

What Is Justification?



Foreword

Justification by Faith Alone:

A Biblical Definition, Human Depravity, and the Path to Christ

Is the Christian gospel a free gift, or is it a demand that we do better? That is the question justification answers. Almost everything else in the Bible—the law, sacrifices, God’s covenants, repentance, and growth in holiness—depends on how we answer it. On what basis can a guilty person stand accepted before a holy God?

Many Christians have mixed together two things that God keeps separate: the verdict that declares a sinner righteous, and the changed life that follows that verdict. This essay keeps them apart. It first defines what the Bible means by justification. Then it sets that definition against the **real condition** of the human heart. Next, it distinguishes God’s justifying verdict from the command to “**sin no more.**” Finally, it shows how the many roads of Scripture **all lead to Christ.**

Biblical Justification Defined

In the Bible, to justify means to declare someone righteous. It is courtroom language. A judge who justifies a person does not change that person's character. **He simply announces a verdict. Deuteronomy 25:1** gives the basic picture: judges are to **"justify the righteous and condemn the wicked."** The same idea appears when God justifies someone. In **Luke 18:14** Jesus says the tax collector, not the Pharisee, **"went down to his house justified."** The story does not say the tax collector suddenly became a better person. What changed was his standing before God.

Paul makes this especially clear. He writes, **"To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).** Notice who is justified: **the ungodly.** God does not wait until a person becomes good and then declare them righteous. **He declares righteous people who are still ungodly.** The righteousness that counts is not their own. **It is credited,** or reckoned, to them. Paul uses the same language for Abraham. Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness long before he was circumcised and long before the law was given (**Romans 4:3, 9–11; Genesis 15:6**).

God can give this verdict because of Christ's work. "He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (**Romans 4:25**). God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). Our sins were charged to Christ; his perfect obedience is credited to those who trust him. That is why Paul can say, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).**

Justification is not a long process that stretches across a lifetime. It is a present verdict. **"Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Romans 5:1).** That verdict also has a future. God will also glorify the people he justifies (**Romans 8:30**).

Faith is how we receive this gift. Faith does not earn the verdict; **it simply takes hold of it.** Paul contrasts faith with works of the law so the promise rests on grace, not on what we do (**Romans 4:16; Galatians 2:16**). James does not contradict this. When he says a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (**James 2:24**), he is answering a different question: What does real, living faith look like? Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac showed that the faith already credited to him in **Genesis**

15 was genuine. **Good works prove that faith is real.** They are not the basis on which God declares a sinner righteous.

Depravity of the Human Heart

Justification must be a free declaration from God, **because the human heart cannot produce the righteousness God requires.** The Bible does not describe our problem as simply not trying hard enough. It describes a deeper corruption of our nature.

Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). In the days of Noah, “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (**Genesis 6:5**). Paul gathers the Old Testament witness into one sweeping statement: **“None is righteous, no, not one... no one seeks for God... no one does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10–12).** The conclusion is clear and universal: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (**Romans 3:23**).

This is not just a list of bad actions. **It is a condition.** People apart from Christ are **“dead in trespasses and sins.”** They follow the ways of this world and the desires of the flesh, and are “by nature children of wrath” (**Ephesians 2:1–3**). The mind set on the flesh **“is hostile to God,** for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot” (**Romans 8:7**). The problem is not a lack of physical ability to obey. The problem is that we do not want the holy God, and so we cannot produce the obedience he requires. Even the good things unconverted people do are not offered to God as God. Therefore, they do not clear us in his courtroom.

The law reveals this problem; it does not solve it. “Through the law comes knowledge of sin” (**Romans 3:20**). The commandment is holy and good, but sin seizes it and produces even more disobedience (**Romans 7:7–13**). To tell a person with a deceitful heart that acceptance with God depends on **“sinning no more”** is like handing a dying patient the diagnosis and calling it the cure.

This is why justification cannot be a reward for self-improvement. If God only declared righteous those who had already become godly, no one would be justified. The gospel answers the charge against us with a righteousness that comes from

outside ourselves: “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (**Romans 3:22**).

Justification versus “Sin No More”

Jesus really did say “sin no more.” He said it to the man he healed at the pool of Bethesda after warning him that something worse could happen (**John 5:14**). He also said it to the woman caught in adultery after he told her accusers that the one without sin should cast the first stone (**John 8:11**). Those words are a genuine call to turn from sin and live a new life. ***They belong in the Christian message. But they are not the reason God accepts a person.***

Justification and sanctification are different. Justification is God’s once-for-all declaration that a believer is righteous in Christ. It is a verdict, not a process. Sanctification is God’s ongoing work of gradually making the believer more like Christ. Justification is finished the moment a person trusts Christ. Sanctification continues until heaven. Paul can say both things at once: believers have already been sanctified (**1 Corinthians 6:11**), and they must still cleanse themselves and pursue holiness (**2 Corinthians 7:1**). The declaration comes first and makes the command possible. “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God... Put to death therefore what is earthly in you” (**Colossians 3:3–5**). The call to stop sinning is spoken to people who are already accepted. It is not offered as the price they must pay to be accepted.

This difference matters for everyday Christian life. If God’s acceptance depended on us fully stopping every sin, no one could be sure of salvation. Sin does not completely disappear in this life. John writes to Christians, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves”** (**1 John 1:8**). In the next verses he points them to confession and to Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the sacrifice that covers our sins (**1 John 1:9–2:2**). When believers sin, they do not start over with a new basis for acceptance. They return to the same verdict of justification. The justified person still repents, still fights sin, and still falls and gets up. **Repentance is the fruit of being justified and the way we stay close to God. It is not a second system of earning acceptance by works.**

A simple example shows the difference. Suppose a man is drowning and someone pulls him into a boat. The rescuer then tells him, “Stop thrashing and learn to swim.” The command is real and necessary. But the man is already safe because someone pulled him into the boat. The command is not the reason he is in the boat. In the same way, Jesus says “sin no more” to people he has already claimed. **The command shapes their new life.** It does not create their acceptance.

Treating “sin no more” as the condition of peace with God also misunderstands grace. Grace that only helps people who are already willing still leaves the unwilling outside. **Biblical grace first justifies the ungodly, and then teaches them “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives” (Titus 2:11–12).** The order cannot be reversed. A changed life shows that faith is real. It does not create the righteousness that God counts as ours. To make the changed life the price of the verdict is to rebuild what Paul said he tore down and to cancel the grace of God (**Galatians 2:18–21**).

The command to “sin no more” is therefore the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in those who are already justified. It is the shape of a life that has been accepted, not the condition of acceptance.

All Paths Led to Christ

The Bible does not offer several different ways to stand right with God. **It offers one way**, prepared from the beginning and revealed step by step.

God promised Abraham that in his offspring all nations would be blessed. Paul calls that promise the gospel in advance. When the law came later, it did not cancel the promise (**Galatians 3:8, 17**). The sacrifices, the priesthood, and the temple were shadows of something better. **“The law has but a shadow of the good things to come” (Hebrews 10:1).** Blood was required, because “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (**Hebrews 9:22**). Yet the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (**Hebrews 10:4**). Those ceremonies trained Israel to look for a priest and a sacrifice who would finish the work.

The prophets pointed in the same direction. Isaiah said the servant of the Lord would be pierced for our transgressions, and that **“upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.”** He also said that by the knowledge of this servant many would be accounted righteous (**Isaiah 53:5, 11**). Jeremiah promised a new covenant in which sins would be forgiven and remembered no more (**Jeremiah 31:34**). The paths of promise, law, sacrifice, and prophecy are not competing roads. **They are one road with many markers, and every marker faces the cross.**

Jesus claimed that all of Scripture converges on him. **“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me”** (**John 5:39**). On the road to Emmaus he explained to the two disciples “in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself,” beginning with Moses and the prophets (**Luke 24:27**). Paul told the people of Athens that God now commands everyone everywhere to repent, because he has set a day when he will judge the world by a man he has appointed, and he has given proof by raising him from the dead (**Acts 17:30–31**). Peter told the Jewish council that there is salvation in no other name (**Acts 4:12**).

Saying “all paths led to Christ” does not mean every religious system is secretly Christian. **It means that Scripture itself, and the history God directed, all point to one answer.**

There is only one road to God. Jesus said, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (**John 14:6**). Peter declared, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (**Acts 4:12**).

Pagan philosophy is not a neutral search that somehow leads toward Christ. **It is rebellion against God and his Son.** People suppress the truth about God and exchange his glory for images of created things (**Romans 1:18–25**). The wisdom of this world is foolishness before God (**1 Corinthians 1:20–25**). It may expose the hunger for righteousness and the failure of human thinking, but it leads people away from Christ, not to him.

The law can show us our sin and hold it back, but it cannot make us right with God. Conscience can accuse us, but it cannot declare us innocent. Every true approach to the living God finds its answer only when God presents Christ as the sacrifice who

turns away his wrath, received by faith. In this way, God remains just and becomes the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (**Romans 3:25–26**).

Conclusion

Biblical justification is God’s verdict, not our improvement. He declares people righteous who are still ungodly in themselves. He credits them with the obedience of Christ, which they receive by faith alone.

This verdict is necessary because the human heart is deceitful and the whole world stands guilty before God. No effort to “**sin no more**” can clear the charge.

The command to stop sinning is real. It is the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the believer, shaping a life that has already been accepted. It is not the condition of acceptance.

The long story of Scripture—God’s promises, the law, the altar, and the prophets—was never a set of different ways to be saved. It was one path that led to Christ. That is where Paul also ends: he declares that ***Christ himself is our righteousness***.

The believer’s confidence is not that sin has completely stopped. It is that the Judge has already spoken, and the word he spoke is the name of his Son.

