

**LECTURE ON
JUSTIFICATION**

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Introductory Remarks:

The word “justify” in the New Testament means *not* to “make righteous” but to “count righteous”. Of this there is no doubt. Greek verbs ending in –oo have this sense: “count or reckon, *not* make”: *dikaioo* here. It is a pity that the great Augustine of Hippo, the finest theologian of the Early Church and the most influential, read *Latin* as an expert but read *Greek* inexpertly. The Latin verb “*iustificare*” has the sense of “to make righteous”, (not in NT word *dikaioo*). Even Augustine, who was so clear on many points of doctrine, was not entirely clear on this subject of how a sinner becomes justified by God. (Explain).

Not till the Reformation was this doctrine correctly defined – first by Luther. In our own day there is reason to fear that even some Evangelicals are slipping back to inaccurate views of this central gospel truth.

I.

The Great Importance of Justification as a Doctrine which must be Rightly Understood

1. Luther

- 1) The “first and chief article [of faith] upon which depends all that we teach and practise against the pope, the devil, and all the world. We must therefore be entirely certain of this, and not doubt it, otherwise all

will be lost, and the pope, and the devil, and our opponents will prevail and obtain the victory” (*Schmalkald Articles*, 1537).

- 2) “The article on which the church stands or falls” (Lutheran theologians’ summary of Luther’s exposition of Psalm 130:4, 1538).

2. Calvin

- 1) “Justification... is the principal hinge by which religion is supported” (*Institutes* 3:11:1).
- 2) “Whenever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished, the church destroyed and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown” (Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto in *Tracts* I. 137) .

3. Augustine of Hippo

- 1) “The justification of the wicked is a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth. They will pass away but the justification of the elect will not” (*On the Gospel of John* 72:3).
- 2) “The justification of sinners surpasses the creation of the angels in justice in that it bears witness to a greater mercy” (Quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 483).

4. John Knox (c. 1514 – 1572)

He argued with the Jesuit James Tyrie that what is at stake in the debate between Reformation and Roman Catholic Church is the gospel of God’s

grace, “for it concerneth the *chief head* of justification” (Works, vol. 6, Ed. Laing: 1847).

Observation: Let me emphasise this point made here by Knox: “chief head”. The Reformers did not regard Justification as just one of many points in the gospel. This attitude on their part is crucial for us now to appreciate.

5. John Foxe (1516 – 1587), writing in his *Acts and Monuments*, speaks of Luther beating down the Roman errors by the article on justification: “Luther gave the stroke... by opening one vein, long hid before, wherein lieth the touchstone of all truth and doctrine, as the only principal origin of our salvation, which is, our free justifying by faith alone, in Christ the Son of God” (*Acts and Monuments*, vol. 4, Seeley, etc. 1846, p. 259).

Observation: Foxe here helps us to see the motive behind the Reformers’ tenacity in holding on to this point. They, far better than we in our day, knew that Justification had been “long hid”. (For a good 1000 years.)

II.

The Relevance of this Discussion to us as Evangelical Christians Today

1. *The softening attitude of Protestants to Roman Catholicism:*
(1948: The Ecumenical Movement, especially)
1994: ECT I – supervised by Charles Colson, a professed evangelical in America, and Richard John Neuhaus, a former Lutheran, now a Roman Catholic priest. This ECT document has found support in surprising places.

1997: ECT II, “The Gift of Salvation” – done in close collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church and a leading Vatican prelate, Cardinal Edward Idriss Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. This document says: “It [Justification] is entirely God’s gift conferred... and by virtue of his declaration it is so.” (Note: “conferred”, not “imputed”. No Roman Catholic authority says “imputed”.)

2000, October 31st: Reformation Day – the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican signed a joint Declaration = consensus on this doctrine of Justification.

1987: Anglican-RC International Commission (ARCIC) – has led to weakening Protestant grasp of Justification. *The Times* newspaper (24 June 1987) stated: “The Reformation was indeed a misunderstanding about certain words and concepts at the centre of Christianity’s self-knowledge.”

***Observation:* In the past 10 – 15 years there has been a marked loss of conviction about this supremely great Reformation doctrine of Justification. Note difference from Reformers!**

- 2. *Evangelicals themselves have moved away in some cases from the old ground:***

January 1982, Norman Shepherd was dismissed as Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary for his views on Justification. Shepherd could write this: “Works done from true faith... being the new obedience wrought by the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer united

to Christ... are necessary for salvation from eternal condemnation” (Quotation from *Christianity Today*, Jan. 1st 1982, p. 49). This confounds Justification with Sanctification. (Explain)

3. Some *noted Anglican scholars* have introduced a whole “*new perspective*” on the very concept of Justification. Of this we must say more later. At this stage I mention their names simply:

Alister McGrath, notably in a two-volume history of Justification entitled *Iustitia Dei*, Cambridge, 1986; a more popular book *Justification by Faith: What it means to us Today*, Zondervan, 1988.

Dr N.T. Wright: The Great Acquittal, 1980, etc.

J.D.G. Dunn, Professor of Divinity at Durham: *Commentary on Romans*, SPCK, 1990.

Observation: I therefore must point out from the above evidence (to which more could be added) that the past twenty years have witnessed an astonishingly great change in the attitude of many Protestants worldwide towards this doctrine of Justification. One might call it “*the quiet revolution in Protestantism*”.

I might explain that the fount from which these changed views have come is largely a book written in 1977 called *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* written by E.P. Sanders.

III.

The Historic Interpretation and Definition of the Doctrine of Justification

There were minor differences on various matters such as church government and worship, but none on this issue of Justification:

1. *Lutheran Church's Augsburg Confession of 1530*: "Men cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits or works; but are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith..." (Compare medieval idea).
2. *Church of England's XXXIX Articles*: "We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings": Article XI. (*American Revision of 1801*).
3. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: 1647: "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."

How may we Comment on this clear Reformation view of Justification?

1. Our own works of every kind are totally out of sight in the matter of Justification.
2. The act of Justification results in the full, free and eternal pardon of all our sins.
3. Justification is not a process, nor is it divisible into stages, but is done at once and is perfect at once.

4. The category under which God pronounces us “righteous” is that of a Judge, not of a Doctor to heal us, nor of a Father to adopt us. It is an error to slip from one category to another (Law-Court/Law/Judge/Sentence).
5. The basis upon which God as our Judge, justifies us is the righteousness of Christ purchased for us by His life and death. This righteousness of Christ is wholly outside ourselves but is imputed (*not* in Justification imparted) to us by God when we believe.
6. The one and only means or instrument by which we receive this free gift of Christ’s righteousness is faith in Him as our Lord and Saviour.
7. The moment God pronounces any man to be righteous, that man is at peace with God and will never come into condemnation.
8. So, *all* sin is immediately pardoned: past, present and to come. The whole righteousness of Christ, the fruit of his Active and Passive Obedience, becomes at once, and forever the possession of the justified person.
9. The way in which this doctrine is alien to RC thinking is all too clear:
 - (1) It leaves no place for the Mass, in which the sacrifice of Christ is purportedly re-enacted for sin.
 - (2) It eliminates all need for a priesthood endowed with giving a judicial pardon to the penitent.
 - (3) It abolishes purgatory, since there is no sin to be pardoned or suffered for in purgatorial fire.

Justification virtually abolishes Roman Catholicism.

IV.

A classic Objection to this Doctrine of Justification: “It will lead to antinomianism because men will say that if you have faith you are saved and afterwards you may live as you like.”

The classic doctrine of Justification is poised delicately between two extremes, Legalism and Antinomianism. There is, and must ever be, something in this doctrine which amazes us. *Dr D.M. Lloyd-Jones* in his exposition of Romans 6:1 could say this: “The doctrine of justification by faith only is a very dangerous doctrine, i.e. it always exposes us to the possibility of being misunderstood to teach Antinomianism. If we preach the real New Testament doctrine of Justification, we shall always be by some accused of this Antinomianism. Paul himself was: ‘Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid!’” (Sermon on Romans 6:1).

Even in Puritan times the great and good Puritan, *Richard Baxter* (1615-91), fell into a wrong view of this doctrine. He attempted a revision of the Reformation teaching. This came to be known as *Neonomianism* (or *Baxteriansim*). In his work *Aphorisms of Justification* (1655) Baxter could write:

“To affirm therefore that our Evangelical or new Covenant righteousness is in Christ and not in ourselves, or performed by Christ and not by ourselves, is such a piece of Antinomian doctrine that no man who knows the nature and difference of the Covenant can possibly entertain and which every Christian should abhor as insufferable.”

Baxter's view did much harm in that it sowed seeds of moralism and legalism. According to a recent writer on the subject of Justification (*The Great Exchange*, Philip Eveson, Day one, 1996), there are similarities between Baxter's view and the recent revisions of this doctrine in our own day. (*Op. cit.* p. 169).

This is the point at which it is appropriate to look at two New Testament passages which appear at first sight to be in conflict:

- (1) *Romans 3:28*: "... we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." (*Repeat*)
- (2) *James 2:24*: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified and not by faith only." (*Repeat*)

There cannot be any real conflict as both Paul and James are inspired men. Also there was never in apostolic times any church council to resolve a difference over the teaching of these two apostolic men.

The neatest way to explain these two passages is this:

We are justified:

- (1) *meritoriously* – by Christ's blood;
- (2) *instrumentally* – by faith;
- (3) *declaratively* – by works.

V.

The Way we are to Explain how the New Testament Doctrine of Justification by Faith alone does not lead to Antinomianism

1. One of the key passages is Romans 6:1f.
2. Justification and Sanctification begin together: where the one is the other is. Yet we must not confuse these two.
3. Those who are justified are also in union now with Christ and so they are a “new man in Christ” with a hatred for sin and a love for God.
4. This union of a justified sinner is illustrated in Romans 6 by Paul in three ways:
 - (1) *baptism*, or definitive sanctification;
 - (2) *joint-implantation*: “planted together”;
 - (3) *co-crucifixion*: “our old man...”
5. Our union brings us experimentally into the benefits of Christ’s redemptive acts in death and burial. We are therefore to regard and reckon ourselves to be under grace, so that God’s power in our soul will enable us to resist temptation and sin.
6. Those therefore who are truly justified will desire to live a holy life.

Justification, that is to say, is not Sanctification. But it is always accompanied by Sanctification. Good works must never be intruded into a definition of Justification; but wherever Justification has taken place in the soul, it inevitably results in good works and a holy life.

This is the Gospel's own answer to the Antinomian objection and it is as true to experience as it is true to Scripture.

This is how Paul argues in Romans 6:1-2: "God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"

Paul's argument here:

- (1) implies that, whilst we are justified by faith alone, faith, when it is saving faith, is never alone but is always found in a soul that has entered into a new relationship to Christ.**
- (2) Hence, the justified man now cannot live as once he did because he is a man now united to Christ, over whom sin shall not have the dominion which once it had in his former life.**

This accords exactly with the argument of James 2:14f, that faith, if there is no holy life, is not the faith that justifies but the faith of devils.

However, this must not lead us to define Justification in any way that makes room for human merit or good works. The instrument, or means, by which the perfect righteousness of Christ becomes that of the sinner is faith alone. This must be said with strong emphasis and insistence.

The moment human merit or work is inserted into a definition of Justification we have overstepped the biblical mark. Over our heads is the fearful warning: "Anathema" (Galatians 1:8-9). Paul states it TWICE here.

VI.

Passages in Paul where this Doctrine is Expounded

1. Among *key passages* are these:

Romans	1:17
	3:28 (Luther's <i>sola fide</i>)
	4:4-5, 8, 21-24
Galatians	1:8, 9
	2:16
	3:6, 11-13
Philippians	3:7-9 (autobiographical)
Titus	3:4-7

Observation: All in every age, whether Abraham or Paul – or any other – is justified by FAITH only.

2. Those who wish to have an up-to-date book giving helpful exegesis and exposition of all the relevant New Testament passages should see a recent book by *James White* entitled "*The God who Justifies*", Bethany Press (Minnesota), 2001. Professor White here offers comment on practically every relevant text re Justification in the entire NT *Greek text*. But it is not essential to have Greek to benefit from this book. The reader who lacks Greek will find it valuable in understanding Justification.

VII.

1. *Luther's discovery of this doctrine is of interest and importance:*

- (1) Romans 1:17: "The righteousness of God".
- (2) Luther's "Tower Experience", one of the truly great moments in the history of the Christian church. Date: probably Autumn or early Winter of 1518. This is the experience and the insight which was the beginning of the Reformation. Luther's writings before 1518 are pre-Reformational and in theological light they are sub-Reformational. True "Lutheranism" begins with the "Tower Experience" of 1518.

2. *Quotations from Luther himself:*

- (1) "As a monk I led an irreproachable life. Nevertheless I felt that I was a sinner before God. My conscience was restless, and I could not depend on God being propitiated by my satisfactions. Not only did I not love, but I actually hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. ... Thus a furious battle raged within my perplexed conscience, but meanwhile I was knocking at the door of this particular Pauline passage, earnestly seeking to know the mind of the great Apostle.

"Day and night I tried to meditate upon the significance of these words: "The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The righteous shall live by faith.' Then, finally, God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith, and that this sentence: The

righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel, is passive, indicating that the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: 'The righteous shall live by faith.' Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise. In the same moment the face of the whole of Scripture became apparent to me. My mind ran through the Scriptures, as far as I was able to recollect them, seeking analogies in other phrases, such as the work of God, by which He makes us strong, the wisdom of God, by which He makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

“Just as intensely as I had before hated the expression ‘the righteousness of God,’ I now lovingly praised this most pleasant word. This passage from Paul became to me the very gate to Paradise. Afterwards I read Augustine’s treatise *On the Spirit and the Letter*, and, contrary to my expectation, I discovered a similar interpretation of the righteousness of God: that with which we are endued when God justifies us. Although up until now this had been imperfectly explained, and he does not clearly expound everything concerning imputation, he nevertheless seemed to teach the righteousness of God by which we are justified.

“Better equipped after these considerations, I began to interpret the Psalms the second time. The result would have been an extensive commentary, but I was again interrupted the following year by the summons of Emperor Charles V to the Diet at Worms.”

- (2) The *Table Talks* of Luther contain several accounts of his discovery of the true meaning of Romans 1:17. Since they throw additional light upon the event, we shall quote the most important of them.

“These words ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness of God’ (*iustus, iustitia Dei*) struck my conscience as flashes of lightning, frightening me each time I heard them: if God is righteous, He punishes. But by the grace of God, as I once meditated upon these words in this tower and *hypocaustum* (heated room): ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ and the ‘righteousness of God’, there suddenly came into my mind the thought that if we as righteous are to live by faith, and if the righteousness of faith is to be for salvation to everyone who believes, then it is not our merit, but the mercy of God. Thus my soul was refreshed, for it is the righteousness of God by which we are justified and saved through Christ. These words became more pleasant to me. Through this word the Holy Spirit enlightened me in the tower.” (*Luther Discovers the Gospel*, Dr Uuras Saarnivaara, 1951, pp. 36 – 37)

VIII.

Crucial Aspects of Luther’s “Tower Experience” which we Should Notice

1. He was driven on in his study of the “righteousness” referred to in Romans 1:17 by a profound sense of sin in his own heart.

Observation: The way to appreciate this great doctrine is the sense of need which Luther had and all sinners under conviction have. It is not merely an academic interest.

2. He came to this understanding from a false doctrine which had been in the church for centuries.

Observation: Hence the need to guard all our churches today from returning to a non-evangelical doctrine of Justification.

3. He sought light for his soul from the Bible alone and not from the traditional teachings of the church of his day.

Observation: Roman Catholicism still has a two-fold source of authority: Sacred Scripture AND Sacred Tradition. (See recent RC Catechism).

IX.

The New Perspective Teaching of the Past Few Years

1. What modern revisionist writers have done is to redefine “righteousness” and “justification”.
2. So: *Tom Wright* sees “justification” as something other than the individual sinner being put right before God forensically. For Wright, “righteousness” means “membership within the covenant”. So “Justification” is “God’s declaration that certain people are within the covenant”. (*The Great Exchange*, Philip Eveson, p. 119). Says Tom Wright: “This declaration is in turn closely correlated with baptism, in which one becomes a member of that family in its historical life.”
3. *I comment:*
 - (1) But this is to confuse Justification and Adoption.

- (2) It is also to encourage baptized persons to regard themselves as justified while they are still no more than nominally Christians.
- (3) To alter the connotation of Justification *from the forensic to the covenantal sphere* is to alter the theology of the Bible. It is a quantum leap and one which ignores the first and greatest need of the sinner, which is, not to be instated into covenant favours, but to have his guilty soul put right with a just God. In no other way can the sinner's conscience find peace.
- (4) *Alister McGrath* is a specialist in Historical Theology and a professed Anglican evangelical. He is of the view that the doctrine of Justification should be allowed to include more than it does in the language of the Bible. He admits that the biblical concept is about the removal of condemnation and the establishment of a right relationship with God. But he would like the term Justification to be widened to include the *life-transforming experience of the Christian as a whole*. "In justification", he writes, "God offers to dwell within us as his temple" (Eveson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 103).
- (5) *I comment:* Paul uses "justification" in a *legal context*. It must not, if we are to be true to the Bible and to men's souls, be expanded to include any and every aspect of our conversion. It refers *narrowly* to the act of God our Judge in pronouncing us righteous for Christ's sake.
- (6) Not the least dangerous aspect of this New Perspective desire to draw both Justification and Sanctification together under the concept of

“Justification” is its obvious tendency to lead Protestants back to Rome.

- (7) If any aspect of Sanctification enters into our doctrine of Justification, to that extent it will destroy the latter. As a consequence, since Sanctification in the best believer is in this life imperfect, the conscience cannot rest at peace. This is the medieval error and we go back to it at our peril.**

X.

Concluding Remarks:

- 1. All the great doctrines of Scripture, as we have them in our creeds and confessions today, were at one time or another in the past the subject of long and often acrimonious debate. This is true of the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the Person of Christ, the total depravity of man and the electing grace of God.**
- 2. The same is especially true of the doctrine of Justification, which has been the great stone of stumbling for the Roman Catholic Church from the Reformation to this present day.**
- 3. We have an obligation to defend and promote this doctrine as one of the principal jewels in the crown of Christ’s gospel.**
- 4. The history of the world was changed by Luther’s experience of illumination, enabling him to formulate this doctrine aright as it had not been so clearly in**

the Church before his day. The history of the world, no doubt, in time to come – for America, Britain and all other nations – will depend very much on whether this central Christian truth is correctly defined and preached in the days ahead, or whether it will be buried once again under mountainous heaps of errors and traditions.

May God grant in his abundant grace that this crucial biblical truth may be preserved and preached till all nations, seeing by it the same glory that Luther saw in his “Tower” experience, come to hail Jesus Christ our Lord as the one and only Redeemer in whom we have **RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE WITH GOD.**

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