

What is Justification?

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Erwin Lutzer

(Transcribed from the television series, “How You Can Know For Sure That You Will Spend Eternity With God.” Edited for publication.)

Dr. John Ankerberg: We’re talking about how you can be sure that you will spend eternity with God. Isn’t that a great topic? Isn’t that something that you really want to know? Now, there are many facets of that question. When you ask people, “Are you going to go to Heaven?” people, most of the time, will say, “Yes” or “I hope that I will.” And if you ask them the next question, “How good does a person have to be to get into Heaven?” you get some interesting answers. In fact, Erwin, one of your staff members did a survey at the Christian Booksellers Association conventions and got some interesting answers. Tell us about it.

Dr. Erwin Lutzer (Pastor of Moody Church, Chicago, IL): Well, he went from booth to booth and he asked the question, “How good do you have to be to get into Heaven?” and the results were surprising. Many people said, “Well, I hope not too good or I won’t make it.” Other people said, “Well, Christians aren’t perfect. They’re just forgiven.” Of about ten or twelve people, only one gave a biblical answer, namely, that you have to be as perfect as God, obviously. How can a righteous God accept sinners unless they are as perfect as He Himself is? It only makes sense. It’s not only logical, it’s also biblical.

Ankerberg: The problem is, if you actually think about that and you were to say, “Am I perfect?”

Lutzer: Well, you can imagine that there are people reading this who are ready to say, “This is ridiculous! Because who has that kind of perfection, who is perfect?” And could I say that if there is someone who thinks that he is perfect, all he has to do is to check with his wife and she’ll help him with his theology and realize that he’s in deep trouble. All of us are in deep trouble because we are so far from perfection.

I need to tell the story about a man who wrestled with this. His name was Martin Luther. Regardless of what people think of Luther, they have to hear this part. Here’s a man who enrolls in the monastery in Erfurt with the desire to save his soul. Thank God that at least medieval theology taught that you had to be as perfect as God to get into Heaven. So what he wants to do is to strive to become perfect enough for God to accept him. He goes through all of the disciplines of the Church. He slept on a rough floor without blankets to mortify the flesh. He went begging. He accepted poverty. He did all that he possibly could. Sometimes he fasted so long that people thought that perhaps he would die.

Now, in addition to that, the Sacraments of the Church were of some solace to him, particularly confession. The problem is, he would confess his sins for up to six hours at a time, until Staupitz, his confessor, became so exasperated and he said, “Luther! The next time you come here, let it be for some big sin, not all of these little peccadilloes, not all these little sins.” But John, Luther was a better theologian than his contemporaries because he understood something that our generation has forgotten: it doesn’t matter whether the sin is big or little. The smallest smidgeon of sin will separate you from God forever.

So, he wanted to confess all of his sins, but he ran into a problem. Sin, in order to be

confessed, had to be remembered. If he couldn't remember them, he couldn't confess them, so they wouldn't be forgiven. Furthermore, there may be some things that he did that God regarded as sin but he didn't see as sin. And there was another problem. It was like mopping the floor with the faucet running, because tomorrow was another day! Even if you confessed all of your sins, tomorrow there would be more sins that needed to be confessed and it went on endlessly. He struggled with what is known in German as *anfechtungen*—that's “an existential despair of soul and helplessness.”

Can I tell you the rest of the story?

Ankerberg: Please.

Lutzer: It doesn't end there, thankfully. Luther eventually becomes a teacher in the little town of Wittenburg and Staupitz visits him there. Luther is teaching ethics and philosophy. And Staupitz says, “Why don't you teach theology. It might help your soul” because he's going through this restlessness. I mean, he's been to Rome and he never found peace there. And Luther said, “If I begin to teach the Bible, it might be the death of me.” He didn't realize that in a sense, it was the death of him. So he begins lecturing on the Psalms. He comes to Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Now, says Luther, Jesus experienced what I'm experiencing, this sense of alienation from God. And it begins to dawn, “He did it for me.”

But the truth didn't really light upon his soul yet until he was teaching the book of Romans and the famous verse Romans 1:16: “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul says. But in verse 17 Paul says, “For in the gospel a righteousness **from** God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.” Notice, a righteousness from God is revealed. Luther read that and trembled. His problem was the righteousness of God. If God wasn't so righteous, He would be easier to appease, right? But he began to ponder this text until he saw a connection and he realized something. Righteousness is an attribute of God, but it's also a gift of God to those who believe. There is a righteousness that God confers upon us that is His own righteousness that is credited to our account by faith in Christ.

No wonder Luther said that, when he saw this, he was reborn and it was as if he entered into the gates of paradise. He finally was able to meet God's requirements because Jesus would meet all of God's requirements **for him**. And the perfection that he sought through the Sacraments and through good works (all of which, of course, fell by the wayside because nobody can **attain** the righteousness of God), would now be given to him as a **gift**. What a revolutionary idea—a biblical idea, but incredibly revolutionary. Because what Luther saw is that all the human righteousness we could possibly do, all added together, can never attain the righteousness of God. And so just like you can add a billion bananas and never get an orange, in the very same way **all** of our righteousness can never attain God's righteousness. If we receive God's righteousness, it has to be a gift.

Now, John, here's the best part, and I hope everyone grasps this, because this now is the heart of the Gospel. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5, “For he [that is, God] made Christ to be sin for us [the One who knew no sin] that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” So, what you have is, our sin is credited to Christ's account. Personally, He is sinless, but legally, He becomes guilty of adultery and extortion and child abuse and alcoholism and self-righteousness and all of the sins that God hates. Our sin is credited to Him. His righteousness and purity is credited to us. So He gets what He doesn't deserve—namely, our sin; we get what we don't deserve—namely, His righteousness. And that is the

Gospel: justification by faith alone. God declares us—it's a declaration in Heaven—God declares us to be as righteous as Christ Himself is, because the righteousness of God is credited to sinners. And legally, in God's sight, we are as perfect as God Himself is. And without that, John, **nobody** can be saved—without the righteousness of God credited to his account. **That** is the good news of the Gospel.

Ankerberg: Speak to how a person gets that righteousness that Luther got when he realized what Scripture was saying.

Lutzer: First of all, it is a recognition that our works contribute nothing to salvation. Because I've already emphasized, the only righteousness that God accepts is His own—it's a righteousness of which we have **none!** All of our good works are tainted, even "our righteousness is as filthy rags," it says in the book of Isaiah [64:6] and in the New Testament, "**All** have sinned and come short of the glory of God" [Rom. 3:23]. Yes, some have sinned worse than others. No doubt about it. But all have sinned. And so what happens is, Jesus becomes for us now everything that we have sought. Twenty four hours a day God demands perfection and holiness from me if I am to be His child and to be in fellowship with Him. Twenty four hours a day, Jesus supplies what God demands. Isn't that wonderful?

Ankerberg: It's fantastic.

Lutzer: Talk about something I'd die for—there aren't a whole lot of things I'd die for, but I'd die for what I'm telling you right now. Because it has affected my life, it has changed my life—and it isn't something that you experience just at conversion. It's something that invigorates me every day, that "before the throne my surety stands," as the hymn writer says, "My name is written on His hands." To think that I am already in Heaven legally because it says that we have been raised with Jesus Christ, we have been seated with Jesus Christ, and Jesus represents me now to the Father. And do you know what that means? At death there's no hassle at the border because, you see, we're already legally in Heaven.

One of the first doctrines that Luther gave up when he understood this was Purgatory, because Purgatory was based on the notion that nobody dies righteous enough to get into Heaven. Now, they understood that you have to be perfect to get into Heaven. The way in which you get into Heaven, you see, is you die imperfect and you're in Purgatory where you are purged in these fires and so forth. Nobody knows how long, but eventually, God says, "Now you're perfect. Now you can come in."

What Luther understood was this: that if the righteousness of God is applied to me in **this life**, I can go from this life **directly into Heaven** and be presented into the presence of God as perfect as Christ Himself is—because I'm saved completely on the basis of the merit of Jesus, and not my own righteousness. That is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ankerberg: I've got a follow up question on what you were saying. Some folks would say, "Look, if what you're saying, the righteousness of Christ, His track record, is applied to me legally the moment I put my faith in Him, does that mean that I can accept Christ and then live like the devil?"

Lutzer: You know, I love to hear people ask that question, and I'll tell you why. First of all, the only person who would ever ask that question almost always is someone who has never accepted the Gospel. The reason is because they don't understand its implications. You know, the Apostle Paul in Romans when he was explaining the Gospel, he knew that the unbeliever, reading what he was writing, would conclude that and that's why the Apostle

Paul says, “Well, shall we continue in sin then that grace may abound?” [Rom. 6:1] The natural man, hearing the Gospel, is going to think, “What a deal! I believe in Jesus; I live like the devil; I get the best of both worlds.” The part that is missing is an understanding of what happens. We are not merely declared righteous in Heaven by God, which is justification. At the very same time we are born again of the Spirit which means that God gives us a whole new set of desires, a new set of aspirations, a desire to serve Him, and we become different people. “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is passed away and the new has come” [2 Cor. 5:17]. So, there’s that. And if we, as children of God, think that we can live like the world and go back to our old sins, God will work with us; God will discipline us; God will work in our hearts. He won’t let us get by because His desire is that the sins of the past fall away and we walk in newness of life.

Ankerberg: Flip the coin. The person that says, “Look, I need to make a promise to God. I’m going to serve Him as best I can.” They’re sincere. They haven’t really understood the Gospel. People are using that as an invitation: “I want you to come forward. I want you to promise that you’re going to serve Christ forever.” But the guy says, “Look, if I’m really honest, I’d like to, but man, I can’t tell you about tomorrow.” How does a person ever get secure in this salvation?

Lutzer: That’s an excellent question. I remember an evangelist saying one time, “Why don’t you come forward and promise that you’re going to follow Christ.” **Promise** that you’re going to follow Christ?! You and I, John, have known Christ for years and we struggle following Him. Can you imagine somebody out there saying, “Oh, I’m going to follow Jesus.” That’s not the Gospel.

When you come to Jesus Christ, you don’t come making a promise that you’re going to follow Him. You don’t come to promise anything. You come to receive something. Like the hymn says, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”

So, true salvation means that I give up all attempts even to promise God that I’m going to do A, B, C, or D. It means that I come to God with all of my need, with all of my sin, unchanged. But I come to put my faith in Somebody who can save me and give me the righteousness I need to stand in the presence of a holy God. And it is that simplicity of faith, a transfer of trust—not Christ **and** these Sacraments over here; not Christ **and** my good works; not Christ **and** this. The more beautiful we see Jesus Christ and the truth of the Gospel and what He did for us on the cross, the greater faith is inspired in our heart. And assurance comes by knowing that Jesus Christ paid it all.

I often say this: If you believe that when Jesus died on the cross He did all that will ever be necessary for you to stand in God’s presence, and you embrace that for yourself, you will **know** that you are saved. Why? Because it does not rest on your merit, but 100% on the merit of Jesus. See, John, if I think that salvation is 95% of God but I’ve got this 5% over here, how can I have assurance? I can’t trust my 5% of the equation. When I see that Jesus paid it all and said, “It is finished,” when I see the wonder of what He did and the completeness for those who believe and I trust Him, I am received in God’s presence as if I were Him—and that’s the beauty of the Gospel.

Ankerberg: Let me test grace with you. You’ve got, before they were saved, some people are trying to add their good works to get saved. But then, the person that says, “No. It’s totally a gift and I’m in—but I’ve got tomorrow. What if I truly believe in Christ and I sin tomorrow, do I have to contribute at that point? before? after? Where do my works come in? Tell me why I’m eternally secure?”

Lutzer: First of all, let's say that you accept Christ today and you sin tomorrow. In fact, maybe you sin by this evening if you accept Him today, because all of us sin. We sin in thought, in word, often in deed. The simple fact is, you confess your sin, and that confession is needed to maintain fellowship.

By the way, this is a good point to make, John. Luther was not saved in the monastery in Erfurt when he confessed his sins six hours at a time. There are some people confessing their sins regularly in churches today who are not saved. You don't get saved through the confession of your sins. You get saved by receiving Jesus Christ as your sin-bearer, the One whom you trust to reconcile you to God. That's how you get saved.

But having been saved, we confess our sins. I confessed my sins this morning. That's a part of the Christian life—to confess means that we agree with God, we agree with God that we have sinned. We agree with Him that He has a right to take the sin out of our lives and therefore, just like I had to confess to my parents as a child so that we could be reconciled, we reconciled in the very way that Christians do that. But it's not in order to be saved again. I was still my father's child even when I was disobedient, even though I had to confess my sins to be reconciled in terms of fellowship.

Now, assurance comes when we understand that Jesus Christ, by one act (Hebrews 10), "Jesus has perfected forever those who have been sanctified," those who trust Him. And what Luther needed was one act that would take away all of his sin, reconcile him to God. And then he would have to—and I'm sure he did—continually confess his sin to maintain fellowship. But he didn't have to be saved all over again. Because with that kind of a theology, nobody can have any assurance of salvation.

And so then, God disciplines us if we are disobedient, but we have that deep down settled assurance that lets us know that we are God's child and we are God's child forever.

Ankerberg: Let's probe grace one step further for the person that says, "But Erwin, you don't know me. I'm a big sinner. You name the sins, I've done them. What you're saying sounds too good to be true." Is it really that true? Illustrate this.

Lutzer: I received a letter from a prisoner who said, "I have raped four women. Can I be forgiven?" Now, you know my natural instincts would say, "You deserve hell," and he does, but so do you, John, and so do I. So I wrote back and I said to him, "I want you to visualize two trails. One trail is really ugly. It's got all kinds of ruts in it. The other trail is very beautiful and it's well taken care of. And then I said, "Let's suppose that 10 or 15 inches of snow covers both trails. Can you tell the difference? No. All trails are equally covered.

Isn't it wonderful to know the Bible even says, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" [Isa. 1:18]. And if we could say that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is likened unto snow, using the illustration, the snow covers that ugly trail just as well as it covers the neat trail, and no matter whether it is a prisoner who has committed crimes, a rapist, a thief, a murderer, no matter who, they receive the same gift of righteousness when they trust Christ as Savior as you did, John, even though you were born into a fine Christian home and so was I. But the simple fact is, we all need the righteousness of God and it is given to the vilest of sinners. You know that song, it really is true: "The vilest of sinners who truly believes that moment from God a pardon receives." All because of Jesus—that's the wonder of the Gospel.