

## Scripture, Tradition, and Rome, Part 6

Scripture: Genesis 3:21; Matthew 9:5–6; Luke 18:9–14; John 5:24; Romans 4:9–11; Philippians 3:9  
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### THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS

Let's return to the Roman Catholic priest's challenge. Certainly if justification by faith alone is so crucial a doctrine, we would expect to find it clearly taught by our Lord. Indeed, that is precisely what we discover.

Although Christ made no formal explication of the doctrine of justification (such as Paul did in his epistle to the Romans), justification by faith underlay and permeated all His gospel preaching. While Jesus never gave a discourse on the subject, it is easy to demonstrate from Jesus' evangelistic ministry that He taught *sola fide*.

For example, it was Jesus Himself who stated, "he who hears My word, and believes . . . has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24)—without undergoing any sacrament or ritual, and without any waiting period or purgatory. The thief on the cross is the classic example. On the most meager evidence of his faith, Jesus told him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). No sacrament or work was required for him to procure salvation.

Furthermore, the many healings Jesus accomplished were physical evidence of His power to forgive sins (Matthew 9:5-6). When He healed, He frequently said, "Your faith has made you well" (Matthew 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). All those healings were object lessons on the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

But the one occasion where Jesus actually declared someone "justified" provides the best insight into the doctrine as He taught it:

He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get. 'But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, *this man went down to his house justified* rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14, emphasis added).

That parable surely shocked Jesus' listeners! They "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (Luke 18:9)—the very definition of self-righteousness. Their theological heroes were the Pharisees, who held to the most rigid legalistic standards. They fasted, made a great show of praying and giving alms, and even went further in applying the ceremonial laws than Moses had actually prescribed." As to the righteousness which is in the Law," they considered themselves "blameless" (cf. Philippians

3:5-6).

Yet Jesus had stunned multitudes by saying, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20)—followed by, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Clearly, He set a standard that was humanly impossible, for no one could surpass the rigorous living of the scribes and Pharisees. Now He further astounds His listeners with a parable that seems to place a detestable tax-gatherer in a better position spiritually than a praying Pharisee.

Jesus' point is clear. He was teaching that justification is by faith alone. All the theology of justification is there. But without delving into abstract theology, Jesus clearly painted the picture for us with a parable.

### **A judicial act of God**

This tax-gatherer's justification was an instantaneous reality. There was no process, no time lapse, no fear of purgatory. He "went down to his house justified" (Luke 18:14)—not because of anything he had done, but because of what had been done on his behalf.

Notice that the tax-collector understood his own helplessness. He owed an impossible debt he knew he could not pay. All he could do was repent and plead for mercy. Contrast his prayer with that of the arrogant Pharisee. He did not recite what he had done. He knew that even his best works were sin. He did not offer to do anything for God. He simply pleaded for divine mercy. He was looking for God to do for him what he could not do for himself. That is the very nature of the penitence Jesus called for.

### **By faith alone**

Furthermore, this man went away justified without performing any works of penance, without doing any sacrament or ritual, without any meritorious works whatsoever. His justification was complete without any of those things, because it was solely on the basis of faith. Everything necessary to atone for his sin and provide forgiveness had already been done on his behalf. He was justified by faith on the spot.

Again, he makes a stark contrast with the smug Pharisee, who was so certain that all his fasting and tithing and other works made him acceptable to God. But while the working Pharisee remained unjustified, the believing tax-gatherer received full justification by faith alone.

### **An imputed righteousness**

Remember Jesus' statement from the Sermon on the Mount, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20)? Yet now He states that this tax-gatherer—the most wicked of men—was justified! How did such a sinner obtain a righteousness that exceeded that of the Pharisee? If the standard is divine perfection (Matthew 5:48), how could a traitorous tax-collector ever become just in God's eyes?

The only possible answer is that he received a righteousness that was not his own (cf. Philippians 3:9). Righteousness was imputed to him by faith (Romans 4:9-11).

Whose righteousness was reckoned to him? It could only be the perfect righteousness of a flawless Substitute, who in turn must bear the tax-gatherer's sins and suffer the penalty of God's wrath in his place. And the gospel tells us that is precisely what Jesus did.

The tax-gatherer was justified. God declared him righteous, imputing to him the full and perfect righteousness of Christ, forgiving him of all unrighteousness, and delivering him from all condemnation. Forever thereafter he stood before God on the ground of a perfect righteousness that had been reckoned to his account.

That is what justification means. It is the only true gospel. All other points of theology emanate from it. As Packer wrote, "The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace. "The difference between Rome and the Reformers is not theological hair-splitting. A right understanding of justification by faith is the very foundation of the gospel. You cannot go wrong on this point without corrupting every other doctrine as well. And that is why every "different gospel" is under the eternal curse of God.

You cannot say that Luther invented the idea of justification by faith alone. Long before Luther it was taught by Augustine and Paul and Jesus and Moses. Even back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve realized soon after their sin that the fig leaves with which they tried to cover their shame were woefully inadequate. The gospel is given in Genesis 3:21 when Moses tells us that God clothed them. They needed something they couldn't provide for themselves; and God giving man what man needs to stand in His favorable presence is the essence of the gospel. Luther merely restated what true Christians have understood for centuries, that justification is by faith alone.

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