

Romans: The Good News of God

How Justification Works

Romans 3:24-26

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How Justification Works

Scripture

Last week we resumed our study in “Romans: The Good News of God.” However, I did not finish my sermon, and so I plan to finish it today.

The issue that the Apostle Paul is dealing with in his letter to the Roman Church is how God saves sinners.

The most important question that anyone can ever answer is: *How can a person come into a right relationship with God?*

God is a holy God. He created Adam and Eve without sin. Adam and Eve enjoyed a wonderful relationship with God in the Garden of Eden. But Adam and Eve fell into sin when they disobeyed God’s command and ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). And they also broke their relationship with God.

Adam’s sin was passed on to all his posterity. From Adam onwards every person who has ever lived—with the exception of Jesus Christ—is out of fellowship with God because of his or her sin. Moreover, God is angry with each person because of sin.

But, thankfully, God has acted. God has provided a way for sinners to be saved. The Apostle Paul explained how God himself has provided his own righteousness for sinners. Let’s read Romans 3:21-26, keeping in mind that today’s text is Romans 3:24-26:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,** ²⁵ **whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former**

sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:25b-26)

Introduction

Last week I mentioned that Romans 3:21-26 deals with the subject of *justification*. I also said that New Testament scholar Leon Morris says that these verses may be “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”¹

And because these verses deal with the most important subject of *justification*, I feel constrained to continue teaching about it this week. I completely agree with my favorite Bible commentator, John R. W. Stott, who said, “Nobody has understood Christianity who does not understand . . . the word ‘justification.’”²

So, we shall spend another week on *justification*.

Pastors who are committed to teaching the Bible understand the importance of teaching on the subject of *justification*. We teach it many times and in different ways in order to help God’s people understand *justification*.

But sometimes God’s people are slow to learn, and pastors feel a little like the great German Reformer, Martin Luther (who rediscovered the doctrine of *justification* in the 16th century and was the human instrument responsible for the Reformation) who said to his congregation after years of teaching about *justification*, “I have preached justification by faith so often, and I feel sometimes that you are so slow to receive it that I could almost take the Bible and bang it about your heads”!³

You may recall that last week I presented an extended illustration describing *justification*. The word *justification* comes from the law courts, and it “is a legal term indicating the process of declaring a person righteous.”⁴

¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 173.

² John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 364.

³ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 271.

I love the way theologian J. I. Packer describes what happens in *justification*. He says, “Justification is the truly dramatic transition from the status of a condemned criminal awaiting a terrible sentence to that of an heir awaiting a fabulous inheritance.”⁵

Question 33 of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, “What is justification?” And the answer given is, “*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.*”⁶

Lesson

Today, let us look more closely at the definition of *justification*. I am using the outline that was originally given by John R. W. Stott in his treatment of *justification* in *The Cross of Christ*.⁷

I. The Source of Our Justification Is the Grace of God (3:24)

First, the source of our justification is the grace of God.

Since “none is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10), it is clear that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight” (Romans 3:20).

How then is anyone then saved? If we are all sinners (and we are), and if we are all under God’s righteous wrath (and we are), and if we are all under condemnation (and we are), and if there is nothing that we can do to save ourselves (and we cannot), how then can anyone be saved?

The only way it is possible to be saved is if God does the saving for us. We do not deserve help. We deserve nothing but wrath, judgment, and condemnation. But, thankfully, God works on be-

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Index Created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in Electronic Form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996., electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, c1973).

⁶ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), Question 33.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 189-192.

half of sinners. And that is what *grace* is. The Apostle Paul says that we are **“justified by his [i.e., God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 3:24).

One ad for the U.S. Marines pictures a sword, and beneath it are the words: *“Earned, never given.”*

If you want to become a Marine, you must be prepared to earn that name through sacrifice, hardship, and training. If you get it, you deserve it.

But, if you want to become a Christian, you must have the exact opposite attitude, for the message of grace is: *“Given, never earned.”*

You cannot save your own soul, and God will not save anyone who tries to earn salvation, but only those who will humbly receive it as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ. If you get it, you absolutely do not deserve it.⁸ And you receive it because of God’s grace.

I love the way J. I. Packer explains *grace*. He says that “the grace of God is love freely shown toward guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity and had no reason to expect anything but severity.”⁹

An old tale speaks of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven’s gates.

The angel said, “Here’s how this works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I will give a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to 100 points, you get in.”

“Okay,” the man said, “I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never ever cheated on her, not even in my heart.”

Gabriel replied, “That’s wonderful. That’s worth three points.”

⁸ Craig Brian Larson, editor, in www.preachingtoday.com.

⁹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Index Created by Christian Classics Foundation.; Published in Electronic Form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996., electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, c1973).

“Three points?” said the man incredulously. “Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service.”

“Terrific!” said Gabriel, “that’s certainly worth a point.”

“One point?” said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. “Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays.”

“Fantastic, that’s good for two more points,” said the angel.

“TWO POINTS!” cried the man in desperation. “At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God.”

“Come on in,” said Gabriel.¹⁰

We cannot earn our way into heaven. The only way we can get into heaven is to be acquitted of all our sins; and that is what *justification* is. And that can only happen if God acts in grace towards us.

So, the source of our justification is the grace of God.

II. The Ground of Our Justification Is the Work of Christ (3:25)

Second, the ground of our justification is the work of Christ.

God is righteously angry with us because of our sin. We deserve his wrath. We deserve condemnation. We deserve to be sentenced to hell.

But God in his grace sent Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sin. Paul says about Jesus, “**whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith**” (Romans 3:25). That is, Jesus appeased the wrath of God by shedding his blood and dying on our behalf.

The affair had been going on for years. The attraction and eventual surrender to unfaithfulness had actually surprised both people. They thought of themselves as honorable. The woman was

¹⁰ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness By Grace: Delighting in the Joy That Is Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 22-23.

happily married, living in enviable circumstances with a truly great man. Her lover was an achiever at the highest level. He was a most trusted friend and ally of her husband. If they were ever discovered, what would her husband do? The laws of the land required capital punishment in the case of unfaithfulness. And now you know that the situation I'm describing happened a long time ago.

This is the story of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot in T. H. White's novel *The Once and Future King*, better known as the basis for the famous movie musical, *Camelot*. In the book, Arthur's illegitimate son, Mordred, exposes the affair, forcing Arthur to confront the incredible dilemma of bringing justice to bear on those he loves the most. Before the affair was exposed, Arthur had explained the need for justice to Guinevere and Lancelot.

"You will find," Arthur said, "that when kings are bullies who believe in force, the people are bullies too. If I don't stand for law, I won't have law among my people. You see, Lancelot, I have to be absolutely just. Far from being willing to execute his enemies, a real king must be willing to execute his friends."

That dilemma of the king's justice pitted against the king's love is captured in the musical *Camelot* when Mordred sings, "Arthur, what a magnificent dilemma. Let her die and your life is over; let her live and your life's a fraud. Which will it be, Arthur? Do you kill the queen or kill the law?"

We could actually say that this is God's dilemma also, because God created us. God loves us. God cherishes us. God formed us in the dust of the earth in his own image, and then he breathed into us the breath of life. You can't get any more intimate, any more personal, any more caring than that. And yet, we have gone our own way. We deliberately defy his commands and also refuse his overtures of love and reconciliation.

But God is also a just God. He could not simply turn the other way. His justice had to be satisfied. And it was fully satisfied in the death of Jesus for sinners.¹¹

¹¹ Douglas Rumford, in the sermon "God's Dilemma: What's Christianity All About?" (preached 1-11-04).

“Justification,” writes John Stott, “is not a synonym for amnesty, which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets (*amnestia* is ‘forgetfulness’)—wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice. . . . When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all; he is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking. . . . In other words, we are ‘justified by his blood.’”¹²

This vitally important doctrine is not well understood today. We must clearly understand what is involved in justification, otherwise we are in danger of a shallow understanding, which may not actually involve salvation. Our understanding of justification must be something closer to Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s than the common misunderstanding of justification today. This is how Spurgeon explains justification:

When I was under the hand of the Holy Spirit, under conviction of sin, I had a clear and sharp sense of the justice of God. Sin, whatever it might be to other people, became to me an intolerable burden. It was not so much that I feared hell, but that I feared sin. I knew myself to be so horribly guilty that I remember feeling that if God did not punish me for sin he ought to do so. I felt that the Judge of all the earth ought to condemn such sin as mine. . . . I had upon my mind a deep concern for the honor of God’s name, and the integrity of his moral government. I felt that it would not satisfy my conscience if I could be forgiven unjustly. The sin I had committed must be punished. But then there was the question how God could be just, and yet justify me who had been so guilty.¹³

But then, as the great Baptist preacher noted, light dawned on his understanding. He saw that “Jesus had borne the death penalty on our behalf. . . . Why did he suffer, if not to turn aside the penalty from us? If then, he turned it aside by his death, it is turned

¹² John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 190.

¹³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *All of Grace* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.) 27, 29.

aside, and those who believe in him need not fear it. It must be so, that since [God's wrath is satisfied], God is able to forgive without shaking the basis of his throne."¹⁴

Because of Jesus' death, God is able to remain just and, at the same time, be the justifier those who believe in Jesus.

So, the source of our justification is the grace of God. The ground of our justification is the work of Christ.

III. The Means of Our Justification Is Faith (3:25-26)

And finally, the means of our justification is faith.

Faith is the means by which justification becomes ours. Faith is the instrument by which we receive the work of Christ.

Verses 25 and 26 show us that faith is the key to receiving justification. Notice the emphasis on faith in Romans 3:25-26, "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to **be received by faith**. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier **of the one who has faith in Jesus**."

And even the faith that we exercise, which is absolutely essential for salvation is a gift of God, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Kathy was one of 13 children raised by a common father and three mothers in a polygamist community in Utah. The community was a part of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a sect that split from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the 1890's.

Growing up, she was burdened by the unrealistic expectations of the cult.

"We were constantly told to 'keep sweet,'" she said, "and that 'perfect obedience produces perfect faith.' Behind these sug-

¹⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *All of Grace* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, n.d.) 27, 29.

ary slogans lay the impossible duty of living in complete obedience to the Prophet.”

This prophet was a man named Leroy Johnson, and Mormon belief stated that he was the earthly leader of the community and mediator between God and man.

“We called him Uncle Roy,” said Kathy. “He was a feeble old man who prophesied that he would never die—that he’d become young again and be lifted up to heaven. If I kept sweet, I’d be taken with him. I looked forward to that glorious day with hope and fear.”

But that day never came. Instead, Johnson passed away at the age of 93 in 1986, and was succeeded by a new Prophet. These events shattered Kathy’s faith in the Mormon way of life.

In an act of rebellion, she ran away with a young man named Matt at the age of 18. The two were married and moved to California, but Kathy found that physical distance was not enough to separate her from her former life.

“I was ashamed I grew up in polygamy,” she says. “I worried people would find out about my past, so I over-indulged in drinking, smoking, and drugs in an attempt to appear worldly. My thoughts mocked me. *You’re an idiot for leaving! You didn’t stay sweet and obey the Prophet! You’re going to hell!* I sought therapy, but couldn’t express my feelings. I wanted desperately to believe in God, yet what had he ever done for me? I tried to read the Book of Mormon, but I didn’t believe it anymore.”

After two years of marriage, Kathy and Matt divorced.

Years later, she met a man named Brian at work. Brian was a Christian and stood out in Kathy’s circle of friends. What happened next is a miracle of grace:

We began attending church, and Brian and I spent more time together. He had a purpose to his life, a steadiness I wanted. When I told him all about my past, he shared how Mormonism differed from the truth of the Bible. We began praying together. God seemed real and different than I’d ever expected.

One day, Brian's mother talked about a baptism. Confused, I asked many questions: What did a person need to do to be baptized? Did he say a vow or go through a ceremony? How much did it cost? She assured me baptism was free, that it was an outward statement of an inward commitment to Christ. I admitted I wasn't sure I'd made that commitment. How did I get this faith? Did you have to keep sweet and be perfectly obedient? She explained good deeds don't save us. Mormonism teaches you must work to earn your way to heaven. The Bible teaches that trusting in Christ's finished work on the cross saves us.

I was amazed at the simplicity of the gospel message. I cried as I realized I could come to Christ just as I was. He didn't require perfection. Sitting there talking with Brian's mom, I prayed to receive Jesus as my Savior. Several weeks later, following counseling sessions with the pastor to make sure I fully understood, I was baptized.

By God's grace, I am now a woman of faith.¹⁵

So, the source of our justification is the grace of God. The ground of our justification is the work of Christ. And the means of our justification is faith.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a simple question. Are you justified?

Are you justified by God's grace through the work of Christ, which you have received by faith?

If not, you simply need to recognize that you are a sinner with a massive pile of sins against your name. Ask Jesus to pay the penalty for all your sin, and to credit his righteousness to your account. Amen.

¹⁵ Story told to Jan Brown, "I Grew Up in a Polygamist Family," *Today's Christian Woman* (November/December 2006), 64-67.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, we recognize today that every one of us is a sinner. We deserve your wrath. We deserve your condemnation. We deserve to go to hell.

But, in your grace you sent the Lord Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for all of our sin. We thank you that you did not overlook sin. We thank you that you are both just and the justifier in the way in which you save sinners. We thank you for the work of Jesus Christ.

O Lord, we thank you that even the faith that is needed to receive justification is a gift that you give to sinners. Thank you for the gift of faith.

O Lord, if there is anyone here today who has not yet received your justification, will you please grant that person the gift of faith in Jesus Christ. Open the eyes of that person to trust alone in Jesus Christ.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.