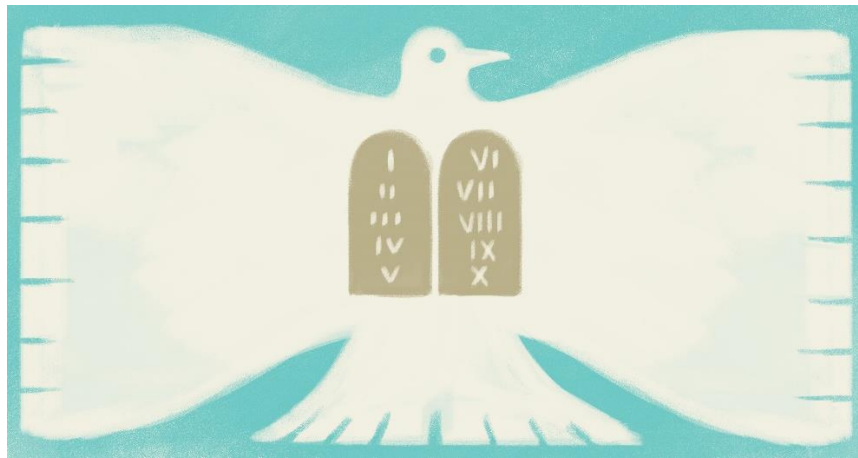


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What is Justification by Works, and Why Do We Reject It?

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1



The Works of the Law

The apostle Paul emphasizes that we are not justified by “works” or by the “works of the law,” and the question before us is what Paul means when he speaks this way. Paul emphasizes that we don’t receive the Spirit and we aren’t justified by the works of the law ([Gal. 2:16](#); [Gal. 3:2, 5, 10](#); [Rom. 3:20, 28](#)). The works of the law refer to the entire law. The New Perspective on Paul argues that the works of the law focus on boundary markers like circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath, but it is more natural to think that the entire law is in view. This is supported by [Galatians 3:10](#), “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” Paul emphasizes here that we must do *everything* written in the law to be justified, and thus works of the law more naturally refer to the *entire* law. The Galatians are also criticized for wanting to be “under the law” ([Gal. 4:21](#)), which refers to the law as a whole.

We also see from [Galatians 3:10](#) and the argument in [Romans 1:18–3:20](#) that one must keep the law perfectly to be saved. Everything in the law must be observed to avoid the curse of the law. Since no one keeps all that the law demands (see [1 Kings 8:46](#); [Ps. 143:2](#); [Prov. 20:9](#)), the works of the law can’t save. God demands perfection, and thus the

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only hope for forgiveness is the atoning work of Jesus ([Rom. 3:21–26](#)) where the curse of the law is lifted for those who trust in Christ ([Gal. 3:13](#)). We receive the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ only because Christ has become sin for our sake and for our salvation ([2 Cor. 5:21](#)).

The works of the law don't bring justification, and Paul argues in a similar way when he teaches that works don't justify. We read in [Romans 4:2](#), "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." The term "works" here refers to what human beings do, particularly the good things we might do to receive God's approval. This definition of works is supported by [Romans 9:11](#) where works are defined as anything we should do "either good or bad." Works of the law aren't in view in [Romans 4](#) since Abraham didn't live under the law. In the case of Abraham, then, works in a broad and general sense are intended.

We must read Paul's argument in [Romans 4:2](#) very carefully. He is not saying that Abraham did all the works that God required but he was judged to be unrighteous anyway. The argument is precisely the opposite. If Abraham did what God demanded, he would rightly be able to boast about his works and would be justified on the basis of these works. God is fair and just. He doesn't condemn those who carry out his commandments. Paul then quotes [Genesis 15:6](#) in [Romans 4:3](#)—"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—to show that Abraham stood in the right before God not by achieving but by believing, not by performing but by resting in God's grace, not through his merit but because of the mercy of God.

Counted as Righteous

Paul continues to explain his view of works in [Romans 4:4–5](#). "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." Verse 4 teaches us that if Abraham or anyone else performs the works that are required, then they would deserve to be justified. Their justification would be warranted because of the works they performed, just as a person who faithfully works in his job deserves his pay. We see once again that Paul doesn't rule out works by definition. If the required works are present, then we would be justified by works. Still, the problem with Abraham and with all of us is that we don't observe the works God demands. When Paul declares in [Romans 4:5](#) that God justifies the ungodly, Abraham is included among the ungodly. Justification can't be attained by works because we are all ungodly, because we have "all sinned and fall short of the glory of God" ([Rom. 3:23](#)). There is Old Testament support for the idea that Abraham was ungodly, for [Joshua 24:2](#) says, "And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the

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Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.””” Before Abraham was saved, he was an idolater, a worshiper of false gods. In other words, he was ungodly! Abraham experienced the joy that comes from the gospel, where God justifies the ungodly who put their trust in him.

Our works done in righteousness can't save us, for these works aren't sufficient to warrant God's approval.

3

The understanding of works presented in [Romans 4:1–5](#) is explained even further as Paul brings up David in [Romans 4:6–8](#), “just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’” Why wasn’t David justified by works? The answer is that he didn’t do the works God required, that he, too, was a sinner. He did “lawless deeds” and sinned against the Lord. Paul almost certainly has in mind David’s adultery and his murder of Uriah. Since God is perfect in holiness and is just in all his ways, he demands perfection.

Forgiveness Is from God

No one stained with sin can be in God’s presence without facing judgment and wrath. Otherwise, God would contradict his very nature, his beautiful holiness. Forgiveness, then, can only come from God himself. Human beings, since they are transgressors, can’t perform what God requires. God must save us from our terrible dilemma, and this explains why justification is by faith alone and is rooted in Christ bearing our sins on the cross. Thus, those who try to be justified by works instead of faith stumble over the free grace offered to us in Christ ([Rom. 9:32](#)). Those who attempt to be justified by works are actually falling prey to idolatry, to worship of the creature rather than the Creator ([Rom. 1:25](#)). They are using their works as a basis for boasting in order to justify themselves. The desire to boast in our works is folly since we are sinners, and there is no basis for boasting. Such boasting reflects the self-deception engendered by sin, as if we can do anything in the flesh to please God ([Rom. 8:7–8](#)).

It is very clear, then, that justification through grace alone rules out works, for if works save us, then grace is canceled. [Romans 11:6](#) makes this very clear: “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” Grace and works are fundamentally and irretrievably opposed to one another. As Paul says

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in [Ephesians 2:9](#), since salvation is by God's grace, then it can't be the "result of works, so that no one may boast." Paul makes the same point in [2 Timothy 1:9](#): he "saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." Salvation apart from works shows us that salvation isn't a human work, and that all the glory goes to God for our rescue from sin. Paul returns to this truth again and again because it is at the center of the gospel. Thus, he says in one of his last letters that God "saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Our works done in righteousness can't save us, for these works aren't sufficient to warrant God's approval. Thus, we rely on God's mercy for our justification and for our salvation.

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