

The Doctrine of Justification—Part Two

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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.¹

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."²

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.³

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.).⁴

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).⁵

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).⁶

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)

Notes

¹ James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et al., eds, *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 305.

² Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982), p. 155.

³ James Packer, *God’s Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 141-42.

⁴ James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et al., eds, *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 306.

⁵ James Packer, *God’s Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 141-42.

⁶ James Packer in Everett F. Harrison et al., eds, *Baker Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), p. 306.