

The Doctrine of Justification

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“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. (Luke 18:9-14)

Justification is one of the most important doctrines in the Bible. It is without question a doctrine that is rejected and opposed by 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 of 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

Ferguson 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 me 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

The biblical doctrine of justification is particularly relevant for those who may claim that the doctrine involves only a *partial* justification, which we must maintain by our good works in order to receive final, complete justification or acceptance before God. In essence, these people argue that the biblical doctrine is a legal fiction because an ultimate self-justification is the only way people can finally earn God’s favor. The Bible disagrees because Scripture emphatically teaches that any person who simply and truly believes in Jesus Christ as his

or her personal Savior from sin is, *at that moment*, irrevocably and eternally justified. Justification is thus the final verdict of God whereby He not only forgives and pardons the sins of the believer but also declares the believer perfectly righteous by imputing, or crediting, the obedience and righteousness of Christ Himself to the believer—solely through faith. It is therefore on the basis of Christ’s life and atonement that God “pronounces believers to have fulfilled all the requirements of the law which pertain to them.”³

Because justification is an eternal verdict pronounced of God, it is made final the moment a person believes on Christ. This explains why eternal life is granted at the moment of faith (John 6:47; 1 John 5:13). As a result, justification is not a lifelong process and must be distinguished from personal sanctification, which is individual growth in holy living over the period of a lifetime. Both the Old and New Testaments teach the Protestant view of legal (forensic) justification. Consider the following evidence for the Old Testament view of justification:

Concerning the Old Testament word *hitsdiq*, usually rendered “justified,” more often than not it is “used in a forensic or legal sense, as meaning, not ‘to make just or righteous,’ but ‘to declare judicially that one is in harmony with the law’” “...in the Old Testament, the concept of righteousness frequently appears in a forensic or juridical context. A righteous man is one who has been declared by a judge to be free from guilt.”⁴

In his book *Justification*, even Catholic theologian Hans Kung argues for this view when he says. “According to the original biblical usage of the term, ‘justification’ must be defined as *a declaring just by court order*.”⁵ Despite the official Catholic teaching of salvation by works, some other Catholic theologians have agreed with Kung.

The New Testament Scripture agrees with the Old, clearly showing that justification is: (1) a crediting of righteousness on the basis of a person’s faith, (2) a completed act of God, and (3) something that occurs wholly apart from personal merit or good works:

1. “[To] the man who... trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.... [How blessed is] the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works” (Romans 4:5-6).
2. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).
3. “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 5:28).

This explains why the Bible teaches, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1; also read Luke 18:1-14; Acts 18:38-39; 15:10, 11; Galatians 2:26).

The weight of these Scriptures is formidable; it is indeed logically impossible to deny the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone. For anyone—the Pope or Billy Graham or an angel from heaven—to say that the Bible teaches that sinners “are justified by Christ and by good works”⁶ is simply wrong and heretical. As the Apostle Paul emphasized, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Galatians 1:6-8).

Scripture clearly rules out all forms of partial justification or salvation by grace and

works. And if Scripture is equally clear that salvation comes by grace through faith, then salvation must be by faith alone. Indeed, to make salvation an achievement of “faith plus works” is to destroy Christ’s gospel, as Galatians 2:21 and Romans 11:6 teach: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” “And, if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace,” No one who truly loves God would ever wish to destroy Christ’s gospel, especially realizing the infinite price paid by Him so that salvation could be offered as a free gift. Consider the following Scriptures carefully:

For if those who live by law are heirs, **faith has no value** and the promise is **worthless**.... Therefore, the promise comes **by faith**, so that it may be **by grace** and may be **guaranteed** to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (Romans 4:14,16)

Therefore **no one** will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. 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.... [They] are **justified freely** by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:20-24)

He saved us, **not because of** righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (Titus 3:5)

Having been justified [God’s legal verdict pronouncing one pardoned forever] by his grace.... (Titus 3:7)

Since we **have now been justified** by his blood, how much **more** shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! (Romans 5:9)

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will **never** count against him. (Romans 4:8)

These verses indisputably teach that justification is an eternal and final verdict by God, not a lifelong process, and that a person is justified *by faith alone*. There is no hint of any additional requirement or works for salvation that would make justification by “faith plus works” (see Romans 8:30; 10:3-4; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 3:8-13, 21-25).

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 that 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 (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.

What Justification Is

1. Justification is **an undeserved free gift of God’s grace and mercy** (Romans 3:24; Titus 3:7).

2. Justification is **entirely accomplished by God, once for all**. (While it is not the process of personal sanctification, knowledge of it helps produce sanctification.)

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

This justification, though individually located at the point of time at which a man believes (Romans 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" (Romans 5:9) will not touch the justified. Those accepted now are secure forever. Inquisition before Christ's judgment seat (Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10) may deprive them of certain rewards (1 Corinthians 3:15) but never of their justified status. Christ will not call into question God's justifying verdict, only declare, endorse and implement it.⁷

In other words, if God the Father *justified* believers at the point of faith, would the Son 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 (Romans 4:5-6,17-25).

It is not just that God overlooks our sin and guilt, but that full and entire holiness is credited to our account. Dr. 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 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9). It is not simply that our abysmal failure in life's moral examination is overlooked: we pass with 100 percent, 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."⁸

Righteousness is imputed by faith because the believer is actually 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, and we *now* (present tense) have perfect righteousness before God, not personally, but legally:

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

In his book *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes*, J. I. Packer discusses the meaning of justification, contrasting 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 Romans 4:5-8)—all phrases which express the idea, not of inner transformation, but of conferring a legal status and canceling 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.⁹

Thus, as *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* points out, every believer in Christ is now treated by God as being righteous (on the basis of their imputed righteousness), not as if they are sinners:

"The righteousness of God" [see Philippians 3:9] is bestowed on them as a free gift (Romans 1:17, 3:21ff.; 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;12ff.).¹⁰

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 [the] 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 NAS).¹¹

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).¹²

This is exactly what Scripture teaches: that God is 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, 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. (Romans 3:23-26)

Further Scripture Proof for the Doctrine of Justification

Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord **does not count against him**. (Psalm 32:2)

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. (Isaiah 54:17 NAS [New American Standard Bible])

In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: **the Lord our righteousness**. (Jeremiah 25:6)

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

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 4:5-6 NAS)

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 bear them witness 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**. (Romans 9:30-10:4 NAS)

And 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. (1 Corinthians 6:11 NAS)

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would **justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel** beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (Galatians 5:8-9 NAS)

Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a 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**. (Galatians 3:21,24 NAS)

Important Applications of the Doctrine of Justification

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

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

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. (Philippians 3:8-10 NAS)

You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be **justified by law**; you have fallen from grace. (Galatians 5:4 NAS)

2. Justification properly orients Christian morality. The motive for Christian living and service becomes obedience out of love and gratitude to a Savior whose gift of righteous-

ness made law keeping unnecessary:

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. (Colossians 1:10 NAS)

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. (Romans 12:1-2 NAS)

The doctrine of justification encourages morality and discourages sin when we consider the One who redeemed us and the cost of our redemption (see Romans 6:10-18):

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? (Romans 6:1-2 NAS)

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. (Romans 6:17-18 NAS)

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

3. Justification means Christians may be assured that they *now* possess eternal life. A divine gift is perfect and cannot be taken back. The gifts and calling of God are without repentance (Romans 11:29). Perfect righteousness is a gift (James 1:17; Romans 3:24). If we are declared perfectly righteous by Him, God can only give the gift of perfect righteousness. What condition, then, 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 (Romans 5:8-9)?

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

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 5:24 NAS)

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

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. (1 John 5:10-13 NAS)

Notes

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

² *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 956, as cited in Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), p. 246.

⁴ Geisler and MacKenzie, p. 247, citing respectively Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (1989), p. 154 and Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (1987), 4th printing, p. 955.

⁵ Hans Kung, *Justification* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 209. Geisler observes, “For an extended

treatment of the Old Testament understanding of these terms and the difficulties inherent in translating from the Hebrew into Greek and Latin, see Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, Vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 4-16” (Geisler and MacKenzie, p. 245).

⁶ Robert C. Broderick, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, revised and updated (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), p. 319.

⁷ James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et al., eds, *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 305.

⁸ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), p. 155.

⁹ James Packer, *God’s Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 141-42.

¹⁰ James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et al., eds, *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 306.

¹¹ James Packer, *God’s Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 141-42.

¹² James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et al., eds, *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 306.