

## The School of Christian Theology

### Lesson 13

#### Justification and Adoption, the first two blessings which flow from our union with Christ

**Objective:** To understand the relationship between the spiritual blessings of Christ and our union with Christ. To grasp the importance of our Justification and Adoption in Christ. And to gain a fuller understanding of what it means to be justified and a child of God.

#### I. Covenant Concept of our Union with Christ

A few weeks ago, we looked at our mystical union with Christ, and we saw that it is only through being united to Him that we become partakers of all that He has accomplished for our sakes. All the spiritual blessings of salvation are ours only by being “in Him”, from our election to be in Christ in eternity past to our glorification in Him in eternity future, as well as everything in between.

Through these blessings Christ is conforming His body into His own image. And so, all these covenant blessings listed above are the progression of the one work of re-creating the redeemed into the image of Christ, their Head.

**Romans 8:29**, For those whom (God) foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

When we pan out to get the biggest picture view of what God is doing in the work of salvation, this purpose of re-creating the fallen image of God in man through uniting us and conforming us to the image of Christ is what comes into focus. It is God’s ultimate purpose in salvation to glorify the Son and to glorify us in the Son.

#### A. The distinctions between the covenant blessings of our union

**WLC Q. 69.** What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ?

A. The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ, is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.

The catechism then goes on in questions 70-78 to address the principle benefits of Christ’s mediation, which are found in the blessings of our Justification, adoption, sanctification and repentance. Each of these are distinct blessings which flow to us through our union with Christ.

## **B. The inseparableness of the covenant blessings of our union**

If we are truly in Christ, it is impossible to not be the recipients of all that is found in Him. And what is found in Him is our election, our justification our sanctification, our adoption, and so on – together as one.

**Romans 8:30**, And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The blessing of salvation which flows to us from Christ is multi-dimensional and inseparable.

## **II. The Grace of Justification**

“When the article of justification has fallen, everything is fallen. This is the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church cannot exist for one hour. It is the master and prince, the lord and ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines...The truth of the gospel is the principal article of all Christian doctrine. Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.” – Martin Luther

“Justification is the very hinge and pillar of Christianity. An error about justification is dangerous, like a defect in a foundation. Justification by Christ is the spring and water of life. To have the poison of corrupt doctrine cast into this spring is damnable.” – Thomas Watson

### **A. Justification is the grace of our “standing” before God.**

- **The value of being justified**

The blessing of being justified in Christ is a legal blessing. It is the positional grace of our acceptance before God.

This grace of our positional standing can be seen as the foundation upon which the house of salvation rests. We either stand justified or we stand condemned before God. Unlike the grace of sanctification which, God works “in us”, this foundation exists completely outside of us, solely on the accomplished work of Christ for us. He is the perfect righteousness that stands guiltless before God. And that perfect righteousness is clothed upon us in the grace of justification, it becomes our righteousness.

So, just as the perfect righteousness of Christ is the engine of the vehicle of justification, imputation is the transmission of the vehicle of justification.

- **Our justification is through faith**

If we are **made righteous** in order to be justified, then something is taking place “in us” in order for that to be accomplished. And therefore, our performance becomes a vital element in our justification, whether it is strictly a self-reliance upon our own performance of the works of the law, or an infused grace which enables us to keep the law, there is still an element of something being “in us” which justifies us. But Paul contrasts this idea of something being in us that we place our trust and dependence upon to something outside of us which we place our trust and dependence upon. And Paul defines this contrast as the difference between faith and works. Paul says that we are justified by faith, which is a placing of ones dependence upon another instead of self. And he says that we are justified by faith alone apart from any works in us. The hands of faith are empty hands and the eyes of faith are always looking outward.

**Galatians 3:15-16**, We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

**Romans 3:28**, For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Since our justification is not a work “in us” but a declaration of our standing based upon the work of Christ alone, the moment we receive the gift of faith we receive the declaration of righteous, it is a finished declaration.

**Romans 3:26**, God is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

## **B. Justification is the heartbeat of the gospel**

- **The importance of this grace**

“Justification by faith is the hinge on which all true religion turns.” – John Calvin

“When the article of justification has fallen, everything is fallen. This is the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed...The truth of the gospel is the principal article of all Christian doctrine. Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.” – Martin Luther

- **Imputation, the heart of this grace**

The good news of the gospel is that although we are unrighteous of ourselves, God has provided a righteousness by which we stand justified, the righteousness of Christ, which is laid to our account or, imputed to us. Paul refers to this righteousness as the “**righteousness of God**”. In this phrase Paul is not referring to the concept that God is a righteous being, but that he has a righteousness which He provides for us in order for us to be counted righteous.

**2 Corinthians 5:21**, For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become... What? **the righteousness of God.**

A double transaction of imputation took place to accomplish the gospel. Our sins were laid to the account of Christ, so that His righteousness could be laid to our account. And by faith (by resting upon the work of that transaction) we are counted righteous. There is no righteousness derived from faith itself in this transaction. It is only the righteousness of Christ which, being imputed to us, justifies us.

- **The righteousness of God**

And Paul opens his letter to the Romans by saying that in the gospel:

**Romans 1:17**, ...**the righteousness of God** is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

This righteousness of God is not Paul referring to God’s covenant faithfulness. It is the Divinely provided righteousness which Christ merited on our behalf, and which we receive by faith. And this divinely provided righteousness by which God justifies us, according to Paul, is itself what is revealed in the good news of the gospel.

**Romans 3:19-25**, 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 works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

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 Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for

fall 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.

Paul, readily returns to this phrase, *the righteousness of God*, and in doing so, stresses that God has provided a righteousness accomplished in humanity by the incarnate Son, for us. And throughout these chapters in Romans gives an exhaustive explanation of our justification resting in no part upon us, but solely in who Christ is and what He has done. And like Luther said, we need to beat this into our heads continually. For the first thing our sinful hearts want to do is justify ourselves. And to the degree we seek to do that, we deny the gospel. And as well we must contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3) We must guard and defend the gospel for it can so easily be perverted so that it is no gospel at all. (Gal. 1:7)

**WLC Q. 70.** What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

**WLC Q. 71.** How is justification an act of God's free grace?

A. Although Christ, by his obedience and death, did make a proper, real and full satisfaction to God's justice in the behalf of them that are justified; yet in as much as God accepteth the satisfaction from a surety, which he might have demanded of them, and did provide this surety, his own only Son, imputing his righteousness to them, and requiring nothing of them for their justification but faith, which also is his gift, their justification is to them of free grace.

**WLC Q. 72.** What is justifying faith?

A. Justifying faith is a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner, by the Spirit and Word of God, whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, but receiveth and resteth upon Christ and his righteousness therein held forth, for pardon of sin, and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation.

**WLC Q. 73.** How doth faith justify a sinner in the sight of God?

A. Faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, not because of those other graces

which do always accompany it, or of good works that are the fruits of it, nor as if the grace of faith, or any act thereof, were imputed to him for his justification; but only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness.

### III. The Grace of Adoption

#### A. The uniqueness of the grace of Adoption

The essence of our adoption is that we are sons of God because we are in union with God the Son.

Justification focused on our legal standing before God. Adoption, while it has a relational focus, is not a separated grace from that justification, but actually encompasses this legal standing by giving us a fuller picture of God's purpose in justifying us.

I said earlier that all these spiritual blessings are for the purpose of re-creating us into the image of Christ. Our adoption reflects that end goal, for it brings us into the family of Christ, so that we might bear a family likeness to the Son.

Now, we can see how our sanctification and our glorification are to this end as well. Like our justification, each of these are vital in us being conformed to the image of Christ. As our justification was God delivering us from the penalty of our sin, our sanctification is God delivering us from sin's dominion over us in this life. And our glorification is God's final deliverance from the effects of sin in our lives.

But Adoption is unique grace, for it, in a sense, brings us into the home where these other graces live and exercise themselves in our lives. We have been adopted into the family of the justified. We have been delivered into the life of the sanctified. And we have been embraced into the glory of the life to come. Our adoption encompasses all of this. For as Hebrews tells us, Christ suffered for the purpose of *bringing many sons to glory*.

#### B. Dual importance of Adoption

The grace of adoption is both relational and legal. Parents who are adopting a child, are overwhelmingly moved by love. Their desire is to care for and provide for this child, and to pour out their love into this child's life. But they are doing something else as they are bringing this child into their family. They are legally incorporating this child into the benefits of being in this family. A child is an heir to the parent's estate. There is an inheritance which now legally belongs to the adopted child as well as the natural born.

And the grace of God adopting us into His family carries the importance of both these truths. Both the relational and the legal aspects of adoption are emphasized in scripture.

- **Relational implications to Adoption**

**Romans 8:15-16**, For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Paul informs his readers that in our new life of walking by the Spirit, our relationship to God has changed from what it previously was. We are set free from our slavery to sin by the death of Christ. And so, relationally we move from a position of God being our Judge to God being our Father. What a dramatic shift! The gap between Judge and Father is immeasurable. Paul wants us to realize that we now stand in a completely new relationship with God. The old is a relationship of fear, and the new is a relationship of perfect loving protection from anything that we might fear. We have moved from the Judge’s wrath to the Father’s love. And the life of the Spirit in us testifies to this relational change. A change from the desire to run and hide from the presence of this God to crawling up into the lap of the loving arms of this God. And the best way Paul can describe this change in relationship is by our heart’s cry of Abba! Father! The same vocabulary that Jesus uses in addressing the Father. We participate in the loving relationship that the eternal Son of God has with His Father.

As we are “in Christ” we commune with the Father as if we are His beloved Son. This is the significance of the relational dimension of our adoption.

**John 17:20-23**, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

**1 John 1:3-4**, ... our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ...that our joy may be complete.

- **Legal implications to Adoption**

**Romans 8:17**, ... and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Adoption is not only relational, it makes us legal heirs of God, heirs of the entire inheritance which belongs to the Son, for we were adopted into Christ.

**Ephesians 1:3-14**, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. **In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ**, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

**11 In him we have obtained an inheritance**, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 **who is the guarantee of our inheritance** until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Notice in verse seven that Paul starts listing the spiritual blessings which we receive in Christ, such as our redemption and forgiveness. But overarching those blessings is the grace that God has predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ. And all those spiritual blessings which flow from Christ find a home in us because God has brought us into the home of Christ.

And Paul builds upon that adoption theme to speak of our inheritance through being adopted.

- In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestinated (v. 11)
- We were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of the fullness of our inheritance. (v. 13-14)



And so, running through these verses Of Ephesians 1:3-14 is the idea of a family who receives an inheritance. The family is the adopted children of God. The inheritance is the eternal glory of the Son.

- **Summation**

We are not God's children by nature. But through adoption we become His.

**Hosea 1:10**, And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."

This truth reflects the positive and negative reality about us. We are now children, ranked in an equivalent status to the eternal Son of God. And yet we are not the same as Christ to the Father. He is Son by eternal generation. We are sons by adoption. And therefore, we stand in a relationship that is not rightly ours. Adoption is a grace exercised toward us. And in that adoption, we have been loved with the love the Father has for His eternal Son, and we become the heirs of something that is not rightly ours, that is not ours by birth. It is ours by being "in Christ". In that adoption, God has done far more than bring us back from what Adam has lost. We are sons in a way he never was before the fall. We are sons "in Christ".

**1 Corinthians 15:47-49**, The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

**WLC Q. 74.** What is adoption?

A. Adoption is an act of the free grace of God, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, whereby all those that are justified are **received into the number of his children**, have his **name put upon** them, the **Spirit of his Son** given to them, are **under his fatherly care** and dispensations, admitted to all the **liberties and privileges** of the sons of God, made heirs of all the promises, and fellow-heirs with Christ in glory.

- We are received as children
- We are given God's name
- We are given God's Spirit
- We are under His fatherly care
- We are given the liberties of sons
- We are given the privileges of sons
- We are made heirs of His covenant promises
- And we are heirs of the glories of Christ

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**Suggested Further Reading on Justification and Adoption**

“Two Pastoral Thoughts on Justification and Sanctification” by Justin Dillehay

“The Doctrine of Justification” and “Justification in Everyday Life” in *Do You Believe?* by Paul Tripp

*Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* by J.V. Fesko

*Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* by David B. Garner

**Readings for Next Class**

*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 13-18

*WLC* 75-81, 152-153; *WSC* 35-36, 85-87

Horton, 303-324

**Additional Readings for Next Class on Benefits of Our Union with Christ II: Sanctification & Perseverance**

None