

# JUSTIFICATION

## SALVATION IS BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

*Clearly no one is justified before God  
by the law, because,  
"The righteous will live by faith."*

GALATIANS 3:11

The doctrine of justification, **the storm center of the Reformation**, was a major concern of the apostle Paul. For him it was the heart of the Gospel, shaping both his message and his devotion and spiritual life.

A right understanding of Justification is absolutely crucial to the whole Christian faith. Once Martin Luther realized the truth of Justification by faith alone, he became a Christian and overflowed with the new-found joy of the gospel. The primary issue in the Protestant Reformation was a dispute with the Roman Catholic Church over justification. If we are to safeguard the truth of the gospel for future generations, we must understand the truth of justification. Even today, a true view of justification is the dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation by faith alone and all false gospels of salvation based on good works.

When Paul gives an overview of the process by which God applies salvation to us, he mentions Justification explicitly: *"Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified"* (Rom. 8:30). The word called here refers to the effective calling of the gospel, which includes regeneration and brings forth the response of repentance and faith(or conversion) on our part. After effective calling and the response that it initiates on our part, the next step in the application of redemption is "**justification**." Here Paul mentions that this is something that God himself does: *"Those whom he called he also justified."*

Moreover, Paul quite clearly teaches that this justification comes after faith and as God's response to our faith. He says that God *"justifies him who has faith in Jesus"* (Rom. 3:26), and that *"a man is justified by faith apart from works of law"* (Rom. 3:28). He says, *"Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Rom. 5:1). Moreover, *"a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ"* (Gal. 2:16).

Just what is Justification?

Wayne Grudem defines it as : Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he

- (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and
- (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.

In explaining the elements of this definition, we will look first at the second half of it, the aspect of justification in which God “declares us to be righteous in his sight.” The reason for treating these items in reverse order is that the emphasis of the New Testament in the use of the word justification and related terms is on the second half of the definition, the legal declaration by God. But there are also passages that show that this declaration is based on the fact that God first thinks of righteousness as belonging to us. So both aspects must be treated, even though the New Testament terms for justification focus on the legal declaration by God.

Easton Bible Dictionary defines justification as: a forensic term, opposed to condemnation. As regards its nature, it is the judicial act of God, by which he pardons all the sins of those who believe in Christ, and accounts, accepts, and treats them as righteous in the eye of the law, i.e., as conformed to all its demands. In addition to the pardon (q.v.) of sin, justification declares that all the claims of the law are satisfied in respect of the justified. It is the act of a judge and not of a sovereign. The law is not relaxed or set aside, but is declared to be fulfilled in the strictest sense; and so the person justified is declared to be entitled to all the advantages and rewards arising from perfect obedience to the law (Rom. 5:1-10).

It proceeds on the imputing or crediting to the believer by God himself of the perfect righteousness, active and passive, of his Representative and Surety, Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:3-9). Justification is not the forgiveness of a man without righteousness, but a declaration that he possesses a righteousness which perfectly and forever satisfies the law, namely, Christ's righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 4:6-8).

The sole condition on which this righteousness is imputed or credited to the believer is faith in or on the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is called a "condition," not because it possesses any merit, but only because it is the instrument, the only instrument by which the soul appropriates or apprehends Christ and his righteousness (Rom. 1:17; 3:25, 26; 4:20, 22; Phil. 3:8-11; Gal. 2:16). The act of faith which thus secures our justification secures also at the same time our sanctification (q.v.); and thus the doctrine of justification by faith does not lead to licentiousness (Rom. 6:2-7). Good works, while not the ground, are the certain consequence of justification (6:14; 7:6). (See GALATIANS, EPISTLE [TO](#).)

One sometimes hears the popular explanation that justified means “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned.” The definition is a clever play on words and contains an element of truth (for the justified person, like the person who has never sinned, has no penalty to pay for sin). But the definition is misleading in two other ways because (1) it mentions nothing about the fact that Christ's righteousness is reckoned to my account when I am justified; to do this it would have to say also “just-as-if-I’d-lived-a-life-of-perfect-righteousness.” (2) But more significantly, it cannot adequately represent the fact that I will never be in a state that is “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned,” because I will always be conscious of the fact that I have sinned and that I am not an innocent person but a guilty person who has been forgiven. This is very different from “just as if I had never sinned”! Moreover, it is different from “just as if I had lived a life of perfect righteousness,” because I will forever know that I have not lived a life of perfect righteousness, but that Christ's righteousness is given to me by God's grace.

Therefore both in the forgiveness of sins and in the imputation of Christ's righteousness, my situation is far different from what it would be if I had never sinned and had lived a perfectly righteous life. For all eternity I will remember that I am a forgiven sinner, and that my righteousness is not based on my own merit, but on the grace of God in the saving work of Jesus Christ. None of that rich teaching at the heart of the gospel will be understood by those who are encouraged to go through their lives thinking "justified" means "just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned."

Romans 1:17 *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."*

Romans 3:21-24 <sup>21</sup> *But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,* <sup>22</sup> *even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;* <sup>23</sup> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* <sup>24</sup> *being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

Galatians 2:16 *knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.*

Acts 13:38-39 <sup>38</sup> *Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins;* <sup>39</sup> *and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.*

2 Corinthians 5:13-21 <sup>13</sup> *For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; or if we are of sound mind, it is for you.* <sup>14</sup> *For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;*<sup>15</sup> *and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.* <sup>16</sup> *Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer.* <sup>17</sup> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.* <sup>18</sup> *Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,*<sup>19</sup> *that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.* <sup>20</sup> *Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.* <sup>21</sup> *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

Though other New Testament writers affirm the same doctrine in substance, the terms in which Protestants have affirmed and defended it for almost five centuries are drawn primarily from Paul.

Justification is a judicial act of God pardoning sinners, accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with Himself. This justifying sentence is God's gift of righteousness, His bestowal of a status of acceptance for Jesus sake.

Romans 4:5 *But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,*

Romans 3:9-24 <sup>9</sup> *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.* <sup>10</sup> *As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;"*<sup>11</sup> *There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.*<sup>12</sup> *They have all turned aside; They have together*

become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one”<sup>13</sup> “Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit” “The poison of asps is under their lip”<sup>14</sup> “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”<sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed blood;<sup>16</sup> Destruction and misery are in their ways;<sup>17</sup> And the way of peace they have not known.”<sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.<sup>20</sup> Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,<sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Romans 5:15-17 <sup>15</sup> But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. <sup>16</sup> And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification.<sup>17</sup> For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

God’s justifying judgment seems strange, for pronouncing sinners righteous may appear to be precisely the unjust action on the judge’s part that God’s own law forbade.

Deuteronomy 25:1 “If there is a dispute between men, and they come to court, that the judges may judge them, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked,

Proverbs 17:15 He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.

Yet it is in fact a just judgment, for its basis is the righteousness of Jesus Christ who as “the last Adam” our representative head acting on our behalf, obeyed the law that bound us and endured the retribution for lawlessness that was our due and so (to use the medieval technical term) “merited” our justification.

1 Corinthians 15:45 And so it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being.” The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

Romans 3:25-26 <sup>25</sup> whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,<sup>26</sup> to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

We may note that justification comes after saving faith. Paul makes this sequence clear when he says, “We have believed in Christ Jesus, 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” (Gal. 2:16). Here Paul indicates that faith comes first and it is for the purpose of being justified. He also says Christ is “to be received by faith” and that God “justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25-26). The entire chapter of Romans 4 is a defense of the fact that we are justified by faith, not by works, just as Abraham and David themselves were. Paul says, “We are justified by Faith” (Rom. 5:1)

Scripture never says that we are justified because of the inherent goodness of our faith, as if our faith has merit before God. It never allows us to think that our faith in itself earns favor with God. Rather, Scripture says that we are justified “by means of” our faith, understanding faith to be the instrument through which justification is given to us, but not at all an activity that earns us merit or favor with God. Rather, we are justified solely because of the merits of Christ’s work (Rom. 5:17-19).

Romans 5:18-19 <sup>18</sup> *Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.* <sup>19</sup> *For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.*

God’s justifying decision is the judgment of the Last Day, declaring where we shall spend eternity, brought forward into the present and pronounced here and now. It is the last judgment that will ever be passed on our destiny; God will never go back on it, however much Satan may appeal against God’s verdict.

Zechariah 3:1 *Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him.*

Revelation 12:10 *Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, “Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.*

Romans 8:33-34 <sup>33</sup> *Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.* <sup>34</sup> *Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.*

To be justified is to be eternally secure.

Romans 5:1-5 <sup>1</sup> *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,* <sup>2</sup> *through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* <sup>3</sup> *And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;* <sup>4</sup> *and perseverance, character; and character, hope.* <sup>5</sup> *Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

Romans 8:30 *Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified*

The necessary means, or instrumental cause, of justification is personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and risen Lord.

Romans 4:23-25 <sup>23</sup> *Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him,* <sup>24</sup> *but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead,* <sup>25</sup> *who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.*

Romans 10:8-13 <sup>8</sup> *But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” that is, the word of faith which we preach);* <sup>9</sup> *that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.* <sup>10</sup> *For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.* <sup>11</sup> *For the Scripture says, “Whoever*

*believes on Him will not be put to shame.”<sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him.<sup>13</sup> For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”* This is because the meritorious ground of our justification is entirely in Christ. As we give ourselves in faith to Jesus, Jesus gives us his gift of righteousness, so that in the very act of “closing with Christ,” as older Reformed teachers put it, we receive divine pardon and acceptance which we could not otherwise have.

*Galatians 2:15-16<sup>15</sup> We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles,<sup>16</sup> knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.*

*Galatians 3:24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*

Official Roman Catholic theology includes sanctification in the definition of justification, which it sees as a process rather than a single decisive event, and affirms that while faith contributes to our acceptance with God, our works of satisfaction and merit contribute too. Rome sees baptism, viewed as a channel of sanctifying grace, as the primary instrumental cause of justification, and the sacrament of penance, whereby congruous merit is achieved through works of satisfaction, as the supplementary restorative cause whenever the grace of God’s initial acceptance is lost through mortal sin. Congruous, as distinct from condign, merit means merit that is fitting, though not absolutely necessary, for God to reward by a fresh flow of sanctifying grace. On the Roman Catholic view, therefore, believers save themselves with the church’s sacramental system, and in this life no sense of confidence in God’s grace can ordinarily be had. Such teaching is a far cry from that of Paul.

\*Most of the foregoing material was taken from “Concise Theology” by J.I. Packer, SOLA FIDE: THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION by Dr. J.I. Packer, and “Systematic Theology” by Wayne Grudem.