

Confirmation 2020-21
Session 9 – Justification
November 8, 2020

Background Information

Justification by faith has been the rallying cry of Lutherans since the Reformation. It's the belief that we are not saved by our good works or our own efforts, but by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The rest – how we live, how we treat others – is important in that it's a response to the freedom from sin we have been given, but we don't earn our way to heaven on some sort of ladder to faith success.

And yet, even after emphasizing this for five centuries, many Lutherans – and others – believe that faith is just about being a good person or doing moral things. Of course, the followers of Christ are expected to do their best to be decent people, be engaged in the world, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and being a voice for the voiceless. But even our involvement in those important things does not make us righteous before God. If left to our own devices, we would always be in trouble – even the most pious, most selfless among us could not live perfectly and sinlessly.

Martin Luther understood justification as a very personal question of faith. As a young seminarian, Luther felt unworthy. Relentless confession and various attempts to make himself righteous before God were impossible tasks and a constant source of anxiety. What helped Luther was a mentor's suggestion to look to scripture. Here, Luther found comfort, internalizing the idea that we are justified by God, saved only by God's grace and the salvific work of Jesus, not by our own works or understanding, and certainly not by purchasing the forgiveness that the church was touting. Luther's acceptance of justification through faith alone fueled the Protestant Reformation.

What you need to know

The Reformation was motivated by Martin Luther's quest to help Christians understand that we are justified by faith. Beginning with his own personal struggles as he attempted to justify himself before God by his own merit, Luther found comfort in the Bible. This message has long been one of the primary tenets of the Lutheran Church.

Doing good works and seeking to be moral people are natural responses to what we have been given by God, but that is not the source of our salvation. Still, the belief that our salvation is in our own hands stubbornly persists. Many Christians can fall into this trap of believing that faith is about being good or at least looking like you're being good. They are prone to perfectionism and can get caught up in the message that Christianity is about what they do.

If we were required to justify ourselves before God, everyone would fail. Even the most saintly among us will sin and act selfishly. Thankfully, we don't have to be perfect to be right with God. We are not dependent on ourselves and our own ability to be in a relationship with God. We can trust in God's grace and love and the promise of the resurrection. Really.

Into the Lutheran Study Bible (LSB)

There is a lot of good stuff on Luther in the LSB beginning on page 1521. Skim through it, and read whatever strikes your interest. There is an interesting Chronology of Luther's life on page 1529.

Into Luther's Small Catechism (2018 500 Years of Reformation edition)

Actually, this comes from the Augsburg Confession:

"We obtain the forgiveness of sins only by faith in Christ, not through love, nor on account of love or works, although love follows faith. Therefore we are justified by faith alone, justification being understood as the making of a righteous person out of an unrighteous one."

Essay Questions

Answer each of the following questions using about 100-150 of your own words.

1 Open your bibles to Romans 3:21-28 and read it.

In the early church, there was a huge debate regarding Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. Should Gentile Christians have to observe the many distinct faith practices of the Jewish people, like dietary laws, rules about clothing, even circumcision?

- What might a modern-day correlation to this question of what's required of Christians?
- How do you think those who were known for keeping the religious law felt when they read Paul's words that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"?
- What's the point of doing anything good if we are all justified by God?
- Sometimes someone will describe another as "a really good Christian." What does that mean exactly? What might Paul say about a rating scale of believers?

2. Find Ephesians 2:8-10 and read it.

- This passage doesn't let us off the hook. If grace is free, what comes next? Why is it so hard for us to believe that being saved is not our doing, but is a gift of God?

Email your answers back to Pastor Jesse by email at pastor@zionohio.org no later than next Sunday, November 15.