

Part 4: The Heart of Justification

Tyler Velin | Galatians 2:11-21

November 16th, 2025

There are lots of words that we associate with one another. For instance, you could take an "athletic" center, swap it out for "fitness" everyone would know what you mean by it. You could call a restaurant an "eatery," and we'd figure it out. If the "Diner's Club" rebranded to the "Supper Club," we'd know what to expect.

But my guess is that we'd all be a bit confused if suddenly our "community center" became "justification center," or community advocates became "justification advocates." I would guess a ministry titled "community groups" would appeal to a lot more people than justification groups.

While justice is often talked about in our culture—justification doesn't have the same presence. Sometimes we will hear it used in a legal sense when someone's actions were declared "justified." Maybe, those who do a lot of typing might know the difference between a left justified margin and a right justified margin.

More frequently though, it's a word we hear in church. And it's not one we hear with great excitement. It's often the sign of the book study you don't want to join. If we were self-diagnosed our own areas for growth we'd lean into the more practical: love, community, or Bible reading. We aren't helped when pastors like the Puritan Anthony Burgess give their books titles like this: *"The True Doctrine of Justification, Asserted and Vindicated, From the Errors of many, and more especially Papists and Socinians or A Treatise of the Natural Righteousness of God and Imputed Righteousness of Christ."*

I was sharing the gospel with a guy once who said, "I don't worry about that justification stuff. It doesn't really affect what we do in the church."

But here is the beauty of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Justification is at the heart of Paul's words. Pound for pound it is one of the heaviest theological hitters in the whole New Testament. But Paul didn't write this for the academy. Paul didn't write this for peer review. Paul didn't write this for his own theological pleasure. Paul wrote this book to Christians who have a community problem. He wrote it because the basis of Christian community and love was being torn apart.

While we are drawn to discussions on love, community, fellowship and care—Paul writes this letter to remind us that justification is at the very heart of our community, fellowship and care. Justification isn't an academic doctrine that we treat like a crock-pot, finding in Christ but then letting it run gently in the background until we have a need for it again. Justification is the daily fabric of our lives.

Before we get into our passage today, what in the world is justification? The word is actually a legal word—and it communicates the status of one individual to others. When someone is declared justified—it means they have a right to be there. In fact in Greek, justification is the process, and righteousness is the result. They are connected.

While righteousness might sound scary as well, listen to the word itself. To be declared righteous is to give you the confidence of "rightness." It reminds us that our sense of peace is once again, outside of us.

The hope for confidence is seeing what's needed to belong and being able to attain the basis of belonging.

Our life is a quest for justification. Think of it this way: When I was working up the courage to ask Sarah out on a date—I laid the groundwork of getting to know her, showing I cared for her, and I even lied and said I like country music. Why did I do those things? Because I wanted her to declare me justified. I wanted her to consider my actions and my affections and say—you deserve a date.

We put a lot of hope in our pitch at work—because we know we need it to be justified by others. We work hard on the team because we want to earn the righteousness of knowing we belong there. While justification might be an unfamiliar and scary word—the fear of not being justified and welcomed is an all-too-common motivator behind every action in our life.

Justification is what's behind our heart, and it's behind the heart we treat others with as well. That's why our sermon this morning is titled: "The Heart of Justification." Our passage today is a transition in Paul's letter where he shares one final story from his past to leverage the present problem facing the Galatian churches.

And his main point is clear: **Justified hearts are confident hearts.**

We are going to see this in three ways today. First Paul is going to show us **The Pain of Unjustified Fear**, then the **Basis of Justified Faith**, and finally **A Life of Justified Fearlessness**.

The book of Galatians is a pastoral letter. A letter written for true community in the church. The beauty of the one true gospel is that it allows broad diversity—but only when there's unity on justification. For the world this looks like whatever cultural markers set people apart. But for the church this looks like what brings Christians from all different cultures together before God.

Paul shows us this through a story where he rebuked Cephas (Peter) over this very issue. **Galatians 2:11-14**, "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

We'll wade through the background of this story—but to put it simply Paul draws this out: What you see as the basis of your belonging to a community becomes the bars for someone else.

And this is our first point: **The Pain of Unjustified Fear.**

Do you remember back in school, when you knew the clothes or the talking points that made you feel accepted? But do you remember the fear you had when you showed up one day and the clothes and the talking points changed? That's a smaller version of what's happening here. But to understand it—we need to frame our context.

First, we need to understand the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Broadly speaking, Jews were those physical descendants of Abraham, and the Gentiles were any culture or nations which was not Jewish.

But what's unique is that ethnicity was not the primary marker of belonging to God's people. The Lord made it possible for Gentiles to come into God's promise. To do this they had to worship God and accept the Old Testament Law that God gave to the Jews.

Just as you've got house rules for family board game night—God gave house rules to the Jews. His Law created a culture and life which was meant to mark his people off as distinct from everyone else. Their distinct hope in God was a distinct witness to a watching world.

This meant that the basis of belonging to God's promised people was in both Jew and Gentiles obeying the law in regard to what food they ate, what clothes they wore, and chiefly for the men—being circumcised.

But all of this changed, when Jesus came about. Jesus claimed that he alone was righteous enough to fulfill the law. Not even the Jews could obey the law well enough to belong to God. Jesus was the distinctly holy and pure. He fulfilled the basis. And when he died on the cross, he allowed his standards to be anyone's standards not by the law—but through him.

But we all know that behind the way of life we are used to is a comfort we enjoy right? The Jews had gotten used to eating a certain way—and those habits hung around. The Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians kind of stayed in their own communities.

This didn't really change until Peter himself began to fellowship with Gentile Christians in Acts 10. And this only happened because the resurrected Jesus himself appeared to Peter and reminded him three times that there is no food or people that are "unclean." Jesus told Peter, "What God has made clean, let man not separate."

In other words, the standard for Christian fellowship is not clean foods, or cultural customs—but instead the only standard is being made clean by faith in Jesus.

Peter did the right, and hard thing. We pressed into cultural discomfort. If this were a movie, it's the scene when the popular kid left his seat at the cool table and went and sat with the losers. He acknowledged that they didn't share the same cultures, but they shared the same savior—and that was enough to bring them together in the church.

Which is why what happened in Antioch was so painful to the Gentile Christians. Peter, who once ate with them, withdrew and separated himself. Why? Because of fear.

What caused that fear? We aren't sure what these men from James said to him—but the effect was that Peter himself forgot his own basis for belonging. Peter feared that if he kept hanging with these Gentiles with their weird foods, that his Jewish Christian friends might withdraw from him!

So Peter, withdrew. He left the basis he once stood on—and while he thought he found freedom Paul makes it clear that he was on the wrong side of the bars. He stood condemned.

Notice the immense pain and confusion which followed. Even Barnabas—the Son of Encouragement who first affirmed the Antioch Christians—withdrew.

Now, notice what Paul said in verse 14: “When I saw his conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel...” Paul assumes that Peter knows the gospel! But he shows us how easy it is to forget the way in which the gospel causes us to treat others. Peter and Barnabas forgot that whatever unites them to God—also unites them to God’s people.

And when those standards are different—pain and confusion follow. Your basis of belonging—become the bars that keep other people out. Here, those Gentile believers in Antioch who once enjoyed such confident fellowship with diverse brothers and sisters were told: Jesus isn’t enough—you’ve got to eat, look, act and talk like us. Belonging to a culture had replaced belonging to Christ.

A good question to ask ourselves as individuals and as a church is what role does culture play in our lives, our homes and our gathering. There has to be a culture. There's no getting around that. But are we more comfortable with our culture than we are with Christ? Do we preach belonging in Christ or do our lives preach belonging by culture?

I've spoken with brothers who were saved in prison. There they were visited by believers from the outside who preached Christ to them, who spent time with them, and who cared for them. But when those same brothers leave the prison where everyone was like them, and try to find a place in the church--they encounter a culture that is quite different than prison.

Do you know that you have had in this room brothers, saved by grace in Jesus Christ, who have come into this room--seen what's going on here, spent time in your community groups, heard your conversations and told me that they are leaving because they feel out of place--they don't feel justified to be here. They don't have the right clothes, they don't say the right words, they don't look the right way. They feel they don't have the same basis, and they fear once more they are behind bars—and they are bigger than any they faced in prison.

We all have a culture, but the gospel is what's needed to create something bigger than a culture. Do we naturally only drift in conversation to those who are like us? Those who are of the same age? Those who have the same hobbies? Those who eat the same foods? Those kinds of relationships aren't wrong--but those shared interests are not the basis for Christian community.

Now we can spend a whole lot of time trying to examine cultures in order to avoid this—but Paul knows what best fixes it. How can we be corrected or prevented from doing such a thing? Take one quick look at your culture—and one long look back at the cross.

Justified hearts are confident hearts—and if you want right confidence for you, and for others—you need to make sure it's true confidence.

Here's our second point: **The Basis of Justified Faith.**

Paul now uses Peter's situation to transition into the issues presenting the Galatian churches: **Galatians 2:15-17**, "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one

will be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!"

If you want to be wise about the basis of belonging you present to others, you've got to be certain about the basis of belonging to God. Paul jokingly affirms those two artificial cultures of popular and unpopular. He says, "You're born Jews--you were born cool. You're not like those loser sinful Gentiles." But Paul uses those categories not to affirm them. Instead, he shows how foolish that thinking was by appealing to what Jewish Christians already knew about their salvation.

He says, "you know" that a person isn't justified by the works of the law--but through faith in Jesus Christ. We believe in Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Jesus not by the outward and observable works of the law.

And notice how he finished that: "because by works of the law no one will be justified."

Your belonging to a sports team will ultimately be justified because you worked hard enough and got good enough to earn a spot. Your date will ultimately accept you because you worked in such a way that justified her time. Your boss will give you a raise because your time spent on the job or performance has justified it.

But none of us are justified from our sins and accepted by God because we worked hard enough or because we belonged to the right group of people. You, if you are a Christian, are justified by faith in Jesus alone. It doesn't matter if you're Jewish or if you're American. It doesn't matter if you're rich or if you're poor. It doesn't matter if you have tattoos or stinky feet. What matters is faith in Jesus Christ. The bar of belonging in God's righteousness is faith in Jesus alone.

Why? No one is justified by works of the law. There's no other way in which God will accept us except by faith in his son. And if that's how God accepts you--then why would you present anything else to anyone else?

Grace for you brings you back to Jesus and into the church. But for others it has to be faith in Jesus plus having a clean home? If we have been won back to God by faith alone--then isn't faith alone sufficient to win us to one another?

If there's nothing about your clean home, or your mortgage, or your degree that makes you justified with God--then why would we require a fellow believer to have such things to be justified to us?

Paul's logic here is really tight and I want to help us see it. Beginning in verse **17** he says, "If in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?"

He's actually revealing the false standard of morality that is so often behind our treatment of others. We don't want to have these people over because it doesn't feel right. But what the cross shows us is that whatever is not right is sin! And because Jesus will not lead us back into sin--then obeying Jesus by moving into the lives and homes of believers who are not like us might be weird and it might be hard but it is never wrong. Jesus always leads us into those who share Christ with us, and Jesus never leads us into sin. So whatever cultural, comfortable, social norms are pressed--let them be pressed out by the wonder of the cross.

You see Peter's problems didn't start with what he thought about the Gentiles belonging to God--Peter's problems started when he forgot how he belonged to God. If the gospel wins us out of the wrath of God and into his pleasure--then we have the only justification we ever need. You don't need the safety net of our comfort zones or our cultural norms. Why? Because those don't justify us. They won't make you feel right.

When cultures change, when communities change, we feel uncomfortable. That's unavoidable. But the Christian can recognize the discomfort we might have in the flesh is overcome by the comfort we share in Christ. When I go worship in a church in Africa and they clap more than I like, and they kiss me on the cheek, and they make me stay for hours after the service to eat with them--I remind myself that my norms aren't what grant me acceptance with these people. They don't need to worship Jesus like me. But we worship the same Jesus.

If you've been coming to our church and you're wondering what it looks like to be justified here, to belong to our community--I want you to see it's only by faith in Jesus Christ. While we can't avoid cultures--the church should labor hard to make sure the gospel culture is prioritized over any other culture.

This produces not only care for others, but confidence in our own hearts. Then we have what Paul models in our last point: **A Life of Justified Fearlessness.**

A justified heart is a confident heart, and because Paul is so confident in his own justification he has a fearlessness that stands out as freed in contrast with the fear of not belonging.

When we realize the gospel frees others from false standards of justification--it frees us as well.

Galatians 2:19-21, "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life 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 nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

The kind of bold boundary crossing the world so deeply wants to see is something that the Christian church alone is equipped to do.

Why? Because we see how Jesus crossed the boundary for us. When men withdrew from men out of fear—Jesus the Son of God took on flesh and lived among us out of love. He left the culture of heaven and came here out of love.

Why? Because there is no other basis, community, or salvation the world can offer that can give you the promise of righteousness. Whatever you're looking for—the empty tomb shows us it's not found here. It's found only in Jesus.

And the standard isn't changing. It's not going out of style. It's not getting taken off the air. It won't suffer from a cultural revolution. It transfers across borders and thrives in any economy.

Jesus gives us righteousness—and we must learn to rest in that and that alone. We no longer live to those standards—we live to God.

Paul assumes that sometimes the world will see us as foolish for the bars we hold up. It might be weird that you spend so much time with believers, so much time sharing the gospel, so much time not pursuing the pleasures of the world. They might tell you that. You might feel weird answering, “What did you do this weekend,” tomorrow with, “I raked leaves on Saturday and went to church on Sunday.” But you’ve been crucified in Christ. Those standards of the world couldn’t save you—and they didn’t save you.

There are times where we will feel the pinch of gospel living from *inside* the church. We’ll invite someone into our guy’s Bible study or our girl’s night who doesn’t meet the standards of natural friendship. We might “ruin the vibe.”

You might be accused of believing all that person believes about politics, or about schooling, or whatever. But you have been crucified with Christ. We should all see sin as sin—but we should all see Christ as the clear means of fellowship between one another.

When we know the love of God for us in Jesus Christ—it propels us towards one another in Christ. This is true and free living. Justified hearts are confident hearts. So let us confidently stand in Christ and with one another and live for him. May God’s heart in our justification fuel our heart for others.