

# Justification

## God's Righteous Verdict

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### False teachings about justification

#### Introduction

So important is the doctrine of justification that Christians have rightly called it the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. Any false teaching on justification impacts the very foundation of our relationship with God.

True teaching glorifies God above all things and brings comfort to repentant sinners. False teaching takes away from what God has done, and it robs sinners of comfort. It fosters doubt in life and uncertainty in the hour of our death.

Today's lesson reviews some of the false teachings about justification that have arisen throughout the history of the Christian church. In contrast to these false teachings, we'll underscore the truth that rests on the firm foundation of God's Word.

#### "Justification is by works"

This is perhaps the most common and widely held error about how a human being finds a right relationship with God, since the *opinio legis* (law attitude) is the default setting for every human being. The idea that we can appease God, compensate for our own sins, and somehow earn his favor is inherent to natural human thought and is the basis for every man-made religion. It can also infect and corrupt the Christian church, as it has throughout the centuries, when people drift away from the Word of God and base their faith on human instinct and reason.

**Ephesians 2:8,9** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

**Romans 3:20** Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

**Romans 3:23,24** For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

**Galatians 3:10** All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

**Romans 11:5,6** So, too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

#### "Justification is completed by an act of our will"

It is hard to eradicate the notion that we are saved by our *works*. But even where a person is led to trust completely the grace of God and the merit of Christ for salvation, there is still the temptation to trust in one's own *will* to receive Jesus' completed salvation. The idea that human beings still possess a free will in spiritual matters remains very prevalent.

Scripture teaches that we did not choose Jesus; Jesus chose us. We did not create faith in our own hearts; it is a gift of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. God chose, elected, predestined us to know Jesus and receive salvation before the world was created, before we were born, before we ever chose him.

**Ephesians 1:4** For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.

**Romans 8:29** For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

**John 15:16** "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last."

**Romans 9:16** It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

**1 Corinthians 12:3** No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

**Ephesians 2:4,5** God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

### **“Justification is not universal, only personal; not objective, only subjective”**

In the last century some elements within Lutheranism have denied the objective and universal nature of justification, claiming that justification is only personal and subjective. Part of the controversy hinged on definitions. If “justification” is defined only in the narrow sense as “having the forgiveness of sins, being healed of sin, being clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and possessing the gift of eternal life,” then justification according to that definition can only be personal. But this is not the only way Scripture uses the term; some justification terminology is universal. Scripture speaks of Jesus canceling the debt of the world; God justifying all people by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus; God replacing a universal death sentence as a result of Adam’s sin with a universal verdict of life and salvation as a result of Jesus’ obedience, death and resurrection. Since we spent a lesson on the subject of universal and objective justification, we won’t repeat all the Scripture passages that refer to justification in global terms. Martin Luther spoke of forgiveness as acquired for all but distributed only through the gospel when and where it is preached and delivered in the sacraments.

### **“Justification is brought about by the pastor or priest”**

Jesus instituted the holy ministry and appointed some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers. God is a God of order, and he wants things to be done in a fitting and proper way. He calls Christians into positions of public ministry, so that his people can be equipped and his body, the Church, built up.

Ministers of the gospel are not on a higher plane than “regular Christians.” They do not have a special inside track to God or a “closer connection with the Man upstairs.” They are servants and under-shepherds to the flock of Christ. Their call from God through his Church gives them the authority to minister publicly with the Means of Grace—something that belongs to the entire Church—in the name of Jesus.

The false teaching or philosophy of *sacerdotalism* (from the Latin word *sacerdos*, meaning “priest”) places clergy in between the people and God in the role of mediator. According to this idea, more than dispensing the Means of Grace, the pastor makes forgiveness “real” when he pronounces absolution or administers Holy Communion.

**1 Peter 5:2,3** Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

**1 Corinthians 4:1,2** So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

### **“Justification is *because of our faith*, not through our faith”**

This false teaching ties in closely with a denial of objective/universal justification. Instead of viewing faith as a conduit or a receiving hand that grasps an accomplished reality, faith is viewed as completing justification.

We see clearly the error of this teaching when we again remember the nature of faith. Faith is *trust*, and faith trusts something. Faith doesn’t cause something to happen; it relies upon something that has been stated or has happened.

### **“Justification is because of Christ *in us* instead of Christ *for us*”**

In the years after Martin Luther’s death the Lutheran church grappled with several questions about justification. German Lutheran theologian Andreas Osiander (1498-1552) taught that the basis for our justification is Christ who lives *in us*. This teaching comes dangerously close to the Roman idea of infused grace. Ultimately it leads people to look for the cause of their justification inside themselves.

Scripture teaches that the basis for our justification is the completed work of Christ *for us*. Jesus is our Substitute, who fulfilled the law perfectly. His perfect obedience is credited to us as righteousness through faith in his merit.

**Romans 1:17** For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, “The righteous will live by faith.”

**Romans 3:21,22** But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

**Romans 10:4** Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

**Philippians 3:8,9** I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

### **“Let us sin, that grace may abound”**

The sinful flesh dies hard, and our carnal self is always looking for ways to abuse the grace of God. One way is by treating grace as something cheap, turning God’s grace into a license for sin. Scripture warns repeatedly that we who are alive with Christ will not go on intentionally disobeying God and mocking his will.

**Romans 6:1,2** What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

**Galatians 5:13** You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

**Galatians 5:19-21** The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

**Hebrews 10:26,27** If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

**1 John 3:9** No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remain in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

**Mark 1:15** "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"