



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.2.4 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification by Faith, Not by Works

Just as the apostle Paul makes a big contrast between grace and works, so also he makes a big contrast between faith and works. If our justification is by works, then it is not by faith. If it is by faith, then it is not by works. This is stated most clearly by Paul in his letter to the Christians in Galatia: **“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified”** (Galatians 2:16). Paul makes the same point in Romans 3:28: **“We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”**

The majority of the Jewish people made the mistake of thinking that they could earn the favor of God by their works, that is, by their obedience to the law. Because of this fatal mistake they witnessed many Gentiles (non-Jews) receiving the righteousness of God by faith in Christ, while they themselves failed to attain it because they were trusting in their works. Paul explained: **“Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel (the Jews), pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law”** (Romans 9:30-32).

Is it possible to be justified partly by faith, and partly by works? Paul answers that question with a definite “no”. To the Galatians he wrote: **“You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”** (Galatians 5:4). It is an either/or proposition. Either we hope to earn God’s favor by our works, or we trust in Christ for forgiveness. If we put our trust in our own works for salvation, we are lost; we have no benefit from Christ at all; we have fallen from grace, and this means that we are facing God’s anger and condemnation. Faith in Christ is the only way to receive the forgiveness and justification that Jesus has won for the whole world by His suffering and death for all.

We should keep the contrast between faith and works in mind whenever we hear or read that we are justified by faith. Paul repeats this truth many times in his letters. For example, he says that the righteousness of God becomes ours **“through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe”** (Romans 3:22). We hear **“through faith”** again in Romans 3:25. God is **“the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”** (Romans 3:26). In the Greek language, the words for “faith” and “believe” are related words. The apostle John prefers to use the verb form, which is translated “believe”. **“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”** (John 3:36).

Since faith is contrasted with works, we should not think of faith itself as a work by which we save ourselves. Faith in Christ means that we give up trusting in ourselves or our own efforts – our own prayers, our own faith – and put our trust in Christ alone and what He has done to save us. Faith is not the *cause* of our justification, but faith is the way we receive the justification that is already there as a free gift from God because of the work of Jesus Christ. Our faith is counted by God as righteousness, not because our faith is so great, but because of the object of our faith: Jesus Christ, our Savior.

That is why we should always think “faith in Christ” whenever the Bible speaks of saving faith. Jesus said to His disciples: **“He who believes and is baptized will be saved”** (Mark 16:16). Does this mean

any kind of believing will save us? No, not at all! We must look at the context. Jesus said: **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”** (Mark 16:15-16). It is clear that Jesus is saying that everyone who believes the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus will be saved; those who reject that Good News will be condemned.

The word “faith” is used very loosely in our day-to-day language. We talk of faith in our leaders, faith in oneself, faith in our country, faith in our pastor, faith in our church, or even faith in our faith. Faith in anything other than Christ does not save anyone from sin or death. Faith in itself does not save. Only faith *in Christ* saves. What counts is what you have faith in. It doesn’t matter if that faith is weak or strong. As long as it is faith in Christ, it received forgiveness. Thus, faith is not a *cause* of justification. It is what receives justification. The Bible does not say we are justified because of faith; it says we are justified through faith.

It is natural for human beings to think that they themselves need to do something in order to be saved. All the man-made religions of the world focus on man’s own efforts – his own thinking, doing, or feeling – as the only way to gain the favor of God and receive any kind of reward or blessing from Him. This idea is so ingrained in us that it easily sneaks into our Christian teaching. But the Bible absolutely excludes our works as the cause or even a partial cause of our justification. **“A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law”** (Romans 3:28). Again, Paul speaks about being **“justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law”** (Galatians 2:16). The way of works is ruled out, and the way of faith is ruled in. That is why it is correct for us to say that we are saved by faith alone.

This means that the so-called good works that we do before coming to faith in Jesus do not contribute in any way to our being justified. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable in Luke 18:9-14 followed the opinion of the world and was in his own opinion a very good man. He boasted: **“I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”** But these “good” works did not lead to his justification, for the tax collector was the one who went home justified, not the Pharisee.

The apostle Paul himself was such a Pharisee at one time in his life. He had been such a strict Pharisee, intent on obeying God’s law, that if anyone could be justified by his works, it would have been Paul. But after Paul came to believe in Christ and His work, he realized that his former so-called good works were worthless and contributed nothing at all to his justification. These are his words to the Christians in Philippi: **“If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 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”** (Philippians 3:4-9). At one time Paul had trusted in his obedience to the law and his admirable life as a Pharisee, but later he regarded that obedience as worthless garbage, rubbish, because now he had the real thing: the righteousness of God in Christ, which was his, not by works, but by faith.

The real good works that a believer in Christ does after coming to faith do not contribute to their justification either. We are not saved by the good we do as Christians, but only by faith in Christ. Paul writes: **“If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness’”** (Romans 4:2-3). If we could contribute to our own justification by the good things we do as believers in Christ, then we would have something to brag about and it would no longer be true that we are saved by Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, as the Bible teaches.

The apostle Paul as a believer in Christ speaks like this: **“The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain”** (Galatians 2:20-21). If we credit our justification to our own obedience and good works in any way at all, we are telling Christ that He did not complete the work of our atonement by His suffering and death. But Christ alone is our Savior, and we need to cling to Him, and Him alone, for righteousness and forgiveness from God. We need to **“rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh”** (Philippians 3:3)

This is the Gospel (the Good News) that Paul proclaimed, and no one should dare to alter it in any way. Paul used strong language in condemning the false teachers in Galatia who were misleading his converts: **“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed”** (Galatians 1:6-9).

Questions

1. Which way of justification is ruled out, and which way is ruled in as the only right way?
2. Why did the majority of the Jewish people fail to attain righteousness?
3. What is the result if a person depends partly on Christ and partly on his own obedience to God as a way of being saved?
4. Why is it important that we stress faith in Christ, rather than simply faith?
5. Since faith is not the cause of our justification, what is the cause of our justification?
6. What role or part does faith play in our justification?
7. What did Paul think of his former life as a Pharisee after he became a believer in Jesus?
8. Why should we not trust in the good things we do as Christians for salvation?
9. How many ways of salvation are there?
10. What is generally believed by the people in your locale about the right way to God or to a better hereafter?