

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, *and it was counted to him as righteousness*. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who *does not work* but *trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness*. (Rom. 4:2–5)

This means that “getting it right” in one’s behavior, thought life, or desires is not the hinge upon which one’s freedom turns. Rather, freedom is found in Jesus’ imputing his own perfection to those who will never be able to achieve this standard on their own. This provides freedom from the wrath of God. It is the freedom to war mightily against sin without the fear of condemnation when failure strikes. It is the freedom to commune with God. It is the freedom to be compelled by this unspeakable love to love others as a means to glorify him. This is why Paul enthusiastically wrote,

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. (Phil. 3:8–9)

Knowing Christ put everything in Paul’s life into perspective. *All* things, compared to being found “in Christ,” were for Paul now considered rubbish. Paul was a man with an impressive religious pedigree. His whole life had previously been centered on “doing good” according to the law. When faced with the infinite power of the gospel, he soon learned that all things, including his own efforts toward goodness, were in the end “rubbish” without Jesus. This, for Paul, was true freedom!

It is important to understand that this truth, the imputed righteousness of Jesus, is not relevant just to past sins or sins prior to conversion. This reality is a present working reality in the life of every believer in Jesus Christ. Although Justine is not aware of it as she sits helplessly on her kitchen floor, blood racing down her arm, her body disfigured by the teeth of a jagged blade, the righteousness of Christ is being poured out upon her at that very moment. While her relentless pride and her adversary, the devil, will work tirelessly to have her fixate on her own failure, and on the blood and scars left in its wake, Christ whispers, “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matt. 26:26), and “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:27). What Justine’s blood and body cannot accomplish (freedom from guilt, fear, anxiety, and self-condemnation), Jesus offers her daily in his own!

THE GOSPEL AT WORK

When Fear Is Tormenting Your Mind

A major theme in Justine’s life is fear and anxiety. Since every significant person in her life has either left or betrayed her, she wrestles every day with a profound sense of insecurity and worthlessness. This often contributes to panic attacks and what seem to be unstoppable thoughts of anxiety. While good biblical counsel will seek to offer her sound methods to apply in her life that may help overcome these inner struggles, the counsel must be rooted in the finished work of Jesus. If Justine seeks counsel and learns to “put off” the old and “put on the new” (Eph. 4:22–24) or, as she has already attempted, to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), she needs a firm foundation on which to stand when things don’t go according to plan (as they did on the day she ended up on the kitchen floor, knife in hand). Her efforts in repentant living must be based upon what Christ has already accomplished for her; otherwise,

in her weakness she will find herself once again ensnared by fear, anxiety, and self-condemnation.

One of the most gripping scenes in the gospel accounts is that of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. One can only imagine the pressure as Jesus anticipated what was coming. He knew that the hours ahead were going to be filled with ridicule, mocking, beatings, pain, suffering, and ultimately his violent murder. To say this was a prime opportunity for Jesus to give in to the fear of man would be quite an understatement. Real men were going to hurt Jesus, and they were going to do so with some of the cruelest methods ever invented.

What was his response to such danger? God shares an intimate moment with us in the book of Matthew that sheds light on Christ's response in this moment. "And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will'" (Matt. 26:39). Here is Jesus, knowing men are going to inflict excruciating pain and humiliation on him, asking his Father to "let this cup pass." In essence he's saying, "Father, if there is any other way, please make it possible." Jesus knew what was coming. When pressed with the fires of imminent suffering and death, as well as having to experience his own Father turning his face from him, Jesus responded with complete faith and obedience. Rather than allowing his mind to race with sinful fear and doubt or coming up with his own plan of safety, he trusted God. And because he trusted, he exhibited love to the Father, and confirmed what he had said earlier in his life, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34).

Jesus' reaction to danger in the garden that day is very relevant to Justine's present issues. When faced with any potential to be hurt by others, she doesn't always get it right. Instead, she tends to avoid or lash out at people as her means of protection. The overriding priority of her life is her own safety. The will of God as it pertains to human relationships is not even a distant

echo in her conscience. When she is forced to interact with others, emotions of fear and anxiety flood her thoughts to the point that self-injury becomes the only avenue to peace of mind.

Now that she is a believer, this issue is magnified by the fact that she can't turn the thoughts of fear and panic off like a switch. As a result, she feels guilty and "less than" a believer. She tells herself things like, "Strong Christians don't struggle like this." Her faith, which she hoped would become the means by which she could overcome her issues, now complicates them. This is especially true when she can't perfectly execute biblical truth and get the immediate results she wants.

What Justine must remember as her means of hope is Jesus' perfection in the face of danger. His heart remained fixed upon his Father's will, even though he asked for another way. Since he was obedient when provided with the opportunity to fear, and since he imputes that obedience to Justine, she now has freedom in her own struggle with anxiety, in that in her weakness she does not have to fear condemnation from God. This also removes any reason to condemn herself. If the perfection of Christ is hers, then there is nothing to condemn (Rom. 8:33–34). She no longer has a right to do that! Certainly she needs to call upon God to increase her faith, as well as to turn from patterns that reinforce her sin. But in the end, her hope will not be found in being able to avoid the fears of this world, but in the Redeemer who protects her in times of trouble (Ps. 24) and whose righteousness in the face of fear is freely given to her as her very own. When unable to "get it together like a good Christian," rather than find comfort in her blades, Justine must learn to find comfort in Christ's completed work!

When Faced with the Sting of Betrayal

Just like Justine, Jesus experienced extreme abandonment and rejection while on this earth. We are given many accounts of this in the Gospels. For example, one of his disciples, Judas, was responsible for having Jesus arrested: