

Session 9. Justification (part one)

Bible-reading and opening prayer

Romans 3:19-4:6 and 4:20-5:1

Introduction: Justification and the Reformation (Martin Luther, 1483-1546)

Let's begin with a little bit of church history. Martin Luther was one of the founding fathers of the European Reformation: that great rediscovery of Biblical truth.

According to Luther, "justification" is really important. In fact, according to Luther it is the most central of all Christian doctrines. It is, he said, the "doctrine by which the church stands or falls" (Latin: *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).

Righteousness and justification were not always so precious to Luther. Before we seek to understand "justification" let's listen to these words of Luther. Here he looks back on his experience as a Roman Catholic monk:

"I had certainly wanted to understand Paul in his letter to the Romans. But what prevented me from doing so was... that one phrase in the first chapter: "the righteousness of God is revealed in it" (1:17). For I hated that phrase, "the righteousness of God", which I had been taught to understand as the righteousness by which God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners... Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually hated him..." (From Luther's *Autobiographical Fragment*.)

As we try to understand the doctrine of Justification, we'll see how Martin Luther's view of God got turned around.

Link Question: What is "justification"?

1. Justification is a legal DECLARATION that we are right with God

(a) Key words & definition:

Here are the key Bible words that speak of justification: **Justify – Justification – Righteous – Righteousness – Upright**. They all come from the same word group in NT Greek. They look more different in English than they do in the original Bible languages.

What do we mean when we speak of "Justification"? It means this: **"declared righteous"**, which means to be **"declared by God the judge to be in-the-right with him."**

(b) Justification is NOT a work that God does IN us

Justification is often misunderstood. It does not mean to *make us* righteous, or good, or holy, or upright. God does do this work – in regeneration and sanctification, completing it in glorification. Justification does not refer to this inward renewing and sanctifying grace of God. This is one of the big errors of the Roman Catholic Church – which we're to look into in a little more detail next week.

(c) Justification is a legal declaration

It is a word taken from the law courts. It is said to be forensic / judicial / legal.

Think for a moment about “justification” in a human law court. When a judge justifies an accused person he does not actually make that person an upright person inwardly. The judge does not CHANGE the person. He simply declares that in his judgment the person is not guilty of the accusation but is upright in terms of the law that is relevant to the case. And Scripture uses justification in this way – meaning “declare to be righteous.”

The Bible uses it of human judges.

- For example Deuteronomy 25:1, “When men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting [*dikaiow*] the innocent and condemning the guilty.”

The (human) judge doesn’t make someone righteous. He simply declares him to be righteous on the terms of the relevant law.

Scripture even uses it of people “justifying” God:

- For example Luke 7:29, the people “justified God” (lit.)

It doesn’t mean that they made God righteous (a blasphemous thought), but that they declare or state God to be righteous.

But most important of all...

(d) Justification is God’s declaration that we are right with Him

Listen to Romans 8:33-34, “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

Notice here that we’re talking here about bringing a charge against someone, not doing anything inwardly in the elect. We’re talking about justifying or declaring someone to be righteous. Specifically, God the judge declaring us to be right with him.

J.I. Packer writes: “God’s justifying decision is the judgement 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.” (J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p165)

Link Question: Who does God declare to be righteous?

2. God justifies the UNGODLY

Here lies one of the greatest glories of the gospel. That God justifies the UN-godly. The key assumption is this:

(a) We are totally Unrighteous and deserve condemnation

If we’re to grasp the gospel of justification then we must have in view both these things:

- God’s majestic holiness: He’s a consuming fire who must break out against all sin and all sinners;
- and our deep sinfulness. We are sinful through and through. Remember our first session: totally depraved, and thus facing the holy wrath of God.

This creates an impossible problem for us. HOW can SINFUL man ever be right with a holy and righteously angry judge? It is impossible. We deserve condemnation, not justification.

Consider this: what should a judge do with an un-righteous person? **Human judges must NEVER justify the ungodly.** God hates judges who do things like that. He says in Proverbs 17:15, “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent-- the LORD detests them both.”

(b) God DOES justify the ungodly

God does something utterly unique – something truly God-like. He DOES and CAN justify the ungodly, the unrighteous. Listen to the apostle Paul in Romans:

- Romans 4:5, “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”
- Romans 3:19-24, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

God justifies the unjust. He declares righteous those who are not righteous

Link Question: HOW can we be declared right?

How can God rightly say: “you’re in the right, even though you’re in the wrong”?

How can God be just AND the justifier of unjust people?

Bearing in mind that God doesn’t do miscarriages of justice...

3. CHRIST’S righteousness is IMPUTED to us

(a) God gives righteousness – we do not justify ourselves

This is the starting point: God gives righteousness – we do not justify ourselves

So consider what justification is NOT:

- us saying sorry to God. It’s not our confession.
- us trying to excuse ourselves before God.
- any religious exercise we perform, however good it may be

Nothing we do constitutes our justification.

Rather, God gives righteousness. It comes from God. And it is a gift. Consider these Bible texts:

Romans 1:17, “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.””

Romans 3:21-22, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

Romans 5:17, “... the gift of righteousness...”

Romans 10:3, “Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.”

Philippians 3:9, “and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

To use Luther’s language, this righteousness is “alien righteousness.” It is strange – it is “other” to us. God treats the sinner on the basis of another’s righteousness. He does not treat us on the basis of the sinner’s own righteousness (or lack of it).

Here's what that meant to Martin Luther. Here's what happened:

"I was in desperation to know what Paul meant in this passage. At last, as I meditated day and night on these words... I began to understand that 'righteousness of God' as that by which the righteous person lives by the gift of God; [that] by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'the righteous person lives by faith'... This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again... From that moment, I saw the whole face of Scripture in a new light... This passage in Paul became to me the very gate of paradise." (from Luther's *Autobiographical Fragment*)

There's Luther becoming a Christian! This was his big discovery: that righteousness is the gift of God! More specifically...

(b) Christ's righteousness is imputed to us

This is the specific answer to the question "How can God justly justify the ungodly?" Answer: Christ's righteousness is imputed to us.¹

I'll explain what that means. And then show you some key Bible verses.

- **Christ's righteousness**

Christ's righteousness looks like this: it is his OBEDIENCE.

- Christ became a man: remember the incarnation.
- And as a man he obeyed God's law during the course of his perfect life: that's what sometimes is called is active obedience.
- He was obedient unto death, enduring the penalty we should have faced: sometimes called his passive obedience.
- Raised from the grave he is shown to be vindicated and justified: he is no longer under being punished for sin. (Remember when we spoke of the significance of the resurrection).

That's the righteousness of Christ: his perfect obedience. And by the grace of God, the righteousness which God gives sinners is Christ's righteousness. It is imputed to the believer.

- **Is reckoned to my account = imputed**

"Imputed" is the technical word meaning "reckoned to my account." There is a double imputation:

- My sin is imputed to Christ: remember when we thought about penal substitutionary atonement. What's mine becomes his.
- And Christ's righteousness is imputed to me. It is reckoned to me. The righteousness in question is not mine – it is Christ's. But it is reckoned to me. It is given to me. Such that when God considers me, he considers me as clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. When God considers you, he views you as clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Notice what a big deal this is. Bigger than we may have ever realised. Justification is NOT "just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned." That's a memorable Sunday school definition of justification. It's also wrong! It's not just wiping of my slate. It's not just the debt of sin being wiped out, and the balance sheet returned to zero. It is infinitely bigger and better than that. The obedience of Christ himself is reckoned to my account.

¹ It is sometimes argued that our faith is reckoned as righteousness (rather than Christ's righteousness being imputed to us). This is what Genesis 15:16 – quoted in Rom 4:3,9,22, Gal 3:6, James 2:23 – is sometimes taken to mean. However, Scripture *never* says that we are justified "because of" or "on account of" faith, but that we are "by" or "through" or "upon" faith. In addition we note that no inwrought righteousness could deal with our need; we need a perfect righteousness and that can only be Christ's. Plus, the parallel logical and syntactical statement in Romans 2:26 indicates that the statement in Romans 4:3 implies an extra factor which is not explicitly stated, namely the righteousness of Christ.

And that is very, very wonderful. “God cannot but accept into his favour those who are invested with the righteousness of his own Son.” (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p124).

But: How is that just? Answer: because of our union with Christ.

- **In the context of union with Christ**

Remember when we thought before about the doctrine of Union with Christ. Remember all the different Bible pictures given to help explain what it means to be “in Christ.” Especially we thought of human marriage as a picture of that union (Ephesians 5).

Imputation is just and right within the context of our union with Christ. His infinite merit can justly be transferred to me. My infinite de-merit can justly be transferred to him. Why? Because this is imputation occurs ONLY within the context of union with Christ.

Only those who are joined in union with Christ are justified. But because I am joined in union with Jesus his justification and vindication can become my justification. Christ is the head of a new human race. All those joined to him benefit from and share in his justified or vindicated status.

- **Key Bible verses**

Let me show you those key points from a few important Bible verses:

Romans 5:18-19, “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”

Notice the contrast in those verses, between Adam and Christ. Adam and Christ function as federal heads – heads of two human races. (Remember the 2 giants –everyone in the world hangs on either Adam’s belt or on Christ’s belt). What each one does affects loads of other people.

- Adam does something that affects “all men.” That is, all those who are in Adam.
- Christ does something that affects “all men.” That is, all those who are in him.

What is it that they do? Notice the contrast – particularly in v19:

- Adam’s disobedience → makes many sinners
- Christ’s obedience → makes many righteous.

2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

See the contrast here: firstly, Christ the perfect one receives my sin. The Bible puts it so strongly – he is “made” sin [Gk. *poieo*]. Secondly, we receive his perfect righteousness. Notice too that righteousness is found “in him.”

Link Question: To whom is Christ’s r’ness imputed?

4. Christ’s righteousness is imputed to those who BELIEVE

(a) faith alone: the heart of the Reformation

You might know that at the heart of the Reformation rediscovery of Biblical truth were five “alone” statements.²

² Latin: *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli deo Gloria.*

- Scripture alone
- Faith alone
- Grace alone
- Christ alone
- To the glory of God alone

For a few moments we're going to think about "faith alone. And how justification is by "faith" and only by faith. This takes us to the heart of the Gospel.

(b) justification is by faith alone – it is not by works

The necessary means of justification is personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified saviour and risen Lord (Rom 4:23-25, 10:8-13). (Or to put it another way the instrumental cause of justification is faith.)

Remember how we described saving faith in our last session: it is merely an instrument. It's like an empty hand that reaches out to take hold of the free gift of salvation. The meritorious ground of our justification – the merit – is all in Christ. Faith ALONE is merely the means of taking hold of salvation.

There are *many, many* Bible texts that make this point. Let's look at some of them:

Galatians 2:15-16, "'We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."

Galatians 3:8-9, "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." ⁹ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

Galatians 5:4-5, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope."

Philippians 3:8-9, "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."

Romans 1:17, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith.""

Romans 3:22-30, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. ²⁹ Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith."

Romans 4:3-5, "What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Romans 4:16, "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring-- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all."

Romans 4:23-24, "The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness-- for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

(c) why it has to be by faith alone

There are a couple of reasons:

First: Faith alone fits with grace alone. Salvation is a free and gracious gift. Faith fits with grace. Earning merit does not fit with grace.

Second: Nothing inside us could deal with our problem. No righteous deeds *in us* could be good enough. Even the saintliest Christian is still a sinner through and through. None of our works could ever earn merit.

[Objection: "Is this contradicted by James 2:24 – 'You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone?'" **Answer: No.** Read the verse in context (eg. 2:14-26) and you'll see what James means. Saving faith is ALWAYS accompanied by faith. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is *never* alone. If you find someone professing faith but with absolutely no good works, then the Bible would say they probably DON'T have saving faith and aren't justified.]

Let's take QUESTIONS:

5. Application –peace with God

Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"

Here's what that meant to Martin Luther:

"From that moment the whole face of scripture appeared to me in a different light... this passage in Paul became the very gate of paradise for me." (Martin Luther).

Saving righteous is a gift of God. That brings peace with God. It is purchased once-for-all by Christ through his obedient life and death. It is applied as a free gift by God to us. Once justified, a man or woman cannot lose their status as justified.

Justification means peace with God in spite of my ongoing sin. This was another of Luther's wonderful re-discoveries:

- saving righteousness is side by side with sin.

Here's Luther's slogan:

- simul justus et peccator, semper justus et peccator.
- At the same time righteous and a sinner; always righteous and a sinner.

Next week: continue thinking about justification – going to consider specifically why we're not Roman Catholics and why the Reformation matters.

6. Homework:

For reflection:

- Read, pray and worship in the light of some Bible texts we've looked at today.
- Read the hymn below and think about its words.

Next session: justification by faith continued – please read Isaiah 45:24-25, 61:10, 54:17 and Romans 8:33. According to these verses why is justification so wonderful? How should we respond to the Lord's work in making us righteous?

1. A debtor to mercy alone,
of covenant mercy I sing;
I come with your righteousness on,
my humble offering to bring.
The judgements of your holy law,
with me can have nothing to do,
My saviour's obedience and blood
hide all my transgressions from view.

2. The work which your goodness began,
the arm of your strength will complete.
Your promise is yes and amen,
and never was forfeited yet.
The future or things that are now,
no power below or above,
can make you your purpose forego,
or sever my soul from your love.

3. My name from the palms of your hands,
eternity will not erase.
Impressed on your heart it remains
in marks of indelible grace.
Yes I, to the end, will endure,
until I bow down at your throne.
Forever and always secure,
a debtor to mercy, alone.

Words: Augustus Toplady/ alt. words Bob Kauflin