

“The Doctrine of Justification”

There is no doctrine more critical to salvation than the doctrine of justification. It is one doctrine that Satan has so twisted and covered that people have either never studied it or they are very confused about it.

As Dr. Louis Sperry Chafer said, “Romish perversions and Arminian unbelief have robbed multitudes of Christians of any adequate understanding (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 273). It is a doctrine that is very true, extremely important and infinitely deep. It is so important that William Plummer said in the mid 1800’s “ministers should labor to fully explain it to the people in a way that is thoroughly clear” (*Commentary On Romans*, p. 172).

When the Apostle Paul unlocked the Gospel of God in Romans, after clearly establishing that the whole world was sinful and guilty before God, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (**Romans 3:23**), the **first doctrine he mentions in the very next verse (Romans 3:24) and the first doctrine he thoroughly develops in the next two chapters (Romans 4-5) is the doctrine of Justification**. It is “the” foundational doctrine of the whole Gospel. Martin Luther said justification is the “chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed,” and John Calvin said justification is “the main hinge on which religion turns” (Cited from James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, p. 416).

Martin Luther challenged the Pope and the Church of Rome with this one doctrine and he used this doctrine to call for the reformation of the whole church. Luther saw justification as the Gospel. It was the very heart of the grace of God because this is the doctrine that brings potential salvation to any depraved, guilty sinner.

When we think of justify or justification, we immediately think of something judicial and legal that happens in a court of law. In fact, the very word was one taken from judicial courts. It typically was used to describe a person who was tried in a court and was declared to be innocent of the charges. **But when we put this judicial term of justification in a proper theological context, as it relates to God and to us, there is nothing on this earth to which we can even perfectly compare it.**

God’s justification doctrine is far different than any form of justification between humans. For example, it is possible for a person to justify himself with others if he can show that the reason he did something had a just cause. If a large man were standing next to a road and you took off running and slammed into him as hard as you can and knocked him to the ground, he may actually justify your action if it were due to the fact that a car was going to hit him if you did not knock him out of the way.

Also, you could actually go into a court of law and be justified if you can prove that the reason for your conduct was justified conduct. For example, if someone breaks into your home and you grab a gun and shoot and kill the intruder, you will be required to give a defense of what you did to a prosecutor and perhaps a judge and more than likely they will say what you did was ‘justifiable homicide.’ This of course would not mean you were innocent of shooting the man, this would simply mean you were legally declared justified in what you did.

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Our problem, when it comes to justification by God, is very different. All of us have our own sin case against ourselves. Every record of every one of our failures is stored up in heaven and what we have been storing up is the wrath of God (Romans 2:5). In view of this, we are all guilty and stand justly condemned in the sight of the Holy God.

Now the big question of this doctrine is this: “If we stand justly condemned in the sight of God, what possible chance do we have of going into the Court of a Holy, Righteous, True and Just God and have Him justify us, when He knows and we know we have failed and sinned against Him time and time again?” “How could a Perfect God be just and true and at the same time perfectly justify us?”

I doubt seriously that we realize just how perfectly just and righteous God actually is. He cannot overlook sin or forget about sin. He cannot exchange His justice for His mercy and just let the sin matter go. He cannot declare us innocent, because we are not innocent. If God declared us innocent, it would be a declaration contrary to truth and God cannot do anything contrary to truth. **Perfect Justice demands Perfect satisfaction every single time.**

Let me illustrate the difference between God and us. Just recently a man who was out of work stole some food from a store and got caught. The owner not only decided not to press charges, but in sheer mercy, gave the man groceries and also \$40. He substituted justice for mercy without any satisfaction for the infraction. Perfect justice cannot do that. Perfect justice cannot just overlook the crime. That is where the doctrine of justification becomes so critical.

It is quite obvious that any plan God would have for our justification cannot be based on what we have done, it will have to be a plan based on some form of judicial calculation that God must make.

QUESTION #1 – What does the term “justification” actually mean?

The term “justification” comes from a group of Greek forensic words (δικαιος, δικαιοσυνη, δικαιοω, δικαιοσις) which all have to do the righteousness of God. As C. I. Scofield said, “Justification and Righteousness are inseparably united by the fact...the original words come from exactly the same root” (*26 Great Words*, p. 1252). In fact, the Apostle Paul actually calls salvation “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 3:21) and one question we ask is Why? Why does Paul equate salvation with the righteousness of God? Because in order to go to heaven, you must have the same righteousness God has because Heaven is God’s Home.

In various parts of the world, there are nudist colonies. If a nudist were to come to my home, I would not let him in. If you are going to be in my home, I have certain standards that must be adhered to and one of those standards is modest clothing. In God’s home, His clothing standard is His righteousness. He will not permit one to enter His Home without total righteousness. A person must be wearing a robe of total righteousness to get into His Home.

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These particular words connected to justification imply that one is actually in God's court and is shown to be as righteous as God and therefore is acquitted of all sin condemnatory charges (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 115-117). So the entire matter of justification comes down to this—'How can we go before a holy God and be seen and shown to be as righteous as He is to the point where He will acquit us of all sin charges?'

QUESTION #2 – How critical is the word “reckon” or “credited” to justification?

Job 25:4 asks the question, “How is it possible for any sinful man born of a woman to be just with God?” In Numbers 23:19, Moses teaches us that, “God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should repent; Has He said and will He not do it? Or has He spoken and will He not make it good.” If God were to make a judicial calculation concerning a person, His own character demands that He could not ever reverse the calculation and this is the importance of the word “reckon.”

The word “reckon” or “credit” is the word which makes justification possible. This particular Greek word (λογίζομαι) is used eleven times in **Romans 4** (vrs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24). This word, logizomai, means that justification comes by Divine Judicial calculation, mental reckoning or mental consideration (*Ibid.*, p. 270). **This word emphasizes non-emotional calculation.** In fact, we derive our English words “logic,” “logical” “logistics” and “logarithm” from this word. It is obviously a very factual, non-emotional type of word.

By using this word in a soteriological context, it means that justification must come by God's logistical Divine imputation or calculation for there is no other possible way to have it. Making such a logistical calculation concerning someone else's account is clearly seen in **Philemon 18**, in which Paul uses the same root Greek word.

Augustus Strong said, “Justification...is a declarative act, as distinguished from an efficient act; an act of God external to the sinner, as distinguished from an act within the sinner's nature and changing that nature; ...an act based upon and logically presupposing the sinner's union with Christ, as distinguished from an act which causes and is followed by that union with Christ” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 849).

When a minister marries a couple, he makes a legal and judicial declaration at one point of time that the couple is now husband and wife. This has nothing to do with how the husband and wife decide to develop in their relationship. This has nothing to do with what the minister feels. It is simply a judicial legal declaration that now they are husband and wife. In fact, in the state of Michigan, without this declaration and signed marriage license, the marriage is not valid. A couple could actually be living in sin, but this judicial declaration is made and they are no longer living in sin. This is the matter of justification.

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To have a Holy God calculate a person to be as righteous as He is, would mean He would have to make a Divine judicial decision to mentally and legally calculate the person this way. This would be the only possible way justification could occur in God's court. **It would have to be by some judicial calculation or declaration of God, because it certainly cannot be based on our works or track record.** The imputation of righteousness would mean that God would calculate Christ's righteousness to our account instead of our own supposed righteousness, which we actually do not have (**Philippians 3:9**).

This judicial calculation must include the fact that He would no longer see the person as a condemned sinner under the threat of deserved condemnatory punishment and would also mean He would calculate him as totally righteous who is now entitled to all of the eternal benefits and blessings of one viewed as totally righteous.

Obviously, any plan of God that would actually be able to protect His perfect justice and at the same time be able to legitimately make it possible for Him to legally justify a sinner would have to be way beyond anything we could imagine or devise. It would have to come from the Infinite wisdom of an Infinite God.

The doctrine of justification is a judicial and declarative act of God concerning a sinner and it is the only way one may be saved.

QUESTION #3 – Who potentially may be justified?

We know from Paul's statement in **Romans 3:30** that any person of any ethnic background may be justified (any Jew or Gentile), but the most amazing statement comes from **Romans 4:5** in which Paul says God is willing to justify the "ungodly," and **Romans 5:6** in which Paul says Christ died for the "ungodly."

God classifies one not justified as "ungodly" and, in view of this, as Jonathan Edwards said, "it is absurd to suppose that our godliness, taken as some goodness, is the ground of our justification" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, p. 622).

The particular Greek word "ungodly" (ασεβης) is one that means God is prepared to justify a person who has desired to do ungodly, unholy, irreverent, sinful things and has actually done them (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 63). God is prepared to justify any sinner who has purposely done ungodly, irreverent things.

Justification means in spite of all of your evil sin, you can still go into God's court and have Him calculate you as righteous to the point you are guaranteed Heaven. God finds no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but He finds tremendous pleasure in the justification of a sinner and His justification is offered to any ungodly sinner who has committed any ungodly sin (Matt. 12:31).

(5)

QUESTION #4 – What must a sinful person do to cause God to make this justified calculation?

The answer to this question is absolutely nothing! There is not one thing a sinful man can do to cause God to make this legal judicial calculation. We can't do a thing for we are all sinners.

- 1) David said in **Psalm 143:2**, “And do not enter into judgment with Thy servant, for in Thy sight no man living is righteous.”
- 2) **Psalm 130:3** says, “If Thou, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”
- 3) Job said in **Job 9:2-3**, “In truth I know that this is so, but how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to dispute with Him, He could not answer Him once in a thousand times.”
- 4) Solomon said in **Ecclesiastes 7:20**, “Indeed there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.”
- 5) Paul said in **Romans 3:23**, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Clearly there is nothing we may do to merit, earn or deserve a legal calculation of God which declares us totally righteous. There is nothing we can say before God that could get Him to declare us righteous based on anything we have done.

QUESTION #5 – How is it possible that we may be justified by a Holy God?

If we cannot do anything to earn this judicial calculation of God, then how is it possible? There are two clearly stated Biblical answers to this question:

Answer #1 - Justification is possible due solely to God's grace.

Make no mistake about this fact; **justification is rooted in the riches of God's grace**. Since God offers justification to ungodly, undeserving, unmeriting foul sinners, who are nothing but a bunch of guilty condemned rebels, it stands to reason that **any hope we have of justification is purely by God's free grace**. If a person's justification is based on anything but God's free grace, it is not possible because man is a sinner who has broken the law of God. Justification is not on account of anything in man. In fact, Isaiah said that God wipes out our sin for His own sake (Isaiah 43:25). It is all about His grace.

Paul says in **Romans 3:24**, “being justified as a gift by His grace.”

Paul says in **Titus 3:7**, “that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

(6)

God's grace that justifies is unmerited, undeserved and unearned by any human. It is not some works weigh-scale system; it is freely given. It has nothing to do with what we have or have not done. Justification is pure grace that is greater than all our sin. Jonathan Edwards said that to suppose that we are justified by our own sincere obedience or any of our own virtue or goodness is a "scheme of justification...that diminishes the grace of God and is to be rejected" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1, p. 635).

Answer #2 - Justification is possible due solely to Christ's blood.

If you are wise, you will stand in total awe and admiration and adoration of the blood of Jesus Christ for without Him shedding His blood, you have no chance of justification (Heb. 9:22). Our sin never looks more fearful than when you see what God did to His own Son at Calvary. Why did the First member of the Godhead turn His back on the Second member of the Godhead to the point that He cried, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" Something very legal and very judicial was taking place. Take a good look at Jesus Christ on that cross and realize that He shed His precious blood so He could make it possible for God to justify you in your court case with the Holy God. He offered up Himself for this very purpose (Hebrews 9:14).

Paul says in **Romans 3:24-25** that we are justified "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Whom God displayed publicly as propitiation in His blood..."

Paul says in **Romans 5:9**, "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him."

When a person's sin case comes before God, the only possible chance one has to have God judicially calculate a person as righteous is due to His grace and the judicial consideration of His Son's shed blood. God must judicially calculate the specific blood of His Son to a specific individual. What is it that can actually wash away our sins? "Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

QUESTION #6 – At what point would God Divinely calculate one as righteous by His grace and calculate that His Son's blood actually justifies a person?

You are not born into this world justified. There must be a moment when God justifies you. God demands that man first acknowledge that he does not have the righteousness necessary to equal the majestic holiness of God. God demands that man see himself as he truly is, an ungodly, miserable sinner. **The clear answer from Scripture is you are justified by God at the very moment you believe totally and only in Jesus Christ to save you from your sins. The big question concerning whether or not one is justified is not a sin question, but a Son question.** The question is when is the moment one believed on Jesus Christ.

Justification is a single perfect act of God in which He declares a sinner righteous the moment he believes and actually calculates His Son's righteousness to that person's account.

(7)

It is not a progressive series of multiple actions, it is a one time judicial decision declared by a God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

Paul says in **Acts 13:39** that “through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things...”

Paul says in **Romans 3:22** that the righteousness of God is “through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Paul says in **Romans 3:28**, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of The Law.”

Paul says in **Romans 5:1**, “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God...”

Paul says in **Galatians 2:16**, “...a man is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

At the precise moment that you acknowledge to God that you believe only and totally in Jesus Christ to save you from your sins, God makes this judicial calculation concerning you. God does not ask you to do one thing, except believe on His Son’s substitutionary work on your behalf. **All of the benefits of justification are yours the moment you believe.**

We do not receive justification by our works, tears, repentance, love, feelings or promises of holiness; we receive it by faith. **The moment you believe in your heart that only Jesus Christ can save you from your sins in your court case with God, you are totally, completely and eternally justified.**

Let us go back to the marriage analogy. You are not born into this world married. There must be a legal moment where it is legally declared you are married. The moment this judicial pronouncement is made, everything changes before men and before God. So it is with justification. The moment this declaration is made, everything changes.

QUESTION #7 – What are the benefits of justification?

Once God justifies you, and makes this judicial calculation, there is an amazing benefit package that immediately and instantly is yours. There is a twofold breakdown of the justification benefits we receive:

Justification Benefit Package #1 - The negative benefits of justification.

There is no better or bigger benefit than this one. **At the precise moment God justifies us, His judicial declaration or calculation means all our condemnatory sin is gone.** Condemnatory sin will never again be brought up against us.

(8)

Dr. Norman Geisler said, “The first stage of salvation is called justification, salvation from the penalty of sin. Justification is an instantaneous, past act of God by which one is saved from the guilt of sin—his record is cleared and he is guiltless before the Judge (Rom. 8:1)” (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 235).

The removal of sin, just as the reception of righteousness, is by judicial calculation and part of the justification package. God declares that your condemnatory sin is removed from you as far as the east is from the west (**Psalm 103:12**) and He remembers your sins no more (**Hebrews 8:12; 10:17; Is. 43:25**). In justification, God chooses to not remember our sin.

Justification Benefit Package #2 - The positive benefits of justification.

But the justification package doesn't only take away all condemnatory sin; it immediately gives you four amazing blessings:

(Blessing #1) - Justification declares you righteous and frees you from all things.

Paul says in **Acts 13:39** that everyone who believes is justified from all things. This includes all of the terrible things you have ever done, said or thought or all of the things you still might do. This precious doctrine means any who believe are set free from everything the moment God makes this calculation concerning you. Justification does not just subtract sin; it adds Christ's righteousness to your account.

(Blessing #2) - Justification means you have permanent peace with God.

Paul says in **Romans 5:1**, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Contrary to popular notions of many preachers, man is a sinner and is in a hostile relationship and in hostile war with God. Man is an enemy of God (Romans 5:10).

The moment one believes on Jesus Christ, God makes a judicial calculation which says that individual is now in a peaceful relationship with Me. By one judicial edict we go from hostility to harmony, from enmity to amity.

(Blessing #3) - Justification means you can never experience God's wrath.

Paul says in **Romans 5:9**, “having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” The moment you believe in Jesus Christ, God makes a judicial calculation that you can never experience anything connected to His wrath.

What that eschatologically means is you will not ever enter the Tribulation, which will be a time when God will pour out His wrath on this earth (Rev. 6:16) and you certainly will never enter Hell which is the place of eternal wrath.

(9)

Anselm, who was actually a Catholic theologian, wrote a tract in 1100 A.D. for people who were about to die and were overwhelmed with their sin. Here is a part of it:

Question - Do you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died for you?

Answer – Yes I believe it.

Question - Do you thank God for the passion and death of Jesus Christ?

Answer – Yes I do thank Him.

Question - Do you believe that you cannot be saved except by Christ's death?

Answer – Yes I believe that.

Then Anselm says, “Come then, while life remains in you and in Christ's death alone place your entire trust; do not place any of your trust elsewhere; to Christ's death commit yourself wholly; with this alone cover yourself wholly; and if the Lord thy God will to judge you, say, ‘Lord between your judgment and me I present the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, no otherwise can I contend with you. And if he shall say that you are a sinner say, Lord I interpose the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between my sins and you. If he says that you deserve condemnation say Lord I set the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between my evil deserts and you and his merits I offer for those which I ought to have and have not. If he says that he is angry with you, say Lord I place the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between thy wrath and me” (Cited from Strong, p. 849).

Justification means you never will face the wrath of God.

(Blessing #4) - Justification means you are guaranteed eternal life.

Paul says in **Romans 5:18** that through Jesus Christ we receive “justification of life.”

Paul says in **Romans 8:29-30, 35-39** that one God has justified is so guaranteed life that nothing could ever separate the believer from it.

Paul says in **Titus 3:7** that one who is justified is made an “heir...of eternal life.”

The moment you believe in Jesus Christ you are justified which means you are guaranteed everlasting life.

The moment God makes a judicial calculation that you are justified, this entire benefit package is instantly yours; all of it and every bit of it.

QUESTION #8 – What are some of the false ideas concerning justification?

There have been three main false ideas concerning justification that have confused many people:

False Idea #1 - Justification makes or causes a person to be righteous.

This is absolutely false. **Justification declares a person to be righteous**, the truth is even one who has been justified still sins and if he says he doesn't, he is a liar (I John 1:8). The matter of becoming righteous is a matter of sanctification, not justification.

(10)

This is where a major misunderstanding of the doctrine occurs. Justification does not make a person righteous, it declares a person righteous. John Calvin said, “Man is not made righteous in justification, but is accepted as righteous, not on account of his own righteousness, but on account of the righteousness of Christ located outside of man” (Cited from Geisler, Vol. 3, p. 235).

Using the marriage analogy, the declaration that one is married does not cause the couple to act like responsible married people. It simply is a judicial declaration that they are now married.

False Idea #2 - Justification can be maintained by the works that are holy.

This is absolutely false. No one maintains justification by works, for their works have nothing to do with it (Romans 3:20, 28; Galatians 2:16; 3:11; 5:4; Ephesians 2:8-9). It is right at this point where Protestant Theology radically opposes Roman Catholic Theology.

James Montgomery Boice said, “If we think works have a part to play in our justification, we are trusting in those works rather than in the fully sufficient work of Christ and are not justified. We are not saved. We cannot be saved by grace and grace plus works all at the same time” (*Foundations of the Christian Faith*, p. 425).

The fact that a couple has been declared legally married has nothing to do with whether or not they maintain a good married relationship. The fact is, they are declared married regardless of what the relationship actually is.

False Idea #3 - A justified person is still seen as a condemned sinner in God’s sight.

This is absolutely false. A justified believer is declared totally righteous by God and is seen as having God’s own righteousness (Rom. 3:22).

Justification does not leave the sinner in a condition of a discharged criminal. Justification renews and restores to a brand new relationship and status with God, which puts one in a condition of Divine favor. In Luke 15, the son was given the best robe and the best ring and shoes (Luke 15:22-24).

QUESTION #9 – What are the major theological objections to the doctrine of Justification?

There have been three major objections to this doctrine:

Objection #1 - Justification is a doctrine that opposes grace because it is a judicial, legal transaction.

This is absurd. What could demonstrate grace any more than a Holy God making a judicial declaration that an unrighteous sinner is now completely righteous and fully acceptable in the sight of God? The doctrine of Justification is the ultimate doctrine of Grace.

Objection #2 - Justification is an impious and irreverent doctrine because it declares sinners to be righteous contrary to actual facts.

This is also absurd. The declaration of righteousness is not based on the sinner; it is based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was completely righteous and when one believes on Jesus Christ, God calculates His righteousness to the person and that righteousness is perfectly consistent with Biblical facts.

Objection #3 - Justification is a doctrine that leads to the promotion of licentiousness.

Those who use this argument just don't understand grace. **First** of all, the truth is once one is justified by God, even if he did live a licentious life, he would still go to heaven because justification is not connected in any way to works (Romans 4:5). **Second**, when a person believes in Jesus Christ, God's Spirit takes up residency in the person and that Spirit is prompting that believer to live a holy life. **Third**, I have never ever seen a person who understood justification who actually wanted to go out and pursue a licentious lifestyle. It has always had just the opposite effect.

QUESTION #10 – What is the evidence that justification is real and really takes place?

God has given us the greatest proof in all of the universe, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul says in **Romans 4:25** that Christ was “raised for our justification.” The preposition “for” (διὰ) means that Jesus Christ was raised on account of our justification. In other words, His resurrection proves that justification is true and real and the moment you believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead (**Romans 10:9**), you are justified and you are saved.

What God asks us to do is to believe that Jesus Christ is the only Person who can take care of our sin problem in His court case against us. If you will place all of your faith in Jesus Christ to settle your sin case in the court of God, you shall be saved and you shall be justified forever. **The same righteousness that condemns sinners will justify condemned sinners if the sinner will believe in Jesus Christ, and any who are justified have a perfect standing in Christ forever.**

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