

## ***Justified, not by works but by faith*** (Galatians 2:15–16)

As Paul wraps up his autobiographical section of the letter, in which he defends his apostleship, he introduces the truths of justification by grace through faith alone which will occupy the next two chapters. This was the truth under attack in the churches of Galatia and one which Peter inadvertently denied by his actions. So Paul has confronted him (2:11–14) and now continues to address his Jewish Christian audience and, of course, his readers in Galatia. Key words and phrases need to be explained to grasp this essential truth of justification by faith in Jesus Christ.

### 1. ***“Justify”***

Though the context must determine the exact sense, it is essentially a legal term, referring to the declaration in court of a person “not guilty” or not liable to punishment. This meaning implies the problem for which justification is needed, we are all guilty of being law-breakers. (We need break only one law to be a law-breaker.) The whole world is accountable or guilty before God (Romans 3:19).

### 2. ***“Not Gentile sinners”***

The terms “Gentiles” and “sinners” were almost used synonymously by the Jews (cf. Matthew 26:15; Mark 14:41; Luke 18:32). The opposite of “sinner”, as explained by the formerly blind man healed by Jesus, is one who fears God and seeks to do God’s will. The Jews saw themselves in that role, the opposite of Gentiles who neither feared God nor even had the Law.

### 3. ***“Works of the law”***

“Works of law” are our human efforts to conform to what God’s law demands. The false brethren in Galatia were claiming that such efforts were needed to be justified before God.

### 4. ***“We know that works of the law will not justify us”***

Paul, Peter, and the Jewish Christians of Antioch and Galatia knew that works of the law would not justify them. Though Paul’s background seemed faultless (Philippians 3:5–6), his hidden sin of coveting (cf. Romans 7:7–8) clearly made him guilty and liable to punishment. Peter had heard Jesus interact with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–27) whose outward keeping of the law did not make up for his failure to love God with all his heart. All the righteous works of the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisees and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) did not justify him. He also knew that food didn’t defile (Mark 7:18–23) and got to see that truth applied in his experience with Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18). The impact of that time reached to the Jerusalem council where Peter declares that keeping the law was a yoke which even the Jews could not bear (Acts 15:7b–11).

### 5. ***“But through faith in Jesus Christ”***

“Faith in Jesus Christ” is entrusting yourself to Jesus, who He is and what He has done. It means humbling yourself, and not trusting yourself or any of your own efforts, like the tax collector in the parable who went home justified. Paul as well discarded his own efforts at righteousness in exchange for “that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:9). This is justification, declared by God not guilty, because the payment of guilt has been paid by Christ with whom the believer is joined.

### 6. ***“So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law”***

This was the experience of Paul and Peter, trusting Christ alone without works of the law to be fully cleansed before God. Peter knew better and should not, by eating separately from Gentiles, have implied that some further work was needed to avoid defilement.

### 7. ***“Because by works of the law no one will be justified”***

Not only Jews, but no one –neither Jew nor Gentile– will be justified by works of the law. We fail in loving God with our whole being, and we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves. There are no works to be done which can remove that guilt.

Justification in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone is the message we proclaim, the battleground on which we take a stand, and, most important, the truth you must embrace.

### *Questions for further thought and discussion:*

- Peter’s actions denied a truth he firmly believed. Are there ways by which your actions might be denying justification by faith alone? How?
- How would you explain to a non-Christian the qualities of the justified tax-collector, the reason he was justified, and how that should look for a person today?
- Contrast what people mean by “believe in God” with what the Bible means by “believe in Jesus”.