

How Can I Be Justified Before God?

- If you die tonight, stand before God, asks why let into heaven, how answer? Lot ways people answer: “Good person, done lot good things in life, helped lot people. Or, not bad person, not murderer, criminal. Or, true, some bad things, but always tried to make up for it by doing better.” Ways people often answer.
- Now let’s ask ML, a young ML, when still in monastery with tortured conscience. Brother M, if you die tonight, stand, asks why, how answer? As monk, might answered: “You probably shouldn’t; I’m fully expecting to spend many years in purgatory for my wicked deeds. Or, Lord, if anyone deserves to be let into heaven, me, because I’m most faithful monk you have; I gave up future as lawyer to become priest; confess sins many times, every day; beat body, torture myself to show you my remorse over sin; obey all rules of my church, my monastic order; most faithful monk you have. Or, God, I’m conflicted, because you say you love us, but to me you just seem like angry, vengeful judge; and I’m sinner, so honestly don’t know how you could let me into heaven.” How a young ML might have answered.
- Now let’s ask 1st century Galatians, people Paul writing to in 2nd lesson. You Gals, if die tonight, stand, asks why, how answer? This seems to be answer they would’ve given: “We know Jesus is Savior, but also taught that to get to heaven, certain OT, Jewish regulations to follow: esp eating special Kosher food. Since we believe in Jesus AND follow these OT food laws, that’s why you should let heaven.” How 1st cent Gals prob would’ve answered.
- What all responses have in common? All those respondents think have to make a contribution to their salvation; to initiate some kind of activity or good will on their part to be right with God, get into heaven. I want you evaluate that. As 21st Luths celebrating quincentenary of most important event in Christian church history since Jesus walked the planet, how would you answer question? Why God let me into heaven? Or, to rephrase question, ask same thing with terminology Paul uses in lesson for today: How can I be justified before God? Very important question; touches on very essence of Christianity. Get that answer wrong, your eternal salvation in jeopardy. Souls depend on correct answer. Today, as we Luths celebrate 500th ann of Luth Ref, we must understand answer to fundamental question: how can I be justified before God?
- First, what word just even mean? Big church word, don’t use in everyday language. But Paul, 4x in Gal 2! Just means: God has declared us not guilty; announced pronouncement over us, doesn’t count sins against us (even though knows sins); instead, for Jesus’ sake, declares us not guilty of those sins. What word means.
- So how justified before God? Tension in that question is reality that by nature we’re not. There’s these 2 universal, undeniable truths that stand in conflict: 1) God absolutely holy; 2) we’re not. God is essence of holiness, sinlessness, perfection, goodness. We not; just opp; know it. We know we’re sinful; painfully aware of guilt; know we need to be just before God.
- So come to this lesson, Gal 2, very imp in Bible; Paul basically talking re 2 diff ways to be just. Listen for them: **vs. 16** (most imp vs in Gal). Hear 2 ways just? Faith or works of law. 3x in single verse says just only by faith, not by works of law. Yet when I’m talking to people new to Christianity, and ask question, “if die tonight, stand, asks why, how answer?” know what I often hear? “Pretty good person; done lot good things in life; better than most; God’s got to notice that, right?” Don’t come out, say “I’m justified by observing works of law;” but really same thing. Many people believe, in order to be justified, to get to heaven, they’ve got to do something to show God they deserve it; got to prove to God they are worth it, impress him with actions. In church, call that work-right – notion that your works impress God, make you righteous in his sight.
- Understandable why people think that way. Every other aspect of our lives works this way. At job, want to impress boss, what do? Get work done; do it well; promptly – you can impress boss. If student in school, how impress teacher: do homework, get it done on time, don’t mess around in class, well behaved – you can impress teacher. So lot people think how works with God: if I’m pretty good at doing what God wants, I can impress him.
- But today in lesson, Ap Paul: no way; not how justified. **Vs. 16**. Why not? God has high standards. His standards are not: be pretty good person, live descent life. His standards: be perfect; don’t break any of my coms, ever. So when we do break his coms (heaven knows we do), just proves what Ap Paul is saying is true: trying to keep law will never just us before God.
- Now, remember, beg of lesson, something going on where Paul angry at Cephas/Peter? What’s story there? True: Paul here in Gal 2 mad at Peter. Here’s why: Peter started inadvertently teaching people you *can* be just by works of law. **Vs. 11-14**. Try to explain: you know in OT God had lot of specific rules about what Jewish people could/n’t eat – kosher food laws. Peter knew when Jesus came, he fulfilled those; no longer applied to Chrs in NT. So when Peter with Gentile Chr friends, eat whatever want because knew, no laws vs eating non-kosher food. But when some Peter’s Jewish Chr friends came to town, they began teach that if really want be Chr, get heaven,

actually do have to follow those Kosher food laws of OT. (Not true, but what teaching.) Peter spooked, stopped eating with Gentile friends. In doing so, preaching nonverbal sermon, could be heard loud, clear: to be saved, you do have to observe law. That's why Paul angry at Peter: Peter began teach work-right.

- Know who else angry at teaching of work-right? ML. ML lived at time when RCC officially taught that way to be just before God, get to heaven, was by observing the law. So: indulgences, rosaries, monasteries, vows celibacy, fasting, prayers to saints, worship of Mary – all these done to gain merit before God, earn salvation. Luther could see how this work-right diametrically opposed to what Paul says in Gal 2. That's how Ref got started. Luther realized from Scripture (passages like this, and in Rom) that our works cannot earn God's favor. So wrote 95 Th, which challenged notion of work-right. On 10/31/1517, 500 ago this Tues, nailed them to large wooden door on castle church in Wit, Germ. And in years that followed that fateful day, as Luther wrote, preached, taught, debated that just by grace through faith, become more/more evident that split in church was inevitable. To this day, RCC has not changed stance on work-right. Thank God, neither has Luth church. As children/heirs of Ref, 500 years later, we still stand with Luther, who stood with Paul, who said: cannot be saved, just by obs works of law.
- So back to question: how justified before God? If not by works of law, then how? Here's Paul's answer: **vs. 16**. Faith in Christ! Seems like such simple, unassuming answer. You're telling me: if I simply trust in Jesus as Savior, believe in Jesus for forgiveness, then I'll be justified before God, declared not guilty of all my sins!? Sounds too easy, too free! Nothing in life is free; everything costs something!
- Bro/sis in Christ, we come to heart of this lesson, heart of Luth Ref, very foundation of Christianity: that God's gracious, generous gift of forgiveness, eternal life through Christ Jesus, is given to all mankind absolutely, 100%, no-strings attached, free – which is amazing, because talking re going to heaven and being forgiven of sins, saved from hell. Through faith in Christ, God's grace to us is free.
- Not to say it didn't cost anything. No, our justify very expensive! But Christ is one who: paid price for us; actually did impress God, actually was sinless, perfect; did earn heaven. Yet instead of being rewarded, he was crucified, punished in our place. Do you realize what Christ has done for us: taken our guilt on himself; in exchange has given us his innocence. This is what makes him our Savior, why we trust in him. This is what **vs. 20** means.
- So we are just by faith alone, simply by believing this message of salvation through Jesus is true, holding on to it for dear life! Picture person middle lake drowning. Coast Guard pulls up, throws her life preserver. What she do? She'll hold on for dear life! Not going to say to life preserver, "Probably don't need you. I'm a good enough person; do a lot of good things in life. I can survive this on my own." No! She'll hold on for dear life. That's what faith is – holds onto Jesus for dear life and won't let go, because it knows Jesus is only way to be saved.
- But if we, as the Luths who have dist privilege of taking first steps into 2nd 500 yrs of Lutheran church, if we fail to hold onto Jesus for dear life, teach children to hold onto Jesus for dear life, then we will inevitably slip back into Rome's work-right, begin depending on ourselves, our works rather than on Jesus – something Paul here emphatically condemns. And if we, as 21st cent Luths, fail to see ourselves as drowning in sea of our own sin, guilt with no possible rescue except the life preserver of God's grace to us in Christ, then we'll stop caring about Ref; we'll stop cherishing our Luth heritage; and little by little Jesus will become unimportant to us – or, as Paul says, **vs. 21b**.
- But, if we embrace the truth of the gospel: that we are justified not by observing works of law but by faith in Christ, who shed his blood on cross to pay price for our salvation; then, we can stand confidently before God's throne on J-Day and enter his heaven, because we will know **vs. 16a**.

Galatians 2:11-21

¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

¹⁵ We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of 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 the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

¹⁷ "But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

¹⁹ "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"