

# Justification is by Grace Alone

*We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.*

**Gal. 2:15-16**

Thus far, we have expounded why Paul, addressing the subject of the ceremonies, types and shadows which were practised before the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, reaches the general conclusion that a man cannot be justified or acceptable in God's sight unless he observes the whole law. Now, at first, we might consider these things to be two separate issues; however, as we have been saying, Paul has to draw us back to basics in order to expose the folly of believing that we can obtain favour in God's eyes through our own merit. Now, we have already discussed the reason why Paul adds the word 'law'. For however much it may be commonly held that a good man can earn favour and acceptance with God, men are very seriously mistaken in such matters. Indeed, whatever we may have done, we cannot win God's favour, because he deserves the very best of all that is in our power. There is, therefore, no merit possible on our part (if, indeed, we may call it that), unless we fulfil the terms of the covenant he made with us, when he said that whosoever keeps the law shall obtain life and salvation (*Lev. 18:5*). When God uttered these words, he was prepared to accept our total obedience as worthy of salvation, but this does not, in fact, imply that we can, therefore, merit favour, for none of us have done our duty (as we shall see hereafter). Thus, the promise would have been forfeited, or at least without effect in that it would never apply to anyone, had not God sent the remedy — that is to say, unless, despite our unrighteousness, he forgave our sins, and accepted us as righteous. When Paul says that we cannot be justified by the works of the law, he means that if we claim to merit grace and salvation because God has promised that those who observe the law will be accounted as righteous, we are completely mistaken; for no one keeps the law perfectly. We must realise that we all stand guilty before God and have the sentence of condemnation hanging over our heads.

In order to express this fact more clearly, Paul draws a comparison between the Jews and the Gentiles. He says that even though they were 'Jews by nature and not sinners of the Gentiles' they realised that they could only be acceptable to God by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. For, although all men have fallen in Adam and therefore have no individual merit, it appeared that the Jews had a special privilege, in as much as God had adopted them as his own children and called them his servants. Yet, this is where the Jews went wrong. For when the Scriptures speak of 'the uncircumcision', they refer to the pollution which indwells us from Adam, and places us all under condemnation from our mother's womb. But the Jews believed that God had freed them from this curse upon mankind and therefore they boasted. Whilst it is true that great honour was conferred upon them, which they should have valued above all earthly good — for God had chosen them to be his people and his inheritance — yet they ought to have humbly acknowledged that in their own selves they were unworthy. Indeed, we also are used to adopting such a presumptuous attitude when we experience the grace of God; likewise the Jews, for the most part, wrongly believed they were superior to everyone else. They thought God had found

something about them that made him prefer them to those he had rejected. This arrogance brought with it wicked ingratitude, for they did not attribute to God all the good things they had received from his hand, but were puffed up with pride, as if God thought they were better or more worthy of eternal salvation than the Gentiles.

To extinguish all such presumption, Paul begins his argument thus: 'we who are Jews by nature...' It appears that he is saying, 'Yes, it is true that we have been shown greater grace than the Gentiles, whom God did not accept into his church'. But when he speaks like this he does not, in fact, intend to give the Jews occasion for pride; rather, he is spreading before them the things they have freely received from God to teach them that they have no grounds for boasting. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul makes two statements which at first sight seem contradictory, yet which are in perfect harmony. On the one hand he asks, 'Do we not have more privileges than the Gentiles?', and he answers, 'Yes. For we were chosen to be his people; he gave us circumcision as a sign and seal that we are his children; he made a covenant with us; he promised to send us the Redeemer of the world. Thus, if we consider the mercies that God has showered upon us, we have been blessed indeed, and exalted far above all other peoples.' Here Paul magnifies the goodness of God towards them (*Rom.* 3:1-2). However, later he asks the same question (What advantage have the Jews?), but answers, 'None at all' (*Rom.* 3:9-10). 'For we are all under God's curse. If the Gentiles are to be condemned, then we are to be condemned twice as much, for they have the excuse of ignorance. Nevertheless, they cannot escape God, but will perish although they have never had any instruction or knowledge of doctrine. It follows, then, that we will be condemned by the law, because God has taught us and yet we have not stopped sinning or transgressing his righteous laws, so that now we are plunged into greater and deeper condemnation than even Gentiles and unbelievers', he says. Thus, the Jews were distinct from the Gentiles — not because they were more worthy or more righteous, but simply because God chose them out of his free bounty.

In the same way, the children born to believers are no better than the children of other Gentiles or even of Turks when it comes to their nature. For we are all part of a corrupt and accursed mass whom God has condemned, so that none of us may exalt ourselves and think ourselves of more worth than our friends. However, Paul declares that our children are sanctified, that they are not stained in the same way as those born to unbelievers or pagans (*1 Cor.* 7:14). It would seem that there are some contradictions here. Yet the whole hangs together very well, because, as for our natures, we are all tainted and corrupted, with only one exception [Christ]. Yet there is such a thing as a supernatural gift, that is, a privilege that God confers in order that the children of believers are dedicated to him, and he recognises and accepts them as his own. This is why the children of the church today are regarded as the people of God and amongst the number of the elect, just as under the law the Jews were separated from the rest of the world. This explains why Paul says, 'We are Jews and not sinners of the Gentiles'. By 'sinners', he means those who continue in their filth and have not been washed by the grace of God. In deed, circumcision itself was a sign and a testimony to the fact that God accepted the family of Abraham and the race that descended from him as his own familiar and special people. In old times, this is what distinguished the Jews from unbelievers; for, although they were of equal status as children of Adam, yet God had chosen some and left others as strangers to his family. If we ask why this should be, the answer can only be purely because of God's grace, since the Jews themselves were not outstanding in any way.

Let us now follow the argument that Paul is constructing here. He says, 'Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ.' In saying this, Paul demonstrates that whatever grace they had received from God, they were not at liberty to trust in man or in themselves as if they deserved this from God. No, rather, they had to seek refuge in his free bounty, recognising that salvation is in Jesus Christ alone, who came to rescue from

perdition those who were already lost. This is confirmed in that other passage, where it says that he 'came and preached peace to you which were afar off and to them that were nigh' (*Eph. 2:17*). Jesus Christ is that peace, for it is through him that God can love us and receive us in mercy. This is not only true for those who were previously far away like the Gentiles, but also for the children of Abraham, despite the dignity and nobility they already possessed (for this was not theirs by nature). Paul says that the Jews who had been converted to Christianity knew that they could not be justified by the works of the law, but only by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he makes a comparison between the two in order to show that we cannot be justified by grace unless we actually renounce all personal merit.

This is well worthy of our attention. For indeed, even the Papists profess to be justified by faith, but this is only half of the truth and it is the rest of the picture which spoils the whole. Sure enough, they are persuaded of the fact that a man cannot be accounted righteous before God unless Jesus is the Mediator and unless that person rests upon him for salvation. The Papists know this only too well, and yet they so often say, 'We are justified by faith but not by faith alone.' This is the point with which they take issue, and this is the principal matter upon which we differ. Paul, however, shows their folly when he says, 'but by faith', for this expression implies that all that men bring to God to please him is rejected. The door is, therefore, tight shut to all merit, for Paul declares that the only way to come to God is through faith. We will soon see more clearly why Paul draws a comparison with the law as if here are two opposites. The law presupposes that if we fulfil what God requires of us we will be found good servants and he will give us the reward he has promised; faith, on the other hand, presupposes that we are poor, lost, condemned souls and that we are to find in Jesus Christ what we so desperately need.

Take this as an example: there are two men seeking food and shelter. One has money and wishes to be treated in accordance with his means. They both ask for something to eat, but the second man is poor and does not have a penny, so he begs for alms. They both have something in common, for they both seek food, but the first has money with which to satisfy his host. Thus, after eating and drinking well and being courteously entertained, the host, for his part, will be happy to receive his payment, no longer thinking that his guest is in any way indebted to him. Why? Well, he has been satisfied and has even gained from it. But the life of the poor man who asks for alms depends upon the one who can provide him with food and shelter, for he can give him nothing in return. In the same way, if we seek to be justified by the law we must deserve that justification; for then God will receive from us and we from him in a reciprocal manner. Is such a thing possible? Not at all, as we shall examine in more detail later. We must, therefore, conclude that we cannot obtain righteousness by the law, and that if we believe we can make God our debtor, we will only provoke his wrath. The only option is to come as poor beggars, that we may be justified by faith. Not as if faith were a virtue proceeding from us, but we must come humbly, confessing that we cannot obtain salvation except as a free gift. This, then, is why the law is put in opposition to faith. Paul is showing us that all who claim to be acceptable to God by their merits are turning their back upon the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We shall study this at greater length hereafter.

A man may raise this objection: the law was given by God, so therefore it cannot be placed in opposition to faith, which also proceeds from God. The answer to this is simple. God made both the day and the night, water and fire, cold and heat. Surely, the day is not in opposition to the night, but rather God in his goodness and wisdom has arranged that they appear in a suitable order; man has the brightness of the sun in which to do his work by day, and by night the sun hides itself away so that man may take his rest. Therefore, although day differs from night, there is no disharmony between them. The same applies to fire and water. Every created thing has its function — and fire and water complement each other very well; however, if we were to mix them together, then they would indeed clash! This is true of the law and the gospel. Those who believe that we are justified by the law as well as the gospel are confusing everything; it is as if

they are crashing heaven and earth together! In short, it would be easier to mix fire and water than to say this: that we can merit a measure of the grace of God and yet also need the aid of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we consider what the law is and why it was given, we will discover that there is no discrepancy with the gospel, nor with faith, but that there is perfect harmony between them. This objection is thus dealt with. If we say that both faith and the law proceed from God, we are right; but we must give some thought (as we will do shortly) to the reason why God originally instituted them both.

Let us return to Paul's words — he says that we can only be justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When he speaks of justification, he means being accounted righteous in the sight of God. This expression needs to be understood because it is dealing with the whole subject of how we are saved. We would be miserable creatures indeed if, having lived a long life in this world, someone were to ask us the way of salvation and we did not know how to respond! Many fools have feasted on the bread of God without knowing how to be acceptable to him. This is why we ought to be all the more attentive to what Paul is telling us here. He says that we are justified. How? Are we already righteous — are we blameless? Not at all, but God accepts us. The word 'justification' points us to that favour which God bestows upon us when we become his children and he our Father. You may ask, why do the Scriptures use the word 'justify' when it seems so inappropriate? We could just as well say that God loves us, that he takes pity on us, that he desires to be our Father and Saviour — why not use these expressions instead of speaking of justification? The Scriptures do not refer to it without good reason.

If we analyse salvation in its most basic sense, we will say that we are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, this does not imply knowledge of our miserable condition by nature or of the remedy that we need to apply. For in order to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we must acknowledge that by the sin of Adam, as well as by our own iniquities, we are altogether lost. We ought to have already discovered this for ourselves. We will never understand that our sins condemn us in God's sight, unless we know that we need to be put right with him. In other words, we will not be aware of the righteousness of God if we simply say, 'We are saved by grace and by faith.' For God cannot once deny himself, since he embodies sovereign justice; he is all purity and perfection and, therefore, he detests what is evil. Yet we are totally corrupt and there is only wickedness in us; it follows, therefore, that God must hate us. However, if he hates us, woe unto us, for we are damned. This is why we need to be justified before we can be pleasing to God. This means we must be cleansed from our sins and transgressions; otherwise, we could never appreciate God's mercy (as I have said). If we acknowledge that we are sinners, we will realise that God hates sin, and yet though he hates it he has nevertheless provided a way to save us — by forgiving our sins, and by cleansing and purging us from them through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us spiritual cleansing. God washes us clean in order that he might receive us, so that sharing in his love, we may be assured of our salvation. This is why the Scriptures use the word 'justification'.

Papists may debate over its meaning like foolish beasts. 'What!', they say, 'Justified by faith? Faith does not make a person perfect — how, then, can it justify us?' They do not realise that the justification spoken of in the Scriptures refers to God covering our sins (as I have been saying) and, by virtue of his sufferings and death, cancelling them in and through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whatever others may say, it is written that we are accounted righteous in God's sight when he remits and pardons our sins. In fact, Paul speaks of this in the fourth chapter to the Romans, where he says: 'Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered' (*Rom. 4:6-7; Psa. 32:1*). Again, in another passage he says, 'For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin'; (this means that he received all the condemnation due to us for our sins), 'that we might be made the righteousness of God in him'

(2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, we, being joined and united to his person and to his body, are accounted righteous, because his obedience was so perfect that it was sufficient to cleanse and remove our sins. We have now dealt with the meaning of the term 'justification'.

Turning our attention to the expression 'faith', Paul states here that they have 'believed' in Jesus Christ. If we were to ask a fool what he considers faith to be, he might well say 'belief, but he clearly would not understand what either word means. Are we happy to be as ignorant as such fools? Let us firstly point out that the Lord Jesus is the object of both our faith and our belief. Is salvation through faith? Yes, if we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us consider for a moment why the Lord Jesus Christ is set before us as the one in whom we must rest all our faith. It is simply because we find in him all we need for our justification. We have already said that we are accounted righteous in God's sight when he has forgiven our sins and no longer calls them into account. And how does this happen, if not by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for our cleansing? By his sufferings and death, he made satisfaction for our sins and appeased the wrath of God against us. We must seek no further means of payment, other than the sacrifice made by God's only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is he who is called God's beloved Son (*Matt. 3:17*), so that we might be beloved in him; he is called the Righteous One (*Isa. 53:11*), so that we may partake of his righteousness; and he is called the Holy One (*Luke 1:35*), so that we may be sanctified in him. This is why our attention is drawn to the Lord Jesus Christ when we consider 'faith'.

However, the Papists form their own opinions on the subject, revealing by what they claim that they have never experienced what it is to believe. 'What!', they say, 'is it possible for a man to be justified by faith alone, seeing that even devils themselves believe?' This is indeed true, and James uses this argument (*Jas. 2:20*); however, we also see him scorning those who vainly and frivolously said they were Christians and had faith, and yet showed no fruit. The Papists have strayed even further, in that they say faith means believing in God, and that the subject of our faith is God, when by belief they mean a mere imagining that there is a God somewhere who has created the world and who now controls it. They remain at this point, asleep in their ignorance, and yet do not hesitate to call themselves good Christians and good Catholics, as they say, although they are altogether ignorant. Therefore, we should not be surprised if, devoid of discernment or intelligence, they fight against the doctrine contained in Holy Scripture, or when they deny, with incorrigible obstinacy, that man is saved by faith alone. They do not even know what faith is. How carefully, therefore, must we heed the words of Paul here which tell us that if we do not look to Jesus Christ, we cannot know what faith really is. Without him, we cannot know remission of sins, how to approach God, how to put our trust in him, or to call upon him. Neither will we know what it is to have peace of conscience, or the hope of eternal life. All this is beyond our reach until we are introduced to Jesus Christ and until we have looked to him and cast ourselves upon him. This kind of faith brings grace: when we recognise that we are wretched creatures, and abominable in God's sight, seeking the remedy in the Lord Jesus Christ. We must accept that he offered himself for us in order to redeem us from the curse under which we lived, and that he has washed us in his blood. By his obedience, he has cancelled all our transgressions so that we can be assured that God accepts and receives us as his children. This is how we can understand this passage.

Having stated that he, and all the Jews that had been converted to Christianity had been saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul adds the following: 'for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified'. We have heard this before in application to those of his own nation, but here he proclaims it in a more general sense to the whole world. When he says, 'no flesh', he primarily implies that there is no difference between the Jews and the Gentiles when it comes to the way of salvation. Although the Jews had been circumcised, chosen as God's inheritance and sanctified by him, nevertheless, they could have no hope of salvation except through God's pure

grace alone. See how they are set at the same level as the Gentiles, having the same status. Paul seeks to expel all pride that men may have about their own virtues. Indeed, many of us know ourselves to be so depraved that we cannot possibly attribute any honour to ourselves, as if we should deserve anything at God's hand. Those who are drunk or debauched or who have given themselves over to all kinds of evil feel too ashamed to elevate themselves or to boast that they can persuade God to save them by their merits or good works. In fact, they hide themselves even from other people because they are ashamed of their baseness. But the bigoted, who make a show of their 'holiness' before men, are so hardened that they deceive themselves into thinking they deserve paradise — as if God were indebted to them! These hypocrites, though utterly depraved and full of ambition, avarice, wickedness and such like things, because of all their manipulations and pretences, believe that God sees nothing wrong with their corrupt practices and even persuade themselves that he will accept them because of their merits! Those who regularly attend Mass, running from the alehouse to the chapel, buying pardons and other such things, observing fasts and feast days — they are puffed up with vain pride and believe that God owes them something. By saying 'no flesh', Paul declares that it is pointless to separate ourselves from one another here below, as if one is just and the other unjust. We must all humble ourselves and judge ourselves, knowing that all our virtues are but filthy rags in God's sight, even the very best that we can do. For even if a man were perfectly righteous in our estimation, because he never harmed anyone, or because he could resist all kinds of evil and was chaste and sober — in short, though he were reputed to be an angel — yet within, there would be nothing but corruption. How is this possible? Well, we must never judge by the appearance, for all that glitters (as the proverb says) is not gold. We cannot judge what is sin or virtue without first looking within. For if a man does not ascribe to God what is rightfully his, he is not robbing men of their honour, but God. Thus, however much men might praise and commend him, he is full of pride and ambition, and nothing will humble him except coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, even those who make a good outward show of religion shall be condemned before God. Hence, Paul intends to stop men from trusting in their own merits. But there is yet more. For when he says, 'no flesh', he not only refers to men whom God has given over, who have not been renewed by his Holy Spirit, but he also includes believers. For although God's Spirit dwells within us after he has led us to a knowledge of the gospel and grafted us into the body of the Lord Jesus Christ — although, I say, God's Spirit dwells within us, we are all included in this word 'flesh' because of what we are by nature. Thus, when Paul declares here that 'no flesh shall be justified', he means that unbelievers are condemned in Adam and remain condemned, and that believers, because they will always be imperfect and have many spots and blemishes, are condemned as much as the others. Indeed, this condemnation is a general one, for whoever seeks to be justified by the works of the law will always find himself guilty — yes, even the holiest person that ever existed. Let us take Abraham as an example of perfection, or David, who abounded in all virtues, or Noah, Job, and Daniel, whom Ezekiel names as three righteous men (Ezek. 14:14). They all fall into the same category as men who could only be justified in God's sight through grace.

Now then, I ask you all, where do we stand? Those who say that they will be justified by their merits, or 'meritorious works' as they call them, have they not been driven to excessive pride by the devil? For who can match David, or Noah, or Abraham, or Daniel? Surely, even those who have done well in God's school, and who are fired by true zeal in giving themselves totally to God, are convinced that they are still far from having reached the standard set by David, or even Noah or Daniel! Knowing this, therefore, we can see that the Holy Spirit is here casting down those who exalt themselves overmuch, to convince us that we have not the merest drop of righteousness, so that we seek all that pertains to our salvation in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we understand what the statement implies when it says that 'no flesh shall be justified'. It is as if Paul were saying that, when it comes to our nature, we are only evil within, despite what appears to be the case outwardly. We may be greatly praised and respected by the world; we may be surrounded by vain flattery; but until God works in us to change us, we are full

of filth. Indeed, all the virtues that men exalt are nothing short of vices that will lead men to destruction and plunge them into hell. For even those who have been renewed by the grace of God, and who have learnt to obey him by doing the things which God loves and cherishes, even they can bring nothing to God that can settle their accounts with him. They will always be in debt because all the good gifts they have proceed from God; also, even such men are corrupt through sin and infirmity. Thus, we must be stripped of all trust in our own righteousness. For, from the greatest to the least of us, we are all condemned. If we seek justification by the law, we are greatly deceived — we will never find it.

Now we can understand much more clearly the truth of what I have been saying concerning the Lord Jesus Christ as a refuge for those who are convinced of their spiritual need. This means that the only real preparation for belief in Jesus Christ is to be touched with a real, vivid sense and awareness of our sins. This is why Christ said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... and ye shall find rest unto your souls' (*Matt.* 11:28-29). Elsewhere, the Scripture clearly says that he was sent 'to preach good tidings unto the meek... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound' (*Isa.* 61:1). Therefore, those who take pleasure in their sins will never come to the Lord Jesus Christ. They may boast that they have faith, for many mockers of God profane this word, holy as it is. Everyone wishes to be thought of as a Christian, and no matter how depraved they are, they will say that they believe as much as any other. But when a man speaks in this manner, it is evidence enough that he has not one drop of faith. When true believers say, 'I believe', they express it in great weakness, knowing that had not God taken pity on them, even the little they had would have been taken from them. Those who loudly boast that they have complete faith are nothing but dogs and swine, who have never once tasted true religion nor the fear of God. The term 'faith' will always be shamefully defiled by these dogs, who do nothing other than mock God. They cannot discern between good and evil, and are so foolish as to wallow in their own sins. Take a drunkard, for example, who is past shame; after drinking to excess, he longs to remain in his intoxicated state. Then there are the whoremongers, perjurers, blasphemers, and suchlike — all of whom claim to have faith; but for all that, it is certain that they are not ready to meet the Lord Jesus Christ. Why not? Because they do not realise that they can only be justified by grace. Let us remember, however, that to be thoroughly persuaded that we cannot be justified by the law, we must set God before us on his judgment throne and summon ourselves before him every morning and evening, knowing that we must give an account of our whole lives. Also, we must realise that we would be sent to the pit a hundred thousand times if God did not pity us and raise us up in his infinite mercy. Then we will know that we cannot be justified by the law, for we are all under condemnation every time we compare ourselves with God. We need to have such fear, that we cannot find rest until the Lord Jesus Christ has saved us. See, therefore, how good it is for us to be heavy laden, that is to say, to hate our sins and to be in such anguish over them that we feel surrounded by the pains of death, so that we seek God in order that he might ease us of our burden. We must, however, seek him in the knowledge that we cannot obtain salvation, full or in part, unless it is granted to us as a gift. Paul is not saying that we may find something of what we lack in Jesus Christ, and supply the rest ourselves. He says we cannot be counted righteous through our own merits, or works, but only through faith.

Let us, therefore, understand that there is no salvation whatsoever outside of Jesus Christ, for he is the beginning and the end of faith, and he is all in all. Let us continue in humility, knowing that we can only bring condemnation upon ourselves; therefore, we need to find all that pertains to salvation in the pure and free mercy of God. We must be able to say that we are saved through faith. God the Father has appointed his Son the Lord Jesus Christ that he might be both the author and finisher of our salvation. We are to deny ourselves and give ourselves to him wholly and completely, that all the praise might belong to him.

Now let us fall before the majesty of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and asking that he

would make us increasingly aware of them, that we may hate them more and more, and grow in repentance (a grace that we need to exercise all our lives). May we learn so to magnify his grace, as it is shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might be completely taken up with it; and may we not only do so with our lips, but place our entire trust in him. May we grow in that trust until we are gathered up into our eternal home, where we shall receive faith's reward. May he not only grant this grace to us, but to all peoples, etc.

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## John Calvin

John Calvin (1509 – 1564) was a French theologian and pastor, influential in the Reformation.

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[John Calvin, Spirituality, Justification, Grace](#)