



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Our understanding of the great doctrine of justification is a critical element of the Christian faith. **Spiro Zodhiates** in his **Word Study Dictionary** of the New Testament defines the actual meaning of the biblical word “**justify**” as to declare to be righteous, to set forth as righteous, and to justify as a judicial act or in a legal sense. In other words, there has been a judgment given and a judgment declared. The fundamental meaning does not include the idea that in justification someone is actually **made** righteous. That is a very incorrect position because it improperly supposes that sanctification is a part of justification – which it is not. Justification is a

judicial act of God that takes place outside of the believer, whereas sanctification is something that happens within the inner life of the believer. When God justifies, He does not actually make the individual righteous, but rather simply declares them to be righteous in His sight. That understanding is a very significant key in properly addressing justification. **Martyn Lloyd Jones** aptly states:

“Justification is a declaratory act. It does not do anything to us; it says something about us. It has no reference to my actual state or condition inside; it has reference to my standing, to my position, to my appearing in the presence of God...I have nothing at all to do in my justification. It is entirely the act of God. He attributes it to me, He puts to my account, He imputes to me, the positive righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Justification is very much a one-time act that can never be removed or repeated. And because of its judicial and forensic nature, it cannot be a recurring and repetitive event in an individual’s life. By the same token, neither does it take place over a period of time. Rather it is something that is simply declared – a judicial declaration by God on our behalf and completely apart from any personal merit whatsoever. This is something that God does and has nothing to do with any works. In **Romans 4:6** Paul declared the following:

“just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

Historically, the Protestant church has embraced the historic definition of being justified and has affirmed the doctrine of justification. In fact, it was the doctrine of justification that became the watershed issue and historic altering debate of the Reformation. **Augustine**, often called the “*doctor of grace*” was certainly a champion of the doctrine of justification by faith alone over against the view of Pelagius that the grace of God was just an external aid to the believer. For Pelagius, grace was simply a peripheral help for people, but not a God given element of actually procuring justification. Augustine rightly argued that grace could not be restricted to just an external aid, but rather that it was primarily an internal work of God wrought in the individual that prepared them for salvation by the means of God imparted faith. He defined grace as that which was “*freely given*”, as that which was “*given, not paid*”. Obviously, Paul expressed this internal work of grace twice in [Ephesians 2:4-5](#) and [Ephesians 2:8-9](#).

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Unfortunately, the church of the Middle Ages was not willing to fully accept Augustine’s view of justification or Pelagius’ view, so they adopted an intermediate view called semi-Pelagianism. In essence, it could just as easily have been called semi-Augustinianism.

What later came out of the Reformation was that the Catholic Church actually condemned the doctrine of justification by faith alone as heresy. More than anyone else, **Thomas Aquinas** helped establish the false doctrines of the Catholic Church regarding justification. Aquinas believed and taught that justification was a mutual effort between God and man in which the grace of God was “*infused*” or poured, into an individual. In simple terms, it was this infusion of grace that made the individual’s personal nature to be righteous. **Gregg Allison** in his work called **Historical Theology** says that what Thomas

Aquinas taught and what became the underlying doctrine of the Catholic Church regarding justification was that “*the one who is justified is both declared righteous and made righteous.*” In fact, it was Aquinas who was instrumental in developing the doctrine of “purgatory” and of “indulgences”. The Catholic doctrine thus taught that justification was a “*process*” in which the grace of God was actually “*infused*” into the believer, and it was this infusion of grace that made them righteous – both positionally and practically. Unfortunately, however, with the official acceptance and institution of the doctrine of purgatory and its sub-doctrines such as indulgences, what the Catholic Church did was to create a doctrine where justification could be completed in the afterlife through the efforts of multiple individuals.

Wayne Grudem in his **Systematic Theology** wrote this about the issue:

“The Roman Catholic Church understands justification as something that changes us internally and makes us more holy within. According to the teaching of the Council of Trent, justification is ‘sanctifying and renewing of the inner man’. In order for justification to begin, one must first be baptized and then (as an adult) continue to have faith: The instrumental cause...of the first justification is the Sacrament of Baptism.”

And to make the issue even more pronounced, the Catholic doctrine of justification allows for varying degrees of justification within different individuals. Ultimately, the issue is that of joining the work of sanctification to the work of justification. **Grudem** states that in the **Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma**, it maintains that “*the degree of justifying grace is not identical in all the just*” and “*grace can be increased by good works*”, thus feeding the false doctrine that justification can also include the merit of good works in a believer, or what we would call sanctification. But the entire chapter of [Romans 4](#) defends the fact that a man is not justified in any measure by good works, but solely on the merit of Christ. Furthermore, and adding to the theological issue, the Roman Catholic Church states that justification can actually be lost when an individual is engaged in what they deem as “*mortal sin*”. According to this erroneous teaching, once justification has been lost, it can be regained through penance and finally through purgatory.

In contrast to these false doctrines of the Catholic Church, **Martin Luther** asserted and maintained that

justification is a legal act by God on behalf of the sinner, a legal declaration that only God could make in which He declared sinners to be righteous and not guilty before Him. God's just basis for making this declaration was the sacrifice of Christ that satisfied the just demands of God for full payment of sins. Grace was certainly a part of the salvation process and available for the work of faith, but grace was not "infused" into the believer. What God does in the doctrine of justification is to actually credit or impute the very righteousness of Christ to the spiritually bankrupt account of the individual, and thus provide a basis for God's acceptance of them. It should be noted at this juncture that this declaration does not make the individual righteous in a practical sense, but rather provides a legal declaration that makes them acceptable to God in a judicial and forensic sense. The act of becoming righteous in a practical sense is the ongoing work of sanctification in the believer's life.

Luther, in addressing the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone, developed a definition of two kinds of righteousness. **Gregg Allison** quotes **Luther** in his definition of these two kinds of righteousness:

"The first is alien righteousness, that is righteousness of another, instilled from outside. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith...The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self...In the second place, this righteousness consists in love to one's neighbor, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God."

For **Luther**, what he defined as "alien righteousness" was what **Allison** calls "the basis, the cause, the source of all our actual righteousness." In essence, what Luther's doctrine of justification did was to undermine the merit system of the Catholic Church and open the door for the Protestant church. His protest of this doctrine was really the foundational moment in the history of the church that provided the impetus for believers to move away from the Catholic Church. As Luther stated, "If the doc-

trine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost." **John Calvin** who complemented and reinforced Luther's position called the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as "the main hinge on which religion turns" and he urged believers "to devote the greatest attention and care to it". He further declared "justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into His favor as righteous people. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness." **Allison** further explains the issue when he says:

"By confusing justification and sanctification, the Roman Catholic Church emphasized the infusion of righteousness rather than the imputation of righteousness, and it viewed justification as a reward that could be merited. But justification is not about merit, nor is it about infusion of grace, even with the help of the Holy Spirit."

The debate can easily be summarized and defined as follows. For **Augustine** and the early church fathers, and for **Luther** and the Reformation leaders, justification is by grace through faith **alone**. The Catholic doctrine purports that justification is the result of faith joined with good works. All false religions base salvation on some level of meritorious work, on something that the individual does that merits their salvation. However, authentic Christianity places the burden for that merit on Christ and Christ alone and therefore dismisses personal righteousness as a basis for justification. The spiritual chasm between these two positions is monumental simply because one leads to eternal life and the other leads to the "illusion" of eternal life.

Unfortunately, the debate relative to the doctrine of justification by faith alone was clouded once again by **John Wesley**. **Wesley's** concern was simply that he felt the doctrine of justification as presented by **Luther** and **Calvin** provided a basis to ignore the need for sanctification and a perpetuating doctrine of good works. **Charles Finney** in his book **Finney's Systematic Theology** was severely incorrect when he stated that,

"There is scarcely any question in theology that has been encumbered with more injurious and technical mysticism than that of justification....For sinners to be forensically pronounced just, is impossible and absurd."

Finney actually denied the doctrine of justification "as a forensic or judicial proceeding" and also denied

the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer. In **Finney's Systematic Theology** he actually called the reformed position regarding justification as "*certainly another gospel*" because "*it is antinomianism*".

These are very serious miscalculations of theology, even though within the church many Christians have historically taken advantage of and abused the doctrine of grace. Paul himself was misunderstood on this issue and dealt with the question twice in **Romans 6:1** and **Romans 6:15**.

¹What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

¹⁵What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!

In both cases Paul's answer was "**Certainly not!**" He was stunned, shocked, and astounded that anyone could actually take the doctrine of grace and turn it into a doctrine of lasciviousness and unbridled sin. And certainly the Reformation leaders never accepted the idea that grace provides a license for sin. They rejected that false notion with great passion, and in doing so they were not willing to consent to it undermining the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works.

Romans 4 is the great chapter in Scripture relative to the foundational doctrine of justification by faith, with Paul's theological treatise actually beginning in **Romans 3:21**. When he comes to **Romans 4**, Paul wants to show his readers that God has always saved people the same way. He saved Old Testament saints in exactly the same way that He saves New Testament believers today. And the way that Paul develops his discourse is by providing Old Testament examples of justifying faith in Abraham and David. Salvation has always been through the instrument of faith, and it has never been anything but faith. It has never been faith plus something else. Because the way of salvation has never changed, Paul wants the Jewish Christians to clearly grasp that the doctrine of justification by faith is no novelty, not some new and creative theological innovation on his part. This is not some new idea that Paul is just now inventing. Paul is very eager here to preach the gospel to the Jews because they were still outside biblical salvation and had completely

misunderstood the message of the Old Testament. That is why they were rejecting the gospel.

Ultimately the question that has to be answered is "What does it take to save someone?" Put another way, it could be asked "How can a man be just and right with God?" And in reality, the question is actually more aggravated. It is "How can a **sinful** man be just and right with God?" The problem for an ungodly and unjustified sinner was previously delineated in **Romans 1:18** when Paul stated these words,

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

This is the sinful man's situation before God clearly developed through **Romans 3:20**. Unfortunately, too often man does not consider the gravity of his condition. The reality of his sin and the reality of God's wrath on that sin simply do not seem that important or critical to him. But every lost man has this great need – this need to be right with God. And unfortunately for him, he has absolutely no merit with God. If a man is going to be right with God, it is not man that must bring that to pass, but rather God. In essence, justification is clearly not something that man does, but something that God does and something that God alone must do. **Romans 8:33** declares,

³³Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

Romans 4:5 says,

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

The result of this declaration is given in **Romans 8:1** where God says that for the believer there is "**no condemnation**". In other words, for the believer, for the one who has been justified, there is no penalty to pay for sin and he is no longer subject to any charges of guilt or condemnation.

The problem that the unsaved have is that they believe that salvation is something that they deserve and something that they can earn – both of which are entirely false. But no one has ever done anything to deserve their salvation simply because there is absolutely nothing in an individual to merit such. Salvation has nothing to do with behavior - how good or how bad someone is. Too often we think it does. We think it has

something to do with our “good” behavior, but it does not. Salvation is entirely and completely free and totally independent of anyone and any of their efforts or good works. So, in [Romans 3:24](#), Paul states the simple truth of justification when he declares,

²⁴**being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,**

“**Being justified**” is a declaration by God that none of an individual’s sins - past, present, or future - will be charged to their account. It is similar to a checking account. Every time someone writes a check, it is posted on their account - money is removed. But what would it be like if every check someone wrote and every one someone will ever write were to never show up on their account? In other words, the checks never got charged to their account, but they were all paid? They wrote the check, but it was never recorded - and yet it was paid. That is what “**being justified**” means. It means that none of the sinner’s sins are charged to their spiritual account – even though they deserve to be placed there because they are actual sins committed. In a judicial and forensic sense, not a practical sense, it is as if the person never sinned at all. They are **declared** righteous by God. It is a legal transaction that has taken place in heaven whereby God not only **declares** someone to be righteous (to be completely without sin), but He also **regards** them to be righteous. At the very moment that a person exercises biblical faith in Christ, all of their sins are removed from God’s spiritual accounting, and He declares them to be righteous. And to make it even better, it is true of them from that point on.

The term “**being justified**” is the Greek word “**dikaioo**” and it primarily means to deem to be right. It describes the act by which a man is brought into a right state of relationship to God. It is a legal term having to do with the law and the courtroom, where it represents the legally binding verdict of the judge. **The term means to cause someone to be in a proper or right relation with someone else.** It means that the person has been declared righteous by God and is therefore in a right relationship with Him. **Spiros Zodhiates** in his **Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament** says that “**dikaioo**” ends in “**oo**” which in Greek brings out that which a

person is. Therefore “**dikaioo**” brings out the fact that a person is righteous. **Leon Morris** says:

“The word is a forensic or legal term with the meaning ‘acquit’. It is the normal word to use when the accused is declared ‘Not guilty’.”

W.E. Vines says that “**dikaioo**” means:

“...to show, or declare, to be right. In the N.T. it mostly signifies to declare a person to be righteous before God.”

John MacArthur in his commentary on [Romans 1-8](#) writes this about the term “**being justified**”:

*“**Being justified** refers back to the ‘alls’ of the previous two verses - all those who have believed, of whom all were sinful. Just as there is no distinction among those who need salvation, there is no distinction among those who receive it, because they all are justified as a gift by His grace.”*

“**Dikaioo**” means to declare the rightness of something or someone. Justification is God’s declaration that all the demands of the law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Justification is a wholly forensic, or legal, transaction. It changes the judicial standing of the sinner before God. In justification, God imputes (reckons, places on one’s “account”) the perfect righteousness of Christ to the believer’s account, then declares the redeemed one fully righteous. Justification must be distinguished from sanctification in which God actually enables Christ’s righteousness to be fulfilled in the sinner through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. However, while the two must be distinguished, justification and sanctification can never be separated. God does not justify whom He does not sanctify.

Once again, the word “**justify**” means to **declare** to be righteous, **not to make** righteous. It is critical to the doctrine of justification to understand that justification does not mean to make righteous, to make good, or to make holy. This was the issue between Luther and the Catholic Church and was the issue that provided the impetus for the Reformation. **Wayne Grudem** reinforces this in his book **Systematic Theology** when he states:

“It is important to emphasize that this legal declaration in itself does not change our internal nature or character at all.”

John Murray in his classic work **Redemption Accomplished and Applied** explained the difference with the following illustration:

“Regeneration is an act of God in us; justification is a judgment of God with respect to us. The distinction is like that of the distinction between the act of a surgeon and the act of a judge. The surgeon, when he removes an inward cancer, does something in us. That is not what a judge does – he gives a verdict regarding our judicial status. If we are innocent he declares accordingly....The purity of the gospel is bound up with the recognition of this distinction. If justification is confused with regeneration or sanctification, then the door is opened for the perversion of the gospel at its center. Justification is still the article of the standing or falling of the Church.”

It is true that in the **application** of salvation that God initiates a process whereby men are conformed more and more into the image of Christ. That process is called **sanctification** - the process by which someone progressively becomes more righteous in their behavior. But justification does not refer to this renewing and sanctifying work of God. Justification is first a declaration by God. Whereas sanctification is a work of God **in** us, justification is a work of God **for** us. Justification is an instantaneous act of God in which He declares a man to be righteous and sees his sins as being forgiven and Christ's righteousness as his.

Leon Morris in defining justification says:

“The declaratory meaning is clear. It is to be inferred also from the fact that it stands in opposition to condemnation. ‘To condemn’ does not mean ‘to make wicked’, but ‘to declare guilty’; similarly, “‘to justify’ means ‘to declare just’.”

When someone is “**condemned**” they are declared to be guilty. And in contrast, when someone is spoken of as being justified, it means that they have been declared to be righteous. In **Romans 8:33-34** Paul clearly expresses this remarkable truth regarding justification when he declares,

³³Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and further-

more is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

In other words, even if someone did bring a charge against God's elect, those charges would never stand simply because God has “**justified**” the believer and declared them to be righteous in their sight.

The point is that justification is not doled out piecemeal over a period of time through mediatorial agents and ritual observances. Stated another way, **justification is not a process**, but is an act that occurs once and need not be repeated. It is something that God does, not man. And neither is justification subject to recall so that the person needs to be justified over and over again. Justification is not a continuing change wrought by God in us, but a declared change of our relation to Him. Justification describes a person's forensic status before God, not the condition of their character. The condition of one's character and conduct is that with which sanctification deals. Contrary to what their actual practice may be, God always sees the believer as righteous in His sight because He has declared him so.

In simple terms “**dikaioo**” as used in **Romans 3:24** means to declare a person to be righteous or right before God – and only God can do that. “**Being justified**” is entirely an act of God. “**Being justified**” is once and for all time and as such defines the believer's permanent state. Just as a person may not be tried for the same crime again after being acquitted, in like manner, God's justification means that the believer will never be tried or condemned by God again for their sins - past, present, or future. This is the good news of **Romans 1:16-17**.

Someone will ask the question “How does salvation become ours?” Paul is very concerned that his readers understand this and so he states “how” twice in **Romans 3:24**. He says it becomes ours “**freely**” and by “**grace**”. He is anxious to emphasize that it is a gift, that it is entirely free. **Salvation is a gift from God**. The word “**freely**” is the Greek word “**dorean**” and means that God declares a believer righteous without any cause or legitimate reason. In other words, there is nothing in the individual that merits the declaration of righteousness by God. Justification is a gracious gift which God extends to the repentant, believing sinner, wholly apart from human merit or work. That gift cost God the suffering and death of His own Son on the cross, so that for

the believer there is nothing left to pay. There is no explanation in us as a basis for salvation. God does not say, “*Oh, they are such wonderful people, I will have to do something for them!*” To the contrary, [Romans 1:18 – 3:20](#) clearly delineates that there is nothing good in anyone that would call out the grace of God, other than our great salvific need. We are justified without a cause. It is by His grace, which means that there is no merit on our part. **Donald Grey Barnhouse** wrote this about the word “**freely**”:

“When we understand this word ‘dorean’, we can see the true basis of our salvation. There was absolutely nothing within man that could recommend him to God. God did not sit in Heaven and look down upon this earth until He had found something in some men that recommended them to Him. He gave salvation to men who deserved Hell. There will not be one person in Heaven who deserved Heaven except the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only one who merited Heaven. But an innumerable company who merited Hell are going to be in Heaven simply because the grace of God decided that they should be there.”

To further validate that men are not saved by their own efforts, Paul declares in [Romans 4:5](#) that salvation goes to the one “**who does not work**” and the one who is “**ungodly**”. This is the antithesis.

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

Paul repeats it again in [Romans 5:6](#),

⁶For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

This is great. The man Paul is talking about here is a man who has absolutely no good works to place on his spiritual ledger sheet. He has nothing with which to recommend himself. He cannot come to God and say, “*Hey God, here’s my bill for salvation. I’ve been exceptionally good, and I deserve salvation. You owe it to me, so pay up!*” This man in these two verses is an absolute failure. He has done nothing to merit salvation, not one thing, zero times zero. And to make it worse, it says that he is “**ungodly**”. Just think for a moment of that position

– ungodly with no good works or merit towards salvation. The individual is utterly helpless.

But who do you think Paul is referring to? Is it the bum on the street corner, the guy who cheats on his wife, the man who steals from his employer, or the man who never works, but always wants a handout? In the specific context of [Romans 4](#), he is talking about Abraham! In fact the whole chapter is about Abraham and David. To the Jews, Abraham was their spiritual hero. To them he was the epitome of a godly man, a righteous man. Do you know who Abraham was before God called him? He was a heathen worshipping idols.

But someone will say, “*Don’t I need to do something?*” Well, what could they do? Write it down somewhere. “*Oh, I was a deacon, or I love my kids, or I pay my bills on time, or I don’t curse or chew tobacco.*” So what? We could simply substitute any term which we think needs to be added to trusting and committing our life to Christ - baptism, church attendance, some special spiritual experience, church membership, or tithing. Man wants to think that he has some significant part to add to God’s way of salvation. One of the most common excuses we hear is “*I am not willing to make a commitment to Christ until I know that I will follow Him completely.*” What that person is saying is that they are trusting in their good works to save them. “*I will come to Christ when I can do it, when I can be good enough, when I can be committed.*” But “I” cannot earn, merit, or achieve salvation in any way. No one can be good enough, and no one will ever come to Christ on those terms. Those are man’s terms, not God’s.

[Romans 4:5](#) declares that God **justifies the ungodly**, not the good, not the hard worker, not the moral man, not the religious man – but the ungodly. We must appreciate that **God does not say that an ungodly man is declared to be godly.** That is not the case at all. What He says is that an ungodly man is justified, or **an ungodly man is declared to be righteous.** And because a man has been declared righteous, because a man has been justified, God will continue to work godliness into that man through the process of sanctification. This is an important distinction. In Romans, sanctification is the next great doctrine that Paul addresses in [Romans 5-8](#) after addressing justification in [Romans 3:21 – Romans 4:25](#).

Justification does not procure godliness, rather it provides righteousness. Godliness is a by-product of sanctification, whereas righteousness is a by-product of justification. In the order of salvation, righteousness always precedes godliness. Put another way, justification always precedes sanctification. The simple fact that God has declared a man to be righteous constrains Him to bring that man through sanctification and ultimately to glorification. God told Abraham that he would have a child; therefore the child had to be born. And likewise every believer has been declared righteous, and one day must be brought to perfect righteousness before God and all the hosts of heaven. In fact, in [Romans 8:29-30](#), there is a series of verbs where God declares the believer to be foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified – and all the verbs are in the past tense! We have a standing that can never be disputed, a justification that can never be reversed, a seal that can never be removed, and a forgiveness that can never be overturned.

It is important to understand that there are no good works involved in salvation except the good works of Christ. In fact, if God actually paid someone for their works, for those things they have done in the flesh to try and merit salvation, all someone would receive would be eternal, everlasting damnation. There is in this one of the greatest reasons why many people will not be saved. It is because they utterly refuse to admit that they are ungodly. And because God will not justify anyone but the ungodly, they thereby shut the door that leads to salvation. God says, “**There is no distinction – all have sinned, there is none righteous, no not one.**” Simply stated, God has no basis to justify the godly.

The message of salvation is confrontational because the real test regarding salvation comes when God confronts a man with the truth. When God tells a man that he is sinful and ungodly and helpless to save himself – the natural man resents those words. When God tells the natural man that nothing he can do can save him, he takes it as a personal insult. Deep inside he says, “*I’m a good person, I’ve worked hard. Just look at my track record.*” To them the cross is an offense. But the issue is very simple. **Man has absolutely no righteousness at all, except what God gives to him.** [2 Corinthians 5:21](#) puts it this way,

²¹For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Man can do nothing at all. Man has no righteousness whatsoever. God has it all. It is God’s righteousness, and therefore God is the only One who can give it to someone – and He does that in the one-time act of justification. A Christian is someone who knows that he can do absolutely nothing to save himself. If this sort of ruffles a person’s feathers, chances are that they have never come to Christ. They still think that it is something about them, something about what they have done, or the way that they have lived. It is not. Salvation is not about what someone can do for God, but it is about what God is able to do for them. Paul has clearly stated that salvation is for the man “**who does not work**” and that justification is for the one who “**believes**” ([Romans 4:5](#)).

So, justification provides two integral, yet distinct attributes for the sinner. First, it is the legal declaration that all of their sins – whether past, present, or future – have been paid for and that there is no corresponding penalty to pay for those sins. That is exactly why Paul could declare in [Romans 8:1](#) that the believer was under what **John MacArthur** calls a “*no condemnation status*”. There is absolutely no penalty to pay for sin. But secondly, in the act of justification the believer is also declared to be righteous in God’s sight. In his practical life the believer is not righteous, but still struggles with sin. But from God’s perspective, He sees the believer as righteous. Theologically, the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to him. Obviously, someone is going to ask the question as to how God can justly declare someone to be righteous who is not righteous. It would be like a judge declaring a convicted criminal to not be guilty who was actually guilty. The theological answer is the doctrine of imputation – the secondary aspect of justification whereby the righteousness of Christ is **imputed** to the individual, given to them, and credited to their spiritual account on the basis of the work of Christ in taking the sinner’s place.

This aspect of justification is critical – the imputation of righteousness where God both declares the sinner to be righteous and then places the actual righteousness of Christ onto the believer’s spiritual account. So, it is more than just being declared righteous because it also includes actually being given righteousness. Anyone

can make a declaration, but what makes a declaration valid is that it actually comes to pass. Someone could declare me to be a billionaire, but until I had a billion dollars I would not be a billionaire. So, in justification God not only declares the believer to be righteous, but He then credits the believer with the righteousness of Christ. This is the doctrine of **imputed righteousness**. In a judicial sense, the righteousness of Christ has legally been given to the sinner. The righteousness of Christ is now his. It is the word that Paul used in [Romans 4:3](#) and [Romans 4:6](#) when he said,

³**For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”**

⁶**just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:**

The idea of imputation is first seen when Adam sinned and his guilt was imputed to us. God the Father viewed it as belonging to us, and so it did. The second use of the word “**imputed**” is when Christ suffered and died for our sins, and our sins were imputed to Him. But in the doctrine of justification, imputation is used for the third time whereby Christ’s righteousness is imputed or placed on our account and God sees it as belonging to us. It is essential to the very heart of the gospel that God declares us to be just or righteous not on the basis of someone’s falsely assumed condition of righteousness, but on the basis of Christ’s perfect righteousness. The underlying truth of justification is that it does not actually change the believer, but it does clearly and judicially change his standing before God.

It should always be kept in mind that justification is a **double** counting, crediting, or reckoning. Negatively, God will never count our sins against us, and positively, God credits our account with righteousness, as a free gift, by faith, altogether apart from any works that we may do. [Romans 4:8](#) says,

⁸**Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.”**

The Greek word for “**impute**” in this verse is the verb “**logizomai**” that is translated to credit, to count towards, to account for, and to reckon, and is sometimes translated “**impute**” as in this verse. The

initial imagery of counting and crediting is a financial term. But when the verb is translated “**impute**”, the imagery is that of legality. Both mean to reckon something as belonging to someone else, but in the former case, it is referring to money. In the latter case it is dealing with innocence or guilt. In fact, in the 16th century this was the language that spurred the debate as to whether God in the act of justification “**infused**” righteousness to us (what the Roman Catholic Church taught), or whether God “**imputed**” righteousness to us (what the Protestant Reformers rightly taught). And as noted previously, this is really the great divide between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

It must be understood that when God justifies a sinner that He does **not** make them righteous, but He judicially **declares** them righteous and regards them to be so, reckoning them to be righteous and treating them as being righteous. Theologically, it is the difference between **positional** righteousness and **practical** righteousness. The believer has both. Practical righteousness in a believer’s daily life is not the by-product of justification (a one-time declaration), but it is the by-product of sanctification (a lifetime process). So, the double counting in justification is that God does not impute sin to sinners, even though it actually belongs to them, but He does impute the righteousness of Christ which does not belong to them.

One last issue related to the subject of justification and it has to do with what it means to be justified by faith. [Romans 3:28](#) says,

²⁸**Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.**

[Romans 5:1](#) says,

¹**Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

[Galatians 2:1](#) and [3:24](#) say the same thing – that an individual is “**justified by faith**”. So, the immediate question is what is the connection between faith and justification? The problem with this issue is simply the fact that some people have taken this phrase to mean that we are justified because of **our** faith. It would leave the false impression that our efforts in the work of salvation are meritorious – which they are not. If that were the case, then it would mean that salvation is a works based salvation and not a grace based salvation. God never justifies anyone based on their works – never.

The clue to understanding the relationship is in the preposition “by”. It is a preposition that describes the instrument or the means by which something is accomplished. We are justified through the instrument of faith, but never on account of the exercise of that God given faith. It would be similar to a hose pipe in the garden. The hose pipe is only the instrument through which the water reaches the garden. The water comes not from the hose pipe, but from an entirely different source. And in the same way, our faith is not justifying in and of itself as if we are the instrument of justification. That would be a total travesty of Paul’s teaching on justification.

Martyn Lloyd Jones in his book **Great Doctrines of the Bible** speaking of this subject says this:

“The Bible never says that anywhere, because, if it were true, what would really save us in the end is our believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. The biblical teaching is that faith, our faith, is not the ground of our justification. The ground of our justification is the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ imputed to us. Christ, and not my faith, is my righteousness. It is not my believing in Him that saves me. It is He who saves me....Faith is but the channel, the instrument by which this righteousness of Christ comes on to me....He gives us the new birth; He gives us this power and faculty of faith and then He enables us to exercise it. Through this exercise of faith we receive the righteousness that God imputes to us. It is all of God.”

In **Romans 3:28** Paul declares that a man is “**justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law**”. Paul is clearly teaching that justification is apart from any meritorious works on the sinner’s part. No perceived righteousness of our own will ever provide adequate grounds for justification – none. Justification is based entirely on the substitutionary atonement of Christ. As James reiterates in his epistle, good works are a necessary part of the believer’s life **after** salvation. And they are the things which will always accompany genuine salvation, but they are not in any respect necessary for justification. They have nothing to do with the initial declaration of justification by God, but simply are subsequent evidences that the believer’s justification actually did happen. Justification always leads to sanctification.

The wonder and beauty of all of this is simply that God is the one who provides for the unregenerate sinner everything that is needed for their salvation. If it were not so, man would invariably claim the work of salvation as something that he personally has accomplished. But the simple truth of the matter is that a spiritually dead man cannot do one single thing to promote or achieve his salvation. It is all of God, and therefore He is the One deserving of receiving all of the glory for such a great salvation as is ours. May God be deeply praised and honored in this great work of justification.



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JUSTIFICATION

Of all God’s benefits given in the covenant of grace, first place belongs to Justification, to forgiveness of sins. All joy and peace, all certainty of communion with God, rests on this forgiveness, a benefit no mind can fully comprehend or believe. Forgiveness is not easy and often conflicts with our sense of justice. Here Christianity distinguishes itself by tying justice and love together at the cross. In traditional Eastern religions as well as in Western thought, the ironclad law of causal necessity reigns. Nature knows no forgiveness.

Scripture, using many varied metaphors, depicts God as gracious. Forgiveness is God’s gift; it cannot be earned. The Old Testament, notably in the Psalms, portrays God’s nature as merciful; the New Testament pro-

claims the One who came to seek and save the lost, to lift the burdens of the heavyhearted. Proclaimed throughout the New Testament in various ways, forgiveness is underscored in its forensic dimension as Justification especially by the apostle Paul. Reflecting on his life experience as a Pharisee under the law, Paul accents the righteousness of Christ imputed to believers by faith alone. This Justification produces liberty, frees believers for service, and assures them of eternal life.

Already in Paul's own day, this doctrine was misunderstood as antinomianism. In response, the church moved toward seeing the Christian life in terms of obeying God's commandments. Penance and good works became the preferred way of dealing with sins committed after baptism. Grace was seen as a divine infusion into the believer via the sacraments. Habitual grace then remains the ground of a believer's Justification but, logically, God forgives people because he has made them holy. Rome fails clearly to distinguish between Justification and sanctification.

Luther's great discovery about the "righteousness of God" was that it did not apply to God's righteousness in himself but rather to the righteousness applied to believers through faith in Christ. God's righteousness does not condemn us but justifies us. We are clothed in Christ's righteousness. We are not justified by good works, but for good works, by grace. Faith thus believes that we are sinners and that for Christ's sake we are justified. God's declaration of righteousness is not a mere sentence God pronounces to himself but brings with it the act of making us righteous in Christ. Believers are to take God at his word, recognizing nonetheless that their healing is a lifelong process. The Christian life is a life of faith; trusting in God's promises, we may neither despair nor be falsely secure.

From the start, the Reformation was both a religious and an ethical movement. Though time and polemics brought about changes in emphases as well as greater clarity, Luther's mature thought is true to what was germinally present in his early Lectures on Romans. Thanks especially to the polemics with Rome, Lutherans increasingly ascribed to Justification an exclusively juridical meaning. In

Lutheran circles there was a shift away from predestination, with the result that human achievement and good works began to have a role in faith. As a result, for Pietism and rationalism alike, Justification increasingly became a subjective matter, an experience of forgiveness and renewal.

In the Reformed tradition, however, though neither the objectivity of Christ's satisfaction nor the benefit to believers was ever minimized, the emphasis was placed on righteousness as God's gift rather than as a benefit we accept by faith. The comfort of believers was important but even more so the glory of God. Calvin kept sanctification in the fore as much as Justification; whom Christ justifies he also sanctifies, unto the glory of God. And that is also the believer's glory: Though Calvin kept Justification closely connected to election and satisfaction on the one hand, and sanctification and glorification on the other, those who followed him did not. Rationalism, whether in Socinian, Remonstrant, Cartesian, or Amyraldian form, emphasized the human subject's faith and obedience, creating a new form of nomism or legalism. Pietism and Methodism, for all their differences with the preceding, also represented a turn toward human subjectivity and the experience of faith. In response, some Reformed theologians emphasized the objectivity of Justification and placed it in the divine decree of love. This risked encouraging antinomianism by downplaying the importance of human response. Reformed theologians tried to avoid extremes and began to carefully distinguish active and passive Justification. This distinction was intended as a logical distinction only, not a temporal one. To this day, the two different emphases—the objectivity of divine promise and the subjectivity of faith's response—both remain in the Reformed churches.

Justification is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. Either we must do something to be saved, or our salvation is purely a gift of grace. God does not set aside the law that properly judges us; only because Christ bore the wrath of God are we reckoned righteous in him. Ethical consequences flow forth from Justification, but they must not be imported into the very definition itself. To reverse the order would be to make Justification dependent on sanctification—a hopeless measure since even our best works are imperfect and fail to measure up to God's standard. Though righteousness is through or from faith, faith is never the ground for our righteousness. Faith in itself does not

save us; we are saved by faith in Christ. The faith that justifies is precisely the faith that has Christ as its object and content. This affords great comfort to believers. If our weak faith is the ground for our Justification, we will live in fear and anxiety. Instead of turning inward, we must turn toward Christ and his finished work, the sure ground of our hope.

Against the objections raised against imputed righteousness (such as by Roman Catholic theology), it must be noted that the objection is really against the apostle Paul, who says in [Romans 4:5](#) and [5:16](#) that God justifies the ungodly. The best human analogy is adoption. Imputation is not a fiction; it is a real change of status with real benefits. The righteousness legally imputed to us must still become ethically effective in sanctification. Our being made righteous rests in God's decree and in the [pactum salutis](#). The covenant of grace precedes both our birth and our coming to believe. Our righteousness is "alien" in only a certain sense; it is the righteousness of the "head," which is therefore also that of the members.

If our Justification is grounded in the imputed righteousness of Christ, when exactly does this occur? In eternity or in time? The former view has been held by antinomians as well as antineonomians. For the former, eternal Justification was the sum and substance of Christian truth—our faith only involves acknowledging what God has done in eternity. There is no Justification in time. The latter, urgently seeking to keep the pure gospel of grace from being mixed with law, saw eternal Justification as the beginning and foundation of Justification in time. Though it is important to insist that God's decree of election is eternal, speaking of Justification as taking place in eternity is not advisable. This usage is not scriptural and does not eliminate the problem of needing to explain its execution and outward realization in time. Reformed theology wisely distinguishes between the eternal decree and its execution in time.

We are on firm scriptural ground, however, when we tie Justification to the death and resurrection of Christ. Our Justification has been obtained by Christ; it is objectively accomplished. To clarify matters, Reformed theologians distinguished an active Justification from a passive Justification;

Justification is acquired and applied. Again, this is not a temporal distinction but a logical one; concretely, the two coincide and always go together. The distinction seeks to preserve the dual conviction that faith is both necessary for Justification and that such a faith is itself the fruit of God's regenerating work through the Holy Spirit. This distinction helps us to avoid nominalism, to strengthen believers' assurance by turning them away from introspective self-examination and toward Christ himself, and to recognize that faith is simultaneously a receptive organ and an active power. Faith is the very act of accepting Christ and all his benefits. This faith is active along with works and is brought to completion by works. Paul and James are not at odds.

Reformed theologians have not always agreed on the various elements of Justification and how they are related to each other. It is best to define Justification as the imputation of Christ's obedience as a whole to the believer and to consider its two parts to consist in forgiveness of sins and the right to eternal life. Forgiveness includes past, present, and future sins. The fear of antinomianism must not hinder us from making this claim but does call us to be vigilant in continuing to pray for forgiveness daily. This is necessary for believers to remain assured; confession and prayer are the means by which God the Holy Spirit arouses and reinforces our consciousness of forgiveness.

Although understanding of Justification is sometimes limited to forgiveness, what must not be overlooked is our adoption as children and the right to eternal life. This adoption is both juridical (Paul) and ethical (John). We are God's children; our legal status is provided in Christ and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit as a pledge until the day of full redemption. This doctrine should provide the greatest comfort and assurance to believers, and it equips them for great works. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (pg. 176).

FORGIVENESS IS NOT NATURAL

Rebirth, faith, and conversion are the conditions for the following benefits of the covenant of grace: they are the only way by which humans can receive and enjoy the forgiveness of sins and adoption as children of God, peace and joy, sanctification and glorification. Of all these benefits, first place is due to Justification, for by it we understand that gracious judicial act of God by which he acquits humans of all the guilt and punishment

of sin and confers on them the right to eternal life. Certainly there can be no peace of mind and conscience, no joy in one's heart, no buoyant moral activity, or a blessed life and death, before the guilt of sin is removed, all fear of punishment has been completely eradicated, and the certainty of eternal life in communion with God fills one's consciousness with its consolation and power. But this benefit—the complete forgiveness of sin—is so immense that the natural human intellect cannot grasp and believe it.

Pagans pictured the gods as human, endowing them with such passions as jealousy, spite, and vengeance, and therefore could not grasp the sublime idea of a free and gracious forgiveness. When the gods felt insulted and were angry, they had to be appeased by human gifts and prayers. **Celsus**¹ ridiculed that notion, considering it folly. Yet this [pagan] notion witnesses to a greater seriousness and sense of truth than the shallow idea that forgiving is natural for God, just as sinning is normal for humans.

People who know themselves somewhat also know how terribly difficult true and complete forgiveness is, and how it can only be granted after a serious struggle with oneself. Certainly an assortment of sinful attributes such as envy, hatred, and vindictiveness, which cannot be part of God's character, play a large role here. But there are also countless cases in which forgiveness is simply impossible and impermissible. When our honor and good name, our office and our dignity, have been publicly assaulted, no one is prepared to forgive without public redress, merely on the basis of a private apology and confession of wrongdoing. And when actionable crimes have been committed, the civil government is called, not to forgive but to punish, since as God's servant it has to uphold justice and does not bear the sword in vain [cf. [Romans 13:4](#)].

Opposition to the expiatory sacrifice of Christ, usually supported by an appeal to the parable of the prodigal son,² accordingly, arises from a total denial of the value of justice as well as of the very idea of forgiveness, for forgiveness in the true sense of the word precisely presupposes justice and stands or falls with it. At the same time, the cross of Christ

teaches us that forgiveness, however difficult and seemingly absurd, is nevertheless permitted and possible in accord with justice.

In this respect, Christianity again distinguishes itself from other religions, especially from Buddhism. The ancient Southeast Asian Indians had such a strong sense of justice that they tried to explain all inequality among people in terms of thoughts, words, and deeds that they have entertained, uttered, and committed in a previous life and that had imprinted certain properties and habits on their souls. In that way their present lives determined their future destinies. Those who do good works are reborn in regions of blessedness; those who lead bad lives are degraded to a lower level and receive the form of an animal or other wretched being. Just as the law of gravity prevails in nature, so in the moral world the unbreakable law of karma prevails. There is no forgiveness, only retribution.

Under the influence of this (East) Indian worldview, joined to that of the law of causality that has been observed in operation everywhere by the natural sciences, many Westerners today reason in the same way. Operative everywhere is the law of cause and effect, not only in the physical but no less in the psychic and ethical world. One may later regret having committed some sinful act, but this in no way changes anything about its consequences. One simply has to bear them now and forever in all eternity. The idea of eternal punishment is not at all strange but completely natural. What has happened can never be undone. Nature knows no forgiveness and does not in the least take account of self-humiliation and confession of wrongdoing. Forgiveness is **“physically impossible.”**³

In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, however, we find a different circle of ideas. Immediately of great importance here is that the covenant of God is based not on nature or on a people's merit **but on** a gracious disposition of God **and**, by implication, on a historical act.

Furthermore, in the sin offerings, the law, which presupposes the covenant of grace, while it opened a way of atoning for such sins as occurring **“unwittingly”** ([Leviticus 4:2](#)), also pronounced a sentence of destruction upon all sins that were committed **“with a high hand”** ([Numbers 15:30 RSV](#)). Israel, however, did not adhere to the rule of the covenant. In

later years, Israel repeatedly committed such sins as idolatry, image worship, Sabbath desecration, and so forth—sins that broke the covenant itself and that by implication could not be atoned for by covenant sacrifices.

Then prophets, speaking in the name of the Lord, announced to a faithless and apostate people the coming **Day of Judgment** and the punishment of the exile. That punishment is necessary precisely because Israel is the people of the Lord (**Amos 3:2**), but it also paves the way for redemption.

For God cannot abandon his people. He cannot forget his Israel (**Hosea 11:8**). He will be exalted in justice and show himself holy in righteousness (**Isaiah 5:16**). Part of the people will be saved; a remnant will repent (**Isaiah 4:3; 6:13; 7:3; etc.**). The righteous will surely live (**Ezekiel 18:9**), and they will live by faith (**Habakkuk 2:4; cf. Isaiah 7:9; 28:16; 30:15**).

Even if Israel is unable to repent and does not know how to blush (**Jeremiah 6:15; 13:23**), God remains true to his covenant and will, out of grace, grant to his people all those benefits that they have absolutely forfeited and cannot acquire by any merits of their own. He will make a new covenant with them, forgive them all their sins, give them a new heart and spirit, and cause them to walk in his statutes (**Jeremiah 24:7; 31:31; 32:37; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:24**).

According to the prophets, Isaiah in particular, God's righteousness consists above all in the fact that in the future he will not, on account of their sins, reject the people whom he chose out of grace but will lead them, through punishment and mercy, to complete redemption. He cannot abandon his people because he has bound his own name and honor to them in pledge. Through the Messiah, who will bring forth justice to the Gentiles (**Isaiah 42:1**), he will prepare salvation for his people.

His deliverance is not far off; his salvation will not tarry; he will give salvation to Zion and glory to Israel (**Isaiah 46:13; 51:5; 54:17; 56:1; 60:1–2; 61:11**). From him, accordingly, is their righteousness (**Isaiah 54:17**); only in him is righteousness and strength (**Isaiah 45:24**). He is the Lord, their

righteousness (**Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16**).

Now among all the spiritual and material benefits that God will give to his people in the future by virtue of this righteousness, the forgiveness of sins occupies a place of primary importance. Even in the days of the old covenant, it was already apportioned by God and enjoyed by the faithful (**Exodus 34:7, 9; Numbers 14:18–20; 1 Samuel 15:28; 1 Kings 8:30; Psalm 25:11; 32:1–2, 5; 51:1; 103:3; 130:4; 143:2; Isaiah 6:7; Daniel 9:19; Micah 7:18**), but occurs especially—like conversion, renewal of the heart, the communication of the Spirit, and the promise that they [believers] will be his people—as a benefit of the new covenant God will establish in the future.

FORGIVENESS IN SCRIPTURE

The Old Testament depicts this benefit using different names and images. Examples are) נָשָׂא *nāsā*, suspend, accept, pardon; **1 Samuel 15:25; Job 7:21; Psalm 32:1; 85:2; Isaiah 33:24**,) סָלַח *sālāh*, forgive; **Exodus 34:9; Leviticus 4:20; Psalm 25:11; 103:3**,) אָבַר *ābar*, pass over, through; hiph.: let pass by, put away; **2 Samuel 12:13; 24:10; Job 7:21**,) כָּבַשׁ *kābaš*, tread underfoot, subdue, cast down; **Micah 7:19**,) כָּסָה *kāsā*, hide; pi.: cover; **Psalm 32:1; 85:2; Proverbs 10:12**,) כִּפֶּר *kipper*; pi.: cover, make atonement [**Leviticus 16:17**; etc.], and, hence, forgive; **Psalm 65:3; 78:38; 79:9; Isaiah 6:7; Jeremiah 18:23; Daniel 9:24**,) מָחָה *māhā*, wipe, wipe out, eradicate; **Psalm 51:1; Isaiah 43:25; 44:22; Jeremiah 18:23**,) טָהַר *tāhēr*, be pure; pi.: cleanse, pronounce clean) and) כָּבַשׁ *kābas*, wash, make clean; **Psalm 51:2**,) שָׁרַר *šār*, depart, cease; **Isaiah 6:7**, and further expressions such as “not seeing” (**Numbers 23:21**), “not imputing” (**Psalm 32:2**), “not entering into judgment” (**Psalm 143:2**), “not remembering” (**Isaiah 43:25**), “hiding one's face” (**Psalm 51:9**), “casting behind one's back” (**Isaiah 38:17**), and “casting into the depths of the sea” (**Micah 7:19**).

In these connections, it is always God who grants forgiveness (**Isaiah 43:25; 45:21–25; 48:9–12**). His divine nature shines out in forgiving the iniquity of his people (**Micah 7:18**), for he forgives only for his name's sake (**Psalm 25:11; 79:9; Isaiah 43:25; Ezekiel 36:11**). He acts out of sheer compassion (**Psalm 78:38**), for the sake of his covenant with Abraham and David, for the sake of the oath he swore to them (**Psalm 89:3**;

[105:8–9](#); [111:5](#); [Jeremiah 11:5](#); [Ezekiel 16:60](#); [Micah 7:20](#)), for the sake of his fame and honor among the Gentiles ([Exodus 32:12](#); [Numbers 14:13, 16](#); [Deuteronomy 9:28](#); [32:27](#); [Ezekiel 36:23](#)).

After the exile, however, instead of expecting their righteousness and salvation from God, the Jews increasingly took the path of *nomism* and sought to construct a righteousness of their own out of works. John [the Baptist], accordingly, appears with the message that, despite their circumcision and descent from Abraham, the people of Israel need the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ([Matthew 3:2–10](#)). Jesus then proclaims the good news that another and better righteousness is needed than that of the Pharisees ([Matthew 5:20](#)), that this righteousness is a good gift from God ([Matthew 6:33](#)), and that God grants this benefit, not to the righteous, but to publicans and sinners, to the lost, to the burdened and heavy laden, to children who do not look for their salvation in themselves but expect all their well-being from God.

As proof of all this, he himself as the Messiah of the kingdom distributes the benefit of the forgiveness of sins ([Matthew 9:2](#); [Luke 7:48](#)). Indeed, he gives his life as a ransom for many ([Matthew 20:28](#)), creates the new covenant in his blood, allows his body to be broken and his blood to be shed for the forgiveness of sins ([Matthew 26:26](#)), and promises eternal life to all who become his disciples ([Matthew 10:37](#); [Matthew 16:24](#)). All the apostles, consequently, unanimously and from the very beginning preach that in his name there is repentance and forgiveness of sins ([Luke 24:47](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [5:31](#); [10:36, 43](#); [13:38](#); [26:18](#)).

In their preaching, to be sure, there is great diversity. John especially highlights the life (ζωή, *zōē*) that is obtained through faith in Christ ([John 3:16, 36](#)). James, for practical reasons, urgently warns people against a dead faith ([James 2:14](#)). Peter exhorts believers to follow Christ's example ([1 Peter 2:21](#)), and the Letter to the Hebrews points above all else to the perfection (τελειωσις, *teleiōsis*) that has come with the single offering of Christ ([Hebrews 10:14](#)). But all of them regard the forgiveness of sins as the great benefit that Christ has won and that is received by faith ([John 3:36](#); [Hebrews 8:12](#);

[10:17, 22](#); [James 2:1](#); [1 Peter 1:2, 19](#); [2:24](#); [3:18](#); [1 John 1:9](#); [2:1–2, 12](#); [3:5](#)).

It is especially Paul, however, who puts Justification in the foreground and works out its richest and deepest implications. This is undoubtedly connected with his own life experience. Having been a Pharisee, he had in all seriousness and with passionate zeal striven for a righteousness of his own based on observing the law. But when it pleased God to reveal his Son in him, he saw the vanity of this attempt and sought his righteousness in God through Christ Jesus alone. Yet, also as a Christian Paul remains faithful to the forensic scheme. He does not fight the idea that God is just and that salvation can be obtained only through righteousness.

After coming to the faith, however, he differs from his earlier contemporaries about the *way* righteousness and salvation can become ours. He combats Jewish *nomism*, because, on account of sin, no flesh can be justified by the works of the law ([Romans 3:20](#); [8:3](#); [Galatians 2:16](#)); because then humans would always remain servants and be able to boast before God of their merits ([Romans 4:2, 5](#); [Galatians 3:24–26](#); [4:1–7](#); cf. [1 Corinthians 1:29](#); [4:7](#)); in other words, humans would then live and labor for their own interest and make God subservient to it.

Hence, Paul rejects the *nomistic* ethical principle and squarely bases himself on the religious position. But that does not alter the fact that the law as such is holy and just and good ([Romans 7:12, 14](#); [1 Timothy 1:8](#); cf. also [Romans 3:31](#); [8:4](#); [13:8, 10](#); [Galatians 5:14](#)). If there had not been sin, therefore, it [the law] would also have been able to grant life through works ([Romans 10:5](#); [Galatians 3:12](#)). But what the law by its very nature *cannot do* is grant *forgiveness*, which is precisely what we need.

Paul, accordingly, while he does fight Jewish *nomism*, maintains the righteousness of God and proceeds from it in his soteriology. He takes a theocentric position, in which God does not exist for humankind but humankind for God and communion with God is not the result of our exertion but God's free and unmerited gift.

It is wrong, therefore, to regard the so-called “juridical scheme” in Paul as a remnant or aftereffect of his earlier Pharisaism, or to describe it as a temporary policy of transition that was very useful for as long as

Christianity had to detach itself from Judaism but later lost all meaning and significance.⁴

Nor is it correct to regard the juridical component in Paul's theology as inferior to the mystical and to accord priority to the latter. For although doctrine in the case of this apostle is most intimately tied in with his life experience, it nevertheless very clearly—especially in the letters to the Romans and the Galatians—highlights God's righteousness and revolves totally around the alternatives: our own righteousness or God's, law or gospel, work or faith, merit or grace. If communion with God, life, and salvation are to remain gifts of God, they must precede all our works and be their basis and starting point. In that case religion is the basis of morality. We love God because he first loved us ([1 John 4:19](#)).

On the basis of this religious position, the apostle now develops the following thoughts. Inasmuch as the law condemns humans on account of sin and can never lead them to salvation, it has pleased God to manifest his righteousness in another way, that is, apart from the law ([Romans 3:21](#)). The term *δικαιοσύνη* (*dikaioσynē*), which Paul employs here and elsewhere, acquires a unique sense in his thinking ([Romans 1:17](#); [3:5](#), [21–22](#), [25–26](#); [10:3](#); [2 Corinthians 5:21](#); cf. [Philippians 3:9](#); [James 1:20](#); [2 Peter 1:1](#)).

In the Old Testament, it generally refers to that virtue of God according to which he judges justly without respect of person, and hence does not declare the guilty to be innocent nor the innocent to be guilty, but rewards all according to their works. More specifically, however, it denotes the attribute and conduct of God according to which he helps, rescues, and recognizes the claims of the poor, the wretched, who though personally guilty have the right on their side. But toward the end of the Old Testament economy, this righteousness of God seems to have totally vanished.

For the whole world was now deserving of condemnation before God ([Romans 3:19](#)). No one could be justified by the works of the law ([Romans 3:20](#)). In his divine forbearance God passed over the sins previously committed ([Romans 3:25](#)). Therefore, if salvation was still to be possible for human-

kind, God had to manifest his righteousness in a way other than he had done in the law. And this he did in Christ by offering a sacrifice of atonement for sins. This proved that God himself is righteous but also made it possible for him—while preserving his righteousness, indeed, in keeping with it—to justify those who have faith in Jesus ([Romans 3:25–26](#)).

Accordingly, in considering the “**righteousness of God**” in [Romans 3:21–26](#) (cf. [Romans 1:17](#)), we must not think of a human righteousness that, though existing outside of themselves in Christ, is by faith made their own and is now considered as such in the sight of God (Luther, Calvin, marginal notes in the Authorized Version, Philippi, Umbreit, and Fritzsche, with an appeal to [Romans 2:13](#); [Galatians 3:11](#), “before God”; and [Romans 3:20](#), “in his sight”).

Nor must we think of a righteousness of humans that derives from God, is infused into them by God, or is valid in his sight (Osiander, Schleiermacher, Rothe, Martensen, Nitzsch, Beck). Nor primarily of a righteousness that belongs to God, that he possesses, but that he by grace confers through faith on humans, so that elsewhere Paul can call it a “righteousness from God” ([Philippians 3:9](#)—as many modern exegetes claim, whether they describe the genitive as a subjective genitive [Hausleiter] or as a possessive genitive [Fricke] or as a genitive of efficient cause or authorship [Bengel, Rückert, van Hengel, Winer, et al.]).

But we must, in the first place, understand by that term that attribute or rather that conduct of God according to which he judges justly, and acquits those who have faith in Jesus. But for God to act thus it was necessary for him to put Christ forward as a sacrifice of atonement and to bring about in him a righteousness ([1 Corinthians 1:30](#); [2 Corinthians 5:21](#); [Philippians 3:9](#)) that is the diametrical opposite of a righteousness of our own that comes from the law ([Romans 10:3](#); [Philippians 3:9](#)). The righteousness of God as virtue or mode of conduct has manifested itself most gloriously when in Christ he granted another righteousness apart from the law, on the basis of which he can justify—that is, absolutely and completely acquit—those who believe in Jesus.

Accordingly, those who believe in Christ are justified *through* faith ([Romans 3:22](#), [25](#), [30](#); [Galatians 2:16](#); [3:26](#); [Ephesians 2:8](#); [Philippians 3:9](#); [2 Timo-](#)

[thy 3:15](#)), *on the ground* of faith ([Romans 1:17](#); [3:30](#); [5:1](#); [9:30](#), [32](#); [10:6](#); [Galatians 3:8](#), [24](#)), *by faith* ([Romans 3:28](#)).

This faith does include the acceptance of the testimony of God ([Romans 4:18](#); [10:9](#), [17](#); [1 Corinthians 15:17](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#)) but consists further in heartfelt trust in God's grace in Christ, a personal relationship and personal communion with Christ ([Romans 10:9](#); [1 Corinthians 6:17](#); [2 Corinthians 13:5](#); [Galatians 2:20](#); [Ephesians 3:17](#)).

It is a living, not a dead, faith that excludes all work, merit, and boasting ([Romans 3:28](#); [4:4](#); [11:6](#); [Galatians 2:16](#); [Philippians 3:9](#)) but nevertheless proves its power in love ([Galatians 5:6](#)). This faith is reckoned to people as righteousness ([Romans 4:3](#), [5](#), [9](#), [11](#), [22](#); [Galatians 3:6](#)). The righteous person will live by faith ([Romans 1:17](#); [Galatians 3:11](#); [Hebrews 10:38](#)). This Justification is one that carries life with it ([Romans 5:18](#)).

Given the Justification that believers receive, they are immediately freed from all dread and fear. They have peace with God ([Romans 5:1](#)). They are no longer under the law ([Romans 7:4](#); [Galatians 2:19](#); [4:5](#), [21](#)) but under grace ([Romans 6:15](#)), and they stand in freedom ([Galatians 5:1](#)). They are no longer servants but children, having the spirit of adoption and therefore also being heirs of God ([Romans 8:15–17](#); [Galatians 4:5–7](#)), awaiting with great assurance the completion of their adoption as children ([Romans 8:23](#)) and the hope of righteousness ([Galatians 5:5](#)), for if God justifies, who is to condemn? ([Romans 8:31–39](#)).

1. Henry Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1980

2. Thomas Bailey Saunders, 2nd rev. ed. (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row 1957) pg. 142

3. C. T. Ovenden, "The Forgiveness of Sin," *Hibbert Journal* 56 (April 1907) pg. 58.

4. Williams and Norgate, *The Beginnings of Christianity*; "Alleged Legalism in Paul" New York: Putman 1903-4,

CORAM DEO

(Before the Face of God)

Scripture's emphasis on God's desire to save His people shows us that the atonement was designed to pay fully for all of the sins of the elect. Two thousand years ago, Jesus paid for the sins of His people. This great truth should cause us to burst forth in praise of His particular love for us. It should also make us confident when evangelizing, for it means there are people out there who have been bought and will confess faith. Share your faith with a non-believer today.

Doctrine in Capsule

“What is justification?”

Simply put, to justify is to declare righteous, to make one right with God. Justification is God's declaring those who receive Christ to be righteous, based on Christ's righteousness being imputed to the accounts of those who receive Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

Though justification as a principle is found throughout Scripture, the main passage describing justification in relation to believers is [Romans 3:21-26](#): **“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 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—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.”**

We are justified, declared righteous, at the moment of our salvation. Justification does not make us righteous, but rather pronounces us righteous. Our righteousness comes from placing our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice covers our sin, allowing God to see us as perfect and unblemished. Because as believers we are in Christ, God sees Christ's own righteousness when He looks at us. This meets God's demands for perfection; thus, He declares us righteous—He justifies us.

NOTES

Romans 5:18-19 sums it up well: “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. 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.” It is because of justification that the peace of God can rule in our lives. It is because of justification that believers can have assurance of salvation. It is the fact of justification that enables God to begin the process of sanctification—the process by which God makes us in reality what we already are positionally. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (**Romans 5:1**).



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