

Sola Fide – Justification by Faith Alone (Romans 1:17)

Ps 20:5 says ‘We will rejoice in your salvation, And in the name of our God we will set up our banners!’ And in that spirit, in His name we’ve set up our banners on the wall behind us to help us do that, based on scripture alone we rejoice in our salvation that's by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and for the glory of God alone. These 5 *Solas* that the Reformation recovered 500 years ago need to be rekindled lest the fire go out. We need to keep reforming and transforming by these and conforming more to Jesus.

I mentioned last month the first Sunday of each month we would be looking at these first principles of Christianity we need to keep first and foremost. Last month our 1st Sunday of the month started with the 1st banner on the upper left, the uppermost overarching one: *Sola Scriptura*. That’s Latin for scripture alone, our ultimate authority for salvation and life, the cornerstone of the others. Out of scripture comes another foundational truth next to it: *Sola Fide* (Latin for ‘faith alone’). There’s a reason they’re in that order as faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Historians call the first one *Sola Scriptura* the formal cause of the Reformation that began 500 years ago, while *Sola Fide* is considered the material cause of Reformation. *Sola Fide* is short for ‘justification by faith alone.’ Justification is God the Judge declaring a sinner to be righteous, right with God or in right standing. Tom Schreiner's new book *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*, calls this man's ‘fundamental question...how can a person be right with God?’¹

Michael Horton in another book entitled *Faith Alone*, calls this truth ‘the Atlas upon whose shoulders rests the entire Christian faith...the most important thing for a Christian to know.’ R.C. Sproul called *Sola Fide* ‘the substantive and core issue... Luther called justification by faith alone “the article upon which the church stands or falls”...other Reformers regarded the debate concerning justification as one involving an essential truth of Christianity, a doctrine no less essential than the Trinity...’² Calvin called justification by faith alone ‘the main hinge on which religion turns.’ But the 1500s Reformers didn't invent *sola fide*, Jerome in the early church (born 347 AD) wrote *Deus ex sola fide justificat* (“God justifies by faith alone.”)³

Paul in Phil 3:9 ‘in Him, not having my own righteousness...but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.’ In God’s timing in our studies through Philippians, our next text highlights for us the righteousness from God that comes through faith in Christ and is received by faith alone, not any righteousness of our own or anything of us.

That one verse, Phil 3:9, has several chapters of commentary on that theme in the book of Romans, so to do this subject justice I want to look at how Romans expounds on God's justice and expands on the truths of Phil 3:9. So let's start in Romans 1 and I'll also bring in the context of chapters 1-5. Rom 1:1 starts with Paul, God's servant and apostle set apart for the gospel. He tells who he's writing to in v. 7: *To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...* That means those God set apart as beloved children. He mentions their faith in v. 8 and v. 12. v. 15 says he's eager to preach the gospel to these believers who already have faith in it, v. 15: *So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.* The 'you' he's talking to from v. 7 are the saints in Rome who have faith, v. 8. He's eager to preach the gospel to you who already believe it. He had passionate zeal to proclaim the gospel to the church, as well as to unbelievers. Christians need to hear the gospel preached, as Paul does in all his letters to them in the NT.

Why was he so eager to preach it? ¹⁶ *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.* ¹⁷ *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

5 centuries ago that was the text that turned the world upside down for one monk in Germany and was used by God to turn the gospel right-side up. Martin Luther wrote of his days before he believed: "If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy." John Piper comments 'Justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law, was the triumph of grace in the life of Martin Luther. He did, you might say, stand on his head for joy, and with him all the world was turned upside-down.'⁴

Last month I mentioned for years before posting 95 Theses in 1517, Luther was studying and teaching through the psalms where he saw *Sola Scriptura*. But he wasn't converted yet till he grasped the next *Sola* studying Rom 1:17 in the year 1518. He wrote "up till then...1:[17]...stood in my way...I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely *In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."* There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith...this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written

“He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again...through open gates...that place in Paul [Rom 1:17] was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine [early church father] ... I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us.’⁵

Luther wrote of Romans: 'Every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, [to] occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of his soul.'⁶ So let’s occupy ourselves with Rom 1:17 word-by-word, may it be the daily bread of our soul. Let’s be eager to preach the gospel to our own hearts daily

v. 17 begins *‘In it,’* and the *‘it’* from v. 16 is *‘the gospel...the power of God’* for believers. It’s the good news of Christ’s life and death and resurrection and the power of God to save, and it’s power to us who are already saved in the present tense, as 1 Cor 1:18 says by the same phrase *‘the power of God.’* Paul says here in the gospel, *‘the righteousness of God is revealed...’* That term ‘righteousness’ was used in biblical times of the scales of justice. The word was used of scales being right or on the same level, and if the weight or balance was off, it was an unjust scale. You would call it ‘unrighteous.’ God’s righteousness in this text is contrasted with man’s unrighteousness.

As man’s works are measured by the scales of God’s justice we’ve all been weighed in the balance and found lacking, by the standard of God’s glory or weightiness is the literal idea of glory. Paul will go on to say none of us are righteous and we all sin and fall short of His glory. By divine justice all are unrighteous, and based on God’s righteous standard, we deserve His wrath.
¹⁸ *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth...*

We try to hold it down but we can’t. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God in v. 17 and it reveals the wrath of God in v. 18, same Greek word. The righteous judgment of God is revealed against unrighteousness of men who aren’t living by faith. That’s the bad news and why we need good news. v. 21 says men know God, the problem is when men don’t *‘honor him as God or give thanks to him...’* Not honoring or giving God the glory He’s worthy of, or just not being thankful makes us worthy of His wrath, that’s all of us. Anytime we serve the creature instead of the Creator makes us given over to God’s wrath of abandonment, Paul goes on to say. In v. 29 the indictments against us begin with *‘unrighteousness’* and included in the list is sins like coveting (craving what isn’t yours), envy, strife, gossip, disobeying parents.

Look at v. 32, Paul says men know '*God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die...*' Do you realize by God's righteous justice, you deserve to die for not being thankful, for not honoring or not glorifying God as you should, or when you disobey parents, or when you share things you shouldn't, or crave what others have that you don't, or have strife with others, or aren't humble enough. We're all in big trouble!

Our lack of righteousness is our problem. Look at Rom 3:10: '*As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ There is no one who understands; no one who seeks God.*' That's a problem for seeker-driven churches who redesign church for ones who seek God but the Bible says none seek God, He must seek us. Apart from sovereign seeking grace, no one understands or seeks God rightly. v. 12 says that's all of us, none of us do good by God's righteous standard. Sin radically corrupts our will, our works, and in v. 13-14 our words, and in v. 15-16 our walk, and in v. 17 our way. It's a graphic picture of total depravity as unrighteousness comes from our hearts up the throat, to the tongue, to the lips, out the mouth like venom. In thought, word, and deed, the verdict is guilty, none righteous, no not one.

But there's good news in light of the unrighteousness of the works of man and it's this: in the gospel is revealed the righteousness of God the sinner needs. We see it revealed from faith, by faith, righteousness for faith *alone*, not faith *plus our unrighteous works*. It's the faith by which God the Judge declares us to be righteous, or justifies us to be the righteous one who lives by faith, based on God's righteousness, not on man's unrighteousness. Sin is powerful but the good news is the gospel is the power of God to believers

²² *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe ...* ²⁸ *For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

Luther's translation read 'justified by faith *alone*,' to emphasize faith without works, *faith alone from works* as another way to say *faith apart from works*. His Catholic critics attacked him for adding the word '*alone*' in translating from the Greek, but the Greek for '*apart from*' is also translated '*by itself*' (Jn 20:7) and '*independent of*' (1 Cor 11:11) or usually '*without*' (Rom 10:14). So faith by itself, independent of or without anything else, is what justifies. The context before in v. 24 is also clear that justification is free, it's a gift of grace alone, and the context after this in chapter 4 is even clearer that faith alone was what justified Abraham, before and apart from any works of his. Not just apart from the works of the Law of Moses, before the OT Law was even written, Abraham is Exhibit A of justification by faith alone in Rom 4.

If you study Rom 3-4 you'll see God justifies or declares righteous through faith alone and it happens at a point in time, the hour I first believed, it's not a process throughout my life. God justifying us is His declaring us righteous legally and judicially at the moment of saving faith in Christ, God the Judge brings down the gavel that from that moment on declares us right with Him.

Even Catholic translations before and after Luther had the phrase *faith alone* in v. 28: 1483 German Nuremberg Bible (before Luther was born), and the Catholic Italian Bible of Geneva in 1476 had the Latin phrase '*per sola fide*.' Even after the Reformation, some of the Catholic Latin versions had the phrase '*sola fide*' in Rom 3:28 (1538 Italian Bible of Venice). Luther wrote: 'I am not the only one, nor the first, to say that faith alone makes one righteous...Ambrose, Augustine and many others...said it before me.' Even the Roman Catholic writer Joseph Fitzmyer admits this point and that *sola fide* in similar contexts was used by early church fathers Origen, Cyril, John Chrysostom, Basil, Thomas Aquinas, and others Catholics count as fathers.⁷

But in 1546 the Roman Catholic Council of Trent condemned all who hold to *sola fide* for justification as under anathema. Anathema means 'let them be accursed' or condemned. To this day Rome has not changed their official position that we're outside salvation if we believe faith alone is what God requires for salvation. The latest Catholic Catechism defines justification as being 'through faith...and through baptism' (par. 1987, see also 1992, 2020). It also makes justification a *process* the same as sanctification (1266, 1995), and it says we need *sacraments* when we sin to recover justification (1446), they say we can '*merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for... attainment of eternal life*' (2010). But God's Word in Rom 3-4 says eternal life is all of Christ's grace, His merit for us, not water or any works. Eastern Orthodox like RCC say justification is by baptism.⁸ A confession of theirs 'we believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith which works through love, that is to say, through faith and works.'⁹ But Eph 2:8-9 says it's by grace through faith, not of works or what we do.

We sing: We will live by faith alone, clothed in merit not our own;
All we claim is Jesus Christ and His finished sacrifice.¹⁰

Dan 9:18 '*we are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion*' (NASB). Titus 3:5 explains '*he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy...having been justified by his grace*' (NIV). Those texts are clear we're justified by God's grace through faith alone, not just apart from works of the law, apart from any work at all, anything we do

We need to be clear because some who know these passages on justification make it less clear. Hank Hanegraaf this year became an Eastern Orthodox. In prior years the president of the Evangelical Theological Society became a Roman Catholic. Evangelical scholars have embraced the 'New Perspective on Paul' that denies the historic understanding of *sola fide* and justification. If guys with that much Bible knowledge aren't clear about faith alone, if the early church in the days of the apostles debated this (Acts 15), take heed lest you fall. This is truly the hinge on which churches or individuals rise or fall. Recently we've had a Mormon young man visit our house a couple times, he grew up in a Baptist church but now believes faith plus works, not *sola fide*.

2 questions from Rom 1:16-17 as we close; **1. Do you have saving faith?**

It's one thing to see or agree the Bible teaches justification by faith alone, but are you justified by faith alone? How do you know if you have saving faith? How do you know if the gospel is truly at work in you? Rom 1:16: *'the gospel...is the power of God...to everyone who believes...'* If you truly are one who believes the gospel, the power of God is at work in your life by the gospel. It's God's power unto salvation, power for life transformation. Salvation is by faith alone but saving faith won't stay alone, good works are the evidence that God is at work in us (Phil 1:6, 2:12-13, Eph 2:10, etc.)

It's not just accepting Jesus as Savior, Rom 10:9 says it's confessing Jesus as Lord and it's trusting He is risen in your heart, it's not just an intellectual assent or acknowledgment in your head. It's not about a past event or prayer you prayed, it's about a present personal continual relying on the gospel. *'Believe'* in v. 16 is a present participle, i.e., 'the believing ones, continually believing,' and the end of v. 17 says these made righteous by faith shall live by faith. In v. 17 'from faith for faith' in the ESV has a footnote 'beginning and ending in faith,' or the NIV translates it as *'by faith from first to last.'* It's all of faith all the way till the race is done we walk by faith, not by sight.

We don't sit by faith, we walk by faith. This saving faith isn't passive, in fact v. 5 says *'...we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith...'* (NIV 'the obedience that comes from faith'). Works of obedience come from saving faith. Not perfection, but a new life direction. Sanctification is the word for the process that results from regeneration and our new nature (don't call or confuse that with justification, don't confuse the root of faith alone with the fruit that is evidence faith is real and alive). Are you a justified person, a righteous person living by faith? If you're not sure or in sin, turn from sin, trust Jesus as Lord and His righteousness alone.

If you're not right with God, communion isn't for you today, don't take the elements. Take time to make things right between you and God by repentant faith. If there are things you need to make right with others you've sinned against, start today by doing your part. Chapter 12 says if possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all. Are you right with God and others?

2nd question for believers: Do you rejoice in the gospel of justification?

William Tyndale in England 500 years ago defined *gospel* in v. 16 as 'good, ...glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man's heart glad and maketh him sing, dance and leap for joy...without [his] own merits or deservings [he's] ...justified, restored to life and saved, brought to liberty and reconciled unto the favor of God and set at one with him again: which tidings as many as believe...are glad, sing and dance for joy.'¹¹ The gospel is joy to the world. So rejoice, rejoice, if Immanuel has come to you, God with us in the gospel. Look at Rom 5 at how practical and powerful justification is: ¹ *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* ² *Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

Milton Vincent: 'The gospel encourages me to rest in my righteous standing with God, a standing which Christ Himself has accomplished and always maintains for me. I never have to do a moment's labor to gain or maintain my justified status before God!...I know can put my energies into enjoying God, pursuing holiness, and ministering God's amazing grace to others. The gospel also reminds me that my righteous standing with God always holds firm regardless of my performance, because my standing is based solely on the work of Jesus and not mine [v. 18-19]. On my worst days of sin and failure, the gospel encourages me with God's unrelenting grace toward me [v. 20-21]. On my best days of victory and usefulness, the gospel keeps me relating to God solely on the basis of Jesus' righteousness and not mine.'¹²

³ *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings ...* Vincent: 'the gospel is not just one piece of good news that fits into my life somewhere along all the bad...the gospel makes genuinely good news out of every other aspect of my life, including my severest trials. The good news about my trials is that God is forcing them to bow to His gospel purposes and do good unto me by... making me more conformed to the image of Christ [8:28-29]. Preaching the gospel to myself each day provides a lens through which I can view my trials in this way and see the true cause for rejoicing that exists in them...can embrace trials as friends and allow them to do God's good work in me.'¹³

What a friend we have in Jesus by faith! He gives us justification and peace and access by faith and hope and rejoicing in suffering. Preach that daily to yourself, starting now. In communion Paul says we proclaim His death until He comes, doing this in remembrance of Him, rehearsing gospel benefits. In proclaiming His death for us that justifies us, that should make us glad, sing for joy, dance for joy, stand on our head for joy! Maybe not while we hold a communion cup, or we'll spill on the carpet, but our hearts should leap for joy as we celebrate communion. You can't eat bread while standing on your head, but you can with a smile on your face, and should, for justifying grace

Jesus said the bread pictures His body given for us; rejoice in His righteous life lived for us. This isn't a funeral, it's a celebration of life and He lives! Jesus said the cup represents His blood for the forgiveness of sins; 1 John 1 says *'the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin...If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'* and it says *'These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete'* (v. 4, 9 NASB). Your joy can be complete if you confess your sins and unrighteousness to a righteous faithful Savior as you trust His blood to cover and cleanse and keep you justified. Rom 5:9 *'Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God...'*¹¹ *More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus...'* So do this in remembrance and in rejoicing as we sing of 'the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love'

¹ Subtitled *What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters*, The Five Solas series, edited by Matthew Barrett (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2015), p. 11.

² R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, (Baker), 18–19.

³ George Finch, *A Sketch of Romish Controversy*, p. 220.

⁴ John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 21.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 34:336–338.

⁶ As cited by Boice, *Romans*, 1:13.

⁷ <http://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2006/02/luther-added-word-alone-to-romans-328.html>

⁸ <http://www.stpaulsorthodox.org/article.php?id=36>

See also <https://www.goarch.org/-/how-are-we-saved->

⁹ <http://www.crivoice.org/creeddositheus.html> (see Decree 13 and 17).

¹⁰ Bob Kauflin, "Reformation Hymn."

¹¹ William Tyndale, *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, 1531.

¹² Milton Vincent, *A Gospel Primer for Christians: Learning to See the Glories of Christ's Love*, p. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32.