

Justification

Philip Graham Ryken

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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Picture the scene: An accused criminal stands before an impartial judge to receive his just sentence. The legal proceedings begin with a court official reciting the laws of the kingdom. As he listens, the criminal starts to realize that he is doomed to be condemned, for it turns out that he has violated every single law in the book. Whatever the charge, he is certain to be found guilty. When the judge finally turns to the defendant and asks how he pleads, the man is speechless. He stands before the judge in mute terror, unable to utter anything in his defense.

The Need for Justification: Universal and Desperate

This is the desperate legal predicament described in the opening chapters of Romans. Humanity stands in the dock. The religious and the irreligious, Jews and Gentiles, believers and atheists—everyone must appear before God’s throne for judgment. The standard for justice is God’s perfect law. By that standard, everyone deserves to be condemned, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10; cf. Ps. 14:3).

When the law is read, therefore, every commandment is an accusation. There is nothing we can say in our defense: “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:19–20).

The problem of humanity is sin, plain and simple. We are guilty sinners who deserve nothing except God’s wrath. Nor is there anything we can do to save ourselves. God’s righteous requirements cannot save us; they can only condemn us because we cannot keep them. Therefore, when we stand before God for judgment, there is not the slightest chance that we can be accepted on the basis of anything that we have done. This is not a trial in which we are

innocent until proven guilty; instead, it is a trial in which we have already been proven guilty and must remain guilty until we are declared righteous.

It is only when we recognize how desperate our situation is from the legal standpoint that we can begin to understand the biblical doctrine of justification. A powerful example of a sinner's desperation comes from the life of Donald Smarto. While studying for the priesthood, Smarto performed the role of the cardinal in a religious play. To help him look the part, his monastery had arranged for him to borrow ornate robes from his diocese. "I was excited by this," Smarto writes in his autobiography, "and when they arrived, I went to my room, locked the door and carefully removed the scarlet cassock and sash and cape from the suit bag."¹

As Smarto put on these clothes before each night's performance, they became a growing obsession:

Though the play began at eight o'clock, I found myself putting the robes on earlier and earlier. It took about half an hour to fasten all the buttons, but by the last days of the performance, I was dressing by two o'clock in the afternoon, five hours before the beginning of the play. I would strut back and forth in front of a full-length mirror, and as I did, a feeling would come over me. I stood for the longest time looking at my reflection, and I liked what I saw. . . . I had a sense that I was holy. I simply didn't think I was a sinner; I felt confident that my works pleased God.²

Smarto's false confidence was shattered when he saw what the person under the robes was really like. It happened at the movies:

A bishop came on the stage in the movie. Dressed in a beautiful vestment studded with sparkling gems, he walked out slowly from behind a curtain. As he walked, however, a large gust of wind ripped open his vestment, revealing a rotted skeleton underneath.

In an instant, my mind said, *That's me*. . . . I immediately blocked out the thought. . . . "That's not me!" I said. . . . I wanted to push the film images out of my mind, but it didn't work. . . . I kept trying to make myself feel better. "Make this feeling go away," I said to God. "I am *not* a hypocrite. I am *not* an actor. I'm a *good person!*" I kept thinking of all the good things I did. . . . Yet, these thoughts didn't bring consolation.³

It is only when we see the stark and ugly reality of our sin that we are truly ready to turn to God for help—specifically, for the forgiveness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As James Buchanan wrote in his famous book on justification, “The best preparation for the study of this doctrine is neither great intellectual ability, nor much scholastic learning, but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God.”⁴

The Centrality of Justification: “Hinge,” “Foundation,” “Chief Article”

Having described our predicament in all its miserable detail, the apostle Paul announces that a legal remedy has been made available: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known” (Rom. 3:21). The words “but now” mark a major transition in Paul’s argument. More than that, they introduce the great turning point in the history of salvation. Up to this point we stand condemned. God’s perfect law tells us that we cannot be declared righteous at the bar of God’s justice. But now a righteousness *from* God has been revealed. God has provided the way for us to be declared righteous. Or to put it in the biblical way, he has provided a way for us to be *justified*.

There is more to salvation than justification by faith. Yet without exaggerating its importance, it must be said that this doctrine holds a place near the center of the gospel. Justification is one of the central themes of Scripture, especially the New Testament, where various forms of the word “justify” (*dikaioō*) appear more than two hundred times.⁵ The prevalence of this vocabulary serves as an index to the importance of justification in biblical theology.

The centrality of justification has been recognized by many theologians in the history of the Christian church. John Calvin called it “the main hinge on which salvation turns.”⁶ The English Reformer Thomas Cranmer described it as “the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion.”⁷ Perhaps most famously of all, Martin Luther called justification “the chief article of Christian doctrine,” so that “when justification has fallen, everything has fallen.”⁸ Whether we think of justification as the hinge, the foundation, or the standing-and-falling article of salvation, there is no hope of salvation without it. This is the doctrine, said Luther on another occasion, that “begets, nourishes, builds, preserves,

and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.”⁹

The Meaning of Justification: To Declare Righteous

Justification is central to the Christian gospel because it answers the fundamental question, “How can a sinful human being be righteous before a holy God?” The answer lies in the biblical teaching about justification, which The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement defines as follows:

We believe that Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. By his sacrifice, he bore in our stead the punishment due us for our sins, making a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God’s justice on our behalf. By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God.

The vocabulary of justification comes from the law court, where “to justify” is a declarative verb. In its noun form “justification” is a legal word that refers to a person’s judicial standing. The biblical terms surrounding justification find their origin in legal relationships. The Greek verb *dikaioō*, which means “to justify,” is essentially a forensic term that “denotes basically a sentence of acquittal.”¹⁰ To justify is to render a favorable verdict, to declare a person to be in the right, to announce forgiveness in legal terms. Justification is vindication. It is a decision of the court stating that someone has a right relationship to God and his law. It is the pronouncement that—as far as the law is concerned—the defendant is not guilty but innocent.

One good way to define justification is to contrast it with its opposite: condemnation. To condemn is to declare a person unrighteous. It is the judicial verdict that—as far as the law is concerned—he is guilty. This act of condemnation is not what makes a criminal guilty, of course. His own actions make him guilty, and he becomes guilty the very moment he violates the law. When he is finally condemned, therefore, the court simply pronounces him to be what he already is: a guilty sinner.

Justification is the opposite of condemnation. To justify is to pronounce a verdict of innocence. In justification a person is not

made righteous, but *declared* righteous. Justification is not a process, therefore, but an act. It is not the impartation of righteousness through faith plus works and the sacraments, as some theologians have tried to claim, but the imputation of righteousness by faith alone.

The true meaning of justification—which is “legally to declare righteous,” not “actually to make righteous”—can be demonstrated from Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy 25:1 the Bible teaches that “when men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.” Obviously, a judge does not *make* a person guilty; he simply declares him to be guilty, thereby condemning him to his sentence. By analogy, the word “acquit” (which is really the Hebrew verb *hatsdiq*, “to justify”) means “to declare righteous.”

Or consider Proverbs 17:15: “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both.” Here again, the word “acquit,” or “justify” (*hatsdiq*), obviously refers to a legal declaration. By lamenting the justification of the guilty, God is not trying to stop anyone from transforming the guilty into fine, upstanding citizens. If justifying the guilty means to *make* them righteous, surely God would be in favor of it! His objection rather is to declaring the guilty to be innocent, which would be false and pernicious.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find justification used in much the same way. As in the Old Testament, to justify is the opposite of to condemn. This is clear, for example, from the contrast Paul draws between the sin of Adam and the gift of Christ: “The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification” (Rom. 5:16). To justify, then, means to declare that a defendant is innocent of a charge. In the context of salvation, it is God’s declaration that a person is acceptable in his sight and now stands rightly before him.

Note that justification means something more than acquittal. To acquit is to declare a person “not guilty.” But in justification God does not simply clear a sinner of all charges; he declares a sinner to be positively righteous. Justification is God’s legal declaration that, on the basis of the perfect life and the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, received by faith, a sinner is as righteous as his own beloved Son.

Some theologians object that this places too much emphasis on judicial categories. They object to the idea that the cross was a legal

transaction in which an innocent victim was made to pay the penalty for the crimes of others. Yet the Bible teaches forensic (i.e., judicial) justification—and with good reason. While there are many ways to describe God’s saving grace, the legal category of justification is fundamental to the gospel. Since God is a judge as well as a father, our relationship to him must be a *right* relationship. To eliminate the legal basis for this rightness (i.e., justification) is to make it impossible for a sinner to know God in a saving way. Even worse, it is to believe in a God of unjust love who forgives people without having any right to do so.

The Source of Justification: God’s Free Grace

If righteousness is necessary for justification, where does it come from? As we have seen, our problem is that we have no righteousness of our own. So what is the source of justifying righteousness?

The source of our justification is God’s free grace. The apostle Paul says it very simply: we “are justified freely by his grace” (Rom. 3:24). The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement gives a more expansive answer:

Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own, freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

To say that we are justified by grace is to say that justification is far more than we deserve. It is an act of God’s unmerited favor. As Thomas Cranmer wrote in his *Homily on Salvation*, “No man can, by his own deeds, be justified and made righteous before God: but every man, of necessity, is constrained to seek for another righteousness or justification, to be received at God’s own hands.”¹¹ The message of the gospel is that God offers this righteousness to sinners as a gift: “It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33).

This brings us to a disputed point in New Testament interpretation. The gift of God’s justifying righteousness is mentioned twice in Romans 3, both in verse 21 (“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify”) and in verse 22 (“This righteousness from God”). Technically speaking, how-

ever, these verses do not speak of a “righteousness *from* God,” as the New International Version has it, but of the “righteousness *of* God.”

There is more than one way to interpret this phrase. Perhaps the word “of” in the phrase “righteousness of God” is what grammarians call a “possessive genitive.” An example is the phrase “the people of God,” where the people in question belong to God, and God is the one to whom they belong. So perhaps the “righteousness of God” is simply the righteousness God possesses, which belongs to him and which he displays in salvation. We encounter this idea in Psalm 98:2, among other places: “The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.”

There is another possibility, however. The words “of God” may explain where the righteousness comes from—what grammarians call a “genitive of origin.” An example is the phrase “music of Beethoven,” where the music in question finds its origin in Beethoven. If the “righteousness of God” is a genitive of origin, then God is the origin of the righteousness. Obviously, this is the interpretation that the New International Version favors when it speaks of “a righteousness *from* God.” On this reading, God is the source of the righteousness that he bestows to sinners.

Which interpretation is correct? Does the righteousness belong to God, or does it come from God as a gift? Certainly both statements are true. Righteousness belongs to God as one of his essential attributes. Indeed, the dramatic conclusion of Paul’s argument in Romans 3 is that even when he justifies sinners, of all people, God still preserves his righteousness! In justification, God “[demonstrates] his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Yet the righteousness of God is also “that righteousness which His righteousness requires Him to require,”¹² and which he graciously offers as a gift to everyone who believes. There is righteousness for us *from* God, therefore—righteousness that God not only owns and demonstrates, but also bestows. The issue at stake in justification is not simply whether God is righteous, but whether *we* can be found righteous. Paul seems to cast doubt on this in verse 20, where he reaches the alarming conclusion that “no one will be declared righteous in his sight.”

Now in verse 21 he announces the good news that *we can* be

declared righteous before God, not because of our own righteousness, but because of righteousness that comes from God. This interpretation is confirmed by verse 22, which makes it clear that the righteousness of God comes “to all who believe.” It is further confirmed by Romans 5:17, which speaks of those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the *gift* of righteousness.

Righteousness is not merely an attribute that God displays, therefore, but also a gift that he dispenses. To use a memorable phrase from John Stott, justification is God’s “righteous way of ‘righteousing’ the unrighteous.”¹³

If we are declared righteous on the basis of a gift, then the source of our justification must be the grace of God. For that is what grace is: God’s free gift for utterly undeserving sinners. This is the gift-righteousness Paul has in mind when he testifies to the Philippians that he wants to “be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Phil. 3:9; cf. Heb. 11:7).

It is also what Martin Luther meant when he spoke of an “alien righteousness.” Since there is no righteousness in us, we can be justified only by a righteousness that comes from somewhere outside of us. This righteousness is God’s own righteousness, which he grants to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Basis for Justification: Jesus’ Perfect Life and Sacrificial Death

On what legal basis does God grant the gift of his righteousness? The Bible teaches that God “justifies the wicked” (Rom. 4:5). But if we are in fact wicked, how can he declare us to be what we are not? And how can he justify the wicked without being considered wicked himself?

It would be an outrage for a righteous God simply to overlook or to excuse sin. If he intends to justify sinners, therefore, he must have some legitimate judicial basis for doing so. “Justification is not a synonym for amnesty,” writes John Stott,

which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets—wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice. . . . When God

justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all. He is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has born the penalty of their law-breaking.¹⁴

How then does God maintain his righteousness while at the same time justifying the ungodly? The answer to this theological problem is that God justifies sinners on the basis of the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. To say that Jesus lived a perfect life is to say that he kept the law of God in all its perfection, without ever committing even one little transgression. “He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father,” The Gospel Coalition writes in its doctrinal statement “The Redemption of Christ.” This is in keeping with Scripture, which says, “He committed no sin” (1 Pet. 2:22). Jesus lived the righteous life that God requires.

Furthermore, when we receive Jesus by faith, his righteousness counts for us, as if we ourselves had lived the righteous life that God requires. To quote again from The Gospel Coalition, in its Confession of Faith, “By his perfect obedience [Jesus] satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God.”

By virtue of his perfect life, when Jesus died on the cross he offered a perfect sacrifice for our sins, and this too is part of the basis for our justification: we “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” (Rom. 3:24–25). It is by his life-blood that Jesus secured our justification. As Paul goes on to say in Romans 5:9, “We have now been justified by his blood.” There is no justification without crucifixion. The gospel thus grounds the gift of saving righteousness in the suffering death of Jesus Christ. John Stott writes:

God’s saving work was achieved through the bloodshedding, that is, the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. . . . The death of Jesus was the atoning sacrifice because of which God averted his wrath from us, the ransom-price by which we have been redeemed, the condemnation of the innocent that the guilty might be justified, and the sinless One being made sin for us.¹⁵

Earlier we considered the shocking experience Don Smarto had when he discovered that underneath the proud robes of his outward righteousness there was a skeleton of sin. There is more to that story. When Smarto returned to his monastery that night, he struggled to justify himself before God. He kept trying to tell himself that he was good enough for God. He wandered out into the surrounding corn fields to walk in the moonlight. Yet soon the moon was covered with clouds; the night turned black. As Smarto stumbled around in the darkness, with his heart pounding, he cried out to God: “Tell me I am doing the right thing. Tell me that everything I do pleases you. Speak to me clearly!”

When he was almost in despair, Smarto heard a strange humming sound and walked toward it. He reached out in the darkness and touched a solid piece of wood. Of course! It was only a telephone pole. But as he looked up, the clouds began to part and he could see the crossbar that held up the phone lines. There, silhouetted against the moonlight, was the form of a cross. Don Smarto was standing at the foot of the cross, so to speak, looking to Jesus for his salvation. Here is what Smarto wrote about his encounter with Jesus and the cross:

Now I knew, I really knew, that Christ had died for me. It was coupled with the more important revelation that I was a sinner, that I was *not* the good person I had thought I was a moment before. All at once I embraced the telephone pole and began to cry. I must have hugged that piece of wood for nearly an hour. I could imagine Jesus nailed to this pole, blood dripping from his wounds. I felt as if the blood were dripping over me, cleansing me of my sin and unworthiness.¹⁶

What Don Smarto received in this dramatic encounter is really what every penitent person receives at the foot of the cross: the cleansing blood-sacrifice that atones for sin and justifies sinners before God.

The Righteousness of Justification: A Triple Imputation

When Jesus died on the cross, he was treated like a condemned criminal. The Romans reserved crucifixion for the lowest of the low—for traitors, murderers, and other despicable malefactors. Jesus was neither a traitor nor a murderer; in fact, as we have seen, he never committed a single sin (see Heb. 4:15). Yet God permitted him to be crucified in order to take away our sin. To use the technical term for it, God

imputed our sin to Christ. To impute is to credit something to someone's account, which is precisely how we became sinners in the first place: Adam's sin was charged to our account (see Rom. 5:12–19). By the imputation of Adam's sin, we are reckoned to be sinners.

Happily, there is also a second imputation—the imputation of our sin to Jesus Christ. Jesus was perfectly righteous, yet he died a sinner's death. How could God allow such a thing to occur? The answer has to do with imputation. God removed our sin and credited it to Christ's account, just as he had promised through his servant Isaiah: “My righteous servant [shall] justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11 KJV). Once our sin was imputed to Christ in this way, he was condemned to die—not for his own sin, but for our sin. Jesus was reckoned to be unrighteous on the cross. Seeing that he was bearing the guilt of our sin, God condemned our sin in his flesh (see Rom. 8:3). As the Scripture says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). Or again, “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Pet. 3:18).

But Christ's death is not the end of the story. The Scripture also mentions a third imputation: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). If we are to be justified, it is not enough for our sins to be imputed to Christ; his righteousness must also be imputed to us. Then, and only then, can we be declared righteous. This is exactly what God has done. Thus we have been given righteousness from God, imputed to us on the basis of Christ's perfect life and sacrificial death.

Here it may be helpful to distinguish between active and passive righteousness. Jesus demonstrated his active righteousness by fulfilling the precepts of the law, and he demonstrated his passive righteousness by paying the penalty for sin. Christ obeyed God's law on our behalf (active righteousness) *and* suffered the penalty for our disobedience (passive righteousness).

Active and passive righteousness are two different aspects of the one complete and total righteousness of Jesus Christ; both are required for full justification. For us to be declared “not guilty,” it is necessary for us to receive Christ's passive righteousness through his atoning death. For us to be reckoned positively righteous, however, we also need Christ's active righteousness credited to our account. It is not merely his atoning death that saves us, therefore, but also his obedient life.

The imputation of this righteousness is not merely a “legal fiction,” as some have alleged, but a legal reality that is based on our true spiritual connection to Jesus Christ. Like every other benefit of salvation, justification flows from our union with Christ. Jesus is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30), and thus it is by our participation in him that we are considered righteous. As Calvin explained it, “Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him.”¹⁷

Salvation depends, therefore, on a triple imputation: first, by the fall of Adam, sin is imputed to the human race; second, in repentance, a believer’s sin is imputed to Christ; third, by faith, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believing sinner. Paul sums this all up in Romans 5, where he writes:

Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:18–19)

The imputation of justifying righteousness restores the righteousness that humanity lost through original sin. Marvelous to say, this righteousness is restored without doing any injustice to the righteousness of God’s own character. God has dealt justly with our sin by punishing it in the person of the crucified Christ. He has also dealt justly with us by declaring us to be righteous in Christ. God accomplished this justifying work through the cross in order “to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Thus the justification of sinners is also the justification or vindication of God. In justification, God proves his justice by dealing justly as well as mercifully with sinners through the cross. A transaction has taken place: our sin was imputed to Christ, and he was condemned; his righteousness is imputed to us, and we are justified.

The Means of Justification: Faith in Christ

Earlier we defined justification. Now we are in a position to enrich our understanding a little by further theological reflection:

Justification means a permanent change in our judicial relation to God whereby we are absolved from the charge of guilt, and whereby God forgives all our sins on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, our judicial relation to God is one of condemnation—we stand condemned on account of our sins, both original and actual. When we are justified, our judicial relation to God is changed from one of condemnation to one of acquittal.¹⁸

The Westminster Shorter Catechism offers a more concise definition: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (A. 33).

The last phrase in the definition from the catechism is essential because it identifies faith as the only instrument of justification. Faith is mentioned at least six times in Romans 3: “This righteousness from God comes through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all who *believe*” (Rom. 3:22). “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through *faith* in his blood” (Rom. 3:25). In verse 26 God is described as “the one who justifies those who have *faith* in Jesus.” In verse 27 boasting is excluded on the principle of faith: “For we maintain that a man is justified by *faith* apart from observing the law” (Rom. 3:28; cf. 5:1). What this passage emphasizes over and over again is essential to the gospel: we are justified *by faith*.

People sometimes wonder what they must do to justify themselves before God. The answer is that there is nothing we can do except believe. This is where Christianity differs from every other religion, from every merely human attempt to attain righteousness. As much as anything else, it is this difference which is so hard for unbelievers to understand: Isn’t there something we can *do* to make ourselves good enough for God?

A striking example of humanity’s misplaced confidence in works to justify comes from the epitaph on a first-century tomb:

Here lies Regina . . . She will live again, return to the light again, for she can hope that she will rise to the life promised, as a real assur-

ance, to the worthy and the pious in that she has deserved to possess an abode in the hallowed land. This your piety has assured you, this your chaste life, this your love for your people, this your observance of the Law, your devotion to your wedlock, the glory of which was dear to you. For all these deeds your hope for the future is assured.¹⁹

Regina's epitaph is typical, especially for people who are religious. It assumes that righteous deeds are the best and only guarantee that someone will make it to heaven. Yet anyone who hopes to win acceptance from God by keeping the law has fallen into a soul-destroying legalism. Martin Luther made this point with his usual provocative flair when he said that thinking we can merit grace by our works is really a way of "trying to placate God with sins."²⁰

When Jesus explained the true way of justification to his disciples, he was careful to distinguish between faith and obedience. The disciples asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28–29). The Philippian jailor put the same basic question to the apostle Paul: "What must I do to be saved?" Paul gave the same answer Jesus gave: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30–31). In other words, there is nothing we can do to justify ourselves to God. The only righteousness he accepts comes "apart from law" (Rom. 3:21).

Thus the only thing we can do is put our faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. If we trust in him and his justifying work on the cross, then God will declare us righteous. We are acceptable to God, not by keeping his law but by trusting in the only man who ever did—Jesus Christ.

The difference between being justified by doing and justified by believing is beautifully illustrated in the conversion of Martin Luther. In the days when he was still a monk, the famous theologian was deeply impressed by a verse from the prophet Habakkuk, as quoted by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians: "The righteous will live by faith" (Gal. 3:11; cf. Hab. 2:4).

Luther encountered this verse in the monastery at Erfurt, although at first he was uncertain what it meant. Later he went through a dark period of illness and depression during which he imagined that he was under the wrath of God. Lying on a bed in Italy, and fearing that he was soon to die, Luther found himself repeating the words over and over again: "The righteous will live by his faith. The righteous will live by his faith."

Mercifully, Luther recovered, and not long afterwards he proceeded to Rome, where he visited the church of St. John Lateran. The pope had promised an indulgence forgiving the sins of any pilgrim who mounted the church's staircase, which was alleged to have come from the judgment hall of Pontius Pilate. Believing that the steps were stained with the very blood of Christ, pilgrims ascended the stairs on their knees, pausing frequently to pray and kiss the holy staircase.

Luther's story continues in the words of his son (from a manuscript preserved in the library of Rudolstadt): "As he repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, the words of the prophet Habakkuk came suddenly to his mind: 'The just shall live by faith.' Thereupon he ceased his prayers, returned to Wittenberg, and took this as the chief foundation of all his doctrine." Luther no longer believed that there was anything he could do to gain favor with God, and he began to live instead by faith in God's Son. Later he said:

Before those words broke upon my mind I hated God and was angry with him. . . . But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood those words—"The just shall live by faith!" "The just shall live by faith!"—then I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very Paradise of God.²¹

When the Bible says that we are justified "by faith" or "through faith," it is asserting that faith is the instrument of our justification, the channel by which we receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ. In the words of J. I. Packer, faith is "the outstretched empty hand that receives righteousness by receiving Christ."²² Similarly, J. C. Ryle defined true faith as

laying hold of a Savior's hand, leaning on a husband's arm, and receiving a physician's medicine. [Faith] brings with it nothing to Christ but a sinful man's soul. It gives nothing, contributes nothing, pays nothing, performs nothing. It only receives, takes, accepts, grasps, and embraces the glorious gift of justification which Christ bestows.²³

This means that, properly speaking, it is not faith itself (or even the doctrine of justification by faith) that saves us. Rather, it is Christ who saves us, with faith simply operating as the means by which we appro-

priate Christ. In Calvin's words, "Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man."²⁴

Although Romans 3 does not say that justification is "by faith alone" (at least in so many words), this is what the passage clearly implies, particularly at its close: "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom. 3:27–28; cf. Gal. 2:16).

If we were justified by works, or even by faith plus works, then salvation would be something to boast about (see Eph. 2:9). As it is, however, no one will ever be able to boast of making it to heaven on the strength of his or her own merits. We are justified on the basis of the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, and there is nothing more that needs to be done except to believe. To quote from The Gospel Coalition's Confession of Faith, "We believe that God justifies and sanctifies those who by grace have faith in Jesus."

The Goal of Justification: Good Works for the Glory of God

Some people think that the apostle James contradicts the doctrine of justification by faith alone. After all, James contends that "a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). What James is really saying, however, is something like this: "A person is proven to be justified by his works and not merely by his faith." Unlike Paul, who needed to oppose the popular notion that sinners can be saved by good works, James was combating the misconception that believers can dispense with works altogether. To put the difference between them in theological terms, Paul was dealing with people who wanted to make sanctification part of the basis for their justification, whereas James was dealing with people who wanted to be justified without being sanctified!

For James, as well as for Paul, "to justify" means "to declare righteous." The difference is that in Paul's case it is God who declares the believer righteous, whereas in James's case it is the believer's works that declare him righteous by proving his faith to be genuine. Almost certainly both apostles would have agreed with Calvin that "it is faith

alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”²⁵ Faith and works do not together produce justification (faith + works >> justification). Rather, faith justifies and produces good works (faith >> justification + works).

To express this in yet another way, the faith that alone justifies is a *faith that works*. This explains why The Gospel Coalition ends its statement on justification by saying, “We believe that a zeal for personal and public obedience flows from this free justification.” The true biblical doctrine of justification is not opposed to good works but in fact produces them. Our justification is vitally connected to our sanctification.

As far as justification itself is concerned, Christ’s work and our works are mutually exclusive. As Paul says in Galatians: “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). Justification thus comes by trusting rather than by working: “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Where justification is concerned, the Bible sets faith and works in opposition to one another. If justification is by faith, then it is not by works. By ruling out works in this way, the Bible is really saying that justification is by faith alone. For if justification is not by works, then it must come only by faith.

There is an important reason for this distinction between faith and works—a reason that helps us to understand the purpose of our justification in the plan of God. If justification comes only by faith, then the biblical way of justification ensures that all of the glory goes to God alone. If we are justified by the saving work of Jesus rather than by our own work, then all the praise for our salvation goes to him and not to us. Thus the goal of justification—like every other aspect of the gospel—is the glory of God.

The Recipients of Justification: People like Us

One of the most beautiful affirmations of the biblical doctrine of justification comes from the Heidelberg Catechism, which asks, “How are you righteous before God?” (Q. 60). The answer is this:

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any mer-

it of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

Notice that the catechism expresses justification in terms of the first person. This points us to an important truth: if justification comes through faith, then we ourselves must believe in Jesus Christ—personally and individually—to be justified. Justification is not simply a general principle about the way of salvation; it is a call to make a personal faith commitment to Christ, for without him we are doomed to be condemned. Indeed, the Bible warns that “whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18). Yet the very same verse also promises that “whoever believes in him is not condemned.” If we would be justified and not condemned, therefore, we must put our faith in Jesus Christ.

For those who do believe, God’s final verdict—“righteous for all eternity”—has been brought forward into our present experience. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,” the Scripture says, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). Our legal standing has already been decided. We can never be un-justified. We are acceptable to God right now and forever, to the glory of God. The day of judgment will confirm what God has already declared: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

One man who experienced the joy of justifying faith was the poet William Cowper. Cowper had long suffered from depression, and for a time he lived in an insane asylum where conditions were appalling. Despite all his physical and psychological torments, however, his most acute sufferings were spiritual, for he considered himself a condemned sinner. Yet the day came when Cowper found his legal remedy in the saving message of justification by faith alone. This is the story he told:

The happy period which was to shake off my fetters and afford me a clear opening of the free mercy of God in Christ Jesus was now arrived. I flung myself into a chair near the window, and, seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply to it for comfort and instruction.

The first verses I saw were in the third chapter of Romans: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to manifest his righteousness.” Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone on me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon in his blood, and the fullness and completeness of his justification. In a moment I believed and received the gospel.²⁶

This gift of righteousness is available to everyone who believes and receives the gospel. By his free grace, God offers full and complete justification on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ will be declared righteous forever at the bar of God’s eternal justice.

For Further Reading

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Notes

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8. Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 705, 715.
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The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission

is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all of our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

“Humanity stands in the dock. The religious and the irreligious, Jews and Gentiles, believers and atheists—everyone must appear before God’s throne for judgment. . . . We are guilty sinners who deserve nothing except God’s wrath. . . . There is not the slightest chance that we can be accepted on the basis of anything that we have done. . . . It is only when we recognize how desperate our situation is from the legal standpoint that we can begin to understand the biblical doctrine of justification. . . . Justification is central to the Christian gospel because it answers the fundamental question: How can a sinful human being be righteous before a holy God?”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

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