

## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Justification

**“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. . . . Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” ~ Romans 3:28; 5:1**

### Introduction

The unity and distinctiveness of the components of salvation testifies to the manifold wisdom of God. On the one hand, these components are like chain links. If just one is broken, the entire chain loses its integrity. But the links of salvation cannot be broken. They hold firm—connecting the elements of salvation related to eternity past to those related to eternity future with the full force of divine determination and omnipotence (Rom 8:28-29). On the other hand, these components cannot be melded into each other. To blur their distinctiveness is to step onto an icy slope that descends into heresy. This is certainly the case with the component of **justification**.

At the outset of this series (“Introduction to the Study of Salvation,” 9/4/2019), we asserted that the components of salvation must be understood according to *two kinds of acts*: (1) **judicial/forensic acts**—actions God takes to change the *status* of a sinner, and thus, His *relationship* to that sinner; and (2) **transformational acts**—actions God takes to change the nature or morality of a sinner. **Justification belongs to the first category.** It is a *judicial* or *forensic* act that God does to change the status of a sinner in His sight. It is not a *transformative* act, like regeneration or sanctification. As John Murray explains,

Regeneration is an act of God in us; justification is a judgment of God with respect to us. The distinction is like that of the distinction between the act of the surgeon and the act of a judge. The surgeon, when he removes an inward cancer, does something in us. That is not what a judge does—he gives a verdict regarding our judicial status. If we are innocent he declares accordingly. The purity of the gospel is bound up with the recognition of this distinction. If justification is confused with regeneration or sanctification, then the door is opened for the perversion of the gospel at its center. Justification is still the article of the standing or falling of the Church. (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 121).

Murray’s warning that to confuse justification with a transformative act perverts the gospel “at its center” is no exaggeration. It is so important that the Reformers felt justified in separating from the Roman Catholic Church over this very issue. Martin Luther stated, “Because if this article [a proper understanding of justification] stands, the Church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.” Calvin considered the judicial nature of justification “**the main hinge on which religion turns**” and “**the principle article of the whole doctrine and the foundation of all [true] religion.**”

### A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. **“Justification.”** Murray provides a helpful starting definition: “In a word, justification is simply a declaration or pronouncement respecting the relation of the person to the law which he, the judge, is required to administer” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 125). Brian Vickers provides a more comprehensive definition: justification is “the legal declaration from God that a person stands before him forgiven and as one who lives up to the entirety of God’s will. It absolutely depends on turning, by faith, away from our own works to receive God’s verdict of ‘righteous’ in Christ as a pure gift” (*Justification by Grace through Faith*, 2).

**Key idea:**  
God’s instantaneous  
declaration that the sinner has  
been forgiven and is now  
considered entirely righteous

**Justification deals with the issue of righteousness.** It is God’s formal declaration in response to the question, “How can a sinner attain a right relationship with an infinitely righteous God?” or, “What can be done about the stain of guilt on the sinner’s record?” In other words, justification is *judicial* or *forensic* in character, as is pictured in **Romans 8:33**, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies.”

This concept of justification is based of the New Testament Greek term **δικαίωω** (*dikaioō*). Although the term has a range of meanings, its most common definition is “**to declare righteous.**” This is certainly the case in **Luke 7:28-29**, when the audience “acknowledged God’s justice,” or more literally, “they justified God”—that is, they “declared God righteous” (they certainly don’t “make” Him righteous). Moreover, the *judicial*,

*declarative* nature of justification is seen in its antithesis to **the concept of condemnation**. This contrast is brought out by Paul in **Romans 5:16** – “The gift is not like *that which came* through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment *arose* from one *transgression* resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift *arose* from many transgressions resulting in justification” (see also Deut 25:1).

These and other qualities emphasize that **justification is forensic** (“having to do with the law”) in nature. It is a legal declaration, not a transformative act. As Murray again writes,

Justification does not mean to make righteous, or good, or holy, or upright. It is perfectly true that in the application of redemption God makes people holy and upright. He renews them after his own image. He begins to do this in regeneration and carries it on in the work of sanctification. He will perfect it in glorification. But justification does not refer to this renewing and sanctifying grace of God” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 125).

But this raises an important question. **How can a righteous God declare that one who is inherently unrighteous is now to be regarded as righteous?** Is this not *injustice*? As God Himself has said, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD” (Prov 17:15). Indeed, it would be “an abomination” for God to call black white, and white black.

But this would only be an abomination if there never was: (1) an *actual payment* for the unrighteousness committed by the sinner; and (2) an *actual achievement* of the righteousness committed to the sinner. But this is exactly what the atonement of Jesus Christ provided (see “Atonement,” 10/9/2019). Therefore, it is here—in the discussion of justification—where the concept of *imputation* enters.

2. **“Imputation.”** Imputation can be defined as “the judicial reckoning or forensic transfer of one person’s sin or righteousness to another” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 931). The concept is described succinctly by Paul in **2 Corinthians 5:21** – “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” In other words, onto Jesus Christ was imputed—“judicially reckoned”—all the sins of everyone who would ever believe, and He paid the penalty for all those sins in full. Conversely, the perfect righteousness Jesus Christ demonstrated during His earthly life was imputed—“judicially reckoned”—onto all those who would ever believe in Him.

It is on this basis that God remains perfectly righteous when He justifies the ungodly. Because of imputation, God **“would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26)**. Actual payment for the unrighteousness of those who believe has been made, as has actual achievement of righteousness. Justification is just because of imputation.

**“When man justifies the wicked, it is a miscarriage of justice which God hates, but when God justifies the ungodly it is a miracle of grace for us to adore” ~ J. I. Packer**

3. **“Infused Righteousness.”** It is incorrect to assume that the Reformers split with the Roman Catholic Church because the Church flatly rejected the notion of “justification.” Rather, the Reformers split because the RCC defined “justification” in an entirely different manner than has been stated above. Instead of defining it as an “instantaneous legal declaration” that is made possible by “the imputation of righteousness” to the sinner, the RCC teaches that justification is a *process* initiated at baptism, when God *infuses* His righteousness into the sinner, who then cooperates with God in manifesting righteous acts over his lifetime. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.”

**“Where Rome teaches that one is finally justified by being sanctified, the Reformed conviction is that one is being sanctified because one has already been justified. Rather than working toward the verdict of divine vindication, the believer leaves the court justified in the joy that bears the fruit of faith: namely, good works.”**  
—Horton, “Traditional Reformed View,” *Justification: Five Views*, 87

Thus, for the RCC, justification is not a legal/forensic act, but a transformative act. As a transformative act, it is not instantaneous, but life-long, inseparable from sanctification. It is also not declarative, but one of

cooperation. For a sinner to be justified requires a lifetime of moral obedience, beginning with baptism. Fiducia faith is insufficient (see “Faith,” 1/15/2020). Consequently, assurance of salvation is impossible in this life.

## B. Essential Characteristics

1. **Justification takes place in God’s court** (the *location* of justification). God is the one who makes this declaration entirely on His own. The sinner is declared righteous “in His sight” (**Rom 3:19-20; 8:33**). As Murray states, “This truth that God justifies needs to be underlined. We do not justify ourselves. Justification is not our apology nor is it the effect in us of a process of self-excusation. It is not even our confession nor the good feeling that may be induced in us by confession” (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 124).
2. **Justification pertains not to innocence but to righteousness** (the *achievement* of justification). It is inadequate to think of justification merely as the forgiveness of sins. That would only return the sinner to the state of innocence that Adam enjoyed before the Fall. But justification does much more than this. It declares that that sinner is in a state of righteousness (**Rom 3:21-22; 4:3-5**). Grudem writes, “Therefore both in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, my situation is far different from what it would be if I had never sinned and lived a perfectly righteous life. For all eternity I will remember that I am a forgiven *sinner*, and that my righteousness is not based on my own merit, but on the grace of God in the saving work of Jesus Christ” (*Systematic Theology*, 727 fn 4).
3. **Justification is grounded upon the righteousness of Christ** (the *ground* of justification). Our faith is the *means* of justification, but it is not the *ground* of justification. We are justified “by” or “through” faith, but never “because of” faith. Faith could never provide the righteousness needed for justification. Instead, we are justified “because of” or “on account of” the achievements of Christ, which are applied to us through imputation (**Rom 5:17-19**).
4. **Justification is applied through faith alone** (the *means* of justification). The one who believes in the gospel is *not* justified through his works of righteousness. The apostle Paul makes it crystal clear that justification—God’s declaration of righteousness—as applied through the channel of faith, never through the means of works (**Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9**). And this faith, of course, is a gift of God as well (Eph 2:8-9).
5. **Justification is granted according to grace** (the *motivation* of justification). As MacArthur and Mayhue note, “The religion of human achievement encompasses every other religious system in the history of mankind” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 611). Adherents to these religions believe that God will be motivated to justify them (declare them righteous) based on their good works. But according to Scripture, God’s motivation to justify is based solely on His grace. It is a gift (**Rom 3:23-24; 4:16; 5:17**). After all, the effort of fallen men could never satisfy the demands of God’s law.
6. **Justification leads to an increasing production of righteousness** (the *fruit* of justification). This is the emphasis of the letter of James. As he writes, James draws upon one of the other meanings of the term Greek term δικαιοῶ (*dikaioō*): “to prove, demonstrate.” For James, true faith always demonstrated itself in righteous attitudes and actions. To claim faith without the demonstration of righteousness was a perversion of the concept of saving faith. After all, even the demons had this kind of faith (**James 2:17-20**).

“It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.” ~ John Calvin

While justification must be distinguished from sanctification, it cannot be disconnected from sanctification. As stated above, the relationship between the components of salvation is unbreakable. Thus, **true justification will always be followed by practical sanctification**. God desires not only to declare the sinner righteous, He desires to see that declaration manifest itself through a lifestyle of progressively righteous living.

7. **Justification is once and for all** (the *efficacy* of justification). Finally, it must be noted that justification never appears by itself. In the same way that it cannot be disconnected from sanctification (though it is distinct from it), it cannot be disconnected from the remaining components of salvation—including *glorification*: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the

firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (**Rom 8:29-30**).

Therefore, in light of the nature of justification, “God can never nor will ever *take vengeance* on us for past sins or *make us pay the penalty* that is due for them or *punish us out of wrath* and *for the purpose of doing us harm*” (Grudem, *Biblical Doctrine*, 732). This gives wonderful comfort to the believer who is ever mindful of his lack of perfect righteousness in his daily conduct (see Phil 3:12-14). While the believer must push ahead in sanctification, he must always be mindful that he already wears Christ’s *perfect robes of righteousness*.

### “His Robes for Mine” by Chris Anderson

[1] His robes for mine: O wonderful exchange!  
Clothed in my sin, Christ suffered ‘neath God’s rage.  
Draped in His righteousness, I’m justified.  
In Christ I live, for in my place He died.

[4] His robes for mine: such anguish none can know.  
Christ, God’s beloved, condemned as though His foe.  
He, as though I, accursed and left alone;  
I, as though He, embraced and welcomed home!

[2] His robes for mine: what cause have I for dread?  
God’s daunting Law Christ mastered in my stead.  
Faultless I stand with righteous works not mine,  
Saved by my Lord’s vicarious death and life.

CHORUS:  
I cling to Christ, and marvel at the cost:  
Jesus forsaken, God estranged from God.  
Bought by such love, my life is not my own.  
My praise-my all-shall be for Christ alone.

[3] His robes for mine: God’s justice is appeased.  
Jesus is crushed, and thus the Father’s pleased.  
Christ drank God’s wrath on sin, then cried “‘Tis done!”  
Sin’s wage is paid; propitiation won.

### D. Practical Implications

Homework (see below).

### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** Romans 3:28; 5:1

#### Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 609-624
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 123-138
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 722-732
- Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith*. Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing.

#### Homework:

- Read Romans 3:21-5:21 several times before the next meeting. Make observations about Paul’s use of the term “justification” and “righteousness” in this section of his letter.
- Review the notes above. For each of the seven assertions listed in the section, “Essential Characteristics,” come up with a “practical implication.”
- Can *you* sincerely state you are “not guilty” before God? Explain your answer.
- If you died this evening and stood before God, and He asked you, “Why should I accept you into My heaven?,” how would you answer? (How does the doctrine of justification affect our answer to this question?)
- How would you explain to a Roman Catholic the difference between the evangelical position on “imputed righteousness” and the Roman Catholic position on “infused righteousness”?

**Hymns:** “And Can It Be?” (*Hymns of Grace* #180); “His Robes for Mine” (*Hymns of Grace* #181)

**This Week’s Audio:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** January 29 – Evening of Prayer