

Reformation 500

Faith Alone

Romans 3:24-26

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Scripture

During this fall, we are focusing our attention on the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation began when an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. His propositions sparked a debate that eventually gave us five key Reformation doctrines, and are usually referred to by their Latin names: *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), and *soli deo Gloria* (glory to God alone). Today, I would like to examine faith alone.

Let's read Romans 3:21-26, although my text is Romans 3:24-26:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,** ²⁵ **whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.** ²⁶ **It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.** (Romans 3:24-26)

Introduction

In Romans 3:21-26 the Apostle Paul deals with the subject of *justification*. In these six tightly packed verses are “the centre and heart” of the whole letter, according to New Testament scholar C.

E. B. Cranfield.¹ Another New Testament scholar, Leon Morris asserts that this may be “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”² That is quite a statement, isn’t it?

The Bible uses a number of different words to describe how God saves sinners.

For example, the word *propitiation*, which is very important for our understanding of salvation, is used only 4 times in the entire New Testament. (One of those references is in Romans 3:25).

The word *reconciliation* is also used only 4 times in the New Testament.

The word *redemption* is used 9 times in the New Testament, although it used more frequently in the Old Testament (17 times).

The Greek word for *justification* and *righteousness* come from the same Greek root—*dike*. Remarkably, these two words are used hundreds of times in the Bible. Therefore, the frequency of the words indicates that *justification* is the central idea in salvation.

Preachers throughout history have come to the same conclusion. For example, John Calvin, the father of our Presbyterian and Reformed churches, called *justification* “the main hinge on which salvation turns.”³

Thomas Cranmer, the architect of the Church of England, believed that *justification* is “the strong rock and foundation of the Christian religion.” He declared that “whoever denies [this doctrine] is not to be counted for a true Christian man...but for an adversary of Christ.”⁴

Thomas Watson, one of the great Puritan Divines, said, “*Justification* is the very hinge and pillar of Christianity. An error about

¹ Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The International Critical Commentaries*, Vol. 1, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 199.

² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 173.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. For Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 726.

⁴ Thomas Cranmer, “Sermon on Salvation” in *First Book of Homilies* (London: Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, 1914), 25-26.

justification is dangerous, like a defect in a foundation. Justification by Christ is a spring of the water of life. To have the poison of corrupt doctrine cast into this spring is damnable.”⁵

And finally, the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, wrote, “When the article of *justification* has fallen, everything has fallen.... This is the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed.... It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.... Justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines.”⁶

As James Montgomery Boice says in his commentary, from which I am drawing much of today’s material, “these statements are not exaggerations. They present simple truth, because justification is indeed God’s answer to the most important of all human questions: How can a man or a woman become right with God? We are not right with God in ourselves. We are under God’s wrath. Justification is vital, because we must become right with God or perish eternally.”⁷

But what is *justification*? The word *justification* comes from the law courts and describes the act of a judge in acquitting an accused person. As Leon Morris says, “Justification...is a legal term indicating the process of declaring a person righteous.”⁸

It is important to note that *justification* does not mean that a person is *actually* righteous. It simply means that a person is *declared* to be right as far as the law is concerned. The person who is justified may have broken the law but the law has been satisfied, and so the person is declared to be right with respect to the law.

James Montgomery Boice helps us understand this concept

⁵ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 226.

⁶ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, compiled by Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), vol. 2, 702-704, 715.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, Volume 1, *Justification by Faith: Romans 1-4* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 380.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 271.

when he says:

Let me put it another way. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. When a defendant is found to stand in a wrong relationship to the law, he or she is condemned or pronounced guilty by the judge. Condemnation of that defendant does not make the person guilty. He or she is only declared to be so. In the same way, in justification the person is declared to be just or in a right relationship to the law, but not made righteous. A person *could* be declared righteous on the basis of his or her own righteousness; such a one would be pronounced innocent in a court of law. But in salvation, since we have no righteousness of our own and are not innocent, we are declared righteous on the grounds of Christ's atonement.⁹

Let me illustrate the concept of *justification*. I heard this illustration years ago as a student at the University of Cape Town when my pastor, Bishop Frank Retief, shared it with us.

Imagine that I die and I am now standing in the courtroom of God. I am on trial before God. The charge against me is that I have broken the Law of God. God is the Judge. He asks if I understand the charge against me, namely, that I have broken each one of the Ten Commandments.

I answer, "Yes, I understand the charges against me."

Further, God wants to know if I understand that if I have only broken the Law at just one point I am still guilty of death, which is that I will be sentenced to hell for all eternity.

Again, I answer, "Yes, I understand."

God calls for the first witness. The witness is in fact the Law.

The Law testifies that I have broken each one of the Ten Commandments many times. In fact, in my 61 years, I have broken each commandment thousands of times. And as each infraction is presented, I have to agree to my shame and embarrassment that I

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, Volume 1, Justification by Faith: Romans 1-4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 383.

have indeed broken the Law thousands upon thousands of times in my life.

God then calls the next witness against me. It is Satan.

Satan testifies against me how often he got me to break the Ten Commandments. In fact, he is quite pleased with how easy it was to tempt me to break the Ten Commandments. Again, I have to admit that all of Satan's accusations against me are true. I cannot lie. I am in the presence of God.

Finally, God calls my own conscience to testify against me.

I am shocked. My own conscience testifies against me. My conscience testifies how sometimes I would listen, but more often than not I would reject my conscience and do what pleased me. I would then break yet another of the Ten Commandments. This happened thousands of times, more times than I could count.

Things don't look good for me. I have clearly broken the Ten Commandments thousands upon thousands of times. If God used the "Three Strikes and You're Out" rule, I would have been sentenced to hell 61 years ago! I realize how patient God is. But, I have discovered to my horror that the longer I live, the worse things are for me. The pile of charges against me is enormous!

God asks me what I have to say in my defense.

"God," I answer, "I know that I deserve nothing but condemnation and hell. In fact, I have no merit with you. I have only demerits as far as you are concerned. But, I do have one who is willing to testify on my behalf."

God asks who that might possibly be. After all, there is absolutely no question as to my guilt and condemnation. My sentence to hell seems to be a sure thing.

"God, when I was 19 years old, I realized that I was a sinner deserving condemnation and hell. I realized that there was nothing that I could do to save myself. And so, I asked the Lord Jesus Christ if he would pay the penalty on my behalf. To my amazement I discovered that he would not only pay the penalty for all of my

sin, but that he would also credit to my account his righteousness. God, I truly and sincerely believe that Jesus did that on my behalf. In fact, I am staking my eternal destiny on Jesus' work on my behalf. So, I would ask you to hear Jesus on my behalf."

God calls for Jesus to step forward to testify on my behalf.

Jesus steps forward and testifies that when I was 19 years old I asked him to pay the penalty for all of my sin. He indeed paid the penalty for every single sin of mine. All my past sins, all my present sins, all my future sins, all of them, every single one of them, he paid by dying on the cross. Moreover, he credited to my account all of his righteousness.

So, God the Father then looks at me and he says, "You have indeed broken the Law. You deserve to be condemned. You deserve to be sentenced to hell for all eternity. But, because you have asked Jesus to pay the penalty on your behalf, and because he has done so, I therefore acquit you of all charges. In the eyes of the Law you are no longer condemned; you are justified by my grace because of Christ's work that is credited to your account. Instead of sentencing you to hell, I am sentencing you to heaven for all eternity."

And with that sentence, God stamps JUSTIFIED on the charge sheet, and I am set free to enter into heaven for all eternity.

Theologian J. I. Packer says, "Justification is the truly dramatic transition from the status of a condemned criminal awaiting a terrible sentence to that of an heir awaiting a fabulous inheritance."¹⁰

Friends, that is *justification*! Question 33 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, "What is justification?" And the answer given is, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received

¹⁰J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Index Created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in Electronic Form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996., electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, c1973).

by faith alone.”¹¹

Lesson

Romans 3:24-26 shows us that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. I am using the outline that was originally given by John R. W. Stott in his treatment of justification in *The Cross of Christ*.¹²

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Source of Our Justification Is the Grace of God (3:24)
2. The Ground of Our Justification Is the Work of Christ (3:25)
3. The Means of Our Justification Is Faith (3:25-26)

I. The Source of Our Justification Is the Grace of God (3:24)

First, the source of our justification is the grace of God.

Since “none is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10), it is clear that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight” (Romans 3:20).

How is anyone then saved? If we are all sinners (and we are), and if we are all under God’s righteous wrath (and we are), and if we are all under condemnation (and we are), and if there is nothing that we can do to save ourselves (and we cannot), how then can anyone be saved?

The only way it is possible to be saved is if God does the saving for us. We do not deserve help. We deserve nothing but wrath, judgment, and condemnation. But, thankfully, God works

¹¹ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), Question 33.

¹² John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 189-192.

on behalf of sinners. And that is what *grace* is. The Apostle Paul says that we are **“justified by his [i.e., God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (3:24).

I love the way J. I. Packer explains *grace*. He says that “the grace of God is love freely shown toward guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity and had no reason to expect anything but severity.”¹³

So, the source of our justification is the grace of God.

II. The Ground of Our Justification Is the Work of Christ (3:25)

Second, the ground of our justification is the work of Christ.

God is righteously angry with us because of our sin. We deserve his wrath. We deserve condemnation. We deserve to be sentenced to hell.

But God in his grace sent Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sin. Paul says about Jesus, **“whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith”** (3:25). That is, Jesus appeased the wrath of God by shedding his blood and dying on our behalf.

God is a just God. He could not simply turn the other way. His justice had to be satisfied. And it was fully satisfied in the death of Jesus for sinners.

“Justification,” writes John Stott, “is not a synonym for amnesty, which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets (*amnestia* is ‘forgetfulness’)—wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice.... When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are

¹³J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Index Created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in Electronic Form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996., electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, c1973).

not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking.... In other words, we are ‘justified by his blood.’”¹⁴

This vitally important doctrine is not well understood today. You must clearly understand what is involved in justification, otherwise you are in danger of a shallow understanding, which may not actually involve salvation. Your understanding of justification must be something closer to Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s than the common misunderstanding of justification today. This is how Spurgeon explains justification:

When I was under the hand of the Holy Spirit, under conviction of sin, I had a clear and sharp sense of the justice of God. Sin, whatever it might be to other people, became to me an intolerable burden. It was not so much that I feared hell, but that I feared sin. I knew myself to be so horribly guilty that I remember feeling that if God did not punish me for sin he ought to do so. I felt that the Judge of all the earth ought to condemn such sin as mine.... I had upon my mind a deep concern for the honor of God’s name, and the integrity of his moral government. I felt that it would not satisfy my conscience if I could be forgiven unjustly. The sin I had committed must be punished. But then there was the question how God could be just, and yet justify me who had been so guilty.¹⁵

But then, as the great Baptist preacher noted, light dawned on his understanding. He saw that “Jesus had borne the death penalty on our behalf.... Why did he suffer, if not to turn aside the penalty from us? If then, he turned it aside by his death, it is turned aside, and those who believe in him need not fear it. It must be so, that since [God’s wrath is satisfied], God is able to forgive without

¹⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 190.

¹⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *All of Grace* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.) 27, 29.

shaking the basis of his throne.”¹⁶

Because of Jesus’ death, God is able to remain just and, at the same time, be the justifier those who believe in Jesus.

So, the source of our justification is the grace of God. The ground of our justification is the work of Christ.

III. The Means of Our Justification Is Faith (3:25-26)

And third, the means of our justification is faith.

Faith is the means by which justification becomes ours. Faith is the instrument by which we receive the work of Christ.

Both verses 24 and 26 show us that faith is the key to receiving justification. And even the faith that we exercise, which is absolutely essential for salvation is a gift of God, as 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, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

So, the source of our justification is the grace of God. The ground of our justification is the work of Christ. And the means of our justification is faith.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the doctrine of faith alone as set forth in Romans 3:24-26, let us rest in the finished work of Christ for our salvation.

Are you justified by God’s grace through the work of Christ, which you have received by faith?

If not, you simply need to recognize that you are a sinner with a massive pile of sins against your name. Ask Jesus to pay the penalty for all your sin, and to credit his righteousness to your account. Amen.

¹⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *All of Grace* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.) 27, 29.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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