

Sola Fide

Galatians, Romans

Justin Deeter – October 8, 2017



“What must I do to be saved?” There is no other question more important than this. After all, eternity hangs upon its answer. During the Middle Ages, the church left that question unanswered. For almost a thousand years, the church provided no specific answer on how an individual can stand right before God. Because of the Church’s lack of clarity on the answer, many medieval theologians debated and wrestled with the question of salvation.¹

Martin Luther, the German reformer, experienced terrible anxiety over that simple but urgent question: “What must I do to be saved?” After a near death experience, he committed himself to an Augustinian monastery. By his own admission, Luther excelled in his devotion to his monastic vow. He committed himself to his studies, devoted himself to his prayers, and consigned himself to the monastic order. However, Luther was crushed by fear of God’s judgment. No matter how much good he did, he never felt like he was good enough. As he thought about the righteousness of God, he couldn’t help but sense his own wickedness. Despite his most zealous devotion to God, he knew he could never be good enough.

At some point, Luther made a startling discovery. This breakthrough helped him answer that nagging question: *what must I do to be saved?* In his study he began to lecture on different books of the Bible. He lectured through the book of

1 Alistar McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 118.

Psalms (1513-15), Romans (1515-16), Galatians (1516-17), and Hebrews (1517-18). The breakthrough came sometime while he was studying Romans and Galatians. Writing as an older man, Luther described this breakthrough in his own words:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven.

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness. He who sees God as angry

does not see him rightly but looks only on a curtain as if a dark cloud had been drawn across his face.”²

Luther’s great discovery was the connection between faith and the righteousness of God. Rather than fearing the righteousness of God, Luther discovered that he could receive the righteousness of God as his own. How can a sinful man receive the righteousness of God? By faith alone.

Today, we discover the second sola of the Protestant Reformation, Sola Fide (Faith Alone). Today, we will traverse the same path as Martin Luther by meditating on God’s word through Paul’s letter to the Galatians and the Romans. In it, we will discover this all important answer to the question: *What must I do to be saved?* The answer? *We are justified by faith alone and by faith we receive the righteousness of God.*

1. We are Justified by Faith Alone (Galatians 2:15-16)

First let’s turn to the book of Galatians to discover this key principle: we are justified by faith alone. What does it mean to be justified? It means that you are made right with God, that before his throne of judgment you are accepted as just. The question “What must I do to be saved” presumes that we are sinners rebellious creatures who have broken the Law of God. Before the throne of God above, we stand condemned in our sin. So the question of how humanity can be

² LW 54:185-6

saved from God's judgment is the question of how can someone be justified before God.

As the book of Galatians opens, we see that the apostle Paul comes out with fist blazing. He is furious that the church of Galatia has so quickly abandoned the true gospel for a false gospel.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." (Galatians 1:6–7, ESV)

He goes on to say that if anyone preaches another gospel contrary to the one they received, than they should be condemned (anathema).

Before he launches into the nature of this distortion to the Gospel, Paul gives a brief biographical summary of his call by God. Christ Jesus revealed himself to Paul on the road to Damascus, and Paul spent years studying and learning the true Gospel, including being mentored by the apostle Peter himself! Paul was called to the ministry of an apostle, and was sent out by the church to reach the gentiles (the non-Jews) by the church in Jerusalem.

One of the great debates in the early church revolved around the nature of Christianity and Judaism. Was Christianity just an extension of Judaism, an addition to the religion of Israel, or was it something all together different. In other words, did you need to become a Jew before you could become a Christian? Or, to put it more bluntly, did a man have to be circumcised in obedience to the law to become a Christian? Was obedience to the Law of God a prerequisite to becoming a Christian? After much debate at the Jerusalem council, the apostles came to

the conclusion that all people are welcome to partake of the grace of God in Christ, without having to submit themselves in obedience to the law first.

So, as Paul tells his story to the Galatian church, he tells a story of a confrontation he had with the apostle Peter. Peter was sitting and eating with some gentile converts to Christianity in Antioch. However, as soon as some of the Jewish Christians came along, he separated himself from the Gentile Christians, fearing the criticism of the Judiazers. The Judiazers believed that you needed to be circumcised before you became a Christian. Peter, fearing their criticism, withdrew from the gentiles to save face. Good ol' confrontational Paul saw this hypocrisy and calls Peter out!

"But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:14, ESV)

After the story of Peter's confrontation, we arrive at the devilish gospel distortion that Paul chastises so severely as he opens up this letter:

"We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 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." (Galatians 2:15-16, ESV)

Paul adamantly insists that no one, Jew or Gentile, can be justified before God by the works of the law. No one can earn God's favor by performing good deeds. To think you can is the height of pride and folly. Anyone trusting in their own

righteousness to get them into heaven, will be condemned before the throne of God.

Human beings are prone to moralism. Like good little boy scouts and Girl Scouts, we earn our merit badges and believe that if we can accumulate enough of them, then God will accept us on that account. So, we go and do as much good as we can. We end up pandering to a system of karma. We think to ourselves, "As long as my good outweighs the bad, then I'm ok with God."

However the true Gospel of Jesus gives us an incredibly offensive message. You aren't good enough and you never will be. Before you can receive salvation, you must first realize that you are a proud and wicked sinner before a holy and just God! You must come to realize, as Isaiah tells us, that our righteous works are nothing but filthy rags before God.³

Some of us are too proud this morning to hear that truth, and you recoil at the thought of it. With your hardened heart you will continue to attempt to appease God through your religious routine and pitiful attempts at good works. However, some of you feel the weight of your own sinfulness, as if its an anchor dragging you down to the depths of the ocean. Like Martin Luther did, despite all your efforts, you are terrified at the thought of the righteousness of God. If that's you, you are blessed the Spirit of God has brought you to such a place of conviction. Because though we can't be justified by the works of the Law, God has made a way for us to be justified by faith!

In Galatians, Paul makes it crystal clear for us. This is what Martin Luther discovered that changed everything! We are justified by faith in Christ. Sola fide! Faith alone!

³ Isaiah 64:6

2. By Faith We Receive the Righteousness of God (Romans 1:17)

We are saved by putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We believe on him, and fling ourselves upon his mercy. Faith is more than a mere assimilation of the facts, but it's a humble, desperate, trust in Jesus. So we are justified by faith alone, but (secondly) by faith we receive the righteousness of God. To continue our journey in discovering sola fide in the Bible, let's next turn to the book of Romans.

Paul summarizes his whole treaty on the Gospel in Romans 1:16-17:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17)

Martin Luther was terrified by this phrase "the righteousness of God." It reminded him of his own sinfulness. Who was he to stand before a holy God? However, as he discovered in Romans, the phrase "the righteousness of God" took on a new meaning. Rather than an idea to be feared, he realized that God has gifted us with his righteousness by faith. The question nagged him: "What must I do to be saved?" However, Luther discovered this life altering truth—the only way anyone can stand before a holy God is by receiving the righteousness of God for oneself. That righteousness is receive by faith alone in Christ alone.

Turn to Romans 3:21-26,

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 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. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 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.” (Romans 3:21-26, ESV)

Martin Luther discovered two important truths about “the righteousness of God.”

First, the righteousness of God is alien, meaning that it comes outside of ourselves. It isn’t something we summon or muster by our own strength. You can’t be righteous through good deeds or good works. Rather, the only way anyone of us can be made righteous is if we are given righteousness. So in order to be justified before God, God sent forth Christ to be our righteousness. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”⁴ So Christ came to gift us with an alien righteousness, namely his own righteousness. Jesus was the only righteous man that ever lived. He’s the only one who never committed sin and perfectly upheld the law of God. Even though all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Christ did not. At the cross, Jesus takes on the punishment of our sin and we receive his

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV

righteousness. All this by the grace of God. So the righteousness we need to be justified before God comes from beyond us. It comes from Christ alone. Thus, the righteousness of God is alien.

Second, the righteousness of God must be imputed. By impute, we mean that the righteousness of Christ is ascribed to us. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. At the cross, Jesus takes our sin and we get his righteousness. This is called the great exchange. Jesus takes our condemnation and judgment upon himself, and we receive his righteousness and reward.

Do you remember Jesus' parable of the Wedding Feast? A king plans to give a wedding feast for his sons. The servant went to invite all the distinguished guests, but none of them responded or planned to attend. Then the king decides to invite those who were not worthy to attend. As the servants went about the city they filled the wedding hall with these unworthy guests. However, at the wedding, the king discovers that a man was there who did not possess a wedding garment. The man is cast out because he did not wear the garb given to him by the king for this occasion.

If we hope to enter the great wedding feast of God, we must come dressed in the right clothes. And by clothes I don't mean a ball gown or a tuxedo, but the righteousness of Christ. We must come cloaked in the righteousness given by the king. If we come into the presence of God wearing the filthy rags of our own righteousness we will be cast out in the darkness. God has provided you with the righteousness of his son. Only those who put on the righteousness of Christ will be justified before God. The righteousness of God must be imputed upon you.

So if God's righteousness is alien and an imputed righteousness, how do I receive it? The apostle Paul makes this clear,

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it– the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 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. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” (Romans 3:21–25, ESV)

How do we receive the righteousness of God, this alien and imputed righteousness? We receive it by faith alone, sola fide. There is nothing you can do to earn it or deserve it. Rather, we humble ourselves before God and fling ourselves upon Jesus. We trust in him, giving him our lives in faith. We confess that we can’t earn God’s favor, and that we need his righteousness. Only the humble, desperate cry of faith can receive the righteousness of God. As John Calvin puts it, “Faith receives the righteousness which the gospel bestows.”⁵

Martin Luther’s partner for reform in the city of Wittenberg, Phillip Melancthon, sums it up well,

Therefore, we are justified when, put to death by the law, we are made alive again by the word of grace promised in Christ; the gospel forgives our sins, and we cling to Christ in faith, not doubting in the least that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, that the satisfaction Christ wrought is our expiation, and that the resurrection of Christ is ours. In a

⁵ Calvin, Institutes, 748.

*word, we do not doubt at all that our sins have been forgiven and that God now favors us and wills our good. Nothing, therefore, of our own works, however good they may seem or be, constitutes our righteousness. But FAITH alone in the mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus is our RIGHTEOUSNESS.”*⁶

Final Thoughts

So we end where we began, with a question—“What must I do to be saved?” The answer to that question is simple. We are saved by faith alone, and through faith we receive the righteousness of God. You are saved from your sins by wholeheartedly placing your faith in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Works are excluded. The promises of God’s righteousness can only be applied to our account by faith.

Martin Luther said it well,

*“The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith.”*⁷

⁶ Melancthon, *Loci Communes*, 89.

⁷ *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:346.

If you sit in anxiety about the state of your soul this morning, I pray that you will come take comfort in this glorious truth. We are saved by faith alone by the grace of God alone in Christ alone. Come today and put your faith in Jesus. Martin Luther's life was transformed by the truth of sola fide. My life has been transformed by sola fide. Your life can be turned upside down too. Come, receive the righteousness of God for yourself by faith alone.