

Justification by Faith

And he [Abram] believed the LORD, and he [Yahweh] counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

Genesis 15:6 is quoted four times in the New Testament as the foundation for the Christian doctrine of 'justification by faith.' Justification is the "state of being justified" and justify is "to judge, regard, or treat as righteous and worthy of salvation."¹ The Scripture says Abraham believed the LORD concerning the covenant promise of having a son from his own body and offspring as the stars in the sky. And God counted this faith in the promise to him as righteousness. The word 'counted' is also translated as credited, accounted, reckoned, and imputed. Righteousness is the state of being righteous – this is more than free of guilt. The word 'counted' is a judicial term and suggests a declarative act of making one righteous. God, the judge of the universe, is the one who declares the believer to be just or righteous.

Wayne Grudem writes, "Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which He (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in His sight."²

The apostle Paul writes:

- For by works of the law no human being **will be justified** in His [God's] sight... (Rom 3:20)
- It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that He [God] might be **just and the justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:26)
- Yet we know that a person **is not justified** by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be **justified by faith** in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will **be justified**. (Gal 2:16)
- So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might **be justified by faith**. (Gal 3:24)

How then can one be justified or declared to be righteous by God today? Abraham believed in a promise from God, but what must a person believe in to be justified now? Anyone can move from a state of being guilty before God to one of being righteous through genuine faith in the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1-2).

What must a person believe concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ?

- He or she must believe that there is a God and they are not righteous or in a right standing with God. "No one is righteous not even one" (Rom 3:10). They must see their need for an alien or external righteousness because they know internally they are personally guilty of violating God's law. They are sinners.
- They must believe that Jesus, the sinless Messiah, is the one and only Son of God, was crucified, buried, and rose again on the third day 2000 years ago in Jerusalem for their sins. On the cross, God made Jesus, who never sinned, sin in the place of sinners past, present and future so that those who believe can receive Christ's righteousness in exchange for their sin (2Co 5:21). This faith in the promise of forgiveness, righteousness, and the gift of eternal life all from the grace of God can collectively be described as being saved or salvation.

Finally, the apostle James seemingly contradicts all that Paul taught concerning justification by faith in James 2:21, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?" However, a closer look at all that James taught reveals that although one is saved by faith alone this genuine faith in the gospel is never alone. It always produces evidence of salvation which can be aptly described as works. Like the daily work of surrendering to the lordship of Christ in the life of the believer. Or the work of forgiving others when they sin against us because our sins have been forgiven. Or the work of loving our enemies because God demonstrated His love for us when we were enemies of God. Faith without works is dead faith (Jam 2:17). The believer knows he or she is saved by and through God's ongoing work of working out the righteousness they received from Jesus in righteous deeds (Rev 19:8) that glorify God and give evidence of being transformed into the likeness and image of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

¹ Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1996).

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994) p. 723.