

Sola Fide

The Central Hinge

Gn 15:16 [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Hab 2:4 Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Ps 116:9-10 I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. I believed, therefore I spoke.

Luke 18:14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Rom 3:20 "By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,"

²⁶ so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus

²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

4:2-3 If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

^{5:1} Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

YOUR ONLY COMFORT

WHAT IS YOUR ONLY COMFORT in life and in death? This is a question that gets to the root of the matter before us today. The question is about **how a soul can find comfort**. It isn't talking about physical ease and freedom from pain, for the question talks about mortality. It speaks to the alleviation of your feelings of grief or distress during a life full of sin and sorrow. It is a question of utmost importance on a practical level. How many people have thoughts crammed full of worry, anxiety, doubt, and depression? How many are caused by known sins in your life and what you know those deserve? How many are terrified of dying or worse, where you will go when you die? How many feel unable to escape these burdens? How many billions of dollars are spent going to experts to try and find some comfort in this life?

What is your only comfort in life and in death? Is it hearing that God infuses you with grace and righteousness that can be lost when you commit a sin? Is it believing that the moment you commit a mortal sin you have lost heaven? Is there comfort being told that only *good* souls will go to heaven? Is it knowing, OK, you've committed a terrible sin,

so now you go to a priest to get absolved, but in return you must do penance to pay for your actions? Is it a comfort that when you've committed a good work of satisfaction that someone tells you to do, that you have by that work made it fitting for God to restore you to a state of grace and give you a new infusion of righteousness until the next time you do the same thing? Is there in any of this a way “that you may know that you have eternal life” (1Jn 5:13)?

What is your only comfort in life and in death? Is it heartening to hear week after week that if you just pray a little more, do more devotions, go the soup kitchen more, that you will be able to gain complete victory over sin and live a higher Christian life? Is it cheering to your soul to be told that if you just follow the laundry list of dos and don'ts in the latest sermon that you will finally become a victorious Christian? Is it comforting to hear that “the most important thing you can do in your life to give you peace” is (fill in the blank with any virtue or spiritual discipline you like)? How about when someone says, “You just need to do it God's way, not your way, do it in the spirit not in the flesh?” How about being told, “You have to make Jesus the priority in

your life” or “Make Jesus Lord of your life” then God will finally be able to use you for his purposes?

These two lists are nothing but two different sounding ways of saying the exact same thing. And whether it comes from a Roman Catholic priest (the first list) or from an Evangelical preacher near you (the second), none of this is comforting. Sure, in many of these cases they are trading off things that are good things. And it is for that reason that well-meaning people teach this stuff. But when perverted like this, these things deeply confuse what **Martin Luther** called **the article on which the church stands or falls** and what **John Calvin** called **the hinge upon which everything turns**.

“‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God” (**Isa 40:1**). Is there such a thing as comfort? Does the Bible have *good* news to tell us? What would it be if it did?

What is your only comfort in life and in death? This question is the first asked in what became one of the *Three Forms of Unity* of the Reformed Churches of the continent: the **Heidelberg Catechism** of 1563—a work so wonderful that one of the old pastors named **Hercules Collins** decided that rather than make a new one for the Reformed Baptists,

he would just use it in his church, changing only the few questions (such as baptism and church government). He didn't change this answer:

That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

These are great benefits of being united to Christ Jesus. These benefits are your comfort, and chief among them is the first, that you belong to Jesus Christ. **But how do you receive this comfort?** Later, the catechism asks, “**Are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?**” Answer, “**No. Only those who are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all His benefits**” (Q. 20).

By a true faith. That is its answer. The **London Baptist 1689 Confession**, following the traditions of all the Reformation says it this way, “**Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification**” (LBC 11.2). Faith alone. *Sola fide*. The hinge and the chief article upon which *you and I* stand or fall. This is what I want to give you today, the biblical understanding of how a Christian is comforted in this life and how an unbeliever can have that same comfort brought to them.

We will proceed this way. First, how the Bible define faith. Next we will ask how you get faith. Then we will think about what faith does. We will look in a couple of different ways at the relationship of faith and works next. And we will conclude where we began by thinking about the practical importance of this vital doctrine.

WHAT IS FAITH?

What is faith? This seems like a good place to start. We get a definition of faith in **Hebrews 11:1**, “**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not**

seen.” Unfortunately, this definition does not seem very clear to a lot of people, as it has been badly abused. What are the things hoped for? Are they leaps in the dark, faith against reason, blind steps of wishful thinking? Many people think that is what faith is. When you wish upon a star, is that what things hoped for are?

No, the things hoped for are [the promises of the Bible](#) to the Christian. They are, as we have seen, the benefits and comforts of the answer to the Heidelberg question. These things are not seen with human eyes, but as the definition itself indicates, are what faith believes. Faith does not have itself as its own object. We do not have assurance of *faith*, but of *things hoped for*. We do not have the conviction of *faith*, but of *things not seen*. Faith is how you apprehend or grasp *those things*.

Hebrews 11:1 is not the first verse of this book. Rather, this definition comes after 10 chapters of explaining the object of faith. This is its context to understanding the definition. The easiest way to get at this from our verse is to think about one important word in it and look at how Hebrews has talked about this word already. This word gives us the object of faith. The word is [“assurance.”](#) The

Greek word for “assurance” is *hypostasis*. Hebrews has used it only twice before. In the previous instance it said, “**For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence (*hypostasis*) firm to the end**” (Heb 3:14). “Confidence” is the same word. It is a confidence of sharing in Christ. But we can know more.

The book begins with the other use of this word. “**He [Christ] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature** (*hypostasis*)” (Heb 1:3). “His” nature refers to the Father. So, Christ is being called the exact imprint of the *hypostasis* of God. In other words, **faith is an assurance** (*hypostasis*) **that Christ is the exact imprint of the nature** (*hypostasis*) **of God**. This is why Hebrews 11 goes on to tell things like how Moses thought of Christ more than he did the pleasures of this world (11:26). Christ is the object of *their* faith. Because Christ was the way that they knew about the *hypostasis* of the Father, their assurance was in Him. How much more us to whom the fullness of revelation in the incarnation has been granted?

Knowledge of the Law and the Gospel

The **Hebrews 11:1** definition of faith was broken down into **three constituent parts** by the Reformers as they began to think about what faith entails here. The three parts are **knowledge** (*notitia*), **assent** (*assensus*), and **trust** (*fiducia*). You have to have knowledge to have faith. That is, you have to know what you are to believe in order to believe it. But knowledge is not sufficient for *saving* faith. Knowledge without assent is a mockery of the thing, a denial of the thing's truthfulness. Atheists can have knowledge, but they do not have assent.

That means we must ask, **what are we to know?** **Francis Turretin** said you are to know **all the things that pertain to your misery and to the grace of God**. A simpler way of putting it is that you are to know **the law** and **the gospel**. The law is that is what God requires of you, how you have responded to those requirements, and what a Just God must do to those who break them. A great problem with the two lists at the beginning is how they mix the good and bad news, such that the bad news isn't quite as bad and the good news isn't really all that good. The bad news becomes,

“shame on you,” and the good news becomes, “try a little harder next time.”

But it is subtler than that because both groups want to say that the Christian life begins with faith and not works. For Rome, it is the faith of the Church that is dispensed through the sacrament of baptism. The infant isn't doing anything and that baptism justifies him or her apart from anything they do. Evangelicals do it a little differently, especially when they are Arminian and give you the impression that to be saved all you have to “do” is “say a prayer” or “walk an aisle” or “choose to believe” (how can you actually choose to believe that which you don't believe, I'll never know). But I know many who do not see the confusion in their system and if you ask them, they will say that it is faith alone that justifies here.

The problem starts to show itself after the initial act in the mixing and confusing that comes later. Once the Christian life has begun, *then* it's all about what you do. To lose salvation, you *do* something. To get it back, you must *do* something. If you want to really be sold out for Jesus, you have to *do* something. Thus, “faith alone” turns into “faith plus.” This is the root of all moralism and legalism. And it is

the natural tendency of all people, which is why some here this and think, but what about works? We'll come to that, but know that just here, if you are moving here already, you are not understanding or hearing anything I'm saying. It is incredibly easy to fall into this way of thinking, even for the best of us. It even happened to Peter (**Gal 2:11**). You all must constantly fight against this impulse, and the only way to do that is to go back to the basics and get this knowledge right in your head again.

What God requires of you is not trying hard, not sincerity, but **perfect obedience** to all his law. James says, “**If you break one law, you have broken all of them**” (**James 2:10**). This is not just true at the beginning. It is true to go to heaven. Only the perfect will enter heaven. If you have broken the law even one time in your life, you are not perfect, and therefore you cannot enter heaven. For heaven is infinitely holy and God is infinitely perfect. The point here is to utterly shatter your sense of self-goodness before a holy God. It is to break you, to leave you totally helpless and begging for mercy, instead of asking what can I do? “**God have mercy on me a sinner**” (**Luke 18:13**). That's all you can do.

This is where knowing **the gospel** comes in. Surveys are consistently showing that if you go around and ask almost any Christians today, “**What is the Gospel?**” you will get answers like: The gospel is “**love.**” The gospel is “**say your prayers.**” The gospel is “**evangelism.**” It is almost always *things that we do*. None of those are bad, but they also are not the gospel. They are the law. They are works, and it shows deep confusion over essential matters. Sometimes people will say that **faith** is the gospel, because it is the opposite of works. Yes, it is the opposite of works, but faith is not the gospel either. Some will say the gospel is that you can have **a personal relationship with Jesus**. That’s true, you can. But technically speaking, that isn’t the gospel either.

The problem is lack of knowledge. “**My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge**” (**Hosea 4:6**). Knowledge is a real problem in the modern church. Faith has content. **You must know** your misery *and what God has done in Christ*.

The gospel is in a word, **Jesus**. The gospel is that Jesus is the King, and the King has come. “**And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings (*euaggelizo*; gospel) of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,**

which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10). The Gospel is summarized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, “I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel (*euaggelion*) 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...” (1Co 15:1-2). Notice how he says this gospel was “received” and that by it you are “being saved” and that it is only through continuing to believe it that you have hope. But believe what?

“I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1Co 15:4-8). What did you do here? Nothing. It is about Christ. Christ **died for our sins**; he was **buried**; he was **raised**; and he **appeared**. This

is the Gospel. It is historical, factual, and 100% outside of yourself.¹

Do you see then how the gospel is Jesus? It is everything about *him*. It is the declaration that he has come, that he is king, that he is taking a bride. Tolkien's masterpiece got this right? The climax of the book is the Return of the King and his marriage to his bride after evil has been defeated. The gospel is that God has defeated his enemies, conquered evil, and has vindicated his Son by raising him from the dead so that the whole world may see that this is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Now, in both Luke and Paul, salvation *is* part of it. “**A Savior**” “**died for our sins.**” So, the gospel tells us how this King's kingdom is intruding upon the wicked kingdoms of men, bringing with it light and goodness and healing for the nations. God is bringing people into this kingdom. Even though perfection is necessary to be in it, imperfect people are somehow brought into it without God compromising his holiness or justice. By grace, God through Jesus Christ

¹ This is basically the contents of the Apostle's and Nicene Creeds, which is why those have always been held as the most important documents we have outside the Bible itself. The Creeds add a few things, such as who the Father and Spirit are, a couple more things about what Christ has done, and some thoughts about the church and the future judgment. But all in all, they are giving Paul's message of “first importance.”

has made it possible that your judgment can be overcome, your hostility to God broken down, and you can be a citizen of this eternal kingdom and considered God's friend. In Christ, God gives you all the benefits that the Son of God has, including his righteousness (not your own), his Spirit, his works, his blessings, his life. And perhaps best of all, these things are yours as a free gift of God, not through works, not through anything you do, but by faith alone. This then is the basics of what must be known.

Assent: Believing the Knowledge is True

The second part of faith is **assent**. Assent is simply a mental acknowledgement that, yes, God did those things. Many will hear this good news and say, “**No, I don't believe that.**” But many more will say, “**Yes, God gave the law. Yes, God judges sinners. Yes, Christ came and did those things.**” Assent is **agreement with the facts**. Another word for assent to the facts is “belief.” Yes, I believe those are true!

But beloved, you have to understand that like knowledge, assent is also not enough. It is necessary, but it is not sufficient for saving faith. “**You believe that God is**

one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19). I have a growing concern that if the larger part of the visible church today is lacking in knowledge, one of the chief problems in the Reformed community is that too many stop at assent. One particularly vitriolic Calvinist has said,

There are many groups, organizations, and individuals abroad promoting what they call the “Christian worldview.” But while they may have a world-view of some sort, it is not Christian, any more than the world-view of the apostolically anathematized Judaizers in Galatia. What removed the Judaizers from the fold of Christianity, and what removes many today, *is their denial of justification by belief alone*. That doctrine is a *sine qua non* for Christianity and a Christian worldview. Deny it, ignore it, soft-pedal it, and no matter how pious and religious you are, you are not Christian. [italics mine]²

This man’s ministry was nothing but a wrecking ball crashing against one Christian house after another. All he seemed capable of doing was blasting anyone who didn’t

² John Robbins, “Chuck Colson,” The Trinity Review (Oct 2000), 2 [1-5].

agree with him. In writing at least, he was one of the angriest people I've ever read. This went on for weeks, months, years, and decades. Until he died. The root reason why, in my opinion, is that for him, assent is all that faith is. Salvation was a head trip.

Beloved, the doctrine of *sola fide* is not “justification by belief (assent) alone.” It is justification by *faith* alone. If the final component of faith is missing, then this salvation by belief alone ends up becoming doctrinal righteousness akin to salvation by believing in salvation by faith alone. It is salvation by head knowledge, and its fruit is not of the Spirit, but of the flesh. We are not saved by believing the right doctrines. We are saved by Christ through faith alone in him (more on this next week).

Trust: Believing the Knowledge is True FOR ME

Rome actually has the same problem of saying that faith does not need assent to be saving. But the Reformers went beyond Rome, back to the Scripture, saying that true saving faith is knowledge, assent, and *trust* in Christ alone who did these things ... *for me*. “... I live by faith in the Son of God,

who loved me and gave himself for me (*huper emou*)” (Gal 2:20). You believe that Christ did those things? Good. Do you believe that he did them *for you*? Do you believe that he came in the womb of the virgin *for you*? Do you believe that he lived a perfect life *for you*? Do you believe that he died on the cross, satisfying the righteousness of God *for you*? Do you believe that his resurrection *gives you* eternal life? Did he do these things *for you*?

Again, some will say, “**But I don’t know if I’m elect. I don’t know if he did those things for me.**” Stop looking to election and look to Christ. Is Christ dead *for you*? His death is sufficient for all men. Therefore, it is sufficient for you. Do you believe he died for you? That is the question. Come to life through the Word!

*He lived and died to buy my pardon
An empty grace is there to prove my savior lives
Because he lives, I can face tomorrow*

That is saving faith. Believing that God’s grace, election, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification are all done *for and given to you*.

Isaiah's great Servant Songs begin with that word, ““Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God.” Comfort them with what? With the news that someone is coming who would speak tenderly to her and cry to her that through someone else “her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:2). These things were accomplished by the Suffering Servant, and beloved, it is finished.

How Do You Get Faith?

Now we want to move to some other thoughts about faith, so that we can learn to think properly about some different things that bring people no end of confusion. The first question I want to ask is, **how do you get faith?** The passage we looked at for grace alone gives us the answer. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9).

According to this verse, faith is a gift of God. He is its source, not you. Some have tried to argue that the gift here

is grace, not faith. But not only is that not the way the grammar reads, what point would there be to say that grace is the gift of God? Even Pelagius knew that. Furthermore, why add faith here but then not have it be the gift? People naturally already think that faith is what they give to God. They need to be told that isn't true.

Why does God give faith? So that you will not be able to conclude that salvation is by your own doing. It is not a result of works. If faith was something that came from you, it very well could be something you do, it could be a work. Further, it is so that no one may boast. If faith came from you, you could boast. In fact many people have boasted about their faith. Entire movements (like the Word-of-Faith movement) are completely devoted to bragging about their faith and the magical powers it possesses to get God to do anything they want.

But you say, **“I don't know if I have faith.”** You worry that maybe God won't give it to you. I tell you, then listen to what you are hearing. Then know how God is pleased to give faith. What did the Apostle think? **“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also**

to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, ‘*The just shall live by faith*’” (Rom 1:16-17).

What is he saying here? First, he is saying that faith has always been the way the righteous have lived. That’s why he quotes from Habakkuk 2:4. Second, he is saying that God gives the faith through the preaching of the Gospel. That means, right now, as I speak. So, you say to yourself before you walked in here, I don’t know if I believe. I tell you, the gospel has gone out. Christ is King. *Now* what do you believe? Is he king for you? The Word is carries own power to give faith, because the Word is living and active and He is able to do it in you. That’s the whole point.

What Does Faith Do? Justification through Faith Alone

I mentioned earlier that some people do not like this idea that faith includes trust, because they think that by it, this means that we “do” something, and therefore people have unwittingly turned faith into a work. So now we want to think about this idea of what faith does and if by it you are “doing” “works.”

So first, do you “do” something in faith? The answer is an obvious “yes.” Of course you do. *You* have faith. God does not have faith for you. You believe. You trust. But here’s the thing. This **faith is not meritorious**. It is no more meritorious for you to believe than it is for you to **breathe**. You breathe. Breathing is work. But it doesn’t earn God’s favor and somehow make him keep you alive. That’s nonsense. Faith is exactly the opposite of works and that’s the point of the entire NT.

Nevertheless, it is a thing you “do.” You are not justified in eternity past. You are not justified at the cross. You are not justified when you are born. You are justified through faith. One moment it is not there, the next it is, and it is *your* faith, not someone else’s. You are believing.

This is not an active doing, but like breathing, it is a passive doing. You don’t think about breathing, you just do it. In fact, when you start to think about breathing, that’s when you have troubles doing it! When God brings life to people, they breathe. In the same way, when the Holy Spirit brings new life to people, they believe.

If it is something “done,” what is it that faith does? Some people talk about faith “justifying” you. You are justified *by*

faith. But the reality is, you are not justified by faith, you are justified *through* faith. You are justified *by* God.³ **Romans 3:26** says that **God is** “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” God justifies, not faith.

Because this can get tricky, the Reformers spoke about various “causes” of justification. R. C. Sproul gives the helpful illustration of the causes of a **Michelangelo** sculpture.⁴ There are five kinds of causes:

	Definition	Example
Material cause	That out of which something is made.	The stone out of which a statue is carved.
Formal cause	The design or idea followed in the process of making something.	A sketch made by the sculptor as a pattern for the sculpture.
Final cause	The purpose for which something is made.	The reason why the sculptor is doing the sculpture.

³ “The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the Almighty Saviour on whom it rests ... It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ: faith in any other saviour, or in this or that philosophy or human conceit, or in any other gospel than that of Jesus Christ and Him as crucified, brings not salvation but a curse. It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith; and in this the whole biblical representation centres, so that we could not more radically misconceive it than by transferring to faith even the smallest fraction of that saving energy which is attributed in the Scriptures solely to Christ Himself.” **B. B. Warfield**, *Biblical Doctrines*, vol. 2 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 504.

⁴ (**R.C. Sproul**, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, electronic ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000], 74).

Efficient cause	The chief agent causing something to be made.	The sculptor.
Instrumental cause	The means or instrument by which something is made.	The sculptor's chisel.

The stone itself can be said to be a cause of a sculpture (material cause), but no one in their right mind would say that the stone made itself into a statue. Michelangelo used to think about what kind of a sculpture he would make (formal cause). But no one would say that simply because he thought about it that the statue poofed into existence. Michelangelo got paid by the church to make some of his statues (final cause). But no one would say that the money made the statue exist. Michelangelo used a hammer and chisel to bring his statues out of the marble (instrumental cause). But only in cartoons do hammers and chisels work on their own or do anything. Each of these is a necessary but not efficient cause. They don't make the sculpture come into being, but it can't come into being without them.

Faith is the hammer and chisel of justification. It is the instrumental cause. Only God is the efficient cause, the one who actually justifies someone. If I wanted to use a different analogy, when I eat cereal, I put it in a bowl. The bowl in

the instrumental cause of my eating my Count Chocula. I ate the cereal, the bowl held it for me. That's what faith does. Faith is the bowl that holds justifying graces which are given to you by God and filled up by the Spirit through the Word and effectual calling. So, it is *through* faith that God justifies you.

What then is justification? Rome teaches that it is an infusion, a literal pouring in of the righteousness of Christ so that you become righteous. This righteousness is then your righteousness. The problem comes experientially. What happens when you sin? If you commit a bad enough sin, you cease to be righteous. That is, you lose your justification. Protestants have their own version of this, but it ends the same way. They talk about "losing salvation."

This is not the way the Bible thinks of it. Scripture talks about God **declaring you righteous**. It is a legal term. God declares you righteous, even though you aren't. Why? This is where this entire discussion becomes all the more important. Because of Christ and Christ alone. This is something we will need to **spend much more time on next time**. But the point is here, because of what Christ has done, through Christ, through his work, through his obedience,

through his death, through his resurrection ... through Christ, God can do this.

Upon no other basis can he or will he do this than the work of Christ. This includes the basis of your works. This includes [the beginning of salvation](#) in justification, [the middle](#) of it in sanctification, or [the end](#) of it in glorification. If at any point something other than Christ's righteousness becomes the basis of your justification, you are undone. For God cannot justify you on the account of imperfect righteousness, and that is all you could contribute. God cannot let you into heaven on account of 51%-49% good works (as if that were even possible). It is all or nothing. Only perfect people get into heaven, and it is through justification that God declares you perfect in his righteousness.

The image here is that of baptism. In water baptism, you are figuratively clothed with Christ like priest who is clothed with his beautiful garments. Therefore, spiritual baptism does the same thing. When you are saved, Christ becomes your garment. [Zechariah 3:1ff](#) has Satan accusing the priest Joshua of sin. So, [the Angel of the LORD](#) (Christ), inserts himself and defends the priest in a divine council

courtroom drama worthy only of the Bible. Yet, Joshua *was* clothed in filthy garments. That is, he is sinful. Satan is actually correct in his accusations. Therefore, the angel tells him, “**Make yourself perfect by your works.**” God forbid! He commands, “**Remove the filthy garments from him. Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.**” This goes all the way back to Eden, when the LORD clothed Adam and Eve in garments not their own. This is justification. It not a making you righteous, but a covering you in the righteousness of another, so that God sees you through the righteousness of another.

You are counted as righteous, and in fact, because Christ now covers you, more, because he is now “in” you (and you in him), **you have his righteousness.** This is not your own righteousness, but an **alien righteousness**, the righteousness of another. It is the righteousness of the perfect Lamb of God, and because of it, you are given all the benefits and comforts that belong to him.

Do you see what **good news** this is? And do you see why it is so vital to keep this good news going **all the way through** to the end? Do you see why it is so important to

begin *and end* with faith alone, why it is faith from first to last that is what justifies? Because if it is anything else, you end up dead in your sins. You end up frustrated in your sins. You end up having to moralize your way out of the mess that Jesus already solved. When you look inward at your sins, and you still have them, you are turning your eyes away from Christ and what he did. Do you believe that Jesus did *all* of this for you, once for all?

What About Works?

But now I want to deal with the question, **what about works?** This is a terribly important question, and it becomes a razor's edge of precision that is needed to keep you from slipping back into one of the two errors at the beginning, or the opposite error of saying that works are in every sense irrelevant to salvation. The fact of the matter is, **there is some sense in which everyone who will be saved is saved by works.**

First, you are saved *by Christ's works*. God does not flush works down the toilet because people are sinful. Christ obeyed for a reason. It is his works that God saves us by. It

is his works that he credits to your account through faith from first to last.

Second, his works, because you are in union with him through faith, become your works. That is, all Christians have good works, because all Christians are in Christ. A person who claims Christ who does not have good works is not a Christian. James couldn't be any clearer on this. "Someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18). "Faith without works is dead" (17).

James gets confusing, in part, because he uses the words "justify" (2:21; 24; 25) and "saved" (2:14) in the context of saying "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (24). But what is he talking about? He is talking about how *other people* know that your faith is real. He isn't talking about how God justifies a person, but how we are justified before the world.

The word can be used in different senses. "Wisdom is justified by her deeds" (Matt 11:19). Does this mean that God is declaring wisdom righteous when she isn't? Of course not. It is saying that you know wisdom by how it

acts. It is an earthly public vindication, not a heavenly legal declaration. James is saying, “**Show me your faith.**”

You see, *we all* keep sinning, and so we have to strive to put sin to death in our bodies (Romans 6). Some of you obsessed with your sins, seem to forget that we’re all in this same boat. If you know your brother is struggling with this, then we need to do a better job of showing this to one another. Here’s a great Luther quote I heard this week:

May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian Church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be and remain in the church and little flock of the fainthearted, the feeble and the ailing, who feel and recognize the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sins.

We all struggle with sin, and so we also have to struggle and strive to obey God in his law. But our striving is to be done through faith, not fear or frustration. What does Hebrews 11 teach us about works? It teaches us that in every instance of a saint in the OT, their faith worked itself out in obedience to God. Every time. They all remained sinners.

Sometimes, they sinned very, very badly. Yet, God still declared them righteous through faith. And, he gave them good works to prove it.

This necessitates a moment discussion **weak vs. strong faith**. Not all saving faith is of the same degree, but it is all of the same substance. All saving faith is real faith. But some have a weak faith and because of it, they stumble in places you may not. (In fact, I think we all have weak faith in some places and strong faith in others with regard to the law, thus we need one another). But listen to Luther again:

It is true that I and you do not hold and believe the saving truth so firmly as St. Peter does. Yet we have one and the same treasure. Two persons may hold glasses of wine in their hands: the hand of the one trembles, the hand of the other does not. Two persons may hold a purse full of money: one with a weak hand, the other with a strong hand. Whether the hand is strong or weak, please God, it neither increases nor decreases the contents of the purse. So the only difference between me and St. Peter is the fact that he holds this treasure more firmly.⁵

⁵ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*. Edited by Ewald M. Plass. 3 vols. St. Louis: Concordia, 1959. 1:487. Cited in Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 81–82.

How does a person get started in good works? Someone has recently written a book called, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*.⁶ In it, he argues that part of the range of meaning (besides “trust” or “belief) of “faith” (*pistis*) is allegiance. One of the good things about this idea is that too often we speak about faith in these nebulous terms that don’t really make sense.

If Jesus is King and you believe that, then what kind of a response proves it? Allegiance. When a new citizen is sworn into the United States, it is interesting that they have to say:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of

⁶ **Matthew W. Bates**, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Baker Academic, 2017). A good review of this book is **Thomas Schreiner**, “Saved by ‘Allegiance’ Alone? On a New Attempt to Revise the Reformation,” *The Gospel Coalition* (March 3, 2017), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-review-salvation-by-allegiance-alone>. I came across a Reformed Theonomist named **Kevin Craig** who seems to have taken this basic idea a dozen years ago. See “Justification by Allegiance,” <http://justificationbyallegiance.com/>

America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same ... that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

The U.S. oath separates faith from allegiance, and yet you can see how closely tied they are together. The allegiance begins with the oath, and from there it continues throughout a life. In a biblical parallel, [this oath is taken at baptism](#), which occurs *because* you've already received faith, not in order to get faith. It occurs because you've been justified, not to get justified.

Baptism is also called the oath or [the good confession \(1Ti 6:13\)](#). In the NT, it is a kind of first outward act of repentance. In it, you renounce the devil and pledge allegiance to Christ. Through it, as a means of grace, God sanctifies, confirming you in the knowledge that you have died with Christ and been raised to newness of life in him. This is what allegiance is. This is what repentance is. And they are fruits that spring forth early on in justification and set you off towards a lifetime of repentance and good works.

God does not justify a person and not also produce good works in them. He gives his Holy Spirit, and the Spirit produces fruit in our lives, because that's what Vines do for living branches. So, works are the necessary fruit of union with Christ, which comes from being justified through faith. But even at the end, works do not play a *foundational* part in why God will let you into heaven. He will reward you based on your works, but you do not get into heaven because of them, in the future anymore than the past. Rewards for works are completely different from being vindicated on the final day, which is based on Christ's work alone.

The Comforting Gospel

Beloved, I don't know any other good news than this that I can stand to hear. I haven't grown up in Rome, so I can't speak from experience about that system and the way it beats people down regarding comfort, though I have read about it. I can say I grew up in it with certain Protestants groups, and nothing makes me more upset than having the

good news become something I do; that is tyranny to my soul.

Stop telling me to “live in the Spirit” as if God will finally approve of me or finally be able to do something with me. Stop giving me steps to making me a holier person. Tell me about Christ. Tell me what he has done for me in spite of myself. Tell me that in Christ, I am holy! Tell me that God looks upon me the same whether I sin or don't, because of Christ. Tell me that when I fall, Christ picks me up. Tell me that he doesn't leave me or forsake me. Tell me that he loves me and died for me. Tell me that he underwent all these things for me. **Tell me that he alone is good enough for me.** Tell me and don't stop telling me. This is what I need all the days of my life.

What is your only comfort in life and in death? Beloved, it is Jesus. None here can now say they do not know *of* him. Have you believed that these things are true? And do you believe that they are true for you?