



**BETHEL**  
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## **The Biblical Doctrine of Justification**

Ten years ago, at a Franklin Graham Evangelism and Christian Music event in St. Louis, the White Horse Inn conducted a religious survey of the participants (who were NOT non-believers or marginal church goers, BUT leaders in their churches). To give you a feel for the survey, they posed the following questions:

- God is like a helpful coach who's there to help us when we need him; he wants us to be happy. Agree- 96% Disagree- 2%  
Unsure- 2%
- Christianity is primarily about my personal transformation, becoming a better person. Agree- 66% Disagree- 32%  
Unsure- 2%

Of all the questions asked, the response these leaders gave when it came to salvation is most alarming!

- What do you think the doctrine of Justification means?
  - A situation in which people try to justify their sinful lifestyles- 17%
  - We need to do good works to justify ourselves before God in order to go to heaven- 26%
  - God justifies the ungodly by declaring them holy and righteous by faith alone- 31%
  - Justification is a process in which we are made holy over time- 16%
  - Unsure- 10%
- There is no one righteous, there is no one who does good, there is no one who seeks God  
Agree- 31% Disagree- 67%  
Unsure- 2%

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of those queried did NOT understand the gospel. And sixty-seven percent (67%) outrightly denied Paul's teaching on the depravity of man from Romans 3:10-12! This is alarming because of the many warnings in Scripture concerning false professions of faith.

Matthew 7:22-23, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

Martin Luther declared, "Justification is a doctrine upon which the church either rises or falls."

Brothers and sisters, if there is anything, we can't afford NOT to get right, it is the biblical teaching on justification and its sister doctrine, sanctification. Each of us here must have a solid understanding of these doctrines as well as a devotional life that accompanies genuine acceptance and belief of these truths.

## The Doctrine of Justification Explained

Romans 8:30, "and whom He called, these He also justified."

This is NOT the first time Paul referenced "justification" in the book of Romans. It and its derivatives are used forty-three times in the first seven chapters of this epistle alone! It therefore obviously is a very important word in the Bible. And yet, what does it mean? How is it defined in Scripture?

The Bible clearly teaches that justification is a forensic or legal term which was used when a defendant was declared by a judge that he was righteous, not guilty, or innocent of the charge in question. Consider the words of Moses when he speaks of a scenario of a judge "justifying" someone.

Deuteronomy 25:1, "If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked..."

Here the judges do not make the person righteous or without blame, they simply declare that to be the case!

Job 32:2, "But the anger of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram burned; against Job his anger burned, because he [Job] justified himself before God."

This latter expression does NOT mean that Job literally made himself pure. RATHER, it simply means that Job declared his innocence in the presence of the Lord.

Luke 7:28-29a, “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just- [lit., they ‘justified God’]...)”

Once again, this does NOT mean that the people changed something in or about God. RATHER it means that the people said, “God is right or just.”

The biblical doctrine of justification is the provision of the sentence of “Not Guilty” when it comes to a person violating God’s law.<sup>i</sup> From this perspective, it is objective (not subjective) and so occurs outside of us. It simply is the declaration on the part of a judge that the accused is not guilty of the charges brought against him!

Now in the Bible, for a guilty person to receive this declaration of “not guilty” the innocent would be required to go in the place or suffer the punishment of the guilty — which is what the Old Testament SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM was all about! In the course of the offering, the sin of the guilty was symbolically transferred to the innocent animal whereupon the animal bore the punishment of the guilty — which was death. Speaking of the sin offering we read this:

Leviticus 4:24, “And he [the one guilty of sin] shall lay his hand on the head of the male goat, and slay it... before the Lord; it is a sin offering.”

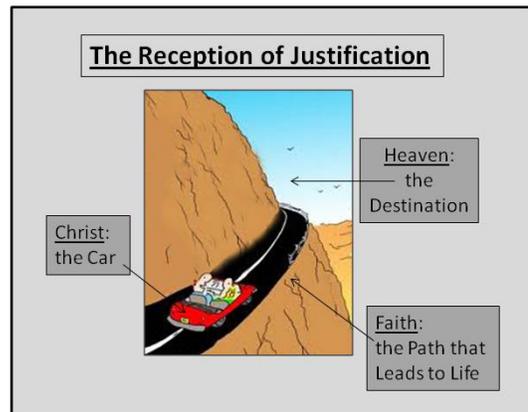
In this context, listen to the words of David after God forgave his sin with Bathsheba.

Psalms 32:1-2, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!”

This is what the provision of “justification” is all about. In reference to our salvation, justification refers to the declaration of God, based on the sacrifice/death of Christ, that the sinner is not guilty of transgressing the law. It clearly is the IMPUTATION of Christ’s righteousness to us!

This raises the question, “What then is THE GROUND of our Justification?” Or better, “Upon what BASIS does God declare us not guilty of sin?” The answer is NOT “On account of our faith”- i.e., *because I believe*.

In Scripture, faith is never represented as the ground or the cause of our justification. If this were so, faith would become a meritorious work — an idea everywhere opposed in Scripture. Rather, the basis or ground of God’s declaration of our right standing before Him, as we have said, is CHRIST’S RIGHTEOUSNESS.<sup>ii</sup>



Well then, how do I receive justification? One receives justification through faith!

Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”

Here “faith” is NOT the basis/ground for salvation, but the path! It is Christ’s work on the Cross that gets us to heaven (He is the car)!!! Faith is simply the road/route travelled! Recall that in Matthew 7:13-14, Christ described two paths both of which are believed to lead to heaven, but only one gets there: the path faith.

Based on all of this, we can summarize the biblical teaching on justification as the shorter catechism does:

It is an act of God's free grace, wherein God pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight, on account of the righteousness of Christ applied to our account, and all of this is received by faith alone. (Divines, 2019)

Now theologically speaking, this really is NOT all that difficult to understand, is it? YET history and personal experience tells us that this is all-so difficult to receive as true when it comes to us! That brings us to the doctrine received.

## The Doctrine Received

Speaking of his Jewish brethren, Paul wrote the following:

Romans 10:2-3, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge [with what the word of God teaches]. For not knowing about God's righteousness [which as we have seen is given to the sinner in the context of salvation; this is what Justification is all about], and seeking to establish their own [this through their acts of obedience], they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God."

In other words, they rejected the righteousness that God grants through Christ! How Sad! As most of you know, the Jews had a difficult time accepting the truths we have just examined. When faced with whether they would live in light of God's unmerited favor or live in light of their own merit, they rejected God's grace in light of the religion of works righteousness (of earning God's favor by their moral conduct). Jeremiah described it with these words:

Jeremiah 2:13, "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

One must see that this passion for works righteousness is something the sinner comes by honestly. Recall, on account of the original relationship God entered into with man in the Garden — a relationship based on our conduct — mankind was created with a passion to relate to God on the basis of their works! This passion was in full bloom at the time of Christ. In Luke 7:36-50 we read of Christ offering free salvation to a prostitute and a Pharisee rejecting Him for it! Why? It was not because Pharisees didn't want lost people to be saved. Rather, Christ tells us that the Pharisees "... travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte..." (Matthew 23:15). RATHER it was because Christ proclaimed the unthinkable: unmerited/unearned forgiveness (Luke 7:48)!

The Pharisee of Luke 7 was shocked NOT because a prostitute was forgiven, BUT because the forgiven prostitute didn't first have to clean up her life!

In Acts 15 we read of Barnabas and Paul arguing at great lengths with supposed Jewish Christians. Why? Because the notion of unmerited forgiveness was unthinkable to their Jewish audience.

Acts 15:1-2a, "And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And... Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them..."

In Galatians 3, we find Paul arguing against this same stubborn disbelief with the Galatian believers.

Galatians 2:18-19, "For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the Law [the teaching of God's word] I died to the Law [as a system of works righteousness], that I might live to God."

Even though they were saved, the Galatians found it so hard to accept the free salvation that God grants in Christ that they endeavored to re-establish the system of works-righteousness in order to be acceptable to God.

Now lest you think that this was a problem germane only to the Jews of Christ's day, would you notice that the Reformation centered around this very same issue. By the time of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the like, the Roman Catholic Church had developed the doctrine of INFUSED grace. Recall David's words in Psalm 32:

Psalm 32:2, "...how blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity..."

To "impute" is to apply something to another's account. For example, to impute guilt is to count someone guilty for another's crime and to impute motive is to consider a person guilty of a certain motive. When it comes to the biblical doctrine of justification, Scripture includes this concept of imputed righteousness.

Romans 5:19, "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous."

The Roman Catholic Church rejected this doctrine in favor of what is known as INFUSED righteousness. They read passages like Romans 1:17 which speaks about "...the righteousness of God" being "revealed from faith to faith" and concluded that salvation is NOT God *counting* a sinner as not guilty based on the work of Christ, BUT God physically *making* a sinner righteous by *infusing* His own righteousness into the sinner as the sinner participated in good works! And thus, in the Roman Catholic scheme, a man stands before God because through Christ AND their participation in the sacraments — through their good works — they receive justifying grace!

During the Council of Trent, Session VI, Chapter 5, the doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic church is defined as, "...through his [Christ's] stimulating and assisting grace [individuals] are disposed to convert themselves to their own justification."

This refusal to accept the biblical doctrine of justification was a problem for the Jews of Christ's day and the Roman Catholic's during the Reformation (and still today), you know it is going to continue to be a problem in our day... in our own walks with God! Theologically, most in the Reformed camp understand this. Yet, the struggle that we all are going to have — if you don't already — is accepting the reality of God's justifying grace in your own life. In the words of Dr. Archibald Alexander,

There is a defect in our belief in the freeness of divine grace. To exercise unshaken confidence in the doctrine of gratuitous pardon [justification] is one of the most difficult things in the world. (Alexander, 2014)

This has led to two types of Christians today in the church (in Protestantism, not Catholicism): those who live as if they have been *infused* with God's righteousness and those who live by the *imputed* righteousness of Christ! Those who are disciples of infused righteousness say that at salvation God made them beautiful. And so, when this "beauty" sins, he is shocked and says, "*I am beautiful, why would I do that?*" Thus, he goes away determined to try harder not to sin. And yet this beauty continues to sin, doesn't he? In fact, he not only sins a couple of times, but if the thoughts and motives of his heart were revealed, he would be undone!

So, what does he do? As a beauty who struggles with the ugliness of his sin, he doesn't dare ask God to forgive him for that would only confirm that he really is not beautiful. And so, the "beauty" is left either to lie to himself that his sin really isn't that bad or to fake it. And the person who holds this view and yet refuses to "fake it" eventually will begin to doubt his beauty-his salvation!

Sadly, the church today is filled with people in this camp who have lost their joy in the Lord on account of their sin. And maybe this is you!

In contrast to this, consider the disciple of imputed righteousness who lives in light of the righteousness of Christ given to his account. The biblical doctrine of justification says that God

has *declared* the sinner to be not guilty of sin and thus beautiful in His sight! Now understand the implication here: To be DECLARED “not guilty” implies at least two things:

- Through the sacrifice of Christ, we the sinner legally have been made acceptable to God! It is NOT a fiction; we literally have no sin that can be charged against us before the Lord!
- Our sinful flesh which characterized us as non-Christians remains apart of us- though its power has been destroyed (cf. Romans 7:21).

In light of this, when this person sins, he is not shocked — he knows that he is a sinner. He does not try to hide his sin. He does not rationalize it away. Rather, he boldly confesses it in light of the sacrifice that God has provided for his sin — Jesus Christ. And so, he rejoices that in spite of his sin, God loves him and accepts him!

Truly, this disciple knows that his beauty is the result NOT of God physically changing him, BUT of God declaring him not guilty and thus beautiful in God’s eyes on account of Christ!

Of these two types, which are you? You say that you want to live as a disciple of imputed righteousness, BUT it seems too good to be true. While that most certainly is the case — it seems too good to be true — the Bible is filled with teaching and examples which tell us that it is not! Consider the message of Mephibosheth.

Mephibosheth lived during the time of King David. He was the son of Jonathan and the grandson of King Saul. During the Israelite wars against the Philistines, after his father and grandfather were killed, his nursemaid hastily carried him away. Yet something horrible happened.

2 Samuel 4:4, “Now Jonathan, Saul’s son, had a son crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the report of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened that in her hurry to flee, he fell and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.”

Advance the clock many years. David is now on the throne of Israel and wants to honor any remaining relative of Jonathan. When it was determined that Mephibosheth was the last remaining heir, David called for him.

2 Samuel 9:5-7, “Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, from Lo-debar. And Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul, came to David and fell on his face and prostrated himself. And David said, ‘Mephibosheth.’ And he said, ‘Here is your servant!’ And David said to him, ‘Do not fear, for I will surely show kindness to you for the sake of your father Jonathan, and will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul; and you shall eat at my table regularly.’”

The context here is that Mephibosheth was the only man who could have claimed the throne of Saul for himself and so he knew, in coming before David, his life was in danger. In fact, this is why in the Ancient Near East when a new king ascended to power, he usually killed everyone who might have a claim to his throne. And such was the obvious fear of Mephibosheth to which David responded with, “Do not fear.”

Now the amazing thing about this account is NOT that David would show kindness to Jonathan’s son — this is understandable on account of the relationship David had with Jonathan. RATHER, what is striking about this text is WHAT Jonathan’s son was when he received David’s kindness. Notice the text here describes the threat of death past, disbelief set in the heart of Mephibosheth on account of his own unworthiness:

2 Samuel 9:8, “Again he [Mephibosheth] prostrated himself and said, ‘What is your servant, that you should regard a dead dog like me?’”

This was not a statement of false humility on the part of Mephibosheth; Mephibosheth meant it! See, he was crippled (he had two lame feet)!

In our day, this is no big deal; but in the context of the Ancient Near East, this was huge! To be crippled was to bear in your body the marks of your sin. Recall that in Christ's day the thought even among the disciples was that physical ailment was the consequence of sin; it was the divine punishment for an evil life.

John 9:1-2, "And as He [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?'"

In light of this thinking, Mephibosheth believed that he was nothing better than "a dead dog." In fact, the passage is going to great lengths to show this. Notice how it ends:

2 Samuel 9:13, "So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate at the king's table regularly. Now he was lame in both feet."

And yet, herein we behold the gospel! David doesn't refute the fact that according to societal standards Mephibosheth was wretched. Instead, in spite of his wretchedness, Mephibosheth is brought into the house of THE King to fellowship at his table — which was a strong statement of approval in a Jewish context.

2 Samuel 9:9-10a, "Then the king called Saul's servant Ziba, and said to him, 'All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall cultivate the land for him, and you shall bring in the produce so that your master's grandson may have food; nevertheless Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall eat at my table regularly...'"

What a glorious picture of the Gospel! The church is comprised NOT of people made beautiful and thus worthy to enter into the presence of their Lord. RATHER, in this age, the church is comprised of sinners declared to be "not guilty" and therefore beautiful in God's eyes NOT on account of them, BUT on account of Christ! And yet, herein lies our confidence! It is NOT that we have loved God or served Him faithfully. RATHER, like Mephibosheth, it is that in spite of our crippled condition on account of our sinful flesh God

- (1) Loves us,
- (2) Has brought us into His house,
- (3) Has seated us at His banqueting table, and
- (4) Delight in us!

This is the glorious doctrine of Justification!!!

## References

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## End Note(s)

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<sup>i</sup> In fact, a beautiful summary of the doctrine is Romans 8:3-4 which says, “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

<sup>ii</sup> The Scriptures teach that we are justified (1) in Christ, Is. 45:24-25; Acts 13:39; Romans 8:1; 1 Cor. 6:11; Galatians 2:17; Phil. 3:9, (2) by Christ’s death work, Romans 3:24-25; 5:9; 8:33-34, (3) not by our own but by the righteousness of God, Is. 61:10; Romans 1:17; 3:21-22; 10:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9, and (4) By the righteousness and obedience of Christ, Romans 5:17-19.

