



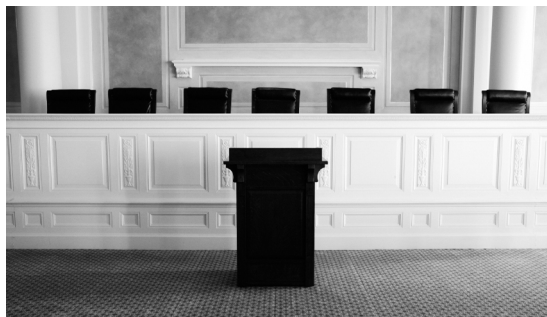
YOU ARE HEREBY DECLARED INNOCENT

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Imagine you are standing in a courtroom staring at a jury of twelve individuals. You are not the court reporter or a member of the audience, but rather the defendant in a capital murder case. The crowd comes to a hush as the judge bangs his gavel.

“Has the jury reached a verdict?” he thunders.

“Yes, Your Honor,” says the foreman, standing. He unveils a piece of paper and announces, “On the count of first degree murder, we find the defendant guilty as charged.” The crowd murmurs as you are led away to prison, having been sentenced to death for your crime.



Now, hopefully you will never find yourself in such a situation. However, if we were to substitute a heavenly scene for this one, we must realize that we all are in this predicament. Maybe we haven't murdered anyone, but we all have sinned and if we were to be put on trial before God, we would be found guilty.

UNDERSTANDING JUSTIFICATION

In Romans 1-3, the Apostle Paul explains how each one of us, whether we're religious or not, whether we're “moral” or not, or whether we're Jewish or Gentile, are guilty in God's court of law. He writes in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the

glory of God.” You see, each one of us has rebelled against God's command and His character, whether overtly or subtly. None of us can stand before God and say that we haven't done anything wrong. And the kicker is that there is a steep price to pay. In Romans 6:23, Paul explains that “the wages of sin is death.”

If you consider a wage, you know that it is a payment, or something you earn. Normally, it is a good thing (like a paycheck for certain hours you work), but in this case, it is terrible. Death is spiritual death, or separation from God. If we die in a state of spiritual death, we will be separated from God for all eternity. And it will be nobody's fault but our own, as each one of us is responsible for our own actions.

Often I am asked, “How can a loving God send good people to hell?” When we begin to understand the reality of our situation, we realize that in fact the question is just the opposite: How can a just and righteous God grant innocence to truly guilty people?

Some people argue that eternal life is gained by being a good person. But suppose, as in our opening scenario, you led a really good life up until the point where you murdered your roommate for setting his alarm clock too early. Do those good deeds done previous to the killing free you from the guilt of your crime? Does the judge say, “Well, he murdered his roommate, plain as day, but you know, he helped 80 year-old Mrs. Gray across the street twice this week, so that means that he didn't actually kill his friend”? I do not think so.

Doing good works may make us nicer people, but it does not remove the guilt of our sin. Paul writes in Romans 3:20 that “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the



knowledge of sin.” In other words, nobody will be declared innocent (or righteous) simply by doing good things. Why? Because doing a good thing doesn’t cancel out the bad things we do. It’s like taking a math exam and getting some answers right and some wrong. Do the right answers mean that you did not in fact get the other ones wrong? No. All we do is hope that we answer enough questions right that it gives us a good overall grade. But this is not how things work. Do my good deeds mean that I did not in fact do my bad deeds? Not at all. Our only hope, eternally speaking, is that God grades on a curve, so to speak, and says, “Well, he did do more good than bad, so that means that we’ll let him off the hook for all his sins.” The Bible is clear that that is not how God’s court of law operates.

But how, then, can a guilty person be declared righteous? Since good works do not remove our guilt, there must be another way. If God is completely just, His system must work such that in fact the penalty for guilt is actually paid. And that is exactly how God does it. Consider Romans 3:24-25, where Paul writes that we are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation (or payment for sin) by His blood, through faith....” In other words, it is like us before God’s judgment seat and being declared guilty and sentenced to eternal death, but Jesus Christ offers to pay that penalty for us. Therefore, justice is served, but we do not have to be the ones who suffer. Such is the miracle of God’s gracious gift of Jesus!

So Jesus offers to pay the penalty for our sin. But how do we receive that gift? Paul makes it clear that it is through faith. By faith, we acknowledge what Jesus did for us and we receive His offer of forgiveness. Notice that it has to be this way – we cannot earn such an offer; a guilty man has no leg to stand on. Yet God offers it freely, and all we can do is accept the gift (and go free) or reject the gift (and serve our time for all eternity).

If you have studied the doctrine of justification at all, you probably have run across what may appear to be a troubling contradiction, found in Romans 3-4 and James 2. Let’s take a look at those passages, because it is important to understand what they are talking about.

James 2:14-26 begins with a proposition: “What good is it, brothers, if a man says he has faith, but does not have works? Can such a faith save him?” Notice right

away that this is a hypothetical – this person claims to have faith, but does not have works consistent with that claim. Can such “faith” save him? James is making it clear that he is not looking at genuine faith, but rather a false faith. He then spends time offering evidence to prove that in fact, works justify us. This is where it gets confusing, because he says in verse 24, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.” What does he mean by this?

We have seen that works can do nothing to erase one’s guilt, and that a gift of grace can only be received by faith. So what works could James be talking about? How could we be “justified” by works?

Imagine you are on top of the tallest building on campus, and God were to instruct you to jump. “It’s safe,” He says, “because I will make sure you land softly.” Now, either you will believe God or not, and either you will jump or not. But what is it that determines whether you jump? You will jump if you believe God, and you will not jump if you don’t believe Him. In other words, your *actions* reflect your *faith* (or lack thereof).

No work can take remove the guilt of our sin. But many works can demonstrate a heart that has been changed by God through our faith in Christ. But what *causes* justification is very different from what *demonstrates* justification. Faith is the trigger (actually, it is the mechanism for receiving the grace of justification); works are the evidence. One might look at you jumping off the building and say, “That work right there justifies you. If you didn’t do it, you never really believed.” To which you would reply, “Right. But the only reason I jumped was because I believed. The faith came first, and the action was simply the outward sign of my faith.”

This is, I believe, what James is getting at. Consider the example of Abraham that he presents as exhibit A. In verse 21 he says, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?” So we see this work of Abraham – offering up Isaac – as evidence that we are justified by works. But follow James’ argument. Verses 22-23: “You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God.”

Now, the key here is verse 23, where James quotes



Genesis 15:6. It is at this moment that justification occurs in Abraham's life. To have faith credited to us as righteousness is what justification is, and it happens through our faith. Paul, in Romans 4:3, quotes the same exact passage as evidence that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith.

But James approaches the subject from a different angle. In using the story of Isaac, James is saying that Abraham is justified by a work that happened 7 chapters (the offering of Isaac occurred in Genesis 22) and many years after Abraham was justified. So what gives? The solution, I believe, is found in the analogy I gave earlier about jumping off the building. Once a person is justified, that justification cannot be taken away. But how do we know that we are justified? What is our assurance? The Scriptures speak of a changed life as evidence that our faith is genuine.

If you truly have faith in Christ, then your life will change accordingly, and you will begin to reflect Jesus' character, more and more. If you only *claim* to have faith, your life will not look more Christ-like. In Abraham's case, his offering of Isaac reflects the faith he had years before. In that sense, then, the work did not justify Abraham, but rather "perfected" it, or, to put it another way, *demonstrated* that faith.

Remember, the offering of Isaac was a test of Abraham's faith. But a test for whom? For God? Did God not know whether Abraham's faith was genuine? Of course He did – He's omniscient. The test, therefore, was for Abraham. How was Abraham to know whether He loved God more than anything else, including his long-desired son Isaac? Only by putting all that on the line. So when he did that, his faith was made evident and "perfected" in the sense that now, once and for all, Abraham knew that he was right before God.

James, therefore, is talking about justification before men, while Paul is talking about justification before God. And this makes perfect sense, given that we cannot see the hearts of men but only the outward actions.

Are you justified? Are you now innocent of your guilt? You are if you have a genuine faith that produces a changed life. That is the Biblical message on justification.



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