

# Justification *by* Faith Alone



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Gal. 2:15–21; Eph. 2:12; Phil. 3:9; Rom. 3:10–20; Gen. 15:5, 6; Rom. 3:8.*

**Memory Text:** “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Galatians 2:20, ESV*).

As we saw last week, Paul publicly confronted Peter in Antioch for the lack of consistency between the faith he advocated and the behavior he displayed. Peter's decision no longer to eat with former pagans suggested that they were second-rate Christians, at best. His actions implied that if they really wanted to be part of the family of God and enjoy the blessings of full table fellowship, they must first submit to the rite of circumcision.

What did Paul actually say to Peter on that tense occasion? In this week's lesson, we will study what is likely a summary of what went on. This passage contains some of the most compressed wording in the New Testament, and it is extremely significant, because it introduces us for the first time to several words and phrases that are foundational both to understanding the gospel and to the rest of Paul's letter to the Galatians. These key words include *justification*, *righteousness*, *works of law*, *belief*, and not only *faith* but even the *faith of Jesus*.

What does Paul mean by these terms, and what do they teach us about the plan of salvation?

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 22.

## The Question of “Justification” (*Gal. 2:15, 16*)

**In Galatians 2:15**, Paul writes, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (*ESV*). What point do you think he was making?

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Paul’s words need to be understood in their context. In an attempt to win over his fellow Jewish Christians to his position, Paul starts with something with which they would agree—the traditional distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Jews were the elect of God, entrusted with His law, and they enjoyed the benefits of the covenant relationship with Him. Gentiles, however, were sinners; God’s law did not restrain their behavior, and they were outside the covenants of promise (*Eph. 2:12, Rom. 2:14*). While Gentiles were obviously “sinners,” in verse 16 Paul warns the Jewish Christians that their spiritual privileges do not make them any more acceptable to God, because no one is justified by “works of the law.”

**Paul** uses the word *justified* four times in Galatians 2:16, 17. What does he mean by “justification”? Consider *Exod. 23:7* and *Deut. 25:1*.

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The verb *to justify* is a key term for Paul. Of the thirty-nine times it occurs in the New Testament, twenty-seven are in Paul’s letters. He uses it eight times in Galatians, including four references in Galatians 2:16, 17. *Justification* is a legal term, used in courts of law. It deals with the verdict a judge pronounces when a person is declared innocent of the charges brought against him or her. It is the opposite of *condemnation*. Additionally, because the words *just* and *righteous* come from the same Greek word, for a person “to be justified” means that the person also is counted as “righteous.” Thus, justification involves more than simply pardon or forgiveness; it is the positive declaration that a person is righteous.

For some of the Jewish believers, however, justification also was relational. It revolved around their relationship with God and His covenant. To be “justified” also meant that a person was counted as a faithful member of God’s covenantal community, the family of Abraham.

**Read Galatians 2:15–17. What is Paul saying to you here, and how can you apply these words to your own Christian experience?**

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Galatians 2:20*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Explain the only way by which we can stand justified before God in judgment.

**Feel:** Sense the rest that comes from abandoning our own qualifying works and from depending on Christ's righteousness.

**Do:** Identify completely with Christ's death and live Christ's life rather than our own.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Made Righteous in Christ**

**A** Why is it impossible to become righteous by hard work, denying self, and obeying God's commandments?

**B** How can God be just in assigning Christ's record of righteousness in place of our own? What does our faith have to do with this transaction?

**II. Feel: None of Me**

**A** Why is it so important to abandon all claims to our own righteousness, and instead, put our faith completely in Christ's?

**B** What emotional, physical, and spiritual benefits come from resting completely in what Christ has done?

**C** Does resting in Christ result in lazy living? Why, or why not?

**III. Do: Living Christ's Life**

**A** How does identifying with Christ's death and living His life make a difference in how we live?

**B** What choices do we make, moment by moment, that make dying Christ's death and living Christ's life possible?

► **Summary:** Faith makes it possible to come before God and accept His provisions, provided through Christ's death, for our forgiveness and restoration to a righteous standing before Him. Through faith we may die to self and let Christ live His life in us.

## Works of the Law

**Paul** says three times in Galatians 2:16 that a person is not justified by “works of the law.” What does he mean by the expression “works of the law”? How do these texts (*Gal. 2:16, 17; 3:2, 5, 10; Rom. 3:20, 28*) help us understand his meaning?

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Before we can understand the phrase “the works of the law,” we first need to understand what Paul means by the word *law*. The word *law* (*nomos* in Greek) is found 121 times in Paul’s letters. It can refer to a number of different things, including God’s will for His people, the first five books of Moses, the entire Old Testament, or even just a general principle. However, the primary way Paul uses it is to refer to the entire collection of God’s commandments as given to His people through Moses.

Therefore, the phrase “the works of the law” likely involves all the requirements found in the commandments given by God through Moses, whether moral or ceremonial. Paul’s point is that no matter how hard we try to follow and obey God’s law, our obedience never will be good enough for God to justify us, to have us declared righteous before God. That’s because His law requires absolute faithfulness in thought and action—not just some of the time but all of the time, and not just for some of His commandments but for all of them.

Although the phrase “works of the law” does not occur in the Old Testament and is not found in the New Testament outside of Paul, stunning confirmation of its meaning emerged in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of writings copied by a group of Jews, called Essenes, who lived at the time of Jesus. Although written in Hebrew, one of the scrolls contains this exact phrase. The scroll’s title is *Miqsat Ma’as Ha-Torah*, which can be translated, “Important Works of the Law.” The scroll describes a number of issues based on biblical law concerned with preventing holy things from being made impure, including several that marked the Jews out as separate from the Gentiles. At the end the author writes that if these “works of the law” are followed, “you will be reckoned righteous” before God. Unlike Paul, the author does not offer his reader righteousness on the basis of faith but on the basis of behavior.

**In your experience, how well do you keep God’s law? Do you really sense that you keep it so well that you can be justified before God on the basis of your law-keeping? See *Rom. 3:10–20*. If not, why not—and how does your answer help you understand Paul’s point here?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** **Becoming justified in God’s sight comes only from having faith in Christ’s death on our behalf and by accepting His righteous record as our own.**

**Just for Teachers:** **Use this opening activity to help your class identify with the theme of justification on an emotional as well as a spiritual level.**

**Opening Activity:** Philip P. Bliss was a young missionary evangelist and songwriter who worked with Dwight Moody in his campaigns. Philip and his wife, Lucy, left their four-year-old and one-year-old baby with friends and family and took a train to an engagement at the Moody tabernacle in December 1876. As the train was crossing the Ashtabula River in Ohio, the trestle bridge collapsed, dropping the train into the icy river. Philip escaped, but he returned to the train for his wife, who was trapped in the fiery wreckage. Neither Philip’s nor Lucy’s body was recovered, but Philip’s trunk survived. In the trunk was a manuscript for the lyrics to what became his best-known song, “I Will Sing of My Redeemer” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Bliss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Bliss)). Ask someone to sing this song for your class or sing it together. You can find it in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, no. 343.

**Consider This:** Does it seem like a paradox to be so joyful about Christ’s death on a cruel cross? Why is it such a wonderful thing to contemplate the story of the cost that Jesus paid for our salvation? How might this song have been a source of comfort to the children that Philip and Lucy left behind?

■ *What songs in Revelation are raised on the same theme as hymn 343—the cost that Jesus paid for our salvation? (See Rev. 5:9–13, 7:9–17, 12:10–12.) List the reasons in these songs that made worshipers around the throne so eternally grateful.*

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

**Just for Teachers:** **Use this study to help your class examine the relationship between faith, obedience, and justification.**

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## The Basis of Our Justification

**“And be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:9, NKJV).**

We should not assume Jewish Christians were suggesting that faith in Christ was not important; after all, they were all believers in Jesus. They all had faith in Him. Their behavior showed, however, that they felt faith was not sufficient by itself; it must be *supplemented* with obedience, as if our obedience adds something to the act of justification itself. Justification, they would have argued, was by both faith and works. The way that Paul repeatedly contrasts faith in Christ with the works of the law indicates his strong opposition to this kind of “both/and” approach. Faith, and faith alone, is the basis of justification.

For Paul, too, faith is not just an abstract concept; it is inseparably connected to Jesus. In fact, the phrase translated twice as “faith in Christ” in Galatians 2:16 is far richer than any translation can really encompass. The phrase in Greek is translated literally as “the faith” or “the faithfulness” of Jesus. This literal translation reveals the powerful contrast Paul is making between the works of the law that we do and the *work* of Christ accomplished in our behalf, the works that He, through His faithfulness (hence, the “faithfulness of Jesus”), has done for us.

It’s important to remember that faith itself doesn’t add to justification, as if faith were meritorious in and of itself. Faith is, instead, the means by which we take hold of Christ and His works in our behalf. We are not justified on the basis of *our faith* but on the basis of Christ’s faithfulness for us, which we claim for ourselves through faith.

Christ did what every individual has failed to do: He alone was faithful to God in everything He did. Our hope is in Christ’s faithfulness, not our own. As one author puts it, “We believe in Christ, not that we might be justified by that belief, but that we might be justified by his faith (fulness) to God.”—John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 355.

An early Syriac translation of Galatians 2:16 conveys Paul’s meaning well: “Therefore we know that a man is not justified from the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus the Messiah, and we believe in him, in Jesus the Messiah, that from his faith, that of the Messiah, we might be justified, and not from the works of the law.”

**Read Romans 3:22, 26; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; and Philippians 3:9. How do these texts, and what we read above, help us to understand the amazing truth that Christ’s faithfulness for us, His perfect obedience to God, is the only basis of our salvation?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED**Bible Commentary****I. The Origins of Faith** (*Review Genesis 12:1–8 and 15:5, 6 with your class.*)

The story of Abraham (formerly Abram) and his walk with God comes a short twelve chapters into the opening book of the Bible, though Abraham was born several hundred years after the Flood and some two thousand years after Adam. While others had a relationship with God, Abraham is the first person to whom the author of Genesis devotes much time to in order to develop his story. In the course of Abraham’s lifetime, he has many firsthand experiences and conversations with God, and we are able to picture a developing relationship of faith in the man who has become known through the ages as an example of true faith.

We first learn about Abram when God asks him to leave his country and his father’s household and then gives him the promise of a blessing to make him the father of many nations. Eventually, we find out, as Abram did sometime later, that this promise won’t be fulfilled in his lifetime. When Abram notes that he is childless, God promises a family that will rival the stars in number. The Lord promises possession of a land of inheritance, and “Abram believed the Lord, and he [the Lord] credited it to him as righteousness” (*Gen. 15:6, NIV*). Then God mentions that this land of promise in which Abram is wandering won’t be his or even his family’s for some four hundred years.

Abram has to wait until he is 100 before he has the son God promised, a miracle baby. It’s a far cry from the uncountable numbers God promised, but it’s a start. Finally, in a closing drama of Abraham’s life, he is asked to sacrifice that longed-for, long-awaited-for boy on a lonely mountaintop, with only the angels and the universe as witnesses.

Abraham had demonstrated a checkerboard pattern of faith. Sometimes he showed faith; other times he took matters into his own hands. However, Abraham grew in faith. When he was asked to offer up his beloved son, he did not stop to reason or make excuses or question. “He knew that God is just and righteous in all His requirements, and he obeyed the command to the very letter.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 153. “Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God” (*James 2:23*). This act of faith shines like a great beacon of light, illuminating the pathway of faith for those of us, Abraham’s children, who also are learning how to walk in faith.

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## The Obedience of Faith

Paul makes it clear that faith absolutely is foundational to the Christian life. It is the means by which we lay hold of the promises we have in Christ. But what is faith exactly? What does it involve?

**What** do the following texts teach us about the origin of faith? *Gen. 15:5, 6; John 3:14–16; 2 Cor. 5:14, 15; Gal. 5:6.*

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Genuine biblical faith is always a response to God. Faith is not some kind of feeling or attitude that humans one day decide to have because God requires it. On the contrary, true faith originates in a heart touched with a sense of gratitude and love for God’s goodness. That’s why when the Bible talks about faith, that faith always follows initiatives that God has taken. In the case of Abraham, for example, faith is his response to the amazing promises God makes to him (*Gen. 15:5, 6*), while in the New Testament, Paul says that faith is ultimately rooted in our realization of what Christ did for us on the cross.

**If** faith is a response to God, what should that response include? Consider what the following texts say about the nature of faith. *John 8:32, 36; Acts 10:43; Rom. 1:5, 8; 6:17; Heb. 11:6; James 2:19.*

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Many people define *faith* as “belief.” This definition is problematic, because in Greek the word for “faith” is simply the noun form of the verb “to believe.” To use one form to define the other is like saying “faith is to have faith.” It tells us nothing.

A careful examination of Scripture reveals that faith involves not only knowledge about God but a mental consent or acceptance of that knowledge. This is one reason why having an accurate picture of God is so important. Distorted ideas about the character of God actually can make it more difficult to have faith. But an intellectual assent to the gospel is not enough, for, in that sense, “even the demons believe.” True faith also affects the way a person lives. In Romans 1:5, Paul writes about the “obedience of faith.” Paul is not saying that obedience is the same as faith. He means true faith affects the whole of a person’s life, not just the mind. It involves commitment to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as opposed to just a list of rules. Faith is as much what we do and how we live and in whom we trust as it is what we believe.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

**Consider This:** What lessons in the long-term nature of the development of faith does the story of Abraham demonstrate? How do his failings help encourage and admonish us when we are tempted to create our own answers to prayer?

## II. Faith and Obedience *(Review Galatians 2:15–21 with your class.)*

Through faith, Abraham was strictly obedient to God’s request to offer up his son. He believed God, took Him at His word, and acted upon it. That belief and action (based on belief) were what was accounted to him as righteousness. “Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did” (*James 2:21, 22, NIV*).

However, it isn’t by following the law that Abraham or anyone else is considered justified before God. Paul doesn’t have a problem with obedience to the law; faith in Jesus makes true obedience possible. Abraham, responding to God’s request to sacrifice his son, “strengthened his soul by dwelling upon the evidences of the Lord’s goodness and faithfulness.” —Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 151. He recalled the promise that from Isaac would come children as countless as the grains of sand on the shore and as the stars in the sky. Faith gave him strength to obey, and it was that faith that was counted to him for righteousness.

**Consider This:** How is faith strictly obedient, even in the face of great unknowns and tragedy? What other scriptural examples illustrate obedient faith, despite obstacles and tragedy and what seemed to be a bleak future?

## III. Faith and Obedience and Justification *(Review Galatians 2:15–21 with your class.)*

Paul makes it clear that it is not possible to be justified before God by observing the law. Christ Jesus, in His righteousness, justifies us, a righteousness that we claim by faith, a faith that results in obedience. When we have faith in Jesus, we hold nothing back from Him, even unto death. If we die to self daily, laying everything that we value on the cross and accepting Christ’s life in place of our own deeds and merits, then the only way we can live is by faith in the Son of God. Though living life through faith in Jesus results in obedience—for Jesus Himself “became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (*Phil. 2:8, NIV*), obedience is not the means by which we become

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## Does Faith Promote Sin?

One of the main accusations against Paul was that his gospel of justification by faith alone encouraged people to sin (*see Rom. 3:8, 6:1*). No doubt the accusers reasoned that if people do not have to keep the law to be accepted by God, why should they be concerned with how they live?

**How** does Paul respond to the accusation that a doctrine of justification by faith alone encourages sinful behavior? *Gal. 2:17, 18.*

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Paul responds to his opponents' charges in the strongest terms possible: "God forbid!" While it is possible that a person might fall into sin after coming to Christ, the responsibility would certainly not belong to Christ. If we break the law, we ourselves are the law-breakers.

**How** does Paul describe his union with Jesus Christ? In what way does this answer refute the objections raised by his opponents? *Gal. 2:19–21.*

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Paul finds the reasoning of his opponents simply preposterous. Accepting Christ by faith is not something trivial; it is not a game of heavenly make-believe where God counts a person as righteous while there is no real change in how that person lives. On the contrary, to accept Christ by faith is extremely radical. It involves a complete union with Christ—a union in both His death and resurrection. Spiritually speaking, Paul says we are crucified with Christ, and our old sinful ways rooted in selfishness are finished (*Rom. 6:5–14*). We have made a radical break with the past. Everything is new (*2 Cor. 5:17*). We have also been raised to a new life in Christ. The resurrected Christ lives within us, daily making us more and more like Himself.

Faith in Christ, therefore, is not a pretext for sin but a call to a much deeper, richer relationship with Christ than could ever be found in a law-based religion.

**How do you relate to the concept of salvation by faith alone without the deeds of the law? Does it, perhaps, scare you a little, making you think that it can be an excuse for sin—or do you rejoice in it? What does your answer say about your understanding of salvation?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

justified before God. Our record of goodness can never match that of Christ's. His record was one of perfect obedience, and that is what we need in order to be justified. The only way we can receive that perfect record of obedience is by faith, laying hold of Christ's promises to give us His perfect record of righteousness as a substitute for our broken, faulty record of misdeeds.

**Consider This:** In the face of such an incredible gift of goodness that we can never imagine, much less merit, why are we tempted to ignore our need for Jesus' gifts and attempt to justify ourselves based on our own good deeds? What are the results of such attempts? What scriptural examples inform us about the consequences of trying to gain God's favor by following our own ideas of what is right?

### ► STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Use this role play as a means of helping your class picture themselves as crucifying self and choosing to live by faith in Christ.

**Role Play:** Give a volunteer from the class two large nails to hold, as if they were on the cross. Pose this situation: someone in your church family, whom you have been trying to help, disparages you to another church member. You have determined to be crucified with Christ and live only His life. What will you do?

Ask for several other volunteers to carry the nails and pose these and other situations to them: (1) you have a difficult time turning down food, even though you have had enough; (2) you are tired, and your children are getting on your nerves; (3) you are embarrassed to give the real reason for being tardy at an important meeting: you simply didn't leave on time to make your appointment. It would be easier to mention traffic as an excuse.

### ► STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Suggest the following ideas for activities to do during the week.

- Create a list of the reasons for which the worshipers of Revelation praise Jesus for what He has done. Post this list where you can see it for a week.
- Research a number of songs that express joy in our redemption. Memorize them and sing them during private devotions and for others.
- Fill a small basket with reminders of Christ's gifts of redemption and place it where you can see it often.

**Further Study:** “The danger has been presented to me again and again of entertaining, as a people, false ideas of justification by faith. I have been shown for years that Satan would work in a special manner to confuse the mind on this point. The law of God has been largely dwelt upon and has been presented to congregations, almost as destitute of the knowledge of Jesus Christ and His relation to the law as was the offering of Cain. I have been shown that many have been kept from the faith because of the mixed, confused ideas of salvation, because the ministers have worked in a wrong manner to reach hearts. The point that has been urged upon my mind for years is the imputed righteousness of Christ. . . .

“There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, pp. 18, 19.

“The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account. Christ’s righteousness is accepted in place of man’s failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 367.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In the first passage quoted above, Ellen G. White says no subject needs to be emphasized more than justification by faith. As a class, discuss whether her comments are as applicable for us today as they were when she wrote them over a hundred years ago and, if so, why.
- ❷ Why does Paul say that Christ would have died for no purpose, if justification were through the law? *Gal. 2:21*. What does he mean by that?

**Summary:** Peter’s behavior in Antioch suggested that former pagans could not be true Christians unless they were first circumcised. Paul pointed out the fallacy of such thinking. God cannot pronounce anyone righteous on the basis of that person’s behavior, for even the best humans are not perfect. It is only by accepting what God has done for us in Christ that sinners can be justified in His sight.