

Our Standing with God

Have you ever been in a courtroom? Now, don't raise your hand or anything if you've been there as a defendant. I've had a few opportunities to be in one. I think the first time was during my first year in seminary when we were in California. I served on a trial jury.

My first impression of the courtroom was that it is built to say, "This is a place where serious business is conducted." They typically have a décor of heavy wood, there are impressive seals, and there is the raised bench on which the judge sits. All of this says this is a serious place. But even more than the décor, courtrooms are serious places because they are a place where a defendant sits before a judge and a jury to have their guilt or innocence determined. I remember how weighty it felt when I served on that trial jury when the jury was assembled and the judge walked in before the defendant. I couldn't imagine what it must feel like to be in the shoes of a defendant at that moment. Can you imagine what that must feel like?

Imagine that you are that defendant. And then imagine that the judge that walks in is not just any judge; the judge is God Himself. And you are on trial for your whole life. Have you obeyed Him perfectly or not? Your guilt and innocence before Him is going to be judged. How do you feel in that place at that moment? As a defendant before the judge of the universe, what is your standing? If your standing is based on your own merits, your standing with God is not good. But if you are a believer in Christ then you never have to stand before God based on your own merits. You stand in the merits of Christ. And that's a much better place to stand.

This morning I want us to look at two verses in the book of Romans that speak to this issue of our standing before God. We are going to look at Romans 5:1-2. Romans is essentially an exposition of the Gospel that Paul had preach for many years. It is the most comprehensive and systematic of all of his letters. At the heart of this letter is Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, which speaks to this issue of our standing with God.

This morning, I want us to try to understand this doctrine a little bit better as well as the results that it bears in the life of a believer. And so let's look at:

I. The Doctrine of Justification

Paul begins this chapter by saying:

¹ *Therefore, having been justified by faith,*

Paul is making a transition here. In the earlier chapters he has been building that case that we are ONLY justified by faith. To get there he first argues that the entire world stands guilty before God. For instance, in Romans 3:9 he says:

⁹ *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already*

charged that both Jew and Greeks are all under sin; ¹⁰ as it is written, There is none righteous, not even one; ¹¹ There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.

And so whether one was a Jew or a Greek, all stand guilty before God. This is true of us as well. And so the question that Paul begins to address then is how then can one have a right standing before God? The Jew would have thought that it was through obedience to the Law, but Paul says in 3:19-20:

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; ²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

The Law was good for by it one came to *the knowledge of sin*. But Paul is clear that by the works of the Law no one will be justified. No one has a right standing through keeping the Law because no one can keep the Law perfectly. And so the question remains, how does one have a right standing before God? Paul says it is only through faith. In Romans 3:21–24 he says:

²¹ But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

No one on his or her own effort meets God's standards because *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. Righteousness, he says, only comes through *faith in Jesus Christ*. For the one who believes he is *justified as a gift by His grace* through the redemption that is found in Jesus Christ. And so it is by faith in the work that Christ accomplished for us through his death on the cross that one comes to have a right standing before God. It is not through our own obedience to any kind of law.

Paul then presents Abraham as an example of this truth. He argues that Abraham was made righteous through his faith, not through any kind of works. In Romans 4:1–3 he says:

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Abraham *believed God* and on the basis of that belief *it was credited to him as righteousness*. And so, the conclusion of the first 4 chapters of Romans is that justification is by faith. And so, that's why Paul says here in our passage, *therefore, having been justified by faith*. He has demonstrated that it is truth.

And so what is justification exactly? Justification is a term that comes from the law courts. To be justified is to stand in that place of the defendant and receive a verdict of acquittal, of not guilty, and so therefore under no possibility of condemnation. To be justified settles the legal status of a person. Theologian Wayne Grudem says it this way:

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight (*Systematic Theology*, 723).

Have we sinned? Yes, we all have. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But at the moment of our faith in Christ's death as payment for our sin, God at that moment counts our sins forgiven AND He thinks of Christ's righteousness as belonging to us. And so He declares us to have the standing of being righteous in His sight.

Here's a key distinction: **justification doesn't mean that a person is made righteous; it means that a person is declared righteous**. If justification means being made righteous through inner, moral transformation and your standing is based on how righteous you actually are you could never be fully sure of your standing before God because a trace of sin remains in all of us. We would be in a situation where we could never be declared perfectly righteous in this life because of that sin. And so we would never be able to have full confidence that we are right before God.

But justification doesn't mean being made righteous; rather, it means that we are declared righteous based on Christ. And because of that we can have full confidence before God because of Christ. Because of Christ, God looks at us as completely forgiven and having the very righteousness of Christ. That IS how God looks at the one who has faith. This is our standing with God.

Now, in saying this, I'm not saying that God doesn't transform us internally. He does. At the moment we experience new spiritual birth this transformation begins. But our standing before Him has nothing to do with how well we are doing in being transformed.

And so that's the doctrine of justification. That's what it is. But what does it bring about in our lives? What are the results of justification?

II. The Results of Justification

Certainly there are many, but in these two verses that we are looking at, Paul mentions two results of justification. First he says that:

A. Because of Justification, we have peace with God (v. 1)

¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

We need to understand *peace* in the context of what Paul has already discussed. Paul makes it clear that God's divine wrath will be poured out on unrighteousness. In Romans 1:18 he said:

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Because of our sin, we all deserve God's wrath. Without Christ, that wrath abides on us. In that condition, Romans 5:10 says that our standing before God is that of an enemy. But because of our justification, we don't face God's wrath, rather *we have peace with God*. We have the standing of being in harmony with God. We are no longer enemies, but are now friends of God. This standing is ours *through our Lord Jesus Christ*; through his payment for our sin on the cross. Colossians 1:20 says:

²⁰ and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross . . .

And so because of being justified, we have peace with God. This is a theological truth that should make a world of difference in our lives and in how we relate to God.

Let me try to illustrate through something that happened to me during our last year in California. In that last year we had some new neighbors move in next to us. We didn't have opportunity to interact with them much, but what little interaction we had with them was positive. Well, one day I'm out in our driveway and there is this younger guy in their yard who I had never seen. He didn't live there. I guessed it was one of their grown sons. Anyway, he comes over and gets in my face and says, "You been messing with my family?" And he said some other things that I can't repeat in church. I thought he was going to throw a punch. I'm not sure if he was on drugs or what was going on, but he was angry. Needless to say, I came to the conclusion that this was not a safe person. There was real hostility between us. How did that hostility affect our relationship? Well, essentially we didn't have one. Whenever I saw him I kept my distance. There was no peace between us.

The difference between what happened to me with this guy and our relationship with God is that in my situation in CA, I was not guilty, but in our relationship with God, we all are guilty. We have all sinned. We have all rebelled against God. And because of that there is real and deserved hostility. We are God's enemies. God's wrath abides on us. There is no peace.

But being justified through Christ changes all of that. All of God's wrath is gone. There is absolutely no hostility between us because God sees us as if Christ's righteousness is ours. Our justification gives us a standing of peace with God.

Are you living in that peace? Do you know that through Christ that IS your standing with God? Do you believe it? Or, do you tend to look at your failures and your continued struggles with sin and feel that God must be displeased with you? Here's a great way to see what you believe. Think about that area of sin that you tend to struggle with – that sin that you've vowed over and over again that you would not do it again and yet you find yourself doing it yet again. When you think about that area, what do you think God thinks? Is He angry at you? Does His displeasure rest on you?

Justification means that even while you continue to struggle with sin, because of Christ, God declares that you are righteous in his eyes. And so there is no anger; there is no displeasure. You have a standing of absolute peace with God. And that means that there is never a time when you need to keep your distance with God.

Now, to be clear, God doesn't want us to stay in our sin. As we grow in Christ we should sin less and less. Hebrews says that God will discipline us because of our sin, but He does so as a Father who loves us and wants what is best for us. But our standing never changes; we have peace with God.

And so that is the first benefit of justification, but Paul also says that:

B. Because of justification, we have access to God (v. 2)

Let me read the passage again:

¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

Through Jesus *we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand*. The NIV says, "we have gained access by faith." What is this talking about?

There are two images that might be behind this idea of access. It could be the image of gaining access into the sanctuary, the place where God himself dwells. That would fit very much with a Jewish audience. But since Paul is addressing an audience that included Gentiles too, I think the second possibility of court imagery makes more sense. I think the image behind this is of gaining access to the presence of the king through the king's royal servant. No one could just walk into the presence of the king without someone granting that access. Christ grants us access to God. And so the picture here is of Jesus ushering us into the presence of the King of the universe. And before the One who is glorious and exalted, what do we find? We find grace. We find God's favor extended to us.

And in that place of grace, Paul says, *we stand*. *Stand* suggests a relationship that is settled and stable. It is not going to change. This idea also comes out of the verb tense. Both the phrase, *we have obtained*, and, *stand*, are in the perfect tense, which is

the verb tense that a writer uses to describe a situation where an action is completed, but which produces a state of being or a result that continues in the present. And so our access and standing in grace were granted in the past, but that standing continues.

Now, will our access to God and this standing in grace continue only if we live a completely obedient life? If we continue to struggle with sin, is God's favor going to go away and become displeasure or anger? Will our access to God be terminated? Again, how did we receive these things in the first place? Did we earn them? Was it based on our merits? No, Paul says that it is Christ through whom we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace. Through our justification, we received access to God and a standing in grace. And because of Christ and the justification that we have experienced we will continue to have access and this standing of grace with God.

And so out of this standing Paul says that we *exult in the hope of the glory of God*. The glory of God is what Romans 3:23 says we fell short of because of our sin. But because of Christ we can boast in the hope that we will share in the glory of God.

Do you hear the message of this passage? Your standing with God has nothing to do with your own good works. If we go back to the courtroom analogy that we started with today, when God looks at you as the defendant, He doesn't see your life. He doesn't look at your merits. He sees Christ's merits on your behalf. He sees you as completely forgiven, because of Christ. And He sees you as completely righteous, because of Christ. And so once and for all, He declares, "Innocent!" The verdict is settled.

The verdict is totally based on Christ. You didn't earn it; you received it through faith as a gift of grace. And so forever, out of that standing, you have peace with God and a standing in grace. This is a theological truth that if you believe it and live in it, it will change your life.

How? Let me talk about two ways that it can change your life. First, there are some here who have yet to trust Christ as Savior. You've been thinking about it, but one of the things that has held you back is that you just don't think you are good enough. And so you are trying to get your life cleaned up a bit before you come to Christ. And you are also concerned that if you become a Christian you are not going to be able to follow through.

Do you hear what the doctrine of justification means for you? You don't have to get your life cleaned up before you come to Christ. In fact you can't. And you don't have to worry about whether or not you can follow through on your commitment. You won't perfectly follow through. No one does. We all continue to struggle with sin. All you can do is come to God by faith. By faith you choose to trust that what Jesus did on the cross when he died was for your sin. When anyone will do that out of genuine faith, God declares, "justified." And you move from a place of being God's enemy to a friend. You have peace with God and access.

Obviously, most of us have trusted Christ as Savior. How can this understanding this doctrine change our lives? The reality is that it already has. It has changed our eternal destiny. But I believe that it can change our lives in the here and now as well.

Here's one example. I think that for many of us, we really get that we could do nothing to gain salvation. We know that it was simply a gift of grace. But for many of us, even though we believe that, deep down we believe something different about our ongoing relationship with God. We can tend to think that we earn our continued good standing with God. And so, when we sin, we tend to think that, "I can't really go to God right now. I can't pray to Him. I'm sure He is really displeased with me right now." And we think that the only way to get back into His good grace again is to earn it. We think we need to establish a bit of a track record of walking with Him again before we can really go to Him in prayer or expect any of His blessings in our life. And so, out of this faulty thinking, we move into works-based approach to the Christian life. And when we do that, we stop living in grace.

The doctrine of justification means that not only could you not do anything to merit a relationship with God, you cannot do anything to merit a continued good standing with God. It is by grace at the start; and it is by grace throughout. And so regardless of how well you are obeying, you do have peace with God. And you have access and a continued standing of grace. It never changes.

Let me encourage you to think about memorizing this passage (Rom. 5:1-2) and to think and meditate on it regularly. Let this truth sink deep within you that you might more and more live out of these truth.

Let's pray . . . Amen.