

On St. Paul and Justification

"To Be Just Means Simply to Be With Christ and in Christ"

VATICAN CITY, NOV. 19, 2008 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of the address Benedict XVI delivered during today's general audience in St. Peter's Square.

The Holy Father continued today the cycle of catecheses dedicated to the figure and thought of St. Paul.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the journey we have undertaken under the guidance of St. Paul, we now wish to reflect on a topic that is at the center of the controversies of the century of the Reformation: the issue of justification. How is a man just in the eyes of God? When Paul met the Risen One on the road to Damascus he was a fulfilled man: irreproachable in regard to justice derived from the law (cf. Philippians 3:6); he surpassed many of his contemporaries in the observance of the Mosaic prescriptions and was zealous in upholding the traditions of his forefathers (cf. Galatians 1:14).

The illumination of Damascus changed his life radically: He began to regard all his merits, achievements of a most honest religious career, as "loss" in face of the sublimity of knowledge of Jesus Christ (cf. Philippians 3:8). The Letter to the Philippians gives us a moving testimony of Paul's turning from a justice based on the law and achieved by observance of the prescribed works, to a justice based on faith in Christ: He understood all that up to now had seemed a gain to him was in fact a loss before God, and because of this decided to dedicate his whole life to Jesus Christ (cf. Philippians 3:7). The treasure hidden in the field, and the precious pearl in whose possession he invests everything, were no longer the works of the law, but Jesus Christ, his Lord.

The relationship between Paul and the Risen One is so profound that it impels him to affirm that Christ was not only his life, but his living, to the point that to be able to reach him, even death was a gain (cf. Philippians 1:21). It was not because he did not appreciate life, but because he understood that for him, living no longer had another objective; therefore, he no longer had a desire other than to reach Christ, as in an athletic competition, to be with him always. The Risen One had become the beginning and end of his existence, the reason and goal of his running. Only concern for the growth in faith of those he had evangelized and solicitude for all the Churches he had founded (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:28), induced him to slow down the run toward his only Lord, to wait for his disciples, so that they would be able to run to the goal with him. If in the previous observance of the law he had nothing to reproach himself from the point of view of moral

integrity, once overtaken by Christ he preferred not to judge himself (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:3-4), but limited himself to run to conquer the one who had conquered him (cf. Philippians 3:12).

It is precisely because of this personal experience of the relationship with Jesus that Paul places at the center of his Gospel an irreducible opposition between two alternative paths to justice: one based on the works of the law, the other founded on the grace of faith in Christ. The alternative between justice through the works of the law and justice through faith in Christ thus becomes one of the dominant themes that runs through his letters: "We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified" (Galatians 2:15-16).

And, he reaffirms to the Christians of Rome that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). And he adds: "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Ibid. 28). Luther translated this point as "justified by faith alone." I will return to this at the end of the catechesis.

First, we must clarify what is the "law" from which we have been freed and what are those "works of the law" that do not justify. Already in the community of Corinth there was the opinion, which will return many times in history, which consisted in thinking that it was a question of the moral law, and that Christian freedom consisted therefore in being free from ethics. So, the words "panta mou estin" (everything is licit for me) circulated in Corinth. It is obvious that this interpretation is erroneous: Christian liberty is not libertinism; the freedom of which St. Paul speaks is not freedom from doing good.

Therefore, what is the meaning of the law from which we have been freed and that does not save? For St. Paul, as well as for all his contemporaries, the word law meant the Torah in its totality, namely, the five books of Moses. In the Pharisaic interpretation, the Torah implied what Paul had studied and made his own, a collection of behaviors extending from an ethical foundation to the ritual and cultural observances that substantially determined the identity of the just man -- particularly circumcision, the observance regarding pure food and general ritual purity, the rules regarding observance of the Sabbath, etc. These behaviors often appear in the debates between Jesus and his contemporaries. All these observances that express a social, cultural and religious identity had come to be singularly important at the time of Hellenistic culture, beginning in the 3rd century B.C.

This culture, which had become the universal culture of the time, was a seemingly rational culture, an apparently tolerant polytheist culture, which constituted a strong pressure toward cultural uniformity and thus threatened the identity of Israel, which was politically obliged to enter into this common identity of Hellenistic culture with the consequent loss of its own identity, loss hence also of the precious inheritance of the faith of their Fathers, of faith in the one God and in God's promises.

Against this cultural pressure, which not only threatened Jewish identity but also faith in the one God and his promises, it was necessary to create a wall of distinction, a defense shield that would protect the precious inheritance of the faith; this wall would consist precisely of the Jewish observances and prescriptions. Paul, who had learned these observances precisely in their defensive function of the gift of God, of the inheritance of the faith in only one God, saw this identity threatened by the freedom of Christians: That is why he persecuted them. At the moment of his encounter with the Risen One he understood that with Christ's resurrection the situation had changed radically. With Christ, the God of Israel, the only true God became the God of all peoples.

The wall -- so says the Letter to the Ephesians -- between Israel and the pagans was no longer necessary: It is Christ who protects us against polytheism and all its deviations; it is Christ who unites us with and in the one God; it is Christ who guarantees our true identity in the diversity of cultures; and it is he who makes us just. To be just means simply to be with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Other observances are no longer necessary.

That is why Luther's expression "sola fide" is true if faith is not opposed to charity, to love. Faith is to look at Christ, to entrust oneself to Christ, to be united to Christ, to be conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence, to believe is to be conformed to Christ and to enter into his love. That is why, in the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul develops above all his doctrine on justification; he speaks of faith that operates through charity (cf. Galatians 5:14).

Paul knows that in the double love of God and neighbor the whole law is fulfilled. Thus the whole law is observed in communion with Christ, in faith that creates charity. We are just when we enter into communion with Christ, who is love. We will see the same in next Sunday's Gospel for the solemnity of Christ the King. It is the Gospel of the judge whose sole criterion is love. What I ask is only this: Did you visit me when I was sick? When I was in prison? Did you feed me when I was hungry, clothe me when I was naked? So justice is decided in charity. Thus, at the end of this Gospel, we can say: love alone, charity alone. However, there is no contradiction between this Gospel and St. Paul. It is the same vision, the one according to which communion with Christ, faith in Christ, creates charity. And charity is the realization of communion with Christ. Thus, being united to him we are just, and in no other way.

At the end, we can only pray to the Lord so that he will help us to believe. To really believe; belief thus becomes life, unity with Christ, the transformation of our life. And thus, transformed by his love, by love of God and neighbor, we can really be just in the eyes of God.

[Translation by ZENIT]

[At the end of the Audience, Benedict XVI greeted pilgrims in several languages. In English, he said:]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our continuing catechesis on St. Paul, we now consider his teaching on our justification. Paul's experience of the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus led him to see that it is only by faith in Christ, and not by any merit of our own, that we are made righteous before God. Our justification in Christ is thus God's gracious gift, revealed in the mystery of the Cross. Christ died in order to become our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (cf. 1 Cor 1:30), and we in turn, justified by faith, have become in him the very righteousness of God (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). In the light of the Cross and its gifts of reconciliation and new life in the Spirit, Paul rejected a righteousness based on the Law and its works.

For the Apostle, the Mosaic Law, as an irrevocable gift of God to Israel, is not abrogated but relativized, since it is only by faith in God's promises to Abraham, now fulfilled in Christ, that we receive the grace of justification and new life. The Law finds its end in Christ (cf. Rom 10:4) and its fulfilment in the new commandment of love. With Paul, then, let us make the Cross of Christ our only boast (cf. Gal 6:14), and give thanks for the grace which has made us members of Christ's Body, which is the Church.

I am pleased to greet the participants in the international Catholic Scouting Conference meeting in Rome. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Finland, South Africa and the United States, I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

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