

Justification by Grace through Faith

By Jay Wegter

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be **justified** in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being **justified** as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:19-26).

Therefore, having been **justified** by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:1-2).

We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not **justified** by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be **justified** by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be **justified** (Gal 2:15-16).

Giving thanks to the Father, who has **qualified** us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:12-14).

The gospel is the revelation of God's love (Jn 3:16), and the revelation of His power and His righteousness (Rom 1:16-17), and the revelation of His wisdom (1 Cor 1:24; Eph 3:10). 'Revealed' means that if God had not disclosed it, we would never have known it or found it. In other words, the gospel is not of man, nor of man's wisdom or reasoning (Gal 1:11ff.). For, the gospel answers two great riddles: **1)** how can sinful man be accounted righteous in God's sight? And **2)** How can our holy God remain righteous when He forgives and accepts unrighteous men? See Romans 3:23-26.

Mankind, even religious mankind is naturally ignorant of God's righteousness (Rom 10:1-3). This ignorance is manifested in man's attempt to earn God's favor by the generation of personal merit and righteousness by works. But this method will not arrive at righteousness. For Christ is the goal, or end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom 10:4). Only by the righteousness of Christ are sinners brought into divine favor, for the gospel casts down all relative righteousness and only accepts God's own absolute righteousness which sinners receive by faith.

The law is not the source of personal righteousness for Scripture states that the law is a strict tutor or schoolmaster to lead us to Christ (Gal 3:24). The law is the revealer of sin, revealing that all men lack the righteousness God requires (Rom 3:19-21; 7:7-13). God regards all as shut up in disobedience, so that only divine mercy, not works can save them (Rom 11:32). The whole world is locked up, shut up, kept in custody so to speak with the only way out being the word of faith, the gospel—namely that righteousness (right-standing before God) is by faith in Christ alone (Gal 3:21-23).

God sets aside His law for no one—there can be no talk of favor to sinners unless His law is fully satisfied. God saves by propitiation (by Christ's atoning sacrifice), and not by leniency toward sinners (Rom 3:24-26). God does not grant eternal life under any other condition than the perfect keeping of the law (Rom 10:1-4; 1 Cor 1:30). Original sin plunged humanity into a hopeless state, a kind of cul-de-sac with no way out in terms of a human answer. The solution could not be found in fallen man. God solves the riddle through His Son and the angels marvel at the solution (Eph 3:9-11; 1 Pet 1:12). Wonder of wonders, creatures locked in sin and death are made alive in Christ. The sinner's solidarity with Adam is replaced with solidarity with Christ, the Last Adam. Christ became the sphere in which our redemption is accomplished (Col 2:9-15).ⁱ

God could not make us alive, or pardon us, or justify us by the mere fiat of His will. Justice had to be fully met. It was this satisfaction of divine justice through the sacrifice of our Substitute that planted eternal life in us. But do not imagine that our spiritual life has experienced a jump start, and now our soul life is running on its own. We have been made alive in Christ through union with Him, He is the sphere in which life is imparted to us and maintained (Jn 15:1-6; Col 2:9-15). God the Son made flesh has the 'equipment' to give us life; He possessed the power to give life before He gave it, for He is the Creator of it (Jn 6:47-51; Col 1:15-18).ⁱⁱ

God wills to be known, but only through the gospel is that saving knowledge of God possible. "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (Jn 17:3). Yes, God wills to be known, but He is only known through the gospel, for the gospel alone 'allows God to be God'. For the gospel

reveals that God's absolute righteous demands are fully satisfied through the Substitute He appoints and provides. God does not save nor make Himself known via human effort and approximations of righteousness. Don't miss this, God makes Himself known savingly ONLY by the message of the gospel—that through the work of Christ, God's absolute standard of righteousness has been satisfied, and through the work of Christ God has propitiated (satisfied) His own wrath (2 Cor 5:19). Only the gospel provides salvation by revealing who God is through the Person and work of Christ (Heb 1:1-3).

No matter how rational and sincere their beliefs may appear, God will not allow men to find Him by means of the assumptions of natural religion (1 Cor 1:21-25). There is a very important reason for this. God is showcasing His wisdom, power, and grace in the gospel (1 Cor 1:22-25; Eph 1:6, 12, 14). This is why it is so important to understand that justification by faith is NOT an internal change in us, but a declaration by God that is legal, judicial, and forensic in nature. The justified sinner receives the status of *right standing* with God as a gift. Thus, to be justified is to be declared 'right with God's righteousness' (Rom 3:24; 6:23).

The justification of the sinner is God's action and pronouncement. James White describes this saving work of God as follows. "Justification in the biblical sense, is a declaration concerning the relationship of a man to God and His law. It is a legal statement that a man is no longer under the curse of the law but stands righteous, just, before the bar of God. The Scriptures distinguish between justification and sanctification, teaching that justification is a statement about a man, while sanctification is an action that changes a man."ⁱⁱⁱ

In natural or false religion, God makes a man better, then looks at the man's improvement and makes that moral reformation the basis for accepting him. That synergistic formula makes sense to us, but how different is the gospel of Jesus Christ! In justification, the full penalty of our sin is borne by our Substitute, and the righteousness God requires of us is credited to us by virtue of Christ's obedience. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (1 Pet 2:24). "For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18).

Justification not only deals with the penalty we deserve for our sin, but also credits to us the righteousness we did not perform. "He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the **righteousness of God in Him**" (2 Cor 5:21). "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written,

‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.’ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith’. However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices them shall live by them’. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:10-14). “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4).

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

- 1)** Justification preserves the fact that salvation is God-centered, it puts His righteousness on display, not ours.
- 2)** God’s righteousness is codified in His moral law, the Ten Commandments, and His righteousness is revealed in the gospel (Rom 3:21-22ff.). But God’s righteousness is not merely a perfect standard, it active in clothing us in our salvation like a robe. God’s righteousness given in Christ is credited to (imputed to) believing sinners. This concept finds its first expression in the O.T. (Is 61:10; Jer 23:6; 33:16; Dan 9:24; Zech 3:4).
- 3)** God’s promises of the gifts of the Spirit, of acceptance, favor, pardon, righteousness, sealing, eternal life, and adoption flow from the finished work of Christ. These ‘new covenant’ promises are purchased by Christ’s shed blood. Believers are safe because they are ‘in covenant’ with God by means of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 26:26-28; Rom 3:25; 5:9; 1 Cor 11:25; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:14, 22; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 1:5).
- 4)** The grace of God in the gospel reveals God’s eternal plan to rescue His people through the work of Christ. Our Lord did not lay down His life as a speculative venture. He offered up His life knowing He would receive what He purchased (Is 53; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 6:19-20; Eph 5:25-27; Titus 2:14; Rev 5:9).
- 5)** Before time God gave a people to His Son. Christ came to earth to save them (Jn 6:37-40; 17:2, 6). How wonderful is the ‘supernatural’ Word of God. For in the Bible a believing sinner discovers that he or she has been the object of God’s particular love from all eternity. Believing does not make it real, for the believer owes his faith to his election (Phil 1:29; 2 Pet 1:1). The unbelieving impenitent has no such confidence.
- 6)** From the beginning salvation was by substitution. To spare their lives and clothe Adam and Eve the lives of two lambs had to be taken and their blood shed. What does salvation by substitution reveal about who God is? (See Romans 3:26).

- 7)** A correct understanding and trust of justification shapes all the believer's motives. Justification provides correct motives for sanctification, service, and fruitfulness (good works). Is justification from God and sanctification from us? (See 1 Cor 1:30).
- 8)** Justification has far-reaching benefits in our relationships. The foremost benefit is reconciliation to God (see 2 Cor 5:19-21). Second, to possess right standing with God, all by the grace of justification IS the primary condition for true fellowship, intimacy, and community. Justification means that each believer that comprises a local assembly has right standing in common with other believers, union with Christ in common, and life in Christ in common (Grk. *koinonia*). So close is this bond between us we are said to be *members of one another in Christ's body* (1 Cor 12:13-14, 18; Eph 4:25).
- 9)** How does our justification produce heroism in dealing with personal sin? Hint: our status and standing before God is immutable, therefore as His adopted sons who can never be disowned, we can be honest about our sins without jeopardizing our position.
- 10)** How does God remain perfectly righteous when granting right standing (justification) to guilty ungodly sinners who believe? (See Romans 3:23-26).
- 11)** Natural religion is legal to the core. In other words, it imagines that something can be done in our natural strength and moral effort to gain God's favor. Explain how God's act of justifying believing sinners 'up front'—before they have done any works constitutes a preemptive strike on legalism.
- 12)** Explain how justification by grace through faith *lets God be God*—for salvation is theocentric, God-centered, not man-centered. Hint: God's righteousness manifested and given in Christ is the divine plan of salvation. Thus, God revelation of His righteousness so that it glorifies His grace is the glorious theme (Eph 1:6). In addition, God is perfectly free to choose the objects of His mercy (Rom 9:15), for no man can obligate God or do a work which makes God indebted to him (Rom 11:33-36).
- 13)** Comment on this statement: *God abandoning Christ at Calvary is the reason/evidence cited by the Pharisees that Jesus was not the Son of God*. Hint: see Psalm 22 and Christ's cry of dereliction from the cross (Ps 22:1), and Isaiah chapter 53 on the crushing of Christ. ('Dereliction' can mean abandoned as useless.)
- 14)** How would a diligent application of the doctrine of justification have been a cure for the strife so abundant in Corinth? See 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:1-9; 4:6-7.

End Notes:

ⁱ Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory*, pp. 224-229

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ James White, *The God who Justifies*, p. 93