

Galatians 2:15-21
(ESV)

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 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.

17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION
Galatians 2:15-21

The heart of Paul's argument: We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ not by works of the law.

Paul moves from the specific case of circumcision to the larger issues at stake in Antioch. By their insistence on circumcision and the necessity of the law obedience the Judaizers are subverting the true gospel, not Paul. There is evidence that Judaism in Paul's day did not see the Law as a gospel of works but a gracious act of God through which He revealed His Divine will to His chosen people. In other words, the gift of the law was an act of grace on God's part, and therefore not antithetical to a life of faith.

These same arguments exist today and even abound among certain schools of Christian scholarship. The problems with such approaches, however, are 1) they assume that Paul misunderstood the Law and its proponents and 2) they fail to recognize the judgment that no flesh is able to keep the law (Gal. 2:16; Psalm 143:2) and, therefore, there is no one good before God (Rom. 3:9-18; Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Isa. 64:6).

Who better to understand the law and the teaching of the Pharisees than Paul a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, and blameless as to righteousness under the law (Phil. 3:4-6). Paul was not ignorant of such interpretations of the law as one trained to love and cherish the law himself. Nonetheless, Paul's view of the law changed when he was confronted with the risen Jesus Christ such that he viewed "works of the law" as the antithesis to justification "through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16).

Furthermore, the judgment of Scripture and the judgment of history is that no flesh keeps the law.

Romans 3:9-18:

9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, 10 as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

11 no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one.”

13 “Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

14 “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

17 and the way of peace they have not known.”

18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Romans 3:19-20:

19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The question has been raised whether the law requires perfect obedience and advocates meritorious works based on the law. Many scholars have argued that Judaism viewed the relationship between God and man on the basis of grace. God graciously initiated the covenant with Israel and gave them the law as means by which they could maintain the covenant relationship. God did not require perfect obedience but rather judged the intentions of the heart and accepted man’s imperfect attempts to keep the law on the basis of his mercy. In other words, God suspended his perfect

justice in favor of his mercy in order to maintain the covenant relationship with his imperfect people. This view of Judaism is similar to the view of Catholicism which led to the Protestant Reformation. According to Catholic dogma (pre-Vatican II), a man entered into covenant with God on the basis of grace through baptism. Once in the covenant, the individual had to maintain the covenant by doing good works and acts of penance. A person could break the covenant but be brought back in through acts of repentance and good works as an appeal to the grace of God.

That Paul would have been familiar with such perspectives in his own day is of little doubt. He was a man of his times who had been thoroughly trained in Judaism. What is not recognized, however, is the differences Paul had with Judaism in his day. Paul was not building a straw man argument by claiming that Judaism was purely a religion of works without grace but he did see in Judaism legalistic traits that subverted the gospel. Judaism did not go far enough in its understanding of sin and the righteousness of God. Judaism failed to recognize that the righteousness required by the law could not be fulfilled by fallen man (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:19-20). Paul had come to realize the sinfulness of his own heart even as he endeavored to remain faithful to the law, an endeavor that led him to persecute Jesus as he rounded up and arrested Christians. The fault of the Judaizers and all who make similar claims is their own honesty, lack of knowledge of their own hearts, and their underestimation of the holiness of God and His just wrath against sin and sinners. Paul, through his encounter with Jesus, was made painfully aware of the sinful deceptiveness of his own heart. Just when we suppose our pitiful efforts to obey God are sufficient we are overtaken by haughtiness of heart and are self-condemned. The subtlety of this threat can only be countered by a thorough understanding of the doctrine of justification.

What is justification?

Justification is the act of God by which guilty sinners are declared righteous before Him. To be justified is to be declared righteous in

a legal sense. The idea behind the term pictures a court of law in which a guilty party is declared innocent and free by the judge. The Biblical doctrine of justification teaches us that in Jesus Christ we sinners, offenders of God's holiness and just law, are declared to be righteous before God and are therefore free from condemnation. This is the forensic (or legal) aspect of justification and deals with forgiveness.

A second aspect of justification deals with how we gain the merits of perfect righteousness before God. Justification, then, has two parts: forgiveness and imputation of righteousness.

1. Forgiveness: Through Jesus Christ we forgiven of our sins: Psalm 103:12; Acts 13:38-39; 2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:13-14; 2:14) .

2. Imputation of righteousness: Not only are we forgiven, but the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which we could never obtain or attain on our own is freely imputed (or credited) to us through faith in Him. Through imputation we are declared righteous before God: Isa. 61:10; Rom. 3:21-22; 4:3 [Gen. 15:6]; 4:6; 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:21.

Imputed righteous is differentiated from the idea of *infused righteousness*. Infused righteousness is the idea that God actually puts righteousness into us and thereby changes us so that we have our own righteousness. Traditional Catholic dogma teaches, that justification is not a once for all act of God by which he declares us righteous and guarantees our salvation. Instead, justification is first obtained at baptism and then faith is required to continue in a state of justification. A person never really knows whether or not they are in a state a grace, and grace can be increased by good works. The logical outcome of this teaching is that salvation is based not

on grace alone but on grace plus our merit.¹ It is exactly such a concept that Paul so vehemently opposes in Galatians.

How are we justified?

We are justified by grace alone by faith alone in Jesus alone apart from any merit or work of our own (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-31; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-14; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:7).

1. Justification is by grace alone! (Rom. 3:24; 5:12-21). Because of man's depravity God initiates salvation by extending grace toward sinners. God moves toward us and calls us to Himself (Rom. 5:6-8; 8:29-30).

2. Justification is by faith! We do not obtain justification by amassing merit on our own; we are justified by trusting in Jesus Christ who atoned for our sins by His death on the cross (Rom. 4:5, 5:1; 5:9-11)

3. Justification is by faith in Jesus! Justification does not result in God setting aside His justice for the sake of His mercy. God is both merciful and just, and in His mercy God overlooked the sins previously committed (Rom. 3:25), but in Christ He is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26) who is the propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:24-25; 1 John 2:1-2). Propitiation refers to Jesus work as an atoning sacrifice for sins by which the justice and wrath of God against sin is satisfied for all who believe in Jesus.

What are the benefits of justification?

- Forgiveness of Sins – Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; 2:13-15
- Cleansing from Sin – 1 Cor. 6:11;

¹See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 722-733.

- Peace with God -- Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:19
- Participation in the community of faith – Eph. 2:11-22
- Reconciliation with God – Rom. 5:10-11; 2 Cor. 5:18-19
- New life – Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20
- Eternal life – John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 10:28; 17:3; Acts 13:48; Rom. 5:21; 6:22, 23; 1 Tim. 1:16; Titus 3:7; 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 5:11, 13, 20; Jude 1:21