

Lesson 7

Justification

The basis upon which God justifies sinners

Introduction

In the Bible, God is a God who works by a method of law. He punishes those who work evil and rewards those who do righteousness. He always acts righteously and expects us to do the same. The problem is that we don't.

Paul writes:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as the mercy seat by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be just and justify the one who has faith in Jesus, Romans 3.23-24.

This paragraph may be the most important ever written. Inside these 80 words is the theology of our salvation. We see the righteousness of God, faith, sin, justification, grace, redemption, propitiation, and the blood of Christ. All of these are based upon grace. What a fantastic passage this is!

In this lesson, we want to delve into the question of how the sinner is justified. In Romans 3, Paul has already ruled out a sinner being saved by works of law, 3.19-20. So, how is it that sinners come to be justified by grace through their dependence on the atoning work of Christ?

Defining Justification

The word for *justification* is used 39 times in the New Testament, 27 of which Paul uses. Fifteen are found in Romans. The simple meaning of the word *justify* is to be acquitted. It is the opposite of being condemned, which is "to be declared guilty." Similarly, when we say someone has been justified, we say they have been declared just. So, *justification* is a specific act of God whereby the sinner's status changes from lost to saved. It is also a continuing *state* in which a Christian exists. Therefore, when speaking of a person who has been *justified*, we say they have been "saved, in the sense of being free from all guilt and penalty, and condemnation."⁵⁹ Paul ties it directly to the assurance of salvation:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, Romans 5.1.

If we know we have been justified, then we can know we are saved and have assurance that we are going to heaven. Paul certainly had this confidence, and he writes it in such a way that we can know, too.

Justification and Righteousness

Over the last 400 years, Christianity has debated over justification and righteousness. Roman Catholicism asserts that when one is justified, one is *made* righteous, and one's continued justification

comes from personal obedience and good works. This turns justification into a subjective process whereby a person can never be sure they have reached the level of work that makes them “good enough” to be saved. This perspective does not produce any peace or assurance.

A better understanding is that justification does not mean “to make righteous” but “to be declared righteous.” Our state of justification is objective as it is a *complete right standing before God and freedom from the law’s penalty*. Justification signifies a transformation in our standing before God and His law rather than our nature. It addresses the issue of *guilt* rather than the issues of sinfulness or moral corruption. Justification doesn't mean that we are made righteous. It's not about an internal, personal change but about an objective and outward adjustment. Ultimately, it reflects a shift in God's perspective toward us, altering how He regards us. God declares us just by grace. Think of it. In the act of salvation, God justifies the ungodly, Romans 4.5. He declares that even though we are sinners, we comply with the law. How can this be?

Well, remember that salvation flows from grace, not from adherence to the law; the very nature of grace stands in stark contrast to the law. However, to fully comprehend the process of justification, we must recognize that the law encompasses not only commands but also penalties. For sinners, it is impossible to align with the law (that is, being justified) concerning its commands because we've transgressed them. When God justifies us, He isn't declaring that we are blameless or have kept the law without sin. Instead, justification is God's pronouncement that we are in good standing with the law regarding its *penalties*. This means that God regards us not as if we've never sinned but as if our due penalty has been satisfied—which, indeed, it has.

For Christians to understand what justification entails, envision yourself as an accused in God's courtroom, with God as the presiding Judge, and hear Him declare: "You are exempt from punishment!" Justification addresses our guilt by lifting the condemnation associated with it.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, Romans 8.1.

Therefore, the Judge pronounces, "You are exempt from punishment!" Hence, being justified doesn't mean God interacts with us as if we've never sinned but as if we've already endured our punishment. This truth is relevant for every believer at every moment, not merely when facing final judgment. Whenever you, as a Christian, start to question your salvation, imagine yourself hearing God's reassuring voice in your heart, saying, "You are exempt from punishment!"

Justification and Forgiveness

Justification essentially equates to the forgiveness of sins, the cancelation of transgressions, and the cleansing from iniquity, in the sense that God expunges them from His record and does not count them against us. This concept is the bedrock of Paul's reasoning from Romans 3.27 to Romans 4.8. After affirming and using the terminology of justification, Paul emboldens his argument by referring to Psalm 32:1–2:

How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How joyful is a person whom the Lord does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit!

This passage illustrates that justification and forgiveness are synonymous. God justifies sinners by pardoning them and by choosing not to impute their sins to them. Importantly, justification and forgiveness are directed at the *individual*, not just his *actions*. It means that it's not only isolated sins that are pardoned; instead, we stand as a person who is forgiven.

It's crucial to recognize that this shift in our relationship with God does not occur progressively; it's not something that happens incrementally. Justification is a divine action that brings about an immediate and total alteration in our standing before God. In one definitive moment, as declared by God, we move from 0% to 100% forgiven in His sight. Justification is also a persistent condition, commencing with that instantaneous divine act and enduring in its entirety (100%) as long as we maintain our connection with Christ. We mustn't entertain the idea that only a portion of our sins are forgiven, leaving us partially forgiven. Partial forgiveness is insufficient for salvation. But we can give thanks to God, for through our continuous faith in the entirely sufficient sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, *all* of our sins are forgiven. This is the core of what it means to be justified.

What's In This For Us?

1. **Embrace Assurance of Salvation:** Recognize that justification by faith grants peace with God and assurance of salvation. Christians can have confidence in their eternal destiny and should live without the fear of condemnation.
2. **Justification is a Legal Declaration:** Justification is not about becoming inherently righteous or perfect but about being declared righteous by God. This declaration changes our status before God from lost to saved and should encourage us to approach God confidently. We must distinguish between justification (being declared righteous) and sanctification (becoming more like Christ). Understanding this distinction helps us avoid conflating our status before God with our ongoing spiritual growth.
3. **Appreciate the Full Forgiveness in Justification:** In justification, God forgives all of our sins completely—not partially. This complete forgiveness means living free from the burden of guilt and striving to maintain a relationship with Christ.
4. **Reject Legalism and Embrace Grace:** Any belief system that ties justification to personal obedience and good works will lead to uncertainty about one's salvation. We must embrace the grace of God as the basis for justification, allowing it to lead to a life of gratitude and service. This comes by depending solely on the atoning work of Jesus Christ for justification rather than any personal merit or effort. This dependence on Christ alone should fuel a life of trust and surrender to God.
5. **Live in the Freedom from Condemnation:** We can live with the understanding that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Allow this freedom to shape how you interact with others, offering forgiveness and grace as you have received it. In moments of doubt about salvation, remember God's judicial pronouncement of "You are exempt from punishment" and let this be a source of comfort and reassurance in the Christian walk.

6. **Maintain Continuous Faith in Christ:** Maintain a continuous, active faith in Christ, knowing that your justification is secure as long as you remain in union with Him. This should inspire perseverance and faithfulness in your Christian life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the doctrine of justification by faith is a cornerstone of our faith, offering assurance and comfort to all who believe. Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God has graciously cleared our ledger of sin, declaring us righteous and freeing us from the weight of eternal punishment. This act of divine grace is not a gradual process but an immediate change in our legal standing before God. It is not based on our efforts or righteousness but Christ's atoning work.

As we reflect on the teachings of Romans and the profound truth that justification is synonymous with complete forgiveness, let us hold fast to this assurance. Let it encourage us to live lives characterized by peace with God, gratitude for His mercy, and a commitment to walking in the freedom that comes from being declared just in His sight. We must rest in the knowledge that our salvation is secure, not because of who we are or what we have done, but because of who Christ is and what He has accomplished for us on the cross.

Justification by faith is not merely a theological concept; it is the essence of the Christian experience, a daily reality that shapes how we view ourselves, interact with others and approach God with confidence and hope. In the words of Romans 8:1, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline:

1. Introduction to Justification
 - Definition and meaning of justification
 - The role of grace in justification
 - The difference between law and grace
2. Key Scripture Exploration
 - Romans 3:23-24
 - Romans 5:1
 - Romans 8:1
3. The Nature of Justification
 - Exploring the Legal Declaration by God
 - Contrasts between justification and sanctification
 - Assurance of salvation through justification
4. The Implications of Justification
 - Total forgiveness of sins
 - Objective righteousness before God
 - Continuous faith and union with Christ
5. Conclusion
 - Living out our justified status
 - Maintaining peace and assurance in Christ

Definitions

1. **Justification:**

Thought Questions for Discussion:

1. What does justification mean to you personally, and how does it affect your daily life?
2. How does understanding justification as a legal declaration change your view of God's grace?

3. In what ways does the assurance of justification provide peace in your relationship with God?
4. Why is it important to distinguish between being declared righteous and being made righteous?
5. Discuss how a misinterpretation of justification could lead to legalism or insecurity in faith.
6. How can the concept of total forgiveness impact our interactions with others?
7. What does it mean to live as someone who has been justified? Provide practical examples.
8. How can we maintain continuous faith in Christ and our justified status?
9. Share a time when the truth of "no condemnation in Christ Jesus" brought you comfort.
10. How can the church better communicate the message of justification to those seeking it?

Group Activities:

1. **Group Discussion:** Split the class into two groups. One group presents arguments for justification from the perspective of legalism, while the other defends the doctrine of grace.
2. **Grace Letters:** Each person writes a letter to themselves from the perspective of God, emphasizing their justified status and the assurance that comes with it.

Final Encouraging Word:

As we wrap up today's lesson on the doctrine of justification by faith, let us hold dear to the incredible truth that, in Christ, we are declared righteous and fully forgiven. Allow this fact to fill your heart with the confidence and joy of one who is justified. Go forward in peace and assurance, knowing that your status before God is secured by His love and the finished work of Jesus on the cross. Be encouraged and let your heart be filled with hope from our Lord, for in Him, we are free indeed.

⁵⁹ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About Grace*, p. 174.