

# *Justification . . . declares that a sinner is free from all guilt and that the*

**T**he doctrine of justification by faith is fundamental to a biblical understanding of the gospel. In the act of justification, God, by grace alone, justifies sinners, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Martin Luther termed it “the article of faith that marks whether a church is standing or falling.” We can identify with his assessment of the importance of this doctrine.

*What do we mean when we speak of the justification of sinners?* Job asked this question (Job 9:2), but his counselors had no answer (Job 25:4). We cannot find an answer to this vital question if we confine ourselves to the philosophies of men. The only answer is a biblical one. What the Bible actually teaches about justification is aptly summed up in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Answer 33).

Justification reveals how God deals with our sins, accepts us as righteous in His sight, and makes us the subjects of His favour and not of His wrath. It is strictly a forensic term, taken from the language of the court room. In biblical usage, the verb *to justify* means to declare a sinner “just,” acquitted from the threat of divine justice. This is important. It does not mean to *make* just, but simply to *declare* just. It declares that a sinner is free from all guilt and that the just demands of God’s law are now powerless to accuse him in any way (Romans 8:33–34; Romans 3:26).

*Why do we need to be justified before God?* The opening chapters of Genesis indicate not only how God made man perfect in His own image, but also how man sinned against God (cf. Ecclesiastes 7:29). Romans 5:12 shows us that we are all guilty before God because of sin. But why could not God, who is love, simply forgive us our sins? Paul gives us the answer in Romans 1:16–18: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” Here Paul defines sin as “ungodliness” and “unrighteousness.”

Since the fall, there has been a radical change in man’s relation with God. Because of the fall, he is ungodly. He is alienated from

God, unwilling and unable to fulfil the chief end for his existence, to glorify God. We must remember that all sin is principally against God (Psalm 51:4). On the other hand, there has also been a radical change in man’s conduct before God because man is unrighteous (see Romans 3:10–18).

Furthermore, we need to be justified not only because of our wickedness, but also because of God’s holy wrath against sin. God, by nature, is holy and just, and He

therefore cannot tolerate sin. He must punish all sin (Habakkuk 1:13). His wrath is the expression of his immutable nature. That is why hell is a necessary reality, being the place of God’s unflinching, unchanging, and unending justice for all who refuse His mercy and grace. As sinners under God’s wrath (John 3:18), we need a righteousness whereby we can be accepted and treated as righteous by a holy and just God.

*On what grounds can we receive such a righteousness?* We cannot earn such righteousness for ourselves. Because of sin we cannot render perfect obedience to, and live in perfect conformity to, the law of God (Isaiah 64:6; Romans 8:7). The only way a sinner can be accepted as righteous before God is on the grounds of the perfect righteousness of the Son of God.

Vital to this matter is the teaching of Romans 3:21–25. According to verse 25, Christ came to do two things: to be the propitiation for our sins and to declare the righteousness of God. Propitiation is “the appeasement or turning away of God’s wrath against



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sinners by means of an atoning sacrifice” (Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*). The Lord Jesus Christ accomplished this by His active obedience. As the representative of His people in the covenant of grace, Christ perfectly and consistently obeyed the law of God. Also, He was a propitiation for our sins by His passive obedience. As our substitute Christ suffered the penalty of the broken law. He

shed His blood, died, and rose the third day to live and intercede for us in heaven. In this way “God declared His righteousness.” God manifested in the flesh is Jehovah Tsidkenu, the Lord our righteousness (Jeremiah 33:16). On this ground alone a sinner can be accepted and declared righteous by a just God.

Once this happens, the sinner’s sin is remitted. He is no longer guilty, but forgiven (Acts 13:39). At the same time, he is accepted by God (Romans 5:1). All this is possible because the sinner’s sin was imputed to Christ, and the legal rights of the righteousness of Christ were imputed to the sinner (2 Corinthians 5:21). The act of justification is motivated solely by God’s free and sovereign grace. He does not justify us because we are worthy, but by justifying us makes us worthy (Romans 3:24).

*How can I, a sinner, be just before God?* The Bible says a sinner can be just before God by faith alone. Faith is not the cause of our justification. If this were so, faith would become a meritorious work. Nowhere does the Bible teach that we are justified “because of

faith” or “on account of faith.” Faith is the *means*, not the ground of justification. We are justified *by* faith (Romans 3:28), or *through* faith (Galatians 3:8). It is only by faith, without the works of the law, that we can be accepted as righteous before a holy and just God (Romans 5:1). We are commanded to believe that only the righteousness of Christ alone imputed to us can make us just before God (Romans 4:4–5, 16; Ephesians 2:8–9).

To summarize, justification is an all-embracing act of God (Romans 8:33). It is equal in all believers, no one being more or less justified than any other (Romans 5:19). When a person is justified, all his sins, past, present, and future are completely dealt with once and for all. Thus, once God declares a sinner just, that person cannot ever become unjust (Romans 8:30). This does not mean he is sinless (cf. 1 John 1:8). Luther referred to the justified sinner as “simultaneously righteous and sinner.” Unlike sanctification, justification is not a process. It is of vital importance to differentiate between justification and sanctification (1 Corinthians 6:11). This is where Roman Catholicism errs so gravely, confusing the order of these two doctrines. Luther rightly said, “Good works follow justification as the fruit appears upon the tree.” Good works—sanctification—are the evidence, not the cause of our justification (James 2:14).

From all of this it is evident that the justification of sinners is the triumph of God’s free and sovereign grace (Ephesians 1:5–6). As sinners justified by grace alone we sing,

*Jesus, thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress;  
’Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,  
With joy shall I lift up my head.*

*Bold shall I stand in Thy great day,  
For who aught to my charge shall lay?  
Fully absolved through these I am,  
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame. ■*



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