

Justification By Faith
Galatians 2:15-21
Tampa Covenant Church
13 September 2026

Proposition: Because God justifies the guilty solely on the basis of Christ's person and work; we who have been justified by faith are called to live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

FCF: Our tendency to establish our right standing before God through what we do or to rebuild what Christ has already torn down in our lives.

RHF: Through his person and work, Jesus Christ is the ground of our right standing before God.

(#1) Introduction:

We're continuing our fall series in Galatians entitled, *The Freedom of the Gospel*. And last week we looked at two stories Paul told the Galatian churches concerning the truth of the gospel. The first took place in Jerusalem, where Paul didn't yield to the false brothers' assertion that Titus needed to be circumcised. The second took place in Antioch, where Paul publicly confronted Peter after Peter broke fellowship with the Gentile believers. Over the last few weeks I've wondered how these Galatian churches reacted to Paul's no-nonsense approach at this point in the letter. Did they think Paul was too harsh and uncompromising? Did they understand what was at stake?

Today's helps us understand why Paul didn't yield to the false brothers in Jerusalem and why he confronted Peter in public. He was defending the very heart of the gospel; that not only had implications on the lives of Galatians but on our lives as well: It's the central truth that God justifies the guilty solely on the basis of Christ's person and work; therefore, we who have been justified by faith are called to live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave **(#2) himself for us.**

Justification by Faith Declared: (vv.15-16)

(#3) Paul writes in vv.15-16, 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.* I trust as Samantha was reading our text, you recognized that Paul's language has now shifted from autobiography to theology? And in these verses, the theological terms are flying off the page: *justified, faith and works of the law*. What's Paul doing? He's contrasting works of the law with faith in Jesus Christ. The point of contention is straightforward: Is a person justified before God; by works of the law or through faith in Christ?

Paul begins by acknowledging the fact that those (himself included) who were Jews by birth had an advantage over Gentile sinners. From a Jewish perspective, Gentiles were considered sinners simply because they were Gentiles; meaning they were strangers to God's covenant of promise.¹ But Paul is clear, it doesn't matter if you're a Jew or Gentile, *"no one will be justified by works of the law."*² Paul uses the word "justified"³ three times in these two verses so what does it mean? **(#4 Blank) I remember** as a young Christian, attempting to read through my bible for the first time and running into this word;

justification. Back then I didn't have a bible dictionary or study bible so I threw out the question at a lunch time bible study. And I was told to think of it like a presidential pardon. That was a helpful starting point but over the years, I've discovered it's much more than that. A pardon may remove the remaining punishment and legal penalties, but it doesn't erase the criminal and only declares forgiveness. (#5) The Shorter Catechism defines justification as *"an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."* This pardon isn't a one-time deal for past sins; it also covers our present and future sins.

(#6 Blank) When God justifies the guilty; he renders a favorable verdict in accepting and declaring them as righteous in his sight. And it's not a righteousness inherent to us. Rather it's the righteousness of Christ that's outside of us but has now been imputed (credited) to us and received through the instrument of faith alone in Christ alone. And this faith is not a work (something we do) rather it's a gift given to us by God to receive his gracious work in our lives. One writer said, it's not merely *"you may go; you're off the hook,"* but *"you may come; you're welcomed into my presence and fellowship."*⁴ Paul is saying, this is how both Jew and Gentile are made right with God; they're justified by faith alone in Christ alone. And so, why can't the works of the law serve as the other option?

Over the summer, when we studied the Ten Commandments, we quickly established that God gave his law to his people in the context of a covenant relationship. They received the law after God rescued them from slavery in bringing them to himself. The law was never given as the means for Israel to earn redemption or right standing with God rather it instructed them how they were to live as his people in their covenant relationship with him. And they were to live in obedience to the entire scope of the law; do the works of the law. That included its moral, judicial, and ceremonial requirements, some of which Paul mentions in this letter: circumcision, dietary regulations, and the observance of holy days.

The problem was never God's law; the problem has always been the human heart. The law can tell us what righteousness requires, but because of sin, we can't secure a right standing before God through our obedience to it. When used as the basis of our justification, Luther would describe works of the law as "contrary to grace." Not because God's law is contrary to grace. But because when it comes to justification, we can't rest in what we do and at the same time rest entirely in what God has graciously done for us in Christ.⁵ So what does it look like in our lives when we rest on things we do instead of resting in the work of Christ? This brings us to the second movement of our text; the folly (#7) of self-justification.

The Folly of Self-Justification: (vv.17-18)

Paul continues by answering a possible objection to Justification by faith in Christ (#8) alone. He writes, *"But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?"* As a fellow Jew, Paul is saying to Peter; brother if our right standing comes through faith in Christ alone (not the law), critics call us sinners just like the Gentiles. So then is Christ promoting sin in calling us away from the law?⁶ And Paul's response couldn't be stronger; "Certainly not!" Perish the thought!

And he answers the (#9) objection in v.18, *"For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor."* So for Paul, there's no sin in being justified by faith apart from the law; the sin is in rebuilding what has already been torn down. (#10 Blank) To get what Paul is saying, we have to revisit the incident at Antioch. Peter had already torn down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles by eating

freely with the Gentiles. But when the Jerusalem delegation arrived, he drew back and separated himself from the Gentile believers because of fear of criticism and social pressure. And in so doing, he was seeking to rebuild the very system of acceptance that Christ had already torn down through the gospel. Instead of resting in the favorable verdict that he and these Gentiles already received from God; Peter was looking to the Judaizers for approval.

And oftentimes we do the same thing. We know the gospel; the verdict is in that in Christ we're fully accepted and dearly loved by God. Yet we still find ourselves depending on lesser verdicts to reassure us that we measure up. I caught myself doing this last week. Jim, Alex and I met on Zoom to review the results of an *"Emotional and Spiritual Health Inventory"* as part of their elder training. The assignment was to rate ourselves on a scale of one to four in seven different areas. And as I reviewed my scores with them, I kept noticing how disappointed I was with my lower scores but how pleased I was with my highest scores; even noting areas that were trending upward. And after we got off the call, I asked myself; how much value do I place on my strengths? Are they the lesser verdicts I look to that tell me I matter.

And I don't think this is just a Mark Farrell issue; it's an all of us issue. We all search for and hang on to those things in our lives that allow us to render favorable verdicts of ourselves: *I must be a good parent because my children are doing well. This workplace would fall apart without me because I know my stuff and I work hard. I'm respected everywhere I go because I've managed to build a good reputation of the years. People rely on me quite a bit because I'm pretty cool headed and I don't get rattled under pressure.* Whatever it is; we all look to those things we can point to in saying, *"See, I matter; I bring value."* And those are all good things in one way or another, and they may say something about us in this life, but they don't carry into eternity. Therefore, we must continually take into our hearts that in Christ we've been fully accepted by God and we rest in his finished work as we live this life in light of the life to come. (#11) And this brings us to the final movement...

The Life of the Justified: (vv.19-21)

Notice how Paul describes this life (#12) beginning in v.19; *"For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God."* Paul is not only speaking for himself but he's describing what's true of all believers who've been justified by faith in Jesus Christ.⁷ He isn't saying that dying to law means he's free to live however he wants. No, he's died to the law so that he might live to God. For Paul, that meant an end to looking to the law to establish his right standing before God. And the principle is the same for us: the justified life is one that has been freed from useless striving to justify self so that we might also live to God. And he tells us (#13) how it happens in v.20, *"I have been crucified with Christ."* Full stop! When Paul says he's been crucified with Christ; he isn't talking about physically hanging on the cross with Jesus; he's describing a spiritual reality in our lives. Through our union with Christ, God regards us as having died with Christ in his death; meaning his death becomes our death. And this imagery speaks of "a decisive and total transfer from one state to another."⁸ And what emerges is a new life in Christ. (#14) That's why Paul says, *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."* Paul is saying I died but now I live; and the life I live is no longer defined by me but by Christ who lives in me. And that really leaves no room in our hearts to default to our self-justification projects. Because every time we find ourselves asking, *Do I matter? Have I done enough? Have I accomplished enough? Do I bring value?* We

must remember that our standing is in Christ because we belong to him and he lives in us. (#15) And Paul continues: *"The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."* This verse reminds us that the Christian life is a life of faith (trust). And that faith isn't some distant recollection of a decision made at an altar or in a coffee shop years ago. Rather, it's an ongoing, living reality in the life of the believer. John Calvin provides a helpful (#16) illustration, he writes, *"It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light."*⁹ See what Calvin is saying? The sun warms the earth by its heat. But you never get the sun's heat without its light because they're inseparable. In the same way, faith alone is the instrument by which we're justified, but genuine justifying faith is never alone; it continues to produce the fruit of a changed life; through the work of the Holy Spirit.

But look how intensely personal Paul (#17) makes this life of faith: *"I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* Paul knows that Christ gave himself for his church, but here he can say, Christ loved me; Christ gave himself for me. And that should be the testimony of every believer in this sanctuary. James often reminds us in our new members class and in the hymn sings that some of the songs we sing reflect that we're the people of God singing together. But we also sing songs that express the personal nature of our relationship with our Savior. Today we opened with *The Glories of* (#18) *Calvary* and sang, *"My heart is filled with a thousand songs, proclaiming the glories of Calvary; with every breath, Lord, how I long to sing of Jesus who died for me."* And later (#19) we sang from Psalm 145, *"How great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; how great is the Lord our God."* And there's a (#20 Blank) beauty in holding these two approaches together. While gathered in worship, we can all join with one voice in singing of the greatness of the Lord; who is "our God" and proclaiming the Glories of Calvary in singing of Jesus "who died for me."

Conclusion:

And when we continually take that truth into our hearts in worship, we find joy and delight in resting in what Christ has already done for us. It's knowing that the right standing we have with God isn't something we achieved; rather, it's something we received by grace through faith. (#21) Paul concludes, *"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."* In (#22 Blank) other words, if it were possible to obtain right standing with God through the works of the law, then Christ had no business dying! But thanks be to God, he bore the punishment we deserved in securing our way to God. That's grace! It's a grace we didn't earn, and its efficacy in our lives doesn't depend on our ability to keep our noses clean, but on the finished work of our faithful Savior. And so may we look to him and depend on him alone, knowing that when God looks at us, he sees the righteousness of his Son, who loved us and gave himself for us, that we might be free to live to God. Amen.

¹ In Ephesians, Paul describes the condition of those who were “Gentiles by birth”: they stood under the judgment of God because they had been excluded from citizenship in Israel; they were “foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:11–12).

² Paul quotes from Psalm 143:2; “*Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.*”

³ δικαίω (dikaioō). vb. to pronounce righteous, to justify. *To make or declare someone or something righteous.*

In the nt, the verb δικαίω (dikaioō) means to pronounce or declare a person “righteous.” In the face of accusations, the wise are justified by their actions (Matt 11:19; Luke 18:14). To attempt to justify oneself is to find an excuse for not acting justly (Luke 10:29; 16:15). One may be either justified or condemned, based on testimony (Matt 12:37; Rom 3:4). For Paul, faith in Christ is the basis for all justification, the result of which is righteous living (Rom 2:13; Gal 2:16–17).³

⁴ H. C. G. Moule, *Chapter XI: Justification by Faith*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 145.

⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 120–122.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 165.

⁷ George, 198.

⁸ Moo, 171.

⁹ John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote*, “On the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent,” Canon 11, Monergism, accessed September 11, 2026.