



Session 6 -- Catholicism

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Number three tonight is Catholicism and this one is particularly sensitive. People immediately ask, “Wait. Are you calling Catholicism a cult?” We even had some drop out of Secret Church who were planning on doing it tonight but decided not to when they realized we’d be talking about Catholicism. So why would I include this here? Maybe some of you were surprised to see it—or maybe even offended to see it.

I’m guessing that it’s more likely that people with Catholic backgrounds or who even currently attend Catholic churches are part of Secret Church, more so than Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. So let’s dive into what the Catholic Church teaches officially. Let me emphasize this again. Just because the Catholic Church teaches a doctrine doesn’t mean every single Catholic believes that doctrine. But much like we discussed with Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, there is an official leadership and governance structure with official teachings that mark the Catholic Church. So let’s see what the Catholic Church teaches, then let’s ask is Catholicism a cult? Or is Catholicism a counterfeit gospel? Is it both? Is it neither?

Who Are Catholics?

As a general definition, Catholicism refers to the faith practice and system of government of the Roman Catholic Church, of which the pope or the bishop of Rome is the head. By definition, Catholicism claims to originate with Christianity and to carry on a line of successive popes beginning with St. Peter, who governed the church with authority. We’ll dive more into that as we go.

When it comes to global population, from 1910 to 2010 the global Catholic population grew from 291 million to nearly 1.1 billion people. Catholics have steadily comprised approximately half of the global Christian population and approximately 16% of the entire global population. In other words, Catholicism is huge. It’s interesting, when you look at geographic migration, in 1919, 65% of Catholics lived in Europe,

24% lived in Latin America. One hundred years later, in 2010, 24% of Catholics lived in Europe and 39% in Latin America and the Caribbean. That is a massive shift, particularly away from Europe.

By way of geographic migration, in 1910, approximately one million Catholics—less than 1% of the global Catholic population—lived in sub-Saharan Africa. One hundred years later, in 2010, approximately 171 million Catholics—about 16% of the global Catholic population—lived in sub-Saharan Africa. One million to 171 million. Then when it comes to North America, in 1910, approximately 15 million, or 5%, of Catholics, lived in North America. By 2010 approximately 89 million—8% of Catholics—lived in North America. That was a pretty significant increase.

What Does Catholicism Teach?

From the start we need to see that there are **major similarities** between what I'll call Evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism. By Evangelical Protestantism—which I'll flesh out more as we go—I mean gospel believing. That's what “evangelical” is supposed to mean. The problem is it's become a political label in the United States today in extremely unfortunate ways. But don't think politics; think gospel believing. Then Protestantism is a term that refers to the significant break from the Catholic Church that happened in 15th, 16th and 17th centuries.

But even with some of the differences between Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism—which we'll look at in a minute—there are major similarities. Regarding the Trinity, the Catholic Church teaches all the truth we emphasized at the start of our time tonight about the one true God. God is one. God has revealed Himself as three Persons. The catechism of the Catholic Church, which is basically a systematic statement of the Catholic Church's teachings, states:

“We do not confess three Gods, but one God in three persons, the consubstantial Trinity. The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves but each of them is God whole and entire: The Father is that which the Son is, the Son that which the Father is, the Father and the Son that which the Holy Spirit is, i.e. by nature one God.” – Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 253

I think it's important to mention here, just to clear up any misunderstanding, that Catholicism does not consider Mary as part of the Trinity. We'll talk about what Catholicism teaches about Mary, but it's definitely not that.

Then similar to teaching about the Trinity is teaching on Jesus. According to Catholicism, Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity, and Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Catholicism teaches that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died on the cross, was buried and was resurrected from the dead. And many other doctrines have general similarities: the sinfulness of humanity, the necessity for salvation

and numerous social issues, including abortion, religious liberty and other social issues. These are major similarities.

There are also **miscellaneous differences**, some of which are extremely significant. For example, on Scripture and authority, Catholicism teaches three sources of authority. You have the Bible—which includes additional books called the Apocrypha, which we talked about last year at Secret Church. But on top of the Bible, you have two other sources of authority. You have tradition. The catechism of the Catholic Church teaches:

“The Church ‘forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’” – CCC, 133

“As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, ‘does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.’” – CCC, 82

That’s a huge statement. Revealed truth doesn’t come from Scripture alone. You also need church tradition, and it’s honored “with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.” Then, in addition to Scripture and tradition, you have the Magisterium, which is the teaching ministry of the Church and the authority of the pope.

Because Catholicism believes the pope is in a succession line going all the way back to Peter, and Catholicism believes that Christ entrusted unique authority to Peter, then when the pope speaks, he speaks with the authority of God. The catechism teaches:

“The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, as been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.’ This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.” – CCC, 85

“The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.” – CCC, 882

The implications are huge. This was a major contribution of Vatican I, a council convened by Pope Pius IX in 1869-70, because it established the doctrine of papal infallibility. Hear this:

“If, then, any shall say that the Roman Pontiff has the office merely of inspection or direction, and not full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the universal Church, not only in things which belong to faith and morals, but also in those which relate to

the discipline and government of the Church spread throughout the world; or assert that he possesses merely the principal part, and not all the fullness of this supreme power; or that power which he enjoys is not ordinary and immediate, both over each and all the churches, and over each and all the pastors and the faithful: let him be anathema. This is the teaching of Catholic truth, from which no one can deviate without loss of faith and salvation.” – Vatican I

What Vatican I established was when the pope speaks *ex cathedra*—from his seat as pope, that is, in his official capacity—what he says is supremely authoritative and completely infallible. In other words, it’s perfect. This declaration of Vatican I, in and of itself, was deemed authoritative. So if you put all that together, the Catholic church clearly teaches there are three sources of authority. In the words of the catechism:

“It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.” – CCC, 95

That is extremely different from Evangelical Protestantism, which claims that Scripture alone is the authoritative, and we dare not add or take away from it.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Revelation 22:18–19).

I won’t spend a lot of time here, because we spent six hours in the last Secret Church on this, but I cannot overemphasize the significance of this question of Scripture and authority.

Then regarding Mary, Catholicism teaches that Mary is the “Holy Mother of God.” In the words of the catechism:

“We believe that the Holy Mother of God, the new Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven to exercise her maternal role on behalf of the members of Christ.” – CCC, 975

Catholicism teaches that Mary was preserved from original sin and pure from all sin in her life.

“From among the descendants of Eve, God chose the Virgin Mary to be the mother of his Son. ‘Full of grace,’ Mary is ‘the most excellent fruit of redemption’ (SC 103): from the first instant of her conception, she was totally preserved from the stain of

original sin and she remained pure from all personal sin throughout her life.” – CCC, 508

That’s a pretty shocking statement. According to Catholicism, devotion to Mary and the saints “is intrinsic to Christian worship.” Those aren’t my words. They’re the words of the Catholic church.

‘The Church’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship.’ The Church rightly honors ‘the Blessed Virgin with special devotion. From the most ancient times the Blessed Virgin has been honored with the title of “Mother of God,” to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs... This very special devotion...differs essentially from the adoration which is given to the incarnate Word and equally to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and greatly fosters this adoration.’ The liturgical feasts dedicated to the Mother of God and Marian prayer, such as the rosary, an ‘epitome of the whole Gospel,’ express this devotion to the Virgin Mary.” – CCC, 971

“The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings, and their prayer today. They contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth. When they entered into the joy of their Master, they were ‘put in charge of many things.’ Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.” – CCC, 2683

They fly to Mary for protection. In a similar way, though not nearly the same, they do the same with saints. Evangelical Protestantism is much different. Mary is honored as a godly woman who bore the Son of God incarnate, but it does not attribute sinless purity to Mary nor see her as intrinsic to worship. Quite the opposite, it sees any worship given to Mary as a form of idolatry.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus... And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her (Luke 1:26–31). 10.06

Then regarding sin, we mentioned that both Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism teach human depravity. But Catholicism varies in that Catholicism teaches two types of sin: mortal sin, which destroys the saving grace of God, and venial sin, which does not destroy the saving grace of God. In the words of the catechism:

“Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God’s law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring

an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.” – CCC, 1855

In Evangelical Protestantism, there is no dual concept of sin seen or taught anywhere in Scripture.

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.... (Romans 3:23)

Then, on the sacraments, Catholicism teaches that grace is infused in the very act of the sacraments. So when one is baptized, the grace of God for salvation is infused into them. Similarly other sacraments include confirmation, the Eucharist, which is the partaking of the Lord’s Supper, confession, anointing of sick, holy orders and matrimony. Again, each of those acts is important for obtaining grace—and I use the word “obtaining” intentionally in light of what we’re about to see.

Evangelical Protestantism does not teach that. Evangelical Protestantism teaches that grace is offered as the sacraments are taken in faith in connection with the gospel—namely, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. So let’s drill down a little deeper on both of these.

Catholicism sees baptism as the act through which the new birth occurs in the life of an infant. The catechism teaches:

“Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.” – CCC, 1250

Do you hear that? Baptism is necessary to obtain this grace—as soon as possible after birth. At the point of baptism, all sins are forgiven, including original sin and all personal sins, as well as punishment for sin. The catechism says:

By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin. In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam’s sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God.” – CCC, 1263

Baptism is then completed at confirmation. I use both those words intentionally. The catechism teaches:

“It must be explained to the faithful that the reception of the sacrament of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace. For ‘by the sacrament of Confirmation, [the baptized] are more perfectly bound to the Church

and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.” – CCC, 1285

Again, you’re seeing how participation in the sacraments is necessary to be infused with the grace of God.

In Evangelical Protestantism though, baptism represents the new birth that has already occurred in the life of a believer. Baptism is a testimony to saving grace received, not a means of receiving grace.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.... (Matthew 28:19).

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:1–4).

We’ll come back to why this is so important in a minute.

But then on the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, Catholicism teaches transubstantiation. I don’t know when the last time at 10:00 at night you were writing the word transubstantiation, but tran-sub-stant-iation. That’s how you spell it. Here’s what that means, according to the catechism of the Catholic church:

“Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.” – CCC, 1376

So in the Lord’s Supper, a substantial change takes place whereby the bread and wine become the corporeal presence of Christ. This is totally different from Evangelical Protestantism, where fellowship, thanksgiving, remembrance and proclamation mark the Lord’s Supper. Remembrance is what the meal is about. We read in 1 Corinthians 11:24

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

In just a minute I'm going to show why this is so significant—not just for how we understand the Lord's Supper, but for how we understand salvation.

Let me hit one more difference here, on confession. Catholicism teaches that confession—called “penance”—reconciles one with God. In confession, a sinner confesses mortal sins to a priest, and a priest imposes acts of penance and offers forgiveness of sins. In the words of the catechism:

“Since Christ entrusted to his apostles the ministry of reconciliation, bishops who are their successors, and priests, the bishops’ collaborators, continue to exercise this ministry. Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’” – CCC, 1461

In contrast, Evangelical Protestantism teaches the priesthood of the believer, that Jesus is our great High Priest, who, through His sacrifice on the cross for our sins, has made it possible for all of us to go to God through Jesus and receive forgiveness of our sins through Him alone—not through another mediator like the priest in Catholicism. In the words of 1 Peter 2:9, all believers comprise a royal priesthood.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15–16). But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Now, these differences all lead to the massive difference between Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism, and that difference is over justification. This is arguably the most important question there is, in the world and in your life. Here's the question: how can I, as a sinner, be reconciled to God, Who is holy? That's a really important question. Apart from the answer to that question, you and I are separated from God, Who is holy, forever. This is man's greatest problem. It's the greatest problem in every single one of our lives: how can we be reconciled to God? There's not a person on the planet for whom this question is not eternally important.

Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism answer these questions subtly but totally differently. Evangelical Protestantism teaches that sinners are justified by God solely through faith in Christ, “solely” being the key word. Faith alone—*sola fide*.

Catholicism, on the other hand, teaches that sinners are justified by God through faith in Christ and through their own works. In other words, Catholicism teaches that faith and works both lead to justification. In order to be reconciled to God, you need both faith and works.

Hear this teaching from the Council of Trent, which was a response to the Protestant Reformation. Again, when you hear this, don't just think, "Oh, that was what a group said back between 1545 and 1563, so it doesn't really apply now." That's part of the point of showing the three sources of authority in the Catholic Church. The tradition and the teaching ministry of the church, no matter how long ago they happened, are authoritative just as Scripture is. So this is the authoritative teaching from the Catholic Church:

"If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema." – Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 9

Anathema means condemned. It's the same word Paul used in Galatians 1 to refer to anybody who was preaching a false gospel. The Catholic Church and the Council of Trent uses that language to pronounce condemnation on anybody who says or teaches that faith alone is sufficient to justify sinners before a holy God. Another quote from Trent says:

"If anyone says that the faith which justifies is nothing else but trust in the Divine mercy, which pardons sins because of Christ, or that it is trust alone by which we are justified, let him be anathema." – Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 12

So these sections of Trent are clearly against faith alone for justification. And the catechism offers perspective on what's required for justification. In the words of the catechism:

"The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ and through baptism." – CCC (1987)

Did you notice those last three words there? "And through baptism." It takes faith and a sacrament; faith and baptism. This again from the Council of Trent:

"If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also not increased before God by good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a cause of its increase, let him be anathema." – Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 2

In other words, your works are increasing your justification before God. They're not the fruit of your justification before God. A priest in my neighborhood explained it to me this way: "Grace is infused into you supernaturally through works." This begins at baptism and it carries on into other sacraments of the church—if you attend mass, if you participate in the Eucharist, and so on.

“...through the observance of the commandments of God and the church, faith cooperating with good works,’ believers ‘increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified....” – Council of Trent, Session 6, Chapter 10

So you’re being justified as you work—and you work hard. That same priest in my neighborhood described it to me as the “theology of covering bases.” He basically said, “You want to cover as many bases as you possibly can, because future justification is possible, but not guaranteed. You can’t be sure of your salvation.” Trent said:

“If one considers his own weakness and his defective disposition, he may well be fearful and anxious as to the state of grace, as nobody knows with the certainty of faith, which permits of no error, that he has achieved the grace of God.” – Council of Trent, Session 6, Chapter 9

Nobody knows? When I talk with almost any Catholic person I know about Jesus, I ask them, “Do you know for sure if you’re going to heaven?” the almost inevitable answer is, “I hope so. I hope so, but I don’t know.” Trent reinforces that sense of doubt, saying:

“If anyone says that the guilt is remitted to every penitent sinner after the grace of justification has been received, and that the debt of eternal punishment is so blotted out that there remains no debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened; let him be anathema.” – Council of Trent, Session 6, Canon 30

Ladies and gentlemen, that is not good news. That’s not the gospel. People who believe this need to hear the gospel, the good news of God’s grace—not the bad news about how you can obtain grace. If you obtain it, it’s not grace. What makes grace good news is you can’t obtain it—you can’t earn it. It’s a gift given to you. That’s the good news. We’re not talking about the bad news about how you can obtain grace.

How Do We Share the Gospel With Catholics?

This is who Catholics are and what Catholicism teaches and this leads to the question: how do we share the gospel with Catholics? In asking that question, I’m obviously implying that Catholicism does not officially teach the gospel. To use the language of a counterfeit gospel, the Catholic doctrine of justification is a fraudulent imitation of the gospel that deceives.

Think about it with me, then you decide. My exhortation to followers of Christ would be to engage Catholic friends and neighbors and coworkers in conversations about the gospel and to **proclaim justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone with passion**. That word “alone” is not just an issue of semantics. It makes the gospel message we proclaim totally different from what we just saw in Catholicism. Another way to put that is if we proclaim justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, then we are proclaiming a different gospel than the Catholic Church. To take things one step further, we are actually preaching a gospel that has been condemned by the Catholic Church.

But it’s the gospel according to the Bible:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21–26).

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! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 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 (Galatians 2:15–21).

In other words, if we could gain righteousness through our works, then we do not need Christ. Contrary to what we’ve seen in Catholic teaching, the Bible clearly teaches that justification is the gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner righteous, solely through faith in Jesus.

Just unpack that, step by step. Justification is the gracious act of God. God justifies us, not because of anything in us, but because of grace in Him. This is not something we achieve. “*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?*” (Psalm 130:3). “*Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness! Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you*” (Psalm 143:1-2).

You might say, “Well, God justifies those who have faith, so that means we do something.” This is where the Bible teaches that God gives faith. Ephesians 2:8 says, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*” Faith is a gift that God gives to us.

Even when we put our faith in Him, it’s kind of like when my kids want to give me a birthday or Christmas present. They use my money to buy me a gift. They tell me, “We really want to get you something.” Okay. “Can you give us some money?” Ah! In the end, did they really give me a gift? Yeah...and no. They were only able to give me when I gave them.

So it is with faith before God. It’s a gift He gives to us. That’s the only way we’re able to trust in Him. As God gives us faith, God grants us justification. It’s all grace. Listen to the language of the Bible. We are passive in this thing. Romans 8:30, “*And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*” We are justified by God—not, we justify ourselves. He justifies us. We’re passive. Romans 4:16 “*That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace...*”

Justification is the gracious act of God by which He declares, which means biblically that justification is a declaration. This is significant, because justification is an act, not a process. It’s a once-for-all declaration. It’s not a process whereby we’re more justified tomorrow than we are today. Once you’re declared justified, you are justified. Listen to 1 Corinthians 6:11: “*And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*”

This is a legal declaration. The word picture of justification in the Bible is that of a judge declaring his judgment. It’s a legal pronouncement. At the end of a trial, the judge pronounces either “innocent” or “guilty.” That’s a pronouncement. That’s what justification is. Remember, that’s the problem that was set up throughout the Old Testament. In Exodus 23:7, God says He “*...will not acquit the wicked.*” God will not say the wicked are innocent. He’s just. You see the picture of legal declaration in these three verses:

...for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matthew 12:37).

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Romans 2:13).

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

This is a legal declaration. You’re either declared innocent or guilty.

And it's an eternal declaration, a once-for-all, completed decision. Think of Luke 23:40-43, the story of the thief on the cross. He's declared right before God based on his confession of faith in Jesus. Based on that, he will go to heaven.

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:40–43).

Romans 8:30-39 is an awesome promise that *"those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."* It is a done deal. *"Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Once you've been justified before God, declared right before God, nothing will ever make you wrong before God. Your justification is sure. So justification is the gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner righteous. We've already covered this, but it's important to remember that the people we're talking about here—you and me—are guilty sinners before a holy Judge. Martin Luther said, "Here is a problem which needs God to solve it." The sinfulness of man, the righteousness of God, and the demands of the law—if you put those three things together in the courtroom, things are not looking good for us.

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them... (Romans 2:14–15).

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law (Romans 3:31).

So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good (Romans 7:12–16).

We stand before this Judge and the result is we are condemned by our immorality—all of our actions that break God's law. We've all broken God's law, right?

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:29–32).

James 2:10 says, *“Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”* So we’re condemned by our immorality and—catch this—we’re condemned by our morality, all of our attempts to keep God’s law. That means all of our efforts to obey the law, to do good, all our righteous deeds fall way short. Isaiah 64:6 says they are like a *“polluted garment.”* Romans 3:20, *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”* In the words of one Puritan pastor, *“Even our tears of repentance need to be washed in the blood of the Lamb.”*

So we have no case before a holy God. We are guilty. You cannot earn the favor of God. We are guilty before God, sinners, and justification is the gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner to be righteous. Now that is amazing! A holy God—the holy Judge of the universe—takes a guilty sinner who stands before Him in willful rebellion with nothing in that sinner that would cause him to make any declaration but *“eternally guilty and condemned.”* But God looks at him and says, *“Not guilty—innocent.”* God in justification declares that we are forgiven of sin.

Colossians 2:13-14 says God has *“forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”* There is a great word, propitiation, that we’ve seen already in Romans 3. We are free from all guilt. It’s what that word means. It means Jesus has taken our condemnation for us. He has turned aside God’s wrath from you and me and taken it upon Himself instead. We read it earlier in Romans 3:25-26. God put Him forward *“as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith,”* so that *“he might be the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”*

First John 2:1-2 says Jesus Christ is *“the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”* Romans 8:1, *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* But that’s not even all, as if that wasn’t enough. If God were merely to declare us forgiven from our sins, that would make us morally neutral before Him. It would be a declaration that we haven’t done anything wrong to pay for, but it would not be a declaration that we’ve done anything right. We want to be right before God, not morally neutral.

This is where we realize that to be declared righteous doesn't just mean that God declares us forgiven of all our sins. In justification, God declares that we are clothed in holiness, that our lives are clothed in "*righteousness and sanctification and redemption*" in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30). This is what it means to be justified.

It's not just propitiation, or freedom from guilt, but imputation. We are credited with His righteousness.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith... (Philippians 3:8–9).

This word means that God imputes to us, or credits to us, the very righteousness of Christ. When God looks at you and me, He doesn't see a guilty sinner. He doesn't see a person who is morally neutral. Instead, He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ Himself. How in the world is that possible? I'm so glad you asked.

Justification is the gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner righteous. How is that possible? Solely through faith in Jesus. What can you do to earn this kind of status before God? Nothing. Galatians 2:16 says, "*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.*" It says the same thing over and over and over again. "*Not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*"

We hit on this earlier tonight and now we're drilling down deeper. Christ is the basis of our justification. So in order for you and me to be righteous before God, we need somebody else's righteousness, because we're not righteous. If I ask you, "How do you know if you're right before God?" if the first words out of your mouth are "Because I..." then you've missed the point. How do you know you are right before God? Because Jesus lived a life you could not live, died the death you deserved to die and He conquered the enemy you couldn't conquer: sin and death. It's all because of Jesus. He is the basis of our justification. He's everything.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21–26).

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God (Romans 5:6–9).

A few verses before that, the Bible celebrates this. *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 5:1). Do you see it? We are justified by faith. Faith is the means of our justification. Think about it—why faith? Why are we justified by faith alone? Why not love? Why not joy? Why not wisdom? Why has God ordained faith to be the means of our justification?

Here's why. It's because faith is anti-work. Faith is the realization there is nothing we can do. There's no amount of love we can show, nor kindness or joy or obedience. There's nothing we can do but trust in what has been done for us. Faith is the one attitude of the heart that is the exact opposite of depending on ourselves. When we come to Christ in faith, we're essentially saying, “I give up. I will not depend on myself or my good works anymore. I can never make myself right before You, so I trust You and I depend on You completely to give me a righteous standing before You.”

This is why we have to always be aware of dangerous legalism, thinking that our work before God can make us right before Him. That's what the people in Galatians were doing. Paul says, *“You are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”* (Galatians 1:6-9). He asks in Galatians 3:1-6, *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”*

Now, legalism is a word that is sometimes thrown around fairly aimlessly, so what is it? Legalism summarized is working in our own power—trying to obey God's commands in our own power. It is working according to our own laws. It is adding rules to God's commands. So for example, it's legalistic to say, “As a Christian, you should not eat McDonald's hamburgers.” That's adding to the rules. [I mention McDonald's because I think that applies pretty globally. If you go to McDonald's in India for example, you might get excited until you remember that the cow is sacred in India. So you won't find hamburgers; you will find lamb-burgers—pretty creative. But that misses the point.]

Back to the point, there are all kinds of examples of how we come up with additional rules beyond what we have in the New Testament as a standard for our faith in Christ and our walk with Christ. Legalism

is working in our own power, according to our own rules, and ultimately it's working to earn God's favor. It's thinking that in your actions you are meriting favor before God, earning acceptance before God. You need to pray, read the Bible, go to church, participate in the Lord's Supper. You need to do these things if you want to be accepted by God.

But that misses the whole point of salvation. You think that in doing these things you are gaining credits before God? No, you are already credited with the righteousness of Christ. What will you add to that? In the process of working to earn God's favor, you are actually working to steal God's glory, because you're undercutting the beauty of what He has done for you.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:1–6).

He alone gives all the grace so He alone gets all the glory. Run from dangerous legalism to divine love. The Christian says, *"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"* (Galatians 2:20).

Oh, Christian, feel this verse. Jesus is passionate about you. He loves you and He gave Himself for you. Let it soak in, wherever you are. It's for you. He's passionate about you. Jesus has paid the price for you. His life and death were given for you. Take heart. God's pleasure in you is not based upon your performance for Him. We sometimes think it is. It's how all the religions of the world operate and we've smuggle it into Christianity. "Do this, do this, do this, and you will be all right before God."

God's pleasure in you is not based on your performance for Him. No, God's pleasure in you is based on Christ's performance for you. This truth in justification is so key. It's why Martin Luther said in The Article of Justification:

The law is divine and holy. Let the law have its glory, but yet no law, be it never so divine and holy, ought to teach me that I am justified, and shall live through it. I grant it may teach me that I ought to love God and my neighbor; also to live in love, soberness, patience, etc., but it ought not to show me how I should be delivered from sin, the devil, death, and hell. Here I must take counsel of the gospel. I must hearken to the gospel, which teaches me, not what I ought to do but what Jesus Christ the Son of God hath done for me: that He suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel wills me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this

article [of justification] well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually.

That's what I'm trying to do tonight—beat it into your heads at 10:30 at night.

You say, “Well, doesn't God want us to pray and be kind and love others and share the gospel?”

Absolutely He does. But such works are the evidence of our justification.

Now, this can get confusing, because you read James 2:24, “*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” And you're thinking, “Whoa. Wait a minute. Isn't that the total opposite of what you're saying? Isn't that the opposite of what Paul says in Galatians 2:15-16? “*We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.*” What's the deal?

Again, this is where we always need to be students of the Bible who study the Bible in context. If you look at the broader context surrounding James 2:24, you'll see the verses that come right before it.

But 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. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God (James 2:18-23).

Then you come to James 2:24. Notice how James is clearly talking about how a faith that doesn't lead to works is no faith at all. He uses Abraham as an example. He says, “It's true. Abraham believed God and that was credited to him as righteousness. It was belief. But that belief then became evident in the way he offered his son Isaac on the altar. His faith led to works.” Those works were not the means of his justification before God—that was faith, belief alone. His works were evidence of his justification before God.

So if you put it together, Christ is the basis. He's the One Who makes justification possible. Works are the evidence that we've been justified. And in the middle, faith is the key. Faith is the means, the sole means by which we are justified.

Justification is the gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner righteous solely through faith alone in Jesus. The Catholic Church explicitly denies this. The Council of Trent authoritatively states, “If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification...let him be anathema” (Session 6, Canon 9).

That's not the gospel. Martin Luther said it well, that justification by faith alone is “the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls.” In the words of John Calvin, justification by faith alone is “the

hinge upon which everything turns.” I’m going to quote now from the Heidelberg Catechism, which is not to be confused with the catechism of the Catholic Church. This is a teaching tool in Evangelical Protestantism and is not intended to be authoritative in any way. But it puts it so well. Remember the big question for every one of our lives: how are you righteous before God? Here’s the answer from the Heidelberg Catechism:

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect [sacrifice] of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

Praise God for this gospel! And then proclaim it. That’s the whole point here. Proclaim justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone with passion, particularly in conversations with people in the Catholic Church. Point out the major differences, with respect, to show how it’s a false gospel to say that faith and works both lead to justification. Show how the true gospel clearly states that faith alone leads to justification.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.... (Ephesians 2:8).

Show how it’s a false gospel to say that you progress in justification as grace is infused into you by works. The true gospel says, “No. Rejoice in justification as the righteousness of Christ is imputed to you by God.”

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Open your Bible and show how it’s a false gospel to say that you should be anxious about future justification, even unsure. Show how this is no gospel. It’s not good news at all. The Bible actually teaches the opposite. The true gospel says you can be assured of future justification. First John 5:13: *“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.”* We’ve already seen Ephesians 1:13-14: *“[You] were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”*

You can know you have eternal life through faith in Jesus. So point out the difference with respect. I want to be clear here. I’m not saying that every Catholic believes a false gospel. I believe there are some Catholics who believe, as far as they’re expressing, the true gospel. Some of them might even be surprised

to hear that this is what the Catholic Church teaches, because maybe they have believed the true gospel, that we're saved by grace alone though faith alone in Christ alone.

With my friends who are or who have been Catholic, if they do believe the true gospel, I always ask the question, "Well, then why are you part of a church that officially contradicts the gospel you believe and officially spreads a false gospel?"

Just this week my heart sank when I saw recent comments from the pope questioning hell and some other major Christian doctrines. He also had a conversation with a boy whose dad, who was an atheist, had recently died. This boy went up to the pope and asked him if his father was in heaven. He told the pope his dad was a good man, but he was not a believer. So the pope looked at the crowd of kids from whom he was taking questions, and said, "Do you think God would leave someone like that—who although he wasn't a believer but had had his son baptized—do you think God would leave this dad far from Him for eternity?" And all the kids responded, "No! He would be with God." And the pope said, "There's your answer"—because he was a good man who had his son baptized.

It was an emotionally moving video of this child with the pope, and it sounded so good. But it wasn't true. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. That doctrine not true. A billion people need to see that it's not true. We need to share with them that it's not true.

So wherever you are, live by this gospel. Live by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

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! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 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 (Galatians 2:15–21).

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." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith" (Galatians 3:10–11).

Live by this gospel—and die for this gospel. I don't mean that to sound dramatic. I mean that to sound serious. We can almost yawn—not just because we're tired—but because we think, "I don't know if

this is that big of a deal. It sounds like an issue of semantics to me, maybe changing a couple words around. What's the difference?"

I hope you see the difference is massive. This is why Paul pleads, "Don't preach a different gospel. Don't add anything to faith in God's grace. Don't add anything to the gospel, because when you add anything to the gospel, you lose everything in the gospel." When you add anything to the gospel, you lose everything in the gospel. That's why he says in Galatians 6:11-14, "I'm writing this to you in as big of letters as I can." When people had to work to be saved—in their case, to be circumcised— all that did was cause them to boast in what they had done. But they could not do anything to save themselves.

Paul says, "My only boast is in the cross of Jesus Christ." He says this, because he was being persecuted for preaching a gospel of faith alone in Christ alone. He's saying with as large of letters as he can write, "This doctrine is worth the defense of our lives."

And it was not just Paul. It's followers of Christ throughout Christian history. So can I just pause for a minute to tell you a couple stories?

I mentioned the Reformation when this issue came to a head in the church. Go with me to England for a minute, back to 1555. The church in England was literally under fire from a royal foe named Queen Mary. Over the next four years, 288 people were burned at the stake for their Protestant faith, including men, women, church leaders, common laborers and children. J.C. Ryle wrote that the first to break the ice and cross the river as a martyr in Mary's reign was John Rogers. I don't know if you've ever heard of John Rogers. He got his education at Cambridge, became a Catholic priest, but then he became quickly disillusioned with the teachings of the Catholic Church and in God's providence found himself in Holland, where he met a man by the name of William Tyndale.

Tyndale taught Rogers the Bible and the gospel, and Rogers would never be the same. When Tyndale was arrested nine months after they met, he left his Old Testament manuscripts with Rogers, who in the days to come would compile them into a complete English Bible under the code name Thomas Matthews. The Matthews Bible would become the first officially authorized version of the Bible in the English language. The Lord used this man to open eyes and minds and hearts to Jesus in the Scriptures.

Rogers went on to pastor in Germany, but his heart was for the people of England. So he returned to London in 1548 with his wife Arianna and their eight children at the time. There he preached and pastored safely under the reign of King Edward VI, until the day when Edward died. Soon thereafter Edward's half-sister Mary proclaimed herself queen. Rogers knew where Mary stood on religion—steadfast for the Church of Rome against all Protestant teachings. She arrived in London on Thursday, August 3, 1553. Rogers was appointed to preach the following Sunday. This was his moment and he boldly proclaimed the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He warned the church against all "pestilent potpourri and all idolatry."

Commenting on Rogers' sermon that day, one biographer said, "There was never any position in the whole history of the Reformation, all things considered, where the responsibilities thrown upon a single man were greater and the results more important." The same historian went on to say of Rogers, "His conduct that day was more than noble—it was magnificent."

Rogers' sermon that day would be his last. A week later, he was placed under house arrest with his wife and now ten children, with another on the way. Six months later he was put into prison, where he would live in cruel conditions for the next year. That led to January 1555, when he was summarily examined on three occasions and subsequently condemned for two offenses: one, standing against the church of Rome, and two, saying that in the sacrament of the altar there is not substantially nor really the natural body and blood of Christ.

Rogers had not been able to communicate with his wife and his family the entire time he had been in prison. He had not even met his youngest child. So he pleaded for an opportunity to see them, or at least to speak to his wife before he died. His request was refused and the next morning he was roused from his cell. He was led outside into the streets of the parish he once pastored. He walked in the shadow of the church where he had preached. Thousands of spectators lined the way and in that sea of faces he saw his family—his wife, holding a baby. It was the first time he'd ever seen his youngest child, with ten other children standing beside her, looking at their dad.

One writer said their anxious faces were all fixed on him and their voices of pain reached his ears. Another remarked, "It's difficult even to imagine anything more tender and affecting than this parting scene, this last adieu to a beloved wife and so numerous offspring, all in tears. He stood the shock with the feelings of a father and husband, but with the unshaken confidence of a Christian marching to his death."

John Foxe, in his Book of Martyrs, tells us that he walked calmly to the stake. When he arrived, the sheriff gave him one last opportunity to recant, to revoke his confession of faith, to which Rogers responded, "That which I have preached, I will seal with my blood." Within moments, the fire at Rogers' feet was set ablaze. His body slowly began to burn and as he lifted his arms high in the air, Ryle said, "The enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds. They rent the air with thunders of applause."

"For up to that day," he wrote, "men could not tell how English reformers would behave in the face of death, and they could hardly believe that some would actually give their bodies to be burned for their religion." And some it would be. Within days, others would face the same fate. Nicholas Ridley, who was a fellow prisoner with Rogers, wrote to other pastors who had been in prison saying, "I thank our Lord God and Heavenly Father, by Christ, that since I heard of our dear brother Rogers' departing and stout confession of Christ and His truth—even to the death—since that time, I say, I have no longer felt any lumpish heaviness in my heart."

John Leaf, a 19-year-old apprentice of John Rogers, was arrested and asked if he believed what Rogers had taught him. This 19-year-old answered, not only did he believe every doctrine Rogers had taught him from God's Word, but he was ready to meet the same death that Rogers had faced—and so he did. History said he was burned alive, a 19-year-old, with a cheerfulness and an unshaken resolution that were remarkable for one so young and that would have pleased his teacher in the faith. John Rogers, Nicholas Ridley, John Leaf—I could read 285 other names who would follow in the fire of their footsteps across England under the reign of Queen Mary.

So here's the question: why did they die? And the answer to that question totally surprised me. J.C. Ryle wrote a paper entitled "The Burning of Our English Reformers and the Reason Why They Were Burned." The paper so struck me, because in it he wrote:

Great indeed would be our mistake if we supposed that these martyrs suffered for the vague charge of refusing submission to the pope or desiring to maintain the independence of the Church of England. Nothing of the kind. The principal reason why they were burned was because they refused one of the peculiar doctrines of the Romish Church. On that doctrine, in almost every case, hinged their life or death. If they admitted it, they might live; if they refused it, they must die.

The doctrine in question was the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Did they or did they not believe that the body and blood of Christ were really, that is, corporally, literally, locally and materially present under the forms of bread and wine after the words of consecration were pronounced? Did they or did they not? That was the simple question. If they did not believe and admit it, they were burned.

It's true. John Rogers recounted his interrogation by the church, saying:

I was asked whether I believed in the sacrament to be the very body and blood of our Savior Christ, Who was born of the Virgin Mary and hanged on the cross, really and substantially. I answered, "I think it to be false." I cannot understand really and substantially to signify otherwise than corporally. But corporally Christ is only in heaven, so Christ cannot be corporally in your sacrament.

The same statement was made subsequently by men and women, church leaders and common laborers. Rawlins White was a fisherman. He couldn't read. He had his son taught to read, so that every night his family would gather around the table after dinner and the boy would read the New English Bible to the family. In the course of doing so, he came to believe in salvation through faith in God's mercy. When his belief became public, he was condemned to die.

History tells us he came to the place where his poor wife and children stood weeping. The sight of them so pierced his heart that tears trickled down his face. When everything was ready, they set White on the stake, erected a stand upon which a priest stepped up and began speaking about the Catholic doctrine of

the sacraments. White cried out, “You wicked hypocrite. Do you presume to prove your false doctrine by Scripture? Look at the text! Look at the text.” A fisherman expositor. “Did not Christ say, ‘Do this in remembrance of Me?’” He was preaching to them there at the stake. Immediately they lit the fire. Foxe says his legs were so quickly consumed by the flame that his body “briskly fell over and burned.”

John Holyer was taken to the stake bound with a chain and placed in a pitch barrel. Fire was applied to the reeds of the wood. As he began to burn, people started throwing books in the fire to be burned with him. One of the books was on the communion service. It was a book that countered Catholic teaching on the Lord’s Supper and taught salvation through faith alone. Holyer caught the book, held it high above the flames, opened it and read it joyfully, out loud, until the fire and smoke deprived him of sight. Then he pressed the book to his heart, thanking God for giving him this precious gift in his last moments.

It wasn’t just men. Agnes Snoch. Anne Wright. Joan Soale. Joan Catmer. Four women, alongside one man, John Lomas, were questioned concerning transubstantiation and sentenced to burn together on two stakes in one fire, where Foxe says, “They sang hosannas together until the breath of life was extinguished.” Are we hearing this? Why did these Reformers die? They died for the Lord’s Supper. They died, because they knew that Rome’s doctrine of real presence undercut gospel grace. If receiving communion involves receiving Christ, if eating the communion feast is necessary to obtain Christ’s forgiveness, if works are needed for justification, then man’s merit becomes the means of obtaining Christ’s mercy. The Reformers would have nothing to do with it.

Doctrine like this was decisive for them. Truth like this was not trivial for them. It was not semantics. A pastor looks into the eyes of his wife and eleven kids, one of whom he’s never even held. A fisherman looks into the eyes of his wife and his children, including the little boy who first taught him the gospel through reading the Bible. And together they say, “Salvation by God’s mercy, separate from your merit, is worth your life. It’s all of mercy, kids. It’s all of mercy, my bride. If we lose that, we lose everything.” We have hope—not in our merit, but only in His mercy. It’s not in our merit—it’s in His merit.

Doctrine like this mattered. How we understand God’s Word matters. How we understand God’s worship matters. A doctrine like the Lord’s Supper is worth the defense of our lives. But I fear we live in a day now when doctrine like this is diluted and we don’t think it’s a big deal—when it’s a massive deal. How we’re made right before God—there’s no more massive deal than this.

And not just us—others too. With the Catholic teaching on justification, do we realize what we’re talking about? We’re talking about a billion people—half the supposed global Christian population—who are under the teaching of a fraudulent imitation of the gospel that deceives. I’ll leave it to you regarding whether or not Catholicism is a cult, particularly when it comes to that second part of our definition how it’s

usually attached to one leader in a Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell kind of way. You could point to the pope in this way, but there's obviously not just been one—there have been 266 or so.

Regardless of definition, let's be abundantly clear. Justification by faith plus works, officially taught by the Catholic Church, is a counterfeit gospel that condemns. It causes people to put their faith in what they do instead of solely trusting in what Christ has done. So don't buy it and don't believe. Brothers and sisters in Christ who know the good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, proclaim that good news. Risk your reputation. Pay whatever price to proclaim this good news.

Listen closely. These martyrs in the Reformation did not die just because they believed the gospel. They died because they broadcast the gospel. They didn't just die because they studied it; they died because they spoke it. If you stay silent about your faith, you stay safe from risk in this world. It's when you speak about your faith that you step into risk in this world, and that's what these Reformers did. They shared it in their homes; they taught it in their churches; they proclaimed it in their towns and it cost them everything.

Pastors who are listening, John Rogers had a choice that day when Mary came to London. He could preach a good sermon from a random text. He could keep his life. He could keep his pastorate. He could continue as a dad, as a husband. Or he could preach a gospel sermon filled with truth and he could lose his life. John Rogers chose the latter—why? Because he couldn't keep this good news to himself. He didn't just love the gospel, he loved people who needed the gospel and he was willing to give his life so they might know it.

That's what we're after tonight. Not just soaking in the gospel but spreading it. Right before Rogers died, that's exactly what he did. He exhorted everybody watching his execution to embrace the gospel. Foxe says:

By his death, he demonstrated the reality of the ancient observation, that the blood of the saints was the seed of the church. For instead of being intimidated by the severity of his sufferings, multitudes were encouraged by his magnanimous example, and many who had no religion were led to inquire into the cause for which pious, learned and benevolent men were so contented to lay down their lives, and thus they were changed from atheists or Catholics by the grace of God to the profession of the gospel.

Here's the beauty. You have nothing to be afraid of in proclaiming this gospel. The French ambassador, after observing Rogers' death, wrote home his description of the scene. He said, "It was as if this man was walking to his wedding."

Rowland Taylor was about two miles from the place where he would die. The sheriff asked him how he felt. His reply? "God be praised, master sheriff, never better. For now I'm almost at home. I lack but just two stiles to go over and I am even at my Father's house."

John Bradford, who was burned with the 19-year-old John Leaf that I mentioned earlier, kissed his stake and then turned to the 19-year-old and said, “Be of good comfort, brother, for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night.”

Helen Stark, a mom with a newborn child, was sentenced to be put in a sack and drowned. Her husband was also sentenced to die, but separate from her. He would die first, then her. So she followed him to his execution, gave him a kiss and said, “Husband, rejoice, for we have lived together many joyful days, but this day in which we must die ought to be most joyful unto us both, because we must have joy forever. Therefore, I will not bid you good night, for we shall suddenly meet with joy in the Kingdom of heaven.” She was then taken to the place where she would be drowned. She entrusted her newborn child and other children to the neighbors’ care and was plunged to her death.

All these men and women knew this gospel was worth their lives, and they gave their lives so that others might know it. May that be the commentary on our lives. We’re talking about the good news of how God saves people for eternity from their sins by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So let’s give our lives so that others might know.

Let’s pray.

O God, we praise You for this truth. We praise You for justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We praise You for declaring us, as sinners, righteous before You based on Your grace toward us. All glory be to Your name. So help us to share this good news. We pray especially for Catholic friends, family members, neighbors, coworkers; Catholic men and women and kids all around the world. We pray that You would open eyes to the beauty of Your grace in the gospel. God, we pray that You would open eyes to the truth of the gospel. Please use us. Please help us to know how best to share this good news. Help us to walk through it in Your Word, but Your Spirit alone can do this. So we pray, O God, please, please draw Catholic friends, neighbors, coworkers and family members to salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We pray for this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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