are liable to eternal separation from and punishment by God himself. Consider the practical implications: if we answer the question wrongly, then we spend our lives miserably seeking to be good enough, loving enough, faithful enough, just hoping that we have performed well enough to meet a threshold of goodness. Consider the doctrinal implications: if I have to do something to earn my right standing before God, does that mean that Christ’s work was not enough? Was his performance deficient? Was his sacrifice not sufficient for me to be saved?

“How are we made right with God?” is a crucial question, and we will wrestle with it tonight, and answer it by examining the biblical doctrine of justification. I plan to preach a single verse from Romans chapter 4, verse 5.

Romans 4:5

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”

PRAYER

1. First, notice in our verse: **the status of those whom God justifies: they’re ungodly**. They are ungodly, impious, irreverent, we might translate it.
   1. If the main question of every religion is “How is man made right with God?” then within Christianity the question is agitated even more: “How is an unrighteous man made right with God?” If the essence of sin is ungodliness, then how can an ungodly man be made one with God himself?
   2. Indeed, Paul has made clear in Romans 1 already that the wrath of God from Heaven is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. It’s not merely that we’ve missed the mark and we need a little help to get back into God’s good graces. Paul is saying that mankind is opposed to God. Mankind is an enemy to God, marked by his divine displeasure.
   3. So, because of the presence of sin, the question has shifted from “How is man made right with God” to “How does a sinful enemy be made right with a holy God?” The answer is that we can’t. We don’t have the ability to. We are all unrighteous, totally unable and unwilling to be reconciled to this righteous God. We’re adrift in the seas of our own vanity. If it were up to us, we’d continue to sail further from God with every passing moment.
   4. Notice too: Paul defines us by our position as it relates to God himself: we are ungodly. We’re notjust bad. We are, in one sense, the opposite of God; ungodly. We’re marked by a disposition that is the antithesis of everything that God is and that God requires. We’re completely contrary to the very essence of God.
   5. God is love, and we are hate. God is mercy, and we are blind wrath. God is gentleness, and we are harshness. God is generosity, and we are miserly greed. God is kindness, and we are cruelty.
   6. Not only are we ungodly in our actions, we are ungodly in our very hearts. The bible says that no one seeks after God, no, not one. We’re content in our ungodliness, we love it, we’re dominated by it, we’re enslaved to it, and we seek nothing other than it.
   7. This is the state of those addressed by Paul in this verse. They are, and we are, the ungodly. But he doesn’t stop there.
2. Notice, second, in our verse: “Who is it that justifies these ungodly souls?” Who is it that makes right these decidedly un-right people? **It is God himself, God is the justifier**: “And to the one who does not work but believes ***in him*** who justifies the ungodly,” ***It is God*** who justifies the ungodly.
   1. It is not man that justifies himself. It is not man that makes himself right with God. Justification is not our apology to God. Justification is not the renewal of our natures, and the redoubling of our efforts to please him. It’s not our response to God’s grace. Justification is not our growth in holiness, our doing better, or even our doing holy things like going to church, praying, reading our bible, or taking the Lord’s supper. Justification is God’s action.
   2. And what exactly is God’s action in justification? In justification God ***declares*** someone to be just, or to be righteous. That is vitally important, so I will say it again***: justification is God’s action of declaring someone to be just, or righteous***.
      1. In a very real sense, this is the point that divided the Catholics and Protestants during the protestant reformation, and it is the point that continues to divides Catholics and Protestants like us today.
      2. Justification is not God **making** someone just, righteous, or holy. Justification is God **declaring** someone to be just, righteous, or holy.
      3. The language comes from a legal background. Imagine, if you will, God being the divine judge that slams his gavel down on the bench and rules that a defendant is not guilty, that is, the defendant has acted in accordance with the law. That is what God does in justification. He slams the gavel of divine justice down and declares that sinners are not only not guilty, but also that the sinners have positively upheld the law of God. They are innocent, not liable to punishment or condemnation, they are vindicated before the law of God, and exonerated from all charges.
      4. That is justification. We can see this in Romans 8:33, which uses courtroom language: “Who shall bring *any* *charge* against God's elect? It is God who justifies.” Nobody can bring charges against God’s people, because it is God who justifies, and God has already declared his people not guilty in Christ.
      5. But this leads us to a legitimate question: If God is holy, righteous, and good, how can he declare the ungodly to be righteous? How can the unholy be declared to be holy? How can the guilty be declared to be innocent? That seems unjust, unfair, and unbefitting of God’s perfect moral character.
   3. How can God do this? On what grounds may God give this declaration?
      1. Here we move into another intimately related doctrine: **the doctrine of imputation**. Imputation. To impute means to reckon, to assign, to credit, or to count something.
      2. We see this imagery of imputation in the Old Testament sacrifices. The priest would take the lamb that was to be slaughtered, and he would lay his hands upon it. Why was he doing that? Because he was picturing the symbolic transfer of the sins of the Israelites onto the lamb. Israel’s sinfulness was imputed to that spotless lamb.
      3. Furthermore, this idea of imputation is explicit in the New Testament. Paul explains in the next chapter of Romans that because of Adam’s sin, his condemnation was imputed to us, his sin made us all sinners and brought about death to all mankind.
      4. But, the good news of the Gospel is that God justifies the ungodly through the justifying them as not guilty through the imputation of Christ’s work on their behalf.
      5. Last week I preached on Christ’s atoning work. That work contains two aspects: not only his willingness to take on the condemnation earned by his people, but also his active obedience to God’s law. Both of these aspects are crucial, especially for the doctrine of justification.
      6. If Christ was merely my substitutionary sacrifice, if he was merely the lamb that bore the punishment for my sins, then I have a problem. I am merely forgiven of my sins, but I am not yet righteous or just. If my condemnation, my punishment is removed by Christ, then I have been made innocent and avoided hell, but I have not yet been made righteous, I have not yet earned heaven, I have not yet been justified, or declared just. And we have to have that righteousness: Christ himself said “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you’ll never enter the kingdom of God.”
      7. But the biblical gospel contains both acts of imputation: that is, Christ’s obedience to the father, his earned righteousness, the entrance into heaven that he merited is imputed to us, is credited to us, and our earned guilt and condemnation, has been imputed to him, has been credited to him. In this blessed exchange, God retains his holy standard of perfection, mankind is treated as an innocent party on the basis of Christ’s righteous obedience, and Christ is treated as the condemned sinner in our place.
      8. This is the glorious exchange that takes place in the gospel, and it is this exchange, this double imputation that is the ground of our justification. This imputation of Christ’s life for ours is the basis of God’s declaring us justified.
3. So far we’ve seen the status of those that need to be justified: they’re ungodly. We’ve seen who it is that does the justifying: that’s God. We’ve examined what God does in justification: he declares sinners to be righteous because of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to sinners, and the imputation of their sin to Christ. The next question, is how do I get this justification? The answer is in our verse: ““And to the one who does not work but ***believes*** in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”” The one who believes is justified, and his faith is counted as righteousness.
   1. Here we see the necessity of faith. Faith becomes the mechanism of receiving justification. Faith is the necessary condition of our justification.
   2. The language here and the connection between faith and justification is crucial, so I want to explain that connection with precision: **faith is the necessary condition of our justification, but not the meritorious ground of our justification**. I’ll explain that statement in a second, but I want to say it again: **Faith is the necessary condition of our justification, but not the meritorious ground of our justification**.
   3. I say that faith is the necessary condition for our justification because the bible is clear that without faith, no man will see God. Jesus himself preached the gospel of the kingdom of God which was to repent and BELIEVE.
   4. But we must also remember that our believing is not the reason why God will declare us righteous, it’s not the reason why God can justify us. We must have faith, yes, we must believe, but it is Christ’s imputed righteousness, his perfect obedience counted to us, that merited our justification. His work and his alone is the ground upon which God may declare us to be just.
   5. Faith is the necessary condition, it is the thing without which we may not be justified, but it is not the meritorious ground, it is not the thing that earns us justification.

I know this all seems foreign, and perhaps tedious. Why is this important? Why am I teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith alone? First, because there are entire denominations of churches that march under the banner of Christianity and yet deny this biblical doctrine of justification by faith. Indeed, we call ourselves protestants, which means we follow in the tradition of the Protestant Reformers. These men sought to reform the Roman Catholic church, and when they saw that the Roman church would not be reformed, they started preaching the true gospel and started biblical churches.

This week I read through again the rulings that were pronounced by the catholic church in response to this protestant reformation. In the middle of the 1500s the roman church hosted a church council in the city of Trent in Italy. This council concluded with a series of declarations, or canons in which they anathematize, or condemn to hell, certain teachings or people who hold to those teachings. Let me summarize a few of them for you, particularly those that deal with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and explain how these undermine the biblical gospel.

* Canons of Trent
  + Canon 9: If anyone says, that by faith alone the ungodly is justified; and by that they mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate (work together with God) in order to obtain justification … let him be anathema (condemned to hell).
    - This canon assumes that we have to work together with God in order to be justified, which denies what we say above that it is God alone that does the justifying.
  + CANON 10. If anyone says, that men may be declared righteous (that is, justified) solely on the basis of the righteousness of Christ let him be anathema.
    - That means that Christ’s work is not sufficient to justify sinners, something must be added to it, something must supplement it, by which they mean our own works.
  + CANON 24.-If anyone says, that the justification we received is not kept and also increased before God through good works; and that those good works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification…; let him be anathema.
    - That canon means that we have to do works in order to keep our justification. We have to improve upon the merit that was given to us in Christ. But that understanding assumes that Christ’s work imputed to us was deficient; Christ did not do enough for us in the atonement; we have to supplement his work by our own. Which means we have to work hard in order to keep our salvation. And that is a terrible life to live, because you’ll never have assurance that you’ve done enough.
  + CANON 30.-If anyone says, that, after a sinner is justified there remains no more punishment for sins, that their eternal punishment has been blotted out…; let him be anathema.
    - This canon deals with the logical conclusion of justification by faith alone. If Christ has fully atoned for our sin and earned our entrance into heaven, and if those things are imputed to us, then there is nothing left for us be punished for: Christ has taken all of our punishment.
    - But, if there are sins that are not dealt with, if we have not been completely justified, if we still have to work for our justification, then we will die with sins that need to be atoned for, and we Genuine believers will go to purgatory, the Catholics say.
    - Purgatory, they say, is a place of punishment we God’s people are purged of their remaining sins before they enter into heaven. But, such a doctrine is not only unbiblical, it is counter to the biblical doctrine of justification. If Christ has completely dealt with our sins, there is nothing left for me to be punished for, I have been given the right to enter straight into heaven upon death.
    - Justification by faith alone denies the existence of or need for further punishment for God’s people in purgatory.
  + CANON 32.-If anyone says, that the justified person, by the good works which he performs … does not truly merit…eternal life… let him be anathema.
    - This canon clearly teaches that our good works are meritorious for our justification, they earn our entrance into eternal life, even if they caveat it by saying through the grace of Christ.
    - This is exactly the opposite of what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9**not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”
  + Canon 33 says that if anyone disagrees with the Roman church’s declaration regarding justification, that one is anathema.
    - According to Rome, there is a special place in hell for people that believe in justification by faith alone.
  + All of these declarations and anathemas of the Council of Trent have never been revoked. The decrees of the Council of Trent are confirmed by both the Second Vatican Council (1960s) and the official “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (1992).
* Those are the doctrinal reasons why the biblical teaching on justification needs to be proclaimed with clarity and with resolve.
* Finally, I want to close tonight with four practical reasons that justification by faith alone is crucial to our spiritual health. I want to give us a few reasons to see that this is not merely an academic exercise in speculative theology; the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a joy to our souls, and an encouragement for us in our Christian life.
  + First, justification by faith alone teaches us that you’re as loved by God on your best day as you are on your worst day.
    - We all have bad days. Days where we get a parking ticket, an unexpected bill comes in, your boss gives you an extra assignment, and everything seems to be going against you. In your frustration you yell at the kids, kick the dog, and lash out at your spouse.
    - The doctrine of justification teaches us that in that moment of sinful frustration and angry outbursts you are as loved by the Father as Christ is loved. God sees you with as much affection and tenderness in that weak moment as he sees his very own son, because it’s not your performance that makes God love you.
    - God loves you because he sees in you the very perfections, the very obedience and faithfulness of his very own son. There’s nothing left in you for God to condemn. You have been made a beloved son or daughter, equally as loved by the father as the very Son of God himself.
    - You’re as loved by God on your worst days, as you are on your best days.
  + Second, justification by faith alone teaches us that your salvation is as secure on your best day as you are on your worst day. Your salvation is as secure on your best day as you are on your worst day.
    - If you have been declared righteous before God, the perfect and holy judge of the universe, and IF the basis of his declaration is the perfect work of his son on your behalf, then there is nothing that is lacking from your case. You’ve been vindicated by God himself. Who can bring a charge against you?
    - What more needs to be done on your account? Nothing. What is lacking from your salvation? Nothing. What more need you do to make sure that God really loves you? Nothing. What bible reading or church attendance or generosity or acts of mercy do you have to do in order to be in God’s good graces? None.
    - Your enemies can’t condemn you. Your feelings can’t condemn you. Your falling into that same sin again can’t condemn you.
    - Christ has done it all. Nothing in our hands do we bring, simply to the cross we cling.
    - Your salvation is as secure on your best day as you are on your worst day.
  + Third, When you know you’re completely justified, you no longer have to compete with others.
    - You can congratulate with genuine joy when others get praised instead of you, when they get the place of honor, when they get the recognition instead of you. You don’t have be jealous or discontent, because you’ve already been declared complete and righteous. You have nothing else to prove.
    - The sovereign king of the universe has said before all of his angelic host, and will one day declare in front of all creation that you are righteous, that you are just, that you are complete, that you lack nothing needed for eternity in heaven, that you have nothing within you to condemn or that is worthy of wrath.
    - If the God of heaven has said that on your account, what does it matter if someone gets a little more attention than you? If God’s attention is on you, what more attention do you need? Why must we get all wrapped up in competing with others, when the eternal, all-knowing Father thinks that we are enough, that we are perfect in his Son, that we lack nothing, and that we are, in Christ, worthy of all of his affection and joy?
    - Let us not be held captive to prideful competition with others, because we have been made the apple of God’s eye through the work of his son.
  + Fourth, when you know you’re completely justified before God, you aren’t held captive to the opinions of others.
    - You no longer have to be enslaved to what others think about you. You don’t have to defend your reputation. You don’t have to put up a front, and act like you’ve got it all together. You don’t have to pretend and wear a mask. Men, you don’t have to be the funniest, or the strongest, or the richest, or the cleverest, or the smartest. You don’t have to be critical of others, and correct everyone to show off your intelligence. Women, you don’t have to have the perfect house, or cook the perfect meals, be the perfect wife and mother, or produce pinterest-level cuteness at all times. It’s ok to be ordinary and average because God has declared you special to him.
    - We’ve already been tried and declared perfectly righteous by the Sovereign judge of the universe. What can anybody else’s opinion do to you? Don’t fall into the trap of being bound by another’s opinion. You don’t need their affirmation, you have been affirmed by your heavenly father. You don’t need their praise; your heavenly father has already told you in Christ, “well done my good and faithful servant.” You don’t need to have your beauty or your wit or your intelligence praised by men, you’ve already been accepted and beloved by the Father.
    - When you know that you stand justified before God, you’re no longer held captive to the opinions of others.

In conclusion, this offer of justification before God is available not merely to the rich, not to the powerful, not to the really holy Christians, and not to the privileged majority or the oppressed minority. No, this offer is available to any that would but believe on the Son. I urge you to believe in the Christ of scripture, to believe that his work was sufficient for all of his people, that there is nothing lacking from his work, and that all you must do is receive him as your king.

We have tonight another occasion to think about the justifying work of God on our behalf. The Lord’s supper is a means of grace that God has instituted in order to preserve and protect God’s people on their journey to the heavenly city. See again the very body that was broken for you, and remember how Christ stood in your place, that your condemnation and curse was imputed to him, and how he willing received every drop of wrath that was reserved for you.

See also his blood, and remember his atoning work of cleansing. The bible speaks of having garments washed white by the blood of the lamb. That language means that his blood, his willing death, is the means of our cleansing, his blood becomes the garment of our righteousness, the robe of our perfection.

His obedience is imputed to us, and his righteousness is credited to our account. Nothing is lacking for us now; our entrance into heaven is secure, and our status as redeemed sons and daughters is final. The gavel of divine justice has struck the Son, that we might stand vindicated before the divine judge of all.

Entrance to this table is reserved for those that have believed on the Son of God and are following him in obedience. If you’re devoted to the Apostles teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers, just like the disciples in Acts 2, then we invite you to come. But if you have not believed, or if you are not obeying scripture by being baptized and joining a local body of believers, then I urge you to let the plate pass.

Let’s pray and ask the Lord to bless these elements.

Bread- 1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.”

Cup- Ephesians 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace”

Prayer

224- There is a fountain

Let us depart, remembering that we’ve been declared by God to be holy, righteous, and just, and rejoicing in knowing that our standing before God is on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Christ himself. Nothing is left for us to do, but to joyfully walk in that righteousness and praise his name. Amen.