

The Doctrine of Justification

Introduction

Of the many attributes of God two of the most relevant to salvation are His justice and righteousness. Because of His justice God must not simply forgive sin, ignoring the damage done and insults made. There has to be a just punishment which is necessary for our justification. He is also righteous, therefore, how He provides justification and how it is offered must be in perfect righteousness. What do these terms signify?

Justification is a legal term which can only be applied to the sinner if they have been declared righteous by God. It is God's clearance of the individual by eradication of the record of their guilt. It gives the child of God a righteous standing before God on the merits of the sacrifice of the Lord. There is a difference between the individual's "standing" before God and their "state". As a justified one their "standing" is in Christ and is always perfect, whereas their "state" is dependent on the individual and fluctuates.

- a) "Standing" is that perfection of position which God has given to us.
- b) "State" is what we are in present spiritual experience. Some of the distinctions are:

"Standing" What we are by grace through Christ	Reference	"State" What I am in my spiritual condition through my response to God	Reference
Called the sons of God	1 Jn. 3:1	Called you . . . Walk worthy	1 Thess. 2:12
Saved . . . By grace	Eph. 2:5	Grow in grace	2 Pet. 3:18
Hidden in Christ	Col. 3:3	Abiding in Christ	Jn. 15:4
Forgiven by God	Eph. 1:7	Forgiving like God	Eph. 4:32
Ordained to eternal life	Acts 13:48	Ordained to good works	Eph. 2:10
Translated	Col. 1:13	Transformed	Rom. 12:2

God is righteous in His judgements (Rom. 2:5; Rev. 16:7); in His person (Ezra 9:15; Psa. 7:9); in His works (Dan. 9:14); the Psalmist records that His righteousness is "very high" (Psa. 71:19); and it is a characteristic He loves (Psa. 45:7; Heb. 1:9). Righteousness is moral conformity to God (Heb. 1:9). Thank God for the eleven times in Romans chapter 4 when we find:

- a) Righteousness is reckoned (in this context, put to our account) to us. (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24)
- b) Righteousness is, apart from works, teaching nothing man can do can secure it. (vv. 2, 5, 6)
- c) Righteousness is, apart from circumcision, teaching no religious ordinance or church rite can secure it. (vv. 10, 11)
- d) Righteousness is, apart from the law, teaching no legislation can secure it. (vv. 13, 14, 16)
- e) Righteousness is by grace, teaching it is based on the gracious attitude of God. (v. 16)
- f) Righteousness is dependent on Christ, teaching only His death and resurrection can secure it. (v. 25)

It is a mistake to think that justification is only a New Testament doctrine and never taught in the Old Testament". Indeed, the word translated "justified" (tsadaq) is used in forty verses of the Old Testament. Its first occurrence is when Jacob spoke concerning Tamar. He said: "She hath been more righteous than I" (Gen. 38:26). Other ways the word is translated are:

- a) "How shall we clear ourselves?" (Gen. 44:16). The words of the guilty brothers concerning Joseph.
- b) "I will not justify the wicked." (Ex. 23:7)
- c) "I would do him justice!" (2 Sam. 15:4). The words of Absalom to the people.
- d) "Justifying the righteous, by giving him according to his righteousness." (2 Chron. 6:23)

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- e) "Shall mortal man be more righteous than God?" (Job 4:17)
- f) "How should man be just with God?" (Job 9:2; 25:4). A question Job asked which is fundamental to fellowship with God.
- g) "That Thou mightest be justified." (Psa. 51:4)
- h) "Shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (Dan. 8:14)

Thus, its foundation and meaning is in the Old Testament which is the pictorial foundation for the teaching of justification in the New Testament. It indicates "clearance from guilt"; "justice"; "righteous"; and "cleansing". By such terms it is evidently a legal term which poses the problem of how can an individual be legally restored to a righteous standing before God? In the New Testament the word "justify" and its associate terms occurs thirty-five times.

Word	No. of verses
Justified	28 verses
Justify	4 verses
Justifier	1 verse

If one were to put salvation in a time line then the order would be:

- a) Conviction of sin
- b) Repentance of sin
- c) Conversion to God by faith in the work of Jesus Christ, thus being made righteous before God
- d) Declared justified.

Justification is not just a forensic word but it is a real declaration by God to the individual who believes. The sinner who accepts the finished work of Christ can declare by the authority of God, "My record is clear, I stand as one who has no record of guilt". A very faint illustration is given concerning Corrie Ten Boom. During the war she wrote in a book the names of the Jews she helped. It was found by the German army and given to the commandant. He brought Corrie into his office and showed her the book. It was the record of the crimes she had done against Germany in saving the lives of Jews, and she was guilty. The sentence was death. Then the commandant took the book, threw it in the fire, and when it was burnt and was no more, he let her go free. The record of guilt against her was forever gone. That is what the Lord did for us.

Definition

Simply put, justification with God is the righteous clearance of all guilt. It is therefore more than the forgiveness of sins.

Illustration: Years ago in Ireland I was brought to court for not having a bell on my bicycle. I was guilty and paid the fine. I was cleared from the viewpoint of the demands of the law, but on my record there was left the declaration of my guilt. That can never be removed by any court for I, Rowan Jennings, will be forever guilty of cycling without that bell.

When God justifies the sinner, He not only forgives the crimes, but righteously eradicates my guiltiness.

Justification is distinct from regeneration. In regeneration an individual receives a new life, a new nature, which is the result of the new birth. Justification gives the individual a new righteous legal standing before God. It is not a standing brought about by the works of man but the declaration of God concerning man.

Justification is not just a descriptive term but is a wonderful truth which declares the character of God, the need of man, that which God through Christ has provided, the moral qualities of God and my moral obligation because of it.

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Justification is not an acquittal for acquittal means the person was not guilty of the crime committed. God says: “will not at all acquit the wicked (guilty)” (Nah. 1:3). The word translated “acquit” (Nah. 1:3) is translated:

- a) The Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.” (Ex. 20:7)
- b) God “will by no means clear the guilty.” (Ex. 34:7)

The Range of Aspects of Justification

We humans are inclined to give a biblical word one meaning, and in doing so we miss the reality that God at times uses one word but in totally different contexts. For instance: We read of the Lord saying: “I sanctify myself” (Jn. 17:19), but that is totally different from: “The very God of peace sanctify you wholly” (1 Thess. 5:23). The word “baptize” is different in its meaning from that which it signifies, for the word simply means “to dip” or “put into” without any thought of coming out, whereas it signifies the death, burial, and resurrection of the believer by going in, under, and out of the water. So the word “justify” and its associates have a variety of contexts.

For instance:

- a) Divine persons are declared justified:
 - i) God is declared to be justified (Psa. 51:4)
 - ii) Christ is justified (1 Tim. 3:16)

- b) Divine wisdom is declared to be justified:
 - i) Wisdom is justified of her children (Matt. 11:19)

- c) We are justified:
 - i) By God, He is the source (Rom. 8:33)
 - ii) By grace, that is God’s attitude (Rom. 3:24)
 - iii) By blood, that is the price of justification (Rom. 5:9)
 - iv) By the resurrection, that is the ground of justification (Rom. 4:25)
 - v) By faith, that is the method of receiving justification (Rom. 5:1)
 - vi) From all things, that is the fulness of justification (Acts 13:39)
 - vii) By works, that is the fruit of justification (Jam. 2:24-25)
 - viii) In the Name, that is the person who secured justification (1 Cor. 6:11)

When this is observed we learn that we cannot declare that everyone who is justified is cleared of guiltiness, for God and Christ were never and could never be guilty of crimes as we are. How then do we understand these statements? In any language and its synonyms, there is always one word which catches better than another. When we read of divine persons or wisdom being justified, because there is no guilt with them it is soon discovered that no single word conveys the full truth. We can say that the Lord vindicated, exonerated, acquitted, authenticated, or corroborated, endorsed, for all have a distinct shade of meaning. The following table will help simplify the distinctions.

Legal term	Its meaning	Its application to divine Persons
Absolve	To set free from any guilt or blame	He was raised from the dead by the spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:4), thus absolved from any guiltiness He was accused of.
Vindicated	The clearing of the individual who has been maliciously attacked	With what venom the motley crowd cried: “By our law he ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God” (Jn. 19:7)
Exonerated	Clearance for any definite charge and suspicion	He was called a deceiver, His manifested resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Spirit cleared Him of any charge. (1 Tim. 3:16)

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Legal term	Its meaning	Its application to divine Persons
Acquitted	To be released from any specific and formal accusation of wrong	Lifting Rom. 8:33 to its highest level, viewing the “elect” as Christ, a term He is described by in Isa. 42:1; 1 Pet. 2:6 with God justifying Him, who could lay any charge against Him?

On five occasions we read, concerning Christ, the words “no fault”.

- a) Pilate speaking to the chief priests and the people said: “I find no fault in this man” (Lk. 23:4).
- b) Then after the Lord had been examined by Pilate and Herod, Pilate speaks to the chief priests, rulers, and the people, and said: I have “found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse Him” (Lk. 23:14).
- c) This expression is repeated three times in John (Jn. 18:38; 19:4; 19:6).

The words indicate that the political judicial supreme authority, (similar to the supreme court of Canada, etc.) of the land could find no legal ground for punishment in Christ. Pilate knew the law, and the serious consequences from Rome if he made a wrong call. Insurrection could not be tolerated, and they accused Him of declaring Himself to be a king (Lk. 23:2). The breaking of the Jewish religious matters meant nothing to Pilate, but the announcing of Himself as king was something which could not be ignored. This was the point Pilate stressed: “Art Thou the King of the Jews?” (Matt. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3; Jn. 18:33). On this major matter Pilate found the Lord to be void of any cause of punishment.

How could there be a reason for punishment in the Lord? It was He who said to them: “Which of you convinceth (can convict) me of sin?” (Jn. 8:46). How could man find a distortion in the Light? Neither in Him, or by His words or works was there an outstanding feature as wisdom was with Solomon, meekness with Moses, patience with Job, or weeping with Jeremiah. He was perfectly balanced in every moral attribute. With Him mercy was balanced with justice, faith with sight, divine responsibility and human obligation. At all times He was the perfect Son of God and of Mary, perfect Leader and Teacher, yet perfect as one with an opened ear. Beyond this evaluation of man, God’s declaration far outweighed the authority of the chief priests, elders, Pilate or Herod, and God’s estimation was: “My Servant . . . in whom my soul delighteth” (Isa. 42:1), and “Behold my servant . . . in whom my soul is well pleased” (Matt. 12:18). Again on the Holy Mount God says: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 17:5).

- a) David (Psa. 51:4) had sinned and confessed his iniquity. He removes all possible guilt from God, and when God pronounces judgment David is declaring that it is not from a bias perspective, but He is perfectly justified in His evaluation and judgment.
- b) When our Lord was here He claimed to be the Son of God, yet despite the miracles He performed, the chief priests and elders of the people called him a deceiver (Matt. 27:63). Were the claims He made of divine sonship true? He was justified (1 Tim. 3:16) that is, God raised Him from the dead and declared He was true and right in all His claims.

The Character of God Who Pronounces “Justified”, “Guiltless”

It will be seen there is a moral tension for how can God righteously declare a guilty individual justified and cleared of all guilt? His character will not allow it. God is Holy and: “The Lord is righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works” (Psa. 145:17), so it is impossible for a guilty individual to be declare justified, cleared of all guilt. Thank God that with Him “all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26) and He has devised a means: “that His banished (though guilty as Absalom was) be not expelled from Him” (2 Sam. 14:14).

Not only must God be righteous in the declaration of righteousness but He must also be in the method by which He is able to make that declaration. With man, the end justifies the means, but not with God. It is this very point Paul expounds when he writes: “To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

The Qualifications of The Justifying Medium, That is Christ

The qualification to be able to justify others is that the Justifier must be guiltless, and since humanity is guilty of every crime possible, it necessitates the Justifier must be guiltless of every crime possible. This is different from being positively holy, but necessitates the Justifier must never, under any circumstances, in any way, at any time, in any degree, ever have rebelled against the law of God. But beyond that, their goal and motivation for doing that which was according to God must always be without self interests or through personal ego. How magnificent the Lord is. Never had he to retract a word, put a spin on an activity, or act covertly and thus was never guilty.

The Results Because of Justification

- 1) The removal of the penalty for our guiltiness and its penalty (Rom. 4:7-8; 2 Cor. 5:19). We needed more than God's forgiveness. The fulness of His expiation and propitiation had to be righteously gained and applied to us. We needed every sin, past, present, and future all expunged from our record. In the words of Paul:
 - i) "The handwriting that was against us" was "blotted out", taken away (Col. 2:14).
 - ii) The curse of the broken law was removed (Gal. 3:13).
 - iii) The record of our guiltiness was "blotted out" (Col. 2:14), it was obliterated, erased, and has been "taken away", that is permanently taken away by the Lamb of God who "beareth away" (same word) the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29).
- 2) Forgiveness of sins is proffered to the whosoever. How gracious of God. How solemn is the condition of the individual who rejects God's forgiveness. This also goes beyond justification for justification is the legal aspect, but to forgive one who has done wrong requires largeness of heart.
 - i) Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, Paul was ready to make retribution, but the concern was if Philemon would forgive him.
 - ii) Absalom rebelled against David the King, and in time was restored, but fellowship was never complete and forgiveness was never available, for Absalom never repented of his wrongs.
- 3) We are blessed with a relationship that Adam never had (Eph. 2:6; 1 Jn. 3:1). It is hard for us to comprehend but we are spiritually better off now that we would ever have been had Adam never sinned. We have become the "sons and daughters" of the living God (2 Cor. 6:18); are made "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17); and "kings and priests unto God" (Rev. 1:6).

When the truth of justification begins to dawn on our souls we cannot help but sing the words of Samuel Davies:

Great God of wonders! All Thy ways
Are matchless, Godlike and divine;
But the fair glories of Thy grace
More Godlike and unrivaled shine

Refrain:

*Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

Crimes of such horror to forgive,
Such guilty, daring worms to spare;
This is Thy grand prerogative,
And none shall in the honor share,

Angels and men, resign your claim
To pity, mercy, love and grace:
These glories crown Jehovah's Name
With an incomparable glaze

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In wonder lost, with trembling joy,
We take the pardon of our God:
Pardon for crimes of deepest dye,
A pardon bought with Jesus' blood,
O may this strange, this matchless grace,
This Godlike miracle of love,
Fill the whole earth with grateful praise,
And all th'angelic choirs above.

Then add to this:

- a) Peace with God (Rom. 5:1)
- b) Condemnation is forever gone (Rom. 8:1, 33, 34)
- c) The imputation of divine righteousness (Rom. 4:5)
- d) Acceptance in the beloved (Eph. 1:6)
- e) Heirship (Titus 3:7)
- f) Saved from coming wrath (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10)
- g) Assured of glorification (Rom. 8:30; Gal. 5:5)

The Resurrection of Our Lord and Our Justification

Having developed the truth that all are under condemnation, Paul begins a new section in Romans 3:19 which deals with the provision, scope, and blessings of salvation. The particular aspect of salvation is not being with Christ for eternity, that is his focus, but the new position the individual is brought into at the moment of salvation. The first basic sin was that of "unthankfulness" (Rom. 1:21) which is the attitude of non-dependence on another! He will show that the way of salvation demands "dependence on another".

- a) Justification is secured by:
 - i) The redemption which is in Christ Jesus - His work (Rom. 3:24)
 - 1. Extends to all including the sins of the past (Rom. 3:25)
 - ii) The righteousness of God in how He provided remission of sins (Rom. 3:25-26)
- (b) Justification is received by:
 - i) Faith without our works (Rom. 4:1-8)
 - 1. Extends to all circumcised and uncircumcised (Rom. 4:9-17)
 - ii) The power of God in raising Christ from the dead resulting in justification (Rom. 4:17-25).

Justification is by faith and Paul informs us on what sort of faith. It is faith that:

- a) Believes in divine power: "Who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were" (Rom. 4:17). To be justified one must believe that by the power of God Christ was raised from the dead, and that same power can raise the individual to new life, a justified individual. (Rom. 4:25; Eph. 1:19-2:1)
- b) Believes in the ability of God to do the impossible (Rom. 4:18). The question was asked: "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" (Job. 14:4). God is the God of the impossible and He is able to clear the guilty.
- c) Believes in the ability of God to overcome special difficulties (Rom. 4:19). No matter how deep dyed the sinner, the number of rebellions in their past, the character of the sins, the condemnation of them all can be forever removed so that the individual can say: "There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" and "Who can condemn?" (Rom. 8:33-34)
- d) Believes fully in the willingness, power, and desire of God (Rom. 4:19-21). One can never be justified while they ponder if their faith is strong enough and if God will accept them. Justification is not dependent on the largeness or strength of our faith, but on the God who promises.

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Godet puts this whole section very beautifully when he writes: "On the same way as Jesus died for our offenses, that is our merited condemnation, He was raised for our accomplished justification". (He had to be raised from the dead). In a criminal case the debt is not paid while the criminal is still in prison. While the Lord was dead, full deliverance was not complete, forgiveness of sins was available but our relationship to Adam still existed, as well as the criminal record. Immediately the criminal's debt has been paid he is freed from the prison. Christ did not have to wait for the penalty to be paid, it was through His blood, but the manifestation of that payment and our justification is only possible because of His resurrection.

The Richness of Our Justification

The justification God gives puts us in such a standing before God that the Holy Spirit could cause John to write: "As he is, so are we in this world" (1 Jn. 4:17). It does not say "As he was", but "As He is", that is, in the fulness of His perfections and righteousness before God, in the place He occupied before God, so are we. This is profound for when we sin, or are sinning, at that moment or during those moments, there is no guiltiness put to our record. Such is the physical death of Christ that all I am in Adam, all that I do because of the sin nature, is eradicated.



**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

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