

Justification

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Justification

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Picture the scene: An accused criminal stands before an impartial judge to receive his just sentence. The legal proceedings begin with a court official reciting the laws of the kingdom. As he listens, the criminal starts to realize that he is doomed to be condemned, for it turns out that he has violated every single law in the book. Whatever the charge, he is certain to be found guilty. When the judge finally turns to the defendant and asks how he pleads, the man is speechless. He stands before the judge in mute terror, unable to utter anything in his defense.

The Need for Justification: Universal and Desperate

This is the desperate legal predicament described in the opening chapters of Romans. Humanity stands in the dock. The religious and the irreligious, Jews and Gentiles, believers and atheists—everyone must appear before God’s throne for judgment. The standard for justice is God’s perfect law. By that standard, everyone deserves to be condemned, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23); “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10; cf. Ps. 14:3).

When the law is read, therefore, every commandment is an accusation. There is nothing we can say in our defense: “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:19–20).

The problem of humanity is sin, plain and simple. We are guilty sinners who deserve nothing except God’s wrath. Nor is there anything we can do to save ourselves. God’s righteous requirements cannot save us; they can only condemn us because we cannot keep them. Therefore, when we stand before God for judgment, there is not the slightest chance that we can be accepted on the basis of anything that we have done. This is not a trial in which we are

innocent until proven guilty; instead, it is a trial in which we have already been proven guilty and must remain guilty until we are declared righteous.

It is only when we recognize how desperate our situation is from the legal standpoint that we can begin to understand the biblical doctrine of justification. A powerful example of a sinner's desperation comes from the life of Donald Smarto. While studying for the priesthood, Smarto performed the role of the cardinal in a religious play. To help him look the part, his monastery had arranged for him to borrow ornate robes from his diocese. "I was excited by this," Smarto writes in his autobiography, "and when they arrived, I went to my room, locked the door and carefully removed the scarlet cassock and sash and cape from the suit bag."¹

As Smarto put on these clothes before each night's performance, they became a growing obsession:

Though the play began at eight o'clock, I found myself putting the robes on earlier and earlier. It took about half an hour to fasten all the buttons, but by the last days of the performance, I was dressing by two o'clock in the afternoon, five hours before the beginning of the play. I would strut back and forth in front of a full-length mirror, and as I did, a feeling would come over me. I stood for the longest time looking at my reflection, and I liked what I saw. . . . I had a sense that I was holy. I simply didn't think I was a sinner; I felt confident that my works pleased God.²

Smarto's false confidence was shattered when he saw what the person under the robes was really like. It happened at the movies:

A bishop came on the stage in the movie. Dressed in a beautiful vestment studded with sparkling gems, he walked out slowly from behind a curtain. As he walked, however, a large gust of wind ripped open his vestment, revealing a rotted skeleton underneath.

In an instant, my mind said, *That's me*. . . . I immediately blocked out the thought. . . . "That's not me!" I said. . . . I wanted to push the film images out of my mind, but it didn't work. . . . I kept trying to make myself feel better. "Make this feeling go away," I said to God. "I am *not* a hypocrite. I am *not* an actor. I'm a *good person!*" I kept thinking of all the good things I did. . . . Yet, these thoughts didn't bring consolation.³

It is only when we see the stark and ugly reality of our sin that we are truly ready to turn to God for help—specifically, for the forgiveness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As James Buchanan wrote in his famous book on justification, “The best preparation for the study of this doctrine is neither great intellectual ability, nor much scholastic learning, but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God.”⁴

The Centrality of Justification: “Hinge,” “Foundation,” “Chief Article”

Having described our predicament in all its miserable detail, the apostle Paul announces that a legal remedy has been made available: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known” (Rom. 3:21). The words “but now” mark a major transition in Paul’s argument. More than that, they introduce the great turning point in the history of salvation. Up to this point we stand condemned. God’s perfect law tells us that we cannot be declared righteous at the bar of God’s justice. But now a righteousness *from* God has been revealed. God has provided the way for us to be declared righteous. Or to put it in the biblical way, he has provided a way for us to be *justified*.

There is more to salvation than justification by faith. Yet without exaggerating its importance, it must be said that this doctrine holds a place near the center of the gospel. Justification is one of the central themes of Scripture, especially the New Testament, where various forms of the word “justify” (*dikaioō*) appear more than two hundred times.⁵ The prevalence of this vocabulary serves as an index to the importance of justification in biblical theology.

The centrality of justification has been recognized by many theologians in the history of the Christian church. John Calvin called it “the main hinge on which salvation turns.”⁶ The English Reformer Thomas Cranmer described it as “the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion.”⁷ Perhaps most famously of all, Martin Luther called justification “the chief article of Christian doctrine,” so that “when justification has fallen, everything has fallen.”⁸ Whether we think of justification as the hinge, the foundation, or the standing-and-falling article of salvation, there is no hope of salvation without it. This is the doctrine, said Luther on another occasion, that “begets, nourishes, builds, preserves,