

Faith ALONE

Romans 1:16-17

12 November 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: We're justified by faith alone.

Big Question: How are we right with God?

Introduction

Imagine that you lived 500 years ago in medieval Europe.

You're likely to only see half of your children make it into adulthood.

In your lifetime, you might well have two or three spouses.

Not because people were getting divorced all the time, but because there was such a low life expectancy.

Hopefully you remember the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli from last week.

He helped launch a revolution when he taught the Bible expositionally.

Zwingli was a pastor who knew the harsh realities of life first-hand.

As a military chaplain to Swiss mercenaries, he'd seen the devastation of war – the pain, the suffering, the wasted lives.

Soon after he became the pastor of Zurich, the whole city was hit by the plague.

Something like 2000 out of the 7000 people in the city died, including his own brother.

Zwingli went and ministered to those who were sick, even though he knew it might mean he'd get ill himself.

When he did get sick, he even wrote a hymn called, "The Song of the Plague."

Strangely enough, it's not sung in churches today but the words show just how much he placed his trust in God.

That gives you a little bit of a picture of the world that the Reformers lived in.

In our culture, we live in denial.

We try to avoid thinking about what will happen after death.

But they couldn't avoid it. It was very much on their minds.

They were very aware that sometime soon they would meet their maker.

And if not them, then a friend or family member.

Outline

It's not surprising, then, that people were very interested in two questions, "Am I right with God?" and "If not, how do I get right with him?".

These questions all belong to a category called 'justification'.

According to the dictionary, justification is the act of showing something to be right or reasonable.

At first, justification might like a very foreign concept, but it's actually one that we're all familiar with.

It's not enough for a student to just give an answer on a test – you also have to explain how you got the answer.

In court, people are often judged as much on the reasons that they did something as what they actually did.

Martin Luther emphasised the importance of justification to Christians by saying:

Upon this article the church is standing or falling.

The 31st of October was the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation.

It was a time in history when the church rediscovered some central truths of the Christian faith.

They're often summarised with these five 'alone' statements:

Salvation is by Grace ALONE

Through Faith ALONE

In Christ ALONE

According to Scripture ALONE

To the Glory of God ALONE.

We're in the middle of a series look at each of these 'alones'.

The truth we're looking at today is that we're justified by faith alone.

- We're not Right with God
- Getting Right with God

- Faith and Being Right with God

We're Not Right with God

Theologians in the 1500s started with an assumption.

They began with the assumption that we aren't right with God.

It doesn't make sense to talk about getting right with God – being justified – if we're tight to begin with.

Why would you need to make up with someone you haven't had a disagreement with?

We need to back up a step because that's not where most people in our culture are at.

I reckon that most Aussies would say that the gods don't really have anything to do with our lives.

Not everyone believes that there even is a God, far less that they need to be made right with him.

We're too advanced to believe all that mumbo-jumbo.

And if there is a God, then surely we're okay with him?

Isn't it his job is to let people into heaven?

After all, it's obvious that we're not really bad people, are we?

But when you start to dig under the surface a bit, it often isn't all that obvious at all.

Deep down, we know from our own experience of the world that something's not right.

It just doesn't add up – there's too much pain, too much brokenness.

I was sitting in traffic the other afternoon when I heard the sound of a siren.

When you hear that sound, you're suddenly alert and you look forwards, then to the sides and in your mirrors.

A police car came flying up from behind with its blues and twos on.

Sitting there, it occurred to me that is an obvious example that we're not all okay.

The very fact that we need police is proof that there's something wrong with the world.

Left to our own devices, we don't get along with each other as we'd like to think we do.

Different religions disagree over what the problem is and therefore what the solution is.

Buddhists believe that the problem is their own desires.

So, they try to purge themselves of desire in an effort to try and achieve a state of nirvana.

Muslims see the problem as breaking God's commands.

Their solution is to vainly hope that Allah will be merciful despite their transgressions and let them into Paradise.

The religion of atheism believes that there is no problem.

Their solution is a self-help industry that flogs books telling us that we need to improve and better ourselves.

The Bible tells us that although there are bits of truth in all of those, the problem goes much deeper than that.

All of our problems, all of the hurt and misery we see in the world around us is caused by our rebellion against God.

The Bible calls this problem 'sin'.

Sin is committing treason against God.

Betraying the God who is our king and choosing to do things the way that we see fit.

All of us sin because it's hardwired into our nature to cut ourselves off from God.

Romans 3:10–11 (NIV11) ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

The problem isn't out there – it's in here.

What's the solution? How can we be right with God, then?

The solution isn't just to follow rules.

God even gave his people – the nation of Israel – rules to follow.

He told them, "This is how you respond to my grace."

The rules didn't fix the problem, though.

All they did was show that we don't like following God's rules.

That's the argument that Paul makes in the first three chapters of Romans and it culminates in him saying:

Romans 3:20 NIV11 ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin

That would seem to leave us in a pickle with a massive problem, but no solution.

How can we be right with God again?

How can we have the 'righteousness of God' that the Bible talks about?

That was the crisis that faced a young monk named Martin Luther.

He was a very godly man.

He'd given up his law degree to become a monk.

As a monk, he spent his days confessing his sin, praying, fasting and worshipping God.

If anyone was going to be right with God, it was Luther.

Later, he said of himself,

"If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

And yet he constantly felt like he wasn't good enough.

He had an existential crisis.

Many of you probably aren't familiar with that term.

It's the fancy way of saying that he was asking questions about the meaning of his life.

He was having a crisis about his purpose and his values.

Luther worked hard to follow all of God's rules, trying his absolute best to be a good person.

Except he knew that it wasn't enough.

Not matter how much he did, there was always more to be done and so he couldn't be sure of being right with God.

In his own words:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience.

Where do you stand before God?

Do a quick little self-assessment in your own mind.

Perhaps you've never even thought before about where your relationship is with the God of the Bible.

Do you think that you're right with him?

What's the reason that you think that?

Are you just assuming that you're okay?

The Bible teaches us that our default position is that we're not right with God.

Getting Right with God

If we're not right with God, how can we get right with God?

What's the solution to the problem of sin?

They're probably some of the most important questions we could ask.

How the Bible answers to these questions is probably the most important truth that was regained in the reformation.

There's one phrase that comes up a number of times in the Bible, especially in the book of Romans.

That phrase was "the righteousness of God".

One of the key places that it comes up is in the first chapter of Romans:

Romans 1:16–17 (NIV11) ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

That phrase really got Luther upset.

You might be wondering why on earth Luther would be upset about that.

After all, it's something that Paul says that he isn't ashamed of.

In fact, he's quite proud of the gospel.

He celebrates what God's done in revealing the righteousness of God.

Those words were bitter to Luther because he wondered how he could possibly have the righteousness of God?

It was too big, too massive, too out-of-reach.

How could he be good enough for God?

In medieval theology, justification was a life-long process of transformation.

Justification was talked about using the Latin term *justificare*.

It's a compound word of the word to be just (*justus*) and *facere* which means 'to make'.

Justification was the process of making yourself right with God.

They understood that over time, righteousness gets imparted to a believer.

How does that happen?

The main way to get justified is through the sacraments.

The infusing of this righteousness is made possible because of Jesus, but it also places significant responsibility on the person to take part in the sacraments.

One of the best ways of showing it is in this diagram.

It really kicks off when you get baptised.

They taught that you can't respond to God because of original sin, but baptism provides forgiveness for original sin and creates faith in a Christian.

And then through the other sacraments – confirmation, mass, penance, anointing of the sick, marriage, priesthood and last rights – you become more and more righteous.

If you're a saint, then the process of justification is said to be completed in your own lifetime.

And so saints get to take the express elevator straight to heaven.

At the other end if you reject God's grace, then you too get an express ticket.

Only instead of being to heaven, it's directly to hell.

What about the ordinary, baptised Christians, you ask?

Well, according to medieval theology, because they weren't justified in this life then they need to go to a place called purgatory.

In purgatory, you work off the penalty for you sin until you become justified enough to make it to heaven.

Purgatory isn't a fun place.

Like hell, it's a place of suffering.

However, unlike hell, you can leave when you've done your time.

And eventually, you'll make it to heaven.

Spending as little time as possible in purgatory is obviously a good motivation to live God's way.

That's exactly how Luther understood justification, which meant that Romans 1:16-17 was like a red rag to a bull.

It was bad enough that God had given people the law.

Luther knew that he couldn't keep even the ten commandments on his own.

He lived as a monk – a life dedicated to God – and he still struggled and failed to do what God required of him.

Then Jesus came and made things a whole heap worse.

He didn't just teach the law, but the maximum application of the Law.

"You have heard that it was said... but I say..."

To Luther, the gospel was the promise of a higher standard and even more certain wrath from God, so it wasn't something to be celebrated.

This made Luther angry with God.

He hated God for making it even harder to be righteous and punishing them.

Again, in his own words:

I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God.

That's a pretty bold statement, isn't it?

To admit to saying that you actually hated God? That's a very, very serious thing to do.

It'd be easy to throw mud at Luther.

How could he possibly have the audacity to do something like that, we might wonder?

I think that Luther is a great example to us, though.

When we don't like something that God's said, we often get angry with him.

Whether it's what he's said about predestination, or slavery, or the roles of men and women, or creation.

It's not that uncommon for someone to have a dummy spit and decide to take their bat and ball and go home.

"I don't like what God's said, so I'm getting out of here."

Luther had a much better approach.

He wrestled with the things he didn't understand and we need to wrestle with them too.

Like Jacob who wrestled with God physically, we need to wrestle with what God's said.

We won't necessarily make sense of it all, but we need to come to the place where we can trust him.

Eventually, Luther had a breakthrough.

As a professor, teaching theology at the University of Wittenberg, he had to teach the book of Romans.

When he came to teaching those troubling verses in chapter one, he came to it with fresh eyes.

Because this time, he was armed with the New Testament.

I'm sure you've all had the situation where you're trying to fix something.

You've done all the right things, and yet nothing seems to work.

Then you try something that you didn't think you could change.

Suddenly, everything falls into place.

Luther's lightbulb moment was when he looked at the word justification.

When he looked at it in Greek, he realised that the way the word is used differently from what he'd been taught.

Justification is a declaration, rather than a process.

And that turned the whole passage on its head – from a cruel joke to wonderful news.

Instead of God's righteousness being imparted to us little by little, we are declared to be right with him.

That doesn't take a lifetime, it happens in a moment.

God's righteousness is imputed to us.

Again, not a word we use very often.

It comes from the Latin *imputare* which means to 'enter in the account'.

Imputed righteousness is a declaration that we're right before God when we believe.

Justification isn't about God slowly making us right with him.

It doesn't depend on us at all.

Our righteousness comes from what Jesus has completely and fully done for us.

What he's done is credited to our account.

Jesus gives us a righteousness that's alien.

It doesn't come from within us, it comes from outside of us.

It's a different righteousness to the kind that we try to gain by following the rules.

In fact the rules point to it.

Romans 3:21 NIV11 ²¹ *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.*

It took a radical solution – the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Romans 3:24–25 (NIV11) ²⁴ *and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* ²⁵ *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.*

The moment we trust in Jesus, we are declared to be righteous.

That's how we can be "justified and at the same time sinners".

Then we become sanctified as we wait for the last day when we know that we will stand before God righteous.

That is such a liberating truth to learn.

How do we get right with God?

By him declaring us to be right with him.

When he looks at us, he sees Jesus' righteousness.

Faith and Being Right with God

The final question then is how we can receive that righteousness?

We can't do anything to earn Jesus' righteousness.

We can't make him give it to us.

The only way to gain it is to receive it by faith.

It's there in Romans 1:17:

Romans 1:17 NIV11 For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

And there's the same answer in Romans 3:

Romans 3:22 NIV11 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

God's righteousness is received by believing.

As the Reformers put it, we're justified by faith alone.

George Michael told us, "I gotta have faith."

Christians often say exactly the same thing – "You've gotta have faith."

Faith's often talked about as if it's a commodity.

You just need to have enough of it.

Have you ever been talking to someone about becoming a Christian, only to have them say.

"But I don't have faith?"

“How do I get it?”

That’s actually the very opposite of what it means.

Faith means coming empty handed and in humility accepting what Jesus has done.

Faith is define in Hebrews 11:

Hebrews 11:1 (NIV11) ¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Faith isn’t just knowing stuff – even the demons know good doctrine.

Faith is trust God.

Faith looks away from ourselves and trusts in what Jesus has done.

Faith itself doesn’t save, but it attaches us to Jesus who is our righteousness.

If that’s the case, what’s the relationship between faith and works?

The reformers said that we’re justified by faith alone.

Our works don’t contribute to our justification.

However, there was a deep concern in the church that by saying that justification was by faith alone, the result would be people who couldn’t care less about holiness.

They’d have their swipe-card into heaven and that’d think that they don’t need to take sin seriously.

That’s a very valid concern.

The place of works was a defining line.

The Roman Catholic church insisted that our works contribute to our justification.

The Council of Trent affirmed that works are part of the basis of justification at the last judgement.

The Council of Trent stated:

"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."¹

That needs some unpacking.

They were condemning the reformers who said that good works don't make you more justified.

If works are just the fruit of our faith, then you'll be damned.

They said this because the reformers had discovered that we're justified by faith alone.

We aren't made righteous by faith and works, but pronounced to be righteous by faith alone.

It might help you to think of it like this:

Medieval theology used the following formula: Faith + works = justification

The reformers changed the formula: Faith = justification + works

Martin Luther so wanted to affirm justification by faith alone that he really struggled with the book of James.

He famously called it, "A strawy epistle."

Because the only time that the Bible talks of "faith alone" is James 2:24.

And there, it seems to condemn the reformers' position:

James 2:24 (NIV11) ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

At first, that verse sounds very confusing.

This verse seems to be arguing the very opposite of what the Reformers were saying.

James tells us that faith that's not accompanied by deeds, is dead.

James 2:26 (NIV11) ²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

However, when James talks about "faith alone", he's talking about something different to the reformers.

Both the established church and the reformers agreed on the need for deed in the life of the believer.

The question is whether works are part of justification or not.

We are justified by our faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.

Good works are a necessary consequence of justification, but they're not the basis for it.

That's why the Reformers drew a sharp line between justification and sanctification.

Good works are a consequence, but not the cause of salvation.

What does that mean for living?

Faith expresses itself through love, Galatians 5:6.

Loving acts will naturally flow from the life of faith.

Far from being a free ride, it means that the Christian life is a life-long process of sanctification.

Assurance is also the outcome of justification by faith alone.

It means that we don't have to wonder about what the future holds.

We don't have to live in constant fear of whether we're going to stand right before God.

By faith alone, we can trust that we will be justified when we stand before the great white throne of judgement.

Because that's what God has already declared us to be.

Conclusion

How can I stand before God and be declared innocent?

That's not an irrelevant question.

The answer isn't faith plus something else.

Faith is the only instrument by which we can receive all of Christ's benefits.

As Christians, we're people who have the great privilege of being people who

2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV11) ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight.

¹ Session 6, Canon 24

Faith ALONE

Romans 1:16-17

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Big Idea: We're justified by faith alone.

Big Question: How are we right with God?

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Luther think that he wasn't right with God?
2. Some people think that we can be right with God by following his rules? Is that what the Bible tells us?
3. What are the similarities and differences between the medieval theologians' understanding of justification and the reformers'?
4. How did Luther respond to the "righteousness of God"? Why?
5. How would you define faith?
6. What would you say to the person who says, "But I don't have faith. How do I get it?"
7. Does justification by faith alone mean that good works are irrelevant?
8. Why does justification by faith alone give us assurance of our salvation?