



Unjustifiable Faiths:

Four Common — and *Wrong* — Beliefs about Justification

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (ROM. 3:28). Luther’s understanding of this Biblical teaching created a ripple effect through both the church and society of his day. What do people understand “justification” to mean in our time?

Within the Christian Church, the concept of justification refers to God’s juridical declaration of righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus. But even more people understand justification to mean “the act of showing that a person’s conduct is right or reasonable.” When put under pressure to explain their actions or their character, most people will try to show why their behavior should be approved by those calling their actions into question. So a Board of Directors may ask the corporate CEO to justify certain actions that he or she has taken. Radical environmentalists ask the world to justify human existence on the planet, which they believe humans are destroying. Legislators must justify to the taxpayer proposed increases in local, state or federal taxes.

In response to a specific request of the 2016 Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (Res. 5-10), the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) has prepared a series of Bible studies on the doctrine of justification. The other studies in this series look at the Scriptural doctrine of justification from historical and Biblical viewpoints. This Bible study explores four commonly held beliefs that do not justify a person before God. Since each is an attempt to show that the person’s conduct is right or reasonable (and therefore should be acceptable to God), each is really an example of *self*-justification, and as such, falls short of what Scripture teaches: “It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33b), as He declares people righteous through faith in Christ. The titles of each session (in quotation marks) are commonly heard and commonly believed religious truisms that are *not* true but rather false and dangerous human myths and opinions about justification.

SESSION ONE: “JUST BELIEVE”

Believe in what your heart is saying,
Hear the melody that’s playing.
There’s no time to waste,
There’s so much to celebrate.
Believe in what you feel inside,
Give your dreams the wings to fly.
You have everything you need,
If you just believe.¹

When St. Paul writes that we are justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law, he is contrasting two distinct approaches to God: through “faith” or through “deeds of the law.” The wider context of Romans reveals what is unstated in that sentence, namely, the *object* of faith (i.e., *what* or *whom* we are trusting), which is Jesus Christ. American culture believes people are justified by faith, too, but the object of that faith is quite different. The object of that faith is oneself, and belief in oneself is the key to achieving a kind of secular “salvation,” namely, realizing the American dream.

1. The lyric just quoted, from the movie *The Polar Express*, offers belief as salvation from the grown-up’s world of cynicism. According to the lyric, in what two things is the hearer to believe? What is the promised outcome of such faith?

2. To believe in what your heart is saying is to believe in yourself. According to Scripture, why can’t a person always believe what the heart is saying? See Gen. 6:5, Jer. 17:9 and Matt. 15:19. Does the same verdict hold true for the Christian’s heart?

3. According to the song, to believe in what you feel inside is to give your dreams the wings to fly. What examples from history illustrate that faith in a dream brought it to reality?

¹ Josh Groban, “Believe” *The Polar Express*. (Warner, 2004).

What examples illustrate that faith in a dream was not enough to bring it to reality?

4. After years of rejection, Tom’s idea finally comes to successful fruition. His faith in himself is justified by overwhelming sales. He explains to his pastor, “The secret to my success is this: I just believed in myself and never gave up.” If you were Tom’s pastor, how would you answer? See James 1:17.

5. A poster reads, “Have faith ... believe in yourself ... and what others think won’t matter.” The author of that poster thinks that the opinion of others should not be a deterrent to those who believe in themselves. But what if one of the “others” is God?

6. Bill wants to be a pastor, but his pastor and other members of the church are not certain that he has the gifts for it. Should what others think matter to Bill if he really believes? Why or why not?

7. Positive thinking is as old as another childhood railroad story, *The Little Engine That Could*.² While attempting a steep hill, the little engine’s refrain was, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” Read Phil. 4:13. Some understand Paul’s words to be the Christian equivalent of the little engine’s mantra. Now read the verse in its context, 4:10–13. How does the context inform the reader of the meaning of Paul’s words?

² Piper, Watty. *The Little Engine That Could*. (New York: Platt & Munk Publishers, 1930).

8. Read Phil. 3:3–9. At one time where was Paul’s confidence? What did he believe about himself? What has replaced that confidence?

9. The phrase “Just believe!” is also dangerous and misleading when it encourages us to trust in our own faith rather than in Christ. At the time of the Reformation, for example, Anabaptists taught that a person must be able to profess his or her faith before being baptized. Luther noted that such a requirement makes the Sacrament dependent upon a person’s profession of faith rather than on God’s command and the promises connected to Baptism. He criticized that practice, saying that such a person “trusts in and builds on something of his own, namely, on a gift which he has from God, and not on God’s Word alone. So another may build on and trust in his strength, wealth, power, wisdom, holiness, which are also gifts from God” (See AE 40:252). What is the difference between “faith in faith” and “faith in God”?

SESSION TWO: “PROSPERITY SHOWS THAT YOU HAVE GOD’S APPROVAL.”

Throughout history, many people have interpreted wealth as a sure and certain sign of divine approval. Some modern-day preachers and teachers point people to Christ not primarily as their Savior from sin, but as their Deliverer from sickness, disease, sorrow, grief *and poverty*. All the benefits of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, they claim — prosperity included — can be actualized in this life through faith in Jesus. Temporal health, wealth and prosperity are then seen as sure signs (even necessary) that one has God’s approval, because they can and should be claimed by faith. A Christian who lacks such wealth is giving evidence of little or no faith and so does not have God’s approval.

1. Read Eccl. 9:11. According to this verse, why is it unwise to point to one’s wealth as a sign of God’s favor?

2. Read Matt. 19:16–24. If wealth is a sign of God’s approval, how does one explain Jesus’ words that such wealth makes it *more* difficult for the person to enter the kingdom?

3. Read Luke 12:13–21. What warning does Jesus give about material wealth? What if someone says, “I understand that material blessings bring with them all kinds of temptations. But I’m not tempted to idolatry by wealth.”

4. Read Luke 6:20. On the basis of these words, can it be said that poverty is a sign of God’s approval?

5. Read Job 31:24–28. How can wealth or any created thing interfere with one’s faith in God?

6. Read 1 Tim. 6:17–18. Can wealth be a blessing? Are there circumstances where it is alright to desire riches?

7. Luther imagines how Esau’s family might have regarded Isaac’s blessing of Jacob, which resulted in his exile: “This blessing did not please God; and the fact that he is forced to be an exile is an important sign that he was not blessed. We are the wives of the prince and priest; we are the daughters-in-law of Isaac, to whom the promise was made. Consequently, we shall not bother about that fugitive. Such undoubtedly were the thoughts of all who were in the household of Esau; for when there is prosperity and a false persuasion about the blessing is added, people say at once: ‘God is well disposed toward us.’ But prosperity and a godless opinion make people proud and smug” (AE 5:175).

If people judge by outward appearance while God judges the heart (1 SAM. 16:9), is there any reliable earthly sign that God is favorably inclined toward anyone? What is the best that can be said about prosperity?

SESSION THREE: “GOD ONLY EXPECTS YOU TO DO THE BEST YOU CAN.”

A Bible class participant shared this with other members of his class: “Before I came to this church, I thought that I was a Christian because I provided for my family, supported my church and was loyal to my country. After coming here, I learned how wrong I was. A Christian is one who has faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior.”

A system where people receive approval or rewards based on their own work rather than on family lineage, skin color, religion or other factors, is called a *meritocracy*. If one is perceived to be a hard worker, loyal to company or country, there is an expectation that such efforts will be recognized and rewarded in some fashion. That’s how “the system” works. So, if that’s how the system works in our world, isn’t it reasonable to believe that that is how it works in God’s economy, too?

1. Read Matt. 20:1–16. Why did the workers who were hired first grumble when they received their pay? How did they try to justify their expectation of receiving a higher wage than the later workers received? How does the owner’s words to them show that the Kingdom of God is not a meritocracy? By what system does the vineyard owner operate if not a meritocracy? Read Rom. 9:14–16.

2. Read Luke 7:1–6a. On what grounds did the elders make their case for Jesus to help the centurion? Do you think that Jesus went with them because they convinced Him that the centurion was worthy of His help? Why else might He have gone with them? See Ps. 50:15 and John 9:4.

3. Now read verses 6b–8. Does the centurion agree with their assessment that he deserved Jesus’ help? What did the centurion believe about Jesus?

4. Finally, read verses 9–10. On what basis did Jesus heal the centurion’s servant?

5. Some have noted that their pastor or priest only visits in the hospital those members who are very supportive of the church by way of their contributions and involvement. If true, how does this reinforce the mistaken belief that God operates on a merit system, too?

6. Lutherans speak of two realms in which God operates — the spiritual realm and the temporal realm. In the spiritual realm, God brings people to faith in Christ through the preaching of the Gospel. In the temporal realm, God uses political authorities, courts, etc., to maintain just, ordered societies. In this realm, God uses the Law to punish evil and reward good behavior. In the spiritual realm, the Gospel produces love, which attends to the neighbor in need. John, a Christian, helps his elderly neighbor with lawn care and snow removal. Bill, an atheist, does the same for his neighbor. In the temporal realm (civic life), on what grounds would the community approve each? How would each be judged by the ones who received their help? In the spiritual realm, on what basis would both men be viewed? How would each be judged and by whom?

7. At Mr. Jones’ funeral, the pastor notes all that the deceased had done for his community and church. According to what the Lutheran Confessions say in the next point (under #8), how might the pastor’s words be misleading? If there is a chance that he could be misunderstood, should the pastor say nothing at all of Mr. Jones’ Christian life?

8. As a concluding statement, consider again the following quotation regarding the false idea that our justification by God is based on having done the best we could:

Although good works ought to follow faith in this way [as the result of our justification and new birth], people who cannot believe or establish in their hearts that they are freely forgiven on account of Christ use works for a very different purpose. When they see the works of the saints, they think in a human fashion that the saints have merited forgiveness of sins by those works and that they are regarded as righteous before God on account of those works. Accordingly, they imitated those works and think that through similar works they also merit the forgiveness of sins. They try to appease the wrath of God and trust that they are regarded as righteous on account of such works (Ap IV 203).

SESSION FOUR: “I BELIEVE WHAT MY CHURCH TEACHES.”

From Luther’s time forward, the Lutheran Church has continued the Church’s practice of confirmation. Our youth have been examined prior to their confirmation by answering any number of doctrinal questions taken from the lengthy section of questions and answers that followed Luther’s Small Catechism. While the questioning was originally intended to show that the catechumen could examine himself before receiving the Lord’s Supper, it evolved into an opportunity to show that he understood the doctrine of the Lutheran Church and so could be accepted as a “communicant” member. One unintended result was that some felt that confirmation, a rite that somewhat resembled a school graduation ceremony, meant they had passed a “final” examination, which made them a “full” member of the church, and maybe also a “real Christian,” who was right with God on the basis of having answered the questions correctly.

1. Read Rom. 10:9–10. What “things” does a person need to believe in order to be justified? Why does Paul speak of responses from both heart and mouth? See Luke 6:45. If, in Biblical thought, the heart is the center of affection, intellect and the will, why is it not enough to assent merely to the factual correctness of what the Bible teaches in order to be right with God?

2. Read Rom. 4:1–5. Paul quotes Gen. 15:6, which says that Abraham believed God and was justified. What about God did Abraham believe that led to his justification — His existence, His attributes or His promise? How does it make a difference in one’s understanding if the word “trust” is substituted for “believe”?

3. Read James 2:19. What differentiates the Christian’s belief that God is one from that of the demons’ belief that

God is one? Do both believe the same thing? If so, why then are not both justified?

4. Read Luke 13:22–27. On what basis will some try to justify their entrance through the narrow door?

5. A Jehovah’s Witness comes to the front door, eager to hand out the recent copy of *Awake!* magazine. The person at the door says, “No thanks, I am a Lutheran. I believe what my church teaches.” Read John 17:20 and Rom. 10:14. What is the relationship between the content of the message that is taught and the one to whom the content of the message refers?

6. From time to time, one hears a pastor in the worship service say, “Let us confess our faith in the Apostles’ Creed.” Other pastors say, “Let us confess our faith using the words of the Apostles’ Creed.” Is the difference between the two sentences only one of style? Why or why not?

7. Luther understands the difference between intellectual assent to truth, and belief, or trust in the truth. In the following quotations, which words point to the difference between assent to truth and trust in it?

Well, the devil, too, knew that Christ saved Peter. Faith is not a paltry and petty matter as the pope’s contempt of it would make it appear; but it is a heartfelt confidence in God through Christ that Christ’s suffering and death pertain to you and should belong to you. The pope and the devil have a faith too, but it is only a “historical faith.” True faith

does not doubt; it yields its whole heart to the conviction that the Son of God was given into death for us, that sin is remitted, that death is destroyed, and that these evils have been done away with — but, more than this, that eternal life, salvation, and glory, yes, God Himself have been restored to us, and that through the Son God has made us His children (AE 22:369).

Therefore, we must drive home this matter with resolution, so that we remove this error, and strike with terror those who think that it is enough that one believe that in the Sacrament the body and blood of Christ are there. It is true, the food is indeed there, but you eat and partake of it not. For you partake when you believe that it is a gift for you, as we have said. He does not say, “Behold! There it is! There it lies!” He rather says, “Take it. I shall be yours.”³

For further discussion: The Athanasian Creed begins with these words: “Whoever desires to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith. Whoever does not keep it whole and undefiled will without doubt perish eternally.” The same creed concludes with these words: “This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.” Read through the Creed (*LSB* 319–320). How are its assertions only expansions of what it means to confess that “Jesus is Lord,” and not just a “laundry list” of teachings with which one must agree in order to be saved?

³ Martin Luther, *All Become One Cake: A Sermon on the Lord’s Supper*, trans. Matthew Harrison (St Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2005), 6.

