

The Theology of the Westminster Standards
WCF 11.2 – Faith as the “Instrument” of Justification (Part 2)

“If this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.”
 – Martin Luther

“There is no more basic or fundamental error in the whole realm of what we call religion than to think that a man is accepted in the sight of God, that he is justified by God, on the basis of what he himself is or on the basis of what he himself does.” – John Murray

I. Review: Justification by Faith Alone

- A. In the biblical context, justification is about declaring that one is righteous according to a legal standard. In God’s heavenly courtroom, the righteousness required to be “justified” is exhaustive conformity to God’s perfect law.
1. **Gal 3:10** – *“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”*
- B. By the sheer grace of God, because of the love of God (!), however, sinners may be justified *now*, through faith-union with Christ, because: (a) Christ as my obedient Substitute has fulfilled the positive legal requirements of God’s law for me, and (b) Christ as my dying Substitute has paid the eternal penalty for all of my failures to keep God’s law.
1. **Acts 17:30–31** – *“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”*
 2. **Gal 2:16** – *“... 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.”*

Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.
 (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 33)

C. Faith as the “Instrument” by which we receive Christ, and Justification “in” Him

Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love. (WCF 11.2)

1. **Eph 2:8–9** – *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*
2. What does it mean to say that “we are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone”? Do you believe this?

II. Paul and James on Justification and Works

A. The Apostle Paul

1. **Gal 3:16** – “... we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”
2. **Rom 3:10, 4:2–3** – “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin ... For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.³ For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’”

B. James (the brother of Jesus – see Matt 13:55)

1. **James 2:18–24** – “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.¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;²³ 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.²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

C. Questions

1. How does James 2:14–17 (“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ...”) set the context for James’ discussion in vv. 18–24?
2. How does the example of Abraham’s offering up of Isaac (Genesis 22) relate to James’ main point? When would you say Abraham was justified *before God* (see Gen 15:6, Rom 4:2)? Before whom was Abraham “justified” in Genesis 22?
 - a. **Luke 7:35** – “Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”
3. Do Paul and James contradict one another? What practical lessons should we derive from each biblical writer?

“[A]s the faith which James condemns is different than the faith that Paul commends, so also the works which James commends are different than the works which Paul condemns.”

– J. Gresham Machen

“The faith by which sinners are justified, as it unites them to Christ and so secures for them all the benefits of salvation there are in him, that faith perseveres to the end and in persevering is never alone. It is, as Luther is reported to have said, ‘a busy little thing.’” – Richard Gaffin

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” (Gal 5:6)