

Justification

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- [0 : 00] Well, our study in this class is The Christian Life, the book by Sinclair Ferguson, and our chapter is chapter 5 on justification. It was Martin Luther who claimed that the biblical truth of justification was the article on which the church stands or falls.
- He says the head and cornerstone of the church. It's that important. And justification in Christ is that cornerstone which alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and protects the church.
- Without it, the church of God cannot subsist one hour. Ferguson agrees and would add that it's not only important for the church, but it is also equally important for the individual Christian to have right views about justification.
- Yet many get it wrong, and it's not just Roman Catholics that get it wrong. Not only is this truth vital to salvation, but also to the ongoing health of the believer.
- Ferguson writes, We're going to come back and test that claim at the end.
- [1 : 30] Does the doctrine of justification affect our peace with God, a sense of our peace with God, our concern for others, and a sense of the sheer goodness and wonder of God's grace?
- Where to begin? Well, with the word for justification, for justify. It's a word that carries the idea of being righteous.
- And of course, that word righteous means right. Those first five letters of the word. To be right with God. To be right before his law.
- Before his being, his nature. So to be in a right relationship with God. It's a legal term, so it takes us into a courtroom. And the main issue being determined in the courtroom is how is the accused related to the law?
- Is he in line with it? Or is he out of line with the law? Is she in the right? According to the law. Or is she in the wrong? According to the law.
- [2 : 42] So it's weighing the person against God and his law. Are they right or wrong? And in the Bible, to justify then does not mean to make someone righteous in the sense of changing them from being sinful to becoming holy.
- And this is a critical distinction that we have to make if we're not to err. So to be justified does not mean to make righteous as to change our character into more righteous character.
- There's a different word, a biblical word, for that. When we are being changed more and more into the character of Christ. What is that biblical word? Sanctification.
- Good. So that's a different doctrine. That's a different subject. It's related to justification. But it is not justification. To make the person righteous in heart and life.
- But to justify means to declare a person to be righteous. To be in a right relationship to God and his law. Now a human judge may get it wrong, might he?
- [3 : 55] He might declare a guilty person innocent. Or an innocent person guilty. But our divine judge knows all things and therefore he always gets it right.

When he announces the situation, the verdict, it's always right. And so when he says a person is justified, is right, and rightly related to him and his law, then he really is.

Now this difference between actually making someone righteous and declaring someone righteous is the difference between the Roman Catholic view of justification and the Protestant view of justification.

It is the difference between a legalistic view of justification and a free grace view of justification. So it's critical that we not be mistaken on this.

How can we be sure then that the word in the Bible, justify, means to declare someone righteous instead of actually making them righteous by changing their heart and life?

[5 : 09] Well, turn to Deuteronomy 25. Let's look and see how it is used. And obviously we've got to be very selective. But I think this passage and another couple that we'll look at are very clear in making that distinction.

Deuteronomy 25. And it's a context where the Lord, through Moses, is telling the Israelites how their court system is to operate.

And how the judges are to rule. And it's in this courtroom setting that we bump into this word justify. In our text here, at least in the NIV, it has the word acquit.

But it's the same word for justify in other places. So notice how this word is used in the context.

Deuteronomy 25.1. When men have a dispute, they're to take it to court. And the judges will decide the case. Acquitting, justifying the innocent, and condemning the guilty.

[6 : 18] Now, what does acquitting or justifying stand in comparison to? In contrast to? Condemning.

All right? So it's contrasted with condemning. So you either justify or you condemn. Now, tell me, when the judge condemns someone as guilty, is he making that person guilty?

No. He was found to be guilty. And just the declaration is to say, he is guilty. This is what he is.

This is how he stands before the law. He's guilty. And in the same way, then, to acquit or to justify doesn't make the person innocent, but rather finds him to be and declares him, therefore, to be innocent.

Do you see how the word is used and why it can't mean this idea of actually changing someone's life and making them better? Not at all. Turn to Proverbs 17 and verse 15.

[7 : 30] We see the same thing set before us. And we're given God's attitude toward judgment and how it's to be carried out.

Proverbs 17, verse 15. Somebody read that for me. He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both a right and a combination to the Lord.

Okay. Okay. Okay. Justifying, acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent, the righteous. The Lord detests them both.

You see how, again, justifying is set on contrast with condemning. And so those two are compared to each other.

And to get it wrong is a detestation, an abomination to the Lord. So we see that, again, this term doesn't mean to make righteous, but to declare righteous.

[8 : 35] The second text is 1 Timothy, the third text actually, but another line of argument is 1 Timothy 3.16.

And it's the fact that by the resurrection, Jesus was justified. That's the language of 1 Timothy 3.16. So what happened when Jesus rose from the dead and was justified?

1 Timothy 3.16. Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great. He appeared in a body, was justified by the Spirit, vindicated by the Spirit.

King James, ASV, have justified here. It's the same word. So the question is, did the resurrection make Jesus righteous?

Or did it declare him to be righteous? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Jesus is holy, innocent, and pure. He blameless and pure.

[9 : 42] He never had any sin. So he always was innocent. What the resurrection did was to declare him to be so. And why was that such an issue? Why was that even necessary?

To declare him righteous? What had just happened in the court of man? They found him guilty.

They found him to be worthy of being condemned. You are condemned. You're guilty of blasphemy. You're a phony messiah. You're a liar. You're deceiving the people.

That was the verdict that man gave of the Lord Jesus. And so he dies. And they say he trusts in God. If God wants him, let him save him.

And God didn't save him. Didn't do what they thought. Bringing him down from the cross. So in their minds, you see, three criminals. One, two, three.

[10 : 41] They're all guilty. Condemned. Getting the capital punishment they deserve. And so he dies. In the eyes of man is a condemned criminal. But for those that said, surely he was a righteous man.

And they did declare his innocence, some of them. But to the commoner's eye, the charge was guilty and condemned. And so there was need for God to vindicate him, to justify him.

And he did that when he raised him from the dead. He showed that he is right with me. I am pleased with him. And he raised him from the dead, thereby justifying him in the court of God, showing what his view was.

Romans 1, 3 and 4 says the same concerning the resurrection. By which he was declared to be the son of God with power. The one that he claimed to be. And everybody said, no, he's lying.

So justification is declaring the true condition of one as being righteous. Not making him righteous. Now who does God justify then?

[11 : 50] Who is it that God justifies? Not all men are justified. But what is the character of men that he justifies? Sinners.

Sinners. That's interesting, isn't it? And so let's just turn to Romans chapter 3. And this is the key section, one of the key sections on justification.

So have your Bible open there in Romans 3. Romans 3, 23. Very common verse.

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. Who? The sinners.

Because we're all sinners. And then in chapter 4, verse 5. However, to the man who does not work but trust God, who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

[12 : 53] God justifies sinners. He justifies the wicked. Now does that create any problem for you? When we've just seen, what does justification mean?

To declare a person as to being right with God in a right standing? Often when voting at the polling booth, I've been dumbfounded as to which lever to pull when it comes to reinstating or retaining Judge Joseph Yoder in his seat as judge.

And I don't know Joseph Yoder. I have no clue of what he ever has done in a court of law. Maybe that's on me and I need to do my search ahead of time.

I'm never even sure who's being voted on. But if there was a judge on the ballot and you knew and everybody else in town knew that he had a habit of justifying the guilty.

People who were as guilty as sin and yet he would say not guilty. And he'd let them go scot-free. Would you be voting for him? No, you say he would be an unjust judge.

[14 : 12] He would be a rotten judge. He wouldn't be upholding the law. He wouldn't be fulfilling his calling as a judge. Indeed, as God sets it forth, it's an abomination to God to have a judge that justifies the guilty.

But isn't that what God is doing in justification? Is he not declaring the guilty to be righteous, to be not guilty?

And does that not make him an unjust judge? So the problem is, how can God be just and still justify the wicked?

And that's exactly what Paul is taking up at the last half of Romans 3. That very question. How can God be a just judge if he doesn't condemn the wicked?

But rather justifies them and pronounces them right with God. Well, Paul takes that up. The first three chapters of Romans, Paul's making the point that no one can be justified by observing the law.

[15 : 23] For the simple reason that nobody obeys the law perfectly. Nobody measures up to the law. Whether their knowledge of the law is simply that which we have in creation.

What they knew of God's law from creation condemns them because they didn't keep it. They didn't give thanks to God. They didn't glorify him for the creation. They're guilty.

Or whether they had the Bible and they saw the law of God in Scripture. No one measures up. Or whether it was just in their conscience of knowing that stealing was wrong and yet still stealing.

Nobody, with whatever knowledge they have, small or large, of God's law, nobody has ever observed it. There's none righteous, no, not one. So that's what he's proven in the first three chapters.

Romans 1 to 3, the first half of chapter 3. And now he takes up this question, then how can God justify guilty, wicked sinners?

[16 : 36] So verse 20 ends. Therefore, no one will be justified or declared righteous by observing the law. So verses 21 to 26.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, law keeping, has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God, the righteousness of God, comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

There's no difference for all who 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, as a propitiation through faith in his blood.

And 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. So the cross is the answer to how God can be a just judge and not go light on sin.

[17 : 52] And yet justify the wicked sinner who believes in Jesus. Ferguson gives us three points to help us understand how this comes about.

How it's through Christ and what he's done on the cross and in his life and death can bring justification to the wicked, the ungodly. First truth out of the three.

Christ lived a life of total obedience to God. So sometimes this is called his active obedience. Galatians 4.4 says that he was born of a woman born under the law.

Under law. So he was the lawgiver, came and became one who had to keep the law. He was under law now. And he rendered throughout his 33 years a perfect obedience to that law.

His active obedience. So if he perfectly obeyed the law, does he deserve the condemnation from the law? No. So he doesn't deserve to die. He's kept it perfectly.

[18 : 55] Second truth. But Christ did die the death of a guilty sinner. Not only did men treat him as a guilty sinner, but God himself treated him as a guilty sinner.

Romans 8.32. He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all. It was God who delivered him up to the death of the cross. Isaiah says it pleased the Lord to crush him and to cause him to suffer.

So he's the perfect lawgiver or lawkeeper. He doesn't deserve to die. But the second truth is he did die under the curse of a broken law. This is sometimes called Christ's passive obedience.

In that he willingly suffered God's will. Which was for him to die the death of the guilty. He suffered God's will.

So his passive obedience. So he both did the will of God, obeying every command, and he suffered the will of God at Calvary.

[20 : 02] Both are part of his perfect obedience. Who humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. So those are the first two truths.

And the third truth is that the reason the sinless Christ is treated as the guilty sinner is found in the special relationship between Christ and his people. When the Lord Jesus became a man, he became our representative.

He became our substitute. The one representing us so that he was in for us. Both in obeying the law, he was doing it for us.

And in dying the death of the guilty, he was doing it for us. Bearing our sin, paying our debt. So he stood in my place at Calvary and in his law keeping and received my condemnation so that I might stand in Christ's place and receive his justification of being right with God.

So it's this wonderful exchange. We sing of it in his robes for mine. He as though I accursed and left alone. I as though he then embraced and welcomed home.

[21 : 19] So he who knew no sin was made sin for us. Why? So that in him we might become the righteousness of God. So he suffers the penalty that was ours and we get the justification.

The right with Godness that was his. I don't know who said it, but it pictures this truth wonderfully. Upon a life I did not live.

And upon a death I did not die. Another's life and another's death. I rest my whole eternity. So it's what he did in obeying and in dying.

That enables God to bring the gavel down for me, ungodly, wicked me, who has faith in Jesus and say not guilty, but righteous, not condemned, but justified.

And in doing so he remains just because he didn't go light and sin. Calvary proves that. Calvary is the proof.

[22 : 24] All the sins of the Old Testament saints that were left unpunished. Those saints didn't go to hell. They went to heaven. How can that be? How can God receive them?

Well, because Christ was going to take their punishment for them and did when he came 2,000 years ago. And so it was there at Calvary that God shows himself to be a just judge and yet also shows how it is that he can be the justifier of sinners.

No, not everyone is justified. Not every sinner. Not every ungodly and wicked person is justified. So how does Christ's righteousness become ours then? What is it?

By grace through faith. Through faith is the Bible's answer, which is all of grace. We see it here in Romans 3.22.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. So everybody who puts their faith in Jesus will be justified.

[23 : 38] Therefore, Romans 5.1. Since we've been justified through faith, we have peace with God. That's how Abraham was justified. And that's what he takes up here in chapter 4, the first three verses.

What should we say then about Abraham, our forefather? What did he discover in this matter? Was it justified by his works or justified by faith? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, well, then he would have something to boast about, but not before God.

But what does the scripture say? And he quotes Genesis 15, verse 6. This is what scripture says about Abraham. He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Now, you remember the scene? God has promised Abraham to give him many descendants, and that he would, through him and his descendants, bring salvation, blessing to all the nations.

And he takes him out one night, and he says, look up and count the stars if you can. Do you believe that I can do what I just promised you?

[24 : 54] And at that point, there was nothing for Abraham to do, was there? All there was to do was either to believe it or to not believe it. And scripture says Abraham believed God, and it was counted as righteousness.

So it's through faith that the righteousness of Christ, his obedience, his blood, becomes ours. That emphasis of the Bible on faith, that justification is by faith, not works, should not lead us to think that faith is itself something that merits justification.

That God looks and says, oh, wow, he had faith? Well, he deserves to be justified. No, faith is not a meritorious thing at all.

Nowhere does the Bible teach that faith is the ground of justification. Now, here, we're getting a little technical, but it's an important technicality. Again, it's the difference between a saving gospel and a damning gospel.

Is faith the ground of our justification, or is it the instrument of our justification? Let me try to illustrate that distinction.

[26 : 18] The ground, the cause of our justification, is it our faith, or is it the work of Christ? Well, it's the work of Christ. That's the thing that earns, that merits our justification.

That's the thing that causes God to say, that's what I require of the man, and that is what measures up to my requirement. Christ's perfect obedience and death.

And so, the ground of our justification is the work of Christ, not our faith. And the reason it's important to make this distinction is lest we be found trusting in our faith rather than in Christ for righteousness.

Am I leaning my hope of heaven on my faith as if that's something to merit heaven for me? Or am I leaning all my weight upon what Jesus has done for me, and obeying the law for me, and in dying the death that I deserved for me?

We dare not trust our own faith, but Christ. Faith is just the instrument by which we receive Christ and justification in him.

[27 : 29] So faith is the channel. It's nothing more than the means, the channel by which we receive Christ and justification in him. So faith is not a meriting work, it's a receiving grace.

It earns nothing, it receives nothing, it receives everything, including Christ and justification in him. We often say it, faith is the empty hands with which we receive Christ and every blessing of salvation in him.

There's nothing to boast about faith, is there? It's empty hands. We can't boast about that. Faith is dependence on another and not on myself.

It's looking away from anything in me and looking to Christ alone, expecting all from him. So if I'm looking away from me and anything in me, that includes my faith.

I'm not leaning on my faith. Then I, you know, have I believed enough? Faith, my faith is mixed with unbelief. It's mixed with sin. That's not the answer. Faith is just the instrument that lays hold of the perfect Savior.

[28 : 38] Listen, as Ferguson quotes J.C. Ryle. True faith has nothing whatever of merit about it. And in the highest sense cannot even be called a work.

It's but the laying hold of a Savior's hand. It's the leaning on a husband's arm. It's receiving a physician's medicine. It brings with it nothing to Christ but a sinful man's soul.

As Sproul says, we contribute nothing to salvation but the sin that makes it necessary. That's all we bring is our sin. Nothing to commend this to God. Faith gives nothing.

It contributes nothing. It pays nothing. It performs nothing. It only receives. It only takes. It only accepts. It only grasps and embraces this glorious gift of justification that Christ bestows.

And by renewed daily acts, faith enjoys that gift. So let me try to draw the distinction with this illustration. You're deathly sick, just hours away from death.

[29 : 46] And a medicine is found that will cure you and save your life. It's given to you. You take it and swallow it. And someone asks you when they see you well, what was the cause of your healing?

What was the ground of it? The cause that you are better? Well, swallowing. Well, I swallowed. And we see immediately that's not it.

You could swallow all day and it doesn't make you better. It's what he swallowed, right? It's the medicine itself that had the healing effect upon him, not his swallowing.

His swallowing was simply the means, the channel, literally the channel, through which the medicine did him good and saved his life.

So the work of Christ is the only effective ground of our salvation, our justification. And our faith is simply the channel, the instrument by which we receive Christ, whose work alone justifies us.

[30 : 49] An important distinction, lest we be trusting in ourselves rather than in what Christ has done. Let me just encourage you just to read the simple summary that is so helpful in our 1689 Confession of Faith.

Just in a page, summarizes and it makes this distinction so clearly. It's very helpful. So though faith is not the ground of our justification, but only the instrument, yet it is absolutely necessary and without faith, no one will be justified.

So it's not the ground, only the instrument, and yet no one will be saved without believing. In the same way that swallowing doesn't save you, it's the medicine that saves you, but no, that man would not be healed unless he did swallow the medicine.

And that's the way God has made it in justification as well. Conclusion then. Let's go back and test Ferguson's earlier claim.

Here was his claim. When the child of God loses his sense of peace with God, finds his concern for others dried up, or generally finds his sense of the sheer goodness and grace of God diminished, it is from this fountain of justification that he has ceased to drink.

[32 : 17] Okay? Let's test each one of those. How does drinking deeply of the fountain of justification, how does remembering, thinking about justification, what the Bible teaches us that we've just tried to summarize in 30 minutes, how does that truth, number one, give a sense of peace with God, a sense of assurance, a well-grounded confidence that heaven's mine, that I'm right with God, that I'll never be lost.

What's the connection with the doctrine of justification? That's a question for you to... We're testing his hypothesis. I'm not looking at myself in the finished work of Christ in that I have a serious experience.

Interesting. He used the word finished work of Christ. That is a finished work, isn't it? He obeyed all the law. And he died the death once for all.

He's no more dying. He's no more obeying down here. Obeying is our substitute. So it's a finished work. Now, you can rest on that, can't you? It's done. The gavel's fallen.

Justified. It can't be undone. It carries with it the guarantee. It can't be undone because Christ's righteousness doesn't rot or decay.

[33 : 48] If that's what was put to your account, it's good forever, right? So even the last judgment is not going to change the declaration that God has already made for every sinner, every wicked person that's trusted in Jesus.

He says, you're right with me. You're justified. What justification does is brings forward the day of judgment. What's going to be pronounced in the day of judgment is brought forward in the moment that we believe.

We're justified. So we're not afraid. How will things go that day? Well, we know the perfect righteousness of Christ has been put to our account.

Can you become more sanctified sanctified today than you were the day you trusted in Jesus? Yes or no? Yes.

You can become more holy, more like Jesus, more sanctified today than you were when you trusted in... Can you become more justified today, tomorrow, the next day than you were the moment you put your hope in Jesus' promise of forgiveness through His work?

[35 : 02] His work. Can you? No. Why not? Because what that brought to you was the full righteousness of Jesus. There's no...

There's nothing better than that. You're already at the top. And Ferguson makes the point, and we can just expand it. John Calvin was no more justified than every one of you who are in Christ.

You are no less justified than Charles Spurgeon was, than Martin Luther was, than your favorite theologian was, than the best Christian you know.

If the righteousness... And we can say it reverently, but Jesus Christ is no more justified than you are. Because it's His own righteousness that's put to our account.

So we're just as justified as Jesus is. We're just as righteous as He is. And that is a tremendous salve to our conscience when Satan would come and accuse us and would seek to stir up our doubts.

[36 : 03] It's to the doctrine of justification. Anybody else? Something to add? Why is it true that this doctrine gives strong assurance to the believer?

Yes? Because it's at that point that gives people this doubt that someone would say, I don't know if I'm truly a Christian because look at how my faith has wavered.

Look at how I've had some doubts. Look at how maybe I've not lived a perfect Christian life and here I am on my deathbed and I don't know if my faith was good enough.

Okay. Excellent. That's why our faith is not in the instrument itself. It's not faith in fact. Our faith is weak and is poor and as doubting as it is, our faith is resting on Christ alone.

And if that's true, then it means that the issue was never what you did. The issue was always what did Christ do? Did He obey everything? Did He take the punishment you deserve?

[37 : 15] You are justified. You're as justified, you're as righteous as Jesus is. So as Karen was saying, so then if your faith wavers and you see that you're not living as you are, that has nothing to do whatsoever with justification.

It has something to do with sanctification and we're going to get there in the book, but it has nothing to do with justice. Justification never even looks at the sinner as to their goodness, their works.

It looks to Christ. Did Christ obey and suffer for me? And God says, then you're justified. Good. Yes.

This Christ who is my life will never leave me. There's confidence. So don't we, isn't that what the hymns are all about?

Aren't they all about this truth of the strong peace and joyful assurance if I know I'm sanctified, if I know I'm justified? No condemnation, now I dread.

[38 : 21] Jesus, and all in him is mine. All of his righteousness is mine. Alive in him, my living head and clothed in righteousness divine. I'm clothed in the righteousness of God.

So, bold, I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ, my own. You see, there's the bold, confident assurance of poor sinners like you and me who are looking away to Jesus and what he's done in his obedience and blood for us.

Test two, we've got to go quickly. Does justification give you a sense of the sheer goodness and grace of God? Justification's source, we talked about the instrument, the ground, I want you to think of its source.

Where does it come from? The love of God. And Ferguson says the Bible gives no room for the idea of a willing, loving Savior trying to coax and reconcile us to a grudging God.

The Bible won't allow us to think that way. Jesus is merciful and loving, but he's got to coax God to accept us on the basis of what he's, who sent Jesus as a propitiation for our sins, who sent him to obey for us.

[39 : 42] It was God who presented him as that atoning sacrifice. It was God that gave him up for us. So we ought, if we thought rightly about this doctrine of justification, have a sense of the sheer goodness and grace of God.

And then, does it give us a concern for others? What's the relationship between the doctrine of justification and our concern for others? Freely, you have received.

Freely, give. Let me just close by a, from a letter of Martin Luther's to George Spenlain, a monk who became a gospel preacher.

I should like to know whether your soul tired of its own righteousness is leaning, learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ. For in our day, there are many who try with all their might just to be good and just without knowing the righteousness of God, which is most bountifully and freely given us in Christ.

They try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible. Among us, you were one who held this opinion, or rather error.

[40 : 50] So was I, and I'm still fighting against the error without having conquered it as yet. Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to pray to him in despairing of yourself. Say, Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am thy sin.

Thou hast taken upon thyself what is mine and hast given to me what is thine. Thou hast taken upon thyself what thou was not and hast given to me what I was not.

He descended from heaven where he dwelled among the righteous to dwell among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation. And then Luther pivots.

From justification to patient and loving concern for others. Cursed is the righteousness of the man who is unwilling to assist others on the ground that they're worse than he is.

Only keep your eyes fixed on what Jesus Christ has done for you and for all men in order that you may learn what you should do for others. If he had desired to live only among good people and to die only for his friends, for whom, pray, would he have died and with whom would he have ever lived?

[41 : 57] Act accordingly, my dear brother and pray for me. So, if we understand how much has been given us in justification, can we do other than be patient and loving with others who need to know this Savior and need to receive love from our hearts of faith that works by love?

Well, that's the doctrine of justification. let's feed on it and let's see our assurance grow, let's see our love for others grow, and our amazing sense of the goodness and grace of God to us in Christ.

We're dismissed. min min min min min min min min