

Dave Johnson
Sermon: “Justified by Faith” (Galatians 2:15-21)
June 13, 2010

This year Paul and I have woven one theme into the vast majority of our sermons: “justification by faith.” In today’s reading from Paul’s Letter to the Galatians “justification by faith” is not just a theme; it is the main point. Justification by faith means that we are made righteous in God’s eyes solely through faith in Jesus Christ, period, full stop. In today’s passage from Galatians Paul writes, “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ... we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law... if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.”

We are not justified by what we do, but by faith in what God has already done for us in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach, recently died at the age of 99. Last week I was watching the NBA Finals with my son, Paul, and during the halftime show one of Wooden’s former players from UCLA, NBA Hall of Famer Bill Walton, was reminiscing about Wooden’s famous sayings. The one he emphasized was this: “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.”

This was the case with the Apostle Paul. Paul was a Jew from Tarsus, a Roman citizen who had received the best education possible for a Jewish young man. He was tutored as a young man by the renowned Pharisee Gamaliel, and was a rising star among the Pharisees. The Pharisees taught one main thing: justification through works, particularly obedience to the laws of the Old Testament as well as the hundreds of ceremonial and ritual laws that they had made up over time. Paul took great pride in his obedience to the law. Listen to how he describes this in his Letter to the Philippians:

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (3:4b-6).

In fact, Paul was so zealous for the law that he persecuted Christians, those who believed in Jesus Christ, the One who fulfilled the law. Paul’s persecution of Christians did not consist of mean emails or blistering blogs, but separating loved ones from one another, imprisonment and as in the case of Stephen, execution. For Paul, righteousness through the works of the law was no religious hobbyhorse, it was the be all and end all of his life. When it came to righteousness through the works of the law, Paul in fact knew it all.

But just like John Wooden said, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” After his life changing encounter with the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul learned something that counted more than anything: that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ alone, as he wrote to the Philippians:

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ... For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith” (3:7-9).

And that was it for Paul. He spent the rest of his life traveling the Roman Empire, preaching the Gospel—justification through faith in Jesus Christ, planting churches, and suffering for the sake of Christ. Paul authored thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and the predominant recurring theme in all of them is justification through faith. It’s what Paul learned after he knew it all that counted.

And it’s the same with us. We live in a meritocracy, a culture in which we are judged by our merits from cradle to grave. This past week I attended both a fifth grade graduation and an eighth grade graduation, and the number of awards given out was crazy. My favorite is the “perfect attendance award”—please... I always feel a little sorry for those kids who can’t stay home even if they’re sick (I’ve also thought about writing thank-you notes to their parents for the times their kids brought their sickness to school to share with my kids—but hey, they got their perfect attendance certificates ☺).

And the meritocracy doesn’t stop in eighth grade, but continues our whole lives. It’s the way the world works. But when it comes to our salvation, when it comes to being justified by faith, it’s what we learn after we know it all that counts. We are neither saved by our merits nor justified by works. We are justified solely through faith in Jesus Christ.

One of my heroes is Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury and leading figure of the English Reformation who wrote/compiled the first and second English prayer books. Cranmer, along with some others, wrote some sermons that were compiled into two *Books of Homilies*. Listen to how Cranmer describes justification by faith in his sermon entitled *A Sermon of the Salvation of Mankind by Only Christ Our Saviour from Sin and Death Everlasting*:

“This justification or righteousness, which we so receive by God’s mercy and Christ’s merits, embraced by faith, is taken, accepted, and allowed of God for our perfect and full justification... For all the good works that we can do be imperfect, and therefore not able to deserve our justification: but our justification doth come freely, by the mere mercy of God; and of so great and free mercy that, whereas all the world was not able of their selves to pay any part towards their ransom, it pleased our heavenly Father, of his infinite

mercy, without any our desert or deserving, to prepare for us the most precious jewels of Christ's body and blood, whereby our ransom might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and his justice fully satisfied. So that Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly do believe in him. He for them paid their ransom by his death. He for them fulfilled the law in his life."

Cranmer did not retire comfortably with a generous pension for archbishops, juggling speaking engagements with trips to see his grandkids. In fact, at the age of sixty-six on a rainy Saturday morning, March 21, 1556, he was taken down from the pulpit at St. Mary's Church in Oxford as he was preaching and driven to the center of town where he was burned at the stake for his convictions. Justification by faith is a life and death matter.

And our justification is due solely and completely to the mercy of God, a mercy Cranmer described as "great," "free," and "infinite."

After I graduated from college I worked in finance for awhile... I was a bank teller. I worked at a bank in Northern Virginia, on King St. in Alexandria. It was a fascinating and humbling place to work. I was the only white male who worked there, and the vast majority of our customers were immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. I'm not exactly a financial wizard, so I learned a lot of helpful things. One day an elderly man from Vietnam came in and walked up to my window. "Deposit!" he cried as he slammed his check on the counter. There was no deposit slip and no account number on the check, so I replied, "Yes, sir—savings account or checking account?" "No!" he yelled, "Deposit!" I repeated my response and he got really fired up and started yelling, "Deposit! Deposit! Deposit!" as he jumped up and down, slamming his hand on the counter (I'm not making this up). Our head teller, a very kind woman from the Philippines named Layla (she was born before the classic Eric Clapton song during his stint with Derek and the Dominos) spoke Vietnamese and called the gentleman over and politely completed his deposit. From then on, every time he entered the bank, he would glare at me and would only go to Layla's window.

In the fourth chapter of his Letter to the Romans, Paul describes how the righteousness of God is credited to our account through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, because of our sin we owe a debt to God that we can never repay—no matter how well we do keeping the law, no matter how great our merits—even if we have perfect attendance, we can't pay our the debt we owe because of our sin. But God in his grace, God in his great, free, and infinite mercy, paid that debt for us through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross to atone for our sins. Through faith in him, God's righteousness is placed in your account and my account. It is a free gift of God, a check of forgiveness that is placed in our account, a check of forgiveness that covers all our sins. It is deposited through faith; no yelling necessary.

Moreover, faith itself is a gift of God. Scripture tells us that God gives each of us a “measure of faith” (Romans 12:3), or as Roland Bainton wrote in his classic biography of Martin Luther, *Here I Stand*: “Faith is not an achievement. It is a gift.” And we are not only justified by faith, by belief and trust in the grace and mercy of God, but we live our lives by faith as well, as Scripture tells us, “The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17, KJV).

I recently read Jon Krakauer’s powerful book, *Into the Wild*, in which he recounts some of his mountaineering experiences, including solo ascents of icy Alaskan peaks. Listen to how he felt during these climbs thousands of feet high:

“All that held me to the mountainside, all that held me to the world, were two thin spikes of chrome stuck half an inch into a smear of frozen water... early on a climb, especially a difficult solo climb, you constantly feel the abyss pulling at your back... the siren song of the void puts you on edge; it makes your movements tentative, clumsy, herky-jerky.”

Sometimes our faith feels like that—so small, the only thing holding us to the mountainside. Sometimes the circumstances in our lives get really hard—we can feel the abyss pulling at our backs and hear the siren song of the void, our minds riddled with anxiety and fear.

But it is faith that justifies us, faith in Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross atoned for all the sin in your life, all the sin in my life, all the sin of all time. It is faith in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) that saves us. And that faith is a gift from God, which means that even if the thin spikes of chrome that are holding us to the mountainside break, and we think we are falling into the void, God will catch us. Jesus, referring to himself as the Good Shepherd and you and me as the sheep, said: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). Scripture tells us that “if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). We are justified by faith in the One who will never let us go.

In the late fifties to early sixties there was a boy who attended Catholic schools. When he was in third grade and acted out of line in class and a nun stuffed him into the garbage can under her desk and told him that’s where he belonged. As an altar boy during Mass he messed up and a priest knocked him down the stairs leading up to the altar. The young man was Bruce Springsteen (see *It Ain’t No Sin to be Glad You’re Alive: The Promise of Bruce Springsteen* by Eric Alterman).

And yet in spite of all that he has written many inspiring songs over the past forty years, including *Badlands*, the classic opening track from his brilliant 1978 album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, in which he sings:

I believe in the love that you gave me.
I believe in the faith that could save me.

I believe in the hope and I pray that some day it
Will raise me above these Badlands...

My wife and I have seen him perform that song live several times—there's nothing like it ☺.

The good news of the gospel is that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross for us. We can believe in the love he gave us. That faith saves us. That hope assures us that one day we will not only be raised above these badlands, but from the grave itself. The good news of the gospel is that regardless of whether like Bruce Springsteen you've been put in trashcans or knocked down stairs by the very ones from whom you should have received love and encouragement, you are loved. You are loved by the One who was knocked down repeatedly on the way to Calvary. You are loved by the One who was nailed to the cross to atone for our sins. You are loved by the One who paid the debt we could never ever pay.

Well, enough about John Wooden, the kids with perfect attendance, Thomas Cranmer, deposit man, Jon Krakauer, and Bruce Springsteen—what about you?

Perhaps today you can be assured for the first time or reassured yet again that you are fully known and fully loved, that you are forgiven, that God will never let you go, that your debt to God has been fully paid and deposited into your account.

Perhaps today you can be assured that God loves you personally, so that you can echo what the Apostle Paul wrote in today's passage: "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Perhaps today you can be encouraged by the good news of the gospel, that we are justified solely through faith in Jesus Christ, not by anything we can or can't do.

Amen.