

The Doctrine of Justification

Galatians 2:16–19; 2 Corinthians 5:17–21; 12:9; 13:11; Romans 5:8–12; 11:15; Hebrews 2:17; 2 Nephi 10:24; 25:23; 33:9; 3 Nephi 27:19

“The Law,” “The Works of the Law,” and “Justification by Faith” (Galatians 2:16)

The major thrust of the letter to the Galatians was that obedience to the Mosaic law was not only unnecessary but actually contrary to the gospel. Technically, “the law” referred to the first five books of the Old Testament. In Hebrew those were called the Torah. Paul used the word in that sense in 4:21–22 when he called attention to the example of Sarah and Hagar. But by the time of Jesus, the phrase “the law” had also come to mean the whole set of rules, rituals, and practices of the Mosaic code, both those included specifically in the writings of Moses, and the mass of oral traditions that had been formulated throughout the following centuries. It is in this sense that Paul most typically uses law in Galatians.

Very briefly, justification means “to be declared righteous,” and also “to be put back into the right relationship with a person.” Therefore, what Paul was saying is that no man can be made righteous and reestablish the proper relationship with God exclusively by the words of the Mosaic law or, for that matter, by any law of works alone. This can come only through the atoning sacrifice of the Savior and through the obedience to the principles and ordinances of the gospel. Paul outlined this doctrine much more completely and systematically in the first few chapters of his letter to the Romans.

Bruce R. McConkie said:

“Reconciliation is the process of ransoming man from his state of sin and spiritual darkness and of restoring him to a state of harmony and unity with Deity. . . . Man, who was once carnal and evil, who lived after the manner of the flesh, becomes a new creature of the Holy Ghost; he is born again; and, even as a little child, he is alive in Christ.”

—*Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. [1965–73], 2:422–423



Not By Obedience Alone

The Jews believed that by observing the rituals and commandments of the law of Moses, one is made or has become righteous. Since the Jews believed that by doing these things their life was acceptable to God, it must have been easy for a Christian Jew to conclude that he must continue doing the same things to enjoy the same blessings.

But God is the ultimate justifier. Whoever wants to be justified (made righteous) must do it in God’s way. His way, established in the premortal world, is based upon accepting the atoning sacrifice and resurrection of his Son and following his example, including the ordinances of salvation. Paul understood this central truth. He also knew that men had the gospel and were saved before there was a law of Moses. Abraham was one.

Not By Faith Alone

Justification, or being accounted righteous, comes through faith in Jesus Christ. And though justification comes only through Jesus Christ, salvation also involves works—not the works of the old law but the works of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as Paul wrote. The true way included both faith and faithfulness. The Lord’s instructions for salvation are simple and clear: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

Justification vs. Sanctification

A modern scholar explained clearly the difference between justification and sanctification in Paul's discussions:

"In its theological sense, justification . . . describes what God declares about the believer, not what He does to change the believer. In fact, justification effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner's nature or character. Justification is a divine judicial edict. It changes our status only, but it carries ramifications that guarantee other changes will follow . . .

"In biblical terms, justification is a divine verdict of 'not guilty—fully righteous.' It is the reversal of God's attitude toward the sinner. Whereas He formerly condemned, He now vindicates. Although the sinner once lived under God's wrath, as a believer he or she is now under God's blessing. Justification is more than simple pardon; pardon alone would still leave the sinner without merit before God. So when God justifies He imputes divine righteousness to the sinner (Romans 4:22–25). Christ's own infinite merit thus becomes the ground on which the believer stands before God (Romans 5:19; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Phil. 3:9). So justification elevates the believer to a realm of full acceptance and divine privilege in Jesus Christ. . . .

"Justification is distinct from sanctification because in justification God does not make the sinner righteous; he declares that person righteous (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16). Justification imputes Christ's righteousness to the sinner's account (Romans 4:11b); sanctification imparts righteousness to the sinner personally and practically (Romans 6:1–7; 8:11–14). Justification takes place outside sinners and changes their standing (Romans 5:1–2); sanctification is internal and changes the believer's state (Romans 6:19). Justification is an event, sanctification a process. The two must be distinguished but can never be separated. God does not justify whom He does not sanctify, and He does not sanctify whom He does not justify. Both are essential elements of salvation" (MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 89-90).