

**Romans (60):
“The Central Role of Faith”**

Today we will address the nature of true faith and its important role in our salvation. I do not expect that we will be saying anything that is new to many of us, if any of us. But there are some biblical matters that need continuous repetition, for our understanding and appreciation of some truths may wane, if they are not rehearsed and restated among us. The nature and role of true faith is one of these.

It is important for us to retain the context, so let us read the two paragraphs, beginning with Romans 9:30 and continuing through 10:4.

³⁰What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. ³²Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³as it is written,

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.” (Rom. 9:30-33)

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ²For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

The apostle Paul was explaining to the church at Rome why it was that the Jews had largely rejected Jesus as their Messiah but that Gentiles had embraced Him. The reason that he gave was that the Jews had a wrong understanding and use of the Mosaic law that God had given them at Mount Sinai. Although they were zealous to keep the law, they lacked knowledge of how that was to be done; they did not even understand what God was instructing them to believe and do through the law. They were zealous for the law, but their understanding and regard for the law was “not according to knowledge” (10:2). “How contrary to the popular notion that ignorance is an excuse and good intent the norm for approbation (i.e. God’s approval and acceptance)!”¹ Sincerity counts for nothing if it is uniformed by the truth of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

The Jews did not understand that God’s law was to be observed through faith. They did not see that God’s law was given to reveal to them their sinfulness and need for God to send them their Savior; rather, they viewed the law as a means by which they earned righteousness before God. In other words, they regarded and treated the law of Moses as a covenant of works rather than a manifestation of the covenant of grace. Rather than the law guiding them in the way they should live by faith in their covenantal relationship to their God, they viewed the works of the law as the basis of attaining and retaining their relationship with God. Instead of the law guiding and directing them in faith, the law condemned them in their works. They fell into the error of legalism, which damned their souls. Instead of seeing that they were in need of the gift of righteousness through faith alone, they thought their own good works of keeping the law was the cause of their justification before God.

“The reason, then, that the Jews did not subject themselves to the saving righteousness of God is because they were ignorant of the fact that righteousness was a gift of God’s grace and they mistakenly thought they could secure their own righteousness by observing the Torah (i.e. the Law).”²

¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 2, p. 49.

² Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 544.

This is not to say that all Jews believed this way and that all Old Testament Jewish people were legalists. It is only those who failed to have faith in God's way of righteousness. They were guilty of viewing personal obedience to the law as the means to obtain God's favor. But many others in Old Testament times understood and submitted to justification before God through faith alone, and that, not of works. Paul had previously showed that the Old Testament patriarch Abraham had been justified by faith (Cf. Rom. 4:1ff) and that King David had enjoyed the blessedness of being justified through faith alone. We read in **Romans 4:4ff**:

⁴Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶*just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:* ⁷"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

All of those who were saved by God's grace prior to the coming of Jesus Christ were justified by God's grace alone through faith alone. Paul is indicting only those Jews who had failed to have faith in the God that justifies sinners by grace alone. Schreiner wrote of Paul's words in Romans 10:1-4:

We should not conclude that this is a general indictment of all Jews. Instead, it is directed against those Jews who heard and rejected the Pauline gospel, and thus we need not conclude that all Jews were legalists.³

One more point of importance should be brought to our attention. All people, whether Jewish or Gentile, relate with God according to a covenant of works until and unless they are freed from that covenant through faith alone. In other words, all people everywhere are bound by God to order their lives according to His law which He established for all people everywhere. Our confession rightly states regarding the Law of God:

1. God gave to Adam a law of universal obedience written in his heart, and a particular precept of not eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; *by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience*; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it. (Genesis 1:27; Ecclesiastes 7:29; Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:10, 12)

2. The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall, and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables, the four first containing our duty towards God, and the other six, our duty to man. (Romans 2:14, 15; Deuteronomy 10:4)

5. *The moral law doth for ever bind all*, as well justified persons as others, *to the obedience thereof*, and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it; neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation. (Romans 13:8-10; James 2:8, 10-12; James 2:10, 11; Matthew 5:17-19; Romans 3:31)⁴

Faith is what is required of any and all who would be saved from sin and delivered from the sentence of God's condemnation that His law pronounces upon law breakers. But what is faith and what kind of faith

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The Baptist Confession of 1689*, Article 19, per. 1, 2, 5.

is it that God requires? It is the faith of God's elect.⁵ It is the faith that is produced and sustained by the grace of God.⁶

Saving faith must have three elements or it is not saving faith. (1) Faith must first be based on an understanding of truth; there must be knowledge. (2) Second, there must be an affirmation that knowledge is indeed true. Not all who have knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ believe it to be true. (3) And third there must be a trust and commitment to that truth; one must believe and act upon that truth. Faith is like a three-legged stool, remove one of these three and it is not faith.

It is faith that brings the sinner into a justified state before God. When we say a "justified state", we are referring to the believer's righteous standing before God. God no longer regards the true believer as a guilty sinner under His just condemnation, but the believer is a redeemed, pardoned, even righteous saint.

It is faith alone that God uses to bring sinners into this state of righteousness. The Latin phrase that the Reformers used was *Sola fide*, which means "by faith alone." It is one of the five major principles of the Protestant reformation. *Sola fide* is the teaching of the Bible that affirms that God forgives sinners of their sin and regards them as righteous in His sight through upon faith alone, apart from any work that they perform. We affirm the biblical teaching that *God justifies sinners by His grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone*.

There are numerous places in God's Word that speak to this issue. Let us turn to **Galatians 2**.

Paul was writing to a number of local churches in the region of Galatia. They had been troubled by false teachers who had taught that God justified sinners, that is, God forgave their sins and brought them into a favorable relationship with Himself, through both faith in Jesus Christ *and* through obeying the Mosaic Law. Paul had taken a strong stand against these teachers. In the portion of his epistle that we are about to read, Paul asserted his own commitment to the teaching of justification by God's grace through faith alone. He told of the apostles in Jerusalem having endorsed him and his message. And then he related an incident in which he took a strong stand for the truth of justification through faith alone. Certain Jewish "believers" had traveled from Jerusalem to the churches at Galatia, which was comprised of both Jewish and Gentile believers. They led others in the churches to deny the truth that sinners are righteous before God through faith alone. Even the apostle Peter had faltered on this occasion. Paul tells of the strong stand that he took.

⁶But from those who seemed to be something -- whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man -- for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me.

⁷But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter ⁸(for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), ⁹and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

¹⁰They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

¹¹But when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; ¹²for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. ¹³And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

¹⁴But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?" ¹⁵We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles,

¹⁶*knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have*

⁵ Titus 1:1

⁶ 1 Peter 1:5

believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” (Gal. 2:1-16)

Peter had erred because he had begun to treat Gentile believers as though they were not on the same standing with God as Jewish believers, for these Jewish believers were maintaining the Law of Moses in addition to believing on Jesus Christ. Paul makes it very clear that faith, that is, faith alone apart from works, is the instrument that God uses to justify sinners. The sinner is justified by God and before God through faith alone. Verse 16 clearly affirms the truth of justification through faith alone. God does not, will not, justify sinners based upon what they do, but rather based upon what they believe that Jesus Christ has done on their behalf.

But clarification is in order. There are common errors among professing Christians about this matter. And so it is important to understand **the nature of the faith that justifies**.

1. The faith that justifies is a faith that reflects a simple but complete surrender to God and appeal to God based on Christ and His work. Justifying faith is the simple trusting of the sinner in God’s provision in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and for a righteousness that he is in need of in order to stand uncondemned, even found to be righteous before God on the Day of Judgment. A sinner may be easily justified by a simple, turning from sin toward God, petitioning God the Father to receive him on the basis and merit of Christ’s life and death. “Father, I know that I am not able or fit to be received of You. I am a sinner. But please receive me for Christ’s sake.” That is the simple kind of faith that justifies.

2. The faith that justifies itself a product of God’s grace (His working). Although faith is something we do in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and obtain a righteous standing before God, faith should not be seen as something that we are able to do apart from grace. It is not as though God made a plan of salvation and then God leaves it up to us to accept it or not. It is not as though God does His part and He expects us to do our part. Rather faith itself is a fruit of God’s grace in the soul; saving faith occurs due to a work of God in the sinner. Saving faith is not a product of the fallen heart. It is a work of God that is produced in the heart and mind of an individual. God so works in the hearts and minds of His people through regeneration, or the new birth, that He gives them the desire and ability to understand and the desire and ability to believe the gospel. This is the work of the Holy Spirit working through the proclamation of the gospel to save sinners unto Himself. Of Apollos it was said, “When he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those ***who had believed through grace***” (Acts 18:27).

The Holy Spirit first convicts the sinner of his sin and his just condemnation before God due to His sin. He does this by showing the sinner what God’s true righteousness is all about. And the Holy Spirit also convinces the sinner of his own certain condemnation in judgment due to his sin. A person under great conviction can very easily come to desperation during this time. He sees his sin as he had never known before. He perceives that others may have reason to hope, but not he. He is lost and undone. But then the Holy Spirit shows the sinner the glories of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ’s life and death for his own case. The Holy Spirit gives to him the ***desire*** and the ***ability*** to believe the promises of the gospel. This is what is referred to as a “***work of grace***” in the heart. He believes on Christ and becomes justified—forgiven of his sins and treated by God thereafter as righteous—as though he had never sinned, but God regards the believer as though he were fully obedient to God’s law. And so, upon faith in God through Jesus Christ, all the privileges of justification come to the believer. He is adopted into God’s family. He is given an inheritance. He is brought out from under the realm of the devil and given citizenship in the Kingdom of God. All the blessings of Christ are His through faith in Christ. Saving faith is a product of God’s grace.

3. The faith that justifies will manifest itself in a holy life. The faith that justifies the sinner will also lead to the sanctification of the saint. But make no mistake, your works of righteousness have nothing to

do with your justification other than prove to yourself and others that you have it. As the Puritan *Thomas Manton* once wrote:

By the righteousness of faith we are acquitted from sin, and by the righteousness of works we are acquitted of hypocrisy.

In other words, as someone else described it, “the works of obedience add nothing to your justification; they are visible proof of it.”⁷

It is at this point that we come to a very great problem area among evangelicals. (By evangelicals we mean those who profess to be Christians who profess to be Bible-believers and who view the Bible as God’s Word and who take the Bible seriously and literally.) Evangelicals have been taught pretty well about justification by faith alone. It is rehearsed and presented frequently, as it should be. We do this well. However, take note of this: evangelicals are generally very messed up in their thinking about *the necessity of works in order to inherit salvation*. You see, they know that faith is the only condition for justification, but *they wrongly conclude that there are no other conditions that have bearing on their salvation*. Although this wrong notion has always reared its head down through church history, it is at this current time a major error that is held among evangelicals today.

This was apparently not a major problem in **Jonathan Edward’s** day. I mention him because he was the leading American evangelical pastor in America in the early to mid 1700’s. He is generally regarded to one of the most influential and significant Christian leaders that America has ever produced. Moreover I mention him because he was the one who was used of God to initially stir the colonies in the revival of the early 1700’s known as *The Great Awakening*. As many as one third of the colonists became Christian in just a matter of a few years. The entire fabric of society was transformed. Edwards championed the teaching of justification by faith alone as did the Puritans in England and New England and the Protestant Reformers of a century before him. He wrote a significant sermon entitled “*Justification by Faith Alone*.” In his sermon in which he affirmed all that we have affirmed today, he wrote these words:

And there are many other things besides faith, which are directly proposed to us, to be pursued or performed by us, in order to eternal life, which if they are done, or obtained, we shall have eternal life, and if not done, or not obtained, we shall surely perish.⁸

Later in the sermon he wrote,

So are many other things besides faith; and yet nothing in us but faith renders it meet (fitting) that we should have justification assigned to us.⁹

And then later on in the same sermon he wrote,

We frequently find (in the Bible) promises of eternal life and salvation, and sometimes justification itself, made to our own virtue and obedience. Eternal life is promised to obedience, in Romans 2:7...

And,

Obedience and salvation are connected in fact; which nobody denies . . .¹⁰

⁷ John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, Joel Beeke, John Gerstner, John Armstrong, *Justification by Faith Alone*, Soli Deo Gloria Publishing, 1995, p. 164.

⁸ Edwards, p. 623.

⁹ Ibid., p. 624.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 642.

But the fact remains is this, today, many do deny that obedience is in any way connected with salvation. “As long as you believe, it does not matter what you do” is often the message that is either explicitly stated or it is implicitly implied in a skewed, twisting of this doctrine. Although faith alone justifies, that faith is not a mere affirmation or assertion of who Christ is and what He has done. The faith that saves is a living vital thing that shapes the course and nature of the entire life of a justified person. So much so, that God can say that: **“the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him”** (Heb. 10:38). In other words there is no salvation promised to one who does not live, as a Christian is to live.

4. The faith that justifies will be persevering faith. Saving faith is born and sustained by the power of God, even by the grace of God. We are “kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:4). God’s promise of salvation is only for those who continue to believe. Temporary faith is not saving faith. Paul wrote to the believers at Colossae:

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, ***if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation.***” (Col. 1:21-23)

Continuance in faith is evidence of true faith. Temporary faith is proof of no true, saving faith present.

Hebrews 3:5f reads, “And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are ***if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.***” And Hebrews 3:14 reads, “For we have come to share in Christ, ***if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.***” And Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:1f “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, ***if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain.***” Here, to “believe in vain” is to fail to hold fast to the gospel, in other words, to fail to continue in faith.

There have been historical challenges to justification through faith alone. The greatest of these has been **Roman Catholicism**. How does the matter of justification differ between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism? *First*, Protestantism understands the Bible to teach justification as a legal act of God whereby God ***declares*** the believing sinner to be righteous. Rome teaches that justification is the outcome of God ***making*** a sinner to become righteous.

Second, for Protestants, justification occurs when the sinner first believes on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Rome, however, believes that justification occurs in the distant future, after the “believer” has undergone the process of becoming more holy in this life and through a future indeterminate period in purgatory. Only after having been fully cleansed of all sin, does Rome teach that God justifies the believer. In other words, Protestants would argue that Rome confuses the single declarative act of God that occurs upon faith in Jesus with the work of sanctification that God does in the life of His people. The Bible (historic Protestantism) teaches a single event upon faith in which the believer is fully justified. Rome teaches that justification is the result of a long process, taking perhaps thousands of years and only attained after full purification through purgatory.

And *third*, whereas Protestants believe that the Bible teaches God’s justification of the sinner through faith alone, Rome denies this doctrine. During the 16th century the Protestants made great inroads in regions in which Roman Catholicism had dominated. Rome responded to the Protestant Reformation with the **Council of Trent**. Pope Paul III, who was pope from 1534 to 1549, called this Roman Catholic council. The Council began to meet in 1545. It was disbanded in 1563, but of the 18 years, it actually met formally for about 4½ years of that time. Trent made official declarations against the Protestant teaching of justification through faith alone. The council with the signature of the pope that sanctioned it, declared eternal damnation upon all who preached or believed this doctrine. Here are words from Trent regarding this subject:

Whosoever shall affirm, that when the grace of Justification is received, the offence of the penitent sinner is so forgiven, and the sentence of eternal punishment reversed, that there remains no temporal punishment to be endured, before his entrance into the kingdom of Heaven, either in this world or in the future world, in purgatory, let him be accursed. (Council of Trent, January 1547).

Trent declared,

If anyone maintain that a man once justified cannot lose grace and, therefore, that he who falls and sins never was truly justified, let him be accursed” (Council of Trent, sess. 6, canon23).

This difference between Rome and Protestants remains to this day, although there have been several very weak and failed efforts to bridge the difference. This is a matter which distinguishes those who declare themselves to be Reformed.

But equally dangerous threat to the biblical teaching of true saving faith is the error of “**easy believism**” that is so common among so-called **evangelical churches**. This doctrine is a perversion of the doctrine of justification through faith alone in that it promotes a deficient view of the nature of faith that justifies the sinner. This is an error that is characteristic of a great many evangelicals. It is a teaching that says saving faith is nothing more than an understanding and ascent (agreement and acceptance) of the doctrine of justification through faith alone. It denies the biblical teaching that saving faith includes an acknowledgement and submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

And so, we may say that faith in Jesus Christ is the principle need. Through faith we believe on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior to do and to have done all that is required of us but that only He could perform. We abandon and repudiate all sense of merit or self-righteousness as a cause or means by which God relates to us. He does so through faith.

But true Christians may lapse into legalism, failing to see that it is through faith alone that they are not only justified before God, but that it is through faith that are sanctified by God. We are all prone to become legalists quite readily. Just as the Jews twisted the law of Moses from being a life that could only be lived by God’s grace through faith, so evangelicals commonly take the Bible, including the New Testament teachings, and treat it as though we were under a covenant of works. We assume that since we have the responsibility to do the will of God, to order our lives according to the law of God, that we have it within ourselves to do so. We can very easily fall into a pattern of self effort, selfish independence, and we cease to trust Jesus Christ to do for us and in us that for which we are incapable.

Paul wrote of this problem into which the churches of Galatia had fallen. They had departed from their earlier understanding that it was by grace alone through faith alone that not only sinners were justified but that believers are sanctified.

Christians are prone to think themselves sufficient in themselves to live before God. They read the Word of God and then attempt through their own determination and in their own strength to do these things. I suspect there are number of us who follow this pattern in our lives. But although we are born again by God we do not inherently have any more ability in ourselves to live the Christian life than did the Jews under the Mosaic system. We have understood that we can only trust Jesus Christ and not rely upon ourselves for our justification, but we foolishly think that we can become sanctified through our own efforts. There are many who are justified by God’s grace alone through faith alone, who, nevertheless, attempt to live the christian life through their own works rather than submit to and rely upon the grace of God. Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia who had fallen into this error:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you

receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? (Gal. 3:1-3)

Before conversion Paul had sought through works to obtain favor with God. But when he came to faith he abandoned forever any effort of his own as enabling him to live before God. Rather, he trusted Jesus Christ to do for him and in him that which he recognized that he was obligated to do but was unable to do, even after having become a Christian. He wrote:

“For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and ***the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God***, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.” (Gal 2:19ff)

The righteousness we needed in our justification was not through our works, and the righteousness we need in our sanctification will not be attained through our works. We are to call upon our Savior Jesus Christ to subdue in us and for us those forces of sin that are too great for us. We are to ask Him to give us the Holy Spirit to enable us to live before Him. He must do it. He must enable it, or we will not be successful. But sadly there are many Christians who encounter only defeat and failure in their efforts to live the Christian life because they have fallen into the error of legalism. They rightly realize their responsibility to live according to the law of God under Christ, but they fail to see that they are still unable to do so apart from the grace of God that God gives to His people who look to Him in faith.

¹⁰And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

¹¹But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. ¹²Therefore, brethren, we are debtors-- not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (Rom. 8:10-14)

May our God enable each of us to resort to Him in faith as we purpose to live for Him and unto Him every day of our lives.

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20f)