

In Galatians 2:21 Paul goes out of his way to stress that any system that places good behavior as the requirement for justification is worse than just false. Such systems render God's grace null and void and Christ's death on the cross unnecessary. He says, "I do not *nullify the grace of God*, for if righteousness comes through the law, *then Christ died needlessly.*"

Justification Involves No Deliberation

In the imaginary courtroom drama you knew you were not guilty, but were still required to undergo five hours of anxious waiting before learning what the jury's verdict would be. During those five hours, you were hoping the jury would recognize your innocence and justify you on that basis, but you were not sure what they would decide. Justification in the biblical sense is not like this at all. The "not guilty" verdict has already been announced concerning those who have put their faith in Jesus. As Paul says in Romans 5:1, "Therefore, *having been* justified by faith, we *have* peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice that Paul did not say, "*hoping to be* justified by faith," or "*hoping to* have peace with God." Justification and peace with God are realities *now* for every true Christian.

In the next verse Paul continues to speak about Christ, "through whom also we have obtained our introduction [or, access] by faith into this grace *in which we stand*; and we *exult in hope of the glory of God*" (Rom. 5:2). Christians are not waiting to see if they will receive God's grace. They "stand" in His grace, "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:22). They have a joyful and confident expectation (the meaning of "exult in hope") that they will share in God's glory forever.

The biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone allows Christians to live joyfully and boldly, fully confident of their eternal destiny. They have been delivered from sin's penalty and never need to fear again.

JUSTIFICATION

God's "Not Guilty" Verdict

Daryl Wingerd

Imagine you are on trial for a crime you didn't commit—a crime punishable by death. Though you are innocent, circumstantial evidence has convinced police and prosecutors that you are guilty. You have no alibi—no way of proving you were somewhere else when the crime was committed. The jury has been presented with the evidence, including your own declaration of innocence, and is now being sent away to deliberate.

Five hours later you are brought back into the courtroom. The jury assembles to announce their verdict. The jury foreman rises from his seat and begins to read the words that will determine your destiny. While the courtroom is silent, your heart is pounding so hard that you are amazed no one else hears it. When you hear the words, "We find the defendant not guilty," you collapse into your chair in emotionally drained relief.

Justification Is God's "Not Guilty" Verdict

When the foreman said "not guilty," you were justified in the matter before that court of law. Those two words were the court's declaration that you had committed no actual breach of the law you were charged with violating.

When a man is justified before God, he is declared not guilty with reference to the sins he has committed against God. Amazingly, God's "not guilty" verdict does not relate to just one crime (as in the imaginary event above), but to every sin the justified man has ever committed or will commit. The apostle Paul wrote about this, quoting from Psalm 32:1-2.

Blessed are those who lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account. (Rom. 4:7-8)

The justified man has been fully acquitted. He now has, and always will have, a *spotless* record in terms of sin and guilt and judgment.

Justification Does Not Compromise Justice

Because you were actually innocent in the imaginary courtroom scene described above, the jury came to a just verdict by declaring you "not guilty." But in relation to God's law you have committed more crimes than you know. If you were to stand trial for these sins, and if a jury concluded that you were "not guilty," it would be an unjust verdict. God Himself would be unjust if He acquitted you out of compassion alone. After all, what would you think of a judge or jury that permitted a convicted murderer (or any

other criminal) to go free, knowing he was guilty but without any penalty being paid? No matter how merciful this might seem, it would be unjust. Crime demands punishment.

When Paul told us that God does not hold justified people accountable for their sins, he did not mean God is unaware that these sins actually occurred, or that He overlooks them out of compassion. God is able to justify these people (meaning declare them righteous) while remaining just Himself because though they were guilty, the penalty for their sins was paid by someone else. Jesus Christ took the guilt of their sins on Himself and bore the wrath of His Father in their place—the wrath *they* deserved.

Speaking prophetically about Jesus and His death on the cross, the prophet Isaiah described the way God would deal with the sins of His people justly, without overlooking them.

He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities . . .
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him. (Is. 53:5, 6)

Later in the same passage the Lord says this about Jesus: “My Servant will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (Is. 53:11).

By crediting the sins of His people to the account of His beloved Son and then putting His Son to death for those sins, God showed Himself to be both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). He demonstrated His justice by punishing every sin as sin deserves, and He justifies those whose sins Jesus bore on the cross by forgiving them completely. Since Jesus paid the penalty for their sins, there is no remaining penalty for them to pay.

Justification Is Not Based On Your Moral Performance

Justification in a court of law is based on a person’s actual performance in relation to the law. When the legal system works properly, the person who commits a crime will be charged and found guilty, while the innocent person who is wrongfully charged will be found “not guilty.” Justification in the biblical sense is not like this at all. That is, it is not based on your own performance, but on what someone else has done for you. Jesus Christ lived without sin, perfectly obeying God’s law and proving that He did not have to die in order to satisfy God’s justice for Himself. Then, being sinless and not subject to the death penalty for any sins of His own, He died for the sins of others in order to satisfy justice for them. As Paul wrote, “He (i.e., God the

Father) made Him who knew no sin (i.e., Jesus) to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Justification Is by Faith Alone.

The biblical promise is that the person who believes in Christ will be justified. As an example of the frequency and clarity of this biblical doctrine, consider how often Paul connects the justification of sinners with faith in Christ in his letter to the Romans:

- In Romans 3:22 Paul speaks of “the righteousness of God *through faith in Jesus Christ* for all those who *believe*.”
- In Romans 3:26 Paul says that God’s motive in offering Christ as a sacrifice was so that He (God the Father) would “be just and the justifier of *the one who has faith in Jesus*.”
- In Romans 4:3 Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6, saying, “Abraham *believed* God, and it was credited to Him as righteousness.”
- In Romans 4:4-6 Paul says, “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but *believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith* is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God *credits righteousness apart from works*.”
- In Romans 5:1 Paul says, “Therefore, having been *justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The faith that moves God to justify a person also produces righteous behavior in that person, but it is critical that the order not be reversed. Justification does not result from practicing enough righteous behavior to please God, or from practicing the type of righteous behavior that is produced by faith in Christ. A man is justified by faith *alone* in Christ *alone*, and then, being fully justified by faith, he practices righteous behavior.

Consider the following comparison of this biblical truth with two common religious errors concerning justification:

Biblical Truth

Faith in Christ → Justification → a Pattern of Righteous Behavior

Religious Error #1:

More Righteous Behavior than Sinful Behavior → Justification

Religious Error #2

Faith in Christ → a Pattern of Righteous Behavior → Justification