

Watch Your *Doctrine*

Session 5: Justification by Faith with Pastor Colin Smith

Last time we looked at regeneration, the miracle of grace by which God brings us to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we are looking at justification—the gift in which God drops all charges against us so we are freed from condemnation and are reconciled to God.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1–2)

To be at peace with God! To live in the world of grace! To joyfully anticipate seeing and sharing the glory of God Himself. All of this is the fruit of the marvelous gift of justification.

1. Justification

The word ‘justify’ means ‘to declare a person righteous.’ It is the opposite of ‘condemn,’ which is to declare a person guilty. Both justification and condemnation announce a verdict. When the judge pronounces a person guilty in a court of law, a sentence will follow, and it will have to be served. When a judge pronounces a person ‘not guilty,’ freedom follows, and the charge against that person can never be raised again. Get this settled in your mind. Justification is a declaration or a verdict. When God justifies a person, He pronounces that person ‘not guilty.’

We read in Romans 8 that, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1). That is a marvelous statement, but the obvious question is ‘why?’ Why is there no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? It’s not that there is nothing in us that God could condemn. If I were to ask you, “Is there anything in your life today, this week, or this month, that God could rightly condemn?” You would have to say, as I would, “Yes! Plenty!”

So why is there no condemnation for us when there is plenty in our lives that God could rightly condemn? The answer is that God in His mercy, drops all charges against those who are *in Christ Jesus*. And He does this in absolute justice because God has charged to Jesus all that would have been charged to us and Jesus dealt with all of our sins on the cross. This is the great truth that we are looking at in this session.

The Story

I have found it helpful to follow the story of how there came to be so much confusion over justification. Early in the history of the Church, the Bible was translated into Latin. In this translation, the Greek word for justification which means ‘**to declare righteous**’ was translated with a Latin word that means ‘**to make righteous**.’ There’s a big difference!

God makes a person righteous through a process of change in which we become more like Jesus. You can see the problem. If justification means us becoming righteous, none of us would be justified. The best Christian you know is a long way from being like Jesus!

For many hundreds of years, scholars focused on the question, how does God make us righteous? The answer to that question is that God makes us righteous by His Holy Spirit working through prayer, the Word, the church, fellowship, service, suffering etc. But justification is not about how God *makes* us righteous. Justification is the wonderful gift in which God *declares* us righteous.

God declares us righteous by forgiving our sins. God drops all charges against those who are 'in Christ' because He has charged all of our sins to Jesus and credited all of Jesus' righteousness to us.

But scholars working with the Latin translation of the Bible missed this. A bad translation misled them. They worked on the assumption that justification means being made righteous and that led them to believe that a Christian's progress in the pursuit of holiness played a role in his or her justification.

Early in the history of the church, justification was understood to include sanctification. (The process of change in which we become more like Jesus.) And that stuck. If you follow that line of thought, you end up with the idea that in order to be right with God, you have to repent more, to pray more, to serve more, and of course, on that basis you can never have peace.

This was Martin Luther's struggle. Luther experienced a great battle with his inclinations to toward sin. He knew that his heart, even at its best, was not what it should be and although he hated his own sins, he knew that his repentance was not all that it could be. He knew that he was a long way from being 'made righteous.' Behind his great sense of sin, was Luther's overwhelming sense of the greatness and glory of God. Luther feared God and when he read about the righteousness of God, he resented it because it seemed to him that this all-powerful God was demanding a righteousness that Luther could not produce.

The sixteenth century was the time of the renaissance. A time of new learning when scholars began to study ancient texts in their original languages. The printing press was invented, and a man by the name of Erasmus published the New Testament in the original Greek. Luther's breakthrough came through studying the Bible in its original language. He was especially struck by Romans 1:16–17,

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'

Luther came to see that the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is not the righteousness that God requires of us, but a righteousness that God gives to us and that we receive it by faith.

And this is his testimony:

I began to understand that 'the justice of God' meant that justice by which the just man lives through God's gift, namely by faith. This is what it means: ...the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'He who through faith is just shall live.'

When I realized this I felt myself absolutely born again.

The gates of paradise had been flung open and I had entered.
There and then the whole of Scripture took on another look to me.

What Luther grasped was that peace with God does not rest on the gradual and progressive curing of sin in us but on what the free gift of Christ's righteousness to us. Or to put it another way: Justification rests not on the continuing work of the Spirit *in you* but on the completed work of Christ *for you*. There's all the difference in the world!

The work of the Spirit in you is gradual, progressive, and it is never done in this life. Your faith is not what you want it to be. Your repentance is not what it ought to be. Your service to Christ is not what it could be. Till the day you die you will be a work in progress! But the work of Jesus Christ for you is complete. On the cross, He said, "It is finished." The perfect life has been lived. The atoning sacrifice has been offered and accepted. And in Christ, God counts this perfect, complete, righteousness of the Savior as yours.

Before he understood this, Luther had been working on the premise that you had to be free from sin in order to be at peace with God. What he found was that there is peace with God through faith in Jesus even though we are still doing battle with sin.

Paul uses a very striking phrase in Romans 4:5. "[God] *justifies the ungodly.*" That is an astonishing statement but thank God for it! God justifies us in Christ even though we are still far from being all that He calls us to be.

2. Union with Christ

This great truth of justification raises some obvious questions. A friend of mine told me the story of a teenager in his church who had professed faith but was living in flagrant rebellion against the Lord. When his pastor challenged him on what he was doing, the youngster said, "I was saved when I was 12 and I'll live like hell if I want to!"

Here was a lad who had been taught that his sins were forgiven through faith in Jesus, and that this did not depend on his growth or progress in the Christian life. From that he had concluded that pursuing a godly life was of no importance. It simply didn't matter. Since he was 'saved' he could live however he wanted. How would you answer that lad? What would you say to him?

We've seen that Paul explains the doctrine of justification by faith in Romans chapter 5. And in the next chapter, he deals with the question that naturally arises from this truth.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? (Romans 6:1)

Shall we say that sin in the believer does not matter, and that sanctification is a kind of optional upgrade in the Christian life for enthusiasts who want to pursue it? Paul's answer is clear: "*By no means!*" (Romans 6:2) The reason he gives is the doctrine of *Union with Christ*.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

We were baptized into Christ, we died and were buried with Christ, and now we are raised with Him to a new kind of life. Faith unites us with the Lord Jesus Christ and if we are united with Christ in His death, we are also united with Christ in His life. The relationship between justification, in which we are declared right with God and sanctification, the ongoing process by which the Holy Spirit makes you more like Jesus, is really important. And the way that they're connected is that they are both found in Christ.

How are we justified? We're justified in Christ. And how are we sanctified? We're sanctified in Christ. Justification and sanctification are two distinct things, but they're not separate things because they're both found together in Christ.

Seeing the centrality of union with Christ in the New Testament has really helped me here. For many years, I had thought about the gifts of Christ: justification, adoption, redemption, sanctification, and more, as if they stood in a line with justification being first. The problem with the line is that it invites the idea that you can pick up justification and that you don't need to worry about going any further down the line. So you find people saying that they received Jesus as Savior, but never quite got round to crowning Him as Lord. I want to suggest that you forget about the line and think about a circle.

The Line

Justification → Adoption → Redemption → Sanctification → and more

Let's call the circle 'in Christ.' In the circle are justification, sanctification, redemption, adoption, and more. Apart from Christ, (outside the circle) none of these are yours. In Christ, (in the circle) all of these are yours! If you want to be justified, you have to be 'in Christ.' If you want to be sanctified, you have to be 'in Christ.' If you are 'in Christ,' you will be justified and sanctified. God justifies no one who He does not at the same time sanctify.

This is the point of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "*And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption*" (1 Corinthians 1:30). All these things are ours in Christ, and none of them are ours without Him. Justification and sanctification must never be confused, and they must never be separated.

The sun gives heat, and it gives light. The sun's heat and the sun's light are distinct, but they are also inseparable. They are distinct because the sun's heat is not its light, and its light is not its heat. But they are inseparable because where the sun is, there is both heat and light. In the same way, justification and sanctification are distinct gifts of Christ and that is why we can have peace with God even though we are a long way short of what God calls us to be. But justification and sanctification are also inseparable gifts of Christ and that is why all who are justified will pursue holiness of life.

The Circle



This great truth of union with Christ ties justification and sanctification together. The New Testament offers us one wonderful gift, Jesus Christ. He is the gift of gifts, all other gifts in one. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ!

3. The Role and Function of Faith

The New Testament speaks of our justification in three ways and each of them contributes to a proper understanding of justification: we are justified by faith; we are justified by grace; and we are justified by the blood of Christ.

a. We are justified by faith

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

Faith is the bond of a living union that unites us with Jesus Christ. When the Bible says that we are justified by faith, it is telling us that we are justified in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Never apart from Him and never without Him.

“By faith” reminds us that people must turn to Jesus Christ and receive Him. Without faith we would not be justified. Living faith joins you to Jesus. It puts you ‘in Christ’ who justifies, redeems, adopts, and sanctifies you, and one day will receive you into heaven.

James addresses the person who claims to have faith but shows no evidence of belonging to Jesus in the way that he or she lives. He is concerned about the person like the lad I referred to earlier who said, “I was saved when I was 12 and I’ll live like hell if I want to.”

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14)

In other words, simply saying that you have a faith is not biblical faith and it’s certainly not saving faith. James is saying that genuine faith is more than words. Genuine faith works. It produces the good fruit of a growing likeness to Jesus.

And the reason faith does this is that it unites you to Christ in whom you have the wonderful gifts of justification, adoption, redemption, sanctification, and more.

b. We are justified by grace

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:23–24)

Justified by grace reminds us that justification is a free gift. Faith is not a work that we contribute to our justification. It is the means by which we receive this gift from the hand of God. Faith is like an empty hand open to receive. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

c. We are justified by His blood

...since, therefore, we have been justified by His blood. (Romans 5:9)

The death of Jesus is what justifies us. Faith is the way in which we receive this gift because it is the means by which Christ becomes ours.

So we must call people to faith, but we must help them, to see that it is Christ who saves us, not our faith. Faith is simply the means by which we receive what Christ gives.

Listen to these words from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

It is not faith that saves us. What saves us is the Lord Jesus Christ and His perfect work. It is the death of Christ upon Calvary's cross that saves us. It is His perfect life that saves us. It is His appearing on our behalf in the presence of God that saves us. It is God putting Christ's righteousness to our account that saves us...faith is but the channel and the instrument by which His righteousness becomes mine.

When you read the words 'justified by faith' it would be easy to get the idea that it is your faith that justifies you. That would leave you looking at your faith rather than your Savior. Faith does not look to itself. It looks to Jesus and all that He accomplished for us on the cross.

Here's some really good news. Your salvation does not rest on the strength of your faith but on the strength of your Savior. Knowing this will help you especially when you feel the weakness of your faith. What matters most is not that you have a great faith, but that you have a great Savior!

In the first winter after our family came here to the United States from Great Britain, we went on a trip to Wisconsin. Our boys were 10 and 8 at the time. We stopped at Fon-du-Lac. It was the last week of the year, and I don't think I've ever been so cold in all my life. It was perishingly cold.

We pulled up by the lake and when we got out, the boys said, "Hey dad, can we go on the ice?" Parents know that when you're not concentrating, you often default to whatever you said before. In Britain we have ice, but it's rarely thick and so you have to be careful. So, I said what I always said, "Yes, you can go on the ice, but be careful."

Our boys moved onto the ice very carefully, followed by their mother who was even more cautious, and then having locked the car, I followed, inching my way out onto the ice. Suddenly, a large 4x4 vehicle, with six teenagers inside, came over the brow of the hill and went right out onto the middle of the ice. And here we were, four foreigners, cautiously creeping forward. I don't think I have ever felt so foolish in all of my life!

Now, think about this. How much confidence did we have? Not much. But we were absolutely safe. We were secure, not because of the strength of our faith, but because of the strength of the ice on which we were standing.

You are not saved by the strength of your faith, but by the strength of your Savior. Faith is sometimes like a trembling hand that receives what Christ offers. But faith is a hand open to receive what Christ gives. And Christ puts into the hand of faith all that He has purchased for us

through the shedding of His blood. You will not arrive in heaven because of the strength of your faith. You will arrive in heaven because of the strength of your Savior.

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