




THE COMPASS

A TOOL FOR DISCIPLERS

Justification by Faith

Conversation On the Journey

Because this is a fairly complex concept, try to cut down on the complexity by doing your teaching primarily from one book, Romans. Following the flow of logic contained within the book should also help in your teaching. In the first several chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul summarizes the universal lost state of mankind. He also underscores to the Jews that possessing God's laws did not make them any more righteous, or any more successful, than Gentiles at keeping them. His summary statement is found in Romans 3:20:
Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law, rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

(You might ask how the law made us conscious of sin?) The Mosaic Law functioned like a speed limit sign. It only made you aware you were speeding (sinning), but had no power to help you slow down. In fact, Paul will later argue that the law increased sin. You also might ask your disciple how it did that. Ever have someone say "Whatever you do, don't touch that?" What did that make you want to do? Exactly, it made you want to touch it.

Now read the next section, Romans 3:21-24:
But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. All right, you have two words you'll need to explain: "righteousness" and "justified." But first, ask your disciple to define them always good to ask a question before telling.

Paul is using legal, courtroom, terminology to help explain what God has done for us. Righteousness means a "right-standing" before the judge (God). Justified means for the judge (God) to declare you "just." The courtroom background is important, because even if someone is guilty, a judge has the ability to declare someone innocent. Here, now, is the big idea. When we think of Christ's death for our sin, we think only that He has forgiven our sin, but these verses are saying something far greater: God actually credited to us Jesus' righteousness. To use a financial analogy, not only was our debt covered, but we were awarded a billion dollars.

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This Week's Excursion

There are few concepts as revolutionary to the Christian life as knowing that we've been justified by God; that is, that God has declared us "just" or "righteous." Yet, explaining it requires some theological verbiage that makes this a difficult subject to teach. You have two objectives. First is to communicate that Jesus has not only paid the penalty for our sins, but He has also given something to us: His righteousness. The second thing you will need to communicate is that this was a gift of God, not earned, but received by faith.

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And of course what makes it all the more amazing is that it's given to us as a gift. We didn't earn it, but received it by faith. If this incredible generosity is difficult for us to grasp, it was doubly so for the Jews in Paul's audience. They were steeped in the belief that one is justified, or righteous, only by observing every letter of the Mosaic law.

Paul, then, must prove his point to his skeptical Jewish hearers. So in chapter four, he introduces two testimonies into the law court he has metaphorically constructed: Abraham and David, the pillars of the Old Testament and men renowned for their godliness. To paraphrase his argument, Paul says, "Hey, reread your Bible! These guys were declared righteous by faith, not by how good they were or how well they followed the Law of Moses." Though your disciple may not be Jewish, it can still be helpful for them to see the logic of the argument Paul has constructed. The great men of God were considered righteous because of their faith. They believed God, and, therefore, God considered them righteous.

Finally in Romans 5:1-2 (as well as v. 9) we have the summation of the argument: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

There are a lot of ways to illustrate this incredible truth. My favorite is to take a dirty page and shove it inside a book. The book represents Christ, the dirty page, us. God does not see our sin, but sees the righteous life of Christ, that has been credited to us. Now, you have made your point: Because we are in Christ, God sees us as "righteous." We are clothed, like the dirty page in the book, in Christ's righteousness. But this leads to the obvious reflection that we are still, in practice, far from righteous. So, you have two more theological terms to expose to your disciple.

Sanctification

Sanctification is the process by which God aligns our actions to what He has already declared us: righteous. The word sanctify means to "set apart," or "to be made holy." Eph. 4:11-16 is an overview of the growth and sanctification process. You might read through the passage and ask, what are some qualities of a mature Christian? How does God cause growth? How have you seen growth occurring in your life?

Glorification

The final step on the spiritual journey is seen in 1 Cor. 15:50-55 and 1 Jn 3:2. These passages assure us that one day the process will be complete, and we will be made holy. You might ask in what area of their life they are most looking forward to seeing perfected.

†End

Next Steps

Though we come to understand our righteousness is by faith, we can easily begin to come back under performance: in our own strength, trying to do things for God. Here is the critical truth. God doesn't want us to do things for Him. He wants to live His life out through us.

By faith you have received Christ's righteousness. Daily, by faith, you ask Jesus to live out His life in and through you.

Ask your disciple what sort of situation would be helpful to, by faith, ask Jesus to live His life out through them. "Lord, lead me, use me, show me, what you want to do through me today," is the prayer of the disciple. Not, "Watch me Jesus. I'm going to do some really good things for you."

Side Trails

The Finished Work of Christ: The Truth of Romans 1-8. Francis Schaeffer. Good News.

Justification by Faith Alone. Sproul, MacArthur, Beeke. Soli Deo Gloria Books.

The Cross of Christ. John Stott. IV Press.

Order at christianbook.com



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