

The Meaning of Justification

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How can a man be just with God? The answer given to this question decides the character of our religion, and, if practically adopted, our future destiny. To give a wrong answer is to mistake the way to Heaven. It is to err where error is fatal, because it cannot be corrected. If God requires one thing, and we present another, how can we be saved? If he has revealed a method in which he can be just and yet justify the sinner, and if we reject that method and insist upon pursuing a different way, how can we hope to be accepted? The answer, therefore, which is given to the above question, should be seriously pondered by all who assume the office of religious teachers and by all who rely upon their instructions. As we are not to be judged by proxy,¹ but every man must answer for himself, so every man should be satisfied for himself what the Bible teaches on this subject. All that religious teachers can do is to endeavor to aid the investigations of those who are anxious to learn the way of life. And in doing this, the safest method is to adhere strictly to the instructions of the Scriptures and to exhibit the subject as it is there presented.

It is one of the primary doctrines of the Bible, everywhere either asserted or assumed, that we are under the Law of God. This is true of all classes of men, whether they enjoy a divine revelation or not. Everything which God has revealed as a rule of duty enters into the constitution of the Law which binds those to whom that revelation is given and by which they are to be ultimately judged. Those who have not received any external revelation of the divine will are a law unto themselves. The knowledge of right and wrong, written upon their hearts, is of the nature of a divine law, having its authority and sanction, and by it the heathen are to be judged in the last day.

God has seen fit to annex the promise of life to obedience to His Law. "*The man which doeth those things shall live by them*" (Rom 10:5) is the language of Scripture on this subject. To the lawyer who admitted that the Law required love to God and man, our Savior said, "*Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live*" (Luk 10:28). And to one who asked Him, "*If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments*" "*What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?*" He said (Mat 19:17). On the other hand, the Law denounces death as the penalty of transgression: "*The wages of sin is death*" (Rom 6:23). Such is the uniform declaration of Scripture on this subject.

The obedience which the Law demands is called *righteousness*, and those who render that obedience are called *righteous*. To ascribe righteousness to anyone, or to pronounce him righteous, is the Scriptural meaning of the word "to justify." The word never means "to make good" in a moral sense, but always "to pronounce just or righteous." Thus God says, "*I will not justify the wicked*" (Exo 23:7). Judges are commanded to justify the righteous and to condemn the wicked (Deu 25:1). Woe is pronounced on those who "*justify the wicked for reward*" (Isa 5:23). In the New Testament it is said, "*By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight*" (Rom 3:20). "*It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns?*" (Rom 8:33, 34). There is scarcely a word in the Bible the meaning of which is less open to doubt. There is no passage in the New Testament in which it is used out of its ordinary and obvious sense.

When God justifies a man, He *declares* him to be righteous. To justify never means "to render one holy." It is said to be sinful to justify the wicked, but it could never be sinful to render the wicked holy. And as the Law demands righteousness, to impute or ascribe righteousness to anyone, is, in Scriptural language, to justify. To make (or constitute) righteous is another equivalent form of expression. Hence, to be righteous before God and to be justified mean the same thing as in the following passage: "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified" (Rom 2:13).

The attentive and especially the anxious reader of the Bible cannot fail to observe that these various expressions—to be righteous in the sight of God, to

impute righteousness, to constitute righteous, to justify, and others of similar import — are so interchanged as to explain each other and to make it clear that to justify a man is to ascribe or impute to him righteousness. The great question then is, How is this righteousness to be obtained? We have reason to be thankful that the answer which the Bible gives to this question is so perfectly plain.

In the first place, that the righteousness by which we are to be justified before God is not of works is not only asserted, but proved. The apostle's first argument on this point is derived from the consideration that the Law demands a *perfect righteousness*. If the Law were satisfied by an imperfect obedience, or by a routine of external duties, or by any service which men are competent to render, then indeed justification would be by works. But since it demands perfect obedience, justification by works is, for sinners, *absolutely impossible*. It is thus the apostle reasons, "*For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them*" (Gal 3:10). As the Law pronounces its curse upon every man who continues not to do all that it commands, and as no man can pretend to this perfect obedience, it follows that all who look to the Law for justification must be condemned. To the same effect in a following verse he says, "*And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.*" That is, the Law is not satisfied by any single grace or imperfect obedience. It knows and can know no other ground of justification than complete compliance with its demands. Hence, in the same chapter Paul says, "*For if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law*" (Gal 3:21). Could the Law pronounce righteous, and thus give a title to the promised life to those who had broken its commands, there would have been no necessity of any other provision for the salvation of men; but as the Law cannot thus lower its demands, justification by the Law is *impossible*. The same truth is taught in a different form when it is said, "*For if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain*" (Gal 2:21). There would have been no necessity for the death of Christ, if it had been possible to satisfy the Law by the imperfect obedience which we can render. Paul therefore warns all those who look to works for justification that they are debtors to do the

whole law (Gal 5:3). It knows *no compromise*; it cannot demand less than what is right, and perfect obedience is right. Therefore its only language is as before, "*Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them*" (Gal 3:10); and, "*That the man which doeth those things shall live by them*" (Rom 10:5). Every man, therefore, who expects justification by works must see to it, not that he is better than other men, or that he is very exact and does many things, or that he fasts twice in the week and gives tithes of all he possesses, but that he is *sinless*.

That the Law of God is thus strict in its demands is a truth which lies at the foundation of all Paul's reasoning in reference to the method of justification. He proves that the Gentiles have sinned against the law written on their hearts, and that the Jews have broken the Law revealed in their Scriptures; both Jews and Gentiles, therefore, are under sin, and the whole world is guilty before God. Hence, he infers, by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight. There is, however, no force in this reasoning, except on the assumption that the Law demands *perfect* obedience. How many men, who freely acknowledge that they are sinners, depend upon their works for acceptance with God! They see no inconsistency between the acknowledgment of sin and the expectation of justification by works. The reason is that they proceed upon a very different principle from that adopted by the apostle: they suppose that the Law may be satisfied by very *imperfect* obedience. Paul assumes that God demands perfect conformity to His will, that His wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. With him, therefore, it is enough that men have sinned to prove that they cannot be justified by works. It is not a question of degrees, more or less, for as to this point there is no difference, since "*all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*" (Rom 3:23).

This doctrine though so plainly taught in Scripture, men are disposed to think very severe. They imagine that their good deeds will be compared with their evil deeds, and that they will be rewarded or punished as the one or the other preponderates;² or that the sins of one part of life may be atoned for by the good works of another; or that they can escape by mere confession and repentance.

They could not entertain such expectations if they believed themselves to be under a law. No human law is administered as men seem to hope the Law of God will be. He who steals or murders, though it be but once, though he confesses and repents, though he does any number of acts of charity, is not less a thief or murderer. The Law cannot take cognizance³ of his repentance and reformation. If he steals or murders, the Law condemns him. Justification by the Law is for him *impossible*. The Law of God extends to the most secret exercises of the heart. It condemns whatever is in its nature evil. If a man violate this perfect rule of right, there is an end of justification by the Law; he has failed to comply with its conditions, and the Law can only condemn him. To justify him would be to say that he had not transgressed.

Men, however, think that they are not to be dealt with on the principles of strict law. Here is their fatal mistake. It is here that they are in most direct conflict with the Scriptures, which proceed upon the uniform assumption of our subjection to the Law. Under the government of God, strict law is nothing but perfect excellence; it is the steady exercise of moral rectitude.⁴ Even conscience, when duly enlightened and roused, is as strict as the Law of God. It refuses to be appeased by repentance, reformation, or penance.⁵ It enforces every command and every denunciation of our Supreme Ruler, and teaches— as plainly as do the Scriptures themselves—that justification by an imperfect obedience is *impossible*. As conscience, however, is fallible, no reliance on this subject is placed on her testimony. The appeal is to the Word of God, which clearly teaches that it is impossible a sinner can be justified by works, because the Law demands perfect obedience.

The apostle's second argument to show that justification is not by works is the testimony of the Scriptures of the Old Testament. This testimony is urged in various forms. In the *first* place, as the apostle proceeds upon the principle that the Law demands perfect obedience, all those passages which assert the universal sinfulness of men are so many declarations that they cannot be justified by works. He therefore quotes such passages as the following: "*There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there*

is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom 3:10-12). The Old Testament, by teaching that all men are sinners, does, in the apostle's view, thereby teach that they can never be accepted before God on the ground of their own righteousness. To say that a man is a sinner is to say that the Law condemns him—and of course, it cannot justify him. As the ancient Scriptures are full of declarations of the sinfulness of men, so they are full of proof that justification is not by works.

But in the *second* place, Paul cites their direct affirmative testimony in support of his doctrine. In the Psalms it is said, "*And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified"* (Psa 143:2). This passage he often quotes, and to the same class belong all those passages which speak of the insufficiency or worthlessness of human righteousness in the sight of God.

In the *third* place, the apostle refers to those passages which imply the doctrine for which he contends; that is, to those which speak of the acceptance of men with God as a matter of grace, as something which they do not deserve, and for which they can urge no claim founded upon their own merit. It is with this view that he refers to the language of David: "*Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin"* (Rom 4:7, 8). The fact that a man is forgiven implies that he is guilty, and the fact that he is guilty implies that his justification cannot rest upon his own character or conduct. It need hardly be remarked, that, in this view, the whole Scriptures, from the beginning to the end, are crowded with condemnations of the doctrine of justification by works. Every penitent confession, every appeal to God's mercy is a renunciation of *all personal merit*, a declaration that the penitent's hope was not founded on anything in himself. Such confessions and appeals are indeed often made by those who still rely upon their good works or inherent righteousness for acceptance with God. This, however, does not invalidate the apostle's argument. It only shows that such persons have a different view of what is necessary for justification from that

entertained by the apostle. They suppose that the demands of the Law are so low that although they are sinners and need to be forgiven, they can still do what the Law demands. Paul proceeds on the assumption that the Law requires perfect obedience, and therefore every confession of sin or appeal for mercy involves a renunciation of justification by the Law.

The Law knows nothing of anything but obedience as the ground of acceptance. If the Scriptures say we are accepted through faith, they thereby say that we are not accepted on the ground of obedience.

¹ **proxy** - substitute.

² **preponderates** - outweighs.

³ **cognizance** - an acknowledgement.

⁴ **rectitude** - uprightness.

⁵ **penance** - acts of humiliation to show sorrow for sin.

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