

This Great Salvation

Session 5—Justification

Introduction

Justification is an act of God's free grace, by which he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.¹

As John Murray puts it, the basic question regarding our relationship with God is not, how can a person be right with God? But how can a sinful person be right with a holy God?² We fail to grasp the gravity of our peril when we do not take seriously our sin or the reality of God's wrath. Our greatest problem is not that we are sufferers but that by nature and deeds we are sinners in the hands of an angry God.

In the opening chapters of Romans, Paul presses the point that the holy God has justified wrath toward Gentiles who suppress the truth evident to them. Further, the Jews may know God's standard, but that is not the same as meeting that standard. Both Jews and Gentiles are alike guilty and in defiance of God. This is the plight of man.

I. Definitions and Terms

- A. *Justification* is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.³
- B. *Justification* is a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons; Romans 4.5; 3.9-24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself. This justifying sentence is God's gift of righteousness (Romans

¹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 33.

² John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1955, p. 117.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 316.

5.15-17), his bestowal of a status of acceptance for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 5.21).⁴

- C. *Justification* is God's "just justifying of the unjust, his righteous way of 'righteousing' the unrighteous."⁵
- D. *The Righteousness of God*—primarily a righteousness *from* God. But also meaning God's perfectly right moral character manifested in his holiness and justice ("Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" Genesis 18.25). Further, it also includes his way of saving sinners through Christ's death which meets the demands of his holy nature.
- E. *Redemption*—from the imagery of the ancient slave market, it involved paying the necessary price to gain release of the prisoner or slave.
- F. *Propitiation*—a wrath-removing sacrifice through which God becomes propitious (favorable) toward us.

II. Romans 3.19-31

19) Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

21) But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

27) Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House, Wheaton, 1993, p. 164.

⁵ John R.W. Stott, *Romans*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1994, p. 109.

faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

- A. 3.19— **so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.** The picture is one of a defendant in a courtroom unable to say anything in his defense because of the mountain of evidence amassed against him.
- B. 3.20— **For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.** The phrase *works of the law* makes its first appearance in Romans. There seems to be some idea of self-salvation in view. But Paul clearly states that justification cannot be gained by works of the law. One of the purposes of the law is to reveal sin, not to justify. J.B. Phillips Version says it well: ... **it is the straightedge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.**
- C. 3.21—**But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, ...** These words introduce perhaps the greatest pivot in all the Bible. In a temporal sense they reflect a change from the old era of sin's dominion to the new era of salvation since God's righteousness has now been revealed. (Cf. Romans 1.17). We have arrived at a new covenant. This manifestation of righteousness is apart from the law, but not in opposition to the law. Indeed, the law witnesses to it. That will be seen in chapter 4 when Paul brings out two witnesses (Abraham and David) from the Old Testament to confirm what he is saying.
- D. 3.22-23— **the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned ...** Faith is the means by which this righteousness reaches us. Both Jews and Gentiles are in the same boat.
- E. 3.24a—... **and are justified by his grace as a gift ...** The source of justification is God's grace.

- F. 3.24b—... **through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...** The basis/ground of justification is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.
- G. 3.25a—... **whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.** The justified wrath of God has been turned to favor, has been satisfied by the sacrifice of Christ. Faith is again mentioned as the instrument through which this gift is received.
- H. 3.25b-26—**This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.** The passing over of sins formerly committed (before Christ’s redemptive work) by God’s covenant people refers to the fact that though they did suffer temporal punishment, they never faced the full weight of condemnation. That came on Christ himself. The contrast between ‘former’ and ‘present’ points up the demonstration of God’s righteousness because though he passed over or overlooked former sins in this sense (Acts 17.30). “... it was his fixed intention in the fulness of time to punish these sins in the death of his Son. This was the only way he could both himself be just, indeed *demonstrate his justice* and simultaneously be *the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus*. Both justice (the divine attribute) and justification (the divine action) would be impossible without the cross.”⁶
- I. The Means of Justification—Faith (3.22; 27-31) **Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**
1. The boasting Paul has in mind is the pride of accomplishment in the keeping of the law. The principle of faith excludes all such boasting. To be justified through faith apart from the works of the law amounts to saying we are justified by faith alone, the watchword of the Reformation. ... **yet we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be**

⁶ Stott, p. 116.

justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2.16)

2. From the time of Genesis 12 God's plan has included Jews and Gentiles, though his initial covenant was with the Jews only. The inclusion of Gentiles is an important theme in this section, but not the main theme. Faith is the main theme. Justification by grace alone in Christ alone and through faith alone will have the effect of breaking down all divisions—racial, ethnic, etc.
3. Though at times Paul may seem to be disparaging the law, he is not. He answers opponents who accuse him of opposing the law first by denying it and then countering that faith establishes the law. Chapter 4 will bring this out. The law has a part to play, but not as the means through which God justifies.

III. **What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."**
Romans 4.1-8

- A. The theme of no boasting is carried through into chapter 4 with Abraham, the great patriarch. Paul uses him to clarify how one becomes justified (through faith). Abraham was *not* justified by works.
 1. **"What does the Scripture say?"** This should always be our first question in settling any issue.

2. Genesis 15.6 is quoted to indicate the means of Abraham's justification.
 3. **"It was counted ..."** *logizomai*—to credit, reckon, charge, impute. In finance, to put into someone's account. **"If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account."** Philemon 18.
 4. There are two grounds by which money comes to us, as wages or as gift. If you work, you should expect to be paid—wages. If you receive money without working, that is gift. "And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness ... "
 5. **"... him who justifies the ungodly ... "** Romans 4.5
- B. *Justification* is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.⁷
1. God declares the ungodly to be righteous in his sight, not on the basis of their works but in response to their faith.⁸ This is the opposite of a pronouncement of condemnation.
 2. This declaration is true because Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. (Romans 4.3) When Adam sinned, his guilt was imputed to us. When Christ suffered, our sin was imputed to him. In justification, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 316.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, p. 723.