

# What is Justification?

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Romans 3.21-26

The God who made heaven and earth – the infinite, everlasting, holy, all-glorious Lord – came into this world and became man. And what did He do? He went to a cross and died! He laid down His life. Why?

That is the most important question to answer, and that answer is found in Romans 3:21-26.

We ended the last message with how we must not turn from the gospel because it is too easy or too simple. Too many insist that there has to be something more, something else which brings me to heaven.

But while it is simple and easy to us and for us – it was anything but simple and easy to the Lord.

It is free to us, but costly to Him; it was a difficult salvation which the Lord accomplished upon that terrible cross!

But there we find this most important answer to a most important question: “How can a man, sinful man, be counted just, or justified, before the perfect Judge of all the earth?”

What is it to be justified? How can a righteous and just God accept unjust and sinful people like you and me? People who deserve judgment, wrath, because of our sins, rather than

blessing and freedom? How is it, as Romans 4.5 puts it so drastically, how can God justify the ungodly?

We learned that the answer is not by our own works done by the law; our own righteousness offered to the Judge last week.

What is it then? Well, in a nutshell, it is the Father giving you a full and free righteousness not your own, but accomplished by His Son Jesus through the cross, and received by us by faith.

God comes to you, sinner, as a friend willing to pardon, to count perfect and complete in His own most tremendous provision.

Jesus is set before you as a closet full of robes of righteousness; you turn from your nasty rags of sin and self-made religion, and you receive what He bought for you at such a price!

And this is not a trick that God has up his sleeve; no loophole in His law; for He justifies you, counts you just, upon a true righteousness – His own Son's! And who will bring a charge against Him?

RC Sproul used to like to shock people and say that we are saved by works; but it is the work of Jesus and not you!

We are going to look at justification, beginning with the deep foundation: where does justification come from? Answer: the Father's grace, the Father's gift, verse 24. Whatever else justification is, it is a matter of grace; justification does not come from us!

Paul had earlier written to the Galatians: *You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (Gal 5:4)*

He later writes in this book, chapter 5: *the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. (Rom 5:16)*

And nearing the end of his life, he says in Titus 3:7: *being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Tit 3:7)*

***Two things then*** – this new righteousness, coming by the death of Christ, is ***the plan, purpose and intent of God the Father***. What a horrible picture to make the Father all justice and wrath, and the Son all love and mercy, as though the two were at odds with each other!

The Father and the Son planned this from eternity, according to grace. In grace, the Father gave the Son to be the only Savior. The Father sends the message of His love in this gracious way. And the Father, calling by grace, brings us TO His grace, to all who believe.

Look at Romans 5:1 – then 2. By grace into grace.

A ***second thing*** here is that this new righteousness of God, apart from the Law, yet witnessed by the Old Testament, is not attained at all by works, but by faith. We will see next time how faith is the *instrument* which will not add or subtract from the Father's gift. Faith is the beggar's open and empty hand receiving the grace, the gift, the free offer held out by God's own promise.

Now the Father has set all of this new righteousness to be found in His Son; in Jesus Christ. Look at verse 22 – righteousness of God in Jesus Christ; and again, verse 24, justified by His grace through redemption in Christ Jesus; and once more, verse 26, His righteousness which justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

In Christ Jesus this righteousness is attained. In other words, as **our second point**, Jesus has fully produced this justification for us by what He has once for all done.

And what is that He has done? Well, not one thing, but at least three.

**First** of all, He redeemed – vs. 24. Christ Jesus is made unto us by God... Redemption.

This is a term borrowed from the world of debt and enslavement.

This word brings us to the market place where in the ancient world you had not only food and clothes and tools and toys to buy at the supermarket, but you had an aisle where you could buy a slave, a servant.

This speaks of the sinner being under the power or dominion of sin; a prisoner of war; owned by another. This term will come into play much more directly when Paul addresses the power of sin in Romans 6; Christ is not only the answer for the guilt of sin here in Rom 3, but the power of sin as well – we are delivered, or taken out of the Egypt of our darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the Beloved Son!

This is Jesus, Mighty to Save.

But in the next breath, Paul takes us secondly from the market place to the temple, to the altar, even to the mercy seat, where Jesus is not only our redemption, but our *propitiation* in His blood.

This is a term which deserves a whole sermon.

This is sometimes translated mercy seat. Others see it as the sacrifice for sin, and certainly that is included.

But this is a term that has a Godward concern about it – it is a word which means the turning away of wrath for sin more than turning away the guilt or pollution of it.

The pagan's used this word in an awful way – of placating blood-thirsty gods. But while we take the word “placate” from them, we leave everything else behind.

Our God is holy. He is not a dissatisfied, needy God. His anger is not fickle or arbitrary, but rather a true, holy and entirely righteous quality. In fact, a quality which, if removed from Him, would make Him less.

Propitiation is not a changing of God's mind so that He might not be angry anymore; no, His mind is already gracious, welcoming, loving. But His anger against real sins in the life of those He saves is real, and must be addressed, must be removed.

And that is precisely what Christ took away, when the bowls of wrath aimed rightly at our heads were poured out on His.

Children, think of when you did something wrong, and you knew it; your dad had to spank you for what you did. But instead, another child – your brother or sister perhaps – said, ‘dad, punish me.’

Now that is a very small, weak illustration of Jesus taking all of hell into His life and being judged – not lovingly chastened – for us!

Jesus not only paid in full, “it is finished” – being judged in our place, the just for the unjust, but all of God’s proper wrath against our sin has been removed. Our Father now says, “There is no fury, wrath, or anger in Me!” Is. 27:4

That is what propitiation means, which is different from expiation.

Jesus blood has drowned the divine fury for sin, becoming the payment for and the extinguisher of it.

God never comes to you, Christian, as an avenger, but as a Father and a Savior, a Rescuer and a Sanctifier, who chastens and encourages rather than raging against you and disowning you.

Then *one more aspect* of Christ’s work on the cross, in the shedding of His blood for us, is Paul taking us from the marketplace and temple, to the courtroom and the judge.

In 25-26, His righteousness is demonstrated, displayed – skip over the forbearing part, and drop down to the present display of his righteousness; that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

God cannot justify the wicked in a matter of straight-forward justice. His own word condemns those who justify the evil or who condemn the righteous.

How can He go back on his own Word? Well He doesn't – He couldn't. God in the courtroom finds all the world guilty, as we have seen in 19-20.

But here is Jesus, the just One, taking the place of the unjust, and the just wrath of God for sin is paid in full by Him. He in turn shares His perfect obedience with them, imputing to their account His own righteous standing.

These ones are not justified by their works but by their faith in Jesus.

Romans 4:5 is very surprising, isn't it? God justifies the *ungodly*, and by faith, counts them righteous! How? How is that right or fair?

Much every way!

Is there a true righteousness here before the Law or not? Yes, there is – a perfect one, as Jesus' own perfect, holy, harmless undefiled life – the righteousness of God – is accounted to we who believe. As Paul says in Phil. 3 – he would be found in a righteousness NOT HIS OWN!

Are the sins, the crimes, the evil they have done – has that been addressed justly? Yes, and even more, the law has been satisfied, which the punishment of the sinner could never accomplish!

Jesus came in our place, as a sacrifice, as a substitute. Look over to Romans 5 for this picture, which adds yet another beautiful gospel term: read 6-11.

We are simultaneously sinners, ungodly, and righteous, justified, but upon the account of another.

This brings us to the **last point** then – the very nature of justification. It is built upon grace, upon the gift of God; not of works, not of man.

It arises from Jesus and His cross work, which redeems, propitiates, reconciles – and especially manifests a new righteousness.

The word ‘justify’ is a legal term, a *courtroom* term; it is a declaration of a standing as either guilty or righteous.

The opposite of this term is ‘*condemn*’ – another legal term. These declaratory acts do not change the character of the one being justified or condemned. They rather declare their standing before the bar of justice. And depending upon that verdict, sentencing, judgment, then follows. You either you are free to go, or you will have to pay.

To find a person guilty is to find them liable to be punished. To find them not guilty, is to keep them free from that punishment.

But how different is the Bible’s justification from our legal system!

Our judges do not find us, “Righteous” but “Not Guilty”. We may be guilty in other areas unknown to the court, but legally, we are not apprehended.

God – who sees all and every sin, and all our crimes for which we deserve judgment – He says not only “No condemnation” – as Jesus said to the adulterous woman – but He says “You are righteous! Pronounced just in my sight!”

To be justified is not a negative term; to be justified is from something and to something. You are counted righteous before God.

Justified means more than “just as if I’d never sinned”; justified means ‘just as if I’d always obeyed’!

This is precisely what Paul told those very sinful and weak Corinthians:

*<sup>21</sup> He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2Co 5:21)*

Jesus’ obedience, even to the depths of the cross, has two sides to it.

We rightly think of His *passive* obedience – He passively took to Himself the punishment our sins deserved, as the guilt offering for sin.

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned He stood;  
Sealed my pardon with His blood.  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

But Christ’s *active* obedience, FOR US, is standing where Adam fell, and He imputes this freely to all who believe. You, believer, have a robe of righteousness not your own. That is justification – found righteous before God.

Dear ones, this is the gospel – praise God! It is not something you do, but something God has done. You need only receive this gift of eternal life, of justification by faith alone!

AS we close let us drive several points home for us:

1. Nothing needs be added to this gift but your faith. You are complete in grace upon applying to Him by turning from our ways to this way, to receive him who offers freely himself to all His enemies! He says to them come; calls us from the lost field of sin and wrath. We cannot add or subtract anything from His wonderful work. As we closed last week, it is still an easy and simple matter on our side.
2. But this is not to say that God only justifies us when we turn to Him – more is at work, as He changes not only our standing before Him, but our hearts inwardly, in a new soul being given. To be only justified and to go on as sons of disobedience on the inside would be torture – to not be at enmity or opposition with our sins which are pardoned would be impossible. The same would be true if we were made new creatures in Christ, born again, but still under the guilt and condemnation of sin hanging over our heads.
3. Lastly, if you still are suspicious of what you have heard; you still think to yourself, ‘well, if it is a gift and so easy, then perhaps the judgement and eternity won’t be that bad; if others get in, I will too,’ know surely that you will see things differently one day. The gospel never tells us our sins are not a big deal and sweeps them under the rug. You should not look around you and see the world going on merrily in its way. It does so only by the forbearance or patience of God regarding sin. God shows his longsuffering – not so we can continue in sin and neglect Christ’s full remedy; but that you might come and enjoy what you have already sampled. God has smiled on you, but behind that smiling providence hides God’s holy and true wrath! Flee to Him, while it is called today! What is it that holds you back? Thrust it from your heart as your worst enemy, and come to the One who has

gone to such lengths and depths to provide for you eternal redemption! Amen? Amen!