

Justification by Faith

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Introduction.

- A. The religious world around us tends to a minimalist view of what it takes to be a Christian. There are a lot of folks out there who will tell you that all you have to do to be saved is pray some prayer, and that guarantees you a place in heaven regardless of what you do later. Still others say that as long as you try to be a good person whenever you think about it, that's enough to please God. As a reaction to these points of view, we in the Lord's church spend a lot of time focusing on the things we DO have to do to please God.
- B. However, friends, we have to be careful not to OVER-emphasize the importance of godly actions. It is absolutely true that we need to strive to be righteous in everything we do, but it is also absolutely true that none of us will save ourselves by our own righteousness. We can't earn our way to heaven.
- C. Instead, our path to heaven is described by the apostle Paul in his great treatise on sin and redemption, the book of Romans. Paul tells us how it is that we can be justified, that is, considered righteous in the eyes of God, even though we have done unrighteous things. This is something that we need to understand, because unless we do understand it, we're missing out on one of the most important concepts in the entire Bible. Let's turn our attention this morning, then, to what is often described as justification by faith.

I. The Sin Problem.

- A. Of course, before we understand God's solution, we have to understand the problem, the problem of sin. Here's the basic situation: God, because of the love that defines His nature, chose to create man. He gave man a law, a series of requirements that God designed for man to fulfill. So. . . how can man be pleasing to God? The easy, obvious answer is by doing what God says. After all, that's the way we do things in every other area of our lives. If we want to please the government, we do what the government says; if we want to please our employer, we do what our employer says, and so on. We can call this "justification by works."
- B. We see the first problem with this scheme of justification by works described in Romans 1:18-19. Now, we don't have time to get into all the contextual subtleties of what Paul is saying here, or indeed, throughout the rest of this sermon, but the basic point is this: that out in the world, there are people who refuse to recognize God and choose to reject Him. God is plainly evident to them. He appears to them in creation just as He appears to us. However, they choose to deny that truth and live in an unrighteous way, earning God's wrath.
- C. We see people like this around us all the time, people who incur the wrath of God by defying the law of God. They engage in sin and immorality whenever they please, they make no effort to serve God, and they may even deny His existence. Obviously, such people can't be justified by their own works. They don't even try.
- D. However, Paul's condemnation of humanity doesn't end there. He next condemns those of us who believe in God, try to serve Him, and try to be godly. We see this happen in Romans 2:1-2. Here's Paul's point. When we look around at the evil people of the world and condemn them for their evil actions, we recognize the validity of a standard that condemns us too. When I get up in the pulpit and point the finger at the people who defy God's law, I've got three more fingers pointing back at me. When I condemn someone else for lying, I condemn myself, because I've lied too. When I condemn someone else for not trusting in God, I condemn myself, because I've been untrusting too, and so on. That's not just true of me; that's true of everyone who has ever tried to serve God. The standard of justification by works requires perfection. It requires us to always do everything that God has commanded, and none of us do that. We are all condemned by sin.

II. God's Solution.

- A. As the book of Romans continues, however, Paul reveals God's solution to this problem of sin. His explanation begins in Romans 3:21-24. We love to single out Romans 3:23 and quote it, but that verse is actually not the main point of the context. Remember that one path of justification by works that we've been talking about? Paul, in 3:21, tells us that there's another path to righteousness that doesn't involve perfect law-keeping. Instead, we can attain to the righteousness of God, which is as righteous as it's possible to get, through faith in Jesus Christ. This is true for everybody, whether we were religious or irreligious people. Everybody's sinned, so everybody needs to be saved through their faith in Jesus.
- B. This is not something that we earn for ourselves. Instead, we receive it as a gift. God, through the redemption of Jesus, chose to bestow His righteousness on us. It's justification not by works, but by faith.
- C. It's like this. During the second half of my sophomore year in high school, my father made a deal with me. If my grades through the rest of the school year reached a certain level, say a 3.75 grade point, then he would reward me with a new computer. If I had actually reached that level of scholastic excellence, I would have earned the computer. I would have been justified by works, so to speak. However, as things actually turned out, the second half of my sophomore year was when I hit the first major romantic trauma of my life, and that

had its predictably horrid effect on my report card. To say the least, I did not earn the computer. What did happen, though, is that my mother figured out what was going on in my head, felt sorry for me, and interceded with my father to buy the computer for me anyway. I got it not because I earned it, but as a gift.

- D. We see Paul making a similar point in Romans 4:4-5. He's essentially saying what I just got through saying, but this is one of the verses where the folks who don't believe in baptism for the remission of sins love to camp out. Their argument goes something like this: We're saved by faith, not by works. Baptism is a work, therefore we can't be saved by baptism. The flaw with the argument, though, is that it misunderstands the way that Paul uses the word "works." When Paul speaks of being justified by works, he's not talking about any one act, no matter how impressive. He's talking about being justified by an entire lifetime of perfect law-keeping. He's talking about someone who lives so righteously that they earn the reward of eternal life.
- E. That idea of being justified by works has nothing to do with baptism. Let me give you an example. Just a couple weeks ago, it was my honor and joy to baptize Angela Ramiro into Christ. Does this mean that Angela can now storm up to heaven, hammer on the door, and demand to be let in because her baptism shows how righteous and godly she is? Of course not! Now, Angela is a fine young lady, but she knows that she has had sin in her life, just as all the rest of us know it, and the presence of that sin would make a mockery of her claim to have earned the right to heaven. Baptism doesn't change that. Here's what baptism does: baptism fulfills the conditions that God has set in His word that we must meet before He will give us the gift of salvation. Baptism is meeting God's terms for forgiveness. Baptism is the way that we can attain to the righteousness of God apart from the law. Baptism is not being saved by works. It's being saved by faith.

III. Why God's Plan Works.

- A. Once we know what God's plan is, it's important for us to understand why God's plan works. Oddly enough, it's actually fairly similar to what happened to me in high school. I didn't earn the computer, but my mother loved me and interceded for me. Similarly, none of us earn eternal life, but Christ loved us and interceded for us. We see Paul explain in Romans 5:6-8. The means that Christ used to intercede for us was to die for us.
- B. It might not make sense at first that Christ had to die for us. After all, nobody had to die for me to get my computer. We must understand, though, how perfectly just God is. When God gives a law and warns that lawbreakers must die, when we break that law, there must be a death. For God to deny that would be for Him to deny Himself. The wonder of God's plan of salvation is that instead of forcing us to die for our own sin, Christ died for us. The death that God's justice demanded became the death that God's mercy provided.
- C. We see the results of the sacrifice of Christ explained in Romans 5:9-10. It is the blood of Christ that is the actual justifying agent in our salvation. We are made righteous by the death of Jesus. Because this is so, we are also saved from the wrath of God, which is only poured out against the unrighteous. Similarly, we are reconciled to God by the blood of Jesus. God has always wanted to be joined to mankind, but our sins separate us from Him. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, then, once that sin is taken out of the way, there is nothing keeping us apart from God. We can be reunited with Him. Furthermore, this salvation is not a one-time event. Just as Christ continues to live now, by His life, we continue to live spiritually through Him.

IV. Its Consequences for Us.

- A. Now that we understand the machinery of God's redemptive plan, we must recognize that this has a number of important consequences for us. Once we by faith make the decision to become Christians, we can claim all of the spiritual benefits we just got through describing. We are justified not by our works, but by our faith.
- B. So what then for us? Can we run around doing whatever we want because hey! Christ wrote a blank check for our sin already? Paul answers this precise question in Romans 6:16-18. His point is that when we are saved, God doesn't save us from sin just so we can go do whatever we want. Instead, as a consequence of our salvation, we become enslaved to righteousness. When we call Jesus "Lord," that's not just verbiage. It means that we are really committing ourselves to do what He wants, not what we want. This doesn't mean that we won't ever sin again, but it does mean that we have to be dedicated to doing God's will, even if we don't always succeed in doing it. If we abandon that dedication, if we decide that we don't care about what God wants anymore, we've given up on being slaves of righteousness and gone back to being slaves of sin. There's no such thing as being a spiritual free agent. We're always slaves of somebody. We just pick who.

Conclusion.

Once we understand all of these things, it's up to us to decide what we want to do with our lives. If we are already faithful Christians, well and good. We need to continue living as slaves of righteousness and refusing to submit to the devil. If we are Christians who are not being faithful, that's not good. If that's our situation, we need to lay hold of God's forgiveness by repenting of our sin and re-committing ourselves to do what He wants. If we aren't Christians at all, though, we see the remedy for this described in Romans 6:3-4. We need to recognize that we are dead in our sins, that we are lost, and that we will be eternally separated from God if we continue as we are. Then, we need to recognize that the blood of Christ offers us a way out of this spiritual death, and then we need to take advantage of it as the Scripture prescribes—through baptism.