

The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith

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I. “Justification” is the act of God whereby He forgives the sins of believers and declares them righteous by imputing the obedience and righteousness of Christ to them through faith. (See Luke 18:9-14.)

Justification is arguably the single most important doctrine in the Bible. It is without question a doctrine that is rejected and opposed by all cults and indeed all religions outside of Christianity. In his book *Know Your Christian Life: A Theological Introduction*, theologian Sinclair Ferguson discusses its importance, not only for the church but also for the Christian:

Martin Luther, whose grasp of the gospel was better than most, once said that the doctrine of Justification was the article by which the Church stands or falls. “This article,” he said, “is the head and cornerstone of the Church, which alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves and protects the Church; without it the Church of God cannot subsist one hour.” Luther was right. Although for our understanding of the general shape and direction of the Christian life we have suggested the doctrine of regeneration is important, the doctrine of justification is central. Not only is it the article of the standing or falling Church, but also of the standing or falling Christian. Probably more trouble is caused in the Christian life by an inadequate or mistaken view of this doctrine than any other. When the child of God loses his sense of peace with God, finds his concern for others dried up, or generally finds his sense of the sheer goodness and grace of God diminished, it is from this fountain that he has ceased to drink. Conversely, if we can gain a solid grounding here, we have the foundation for a life of peace and joy.¹

He then explains why this doctrine is difficult—for some to accept:

The practical importance of this cannot be exaggerated. The glory of the gospel is that God has declared Christians to be rightly related to him in spite of their sin. But our greatest temptation and mistake is to try to smuggle character into his work of grace. How easily we fall into the trap of assuming that we only remain justified so long as there are grounds in our character for that justification. But Paul’s teaching is that nothing we

do ever contributes to our justification. So powerful was his emphasis on this that men accused him of teaching that it did not matter how they lived if God justified them. If God justifies us as we are, what is the point of holiness? There is still a sense in which this is a test of whether we offer the world the grace of God in the Gospel. Does it make men say: "You are offering grace that is so free it doesn't make any difference how you live"? This was precisely the objection the Pharisees had to Jesus' teaching!²

Here are the characteristics that distinguish justification:

II. *What justification is not:*

1. It is not a *reward* for anything good we have done.
2. It is not something in which we cooperate with God. (It is not sanctification.)
3. It is not infused righteousness which results in good works which become the basis of justification (the Mormon and Catholic concept of justification).
4. It is not accomplished apart from the satisfaction of God's justice, i.e., it is not unjust.
5. It is not subject to degrees—one cannot be more or less justified; one can only be fully justified or fully unjustified.

III. *What justification is:*

1. **Justification is an undeserved free gift of God's mercy** (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:7).
2. **Justification is entirely accomplished by God, once for all.** (It is not a process like personal sanctification, but knowledge of it does help produce sanctification.)

One of the leading theologians of our time, James Packer stated:

This justification, though individually located at the point of time at which a man believes (Rom. 4:3; 5:1), is an eschatological once-for-all divine act, the final judgment brought into the present. The justifying sentence, once passed, is irrevocable. "The Wrath" (Rom. 5:9) will not touch the justified. Those accepted now are secure forever. Inquisition before Christ's judgment seat (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10) may deprive them of certain rewards (1 Cor. 3:15) but never of their justified status. Christ will not call into question God's justifying verdict, only declare, endorse and implement it.³

In other words, if God the Father *justified* us at the point of belief, is it possible the Son would ever repudiate the Father's legal declaration?

3. **Justification involves an *imputed* righteousness entirely apart from**

works: the righteousness of God Himself has been given to the believer. It has nothing to do with a person's own righteousness (Rom. 4:5, 6, 17-25).

It is not only that God overlooks our sin and guilt, but also that full and entire holiness is credited to our account. Bruce Milne describes the transaction this way:

Our justification is not simply a matter of God's overlooking our guilt; our need can be met only if righteousness, full and entire holiness of character, is credited to us. This is the amazing gift of grace. Christ's law-keeping and perfect righteousness are made ours by faith in Him (1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9). It is not simply that our abysmal failure in life's moral examination is overlooked; we pass with 100%, First Class Honours! Well may Athanasius speak of "the amazing exchange" whereby, as Calvin puts it, "the Son of God though spotlessly pure took upon Himself the ignominy and shame of our sin and in return clothes us with His purity."⁴

Righteousness is imputed because the believer actually is united to Christ. In other words, because the believer is "in Christ," the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. Justification is the subsequent legal recognition of that fact. We are declared (past tense) righteous. We *now* have perfect righteousness before God (not personally, but legally).

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

In his book *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes*, J. I. Packer discusses the meaning of justification and contrasts it with the Catholic and Mormon view:

To "justify" in the Bible means to "declare righteous": to declare, that is, of a man on trial, that he is not liable to any penalty, but is entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law.... The Church of Rome has always maintained that God's act of justifying is primarily, if not wholly, one of making righteous, by inner spiritual renewal, but there is no biblical or linguistic ground for this view, though it goes back at least as far as Augustine. Paul's synonyms for "justify" are "reckon (impute) righteousness," "forgive (more correctly, remit) sins," "not reckon sin" (see Rom. 4:5-8)—all phrases which express the idea, not of inner transformation, but of conferring a legal status and cancelling a legal liability. Justification is a judgment passed on man, not a work wrought within man; God's gift of a status and a relationship to himself, not of a new heart. Certainly, God does regenerate those whom he justifies, but the two things are not the same.⁵

Thus, as *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* points out, every believer in Christ is now treated by God as if they are righteous (on the basis of their imputed righ-

teousness), not as if they are sinners:

“The righteousness of God” [i.e., righteousness from God: see Philippians 3:9] is bestowed on them as a free gift (Romans 1:17, 3:21 ff.; 5:17, cf. 9:30; 10:3-10): that is to say, they receive the right to be treated and the promise that they shall be treated, no longer as sinners, but as righteous, by the divine Judge. Thus they become “the righteousness of God” in and through Him who “knew no sin” personally but was representatively “made sin” (treated as a sinner, and punished) in their stead (1 Corinthians 5:21). This is the thought expressed in classical Protestant theology by the phrase “the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,” namely, that believers are righteous (Romans 5:19) and have righteousness (Philippians 3:9) before God for no other reason than that Christ their Head was righteous before God, and they are one with Him, sharers of His status and acceptance. God justifies them by passing on them, for Christ’s sake, the verdict which Christ’s obedience merited. God declares them to be righteous, because He reckons them to be righteous; and He reckons righteousness to them, not because He accounts them to have kept His law personally (which would be a false judgment), but because He accounts them to be united to the one who kept it representatively (and that is a true judgment). For Paul, union with Christ is not fantasy, but fact—the basic fact indeed in Christianity; and the doctrine of imputed righteousness is simply Paul’s exposition of the forensic aspect of it (see Romans 5:12 ff.).⁶

4. Justification is accomplished in harmony with God’s justice. It displays His holiness; it does not deny it. The only way for the sinner’s justification to be truly just in God’s eyes is for two requirements to be absolutely satisfied. The first is that every requirement of the law must be satisfied. The second is that the infinitely holy character of God must be satisfied. J. I. Packer comments:

The only way in which justification can be just is for the law to be satisfied so far as the justified are concerned. But the law makes a double demand on sinners: it requires both their full obedience to its precepts, as God’s creatures, and their full endurance of its penalty, as transgressors. How could they conceivably meet this double demand? The answer is that it has been met already by the Lord Jesus Christ, acting in their name. The eternal Son of God was “born under the law” (Galatians 4:4) in order that he might yield double submission to the law in his people’s stead. Both aspects of his submission are indicated in Paul’s words: “he... became *obedient*—unto death” (Philippians 2:8). His life of righteousness culminated in his dying the death of unrighteous according to the will of God: he bore the penal curse of the law in man’s place (Galatians 3:13) to make propitiation for man’s sins (Romans 3:25).

And thus, “through one act of righteousness”—the life and death of the sinless Christ—“there resulted justification of life to all men” (Romans

5:18 NASB).⁷

He concludes:

Paul's thesis is that God justifies sinners on a just ground, namely, that the claims of God's law upon them have been fully satisfied. The law has not been altered, or suspended, or flouted for their justification, but fulfilled—by Jesus Christ, acting in their name. By perfectly serving God, Christ perfectly kept the law (cf. Matthew 3:15). His obedience culminated in death (Philippians 2:8); He bore the penalty of the law in men's place (Galatians 3:13), to make propitiation for their sins (Romans 3:25). On the grounds of Christ's obedience, God does not impute sin, but imputes righteousness, to sinners who believe (Romans 4:2-8; 5:19).⁸

This is exactly what Scripture teaches—that God can be both just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Jesus:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:23-26).

IV. Scripture Proof:

Genesis 15:6 —Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

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

Isaiah 54:17 —“No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me,” declares the Lord.

Jeremiah 23:6—In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, the Lord our righteousness.

Habakkuk 2:4 —Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith.

Romans 3:28 —For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Romans 4:3-6— For what does the Scripture say? “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Now to the

one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works.

Romans 5:1— Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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

Romans 9:30-10:4— What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in him will not be disappointed.” Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

1 Corinthians 6:11— Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Galatians 2:16— Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh 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.” So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Galatians 3:21, 24—Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if the law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.... Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.

V. Important applications of justification include the following:

1. Justification demands we trust in Christ's righteousness alone and not our own.

Acts 13:39— And through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.

Philippians 3:8-10— More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.

Galatians 5:4,5— You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.

2. Justification properly orients Christian morality.

a. The motive for Christian service and living becomes obedience out of love and gratitude to a Savior whose gift of righteousness made law keeping unnecessary, not pride and self-exaltation in self-righteousness and good works.

Romans 12:1,2— I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

b. The doctrine of justification encourages morality and discourages licentiousness when we consider the One who redeemed us and the cost of our redemption (Cf. Rom. 6:10-18).

Romans 6:1,2— What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Colossians 1:10— So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:12— So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

Romans 6:17,18— But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

3. Justification means Christians may be assured that they *now* possess eternal life.

a. A divine gift is perfect and cannot be taken back. The gifts and calling of God are without repentance (Rom. 11:29).

Perfect righteousness is a gift (Jas. 1:17; Rom. 3:24). God can only give perfect righteousness if we are declared perfectly righteous by Him. What condition can exist in the future so that we can lose our righteous standing? If righteousness is a gift to sinners and enemies (if He did the most for us when we hated Him and were His enemies), will God do *less* for us now that we are His precious children (Rom. 5:8, 9)?

b. Eternal life could only be a present condition on a just basis: if from the point of belief we were “eternally righteous” i.e., declared eternally righteous. This is why Scripture teaches that the believer now has *eternal life*.

John 5:24— Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, *has eternal life*, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

John 6:47— Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes *has eternal life*.

John 6:54— He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood *has eternal life*, and I will raise him up on the last day.

¹ John 5:10-13— The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son. And the witness is this, that God *has given us eternal life*, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may *know* that you *have eternal life* (cf. 3:14).

Notes

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *Know Your Christian Life: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 71.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

³ James Packer, in Everett F. Harrison, et al., eds., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), 155.

⁴ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), 155.

⁵ James I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 139-140.

⁶ J. I. Packer, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 306.

⁷ J. I. Packer, *God's Words*, 141-142.

⁸ J. I. Packer, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 306.