

Justified by Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. It's good to see you all here. I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. What is something worth fighting for? It's a question that we ask a lot in our culture today.

The past 50 years or so, the impulse has been to move towards tolerance on the basis of globalism, our broadened experience of the world, the growth of moral relativism that has unmoored from God asked who can judge anything for any reason. It has also rightly recognized the limits of human perception and knowledge and acknowledged the diversity of human culture and experience.

But all of this has led us to a culture that values broadly tolerance and embracing difference. Or maybe that's how it felt five or ten years ago. Today, maybe in a backlash, feels like our polarization in our social world pushes us in the opposite direction, and we have embraced pugnacious attitudes towards others who are different, towards things we don't like or don't agree with. And we have become willing to fight for many things, worthwhile or not. It's not just in culture or society or politics that we see this, but the church has asked this question as well throughout history. Churches have split over things like the color of the carpet or whether we keep an organ. Churches recently have been torn apart by social and political issues. Other churches, in an attempt to maintain unity, have abandoned all criteria for what unity might be based on. And we just say we want to be unified for unified's sake, for unity's sake.

How are we to think about this? Are there things worth fighting for in the church? Well, this is what brings us to our passage today. As we continue in our series in the book of Galatians, a letter that Paul wrote to a church that he had been a part of starting through the preaching of the gospel, writing to help them clarify in their own thinking the importance of the gospel, he answers this question today about what is worth fighting for. And there are a lot of aspects of that question, how we conduct ourselves and what we do in all this, that we probably won't answer today.

But there is an important central answer in our passage that we want to look at. So, we're going to look at Galatians 2 verses 11 through 16. It's on page 913 in your pew Bible if you want to turn there, or if you have your own Bible, or you can read it up on the screen as we read together.

[3 : 0 3] Let's look at this passage together this morning. So, let's read God's Word together. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 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?

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. Let's pray and ask for God's help this morning as we look at this.

Oh, Lord, we thank you for your Word. We thank you that you continue to challenge and refine our understanding. Lord, as you teach us through your Word, I pray for your Holy Spirit's help this morning that I would speak the truth as I ought to, and Lord, that we, that in our hearts, in our minds, and in our wills, would submit to and receive your Word this morning. Shape us, Lord, we pray, by your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. So, this is not groundbreaking new territory, but the gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone is a doctrine worth fighting for.

This is what I believe Paul is saying in this passage, and we're going to look a little bit at that context of the confrontation that he has and how the conflict arose, and then we're going to look at the content. What is the issue at stake? What makes this conflict worthwhile? So, if you're taking outlines, there's broadly your outline, you'll see there's some sub points within those.

So, here we go. In verses 11 through 14, the context. So, basically what we have is Paul is just reported in verses 1 through 10 that he's been doing this ministry, preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. People have been coming to faith. He's resisted already an impulse to... for new believers to have to be circumcised. We see that in verses 3 through 5. He goes up to Jerusalem.

[6 : 18] He meets with the apostles in private, and lo and behold, they find that there's great unity because they're preaching the same gospel, the same truth, and this is a glorious thing. And then right on the heels of that, Paul recounts this encounter with Cephas, which is Peter. That's his other name.

And Peter, the apostle, where Paul confronts him. Why did he do that? Well, because Peter had been happily eating meals with Gentiles. Now, if you go back, you read the book of Acts, you can look through chapters 10 and 11, and you'll see God intervened remarkably to bring through a vision to Peter how important it was that the new way of following Jesus was distinct from the old way of following the Jewish law. And in particular, it related to dietary laws and restrictions on what you could eat and who you could eat with, because in the Jewish law, you were set apart by what you ate and who you ate with. And you could be unclean, ceremonially unclean, and therefore removed from the fellowship of the people of God for a season because you were ceremonially unclean. This was the issue at stake. And God revealed to Peter that for the church of Jesus Christ, this was no longer the issue. In fact, he said, God has told him that we may call no person unclean based on what they eat or drink.

And so, Peter's been eating happily with Gentiles for a long time. This was groundbreaking. This was new and different until some people came from James. So, some people came up to where Peter was in Antioch, and Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. The practice that he had established, he started to change. Whether this happened overnight or slowly, we don't know.

But at the end of the day, Peter stopped eating with the Gentile believers. And so, the community of believers that had been Jews and Gentiles eating together were now slowly separating by the imposition of this requirement of the Jewish law again. Now, we need to be very clear because there are two things that happened. These men came from James, and then Peter, fearing the circumcision party, separated himself. And it's easy for us to read this and think, oh, well, the people from James were telling Peter, stop eating with the Gentiles. But that doesn't really make sense, does it? Because we just saw in verses 8 through 10 that Peter and the other apostles were in unity with Paul on the gospel that he was preaching. And we know that Peter knows in his head that God had revealed to him that you don't have to follow the Jewish dietary laws anymore. So, it doesn't really make sense.

James wouldn't have sent the message, you need to stop...you need to start following the law again, because that doesn't seem to be consistent with what else we see in the New Testament. And this will be codified, again, if you overlap this with the book of Acts in Galatians...or in Acts chapter 15, this will all be settled. But what I do think is happening is that Peter is hearing a report about what's going on in Jerusalem, and that makes him concerned. Acts 15:1 says this, some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. And we see that there's a persecution of unbelieving Jews who wanted to maintain the Jewish identity and community through the keeping of the law by requiring new Christians to follow the Jewish law. This seems to be the core of it.

[10:49] And so, Peter, probably less out of just rank hypocrisy of being, I'm afraid that those people might do something to me, so I'm going to completely change my theology. It's possible.

Peter's waffled before. This might be a waffle. But maybe out of the best of intentions, Peter says, hey, I'm going to pull back for the sake of my brethren in Judea, because they're facing intense persecution over this issue. But for Paul, this was hypocrisy. This was denying the truth of the gospel. The separation that Peter led, that others then, other Jewish Christians followed, even Barnabas, a pillar of the early church, followed him in this separating of Jewish and Gentile believers, communicated that the gospel that they were preaching somehow separated people out.

This was a message that somehow the Gentile believers were somehow second rate at best, and maybe at worst, not really a part of the community of God, not really justified before God, because they were Gentiles, and they did not keep the law of Moses. Paul says this is hypocrisy that is not in line with the gospel, and it's truth. So, this is the context of the conflict, where Paul comes and he publicly rebukes Peter, because Peter's public actions as a leader of the church was causing a confusion and leading people away from the true gospel as he understood it. Does that make sense? All right.

So, here's the thing we need to think about for ourselves. We need to recognize that there is a danger that we can lose sight of the true gospel along the way. We're going to explore this so much more.

I'm just going to ask that as a question, then move on, because Paul goes on to explain what is it about the gospel that is so important that he's willing to confront Peter about this and say, what is at stake?

[13:14] What is he fighting for? And it is the gospel of justification by faith in Christ, not... What does it mean to align with, right? Fundamentally, that's what it means. And particularly in this context, it means being aligned with God's moral rightness or perfect moral perfection. God's righteousness, that is, He does everything rightly, is the standard of righteousness in the kingdom of God.

And the question is, how are we aligned to that? This is the question that justification asks. Justification is a term that's related to righteousness, and so it asks a question, how do we have a righteousness that aligns with God's righteousness? Right? So, this is the basic idea.

Now, I just need to acknowledge this for a minute. Some of you are scholars. You're out there. You know there's a thing called the new perspective on Paul. I do not have the time to get into all of the weeds.

N.T. Wright is one of the leading proponents of this. And listen, N.T. Wright is a lovely scholar and a wonderful man who loves Jesus, and he's done a lot of really good work. His work on the historicity of the resurrection is unmatched and super. However, he has, along with a group of other scholars, tried to redefine justification here to not be about personal righteous alignment with God, that is, how do we deal with our sin in order to be right with God, but has said, I don't think that's what Paul is doing here. I think it's more about the communal identity of the people of God and making that be more about believing in Jesus than it is about Jewish law, but it's about belonging in the community rather than about personal salvation. And what he provides and adds is a helpful addition, an enrichment, I think, to the overall picture. But he fights really hard to say justification is not what I'm about to teach you that it is, but that it's this other thing. And I think he's wrong on that. And you just...if you read him, you need to know that, and you need to be aware of that, and you can come talk to me afterwards.

I am not an expert, but I have researched it enough to feel confident. Moving ahead with justification is about this. How are we made right with God? And the reason why justification is so important is because the biblical worldview assumes a problem. We are not right with God. Now, we know that. It's not hard to figure that out. If we look into our own hearts, we think, am I perfectly morally righteous in every way? No. We look at our world, and we think, is our world any better? No, it's not. We know because Romans 3 explicates at great length that those who know the law of Moses have not kept it and so need a righteousness beyond that. Those who do not know the law of Moses do not know it and do not follow it and do not know God, and the heart of rebellion is in each one of us so that no one lives a life. No human being lives a life fully aligned to God according to the Bible. This is why we use the word sin. We miss the mark because we are unable to match the righteousness of God in our own lives, and it puts us in the need of being justified or getting right with God again.

[17 : 26] And Paul says, this is a question on the table, and how are we justified? Well, in this context, in this conflict with Cephas, there are two options on the table. You can be justified by works of the law, or you can be justified by faith in Christ. So, let's explore those two things. And the first thing he talks about is being justified by the works of the law. And of course, he starts out by saying, you can't be justified in this way, right? But we realize the pressure here, we've already talked about it earlier in chapter 2, there's already pressure from some Jewish believers to say, you should be circumcised in order to be really fully Christian. And they've resisted that and said, no, it's not about that. It's not here, it's about dietary laws. No, it's not about that.

It seems that there were some, because Christianity grew out of, in the primarily Jewish culture setting, that there were those within the Jewish community and who wanted to say, let's continue in our, these Jewish rules and these Jewish identities and this Jewish thought of how we do this.

And Paul says that is not how we do that anymore. Now, we need to be really clear on this, right? Because Paul does say, there's nothing wrong with being circumcised. He circumcised Timothy for missional purposes. So, there's nothing wrong with being circumcised. There's nothing wrong with following the dietary role, the dietary laws. A first-century believer may be circumcised, but he doesn't have to be. And a first-century believer may follow the Jewish laws of eating, dietary restrictions, but she doesn't have to, right? Because the fault in this thinking of justification by works of the law is twofold. One, there's a requirement, right? You must do this in order to be justified, right? You must do this for God to forgive you of your sin, whether it's keeping the dietary law or circumcision or Sabbath. These are the basis upon which forgiveness of sin and acceptance by God is embraced in this thinking.

Requirement and purpose. Why do we do these things? Do we do them because we think that God will accept us because we do them?

We might add all sorts of religious principles and practices to our lives. probably not a lot of us are tempted to go back and obey the Jewish, like, dietary laws or circumcision. That's a whole other question. You know, we can talk about that too. Probably we're not following those things. We're not tempted to do these things, but we might think we need to do certain things, ritual things, Christian things, in order to be justified by God.

[20 : 43] And more broadly, we may just think we need to do good works in order to be justified by God. We need to be good people. But when we do these things, now here's the thing, all of those things could be really good. It could be really good to do religious rituals of certain kinds. It could be really good to do good works or to be a better person. All of these good things, they are good to do. I'm assuming that. I'm excluding, like, there could be bad things that you could do as well, thinking, I'm going to do bad things and be justified by God. We'll just exclude that as an even option. But even these good things, if we do them as a requirement and with the purpose that on this basis, we will be justified, that is made right with God. We are adding our works as a necessary requirement or prerequisite for our salvation.

And when we believe this gospel, we are saying, we and you need to do these things in order to participate with God in being justified, in being made right with Him. Paul says, this is not, this is not the way of justification according to the gospel. Now, I'm going to dig in a little bit deeper. Why is it true? What's the problem with it? Well, here's a couple of things. One, it denies the doctrine of sin. The Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The Bible says that we are dead spiritually in our sins and trespasses. The Bible says that we are slaves to sin apart from God's gracious work in our lives. We are so bound by sin, we have no righteousness that we can muster up or create that would even come close to the glorious holiness and beauty of God Himself.

And so, if we think that by our little addition of something that we might think is righteous enough, that we're adding to the righteousness necessary for God, for us to be right with God, it's not true. And so, justification by works of the law denies the sinfulness of human beings.

It also provokes our human pride and our boasting. Ephesians 2, 8, and 9, these famous words, you know this, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

[23 : 53] Friends, the danger in justification by works of the law is that we would boast in what we do. Look at the righteousness that I have done. And you see this, this is why I think N.T. Wright is wrong, because when you see Jesus interacting with the Pharisees and the Jewish leadership during His lifetime, increasingly it was conflict over these very issues.

Look at me, look at my righteousness. I thank God that I am not like those Gentile sinners. They bring their own righteousness to bear and stand on it and say, this is why God can accept me, because I am good enough in a particular way.

And this pride exalts ourselves rather than exalting Christ. And here's the third thing about this concept of justification by works of the law, is that it fosters doubt and fear among true believers. Because if we think that we have contributed to our salvation, then we probably wonder whether we have to keep going to do it.

And if we have to keep going, we wonder, how much do I need to do to satisfy the infinite holiness of God? Is there another thing that I need to do to reach the level by which God might say, yeah, that's good enough, you're justified now?

It's like taking our teacup and pouring it into the ocean to raise the global level of the water. We can't affect it. And so we keep wondering, and we jump on this hamster wheel of, is it enough? Is it enough? Is it enough?

[25 : 44] And this makes our Christian lives full of fear that we haven't done enough and doubt that God could accept us. And this is why Paul confronts Peter, because he says, by separating from the Gentile believers, saying that you have to follow the dietary laws, you are telling them, and you are saying to yourselves, we must follow these laws in order to be Christian.

This is the gospel that you are preaching by your actions. But Paul says, there's a better way.

Paul says the gospel that we first believed and preached from the start. And he says, Peter, you know this.

We who are Jews know that we're not justified by this. We didn't come to faith because we kept the works of the law. We came to faith because of what Christ has done.

And so justification is by faith in Christ, in Christ alone. Because to be perfectly justified before a holy God, what would we need?

[27 : 10] We'd need something from outside of ourselves. A righteousness that is not our own. A righteousness that matches the perfect righteousness of God.

And this is what Paul says is the truth of the gospel and justification by faith in Christ alone.

The passage that Janet read earlier from Romans explains this so beautifully, right? There's no one righteous, not one. But God has revealed another righteousness to us.

Where does this righteousness come from? It comes from God and particularly through Jesus Christ who perfectly obeyed the law and perfectly lived a life of righteousness before God in every way so that He may come as our Savior to die in our place.

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel that there's this great exchange, right? That Christ goes to the cross bearing our sin, bearing our unrighteousness, bearing all of our self-justifying works that we do.

[28 : 24] And He bears the death that those sins deserve in punishment because of the offense that it is to a holy God. Christ takes all that on Himself.

But it's not just that. But it's His great exchange because by faith in Christ, not only does He take our sin, but He gives us His righteousness, given by grace through faith.

All who believe. So, the typical example, right, is that I have accrued a debt of \$500,000.

I have stolen, I have cheated, I have done all these terrible things, and I now owe this incomprehensible amount of money that I don't have, right?

And so, I stand in a place of unrighteousness before the judge. And Jesus steps in and He says, I'll pay the price for that, right?

[29 : 38] But it's not only that He pays the price for that. It's that He says, oh, and by the way, this means your rap sheet is completely erased. As a matter of fact, you have a new standing in life where you are going to be seen as a noble person, an upright person, member of society.

You're not just erasing the sin, but you're being given a righteous standing in the world. Now, it doesn't make us righteous on the inside.

It doesn't transform us. We'll get to that next week. There is a power of God that does have a transforming power that should ensue in our changing. But the righteousness here is declared.

God says, you are righteous. When God looks at those who, through faith in Christ, have received the righteousness of Christ, God looks at us with the pleasure that He looks at Christ because He sees Christ's righteousness.

This is the propitiation, right, that Christ has made God propitious, that is, favorable towards us.

[30 : 50] So He sees us as His children, and all the richness of the doctrine of salvation comes in. He adopts us as children, and we have His inheritance, and we have a new life, and all these things. But it's based on this declaration that we are now righteous in Christ through faith in Him.

And friends, this is all of what Christ has done. There is nothing that we have added, nothing that we have done to either earn or contribute to this righteousness.

We don't need to clean ourselves up in order to be justified by faith. And we are not justified by our great zeal. We aren't justified by our observance of the sacraments.

We aren't justified by a special religious experience. We aren't justified by the good works we do in serving the poor. But we are justified because Christ has given us a righteousness that is not our own, that allows us to stand before God as we do so by faith.

And we are declared right before God because of it. What a gift that is. And friends, what freedom it is too.

[32 : 13] It means we don't have to pretend to be good anymore. We can confess our sin knowing that He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness.

It means that we have a sure and certain thing that we boast about in our lives. Rather than boasting about how good we are, our religious activities, or justify our lives.

We boast in the work of Christ and the person of Christ. And friends, this is so worthwhile. It's a wonderful thing. And we exalt and live a life seeking the glory of Christ in His life, in our lives.

What joy and freedom. This is the good news of the gospel. And Paul says, this is worth fighting for. When people come and say, you've got to do more than simply receive Christ in order to be justified with God, it's worth fighting to maintain the purity of that gospel and the clarity of that truth in the church and in the world.

Friends, this is what Paul is telling us this morning. We'll continue to explore in our coming days in the book of Galatians, how this gospel plays itself out in our lives.

[33 : 50] This is the gospel that, if you remember back in chapter 1, saying, I'm so sad that you're so quickly departing from this true gospel. This is the gospel that Paul is saying, don't depart from.

This is where we find it. The doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone. All right, let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this word and we thank you for this time that we've had exploring and understanding it.

Lord, I pray that you would help us. Lord, show us if there are ways in which we, Lord, in our hearts or in our minds, believe and trust in things beyond the full and finished work of Christ, the sufficient one whose righteousness is enough for us completely so that we may be right with you.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.