

The Heart of the Gospel Righteousness from God

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the ultimate goal of God in exalting and communicating His glory through a life worthy of the gospel, showcasing the value of Christ and His achievements. It delves into the fearless unity of love rooted in humility and devotion to others, highlighting the obstacles of arrogance and inadequacy faced in serving and being right with God. The focus shifts to the doctrine of justification by faith, addressing controversies and distortions while emphasizing the importance of this foundational truth for salvation and sanctification.

Scripture: Philippians 1:27, Philippians 2:3, Philippians 3:3, Romans 10:3, Romans 5:19, 1 Corinthians 5:7, Romans 3:22, Romans 4:5, Galatians 2:16

Topics: "God's Glory", "Justification by Faith"

Description

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Transcript

The great and ultimate goal of God in all of history and in all of creation and in all of redemption is the exaltation and the communication of his glory. And yesterday we saw that there is a way of life that does that. Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel.

I argued that worthy of the gospel means living in such a way as to show that you esteem the gospel as infinitely worthy, infinitely valuable. Your life reflects the infinite worth or value of Christ and the cross and all that was achieved when he died and rose again. And so the ultimate goal of God and the life that points to it.

And then we saw that this life of living so that you show the gospel as valuable had two parts to it that Paul drew out in verse 27 and 28 of chapter 1. And if you have a Bible, I hope you'll open it. We're going to keep going into chapter 3 in just a moment. And those two things were the unity of love in the cause of the

gospel and the fearlessness in the gospel before adversaries.

So we called it the fearless unity of love. That's the life that is lived worthy of the gospel or draws attention to the value of the gospel in your life. And then we saw three roots of that fearlessness and that unity, and those were humility, counting others more significant than yourself, and devoting yourselves to the lives, to the interest, to the welfare of others.

Now, as we enter chapter 3, we encounter two obstacles or Paul encounters two obstacles to living this kind of life and even being right with God so that he could make any headway at all in living this kind of life. And Paul's not the only one that encounters these obstacles. We're exactly like him in essence.

What are the obstacles? We'll tell you what they are and then we'll read it and you'll see them for yourself. The first obstacle is that Paul saw himself as totally superior to all those who were making their boast in the flesh. This is the pre-Christian Paul.

He knew he was superior to them. So how in the world will he ever be able to serve them, count others more significant than himself when he knows he is off the charts, superior to them in the very things that they're boasting about? That's the first obstacle. How will he ever become a humble man that could serve his adversaries and not be afraid of them? And the second obstacle is that this superiority that he has over them is not nearly good enough to put him right with God.

So he's superior to all of the people that he's talking to and he's inadequate in that superiority for being right with God. He can't measure up to what God requires. And so he can't serve people, he's too arrogant, and he can't be right with God because he's inadequate.

There's a kind of paradox there. The very thing that lifted him above others was totally inadequate in order to make him right with God. And what he does in the first 12 verses of this chapter is to show what God has done to solve both of those problems, to get him over both of those obstacles.

And the reality is that he is humbled and he's set right with God in the same process. He counts all of his superiority over here as refuse, rubbish, dung. And over here, because he did that, he casts himself totally on the righteousness of another to be right with God.

So our focus is going to be on the doctrine of justification by faith. That's what we're going to talk about today. It's enormously important.

It's controversial everywhere. It always has been controversial. It always will be controversial.

If you steer away from things because they're controversial, you will steer away from every important truth in the Bible, and especially this one. And you can't be a Christian without this one. So let's read it.

I'll start at verse 1, and I'll read through verse 8 or 9. Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs.

Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh. In other words, Jewish people who boast in circumcision.

For we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh, circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law of pharisee, as to

zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness, under law, blameless. That's his pedigree.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. For his sake, I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ.

I'll stop right there for now. So on the one hand, his zeal for law-keeping excels everybody's. Verse 4, if anyone else thinks that he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more than at the end of verse 6, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

So how is Paul going to count these dogs more significant than himself? And Paul's superiority, religious superiority over these folks is such that serving them is going to be a great challenge, and his sense of superiority is a massive obstacle to being the kind of person that we were talking about yesterday. So that's one obstacle. And he overcomes it in verses 7 and 8 like this, whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

He looks at those achievements and he says, loss. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value or worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ.

So Paul has a real law-keeping success and he counts it as rubbish. Verse 6, as to righteousness under the law, I was blameless. And I take that blamelessness and I count it as useless.

Useless in my relationship with people and useless in getting right with God. So when it comes to acceptance with God, being right with God, which is the issue in Europe, right? The most important thing is how can all these millions of people get right with God so they don't perish? That's the issue. God has given holy laws, Paul is very aware of that.

And God said in Leviticus 18.5, Paul quotes it twice, Romans 10.5, Galatians 3.12. In Leviticus 18.5, God said, the one who does them will live by them. So if you want to be a law person, if you want to relate to God in terms of law, he has set it up so that you can do that. Do them and you will live.

And that's true. A perfect law keeper would go to heaven. Adam would not have fallen.

None of you would ever perish if you were perfect in your doing them. Do them and you will live. And Paul gave his life to doing them.

And he succeeded beyond everyone that he knew. And then he turned and looked at it and called it rubbish, dung. So he's religiously superior, which keeps him from serving people and loving them, humbling himself under them.

And he is so superior that if anybody could get right with God, by law-keeping, the Apostle Paul could, and he couldn't. So how is he going to be accepted by God and how is he going to serve his enemies? And now we'll read verses 8 and 9, I think, one of those precious, one of the most important verses about justification by faith in the Bible. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ, and here it comes, and be found in him. Oh, how important that phrase is. Union with Christ.

If you need a biblical phrase or verse to solidify for you the term union with Christ, go there. That I may be found in him. And what does he find himself to be when he's in him? That I may be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, namely, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Now, we're going to spend all of our time on this verse. And before I begin to unpack it, I want to step back and speak for a moment about the lay of the land in the world, the little part of the world I know, about the doctrine of justification by faith. It has been a highly controversial doctrine, and it has been attacked in every conceivable way ever since the beginning, namely, Genesis 12, and especially since the Reformation.

So, what I want to do is talk about maybe, I don't know, how many have I got? Five, five ways, in my experience, and this will be true for America and Europe. I don't know anything about what's going on in India with regard to the doctrine of justification. But I know writers here, and I know writers there.

And John Owen, who wrote a great book on justification, said that in the history of the church, there are innumerable subterfuges, underminings of the doctrine of justification in every generation. The devil will cause uprisings in every new generation to make this doctrine unintelligible and distorted. And the Roman Catholic Church is one of the biggest distorters, and that's a big deal in Europe.

So, here's five distortions. Number one, the line between the evangelical, historic, Protestant, Reformed, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli-type understanding of justification and the Roman Catholic teaching have been blurred in our day, blurred, as though there were no line. So, there's a book in America, *Is the Reformation Over?*, written by Mark Knoll and Carolyn Nystrom.

And their answer on this point is yes. And I think that's wrong. It's wrong in America, and it is certainly wrong in Brazil, and Mexico, and probably Poland.

So, the blurring of the lines. Now, number two, which underlies that, the claim that the doctrine of imputation of Christ's obedience to the believer is denied as being taught in the Bible. Robert Gundry teaches at Westmont, published two articles about 10 years ago, and he simply argued, a pretty famous New Testament scholar in America, he simply argued there is no such thing in the New Testament as the doctrine of imputation.

It doesn't even exist. And that is the doctrine that separates Protestants from Roman Catholics. Roman Catholics believe that justification is the real working of righteousness by the Spirit in the believer so that real righteousness is imparted, imparted, not imputed, imparted to me so that I am righteous and in my God-given imparted righteousness, I stand before God accepted on the basis of that.

Which would have to be the case if there isn't any such thing as imputation, which means that God imputes to me a righteousness I don't have because there is an alien righteousness out there that Christ performed and it is counted as mine. So when I read those two articles, I was steaming because I know this man, it's an evangelical school where he teaches, and I wrote a book called *Counted Righteous in Christ*. So that was my effort to say, wrong, it really is in the Bible.

So that's number two. Number three, the new perspective on Paul, most effective spokesman for it, N.T. Wright, Sanders, James Dunn, these are all British folks. The new perspective for the last 30 years or so has redrawn the map of New Testament theology in such a way that, let's just put it mildly, confusion

reigns in many young people today about the meaning of justification.

They're just confused. They read N.T. Wright and he's glorious on many things. I mean, I count him a brother and what he has done in his big fat volumes about the resurrection and the historicity of the gospels, amen, thank God.

On justification, he's confusing. And that's just putting it simply. So I wrote a book about that.

It might be out there, I think, the future of justification. So the new perspective is, I think, fading away. This is one of the things about new stuff, it comes, it lasts for 30 years, it's gone.

It's a wonderful thing to be 70 years old. It's very freeing. You just see stuff come.

Everybody's all, boy, I'm so excited about it, I write books about it. And then it gets boring and old and goes away and it's a new thing coming. And there's a new thing coming.

I won't give the name because he hasn't come all the way yet, but he's also British. It's a big fat book. Don't go there, maybe it'll fade away before it becomes a big thing.

Was that three? Number four, some, and I know some of these people very closely, have merged faith and the fruit of faith in obedience, merged them so that faith is no longer something that attaches you to Christ, who thus then in being declared righteous in your union with Christ enables you to obey, which is, I think, the case. But rather, faith and obedience have been so united that faith can no longer be the instrument of justification that leads to obedience, but rather obedience and faith together become the instrument of justification, which I think, in the end, is going to undo the doctrine. Here's the sad thing about this.

The goal of importing sanctification or obedience or holiness into faith so that they become equal, equivalent, same thing, there's just one. The goal is to raise the importance of obedience and holiness. It's a good goal, and I think it does exactly the opposite.

Because if I have to obey in order to get connected rightly with Jesus so that I will be accepted in him, then the very ground of my obedience is taken away. In the New Testament, the basis of my obedience is I am accepted by God. He accepts me, and because I'm accepted in Christ, I have the wherewithal to obey.

So, I think the nerve of obedience is being cut by the effort to make obedience more important in the instrument of justification. Number five, some have so changed the ordinary meaning of righteousness, this is a big issue, changed the meaning of righteousness in the act of justification that it no longer refers to anybody's right behavior, but only to a verdict or an acquittal. I think that's a mistake.

Even if that word can mean that at times, to interpret it that way here in this text, for example, I think is wrong. So, I'm going to start right there. Let's go into the text now, and we'll jump into the text on that issue, starting at verse 6. As to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor to the church, as to righteousness in the law, blameless.

Now, take that last phrase, as to righteousness in the law, blameless. What does righteousness mean in that sentence? I don't think you need a PhD here. I don't think you need Greek here to see this.

Isn't there a parallel between zeal, as to zeal, my zeal makes me a persecutor, and my righteousness is expressed in blameless behavior? That's, I think, the natural understanding of righteousness in verse 6.

When I'm zealous, I'm a persecutor. When I'm righteous, I'm blameless. I don't break the Sabbath.

I don't sleep around. I tithe. I do the right things.

That's my righteousness. That's the meaning of righteousness in verse 6. And if you agree with that, we're going to be hard put, I think, to give it another meaning when we get to verse 8. So, look at verse 8 or 9. I guess it's 9. Indeed, we'll start at 8. Indeed, I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things, and that would include my law-keeping, my zeal, my righteousness, including my law-keeping.

I count everything as loss, I count them as rubbish, in order... Keep the flow of thought in your mind in order that I might gain Christ and be found in him not having... Now, what's he referring to? Not having a righteousness of my own. He didn't just pull that out of the air. He pulled that from verse 6, right? It's not complicated.

He just said, I'm blameless in my righteousness. And now he says, I don't have that anymore, right? I want to be found in him not having that, my own righteousness that comes from law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. So, in union with Christ, he is done with the former kind of righteousness, namely, blameless behavior before the law.

And he is receiving by faith, because of his union with Christ, another righteousness. And I see no reason to give that second righteousness a different basic meaning. It means perfect, blameless righteousness.

That which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. In other words, my righteousness with God is no longer my own law-keeping. It is from God.

Now, through faith and in union with Christ, not law-keeping, I have a righteousness, a real righteousness, but not the one that I was performing. All right, let's stand back now and just tick off, I don't know how many I have here, three, I think, implications of that observation. Number one, this righteousness in Christ from God is not a mere verdict of innocent.

I mean, that would be wonderful, but I don't think that's what he's saying here. It's not a mere status of acquitted. You're acquitted.

You're in the courtroom and you're just acquitted, and that's your righteousness. Status of acquitted, I don't think that works in this text, to limit it to that, as good as that would be. Because verse 6 is where he's getting the word.

According to righteousness under the law, blameless. That was his righteousness. He performed it.

And at one level, blameless. And now, in Christ, he has the righteousness owing to union with Jesus. Why would we give it another meaning, like verdict? In fact, I don't think it makes any sense to say, not having a verdict of my own, not having a status of acquitted.

If you had a status of acquitted or verdict, it would be your own. It doesn't work in the sentence to substitute that kind of word here. So what Paul is saying is that his own record of righteous behavior won't cut it.

It'll never be sufficient with a holy God. Rather, there is another person's record of behavior that will be counted as his. So let's make a second observation.

This righteousness in verse 9, that is new, and that is in Christ, and that is through faith from God, that righteousness is not Paul's new spirit-empowered obedience. There's a lot of people who are teaching this. Like, of course, old law-keeping, self-reliant, fleshly works won't save anybody.

But new law-keeping in the power of the Holy Spirit, trusting in God to enable you to do it, will cut it. So you replace old law-keeping in the flesh with new obedience or law-keeping in the spirit, and that's good enough. Is that what he's saying in verse 9? I don't think so.

And for three reasons. And I linger here because I suppose when I was involved in these controversies with people that I know, this was probably the most painful one relationally. Three reasons why I don't think new spirit-enabled obedience is what he means by the righteousness that he now has in Christ.

Number one, when he uses the language, being found in him, being found in him with this new righteousness, isn't the emphasis on union with Christ and the way Paul is found there? How do you find Paul there? What is Paul like there? What do you see when Paul is there? Being found in him, I have this. That doesn't sound to me like he's describing a lifelong behavior of spirit-empowered obedience. And we're going to see in a minute in verse 12, it won't work.

So here's my second reason. The righteousness that Paul renounces as his own, not having a righteousness of my own, he doesn't describe in verse 6 or verse 9 as fleshly or worldly or self-reliant. It was.

It was. But he doesn't draw attention to that in order to contrast it with the new spirit-empowered obedience. This is not the way he's thinking.

It's true Paul's former pharisaic obedience was fleshly, worldly, self-reliant, and his new obedience is spirit-empowered and beautiful for that reason. This is not the way he's thinking here because he didn't draw any attention to it to make that the difference between the old righteousness and the new righteousness. But here's the real clincher for me.

Verse 12. Look at verse 12. Doesn't verse 12 show that the way he thinks about his new spirit-empowered obedience or behavior, imperfect as it is, is not the basis of his standing with God, but rather the fruit, the fruit of his standing with God.

Let's read it. Not that I have already obtained this. I'm not perfect.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on. Now, that's a life of obedience, right? I press on to make it, to make perfection my own. Here's the logic.

Get this. Because Christ Jesus has made me his own. How's he thinking? He's thinking, I'm not perfect, but I have been possessed.

I have been captured. I have been taken. I have been seized, katalambano, for all you Greek students.

I've been seized. Isn't that the same as union with Christ? Christ took me. He took me.

He made me his own. And so I have a union with Christ through faith, according to verse 9. And therefore, I am pressing on. And it's the logic that makes the difference.

He says, I press on to make perfection my own because, because, because I belong to Jesus. I'm not trying to get Jesus. I've got Jesus.

If I can't know that I'm united to Christ by faith alone, I think I will live a life of legalism and go to hell. What other option is there? He has made me his own, and therefore, I am pressing on to the fullness of perfection. There's a verse in 1 Corinthians 5 that goes like this.

Paul says to the Corinthians, cleanse out the old leaven. You know what the argument for that is, the ground clause? Cleanse out the old leaven as you really are unleavened. I love that.

That is so Paul, right? So get rid of the sin in your community. Get rid of the sin in your lives because you are sinless. That's New Testament ethics.

To put the language of justification on it, go ahead, pursue with all your might, spirit-empowered obedience, moving toward perfection at the last day because you stand right with God. And if that's not true, there's no Christianity. That's all I have to give to the world.

There is a way to get right with God that does not depend on my performances. My performances, which are necessary, are the fruit of being made right with God and the evidence that I have been made right with God. So, for those reasons, I don't think when he says, not having a righteousness of my own, but that which comes through faith, a righteousness from God that depends on faith, I don't think he means I'm done with self-reliant obedience and now I'm doing spirit-dependent obedience and that's the righteousness I have that makes me right with God.

Wrong. Here's a third thing we can say, a third implication I'm drawing out of verse 9. The most natural way to understand this righteousness in verse 9, this new righteousness, I believe is that it is Christ's perfect obedience, Christ's perfect righteousness that is imputed to Paul. Now, why do I think that? That, of course, N.T. Wright continually accuses me and everybody who thinks like I do of being controlled by tradition.

And he has seen the light and knows what the Bible says and Luther didn't understand it, Calvin didn't understand it, Piper doesn't understand it. And so, all of you people who are being swayed by Piper here to believe in the imputation of the perfect obedience of Jesus are just in the grip of an ironclad Protestant tradition. Poor you.

You have to break free and discover the new perspective meaning of reality. Well, I'm not persuaded by that accusation and I'll try now in the last four minutes to persuade you. Look at Philippians chapter 2, verse 8, being found in him, being found in human form, Christ humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

That is absolutely astonishing. Because do you see what that verse does? It takes the life of Jesus and collapses it into one verse and calls it one thing, obedience. See that? It's just amazing.

If you were to describe Jesus' life from birth to crucifixion, what word would you use? Read it again. Being found in human form. Now, that's the incarnation, right? Being found in human form.

So, born of a virgin, he's now come, human. Being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient, death. What a summary of life.

Born a man, death on the cross. In between, humble obedience. Now, that to me is significant.

That's really significant that Paul in this book would sum up the life of Christ as obedience. Let me read Romans 5, 19. For as by one man's disobedience, that's Adam, as by one man's disobedience, the many were appointed sinners, so Adam's sin appointed to us, that's imputation.

So, by one man's obedience, that's Philippians 2, 8, Jesus. By one man's obedience, the many will be appointed righteous. And so many people, when they write commentaries about Romans 5, 19, say the one act of obedience refers to the cross, not a life lived of obedience.

And my problem with that is how in the world do you separate out, where are you going to draw the line between the life of obedience and the obedience on the cross? Like, where did it start? In the Garden of Gethsemane or 9 o'clock in the morning or a week before? It's not going to work. In Paul's mind, he is coming in human form, living a life of perfect obedience, dying at the climax of that obedience, and now that is counted as ours. So, he humbled himself, was obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

Being found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, the law-keeping, the law-keeping, I now have a righteousness through faith, and we should understand law-keeping, right behavior. Somebody's, it's not Paul's, he's standing on it, and I would argue it's Christ's. Therefore, the answer to the question, how does he overcome the obstacle to being an arrogant person who can't serve people, and a law-keeper who can't be right with God in his own law-keeping, the answer to both is, he embraces Christ as his supreme treasure so that everything else becomes refuse, and now he's under all of those Jewish people, loving them and laying his life down for them.

My heart's desire and prayer to God is that they might be saved, Romans 10.1. And he's done, he's just done with using his behavior, whether pre-Christian or post-Christian, using his behavior as the ground for being right with God. He's done, it's over. So let me close by simply drawing out a few implications for your situation, maybe.

Justification by faith alone is the basis for full acceptance with God and the basis for sanctification or humble, fearless unity of love that we saw yesterday. So yesterday's life lived to the glory of God is only possible because of being right with God by faith alone. I've heard numerous ones of you praying for revival in Europe or awakening.

Are you aware, just historically, that in God's providence, this doctrine has been at the center of stunning awakenings? Clearly, it was at the center of Luther's awakening called the Reformation. It was clearly at the center of Wilberforce's achievements. Wilberforce only wrote one book.

Read it. The point of the book is, I did what I did by means of justification by faith. People don't know this about Wilberforce.

He was a doctrinally rigorous evangelical and gives all praise and credit to the glorious doctrine of justification by faith. Just read the book, *The Christian Life* by Wilberforce. Jonathan Edwards, who was the key human leader in the American Great Awakening, Wesleyan Whitfield in Britain, said five sermons were used of God to bring the Great Awakening.

And the one he thought was the most significant was his long sermon on justification by faith, in which he went into the details of the doctrine and people fell out of their chairs. And, of course, the Roman Catholic Church is huge, huge in Poland here and elsewhere. The Reformation is not over.

And I think what needs to be preached to Roman Catholics is justification by faith alone and help them see the glory of it. If you focus on a thousand things that you have in common and don't touch the one thing that was the watershed of the Reformation, how are you going to get the revival that you long for? So, let's study this great truth, let's preach it, let's teach it, let's publish it, let's make the doctrine of justification by faith alone the foundation of fearless unity in love. Father in heaven, I am so thankful as a sinner that Christ not only died for me, but from the moment of his conception until the moment of his ascension, fulfilled all righteousness so that it could be counted as mine in union with him.

What a glorious truth. Cause it to come to our hearts with fresh love and appreciation and make us valiant for this truth, I pray in Jesus' name.

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