

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN GALATIANS

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In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul wrote the inspired statement that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Paul understood how important scripture would be in delivering reproof and correction to believers. Indeed, the occasion of his letter to Galatians was the need to offer such reproof and correction regarding the doctrine of justification through faith in Christ alone.

More specifically, the book of Galatians was occasioned by the efforts of so-called Judaizers who sought to pervert the gospel by teaching that salvation required both faith in Christ and observance of the Old Testament Law. Paul marveled that the Galatian believers were “so soon removed from him that called (them) into the grace of Christ unto another gospel.” And he took care to communicate that their new gospel was indeed a perversion of the true gospel of justification through Christ alone. In fact, Paul makes eleven references to the gospel (**1:6**, 7, 8, 9, 11; **2:2**, 5, 7 (2), 14; **3:8**; 4:13.) McCarthy quotes Chafer’s eloquent definition of the kind of justification that Paul taught the Galatians:

To forgive means subtraction while to justify means addition. Justification is a declaration of God respecting the Christian that he has been made forever right and acceptable to himself... Justification causes no one to be righteous. It is not bestowment as such of righteousness. It rather proclaims one to be justified whom God sees as perfected in His Son... The sinner becomes righteous in God’s sight when he is in Christ; he is justified by God freely, or without cause, because he is righteous in His sight.¹

This paper will examine Paul’s main references to justification, grace and faith. It will also examine the consequences of adding works to the gospel. And finally, it will examine the benefits accorded to believers who adhere to the true gospel.

¹ Chafer, Lewis S. *Systematic Theology. Vol 7.* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), 218-222.

Tenney observes that Paul makes eight explicit references to justification throughout his letter to the Galatian churches.² Paul's first use of the term appears in 2:16, where he uses it three times in a potent summary of the doctrine:

“...knowing that a man is not justified by works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

The power of this inspired statement lies in its God-breathed simplicity. Paul plainly states that we are justified by Christ and not by the law. And he essentially re-states this simple truth twice for emphasis. McCarthy rightly observed the importance of Paul's statement that the Galatian believers first accepted Christ because they knew *this* truth well.

Paul is convinced about how to be justified and he boldly reminds the Galatians that it is not by works that one is justified but by faith. He uses the word “knowing” as a foundation for his position ... Thus, Paul knowing and understanding the truth believed in Christ Jesus alone to be justified and not in the law at all (the Galatians he was writing to knew also, “even we believe.”³

Paul's second use of the term justification (δικαιωθῆναι, *dikaiōthēnai*) appears in 2:17, where he writes “But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.” McCarthy observed that while this statement appears difficult at first glance, it can be understood by examining its several phrases.⁴ In his analysis, McCarthy concludes that Paul uses this verse to teach that

² Merrill Tenney, *Galatians: The Chart of Christian Liberty* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 117

³ David R. McCarthy, *Called Unto Liberty*, (Newington, CT: Emmanuel Baptist Theological Seminary, unpublished dissertation), p. 62

⁴ McCarthy, p.

both Jews and Gentiles are saved “from the letter of the law to serve God and do not serve the letter of the law for salvation.”

Paul’s next mention of justification occurs in chapter 3. In 3:8, Paul writes “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.” This verse clearly implies that Abraham received the same gospel as the Galatians received and that Old Testament believers were justified in the same manner as the Galatian believers, i.e. through faith in Christ. Paul provides additional support for this conclusion in verse 6, where he writes “Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

McCarthy notes that while we don’t have an inspired record of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ having been preached to Abraham, we do have the inscripturated account of Abraham having followed God’s direction to offer Isaac as a sacrifice⁵ The typology inherent in this account serves to further reinforce the teaching the believers were justified by faith in the Messiah during both the Old Testament and New Testament dispensations.

Several verses latter, Paul again uses the term justification in 3:11. Here, he writes “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, the just shall live by faith.” McCarthy notes that, in this verse, Paul is quoting Habakkuk 2:4, which also teaches that the just shall live by faith.⁶ A full appreciation of this verse requires an examination of the broader context. In 3:10, Paul writes that “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” In context, then, we see

⁵ McCarthy, p. 78.

⁶ McCarthy, p. 81

that Paul taught the Galatian believers that the law was not only incapable of providing justification, but it also served to place them under a curse. Later in chapter 3, Paul expands on this theme in his teaching that real purpose of the law was to reveal the need for justification, not to provide justification. This teaching is evident in verses 3:24-25, where Paul writes, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.” In his commentary on Galatians, Luther observed this same theme:

But Paul treateth not here of the civil use of the law, for another use of the law is divine and spiritual, which is to increase transgressions, that is to say, to reveal unto man his sin, his blindness, his misery, his iniquity, his ignorance, hatred and contempt of God, death hell, judgment, and the deserved wrath of God.⁷

The last use of the term justification occurs in 5:4. Here, Paul writes, “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.” In this verse, Paul taught that the Galatian believers, who were trusting in their circumcision for justification, were not, in fact, not trusting in the true gospel. In fact, this verse is perhaps Paul’s most direct indication of the eternal consequence of placing one’s trust in the law for salvation.

Paul also points to three other consequences of adding works to the gospel. First, in 1:8 he indicated that anyone who preaches another gospel is “accursed.” Second, in 2:21, he observes that if “righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.” In making this statement, Paul illustrates the absurdity of Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary if, in fact, our salvation could have been accomplished by the law. Similarly, in the opening verses of

⁷ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Classics, 1979 edition), p. 189.

Chapter 4, Paul observes that the sacrifices and persecution endured by Christians would also be in vain if Christ's sacrifice wasn't required by God.

The role of grace and faith in justification is amply attested throughout the New Testament. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul made perhaps his clearest statement regarding the role of grace and faith in our justification. In Ephesians 2:8, we read, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." While we don't see this idea communicated quite so directly in Galatians, the same doctrine is taught throughout the book. Indeed, in writing to the Galatians, Paul claimed to have called by God's grace, even from his mother's womb (1:15). And he records that "...James, Cephas, and John ... perceived the grace that was given unto (him) (2:9). Importantly, in both verses, Paul teaches that grace was given to him by God. McCarthy offers an excellent definition of grace:

(Grace) means good will, loving-kindness, or merciful kindness. It is receiving that which one does not deserve, a gift. Also God gives Christians the gift of grace to empower them for his service (Ac 14:26; Ro 12:3, 6; 15:15; 1 Co. 15:10; 2 Co. 9:8, 12:9; Ga 2:9; Ep. 3:7-8; He 12:28)⁸

Paul also addresses the role of faith in justification throughout Galatians. In fact, he uses the English word "faith" 19 times throughout four of the book's six chapters.

McCarthy defines faith as "A conviction of the truth of anything, belief, or trust in something." McCarthy also notes that the word faith is found in 321 verses throughout scripture, but almost exclusively in the New Testament.⁹

The first mention of faith in Galatians occurs in verse 2:20, where Paul writes, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." In this verse, Paul speaks to the new life that we have in Christ as the result of our

⁸ McCarthy, p. 15.

⁹ McCarthy, p. 14.

faith in Christ's completed sacrifice. It is noteworthy that this verse makes no mention of the law as making any contribution to our justification in Christ and the resultant life that we now live.

Paul's next mention of the role of faith in justification occurs in verse 3:2, where he asks the Galatians "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" Here, Paul employs a question to encourage the Galatians to consider if they initially relied upon the law for salvation or if they simply placed their faith in Christ. The clear implication of question is that their justification before God was dependent only on their faith, not their works. In a recent lecture on Galatians, Dr. Joel Grassi commented that Paul's uses of interrogatives in this chapter was meant to encourage reflection and self-evaluation in much the same manner as the Lord's questioning of Adam in the Garden. Paul uses the word faith 13 additional times in the subsequent verses of chapter 3 (3:2, 5, 7, 8, 9 (2), 11, 12, 14, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26).

Paul next employs the word faith in chapter 5. In 5:5, he writes, "For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith." In the broader context of the book, this verse teaches that we receive the Spirit upon being justified through faith and that our future hope also rests upon our faith in Christ. McCarthy points to Stott's comments on the believer's hope:

What we are waiting for is termed "the hope of righteousness," the expectation for the future which our justification brings, namely spending eternity with Christ in Heaven. For this future salvation we wait. We do not work for it; we wait for it by faith. We do not strive anxiously to secure it, or imagine that we have to earn it by good works... by faith, trusting only in Christ crucified, we wait for it.¹⁰

¹⁰ John R.W. Stott. *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians*. (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1968), 134.

The next mention of faith occurs in 5:6, where Paul reiterates the broad theme of the book in his statement that “For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.” The efficacy of faith and insufficiency of the law are powerfully contrasted in this succinct verse. This writer also sees a suggestion that our faith is a loving gift from God. Paul inscripturated a similar thought in Romans 5:8, where we wrote, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

It is clear that Paul uses Galatians to teach the gospel of justification by grace through faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Paul also addresses the benefits of our justification. Importantly, we have already addressed the removal of the curse of the law for those who are justified in Christ. However, this writer also sees at least six additional benefits of justification in Galatians.

First, we see that when we are justified in Christ, we are delivered from servitude to the law to sonship in God. In 3:26, Paul writes that we “are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” And in 4: 7, he writes, “Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.”

Second, we see that that justification results in the removal of earthy barriers that would otherwise separate individuals. In 3:27-29, Paul writes that For as many of you as have been baptized into ... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Pettingill observes the same teaching in 1 Cor 12:12, where Paul writes “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is

Christ.”¹¹ However, this author would not agree with Pettingill’s assertion that believers are baptized by the Holy Spirit into a universal body of Christ.

Third, when we are justified in Christ, we receive great liberty in Christ. In 5:1, Paul writes “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” While Paul’s letter is clearly intended as a rebuke to those believing Jews who desired to retain the law, it also offers encouraging words regarding the liberty that believers find in the pure gospel of Scripture. Indeed, Tenny has called the Book of Galatians the “Charter of Christian Liberty.” Tenny also offer that:

Galatians embodies the germinal teaching on Christian freedom which separates Christianity from Judaism, and which launched it up on a career of missionary conquest... It has been called the “Magna Charta” of spiritual emancipation...¹²

Fourth, when we are justified in Christ, we have access to the fruits of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In 5:22-23, Paul writes, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

Fifth, when we are justified in Christ, we have access to membership in a local church assembly. In 6:10, Paul writes, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of *the household of faith*.” Our membership in our local “household of faith” not only provides a venue for edification and service, but also provides access to the support from a community of fellow believers who are called to “do good” unto each other.

¹¹ William Pettingill, *By Grace Through Faith Plus Nothing*. (Findlay: Fundamental Truth Publishers, 1938), p. 57.

¹² Tenney, p. 15.

In summary, it is clear that in his epistle to the churches in Galatia, Paul sought to correct those Galatians that had fallen into the trap of adding works to the gospel. Paul taught that justification was possible only in the true gospel of grace through faith. And, importantly, circumcision added nothing to that great truth. Baptist believers would do well to bear in mind Paul's warning to those who taught another gospel. And, indeed, we would do well to use the occasion of reading this great treatise to test our own motivations for our works. Amen!

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