

SOTERIOLOGY: The Glorious Doctrine of God's Great Salvation

Lesson 7: Justification

⁴ *How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? (Job 25:4)*

I. What do we mean by "Justification"?

Justification deals with the fundamental issue of how guilty sinners can be acquitted and restored to favor with an infinitely righteous and just God.

God is the perfect standard of what is right. He is absolutely just. In the scriptures, we see God consistently rewarding moral good and punishing moral evil. Because he is an absolutely righteous judge, the Lord cannot, by simple fiat, absolve the guilty, either by altering his inviolable word or by overlooking appalling sin.

In the words of Bruce Demarest, *"How then can a perfectly righteous, just, and holy God acquit guilty and condemn sinners? On what basis can God reckon as righteous those who are wholly unrighteous? Furthermore, how does God accomplish this great justifying work? By what means does God absolve the sin and guilt of rebels against the Divine Lawgiver and Judge of the universe?"*

The answer is God's GRACE demonstrated in **justification**.

Martin Luther once said that justification by faith alone was "the doctrine by which the church stands or falls." Luther had come to understand the Bible's central message as one of free justification received by faith alone in Christ, resulting in the forgiveness of sins. This understanding was the critical catalyst of the Protestant Reformation.

New Hampshire Confession of Faith, Article V: Of Justification

We believe that the great Gospel blessing which Christ secures to such as believe in Him is Justification; that Justification includes the pardon of sin, and the promise of eternal life on principles of righteousness; that it is bestowed, not in consideration of any works of righteousness which we have done, but solely through faith in the Redeemer's blood; by virtue of which faith His perfect righteousness is freely imputed to us of God; that it brings us into a state of most blessed peace and favor with God, and secures every other blessing needful for time and eternity.

The following is adapted from Andy Naselli's "A Systematic Theology of Justification":

Justification is JUDICIAL, not experiential.

Rom 4:5; 5:18; 8:1; 8:33-34

Justification means to *declare* righteous, not to *make* righteous (in the sense of transforming one's character to be righteous). It is a metaphor from the law court, where a judge pronounces someone as either guilty or not guilty. Paul contrasts condemning (pronouncing guilty) and justifying (pronouncing not guilty but righteous) in Romans 8:33–34: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" (cf. Rom. 5:18; 8:1). God "justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5) in that he legally declares ungodly people to be innocent and righteous – not in that he transforms ungodly people into godly people.

Justification includes FORGIVENESS.

When God justifies believing sinners, he forgives those sinners' "lawless deeds" and covers their sins and no longer will count their sins against them. (Romans 4:6-8)

Justification includes IMPUTATION.

Rom. 4:1-8; 5:15-19

Justification is a blessing because God imputes Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner. God does not merely CANCEL a sinner's guilt and declare that the sinner is innocent (neutral). God imputes Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner's account and declares that the sinner is righteous (positive). That is why "the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works" experiences a "blessing" (Rom. 4:6; cf. Rom. 4:7-9): "As by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made [i.e., have the status of] righteous" (Rom. 5:19).

Justification is VERTICAL, not horizontal.

Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26; 9:30-10:13

Justification is fundamentally about how sinful humans relate to the righteous God, not to other humans. It is primarily about *soteriology*, not *ecclesiology*.

II. The Need for Justification

The need for justification is rooted in the default human CONDITION – guilty, condemned, and alienated from God. All humans without exception are sinners under God's condemning WRATH (Rom. 1:18-3:20).

"None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). No one can stand before God as righteous on his or her own merits.

Tom Schreiner describes justification like this:

Both justification and adoption are legal images, though hailing from different sections of the court. Adoption comes from the family court, presenting God as Father, Christ as older Brother and Redeemer, and believers as God's beloved children to whom he gives the benefits and responsibilities of family life.

Justification, like adoption, is a legal image, but it belongs in a different division, the criminal court. It is part of a larger biblical legal picture that portrays God as Lawgiver and Judge of all the earth, to whom every person will give an account. Fallen humans appear before him as guilty sinners who have rebelled against their Maker and broken his law. Christ was "born under the law to redeem those under the law." (Gal 4:4-5) How did he do this? "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Gal 3:13)

It is our righteous CONDEMNATION that begs our need for God's gracious justification.

We are in this state because of a) Adam's ORIGINAL sin (Rom 5:18-19), and b) our ACTUAL sins (Rom 3:10-11; 23)

III. The Basis of Justification

Justification is based on God's imputing Christ's righteousness to believing sinners (Rom. 4:1-8; 5:15-19) – **which is possible because of PROPITIATION** (Rom. 3:25-26).

How can God be a just judge if he declares that guilty people are not only innocent but righteous? Because justification depends on propitiation—that is, Jesus's sacrificial death *propitiates* God the Father. Jesus satisfies God's righteous wrath against us and turns it into favor. We are justified by Jesus's

blood—that is, based on his sacrificial, substitutionary death (Rom. 5:9). The righteous God *righteously* “righteouses” the unrighteous. Justification vindicates God in justifying the ungodly because of propitiation.

Justification is based on God’s imputing Christ’s righteousness to believing sinners (Rom 4:1-8; 5:15-19) – **which is possible because God RAISED Christ from the dead** (Rom 4:24-25).

God raised Christ from the dead to publicly vindicate him and thus take care of or confirm our justification.

Justification is based on God’s imputing Christ’s righteousness to believing sinners (Rom 4:1-8; 5:15-19) – **which is possible because of UNION with Christ** (Rom 3:24; 5:12-21; 8:1).

Union with Christ provides the basis for our justification. Christ’s propitiation and resurrection benefit believing sinners because they are united to Christ.

IV. The Means of Justification

Justification is a gracious GIFT that sinful humans cannot EARN (Rom 2:5-16; 3:9-20, 24, 27-28; 4:1-5; 5:16-17; 9:30-10:5).

The means of justification is **not our good works**. We are justified freely (i.e., as a gift, without payment) by his grace (Rom 3:24). Sinners cannot merit a right standing before God based on their works, so they cannot boast before God (Rom 4:2).

“A true view of justification,” asserts Wayne Grudem, “is the dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation by faith alone and all false gospels of salvation based on good works.”

Justification is accessible by FAITH ALONE in Christ alone (Rom 1:17; 3:22, 25; 4:3-5, 9-25; 5:1-2; 9:30-10:13).

The means of justification is faith in Christ. Faith is instrumental. Being justified does not include works, and the object of faith does not include oneself or anyone else other than God in Christ: “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom 4:5).

Justification occurs through REDEMPTION (Rom 3:24).

We are justified “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24). The human means of justification is faith; the divine means is redemption.

Justification is accessible to everyone w/o ethnic DISTINCTION (Rom 3:22-23, 29–30; 4:9-17; 10:11-13).

“There is no distinction between Jew and Greek ... ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Rom 10:12-13).

V. The Outcome of Justification

Justification is now inseparably connected to FREEDOM from the LAW (Rom 3:19–1; 7:1-25; 9:30-10:13).

God’s people are now under the new covenant and not the Mosaic law-covenant. Justification fulfills the law (Rom 3:21, 31; 8:4). The Old Testament prophetically testifies to the salvation-historical shift that

occurred with Christ's death that made the Mosaic law-covenant obsolete. Now God's people uphold the law "by this faith" (Rom. 3:31).

Michael Horton:

"Paul says the law imprisoned everything under sin. The purpose of the law was not really to make good people better. The purpose of the law was to take everybody and put them in prison so they could see that what they had done was not simply a mistake. It was a transgression. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified through faith."

Justification is inseparably connected to PEACE with God (Rom 5:1).

While the justification metaphor is judicial, the reconciliation metaphor is relational. Before being justified, a sinner is God's enemy and is under God's wrath. After being justified, a sinner is God's friend and has peace with God.

Justification is inseparably connected to the most deeply rooted and satisfying JOY (Rom 5:2-11).

Those who are justified rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:2), in their sufferings (Rom 5:3-10), and in God himself (Rom 5:11). Justification is good news not primarily because God forgives our sins and we escape God's wrath. Justification is good news primarily because it enables us to enjoy God himself.

John Piper, *God is the Gospel*:

"Justification is not an end in itself. Neither is the forgiveness of sins or the imputation of righteousness. Neither is escape from hell or entrance into heaven or freedom from disease or liberation from bondage or eternal life or justice or mercy or the beauties of a pain-free world. None of these facets of the gospel-diamond is the chief good or highest goal of the gospel. Only one thing is: seeing and savoring God himself, being changed into the image of his Son so that more and more we delight in and display God's infinite beauty and worth."

Justification is inseparably connected to progressive SANCTIFICATION (Rom 6:1–23).

For Roman Catholics, "faith + works → justification," and for Protestants, "faith → justification + works".

Progressive sanctification is distinct yet inseparable from justification. Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone. God's grace through the power of his Spirit ensures that the same faith that justifies a Christian also progressively sanctifies a Christian.

Justification is inseparably connected to ASSURANCE that God will finish what he planned, accomplished, and applied (Rom 8:28-39).

God *planned* to save his people— he foreknew and predestined them. God *accomplished* his plan through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. He *applied* his plan—he effectually called and justified his people. And God will finish what he started—he will glorify them. Since God is for us, absolutely nothing can be against us (Rom 8:31)!

VI. The Completion of Justification

Justification is definitive and will be final when God publicly vindicates believers by RAISING them in transformed bodies to experience the new heaven and new earth.

When God initially justifies a believer, that justification is definitive and once for all time. But it is private. When God resurrects believers in the future, he will publicly vindicate them at the last judgment.

VII. The Goal of Justification

The ultimate aim of our justification is THE GLORY OF GOD.

A goal of justification is to enable guilty sinners to stand before the righteous God as righteous. But that is not its *ultimate* goal. Justification occurs ultimately to glorify God. That is why Romans 1–8 ends by praising God for the results of justification – namely, that since God is for us, nothing can be against us (Rom. 8:31-39). That is why Romans 9-11 ends by praising God for his deep riches, wisdom, and knowledge regarding how he saves his people throughout history (Rom 11:33-36). That is why the letter ends by praising God for his righteousness that is now manifested apart from the law-covenant and to which the Law and the Prophets testify (Rom 3:21):

According to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Rom 16:25-27)

In short, “From him and through him and to him are all things”—especially our justification. “To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

Next week: Adoption