

## Seeking Justification

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Last week we just touched on the topic of *justification*, a dense term with a range of meaning but at its core deals with something every single one of us struggle with—*how can things be put right?* Put right with: the world, one another, and God. This passage deals with the last two—right with one another and with God—later on we'll see right with the world. Let's consider: *Right with One Another, with God, Righteous in Christ.*

### Right with One Another

If you've ever experienced tension in a relationship, you know how important it is for things to be put right. Tension in relationships is hard. In verse 11 we encounter tension between two apostles, Peter and Paul, *But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.* You might get the impression that Christianity was hostile and feuding from the start, but the phrase "I opposed him to his face" doesn't mean knock-down, drag out. It means to *successfully defend*. In the tension, Paul successfully defended, not himself but the gospel. As a result, they end up united not divided. It wasn't Paul's opinion vs. Peter's; it was a contending for the truth of the gospel. Wouldn't it be great if honoring the gospel was *our* goal in every tension? So why did he daringly stand up to Peter? Verses 12-13 tell us, *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.* Peter was fine eating with the non-Jewish people *until* some certain men came. They insisted Jews keep the dietary laws of the Torah (1<sup>st</sup> 5 books) not eat with Gentiles. So when these guys show up, Peter backs away. *The first reason Paul confronts Peter is that he sought justification from others.* He wanted to be in the right with his own race *more* than he wanted to be in the right with other races. He valued acceptance by one group but not so much the other. Raising girls I see this a lot: one day you're in with a friend group, the next day they won't even speak to you. Why? Because they're afraid. Afraid of what? *Rejection.* Adults can also be like this. I recently attended a gala where I felt a bit out of place. I met a woman who seemed to fit right in. As my wife and I chatted with her, she began to share how when she's nervous she speaks loud and fast. Guess what she was doing? I started to pity her, but then she said, We all have insecurities don't we? I'd felt some insecurity when I

walked in the room. Peter allowed his insecurity to be exploited by fear, fear of being rejected by a group. See, fear always has a bit of reverence mixed in, reverence for what a thing or person can do to us. Peter doesn't just fear; he worships what they think. We know because Paul says his conduct wasn't in step with the truth of the gospel. His reverence of what certain people think is so strong it displaces the truth of what God thinks: justified, accepted, loved fully in Christ. He revered their truth over gospel truth. And this misplaced reverence, this justification by faith in others, damages those around him. *Sin is social*. Even Barnabas, typically known as a great encourager of others is drawn in. Paul says they acted *hypocritically*. The Greek word means to play act. Peter was not acting himself; he was putting on a face to be accepted by those he feared, tweaking his actions in reverence of others. Have you been in a conversation where you've: run others down, spoken dismissively of them, or softened Scripture because you wanted to be accepted by another group? A friend of mine was in a conversation with someone who didn't share her beliefs, so instead of talking about the truth of the gospel, she later confessed to me she spoke of it as "her truth," what *she* believes. People don't need *our* truth; they need *gospel* truth. Not truth that changes from one person to another but truth that remains the same. That's why Paul bravely opposed Peter, not for *individual* truth; for universal truth, transcendent truth, *gospel* truth. Like the lady said, we all fall into hypocrisy. The question is, Will you climb out? Will you be your true self in Christ, enjoying deep security in him, or cower in fear of others and play the game? Jesus died and rose so we don't have to walk in fear and others don't have to suffer in our anxious pursuit of acceptance.

### **Right with God**

How do we get so right with God that we risk rejection? 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 (15-16). Paul says, even though we have the advantage of being Jews by birth (the Scriptures, the covenant, and so on), it's not enough. We can't really justify ourselves by works of the law. The phrase, **works of the law**, probably refers to obedience to any command in the Torah. Obedience to God's word doesn't get us on his good side, even

though as Paul says it is holy, just, and good (Rom 7:12). To get on God's good side—to get right with him—we have to *trust* his work not our work. **Faith** is repeated three times in this verse: [a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ](#). What is faith? Faith is more than agreement with something; it's trust of someone. I dated my wife on and off for three years before we got married. During that time we got to see how one another handled conflict, finances, the strengths and weaknesses of character. Eventually we decided we're right for one another. But until the altar, it was theory. We couldn't really know until we took the step of commitment, to trust, to say *I do*. Paul is saying you can't know Jesus' acceptance without committing to him. You can study him, question him, pray to him. But only when we trust him do we enjoy the acceptance that never dies, right standing with God that never fades, and love that follows us wherever we go. It's not enough to agree with the gospel; we have to trust the gospel. I have a secular friend who began to consider the claims of Jesus, and as he did he became convinced of the gospel but he wasn't sure he was ready to be baptized. I asked him why. He said, because I still have doubts about the Bible. I told him, we all have doubts, but the only thing you have to be undoubting about is *Jesus*. Is Jesus worthy of your trust? Think of the alternative. Faith in what we can do, in what other homo sapiens think. It's a far cry from what Jesus has done. The question isn't is my faith strong enough but is the object of my trust sturdy enough? Is the self-denying, self-sacrificing, sin, death, and hell-defeating, always interceding for us *Jesus* sturdy enough to trust? I know of nothing more reliable. Will you trust him?

### **Righteousness in Christ**

Is Jesus worth it? Critics of Peter and Paul didn't seem to think so. Responding to a critique he says, [But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!](#) What's he saying? He's saying that if we seek to be justified by Jesus, and not by works of the law, then we must be Gentile sinners in the eyes Jews. Paul counters saying, If I rebuild the law as a way of getting accepted by God, I prove myself a sinner anyway—why?—because I can't keep the law! No one gets straight As in life. In fact, [For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God](#). What? He says I died to the *demands* of the law, self-justification, so I can enjoy truly living for God, ordering my life around the most glorious Being. But how did he do that? [I have been](#)

crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God (20). It's by faith. Faith is a form of dying, dying to Self. And that's gotta be the hardest thing in the Age of Self. To die to my rights, my views, my work, and say, I will live only in you, under you, in line with your gospel. But that is exactly what Jesus is asking of us, *and it's nothing he isn't willing to do himself*. He dies a sinner's death in lieu of the sinner, a vicarious death in exchange for a vibrant resurrection life. The alternative: die under the weight of self-justification, of proving yourself to God. Faith in Jesus is much better. Why? Look how personal he gets—*loved me and gave himself for me*. Nobody has loved you and given themselves for you like this. No family, no race, no spouse, no friend, no political party. If you can't trust him, who can you trust? But if you do trust him, love, acceptance, and life will flow through you. The more we enjoy Christ personally, the more we'll extend him to one another publicly.