

# The Doctrine of Justification

Justification is that instantaneous, everlasting, gracious, free, judicial act of God, whereby, on account of the merit of Christ's blood and righteousness, a repentant, believing sinner is freed from the penalty of the law, restored to God's favor, and considered as possessing the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ; by virtue of all of which he receives adoption as a son.

## 1. THE AUTHOR OF JUSTIFICATION

God is the author of justification. Man has nothing to do with his justification, except, to receive it through the faith that the Holy Spirit enables him to exercise. The Scripture declares: "It is God who justifieth" (Rom. 8:33). Again we read: "Being justified freely by his (God's) grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

Christ can be said to justify us only in the sense that He paid the redemptive price.

## II. THE CAUSE AND GROUND OF JUSTIFICATION DIFFERENTIATED

It is only in the courts of the law that "*cause*" and "*ground*" find acceptable use as synonyms. In a suit in the courts a *cause* of action means the same thing as a *ground* of action. Elsewhere they are not to be confused, and most especially are they not to be confused with respect to justification. Strictly speaking, the cause of an action is the agent, force, motive, or reason by which, or because of which, the action is effected or produced. Insofar as it is proper to speak of a mediate cause, the reference here is to the ultimate or originating cause. *Ground*, as used here means *foundation, basis, that upon which something rests for support*.

With these definitions before us we are prepared to observe that the love of God, giving rise to His grace and mercy, is the cause of our justification; while the death of Christ and the atonement wrought thereby is the ground of our justification. That the love of God is the cause of our justification is made crystal clear in the two following passages:

"But God who is rich in mercy, *for his great love wherewith he loved us*

. . . hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:4, 6).

"*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8).

But God could not consistently ground our salvation on His love, because love of itself could not consistently overlook our sinfulness. The justice of God, arising from His holiness, had to be satisfied. Thus it was necessary that love provide a righteous basis for our salvation. Rom. 3:25,26 tells in beautiful and striking language how that basis was provided. Out of love, God sent Christ to die that He might save sinners and remain just. Christ was a "*propitiation*." A propitiation is that which propitiates. To propitiate is to appease, conciliate. A beautiful picture of the appeasement and conciliation that takes place in justification is given us in Psa. 85:10—"*Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*" What is the *ground* of this reconciliation? The mere love, mercy, or grace of God? Nay. These must find a ground, a righteous basis, before they can become effective in man's pardon; otherwise mercy would violate truth and the righteousness of God would be set aside. *The ground of this reconciliation is the propitiation or atonement made by Jesus Christ.* The only people who will take issue with this statement are those who deny that Christ rendered a proper, real, full, exact, and absolute satisfaction to retributive justice by suffering in full the penalty of the law that believing sinners deserve to suffer in Hell for their sins. Such people will find the ground in the sovereign love and mercy of God or in something done by the sinner.

### **III. THE MEANS OF JUSTIFICATION**

Faith in the blood of Christ is the means of justification. See Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:24,25,28; 5:1,9; Gal. 2:16. It is well to note from these passages that the faith by which we are justified is not faith in the love, grace, and mercy of God; but faith in that which the love, mercy, and grace

of God have provided, that is, the blood of Christ. This fact throws further light upon the foregoing discussion.

It is by faith that justification is applied and made experimental. It is thus that we come into the enjoyment of the benefits of Christ's atoning death.

Faith, as we have noted previously, has no merit in and of itself. It is not a full hand bestowing, but an empty hand receiving. Exercising faith is inward obedience. It is because of this fact that the Scripture alludes to "*the obedience of faith*" (Rom. 16:26), obedience to the gospel (Rom. 10:16; II Thess. 1:8; I Pet. 4:17), "obeying the truth" (I Pet. 1:22), and obeying "*from the heart that form of doctrine*" (Rom. 6:7). But this is not meritorious obedience. It is as fully without merit as is the act of a beggar in eating food that has been given him.

Justification is by faith for the following reasons:

1. *That it might be by grace.* Rom. 4:16.

2. *That boasting might be excluded.* Rom. 3:27.

3. *Because by faith we are identified with Christ in the same manner that we were identified with Adam by the natural birth.* Acts 13:39—should read, "*in Him*" instead of "*by Him*"; I Cor. 1:30; Eph. 2:5,6; 15:22; Col. 3:3; I John 4:17. "Union with Adam and with Christ is the ground of imputation. But the parallelism is incomplete. While the sin of Adam is imputed to us because it is ours, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us simply because of our union with him, not at all because of our personal righteousness. In the one case, character is taken into account; in the other, it is not. In sin, our demerits are included; in justification our merits are excluded" (H. B. Smith, *Presbyterian Review*, July, 1881).

4. *Because faith "worketh by love"* (Gal. 5:6) *and is the medium by which Christ dwells in our hearts* (Eph. 3: 17-19; Gal. 2:20) *and by which we are progressively changed into the image of Christ in our*

*lives (Rom. 1:17; II Cor. 3:18); and thus we are prevented from "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness" (Jude 4). "Now God has so constituted the soul that the affections, and likewise the conscience, are affected and controlled by faith; and the purity of the one and the integrity of the other, and the activity of both, depend upon what a man believes; this being true, no mind can avoid the conviction that the principle of FAITH, which Christ has laid at the foundation of the Christian system is, from the nature of things, the only principle through the operation of which man's moral powers can be brought into happy, harmonious, and perfect activity" (J. B. Walker, *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation*, p. 177).*

There is no conflict between James and Paul on the matter of justification by faith. Paul used the Greek word "*dikaioo*" to mean "*to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous, or such as he ought to be,*" while James used the same word to mean "*to show, exhibit, evince, one to be righteous or such as he ought to be.*" Paul says that Abraham was justified in the sense that he uses the term, before circumcision (Rom. 4:9,10); while James says that Abraham was justified, in the sense he uses the term, when he offered Isaac. Reference to Gen. 17 reveals that Abraham was circumcised a year before the birth of Isaac, which is recorded in Gen. 21. Isaac was approximately twenty-five years old at the time Abraham offered him. Thus is seen that Paul and James were not talking about the same thing.

For other cases where the Greek word is used in the same sense in which James uses it, see Matt. 11:9 and I Tim. 3:16. Moreover note that James affirmed with Paul that "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness*" (Jas. 2:23) .

#### **IV. THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION**

##### *I. It is Instantaneous.*

It is an act, and not a process. It occurs and is complete the moment the individual believes. It admits of no degrees or stages. The penitent

Publican is said to have gone down to his house justified. He was justified completely the moment he put his faith in the propitiatory work of Christ. The justification of the believer is always put in the past tense. There is not in all the Bible the slightest hint of a continuous process in Justification.

### *2. It is Everlasting.*

When one is justified, he is justified for all eternity. Justification can never be revoked or reversed. It is once for all time and eternity. For that reason God asks: "*Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?*" (Rom. 8:33). Christ paid a full ransom, tin! made a complete satisfaction for all believers; otherwise Christ would have to die again, or else the believer would come into condemnation for his future sins. But we read that Christ's offering was once for all (Heb. 10:10), and that the believer "*shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life*" (John 5:24).

So far as the believer's standing is concerned, he has already passed the judgment. He has stood trial, and has been fully and everlastingly acquitted. That Paul taught an everlasting, unchangeable justification is shown by the fact that he felt called on to defend his doctrine against the attacks of those who would contend that it gave license for sin. This is the indictment that is brought today against the doctrine we are setting forth.

Lastly, we read: "*By one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified*" (Heb. 10:14). It is true that it is the sanctified that are under consideration in this quotation, but it is applicable to the justified also; for the sanctified and the justified are one. If the sanctified are perfected forever, so are the justified. The perfection here is perfection of standing before God.

### *3. It is Gracious and Free.*

The sinner deserves nothing at the hands of God, except condemnation. Therefore justification is wholly of grace. It is everywhere thus set forth in the Scripture, except by James who used the secondary

sense of the term. In the primary sense of the term, justification is never represented as being through works or obedience of man. See Rom. 3:20; 4:2-6; Titus 3:5.

And, while justification is on the basis of Christ's meritorious and atoning work, yet it is free and unconstrained on the part of God, inasmuch as God was under no obligation to allow Christ to act as our substitute.

#### *4. It is Judicial and Declarative Only.*

Justification, in its primary sense, is a forensic or law term. It is an act of the court of Heaven. It does not make the believer inwardly righteous or holy. It makes him righteous only as to his standing. Many endlessly confuse justification and sanctification. But they are not the same. Justification is presented as the opposite of condemnation; while sanctification is presented as the opposite of a sinful nature. See Rom. 5:18.

### **V. THE BENEFITS OF JUSTIFICATION**

#### *1. Restoration to the Favor of God.*

Justification does not merely free a man from the penalty the law; it makes him in God's sight as one who has never broken the law. Justification makes the believer as innocent before God in regard to his standing, as Adam was before the fall.

#### *2. The Imputation of the Righteousness of Christ.*

The following Scriptures teach that Christ's righteousness is imputed or reckoned to us in justification: Rom. 3:22; 4:3-6; 10:4; Phil. 3:9.

That the righteousness spoken of in these passages is the righteousness of Christ is proved by the fact that Christ is "*made unto us...righteousness*" (I Cor. 1:30) and we have that righteousness "*in Christ*" (II Cor. 5:21). This is further proved by Rom. 5:18,19, where we are said to receive justification "*by the righteousness of one*" and to "*be made righteous*" "*by the obedience of one,*" which "one" is

certainly Jesus Christ. D. B. Ford comments very appropriately:

"Paul has nowhere used the precise phrase: God imputes to us the righteousness of Christ apart from works, but it amounts to the same thing when he speaks of the righteousness of God which shall be ours through faith in Jesus Christ; when he asserts that we are justified gratuitously and by grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; that justification of life is through the righteous act and obedience of the Second Adam; that our faith in Christ, through which we are justified, is imputed to us for righteousness; that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness; that he is made unto us righteousness; and that we become the righteousness of God in him" (*An American Commentary on the New Testament*).

In the passages given in the foregoing discussion it is plain that the righteousness of Christ equals the obedience of Christ. The key to the meaning of the obedience of Christ is given in Phil. 2:8 and Heb. 5:8. *It was obedience rendered in a state of humiliation*. It is objected by some that as a man, Jesus owed obedience to the law for Himself; therefore He could not obey it for us. *It is true that Jesus, as a man, owed obedience to the law as it respects man, but, as God, He did not owe obedience to the law as it respects man*. As God, Jesus owed obedience to the laws of righteousness as they respect an infinite being. Even God is not exempt from law. He cannot disobey law as it respects an infinite being (that is, He cannot do what is wrong for Him) and remain God. But God, being infinite and, therefore, independent, has rights and prerogatives that do not belong to finite, dependent man. For instance, man is commanded not to kill; but God can take life as it pleases Him, because He is the giver of life. Man is commanded not to judge, but God does judge. Man is forbidden to glory in himself, but glory belongs to God inherently.

Therefore, when Jesus brought deity into union with humanity in the incarnation, deity was voluntarily and gratuitously made subject to the law of God for man. This was as truly vicarious and substitutionary

as His death on the cross. And it was needed to make us positively righteous. It is not enough that we be pardoned, forgiven. That would, of itself, exempt us from Hell; but it would not entitle us to Heaven. To be entitled to Heaven, we must have the positive and perfect merit of Jesus Christ. Heb. 10:14.

### *3. Adoption as a Son.*

We read: "God sent forth his son . . . to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" ( Gal. 4:4,5). It is on the basis of this redemption that we are justified. Adoption is the climax of justification. Christ took our place; therefore, when we believe on Him, we take His place as a *son*. It is thus that we receive the right to become sons. Adoption is in order that we may be legal "heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ" (Rom. 8:17), and that we may have a legal right to the inheritance "incorruptible and undefiled, and fadeth not away, reserved in heaven" for us (I Pet. 1:4). When we were justified we were already children of the Devil. We could not be unborn as such. Hence we had to be transferred from the Devil's family to God's family by adoption. We became sons experientially by regeneration; but legally by adoption. Regeneration and adoption are not the same.

### *4. Freedom from the Law.*

The following passages state this benefit: Rom. 6:14; 7:4-6; 10:4; I Cor. 9:21; Gal. 2:19; 5:18. What do these passages mean? They must be understood, if understood rightly, in the light of New Testament teaching as a whole.

(1) There are senses in which the believer is under the law of God and of Christ.

A. He is under the law of Christ as to the proof of salvation in his life. John 14:24; I John 2:4.

B. He is under the law of God as the Spirit works out in him the righteousness of the law. Rom. 8:4.



(2) There are senses in which the believer is not under law.

A. He is not under the law as to the penalty thereof. Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:13. Christ, by His death, having met the law's demands in full for believers, ended the power of the law to condemn. For this reason the believer can never come again into condemnation and does not have his sins charged to him as deserving the penalty of the law. John 5:24; Rom. 4:7,8; 8:1,33,34. The believer cannot sin with absolute impunity, but God deals with him under grace as a son, and not under law. I Cor. 11:31,32; Heb. 12:7.

B. He is not under the law as an external force compelling his obedience. He has the law written in his heart (Heb. 8:8-10; 10:16; II Cor. 3:6).

C. He is not under the law in the sense of having to win from the law a meritorious righteousness. He already has that in Christ through faith, as already noted.

D. He is not under the Mosaic law as a whole, nor any part of it as such, in any sense whatsoever. The Mosaic law was God's law for an earthly nation. As such it was an adjustment of God's original and perfect rule of righteousness. This is shown in the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus went back of some of the precepts of the Mosaic law, showing their limited scope. That the believer is not under the law of Moses is shown in I Cor. 9:21. Christ's law is simply the perfect, eternal rule of righteousness in the hands of Christ.

##### 5. *Peace with God.*

Rom. 5:1. The believer has peace with God because of, and through knowledge of, all the foregoing benefits.

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