



For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

*Romans 3:23-25*

## Study #4 Reforming Faith

*“When the article of justification has fallen, everything has fallen.”*

Luther

### Background

As we come to our final study in this series, we get to the heart of what was really at stake in the Reformation. Last time we explored what it is that motivates and moves God towards us in his grace alone with salvation secured through Christ alone. But how do these truths actually become real to us and what needs to happen so that we may benefit from them? Here we return to the importance of justification, which answers the question: how can a sinner benefit from what Christ alone achieves and what grace alone offers? The answer the reformers were arguing was that one is justified by faith alone. This answer changed everything.

### Getting justification the right way round

Prior to the Reformation, justification was certainly critical, but because of how the *Latin Vulgate* translated the righteousness/justification words, it meant justification was viewed as a process. As we’ve seen throughout our series, Medieval Catholicism saw salvation as a progression involving God’s grace (through the sacraments) and an individual’s cooperation with grace in order to receive the reward of eternal life. Justification was this end point where an *intrinsic* change in the person was validated by God.

However the righteousness/justification word is not about intrinsic moral change, it’s about a legal declaration. Coming from the law courts, the word ‘justification’’s meaning is that it is the exact opposite to the word ‘condemnation’. Justification means that the sinner is acquitted. So, whereas the medieval system placed justification at the end of the salvation process, the New Testament actually places it at the front. That is, the Christian is already justified and declared right now, not hoping that somehow such justification will be declared later. This has huge implications for all of the Christian life, but the key question remained: how can this justification become reality for the sinner? (both from God’s perspective, and from ours)

### Getting faith into shape

Considering the place of faith is the logical flow on from what we’ve learnt of Christ and Grace the last two weeks.

- The source of our justification before God is his *grace alone*.
- The grounds of such justification is *Christ alone*.
- But ..... the means of this justification and how it is appropriated, is by *faith alone*.

But what is faith? Again, even this was (and still is) a contentious issue. In Medieval Europe, because of ignorance of the gospel, just showing up and watching the sacraments was believed to bring some spiritual benefit. Such “faith” didn’t save, but it did still have value and might be of some help contributing to justification later on. This meant that just attending, without even understanding what might be going on was of some “faith” value. But this has nothing to do with faith as described in the Scriptures.

Genuine faith is to receive in dependence.

God offers a gift, his gift of salvation for you, we are to receive and rely on his merciful provision for us. As such, faith contains three key elements.

1) Faith has knowledge. To trust something or someone, you must at least have some understanding of what you're trusting. That is, you need to know the content of the gospel if you are to have true faith. But of course, just having knowledge of the gospel isn't faith. Plenty of people have knowledge of the gospel, but they refuse to believe it.

2) Faith gives assent. Faith not only knows about the gospel, but also agrees that it is indeed true. You can hardly be trusting something if you believe it to be untrue. However, many people and even devils (James 2:19) know the gospel to be true, but such assent doesn't constitute real faith either.

3) Faith expresses dependence. Genuine faith knows, agrees, but also relies. That is, faith commits in trust to what is known to be true.

So the Christian is the person who understands the mercy of the gospel in Christ, who agrees that the gospel is true and who receives such mercy in humble reliance. All three elements are necessarily operating to constitute genuine faith.

### **Faith a work, or the work of faith?**

Is faith then our contribution to salvation? Well, when something is freely received by the thoroughly undeserving from the completely gracious, it simply can't rest on any work or contribution of the undeserving. The very act of receiving is one of faith, which itself is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). The reformers were adamant that we are justified and therefore saved by faith alone, and not by any work. (Romans 3:28)

Is faith then devoid of good works? Hardly. Indeed true faith will necessarily exhibit good works for they are the very fruits of genuine faith. However it is not such fruits that save, it is the fruit of the saviour's work which saves. Or to put it another way, evidence of genuine faith will be seen in good works, but it is faith alone in Christ's good works that justifies.

This is not just a tremendous relief for us and an expression of God's kindness, it is a joyous freedom for the Christian who is genuinely motivated to love and serve the saviour in grateful joy, not dutiful insecurity.

### **Some questions for your group**

*Note: If as group leader/co-leader you find it easier to print out all these notes for your group, please do so. It may also be helpful to refer back to some of the above notes during your time together.*

- What has been the most helpful or encouraging thing for you during our series on the reformation?
- What have you been caused to consider more deeply in your understanding of Christian truth?

### **Questions of faith**

- Consider the following: "If only I had more faith, I'd be a far better Christian!"
  - What do you make of that statement?
  - What questions does it raise for you?
  - What encouragement would you give to the person who says it?
- "All you need to be a Christian is but a mustard seed of faith. I have faith enough to get me to church each week, so I'm hoping I'll be ok in the end."
  - What questions or worries might this statement raise?
  - How might you go about engaging with this person's view of faith?

## The Reformation way of faith

Romans 3:21-26 is a key passage in the New Testament which gets to the heart of the reformation.

- Have a read through and consider together the prominence of faith.

<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it — <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

- The verses tell us that we are justified (declared right before God) by grace in v.24 and by faith in v.26. How do you think both ideas work together?
- Paul is very careful in his language as he says that the gift of justification is to be received by faith (v.25).
  - What do you think that actually means to receive the gift of justification?
  - What is it that faith is actually receiving from these verses?
- Paul is adamant that salvation is through faith because it highlights not us, but the God who saves through his Son.
  - What importantly do we see in regards to God's character and wonder as he justifies through faith and not through our works?
  - What then is at stake if we insist that our merit and our contribution is vital for justification?

## Faith preceding good works

The place of good works always comes up during discussions on justification. There are many reasons for this, but it's important to remember how connected faith alone is to grace alone and Christ alone. All three teachings affirm that we don't contribute, but that we freely receive.

- Why do we struggle to receive things for free? (if indeed you do)
- Why do we struggle to receive such good things for free from God?
- Read through Ephesians 2:8-10 again
  - Is there anything else here we learn about the nature of faith?
  - Salvation is not a result *of* good works, but you are saved *for* good works. How might you use these verses to encourage someone who seems to have little interest in walking in good works?

## Your ongoing reformation?

- Are you sometimes in a place where you struggle to accept God's gift of salvation to be received by faith alone? What sort of things might be driving this?
- How can you be joyously embracing this reformation truth more effectively to benefit yourself and others?