

Paul: Justification by Faith
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(Romans 4:1–5, 13–17 NRSV) What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? {2} For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. {3} For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." {4} Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. {5} But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. {13} For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. {14} If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. {15} For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. {16} For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, {17} as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

A couple of weeks ago we began this summer series looking at this most perplexing man in the New Testament → Paul.

I have to admit that I have a difficult time with the Paul that was presented to me most of my life. What I learned about Paul growing up was all the ways that he was a bigot, homophobic, and just plain rather self righteous.

But over the last number of years I have tried to really understand this man Paul. Those of you who were with me in DISCIPLE a number of years ago, know that I had very little use for the man – those of you who have been in Bible study with me the last five years or so, know that I find Paul to be a great defender of the faith of Jesus.

Without a doubt, Paul, more than any other person in the New Testament was responsible for the emergence of Christianity as a new religion that included Jews, but over time became more and more separated from Judaism.

What I have come to understand is that persons from the Roman Catholic tradition and persons from a Protestant tradition see Paul very differently because they are looking at him through different lenses.

For Protestants Paul is central in our theological understanding of God and Jesus. And we are going to be talking about some of those theologies in a few minutes.

For Catholics, they see Paul as a Saint, and his letters as sacred scripture, but they don't see Paul in the central role that Protestants do. Peter, you might say, has that place of primary importance.

Last time we focused on his conversion experience, so before we look at one of his central claims about Jesus, let's take a few moments and try to put together some background information about Paul.

What do we know about Paul

- Jesus was born around 4 BCE (give or take a year or two)
- Began his public ministry in late 20's
- Executed by Roman authorities about 30 CE

We don't know exactly when Paul was born, but a best guess would be in the first decade of the first century.

Both Paul and Jesus were Jewish

Jesus grew up in a small village in Galilee

Paul grew up in Tarsus – a significant city in what today would be modern Turkey

Jesus lived his life in the Jewish homeland

Paul lived in the “Diaspora” → a term that refers to Jewish communities that were outside the Jewish homeland.

As we talked about last time, Paul was originally a persecutor of the early Christ followers – after his experience on the road to Damascus, Paul's life is totally transformed and he becomes the biggest proponent of living the faith of Jesus.

Ultimately, in the early 60's he (like Jesus) is executed by the Roman Empire.

27 books in the New Testament

13 are attributed to Paul

Scholars do not believe that all of those were written by Paul

Thus, those 13 books can be divided into three categories

We know that 7 of the letters could be called “genuine”, by that I mean written by Paul himself:

- Romans
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- 1 Thessalonians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- Philemon

These were all written in the 50's of the first century and are the earliest new Testament writings – earlier than even the Gospels – Mark the earliest Gospel was probably written around 70 CE.

Three Letters are understood not to have been written by Paul – Most scholars believe that they were written around the year 100 (maybe even a little later). There are a number of reasons why these are not considered to have been written by Paul, including what appears to be a later historical setting and the style of the writing. These letters, often called “the Pastorals” include:

- 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy
- Titus

Now I know that this bothers our modern sensibilities, that someone would write a book and put somebody else's name to it --- but we know that this was a common practice in Judaism of this time and of the culture as a whole as well.

The final group is a group of 3 more letters that there is not scholarly consensus on – so they are called the “disputed letters” – however, a majority of scholars would argue that they too are not from Paul.

- Ephesians
- Colossians

- 2 Thessalonians

Most scholars see these as written in between the authentic letters and the Pastoral letters.

As we talk about Paul, the important thing to remember is that even to the end of his life – Paul understood himself to be Jewish, not the part of some new religion.

Paul was not converted from one religion to another religion. Paul's conversion was from one way of being Jewish to another way of being Jewish – from being a Pharisaic Jew to being a Christian Jew.

What I want to focus in on this morning is that confusing and often misunderstood concept of “Justification By Grace through Faith.”

If you grew up in a Protestant church this was the battle cry of Luther during the reformation. We are saved *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fides* → by Scripture alone, by grace alone and by faith alone.

Faith is not something we earn, but instead is the result of God's grace!

I assume you are familiar with that concept.

And if not, it is probably because you grew up in a Catholic tradition.

This idea is found in two of Paul's genuine letters: Galatians and Romans. I am going to focus on the book of Romans because it is the most comprehensive treatment of Paul's understanding of Jesus and the Gospel.

But when we hear that phrase – it often has been shortened to simply: “Justification by Faith” what do we mean?

It seems to me that we have understood this in two main ways:

In the first understanding, the issue is:

How do we get to Heaven?

What is the basis for God's Judgment?

Will we be judged on the basis of “works” and “the law”, by that I mean on the basis of our deeds, or on the basis of Grace and faith → which often means “what we believe”?

What matters more to God – behaviors or beliefs? And since the reformation, many have answered that question with: Faith as beliefs (with some good works thrown in for good measure).

Secondly, works and the law are contrasted to faith and grace – so that the issue becomes faith verses works.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their newest book: The First Paul suggests that this is a serious misunderstanding of what Paul was trying to say. They write:

When (Paul) spoke of justification by grace through faith, he was not thinking about how we get to heaven, but about transformation of ourselves and of the world in this life here below. Moreover, when he contrasted faith and works, he was not thinking of *faith-without-works* – which cannot exist because faith always includes works – but about *works-without-faith*, which, unfortunately exists all too often. (p 156)

Let's take a look at these words that make up this phrase: "Justification By Grace through Faith."

Justification – what does that mean?
What does it mean to be justified?

A couple of thoughts come to mind:

Computer word processor, to be justified is to have the words line up perfectly on both sides of the page. The columns are even – they are justified.

Or maybe you look at something that happens at work. You get a raise, and your boss tells you that you deserved it because your performance justified the raise.

I think that is the way most of us understand that word – justification means getting what you deserve.

And so when we talk about justification in a biblical sense we understand it in this retributive way – that is – punishment or reward. Thus God's justice means divine retribution: we deserve to be punished for failing to live up to God's standards (we get what we deserve) and since we are all sinners who have

fallen short of the glory of God – so in the final “Judgment” we are all in BIG trouble.

But that is not what Paul means --- because that kind of Judgment cannot ever be looked at as good news.

Paul is talking about another kind of justice – Distributive justice.

Distributive justice is not about just punishment (or reward), but rather about just distribution.

God’s distributive justice means that God is equally available for all – that God’s spirit is distributed freely to each and every one of us to transform God’s world into a place of that same justice.

Justification by grace through faith means God’s way of making us and the world just.

When we talk about grace we often refer to it as a free gift – but there is no such thing as a free gift – only a free offer, which becomes a free gift when it is accepted.

Think for a moment about the air we breathe.

It is always and equally available for everyone.

We do nothing to obtain it

Nothing to merit it

It is there unconditionally of good people and bad people alike.

Air is a free offer that becomes a free gift when we choose to accept it and cooperate with it.

We are always free to take in too much → and hyperventilate

Or

Too little → and choke

And if we choose to hyperventilate or asphyxiate ourselves we cannot say that the air is punishing us.

We have to cooperate – collaborate with what is already there.

For Paul → God's good news is that God's righteousness (by that I mean God's very character as distributive justice) – is a free gift offered to us all absolutely and unconditionally for our justification – by that I mean for our collaboration with God in the transformation of the world.

We are not justified by God by believing the right things or by doing the right things.

We are justified because God's justice is available for all
God's love is available for all

And we accept that gift WHEN we choose to be transformed by the love that is offered.

And that is good news.

We are “justified” not because God is a God of retribution and desires to punish us for our sins – nor does God simply ignore our sins.

We are “justified” because God is a God of distributive justice and desires us to participate in bringing that type of justice into the world.

Let me close with these words from Thomas Aquinas:

Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.