

# ACCEPTED BY GOD

## Our Justification Through Christ

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**W**hat does the Bible have to say to a person who feels too bad to be accepted by God? Or to someone who feels no need of the forgiveness that Christ offers? Or to a person who wonders how anyone on earth can make it to heaven?

These are crucial questions because the Bible tells us that not only is God characterized by genuine and generous love, but He is also known for His fair and far-reaching justice. Both the Bible and our conscience remind us that we are guilty of violating God's laws. So how do we satisfy His justice?

It is my hope that as you read this booklet by staff writer Kurt De Haan, you will discover the many reasons you have for rejoicing in all that Jesus Christ has done for you. For it is only in Him that we find the solution to how we can be accepted by God.

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## WHO NEEDS TO KNOW?

**D**o you think we'll be surprised to see who makes it to heaven? Will we be just as surprised to see who isn't there? Can you imagine the possibility that a controversial political figure made it and your pastor didn't? What if a person you never dreamed of seeing in heaven was sitting at Jesus' feet?

Is such an outcome possible? If so, how can it be, and who needs to know what it takes to get to heaven?

**Our neighbors need to know.** When my wife and I moved into a four-unit apartment building soon after our marriage, we got to know Earle, who lived in a downstairs unit. He was a widower, retired, and opinionated. When he sneezed, the building shook

to its very foundation.

Earle told me that he could believe most of the Bible, but he thought it arrogant to claim that you could be sure you would be accepted into heaven. As months went by, I continued to talk with him. Then one

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*We'll probably be surprised to see who makes it to heaven.*

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day Earle walked up to me, smiled, and said something like this: "You know, if you can't believe the Bible, you can't believe anything. I'm sure I'm going to heaven." Several years later as he was dying of cancer, he told me he was glad he was able to face death without fear.

In that same building where I met Earle, a young couple with two small children moved into the

apartment below us. They accused me of idolatry because I used the English names *God* and *Jesus* instead of the Hebrew names. They spoke of Jesus as being the true Messiah, the only acceptable sacrifice for our sins, yet they implied that to be accepted by God we needed to keep the Old Testament commands about special days, the Sabbath, food regulations, and other Mosaic laws.

**The world needs to know.** Other neighbors, college students I've interviewed, and letters I've read have made comments that show how crucial it is to understand what it takes to be right with God, accepted by Him, and sure of heaven. You've probably heard these kinds of statements too:

- "I can't believe God will send a good non-Christian to hell and accept a bad Christian into heaven."

- "It sounds too easy to say that God forgives all our sins if we simply trust Jesus."
- "You have to be a member of the church and participate in all the rituals."
- "God doesn't care what you believe as long as you're sincere about it and try to be good."
- "My good deeds outweigh my bad ones."
- "I think I've been too bad to be forgiven."
- "God is too loving to send anyone to hell."
- "I'm saved by faith; how I live doesn't matter."
- "I don't want to believe in Jesus because I know I'll have to change the way I live."
- "God will grade us on a curve. After all, nobody's perfect."
- "People who just try to live like Jesus will

probably be accepted into heaven.”

- “It wouldn’t be fair for God to allow a mass-murderer to go to heaven.”

**You and I need to know.** Perhaps one of these statements echoes your own thoughts as you’ve tried to sort through the issue of what it takes to gain God’s approval and be accepted into heaven. It could be that you’ve never seen yourself as a person who needs to be saved from anything other than intolerant, Bible-toting religious types. Perhaps you are just the opposite, so overwhelmed by a sense of guilt over your past that you think you are a hopeless case. Perhaps you accepted Christ as your Savior when you were a child and you’ve been taking for granted all that Jesus has done for you. Or you may be thinking of your neighbors, friends, or

those at work who need to hear the life-changing truth of how they can know that God accepts them now and forever.

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*No other topic  
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In any case, I invite you to join me in looking closely at this crucial matter. No other topic has greater significance for the way we live right now and where we’ll live eternally.

To better understand what’s at stake, in the next few pages we will first focus on the issue that is at the heart of it all—justice. As we do, we’ll look at justice from both the human and divine perspectives.

## WHEN THE GUILTY GO FREE

**C**rime is a way of life—and death—in so many parts of our world today. To make matters worse, justice can be elusive. Too often we hear of a criminal who escapes justice.

It makes us angry, doesn't it? It infuriates us to think of a rapist or child molester walking out of a courtroom with a smirk on his face because he outsmarted the system, or intimidated the victim or witnesses into silence. We're enraged when we hear of a criminal who goes free. It bothers us when the legal system seems more concerned about the rights of the criminal than of the victim.

**Could God allow a mass murderer into heaven?** Is it possible that

a person convicted of gruesome crimes could cry out to the Lord from his jail cell and be completely forgiven? This question should help us to focus on the key issue to be discussed in this booklet. The thought of a mass murderer sharing a mansion in heaven with you probably makes you shudder; it does me. But could it be possible?

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***“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord.”***

**Proverbs 17:15**

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To answer that question, let's think of another person—one of the two criminals crucified alongside

Jesus. After hearing another dying criminal insult Jesus, he said, “Don’t you fear God, . . . since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Lk. 23:40-43 NIV).

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***“Today you will  
be with Me  
in paradise.”  
Jesus (Lk. 23:43)***

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The repentant law-breaker was forgiven by God just before he died. His guilt was erased; his criminal record wiped clean. Could it happen to a serial killer or child molester today?

**How could it happen?** How could God be just in completely forgiving such a person? The apostle Paul learned firsthand how God could forgive a guilty person and still be an absolutely perfect and just Judge.

By his own admission, at one time Paul had been a self-righteous person who thought he deserved God’s favor (see Phil. 3:4-6). He faithfully kept all the Jewish laws. And when he sensed a threat to the true worship of God by a group of zealous followers of a man they claimed was the promised Messiah, Paul did everything he could, even killing some and dragging others off to prison, to try to silence them (Acts 8:3; 22:4-5).

But one day Paul had a change of mind and heart. That’s because he met Jesus, and Jesus helped Paul to see how wrong he was. As a result, Paul recognized his

complete unworthiness of any favor from God and leaned upon His mercy. He believed that Jesus died in his place and made it possible for him to be right with God. In one of his letters, Paul called himself the worst of all sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), yet he firmly believed that he was headed for heaven because of Jesus.

**Do we see ourselves in the picture?** We need to look beyond the examples of history to a very personal present-day dilemma. As we will see in the pages to follow, when judged by God's standards you and I are guilty of all sorts of crimes. We may have a hard time comprehending it, but we're really not any more qualified for heaven than a mass murderer. How, then, could we ever hope to sidestep justice and spend eternity in a place where only perfect people are admitted? How could God

ever be right to say that imperfect, guilty people like you and me are free of the eternal consequences of our sin? Yet that's what the Bible tells us He does. If He didn't, no one would ever be allowed inside the gates of heaven. We would all be sentenced to an eternity in hell.

**Where are we going with this?** To find answers for our questions, we'll study the truths that are explained in the apostle Paul's letter to the followers of Christ in first-century Rome. In Paul's terms, the key word is *justification*. That term is one of many that we need to be familiar with as we read on.

So let's make sure we are speaking the same language before we address the reasons we can be accepted by God. On the next page are some brief definitions we need to have in mind before we go any further.

# COMING TO TERMS

**Faith:** Dependence or reliance on someone (or something); trust or belief.

**God's Grace:** God's loving acts whereby He bestows undeserved favor.

**God's Law:** What God says is right or wrong, based on His perfect character qualities.

**God's Mercy:** The Lord's expression of withholding deserved punishment.

**Guilt:** God's declaration of wrongdoing.

**Impute:** To credit or transfer to the account of another.

**Justification:** God's once-for-all declaration that a sinner is no longer under judgment but is the recipient of all the benefits of being right with Him because of what Jesus Christ has done.

**Pardon:** The action of a judge to withhold just punishment upon a lawbreaker; forgiveness.

**Propitiation:** The turning away of someone's anger and inflicting it upon a substitute.

**Redemption:** God's work of paying the penalty for our sin through the sacrificial death of Jesus.

**Righteous:** The condition of being approved by God; to be right in God's eyes.

**Salvation:** The act of God whereby He rescues sinners from eternal punishment.

**Sanctification:** The process whereby a follower of Christ becomes more and more like Him.

**Sin:** A violation of God's laws; failing to measure up to His standards of what is right; disobedience.

# HOW CAN WE BE ACCEPTED BY GOD?

**W**hat happens when you get struck by lightning—twice? Martin Luther knew. The first time was during his studies as a law student. On a steamy summer evening in July, 1505, as he was walking outside, a lightning bolt hit so close to him that it knocked him to the ground. In terror he vowed to become a monk. Within a month he quit his legal studies and checked into a monastery.

But Luther's soul was restless. The more he knew about God, the more inadequate he felt. He tried fasting, giving himself to prayer, and spending hours in confession. After years of frustration, depression, and struggling with an overwhelming sense of guilt and

unworthiness to be accepted by God, Luther was “struck by lightning” again—the lightning of God's truth.

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*Luther's soul was restless. The more he knew about God, the more inadequate he felt.*

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In the early 1500s, Luther created quite a stir when he parted company with the established church of his day. Why did he hammer 95 theses on the door of a Wittenburg church? Luther had discovered a liberating, life-changing, and eternally significant truth. Having tried desperately many times to prove to God that he was good enough to deserve His favor, Luther's eyes were opened. He

finally understood how God could call a bad person good—worthy to be called a child of God, worthy to enter heaven.

While he was reading the New Testament book of Romans, it was as if his soul was struck by lightning. The flash of God-given insight gave him everything he had been searching for—and more.

Because the book of

a group, and you would like to do some firsthand discovery, I would encourage you to take time to read the designated parts of Romans listed in “PERSONAL DISCOVERY” at the beginning of each section. As you read, search for answers to the key questions that are listed.

## **PART I: NO EXCUSES**



Romans so clearly explains the truth of justification, we will be taking a close look at the same verses that changed Luther's life and the course of church history.

If you are studying this booklet by yourself or with

**PERSONAL DISCOVERY:**  
In this section we will look at Romans 1:1–3:20. Some key questions are:

1. Why do people choose to disobey God?
2. Why are our excuses groundless?
3. How does God express

His kindness?

4. What will happen to spiritual rebels?
5. Who can measure up to God's standards?
6. What good is God's law?

**What makes God angry?** Some people would rather not think about this possibility. They would like to imagine that God is so loving that He could never get mad at anyone. The first chapters of Romans, however, let us know upfront that because sin makes God furious we need to be justified. Hell is not simply a myth or a preacher's scare tactic. It is a very real destination for all who refuse to turn from their self-serving ways to the Lord Jesus.

In Romans 1:16-18 the apostle wrote:

*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the*

*righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.*

Those verses present the stark contrast between the person who humbly expresses faith in Christ and the person who deliberately pushes away and buries the truth of what God says. The heart of sin is the attitude that we cannot trust God to give us what is best for us. It is selfish arrogance that leads us to reject God's rules and establish our own code of ethics grounded only in our fickle self-centeredness. That is why the statement is true that very few people reject Christ for intellectual reasons; most people reject Him because they do not want

to change their way of life.

**Why doesn't God accept excuses?** Paul told us that the basic knowledge of God's existence and His power is an obvious fact of life. The universe around us points to an all-wise, all-powerful Creator. Because of that, none of us can say that God has left us in the dark.

*What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse (vv.19-20).*

Instead of worshiping the Creator, people bowed before objects of God's creation (v.23).

In addition, the human conscience is a built-in mirror of God's laws (2:15).

True, this inner awareness of what is right and wrong can be ignored and deadened (1 Tim. 4:2), but it is one more reason that none of us will have an excuse when we stand before God on judgment day (Rom. 2:16).

**Was Paul talking about me?** To make his point so clear that we couldn't miss it, Paul described two specific types of people who have no legitimate defense for their sin. All of us fit into one of these categories.

**The pleasure-seeker (1:26-32).** Also known as a hedonist, this type of person is controlled by a thirsty lust for personal gratification. Paul lists several characteristics of pleasure-seekers: sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, hatred of God, violence, arrogance, disobedience to parents. They are undiscerning,

untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful, approving of evil.

**The self-righteous (2:1–3:8).** This type of person would never think of himself as a pleasure-seeking pagan. In fact, he's appalled at the blatant godlessness of many people in society. He acknowledges God's existence and the reality of being accountable to Him. But he has a problem—he's a hypocrite. He's quick to point out the sins of others but slow to recognize the magnitude of his own violations of God's laws. Blind to his own faults, he readily sees that other people are headed for a terrible day of judgment, but he doesn't realize that he faces the same judgment.

The apostle Paul explained that being "religious" and being part of a family with a long history of religious activities do not make a person right with

God. Paul specifically debunked the notion that being born a Jew made a person acceptable to God and exempt from judgment.

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***Scientists will  
never find  
a human gene  
for godliness.***

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This is a truth every religious person needs to think about. Merely having godly parents, attending church, giving money to missions, or serving in the various programs of the church do not make us acceptable to God.

**Why can't our good deeds outweigh our bad ones and make God happy with us?** In case we missed it before, Paul said it one more time and so directly that we can't escape the conclusion: No

one can ever do enough good to counterbalance the terrible weight of even one sin. Paul wrote:

*What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one." "Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "the poison of asps is under their lips"; "whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known." "There*

*is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (3:9-20).*

The conclusion: We all stand before God "guilty as charged." Every one of us has in some way violated God's law. Merely trying to do good does not erase the bad. In God's courtroom, where He is the Lawmaker, Judge, and Jury, we stand totally helpless, without one shred of legitimate evidence as to why He should not "throw the book" at us.

So what should we do? Give up? No. Paul's purpose in bringing us to the end of ourselves is to show us how much we

need Christ to come to our rescue. In the next part of Romans we will see how God can be a just Judge and yet free us from the penalty of our sin.

## **PART 2: ONE SUBSTITUTION**



### **PERSONAL DISCOVERY:**

In this section we will look at Romans 3:21–4:25 and 9:1–11:36. Some key questions are:

1. How can we be right with God?
2. Who took our punishment? Why?
3. Why is so much said about Abraham?
4. Why can't we accuse

God of being unjust?  
5. Why can't we take pride in our faith?

**How can God say we're right when we're wrong?** Romans 3:21-26 is crucial to our understanding of this issue.

*But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being*

*justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

Let's summarize the key points of these verses:

- God graciously has taken the initiative to provide a way for us to be right with Him.
- No one is able to keep His laws.
- Putting our trust in Christ, rather than in trying to be good, makes us right with God.
- Jesus' sacrificial death paid the penalty we

deserved. As our substitute, He experienced the wrath of God against sin.

- God's justice is satisfied and we are declared right with Him because of what Jesus did for us, not because of what we do for ourselves.
- God withheld ultimate judgment on sin until Christ became our substitute.
- As Judge, God says we are in the wrong; as the Justifier, He declares that we are now in the right.

**What does justification mean for us?** It means that our guilt is gone and Christ's righteousness has been given to us. God can call bad people good because Jesus gave Himself as our substitute in His death and in His life. So when God looks at us, He sees Jesus Christ. Let's go back to the

definition given earlier in this booklet: “Justification is God’s once-for-all declaration that a sinner is no longer under judgment but is the recipient of all the benefits of being right with Him because of what Jesus Christ has done.”

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe states, “Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Christ on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross” (*Be Right*, p.35).

Pastor and author Charles Swindoll writes, “Justification is God’s merciful act, whereby He declares righteous the believing sinner while he is still in his sinning state. He sees us in our need, wallowing around in the swamp of our sin. He sees us looking to Jesus Christ and trusting Him completely by faith, to cleanse us from our sin. And though we

come to Him with all of our needs and in all of our darkness, God says to us, ‘Declared righteous! Forgiven! Pardoned!’” (*Growing Deep In The Christian Life*, p.238).

### **Does it mean “just as if I’d never sinned”?**

This has been a popular definition used often in Sunday school classes. It has some merit to it, but it may also give the wrong impression.

On the positive side, this definition is in line with what Paul said in Romans about being declared right with God. Justification means that God applies to our account all the perfect goodness of Christ. The stigma of guilt is gone.

But it certainly cannot be true that we were innocent of all charges—we did sin. Nor does it mean that a huge price did not have to be paid to free us from the guilt of our sins.

The truth is, we stand before God as forgiven sinners whose deserved punishment was taken by our substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Why did Paul write an entire chapter about Abraham?**

What can we learn about justification from a man who lived 2,000 years before Christ?

Paul devoted a whole chapter to Abraham because so many of the people to whom Paul was writing were Jews. And of course all Jews trace their ancestry back to Abraham. From his own personal experience, Paul knew the danger of trusting in his connection to Abraham genetically and through the physical mark of circumcision rather than establishing a vital faith relationship with God. Paul and his fellow Jews had been trying to be right with God by keeping the laws

God communicated to Moses. But they had become deluded into thinking that they were on good terms with God through their attempts at keeping the Law. They were trusting in themselves rather than God's mercy and grace to be revealed in the promised Messiah.

Paul quoted from Genesis 15:6 when he wrote, "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness'" (4:3). Paul then said, "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" (vv.4-6).

The key point of the chapter is this: God declared Abraham to be righteous *before* Abraham submitted to the physical rite of circumcision. Abraham was not declared right because he did something to earn it but because he simply trusted God to do what He said He would do.

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***Many people have a hard time with the concept of justification. It seems too easy, so undemanding of them.***

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**Isn't this too easy?**

Shouldn't we have to do something? Many have a hard time with the concept of justification. It seems too easy, so undemanding of them. They would like to think that either by doing a

lot of humanitarian service or by devoting themselves to prayer and fasting or other rituals that they can somehow become worthy of salvation. The Bible says, however, that such efforts are absolutely worthless to earn salvation.

Look at what the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians. After listing all of the "religious" pre-conversion activities by which he had sought God's favor, Paul said:

*What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through*

*faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (3:7-9).*

And in his letter to a group of believers in Ephesus, Paul emphasized that salvation is the “gift of God”—the result of His work, not our own works.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (2:8-10).*

**How did Martin Luther respond to this truth?** We mentioned earlier how the truth of justification by faith revolutionized Luther’s thinking. In his own words, here is how it happened:

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

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***“I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him.”***

**Martin Luther**

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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 (Quoted by church historian

Roland Bainton in his biography of Luther, *Here I Stand*).

**Does this seem unjust to you?** In Romans 9–11 Paul answered an objection he anticipated from his readers. Because salvation is initiated by God and justification is a sovereign work of God in the lives of people He chooses to rescue, some people may accuse God of being unfair in justifying some and not others.

Paul’s whole argument, however, up to this point in Romans, was that salvation is totally undeserved, unearned, and unrelated to any attempts at righteousness by any man or woman. Paul said, “It does not . . . depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy” (9:16 NIV). This is a hard truth for many people to accept because it deflates our pride—we have absolutely nothing to offer to

God. All we can do is accept by faith what He has offered to us.

Where did the Jews go wrong? Paul said that Israel pursued righteousness and failed “because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. . . . For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God” (9:32; 10:3).

In contrast, the offer of salvation is now open to all who will accept it by faith as a gift.

*If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For*

*the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (10:9-13).*

### **Does James contradict Paul’s teaching of justification by faith?**

The author of the short letter that bears his name is believed to be the oldest half-brother of Jesus. After some years of disbelief (Jn. 7:2-5), James too accepted the truth that Jesus was the Savior, and James became a leader in the early church (Acts 12:17; 15:13), and he is even mentioned favorably by Paul (Gal. 1:19; 2:9).

So why does it seem to some people that James (whose letter was written before Romans) and Paul don’t agree on this most

basic issue of salvation? The problem arises if we take what James said out of the broader context of the point he was trying to make. James wrote:

*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (Jas. 2:14).*

James then gave a practical example of responding to a person who needs food and clothes. It is worthless, he argued, to utter a word of blessing and not give food or clothing. He continued:

*Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (Jas. 2:14,17-18).*

Then James, like Paul, cited the example of Abraham to prove his point.

He wrote:

*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." . . . You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only (vv.21-24).*

What would Paul have said in response? He would have agreed wholeheartedly because he and James were addressing two related but different aspects of justification. Paul spoke of God's action of justification by which He declares a person right with Him at the moment that person puts trust in Jesus as Savior. James wrote of the visible evidence of justification that

occurs in a person's new way of life. In the first sense, we are declared righteous in God's eyes. In the second sense, we are declared righteous in the eyes of people.

J. Ronald Blue, in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, writes, "Together Paul and James give the full dimension of faith. Paul wrote about inner *saving* faith from God's perspective. James wrote about outward *servicing* faith from man's perspective. The true seed of *saving* faith is verified by the tangible fruit of *servicing* faith. James' point is that biblical faith works" (p.816).

The French reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) explained the statements of James this way:

As Paul contends that men are justified without the aid of good works, so James will not allow any

to be regarded as justified who are destitute of good works. Due attention to the scope will thus disentangle every doubt; for the error of our opponents lies chiefly in this, that they think James is defining the mode of justification, whereas his only object is to destroy the depraved security of those who vainly pretended faith as an excuse for their contempt of good works. Therefore, let them twist the words of James as they may, they will never extract out of them more than the two propositions: That an empty phantom of faith does not justify, and that the believer, not contented with such an imagination, manifests his justification by good works (John Calvin, *Institutes Of The Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge).

As we will see, the apostle Paul also proclaimed strongly that a person who has genuine faith in Christ will exhibit a new way of life, a life consistent with a claim to have been declared right with God.

### **PART 3: MANY RESULTS**



**PERSONAL DISCOVERY:**  
In this section we will look at Romans 5–8 and 12–16. Some key questions are:

1. What are the results of justification?
2. Why should believers take sin seriously?
3. Why should we work hard to be good?
4. How does God help us to be good?
5. How do forgiven people live?

**What difference does justification make?** Marriage is a good analogy of the relationship between a legal pronouncement and the practical outworking of it. The marriage ceremony, like justification, is a declaration that a new relationship has been entered. A man and

woman, formerly unrelated, enter a legal contract that should change their lives. Suddenly, they share possessions, they share the same dwelling, and they look to the future as a time when their relationship will grow closer and richer. Legally, marriage changes so much.

On the other hand, a pronouncement of marriage doesn't make the man and woman perfect partners in

life. They have to stop thinking and living like single persons and begin to think and live like married persons. So too, once we have been legally justified by God, we have established a relationship that needs to be cultivated.

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***Justification is based on what God has done, not on our works.***

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The marriage analogy can be taken only so far because marriages don't always last. But when God justifies us and brings us into a new relationship with Him, He never divorces us. Nothing can ever separate us from Christ's love (Rom. 8:38-39). We may fail Him repeatedly, but He is committed to make the relationship last forever, eventually making it perfect

(vv.29-30). Remember, justification is based on what God has done, not on our works.

**What are the practical benefits of justification?** As we indicated in the previous section, Paul would have agreed wholeheartedly with James that justification is not the end of the story. Just as a farmer expects an apple tree to produce fruit, so God is committed to working in a justified person's life to bring about more and more fruit of right behavior. A person who is justified does not automatically become perfect and cease to be a sinner in need of great improvement.

In Romans 5-8, Paul goes to great lengths to show the benefits of being right with God. Here is a partial listing. We have:

- peace with God (5:1).
- hope that God will

finish what He started in us (v.2).

- a sense of God's love through the Holy Spirit who now lives within (v.5).
- assurance that we will not face God's wrath; we have been reconciled to Him (vv.9-11).
- eternal life (v.21).
- the ability to live a new way of life (6:4).
- the hope of a future resurrection (v.5).
- freedom from sin's tyranny; the opportunity to live as God's servants (vv.6-23).
- an obligation to depend on the Spirit of God and not measure our spirituality by our ability to keep rules (7:1-6).
- a struggle with sin that we will ultimately win through Jesus Christ (vv.7-25).

- the help and power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do what is right (8:1-11).
- a closeness to God; we can now call Him Father (vv.15-16).
- a new status as heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ's glory (v.17).
- hope of one day receiving the full benefits of being children of God (vv.23-25).
- the Spirit's help when we pray (vv.26-27).
- the certain hope that we will one day be as perfect as Christ (vv.28-31).
- the reassurance that nothing can divorce us from our relationship with God (vv.31-39).

**What are we supposed to do?** Now that we have been given so much as a result of being justified, how does God expect us to work on our

side of the relationship? Chapters 12–16 of Romans give us many down-to-earth instructions on how we are to live.

The difference between who we are as justified sinners and the process of becoming more like Christ as His followers is sometimes referred to by the terms *standing* and *state* (or *position* and *practice*). Our official, God-declared and once-for-all *standing* as believers in Christ is that we are justified, seen by God as possessing the righteousness of Christ. Our *state* is our present-day level of spiritual maturity as Christ-followers. It refers to our level of dependence on Christ, our commitment to His ways, the practical day-to-day outworking of our faith in making choices that God says are right.

What Paul describes in Romans 12–16 relates to that expression of faith in

everyday life. We are to:

- offer our bodies to the Lord (12:1).
- resist the pressures of the world to conform to sinful thoughts and actions, and instead allow God to transform our minds (v.2).
- serve other believers with our God-given abilities (vv.3-8).
- love sincerely (v.9).
- hate evil, cling to the good (v.9).
- serve the good of others (v.10).
- live joyfully, patiently in trouble, faithfully in prayer (v.12).
- be charitable and hospitable (v.13).
- not be vengeful (vv.14,17).
- show empathy (v.15).
- avoid prejudice (v.16).
- do what produces peace and counters evil with good (vv.17-21).
- submit to authorities and the law (13:1-7).

- love others (vv.8-11).
- behave decently, not even thinking about giving in to temptation (vv.12-14).
- do all we can to get along with other believers and strengthen their faith (14:1–15:13).
- beware of false teachers (16:17-19).

That may seem like a long list, but there are many more exhortations in the Bible. As you read the New Testament, you will find time and time again that Christ and His apostles urged believers to put their faith into practice.

Earlier we referred to Ephesians 2:8-10. Let's take one more look at verse 10, for it has something significant to say to us in this current discussion: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that

we should walk in them." Immediately after making the point that we are saved by faith and not by works, Paul quickly reminded his readers that we are "created in Christ Jesus" for the very purpose of doing good works. In fact, it is all part of God's plan from the very beginning: "God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." It couldn't be said more clearly or forcefully than that.

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***"We are justified by faith alone. But we are not justified by faith that is alone."***

**John Gerstner**

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**So why do so many people think they need to earn their own salvation?**

Could it be a matter of

pride? It is very humbling to have to admit that we are totally unworthy of God's mercy and grace. As we saw in Part 1: No Excuses, nobody has anything to brag about before God. That strikes at the very core of our problem. Ever since Adam and Eve took a bite out of the forbidden fruit, we as members of the human race have a tendency to think we know better than God what is best for us. We have an overblown sense of our importance, our abilities, and our goodness. But God shatters all that arrogance with a call for humble repentance and an acceptance of salvation, in the way a starving beggar would accept a morsel of food.

Or perhaps someone thinks he has been so bad that God could never consider him acceptable. God says we're all deserving of hell. And as far as God is

concerned, no sin (except total rejection of Him) is too bad to be forgiven. Remember the apostle Paul? Because of his self-righteousness and his

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*“My whole hope  
is only in Your  
great mercy.  
Give what You  
command,  
and command  
what You will.”*

*St. Augustine*

---

persecution of Christians before his conversion, he considered himself the worst of sinners, yet he was absolutely sure that God had accepted him.

**What about the verses in the Bible that make it sound as if we are saved by works?**

Those verses that at first reading seem to imply that

our salvation is based on a judgment of our actions must be taken in the total context of what Christ and the apostles taught.

James Montgomery Boice speaks to this issue in his book *Foundations Of The Christian Faith*. After listing several of Christ's parables and teachings that might be taken as promoting salvation by works, Boice writes, "These stories and other sayings of Jesus seem to teach that people are saved on the basis of their perseverance, foresight, enterprise, or charity. But this problem vanishes when we realize that Jesus is not contradicting but rather is showing the consequences of what it means genuinely to believe on Him as Savior" (pp.429-430).

**What do your works say about you?** When people look at you and me, do they see evidence that God has done His work in

our lives? Do they see the fruit of justification and God's regenerating work? (Jn. 3). Although it's true that God's justification comes to all who will accept it by trusting Christ, no one should make the mistake of thinking that he can come to Christ for salvation while retaining his old way of life. True faith produces the fruit of repentance and devotion to Christ. It's that simple.

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*True faith  
produces the  
fruit of repentance  
and devotion  
to Christ.*

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Have you, like Martin Luther, been "struck by lightning" as you've read through Romans? If so, rejoice in what Christ has done for you and share your newfound discovery with others.

## ON TRIAL

If you were suddenly transported into the presence of God and you heard a prosecuting attorney listing all the reasons you should be sent to hell, how would you plead? Guilty or not guilty?

The apostle Paul said, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). That makes us guilty as charged.

What is the penalty for our sin? “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

What could we say in our defense? “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

Because Jesus became our substitute, the penalty has been paid. But we must accept His forgiveness as a gift. The only requirement is

that we recognize our need and accept His offer.

“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . For ‘whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’” (Rom. 10:9,13).

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### *What would you say in your defense?*

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If you haven't done so before, tell Jesus that you believe He died as your substitute and accept the free and undeserved gift of forgiveness. That's the only way to be right about your wrong, to be accepted by God, and to be sure of heaven.

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