
Right with God?

BOB HEERSPINK

The more we read scripture, the more we learn about God; but the more we learn about God, the more we see how incapable we are to do what God desires of us. The Bible tells us that in Christ we are accepted and made right with God, but how does all that work? Can we ever be sure that we are truly saved? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink; Dave, in my ministry I have often found that people wrestle with a deep issue, and it is this: Am I good enough? And I don't merely mean at a religious level. I mean, they are asking that question about whether they are good enough to be a spouse that really cares. Am I a good enough parent? Am I good enough on the job to get respect from my colleagues? You know, I remember a story that was told by a certain principal that I knew. He told me that the mother of a young man came to him one day and said his son comes home every day in tears. He felt a failure; he had no friends; and then the principal said to me: You know, that young man was the star basketball player; he was a straight A student; he was the leader of the most popular group in school; and here he is every day asking the question: Am I good enough?

DAVE BAST

I remember reading somewhere some time ago that the number one fear of successful business executives would be for people to discover how insecure they were – how little they felt that they actually were capable of doing what they were doing.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I find the most secure people, at least the people who project security, are often the most insecure.

DAVE BAST

I ask that question myself: Am I good enough? Only, I have a pretty clear answer. In my case: No, I am not. I am really not very good. If people really knew what I was like inside, nobody would like me. I think that is a pretty common feeling. So what about with God? Because he does know...

BOB HEERSPINK

He knows us inside and out...

DAVE BAST

What we are like inside. How could he possibly accept us?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well you know, that was the real question that Martin Luther faced at the time of the Reformation: How can I be right with God?

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

And for Luther, he wrestled with the fact that no matter what he did, he still didn't feel as though he had really measured up to God's standards.

DAVE BAST

Right; when he went on this spiritual quest to find justification...can we throw the word out? He did what was the normal prescription for his time and place. If you really want to be in with God become a monk. That was what his society, that was what his church taught; and Luther said: You know, I did it heart and soul. If anyone could ever have been saved by being a monk, that person was me because I gave it my all; and still, he was left with this gnawing feeling that he wasn't good enough.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now you know, I think a lot of people today looking at Luther couldn't figure him out because a lot of people today say: Working my way into God's good favor... I mean, how does that work?

DAVE BAST

Exactly. This is almost a meaningless question. To me one of the hardest challenges in really sharing the Gospel with our culture and society is that people just don't feel their need. They have no sense whatsoever that they might be out of favor with God; that their relationship might have a problem, you know? Hello! The question of how are you right with God... well, one response is: God? What God? There isn't any God. I only need to be right with myself.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and that is really making yourself your own god. You know, the only god I have to measure up to is myself; and I think there are other people who basically take the attitude of: Well, if there is a God out there, he works on the basis of these scales. He puts all the good things I do on one side and all the bad things I have done on the other, and as long as I have as much good stuff on one side as the average person, I will get in... I will be okay.

DAVE BAST

There is a presumption that God must accept decent people; so if you are a pretty good person... you haven't actually murdered anybody; you give it your best shot, then surely that would make you acceptable to God, wouldn't it?

BOB HEERSPINK

And yet, you know, Dave, we all have this gnawing sense inside we are not good enough... we are just not good enough; and if we are not good enough for other people, to me that is a reflection of the fact that down deep, even though we can try to cover it up, even though we can say: Hey, you know, it is God who is in the dock... God should be judged for the evils of the world, not me; there is this deep issue down inside our souls that somehow we are... we are out of sync with God; that if God were to show up, I would still be hiding in the garden because I couldn't stand to see him face to face.

DAVE BAST

And that is really the message of the Bible, and it is the message of the Gospel; at least it is the prologue to the Gospel. We do need to be put right with God, and Paul especially wrote his letters to explain how this can be true; and key among those letters is the letter to the Galatians. That is really the theme of this series of *Groundwork* programs; and today we want to look at the very heart of Paul's message of finding acceptance with God through faith in Jesus Christ; justification by faith, to give it its technical term.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is a big expression, but it is something that we have to unpack if we really want to know what is at the core of the Gospel.

We are going to be looking at justification by faith in just a minute, but first let's pause and talk about how listeners like you can join us in this conversation on our website.

DAVE BAST

Listeners like you make *Groundwork* what it is. Our website, groundworkonline.com, is another way that we work to join you as you dig deeper into the scriptures.

BOB HEERSPINK

There we continue to reflect on today's discussion about our world and the Bible, as well as many other conversations that listeners have begun about scripture and how it interacts with their lives. Plus, we look to you to help us think about upcoming programs. Finding us is easy; just visit our website: groundworkonline.com.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Bob, as we have been working our way through the book of Galatians we have come to Chapter 2, and the subject of justification by faith or by faith alone, to use the Reformation watchword: *Sola fide*, by faith alone. In fact, Luther, when he translated the New Testament into German stuck that word *alone* into one passage in Romans, where he said: We are justified by faith *alone*, even though it is not in the original. So he really wanted to emphasize this discovery that he made, really, from Paul; that justification is not by keeping the Law; not by doing good works; not by becoming a monk; not by being religious; but by trusting in Christ. And here is where Paul states that, I think, most clearly of any place... just as clearly, certainly, as anywhere else in the New Testament. In Galatians 2:15, 16:

We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶know that a person is not justified by observing the Law, but by faith in Jesus Christ; so we too have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the Law; because by observing the Law no one will be justified.

BOB HEERSPINK

Now, you know, Dave, that is pretty theological language, but Paul was actually writing these words to deal with a specific practical situation that had arose in the Church; in fact, he talks about that just before in Galatians Chapter 2. Peter had come down to Antioch; he had preached the Gospel – he had preached the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ by faith alone; and yet when some Judaizers showed up from Jerusalem and said: Hey, you know, you really have to become a Jew before you become a Christian; you have got to keep the kosher food laws; you have to be circumcised; you have to keep Sabbath; Peter sold out. He basically said: Okay, to satisfy folks back in Jerusalem we will go this route. We will say you have to keep the ceremonial law to really be justified as a believer; and it is Paul who shows up and confronts Peter and essentially says: Peter, you are saved by faith in Jesus Christ; and you are saved alone – Luther's word; how can you now turn around and tell other people that they have to keep the law to be saved?

DAVE BAST

He says in effect: Look, we have discovered this for ourselves. We haven't been able to be saved as Jews by keeping the Law...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, we couldn't do it.

DAVE BAST

Right; we needed... So, why are you trying to make Gentiles now do that? That is why he starts with this reference to Jews and Gentiles. We have learned this. And then he goes on four times in one verse: Galatians 2:16; four times he says it: Not by Law but by faith; by faith, not by Law. He puts it positively and negatively; and he puts it in terms of the generality: People cannot do this, and we haven't found it to be true either because we have been justified when we trusted in Christ; and then he puts the capstone on his argument because by observing the Law no one will be justified. Nobody can find acceptance with God in this way.

BOB HEERSPINK

Not Gentiles who try to become Jews or Jews themselves.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; so, there it is. There is the statement. How many times can he say it? How many different ways do we get the point: It is by faith not by works; but the question is what does Paul exactly mean here? I think in order to get more deeply into this, we have to ask a series of things; because it seems fairly straight forward, but I really see three questions here: What does Paul mean by *justified*? What does he mean by the law – by keeping the law or the works of the law? And what does he mean by *faith*?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes. You think about that word *justification*, or to be justified, and to me... We have to recognize that Paul is not using the word as we typically use it in our world today. You know, we will say: Well, I can justify what I did; and we are almost saying I can excuse it. I can hear someone say: Well, justification of your sins? That means you are dismissing your sin. You are excusing your sin; but that is not what Paul meant at all.

DAVE BAST

In a sense, there is a forward looking aspect to the concept of justification in the New Testament. It is a courtroom analogy...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is a metaphor from the law system, and it means, really in effect, to be acquitted – to be declared not guilty. The problem is, *we are* guilty; so how can we be acquitted if we are guilty without making God unjust? And that is a problem we are going to look at in a future program when we look at the cross; but there is this prospective sense of justification in Paul thought that says, really, we are justified in the sense that we are promised that we will be acquitted in the day of judgment before the judgment seat of God.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, I think it is really helpful to think about justification by faith in terms of that final judgment. The Jews hoped on the final judgment day that they would be acquitted by God – that they would be vindicated; and Paul recognizes that because of Christ Jesus something very radical has entered history. It is like Judgment Day has entered into time...

DAVE BAST

It is like it has already happened.

BOB HEERSPINK

It has already happened. You know, it is *going* to happen, but it has already happened at the cross.

DAVE BAST

It is as though we can hear the future and hear the Judge of all the universe say, looking at us: You are not guilty. You are my child. I accept you. You are forgiven. Your sins are covered. You are innocent.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; what was expected at the end of the age has broken into time so that we today can know what the judgment will be on us at the end of time; namely: You are innocent. And why? Not because of our own behavior...

DAVE BAST

Exactly.

BOB HEERSPINK

But because of the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

It has nothing to do with what we do because we could never accomplish that by anything that we do. The only way that we could accomplish that would be by being born innocent and never sinning. It is all in Christ; it is what Christ has done; and it is this cosmic after-effect of Christ's saving work on the cross. It is a mind-blowing concept, but it is the heart of the Gospel: Justification.

BOB HEERSPINK

And that is why Paul says it is not by works. It is nothing that we have done. It is just another way of saying it is grace – it is all grace.

DAVE BAST

Not by the Law – by observing the Law – or the works of the Law. So, we have to ask, then, what does he mean by law? And he is not dismissing the idea of the Ten Commandments, certainly.

BOB HEERSPINK

No...

DAVE BAST

But he is talking about the Law as a means of earning God's favor; the religious law especially of keeping the covenant of obedience as most clearly expressed in circumcision.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; there is always this tendency we have when we ask the question, am I good enough, to add something to what Christ has done for me. You know, there must be some kind of law or there must be some kind of identity I can adopt that will somehow earn me favor; and Paul is saying that is not the way it works.

DAVE BAST

In our terms it would be go to church and be a good Christian; that is what makes you acceptable.

BOB HEERSPINK

But see, justification isn't something we do to ourselves. It is fully what God does for us in Jesus Christ. We cannot make it happen.

DAVE BAST

Okay; so, justification, acquittal in the Day of Judgment; not by keeping the Law – not by being religious – but by faith. Now, what does he mean exactly by faith?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, and that is another word that people have a hard time really understanding, I think, in today's culture because so often faith is played off against fact as though it is something that is unreal. You know, it is the little boy who says: Well, faith is believing what you know isn't true; and that isn't at all what scripture understands. In scripture, faith is rooted in fact.

DAVE BAST

And it is not simply believing something intellectually, either.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is a complete act of entrusting oneself to Christ – to God in Christ. It includes repentance; it includes obedience. Paul could even talk about the obedience of faith; and it isn't something that we base on how we feel.

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, so often I find that marriage becomes such a powerful metaphor for our relationship with God, and here is another example of that. I have faith in my wife; my wife has faith in me. Well, that is based on knowing who we are; but it goes beyond just knowing facts about each other. It really says, I trust you. I trust your integrity. I can lean on you; and it is that dimension of faith that we are moving into when we talk about justification by faith. This is faith that leans on Jesus that throws ourselves into Christ's arms knowing that he and he alone can hold us.

DAVE BAST

But there is an objection to this idea that we are justified by that kind of faith, and we will take up that objection because the Apostle himself does, at the end of Chapter 2, just after this break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Welcome back. This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, I recently read the book, *In the Land of Believers* by Gina Welch. I found it to be a very interesting book. Welch is a professed agnostic who went underground at Thomas Road Baptist Church to really try to figure out what makes Christians tick.

DAVE BAST

Right; I read a review of that book. It was very interesting; kind of a newspaper story about this woman; and she actually kind of liked them, didn't she?

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, she feigned baptism and she made a public profession and she grew to like believers...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

It seemed like they had something... there was something different about them than other people; but she really had a problem with salvation, and I found it a very interesting book because it helped me as a pastor kind of get into the mind of someone who has real questions about the faith. She heard the Gospel and this is how she recapped it. She said: I think I get it. Jesus died for my sin. He took away my guilt. I don't have to pay for it anymore; and what that really means is, Christians really cannot stand on their own two feet. Christians don't want to take responsibility for their own lives. They just kind of cast away the notion that we sin, because after all, Jesus is going to fix it.

DAVE BAST

Well, she didn't quite get it, I don't think...

BOB HEERSPINK

No, she didn't; but it is an objection that people make.

DAVE BAST

It is.

BOB HEERSPINK

They say: Look, okay, I am justified by faith, so what does that mean? Can I go on living the way I have always lived? In fact, Paul raises that here in Galatians 2.

DAVE BAST

He does in the very next verse, verse 17, just after declaring we are justified by faith in Christ Jesus, not by observing the Law. Then he goes on:

¹⁷But if in our endeavor to be justified in Christ we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? By which he is saying: Does this promote sin then; or to put it another way, does this make us indifferent to our own lives? Do we just not take responsibility and live any which way we please because, hey, God loves to forgive, that's his business, as one cynic once put it: I like to sin, he likes to forgive; everything is wonderfully arranged.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; you know, the cynic on his deathbed who said: God will forgive me, that is his business; that is what he is into.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes; and Paul responds in two ways. The first response that he makes to this is to say in effect: No, of course not, because faith in Christ unites us with him in his death; and it is a death, as he would put it in his letter to the Romans, it is a death to sin; and it makes us alive with the life of Christ. We become new people – new creatures. How could we possibly want to go on sinning? And this wonderful text, one of the most beautiful texts in all the New Testament:

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. That is Galatians 2:20; one of my first memory verses.

BOB HEERSPINK

And you know that means that very often we as Christians put the cross into too small a box. We think it just deals with the guilt problem. It really deals also with the issue of our character – the way we live out our lives. It is good to remember that in the cross and resurrection a whole new age has broken in and it has gripped us, and we really are different people. We will talk about that in an upcoming program; but it doesn't leave us alone. It is not like we are simply a forgiven people; we are also transformed people.

DAVE BAST

Right; and that cross is the key because Paul's second argument against this is to remind the Galatians of the death of Christ; and he says at the very end of Chapter 2:

^{21b}If we can be justified by keeping the Law (if we are saved through law work – through our own righteousness), then Christ died for no purpose; and again, we want to look more deeply at the cross in our next program; but what he implies there is that Christ had to die in order to justify us, and that this comes to us only by faith – only by trusting him.

BOB HEERSPINK

It is really helpful for me, Dave, to think about the fact that what we are dealing here aren't feelings. We are dealing with facts; we are dealing with what God has done in history.

You know, I was reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer again the other day, and he had something to say about that. He said this: Christians are those who know that God's word in Christ Jesus pronounces them guilty even when they feel nothing of their own guilt. So even if I *don't* feel guilty...

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a good point.

BOB HEERSPINK

I am still guilty.

DAVE BAST

Modern people don't feel much guilt today, but they are still guilty because God says so.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; but then he goes on to say: And Christians are also those who know God's word in Christ pronounces them free and righteous even when they feel nothing of their own righteousness. So even when I feel like I am still guilty, because of what Christ has done for me on the cross – because I have faith in him – I am forgiven.

DAVE BAST

Again, it is believing God, taking him at his word. I may not feel very good; I may not feel very righteous; but I believe because he says it: That through my faith in Christ I am justified – I am right in his sight; and through that same faith I am born into a new life, and I want to live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me...

BOB HEERSPINK

That is the Good News.

DAVE BAST

I love that last thought: He loved me, just like Paul, and gave himself for me.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation; and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keeps our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing, and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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