

# Justification

Five hundred years ago, on April 18, 1521, a monk named Martin Luther was put on trial for teaching that Christians are saved by faith alone. Discussions about justification were not new. But over the centuries most Christians had come to believe that a Christian's good works would be judged, by God, to see if a Christian merited salvation. This understanding was almost universal at the time, but Martin Luther brought that understanding into dispute. Martin Luther was found guilty and condemned. However, because of the teaching of Martin Luther, the teaching of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ, and not by works, has become almost universally accepted among Protestant Christians today. We will turn to the Bible to explain why this understanding still holds up to scrutiny of what the Bible teaches.

When Adam and Eve sinned their relationship with God was broken. God did not give up on humanity. He later called Noah, who fell into sin. God also called Abraham, and Abraham's descendants, the nation of Israel. But the Israelites also fell into sin and God had to send the nation into captivity. God promised a remnant would return, and a remnant did return. There were promises that God would drive evil out of the land. But many of those promises had not been fulfilled.

The Jewish people hoped that a Savior, or Messiah would come. But when the Messiah came most of them did not recognize Him. Some believed that Jesus was the Messiah and the Savior of the world. Jesus' death on the cross paid the price of sin (Colossians 2:14), and everyone who believes in Jesus' death and resurrection will be saved (Romans 10:9). Since all have sinned (Romans 3:23), everyone needs to be saved by Jesus.

No one can save themselves (Romans 3:20). Jesus redeemed sinners (Romans 3:24). His blood, shed on the cross, paid the price (Romans 3:25). The process of forgiving sinners by faith in Jesus is called “justification.”

This week we will focus on the Protestant understanding of the New Testament teaching of “justification.” How does the Bible’s teaching about “justification” fit into Jesus making all things new? To answer this question we will consider ...

- Justification by Jesus' death and resurrection
  - The Justification of Believers will be Vindicated at the Final Judgment
  - The Justification of Believers will be Vindicated by Their Good Works

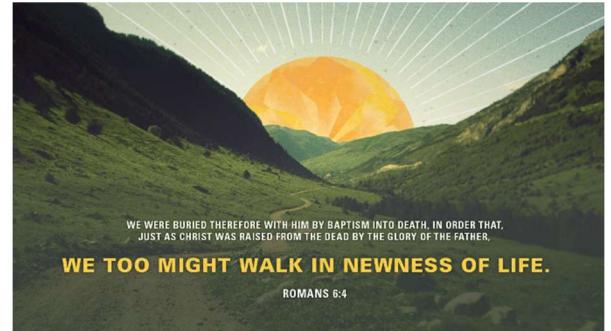
## Justification by Jesus' Death and Resurrection

Jesus' death and resurrection "justified" or verified His claims about Himself and those who believe in Him. Jesus made claims about Himself, which His accusers claimed were lies, but His resurrection proved He was right. Jesus claimed to be equal with God (John 5:18). He is equal to God (John 14:10). When Jesus rose from the dead He "was vindicated by the Spirit" (1 Timothy 3:16). The Holy Spirit brought life to Jesus' body after He died. His resurrection proved, beyond reasonable doubt that the God who created life was at work in Him, because He was "the Author of life" (Acts 3:15).



We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

Romans 6:6



WE WERE BURIED THEREFORE WITH HIM BY BAPTISM INTO DEATH, IN ORDER THAT, JUST AS CHRIST WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD BY THE GLORY OF THE FATHER,

**WE TOO MIGHT WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE.**

ROMANS 6:4

Those who believe in Jesus are "**united with him**" in His "**death**" and "**resurrection**" (Romans 6:5). The believer's "**old self was crucified with him**" Believers are no longer "**enslaved to sin**" (Romans 6:6). His resurrection showed that he "**will never die again**" (Romans 6:9). Believers share a new kind of indestructible life that comes from Jesus' resurrection. They must not let "**sin ... reign**" in their bodies (Romans 6:12). Their bodies must be converted into "**instruments of righteousness**" (Romans 6:13). Believers show their freedom from sin by their righteous actions. This process of overcoming sin is an ongoing struggle for all who believe in Jesus. However, a final victory is guaranteed because Jesus has already defeated the devil.

The word "justification" is a legal term that describes what Jesus did when He forgave sinners. It has nothing to do with anything believers have done or will do. Even a believer's faith is a "gift" from God (Ephesians 2:8). Believers are pardoned from their sins because of Jesus' sacrifice for them, and only because of what Jesus did for them.

## The Justification of Believers Will Be Vindicated at the Final Judgment

At the time of the final judgment all who believe in Jesus will receive a resurrection body. This will take place when the believer's body dies, or when Jesus returns. What is important to know is that believers will stand before the judgment seat in their resurrection body, not their old, sin-filled body.

Paul says that all people will be judged by Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:10). Some will be found genuine believers, and some who claimed to believe will be judged as non-believers.

While here on earth, all believers "**are at home in the body**" (2 Corinthians 5:6). However, this "**earthly home**" will one day be "**destroyed**". When that happens, believers will be given "**a building from God**" that is "**not made with hands**" (2 Corinthians 5:1). In other words, one day every believer in Jesus will be given a body, like the body Jesus had after His resurrection.

Believers will "**not be found naked**" (2 Corinthians 5:3). They will have physical bodies. They will not be disembodied spirits.



In this final resurrection, believers will not be "**unclothed**." Instead, they will be "**further clothed**" (2 Corinthians 5:4). The phrase "**fully clothed**" refers to being "**clothed**" with a new body free from their past sins.

Paul is pointing out that believers will face their judgement before Christ clothed in their new body. The sinful nature will be gone. Believers will be judged only according to their identity in Christ, not their old sinful nature. Believers can look forward to that day with confidence because Jesus' death and resurrection will make them righteous before God.

## The Justification of Believers Will Be Vindicated by Their Good Works

Most Christians are familiar with James' statement that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17, KJV). What isn't so clear is that James is most likely talking about the same judgment Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. How are we to understand James' statement that Christians will be judged by their works?

James says that **Abraham** and **Rahab** were "**justified**" or judged as righteous by their faith that was put into action by their works or deeds. When James says , "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (James 2:23), he is referring to the final judgment. James says that "**Rahab**" was "**justified by works**" (James 2:25). He says that Abraham, like all believers, was justified by works, and "**not by faith alone**" (James 2:24). This appears to contradict Paul's statement that believers are "not justified by works" but "through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16).

Further explanation is needed to understand this. I will use an illustration borrowed from Dr. Greg Beale. Once a year my family pays for a membership card to B.J.'s Wholesale Club. If I want to continue to buy groceries and other items at BJ's I need to pay that fee to get the card. Without the card I can't buy anything at B.J.'s. When I use the card, I don't have to pay for it again, until the next year. The card shows that I paid the money. The card is not the payment, but it shows that the payment was made.

A believer's good works are like the BJ's card. They verify that Christ's salvation has made the believer into a new person, who reflects His image. When believers do good works, they demonstrate that Jesus transformed them to be like Himself. Believers' works are not the price that was paid. Jesus' death on the cross was the price that was paid for believers' justification. A believer's good works don't pay the price for their sins, but they do show that they have been transformed by Christ. Only Christ can pay the price for their sins. But a believer's good works verify that a person has been transformed by Christ, and that is why they do good works.

James tells readers that when believers are judged, the good works they did after being made into Christ's likeness, will verify that Christ has made them new. Believers' good works will vindicate them when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

This does not mean that believers never sin. They do sin. But Jesus' death paid the price of their sin, and the power of His resurrection makes them into a person who reflects the righteousness of Jesus.

## Conclusion

Many believers fall into a trap. They believe they are not "good enough" to belong to Jesus, because when they look back at their history as a believer, they see times when they have failed to obey Jesus. They think that their success as a believer will be measured by a balance of good works compared to bad works. They worry that there won't be enough good works to cancel out the bad works. This is not how Christ will judge people!

All people will come before Christ to be judged (2 Corinthians 5:10). The only measure Christ will use is whether you put your faith and trust in His death and resurrection. Do you measure your own worth according to what Jesus did for you? Do you show your gratitude to Jesus by showing His love to other people, including your enemies? Every believer needs to serve Jesus better. The big question is whether any of your actions have shown Jesus' righteousness and love.

A believer's good works give assurance that the believer has been transformed by the power of Jesus' resurrection in their life. But good works are not proof of being transformed by Jesus. When some people come before

Christ to be judged, they will say, "I cast out demons in your name." But Christ will say, "I never knew you" (). Only God knows the true nature of a person's heart, and whether they truly believe in Christ.

On the other hand, believers cannot rest in satisfaction because they did good works at one time. They must continue to do good works in order to be assured of their connection to Christ's transformation. If you stop doing good works you no longer have assurance of your salvation. To have assurance of your salvation you must continue to do good works. So, even though only Jesus' death and resurrection can save you, your works are verification that you are being transformed by Jesus at work in you.

Can you point to times when you have shown that Jesus is at work in you, helping you to love the unlovable, and care for those who don't care about you? If you can, then you can know in your heart that Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, has been molding and shaping you into His likeness. If you can't find any evidence that Jesus is at work in you, then you need to ask Jesus to save you from your sin. He can save you if you believe in Him. Have you asked Jesus to save you?

## James 2:18–26

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But **someone** will say, "You have **faith** and I have works." **Show** me your **faith apart** from your works, and I will **show** you my **faith** by my works. You **believe** that God is one; you do **well**. Even the **demons believe**—and shudder! Do you **want** to be **shown**, you **foolish person**, that **faith apart** from works is **useless**? Was not **Abraham our father justified** by works **when he offered** up his son **Isaac** on the **altar**? You see that **faith** was **active** along with his works, and **faith** was **completed** by his works; and the **Scripture** was **fulfilled** that says, "**Abraham believed** God, and it was **counted** to him as **righteousness**"—and he was **called** a friend of God. You see that a **person** is **justified** by works and not by **faith** alone. And in the same way was not **also** Rahab the prostitute **justified** by works **when** she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body **apart** from the spirit is **dead**, so **also faith apart** from works is **dead**.

([ESV](#))

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