

Gospel Orthodoxy - Justification

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[0 : 0 0] The scripture reading comes from Romans 3, starting at verse 21. Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also. Since God is one, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law. Amen. Great. Thank you so much, Irene.

[1 : 3 2] Happy New Year, everyone. Just really exciting to come into this new year where we have no idea what lies ahead. But we do know that we have a solid rock in Jesus as we move on into all that God has for us.

Let me just pray for us as we start and we look into the passage this morning. Father, we don't stand before you as if we are those who have any claim on you because we've been good enough for you.

We don't stand this year moving into the year expecting us to deserve something because we are entitled to it.

Because we stand with no entitlements. But Lord, I pray this morning that your incredible grace, that your incredible righteousness, that the amazingness of the gospel would capture our hearts.

I pray that you'd help me to speak in a way which you will take and you will just bury it into our hearts. Lord, move it out of our heads and into our hearts. The word that you want to speak.

[2 : 4 2] And Lord, we just pray that you would be exalted in Jesus name. Amen. Great. So welcome, everyone. Again, it's great to start 2021 together with you.

We're going to be looking at a new series. And I want to talk to you about orthopedics. You see, orthopedics is a branch of medicine that, according to the Oxford Dictionary, deals with the correction of deformities in the bones or muscles.

And ortho means straight. It's about putting things which are deformed into right alignment. Things which are crooked, straightening them.

You know, if you go to the gym or if you train or lift heavy weights, you know, it's possible to just get into bad habits of lifting. So that eventually what happens, your back or your skeletal structure just begins to feel that over time.

And you begin to develop these habits which actually really affect your entire health for the rest of your body. Now, the thing with your bone structure and your muscles is they're not all your body.

[3 : 53] You've got plenty of other bits of your arteries and nervous system and all those different things. But if you don't get the skeleton right, if you don't get the bones and muscles right, if you get into poor habits or posture or lifting, then everything is affected.

But if you get into healthy habits, then that sets you up for health in all kinds of other areas. Well, today we're actually not going to talk about orthopedics. We're going to talk about orthodoxy.

And that's what we're going to be looking at over the next four weeks of gospel orthodoxy. Because orthodoxy is not about straight bones. It's about straight doctrine.

And just as the right bone structure and the right is crucial for health, so the right doctrine is crucial for all the other stuff of the Christian life.

And this year, if we don't get the gospel doctrine right, as we talk about mission, as we talk about community, as we talk about all kinds of other things in the Christian life that we will this year, if our bones are out of line, we'll be hobbling spiritually in all the other areas God calls us to.

[5 : 03] And so we're going to look at just a few backbones of the gospel message over these next few weeks of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. And today we're going to start with looking at justification.

Justification. Now, I think justification by grace through faith is one of the most important doctrines for Christians, not just in the world globally, but in Hong Kong and in our time in history.

You see, it's one of the most countercultural doctrines here in Hong Kong. Rapper Shai Lin once said justification by faith is the key to eliminating racism.

I think he's right. And it's not just racism. It's all kinds of isms. Because we live in a world that is filled with judgment, don't we?

And if you don't feel judged when you go outside into the world, then you will be judging other people. We're always comparing ourselves with others, putting people into boxes of what we think conforms to our standards.

[6 : 12] And, you know, the basis for our judgment, whether it's from childhood all the way to death, is your performance. It's how well you have performance. I spoke to someone who works with the elderly in poverty here in Hong Kong.

And he said to me, many of the elderly, they love kids, but they don't want some of the kids to visit them. Because kids are so used to hearing critical comments from their parents that when they go around to the poor homes of these elderly people, they have no filter and they just blunt out all these critical comments.

And they make the elderly just feel judged. And they already feel bad enough about themselves already. They don't just want to be put again in that box again. So they prefer to be alone, even though they're desperate for community.

You know, that's sometimes not just with the elderly. That's sometimes even in church we can feel like that. Martin Luther, the reformer, was once paraphrased saying this.

He said, every week I preach justification by faith to my people because every week they forget it. I think that is so true.

[7 : 22] You see, one author says it like this. He says, for most Christians, we intellectually know that God's acceptance of us is because of what Jesus did on the cross.

But in our actual day-to-day existence, most of us still rely on our performance to assure us of God's love and acceptance. Either our spiritual sincerity, all the stuff that we've done for Jesus, our past experience of conversion, or our recent religious performance.

I read my Bible today, I prayed. Or the relative infrequency of conscious, willful disobedience. I held my tongue. I didn't watch porn. All those things. That's what we often rely on.

But he says, and he carries on, Christians who are not sure that God loves them and accepts them in Jesus, apart from some spiritual performance or achievement, are subconsciously radically insecure people.

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying, you can know the gospel in your head, but still be deeply insecure in your life. Always confessing sin, but never feeling like there's any joy out of it.

[8 : 35] Always feeling defeated. Always feeling like we're never quite meeting up to other people's expectations, our own expectations, or God's expectations of us. And that doesn't fill your heart with joy.

Brothers and sisters, is that you? Is that you who say, yeah, I've heard this idea of justification before, but do we live in it? Do we?

Does it thrill our hearts? Well, today we're going to talk about this glorious doctrine of the justification through grace, by grace, through faith.

And we're going to look at the bad news, the good news, and so what. So, follow along, we're going to look at, I'm going to base out of the Romans passage and use a couple of others as we go along.

You know, I was talking to a couple about their home country, and they said what an incredible culture theirs was. It was vibrant, it was just people had a great attitude in so many different ways.

[9 : 36] But they said there's a dark side. For generation after generation, people have been ingrained with the mentality that they think it's okay to steal stuff. You know, you're smart if you trick people out of other people's things.

And so even if the police catch you, well, what you do, you go to court, and you can just pay a bribe to the judge. Go, remember that money I gave you last week?

You know, let me off. Or, what they do is they point the finger at someone else and blame someone else. So, they get acquitted, somebody else gets condemned. And so they have this right standing before the law.

They have right standing before the community because everyone thinks they're smart that they got out of it. And that's how justification works for them. Because justification is the declaration of being acquitted, of being proved to be in the right.

It's the status of being righteous, acceptable. But Proverbs says this, when the wicked are justified and the righteous are condemned, this is an abomination to God.

[10 : 46] It says that's a place where injustice reigns. The powerful get away with murder and the weaker crushed. And that is the picture that as we come and look in Romans, that Paul paints of the human race.

He says we're part of the Adams family. Where Adam is the head of our family. And it's a family that from generation after generation on generation we've been characterized by sin and unjust judgment.

And it's embedded into the culture of every one of us. And we feel that, don't we, in our judging culture. And Paul says earlier on, before the passage we read, he says no one is righteous, not even one.

And he says what we try and do is, because we do know that and we feel that, but we try and cover our insecurity. We try and find ways to acquit ourselves.

Ways to prove that we're a good person. To prove that we're acceptable. To justify ourselves. And in order to justify ourselves, we blame and condemn someone else.

[11 : 51] Do you remember the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee? It says that Jesus told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.

And then treated other people with contempt. See, the Pharisee comes into the temple and he parades before God all the good things that he's done. He says, I thank you God that I'm not like other men.

You know, those people down there. I've fasted, I've tithed, I've served chasiofan to homeless people, even if they didn't want it. He produces all the evidence for why he should be justified before God.

He should be declared righteous before God. Look at all this stuff. All these things that I've done for you. What's he doing? He's actually trying to bribe the judge.

He's saying, like, overlook other stuff because look at this stuff that I did here. And what is he doing? He's created his own standards of what he thinks can justify himself.

[12 : 54] And by those same standards, then he ends up condemning other people. It's like the yellow supporter goes, I thank you God that I'm not like those blue ribbon supporters. I fight for justice.

And the blue supporter goes, I thank you God that I'm not like those yellow guys. I honor the government and stability. And we go, God, I thank you God that I'm not like those other water markers.

I come on time. I serve. I read the Bible and pray semi-regularly. And even if I don't, at least I'm responsible and respectful. Unlike that person over there who lets their kids run wild.

And in Romans, it was the Jewish Christians who were going, I thank God I'm not like those Gentiles who eat pork and don't keep the Jewish law like we do.

And the Gentiles were going, Gentile Christians were going, I thank God that I'm not like those legalistic Jewish rule-based Christians. I've got freedom in Christ so I can eat what I like. And that own standards of judgment was the source of every ism that we have in our world.

[13 : 58] It's the source of most conflict. It's the source of the conflict in Romans. One group was bringing in bacon sandwiches to eat to church because they thought they were free.

The other was sitting on a separate table from the Gentiles because they didn't want to be polluted by them. All of them thought they were righteous and justified by their own standard. Isn't it amazing when you're in conflict with someone, you always think you're right.

You never think you're wrong. At least you're 95% right and they're 5%, maybe 5% wrong. And Paul cuts through all of that.

He rips up all the defenses. He tears down the list of things that you thought you could stand on to make yourself feel good about yourself. And he says there is an ultimate courtroom.

He says none of you are righteous. Not even one. Not even one. Because he says there is an ultimate courtroom where only God is righteous one.

[14 : 57] He's the righteous judge. And his righteousness is his way of acting to always bring saving, restoring, order, and flourishing to the world. And God says as the righteous judge, I'm not going to equip the wicked.

I'm not going to justify them. You can't bribe me. You can't flatter me. You can't pull the wool over my eyes. I will be just and my saving justice will come. And my standards are perfect holiness and love.

Now some people may say, well God's standards, they're way too high. We can't expect to live up to perfect love, can we? An apologist, Francis Schaeffer, used to say, yeah, they are high.

So how about we just judge you by your own standards? Okay, right? So what he says, he says, let God just record every time that you judge somebody else according to your standards.

So, oh, they're such a gossip. Or how dare they lie like that? And then at the end of your life, he'll play back that recording and judge you by your own words. Who of us would not be condemned by even our own words, let alone God's?

[16 : 16] Which is why Paul says this. For by works of the law, by your own performance, even serving with an NGO or in kids' ministry, whatever you do, no human being will be justified in God's sight.

Because since through the law, through God's standards, comes the knowledge of sin. All our righteousness is filthy rags before him.

And that's the bad news. You ain't get nothing that God will accept by yourself. But then there's good news. The passage that we read today says this.

But now. That is a big but. It's bigger than my but. It's the biggest but in the entire Bible.

It's a but which says the righteousness of God is revealed. When Martin Luther, the reformer, he thought about the righteousness of God.

[17 : 25] It filled him with fear. It filled him with fear because he thought God was there with like a sword over his head, ready to strike with his justice on him. And some of us have that sneaking suspicion at the back of our minds that maybe some of the hard circumstances you've been going through.

Maybe some of the things that have been going wrong in your life. Maybe it's God punishing you because of something that you have done before in your life. And we might go, yeah, I know God loves me.

But I'm not sure whether he really likes me. Because look at all the mess I've made in my life. And it says Martin Luther was reading Romans. Suddenly the penny dropped. God's righteousness is not his condemning justice.

It's his saving justice. And he says this. There's no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

All of us are way short of God's glorious, loving standards and his character. But then he says, but all of us. Not just good people.

[18 : 25] Not just people who seem very religious. Not just those who've got nice families. Not just those who do charity work. All of us are justified, declared righteous with right standing before God.

By his grace. As a gift. Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

You see what he's saying is? He's saying the child from a wealthy family and the beggar on the street. That manipulative boss who you despise. To the colleague that you really like.

To the corrupt government official. To the social rights activist. To the NGO worker. To the Boko Haram terrorist. All justified, declared righteous in the righteous family of God.

By a free gift of grace. Through Jesus' work on the cross. Not by their performance. This is just totally, totally counter-cultural.

[19 : 28] I remember talking to one guy about this. And he became really mad. He said, how dare you suggest that you put me in the same category as those wicked people? How dare you put me in that same box?

What he's really saying is, I'm more righteous than them. I should be in a different box. Sure, I've done some things wrong. Not perfect. But actually, I'm kind of 80% good.

And God says, if you want to self-justify you by your performance, that's the road to condemnation before God. Because God's got enough evidence to put every single one of us behind bars before eternity.

And we actually need to repent of our self-righteous, justifying good works. If we put our trust in them. You know, some of us, God is going to allow to fail spectacularly this year.

Because he wants to scorch the ground of your own righteousness beneath your feet. So you realize there is only one solid ground of righteousness on which you can stand.

[20 : 35] And it's not yours. It's Jesus. It's not from how successful you've been. Not from how nice you are. Not from how many likes you've got on Instagram. Not from anything other than a pure, undeserved gift of grace.

Paid entirely out of the bank of Jesus' blood. Shed on the cross for you. Jesus is the propitiation, it says, for our sin. He's the one who took God's anger, took God's verdict of judgment and condemnation onto him.

And we go free. Now some people say things like, being justified is just as if I'd never sinned. And that's partly true. But it's actually more than that.

It's not just you get kind of the slate wiped clean. You know, it's like, you know, you're in kind of minus 50 before God. And then he kind of brings you back up to zero.

Wipes you clean. And then now you've got to be kind of good Christians. You've got to read your Bible. You've got to pray. You've got to serve. You've got to help old grannies across the road. All those kind of things. Just to stay out of God's bad books by being good.

[21 : 39] That's actually justification by grace plus works. That's not what Paul's talking about. Nor is it that you become made righteous in the sense of now we're all perfect.

Because quite frankly, if you spend any time with any of us, you can see that that's not true. Okay. But a new creation will come and that will be true. But instead what he's saying is in justifying us, God, Christ totally changes our status.

He does a great exchange. You know, 2 Corinthians 5, 21 says this. And he uses this language of in him. He says, God has made him, Jesus, to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This language of kind of in Christ, this is a family language that he's using. And he's telling an incredible truth because sin, the Bible keeps telling, is like a debt that you owe to God.

You owe him. And you can't pay it off. It's like we're part of this grubby Adams family, continually gambling away all our money, owing millions of dollars in debt, constantly trying to keep the loan sharks and banks away from us off our backs, occasionally offering the odd \$20 note of good works to kind of try and keep us out of trouble for a little while.

[23 : 03] And it's tiring. And it's tiring. But then a wealthy judge comes along. In fact, the judge that you owe the most to in the world.

And he comes along to you and you're in fear and trepidation. But he comes along and he says, for the sake of my name, I need to do justice. And you're wondering, what does this look like?

He's come to get me now. He says, this debt's got to be paid. And then he says, but I want to give you a gift.

Because I love you. I'll do an exchange. I'll exchange myself for yourself. I'll take your name, your sin debt, your unrighteousness, everything that you stand for.

And I'll stand in your place in the dock as if I was taking your name. Your sin was placed upon me. And I'll take the condemnation. I'll take the punishment that was due you.

[24 : 10] I'll take it for all your past, all your present, and all your future sins. Completely wiped out forever. Cancelled. And if you don't want to accept the gift, if you want to go into court under your own name, man, you're already condemned.

Everyone knows what the Adams family are like. There's enough paperwork and evidence around you that could just lead you guilty for the rest of history. And he says, I don't just want to leave it there so you just walk out of prison free and go ahead to do your own thing.

What I'm going to do is, this part of the gift, the exchanges I bring you into my family. And I'm going to give you my righteousness. My righteous name.

And my name is spotless in the courtroom of heaven. You see, I have the highest honor in heaven itself. Because life, my life is perfect.

I'm utterly loving, utterly gracious, utterly blameless, utterly kind, utterly obedient. Spotless. And you could go through every file under my name.

[25 : 20] And all that you would find was pure, unadulterated, beautiful loveliness. That's when people hear my name.

That's what they get. That's what they see. My righteousness. And now I want to give you my name. I want to give you my righteousness. Because you're with me. Because you're in me.

In my family. Connected with me. You'll be counted as righteousness. All that I have is yours. Your bank account doesn't just go back to zero.

Now you get my bank account at all. And that is limitless. You get credited. You're not just zero. You now have so much from me.

My perfect righteousness. And so when you go into God's family courtroom. He looks at you and what does he see? He sees Jesus Christ. Clothed with him.

[26 : 17] And how does God view Jesus? He delights in him. He's pleased with him. He rejoices over him.

He says you're my dearly beloved son with whom I'm well pleased. He's filled with joy at seeing him. And so when God looks at you. If you're a believer in Jesus and have trusted him.

What does his face look like? It's delight. It's pleasure. It's joy. That you belong to him.

That you're his. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that amazing? Isn't that just kind of sometimes hard to believe, right? Because you go, but you don't know all the stuff that I've done.

And he goes, yeah, I know. And he said, but there's some really bad stuff. Like I haven't even told anyone about this. Not even my spouse. He says, yeah, I know it all.

[27 : 18] I felt it all. With every nail that was hammered into my hands. Don't you know how much I know what you've done? But I did it for you.

That you could come into my family. And be mine. And know the delight of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And there's only one condition.

It's the most democratic condition that has ever existed. The condition is this. It's not according to your family background. Not according to your ethnicity. Not according to your past history.

Your gender. Anything else. It's only by faith. And what does that mean? It's only by refusing to trust in your own performance. Your own righteousness to ever get acquitted and justified before God.

It's opening your hands to say, It's not I need to do, do, do to get there with God. But it's how he has done, done, done for me. And I trust your work for me.

[28 : 24] I cannot justify myself. I'm a great sinner. But I have a great saviour in Christ. And it's gift. It's gift. And if you go, Yeah, well, give me a gift.

And okay, let me just kind of give you like ten cents for that. That's actually offensive to the giver. He says, no, I want you to receive it by faith.

This is the incredible good news of God's justification of us. But so what? Some of us, you know, we're, it sounds too good to be true, doesn't it?

And we're all a little bit cynical in a lot of the things that we do because that's part of our culture. And we go and we say things like, if Jesus justified us, if we're completely righteous in God's eyes, if when he looks at us, he sees Jesus, he says he's utterly satisfied, utterly delighted, utterly pleased, then what's the point in obeying him?

Right? Because I've got nothing left to prove, right? You know, Tobin Miller, who was the previous pastor here, he said, used to say, whenever I preach on justification by faith, the next week, everyone will quit serving kids ministry.

[29 : 36] Because it's like they have nothing left to prove. And Paul knows this objection in Romans 3. He says this in verse 31.

Okay, if we've been justified, the Jews, the Gentiles, then do we then overthrow the law by this faith? Okay, in other words, do we kind of not really have to obey any longer?

He says, no, we uphold the law. In other words, and Romans 6, he then says, listen, how can we who have died to sin still live in it? What he's saying is, if you've been brought into the righteous family of God, belonging to him, you died to the Adams family.

He says, righteous, you know, losers, if you think you're a loser, you act like a loser, right? But righteous people act righteously. Righteous family has a righteous culture within them.

And it's a culture where we're learning. And so why go back to the old sinful, broken habits of the old previous life in the Adams family, where he was just messing everything up in guilt and shame and condemnation.

[30 : 47] Why do you want to go back there? You know, it's a bit like if your dad comes in to his kids and says, hey, hey guys, I just saw this toy that was broken.

And immediately you go, it wasn't me. It was my sister. It was her. She did it. It's her. And you become all kind of Adams family behavior, all defensive, all blaming.

And your dad goes, hey, hey, you know, I love you. You're secure. You don't need to justify yourself. We're in a different family now. We've got different rules of the way we engage here now.

But I am asking you this because I want to work at how we can learn how to play better together, how we can love each other better, how we can be righteous together without breaking stuff.

You see, the good works that we are called to do in scripture are not the basis of your justification. They are the fruit that comes out of it.

[31 : 47] And as you learn the security of being in the family of God, what it does, it makes you more honest, more free to accept criticism.

It's not that you stop looking to obey Christ or improve. It's hard work being a Christian. God does want us to change. But it's now we're not obeying for approval.

We're obeying out of approval. We're not at stake any longer. And that's freeing. And that's a place of rest. You know, isn't it tiring always comparing yourself to other people?

Isn't it tiring always having to prove yourself to your friends, to your boss, to your family, to church, to God? And so, one of the things God wants to do is he wants to bring us a rest as his people.

You know, as righteous people, we still have some of the old sinful Adam's family habits, don't we? Any of us been defensive this week? Any of you been judgmental towards other people, critical, harsh?

[33 : 01] Any of you been impatient? Any of you found it difficult to actually say no to other people? Any of you feel like a failure when you start looking at other people who seem to be more successful than yourself?

Or just doing stuff that's better than you? Any of you feel like you're always just behind and you've just kind of got to catch up and you're just restless? Desperate to prove that you can be in the world's righteous category?

Desperate to prove that you're self-justifying. And God comes to us and says, I want to give you rest. And you know one of the things that keeps us driving on, keeps us pushing to prove ourselves, to justify ourselves, is frequently behind all of that there's this condemning bailiff who comes knocking on the door of your heart and your mind and demands payment for your sins.

How could you be so stupid? Why are you such a failure? How can you keep repeating that sin? Answer my accusations. Prove that you're not in that category.

And instead of looping that around and around and around in our minds, instead of allowing ourselves to be placed in that box of condemnation that so many other people try and place us in, if we as a community begin to get the gospel of justification by grace through faith, then we'll be able to go, sorry, what debt?

[34 : 35] Yeah, I had a great debt, but it's been paid in full by Jesus. I think you got the wrong address. Goodbye. Because I need people.

You need people. We all need people to remind of this because we forget justification every single day. And when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, would I look and see him there who made an end of all my sin?

Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free because God the just is satisfied to look on him and to pardon me.

This is the song that we need to sing in 2021. And some of us will even go, well, I've lived with those voices for so long.

How do I know that that's not conviction of sin, that that's condemnation? You know, the difference between conviction and condemnation of sin is this.

[35 : 39] Conviction of sin leads you to confess sin before God and leads you to focus on Jesus relying on his grace and on his work to change you.

Condemnation may bring you to confess your sin and probably again and again and again the same thing, but it leads you to focus on yourself and rely on yourself to change yourself.

You go, I've screwed up so many times. There's no hope. I can't fix myself. And so many of us spend so much of our lives confessing sin and so little time rejoicing in Jesus' forgiveness and grace and justification of us.

So I want to call us in 2021 to be a people who learn how to confess sin, but who never leave confessing the sin and the brokenness of our lives without rejoicing and thanking God that we are now no longer at stake, that we are righteous before the holy God of Israel, the holy God of the world, the holy God who loves us and gave his life for us.

And as we go out this week into our world, into a sea of performance where everyone's going to judge you on how well you've done or not, we're going to be tempted to put our confidence in ourselves.

[37 : 02] We're going to be tempted to judge other people and put other people down. We're going to be tempted to think if we did something well, that was because we're great. But if we continually bring the gospel of justification to each other, it will humble us.

It will enable us to sit down with people that we don't naturally like. It will enable us to be, when we start hearing ourselves judging those people over there, it will check us and go, oh, but for the grace of God, there go I.

It will give us a confidence to walk into our week with a joy that it doesn't matter what anybody else's judgment is over us, because our final judgment is secure, because the only one, the only court that really matters has already ruled in favor of us.

And it's not because of us, it's because of the beauty and the glory of Jesus.