

## JUSTIFIED BY FAITH ROMANS 3:21–23

### INTRODUCTION

The great Reformer **Martin Luther** described justification by faith as “*the first and chief article*” of reformed doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

In his **Institutes of the Christian Religion**, **John Calvin** referred to justification as “*the principal ground on which religion must be supported.*”<sup>2</sup>

The Italian reformer **Peter Martyr Vermigli** argued that justification is “*the head, fountain, and mainstay of all religion.*”<sup>3</sup>

**Another reformer** summed up the Protestant view when he famously said that justification is “*the doctrine on which the church stands or falls.*”<sup>4</sup>

The **emphasis** that the Reformers placed on the doctrine of justification by faith is understandable when we consider the **context** in which they lived.

The Reformers protested the teaching of the Roman Catholics.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles* (1537) in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell and Timothy F. Lull, Third Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 343.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997), 3.11.1.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Matthew Barrett, “Introduction: The Foolishness of Justification,” in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Heinrich Alsted (1618) in Barrett (2019), 35.

Roman Catholicism taught that salvation is obtained on the **basis of good works, not faith alone.**

That is the **official doctrine** of Roman Catholicism even today as it was clarified in the **Council of Trent in the 16th century.**

According to Trent which was convened as a **counter to the Reformation**, **Canon 24** states—*If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof: let him be anathema.*

**Canon 32**—

*If any one saith, that the good works of one that is justified are in such manner the gifts of God, that they are not also the good merits of him that is justified; or, that the said justified, by the good works which he performs through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life, if so be, however, that he depart in grace, and also an increase of glory: let him be anathema.*

The **Catholic Catechism** is simple and clear—

*Is faith in what God revealed sufficient for salvation?*

*No, we must also keep his Commandments. As Christ himself told us, 'If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments' (Matthew 19:17).*

*How do we keep the commandments of God?*

*We keep the commandments of God by living a good moral life.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes above from William Webster, *Salvation, the Bible, and Roman Catholicism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 168–172.

The reason why the doctrine of justification by faith is the **heart of the gospel message** is that it separates a salvation by grace from a salvation by works.

To put that another way, justification is what distinguishes the gospel as **God's work of saving sinners** from man's foolish and futile attempts to save himself.

Justification, therefore, explains how **the righteous God righteously righteouses the unrighteous**.

It is God who makes sinners right with Himself, not sinners whose works make them right with Him.

## PROPOSITION

We return to the paragraph that **D. A. Carson** called, "*The centre of the whole Bible*,"<sup>6</sup> in order to **understand in greater detail the good news** that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

As we now study this paragraph in greater detail, we'll find in **3:21–23** that sinners are **made right with God through faith**.

As Paul explains the good news in detail, he provides us with **three aspects of the doctrine of justification**:

1. **Justification reveals God's plan (21)**
2. **Justification imputes God's righteousness (22)**
3. **Justification addresses our sin problems (23)**

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<sup>6</sup> D. A. Carson, *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 39.

## 1. JUSTIFICATION REVEALS GOD'S PLAN (21)

Paul makes his **transition** from the bad news that explains our need for the gospel to the good news which details the salvation offered in the gospel.

He does so with the words, “**But now.**”

There really is no way to overstate the **significance** of these precious words!

As **Martin Lloyd-Jones** said when he preached through Romans,

*“But now... there are no more wonderful words in the whole of Scripture than just these two words, ‘But now.’”*

- Contrast between bad news and good news/ problem and solution.
- Contrast between receiving the wrath of God and receiving the righteousness of God.
- Contrast between condemnation and justification.
- Contrast between man’s total depravity and inability to please God and God’s own provision of a way to be right with Him.

Can you say, as in the hymn, **Amazing Grace**—

“I once was blind, but now I see”?

“I once was lost, but now I am found”?

“I once was subject to the just wrath of God. But now I have been saved by Jesus, having received the gift of God’s righteousness through faith in Him”?

As Paul explains that **justification reveals God's plan**, he begins with the exultant good news that—

### a) God's plan now fully revealed

#### 21 But now **apart from the Law**

- Shorthand for “**works of the Law**”
- The saving righteousness of God is not available through the Law but has been revealed in Jesus Christ and His atoning death.

This is contrary to what the Roman Catholics teach.

Catholicism views justification as a **process of becoming righteous**.<sup>7</sup>

We refer to their doctrine as “**infused righteousness**,” which refers to the “*righteousness that God actually puts into us and that changes us internally*.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the **Council of Trent**, the righteousness of justification is “*the sanctification and renewal of the inward man*.”<sup>9</sup>

In other words, as **one author** noted, “*Justification is not a once-for-all event; righteousness increases or decreases proportional to the person's faith and works*.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 350.

<sup>8</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 1245.

<sup>9</sup> [http://traditionalcatholic.net/Tradition/Council/Trent/Sixth\\_Session,\\_First\\_Decree.html](http://traditionalcatholic.net/Tradition/Council/Trent/Sixth_Session,_First_Decree.html)

<sup>10</sup> Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 350.

But that is precisely the **legalistic error** of the Jews of Paul's day.

That is the **polar opposite of God's plan** that has been fully revealed in the gospel.

<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the Law **the righteousness of God has been manifested**

As the gospel reveals what was **formerly a mystery**, it reveals that God's plan for making unrighteous sinners right with Him is "**apart from the Law**"—

apart from man's foolish and vain attempts to make himself right through **his own efforts**.

Paul continues to explain that **justification reveals God's plan** fully now, but it was nevertheless—

### **b) God's plan previously anticipated**

God has always justified sinners by faith, apart from works.

<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, **being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets**.

In "**the Law**"—**the Torah or Books of Moses**—we find in **Genesis 15:6** that Abraham, "**believed in Yahweh; and He counted it to him as righteousness.**"

In “**the Prophets**” we read in **Habakkuk 2:4** that “**the righteous will live by his faith.**”

Those two references are so important in understanding God’s plan that **Paul quotes both** in his letter to the Romans.

Those whom God justified in the Old Testament did not have the full revelation of **how** God would accomplish a righteous way of making them right with Him, but they **anticipated the fullness of God’s plan in faith.**

**1 Peter 1:10-12**—

<sup>10</sup> **Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, made careful searches and inquiries,**

<sup>11</sup> **inquiring to know what time or what kind of time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He was predicting the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.**

## 2. JUSTIFICATION IMPUTES GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS (22)

The second aspect of God's plan that Paul explains is that justification imputes God's righteousness.

**Imputation** is an important theological term and refers to “*the legal crediting or charging of something to someone.*”<sup>11</sup>

We learn from Paul that **justification imputes God's righteousness** as we consider both the **means and the mechanics** of justification—

### a) Means of justification

<sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God **through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe**

**Faith is the instrument** through which God declares sinners to be right with Him.

Paul emphasises this with a clever **wordplay**.

“**Through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe**” could be translated as “through trust in Jesus Christ for all who trust,” or “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who are faithing.”

In other words, faith is the **means of justification** or the means by which the righteous God righteously righteousses the unrighteous.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, “Imputation,” in *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 92.

But what is faith?

## Hebrews 11:1

**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.**

**Wayne Grudem** defines faith in **simple terms**—

*“Trust or dependence on God based on the fact that we take him at his word and believe what he has said.”<sup>12</sup>*

Theologians commonly refer to **three elements of faith**—knowledge/ understanding, ascent, and trust.

For example, one such definition states that—

*“[Faith] involves an **understanding** of the person and work of Christ to provide salvation; an **assent** to one’s need for forgiveness; and a decision to **trust** Christ to personally save.”<sup>13</sup>*

The emphasis, however, is always on the **element of trust**, as **one author** explained—

*“It is particularly this... element of trust or confidence that is saving faith’s most characteristic act, as the sinner cognitively, affectively, and volitionally transfers all reliance for pardon, righteousness, and cleansing away from himself and his own resources in complete and total abandonment to Christ, whom he joyfully receives and upon whom alone he rests entirely for his salvation.”<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1507.

<sup>13</sup> Gregg R. Allison, “Faith,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 81.

<sup>14</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1998), 728–729.

**In simple terms**, faith acknowledges that salvation, including justification, is the work of God and therefore it trusts in God to do that work through Jesus Christ.

That is why faith is the means/ instrument of justification.

**Tom Schreiner**—

*“Justification is by faith alone, because it looks to Christ alone for forgiveness of sins and salvation. Faith itself doesn’t save, but faith saves because we receive Christ by faith, because we possess and grasp Christ by faith.”<sup>15</sup>*

The moment sinners, through faith in Jesus Christ, turn away from every human resource and rest in Christ alone, God imputes His righteousness to them and accepts them as right in His sight.

As **Paul** preached to those in **Pisidian Antioch**, according to **Acts 13:38-39**—

<sup>38</sup> **Therefore let it be known to you, brothers, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,**  
<sup>39</sup> **and that in Him, everyone who believes is justified from all things which you could not be justified from through the Law of Moses.**

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why It Still Matters*, ed. Matthew Barrett, The Five Solas Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 45–46.

## b) Mechanics of justification

<sup>22</sup> **even the righteousness of God** through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe

If faith is the **necessary instrument** through which God works to justify sinners, then how exactly does justification work?

The key is Paul's use of the phrase "**the righteousness of God.**"

As we've previously learnt, Paul uses it here in the **sense of God's gift of a righteous status** to sinful people.

It is God's gracious act of **legally declaring** people to be righteous before Him—of **righteously righteousing** them.

It does not make them morally righteous by **gradually infusing righteousness** into them, contrary to what the Catholics teach.

However, in order to **understand the mechanics** we need to consider the **doctrine of imputation**—in justification God imputes righteousness instead of infusing righteousness.

There is actually a **double imputation** in the act of justification.

God the Father imputes our sins to Christ on the cross in order that He could take our place and die for our sins.

The Father also imputes the righteousness of God to those who trust in Christ in order that He can legitimately change their legal status to be right in His sight.

## 2 Corinthians 5:21

**He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**

There is, however, a **significant difference** in how theologians understand this second imputation to work.

According to the position held by **most Covenantalists**, Jesus Christ lived a perfect, sinless life in order to **earn the righteousness** that God credits to those who place their faith in Him.

As **one theologian** explains—  
“Christ fulfilled all the demands of God’s law and the... merit of His obedience is imputed or credited to the believing sinner’s account.”<sup>16</sup>

There are, though, **many problems** with this understanding of how imputation works.

**To begin with**, “it is almost always connected to the covenant of works,” which is a **key doctrine in Covenantalism supported by their theological system but not by the Scriptures**.<sup>17</sup>

**Moreover**, the idea of active obedience is built on the **faulty understanding** that **salvation is based on Law-keeping**.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Man, Sin, Christ, and the Holy Spirit*, vol. 2 (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 201.

<sup>17</sup> Larry D. Pettegrew, “Review of Counted Righteous in Christ by John Piper,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 15, no. 1 (2004): 128.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Larry Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2020), 194–196.

**Contrary to that idea**, Paul has already explained that the righteousness of justification has nothing to do with works of the Law (3:21).

He even argued in 3:20 that, “**by the works of the Law NO FLESH WILL BE JUSTIFIED IN HIS SIGHT, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.**”

That principle includes both Adam and Christ as the second Adam because the **Law was never meant to earn a righteousness before God**—even if one could keep it perfectly.

As Larry Pettegrew explains—  
“No one in the history of the human race, including Adam and Eve, could earn salvation by doing good works or keeping the law. A relationship with God has always been based on a loving trust in Him.”<sup>19</sup>

**Finally**, Paul never refers to the righteousness of Christ being imputed to believers, but always to the “**righteousness of God**,” as he writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21.<sup>20</sup>

It is a righteousness that **belongs to God in His divinity, not to Christ in His humanity.**

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<sup>19</sup> Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel*, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hodge admits that, “Paul never expressly states that the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to believers.” Quoted in Pettegrew, *TMSJ*, 128.

**Ironically**, one of the best explanations of what this means comes from the renowned Covenantalist **John Murray**—  
*“It is righteousness which is divine in quality. It is not, of course, the divine attribute of justice or righteousness, but, nevertheless, it is a righteousness with divine attributes or qualities and therefore a righteousness which is of divine property.”*<sup>21</sup>

How then do the mechanics of justification work?

Through double imputation.

But how does God’s imputation of **“the righteousness of God”** work if it is not through the active obedience of Christ earning a righteousness on our behalf under the Law?

The answer is found in that all-important prepositional phrase that Paul loves to use—**in Jesus Christ**.<sup>22</sup>

Paul connects justification to **union with Christ**.<sup>23</sup>

As **Constantine Campbell** explains—  
*“In-Christ-redemption is the instrument of grace to bring about justification.... Justification occurs through in-Christ-redemption, which is the instrument of grace.”*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 127.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Pettegrew, *Forsaking Israel*, 200–205.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew David Naselli, “The Righteous God Righteously Righteouses the Unrighteous: Justification according to Romans,” in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 221.

<sup>24</sup> Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union With Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 114.

### 3. JUSTIFICATION ADDRESSES OUR SIN PROBLEMS (23)

The third aspect of God's plan that Paul explains is that justification addresses our sin problems.

There are **two problems** that Paul refers to, beginning with—

#### a) Problem of condemning guilt

##### <sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned**

- Universal problem of sin and unrighteousness.
- Condemned under the righteous wrath of God.
- Universal need to be made right with God.

#### **Romans 3:9-10**

<sup>9</sup> **We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;**

<sup>10</sup> **as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE."**

This truth is rejected and rebelled against in our day.

As **D. A. Carson** expressed, "*The hardest truth to get across to this generation is what the Bible says about sin.*"<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> D. A. Carson, *Scandalous: The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 41.

If the first problem is the **most serious**, then the next problem is the **most sad**—

## b) Problem of corrupted glory

<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned **and fall short of the glory of God,**

- This clause is often interpreted as a **declaration of universal human sinfulness**.
  - Man fails to meet God's standards.
- However, it is better translated as “**all have sinned and LACK the glory of God.**”
- This verse highlights mankind's current lack of the glory that was intended for them, which was marred by sin.

## Genesis 1:26-27

<sup>26</sup> **Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness, so that they will have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”**

<sup>27</sup> **And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.**

- **It expresses the profound sense of loss felt by humanity.**
- Sin has distorted/ disfigured the image of God, but has not completely destroyed it.
- **In Christ, believers experience a restoration** of this glory, albeit in an inaugurated form, with a future consummation anticipated.

**Dane Ortlund**—

*“Romans 3:23 is the bottom-line explanation for why we pack stadiums for football games, pay thousands of dollars for liposuction, and meet with psychologists to plumb the depths of the haunting sense of shame we feel. We lack glory, and we know it. At every turn in everyday life we see evidence of the truth that we know, deep within, that we have lost our true glory, our real selves. We feel keenly our sense of alienation from who we were destined to be. We seek to fill that void any way we can, even vicariously through enjoying the glory of others.*

*The message of the gospel, from the perspective of this article, is that in Christ, our glory is given back to us.”<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> Dane C. Ortlund, “What Does It Mean to Fall Short of the Glory of God? Romans 3:23 In Biblical-Theological Perspective,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 80, no. 1 (2018): 139.

## CONCLUSION

Justification by faith is “**the doctrine on which the church stands or falls.**”

We get a **greater understanding** of the significance of justification and why it is the **heart of the gospel** when we understand the **three aspects** of the doctrine of justification:

4. **Justification reveals God’s plan (21)**
5. **Justification imputes God’s righteousness (22)**
6. **Justification addresses our sin problems (23)**

Faith justifies because it **connects you to Jesus Christ** and to His death and resurrection on your behalf.

Though our study of this text may increase your **knowledge/ understanding**, and even find your **ascent**, the **critical question** is whether or not it **produces trust** in your heart?

Do you have the **trust of justifying faith** that acknowledges that salvation is the work of God and therefore it trusts in God to do that work through Jesus Christ?

Do you have the **faith that clings to Christ** as you rest from your efforts and rely solely on all that God does to save you by uniting you to Christ?

Do you have the **confidence** that the righteous God will righteously righteous you by means of faith alone, apart from works?

Can you joyfully sing the words of that wonderful hymn,  
***In Christ Alone***—

*In Christ alone, who took on flesh  
Fullness of God in helpless babe  
This gift of love and righteousness  
Scorned by the ones He came to save  
'Til on that cross as Jesus died  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For every sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live, I live*

In Christ alone, **in your union with Him through faith, God justifies you** so that as you stand before Him in the **gift of His righteousness** you can live **free of condemnation** as you anticipate the **completion of your salvation** in eternal life.

This is the good news at the heart of the gospel!

## **BENEDICTION**

**Ephesians 6:23-24**

**Peace be to the brothers,  
and love with faith,  
from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ  
with incorruptible love.**