

Justification: God's Sovereign Grace

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We begin a new three week series today. Before I tell you the subject, let me tell you the "why." One of the callings of a pastor is to teach his flock the whole counsel of God. That doesn't mean we must say everything that can be said, but it does mean teaching that covers in depth all the essential doctrines of God, Scripture, and the gospel.

About a year ago I decided that before I died, I needed to read John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It is a massive book. It was so long that I got discouraged and had somewhat given up last year. One of my goals on my sabbatical was to finish it. With some persevering reading, I was able to get through it. It's probably my biggest reading project ever.

Here's where our new series comes in. I was reading through Calvin's section on justification—seven long and wonderful chapters. Calvin was a pastor. I'll bet his flock knew justification quite well. I began to think about my own teaching ministry over the years here and whether this essential doctrine had ever been clearly taught. I know I have addressed it at times. Yet we have never taken a deep doctrinal drink. So for three weeks, that is what we will do.

How important is justification? In the words of Martin Luther, whose teaching on it exploded into the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, "If this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses." (*Weimarer Ausgabe* 40/3.352.3). Hopefully by the time we are done, we will all see why.

Why Should I Care?

I am starting with this for the same reason Paul started with this question when he wrote Romans. In some ways, Romans is a whole book on justification. Romans 3:21-26 is a key passage on justification which Luther called the center of Romans and the center of the whole Bible. There are two reasons all of us should care immensely about this doctrine.

The reality of the wrath of God against our/my sin

Here is where Paul begins his explanation:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20 ESV)

The wrath of God is God's holy anger against sin and sinners. His righteous character does not allow him to be anything less than angry at unrighteousness and unrighteous people. You may be thinking of really bad people you know or the Hitlers of history. The wrath of God is targeted much closer than them.

"As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)

There is none righteous, no not one. Let that soak in. If God's wrath is against the unrighteousness, and everyone is unrighteous, this passage says God is angry at all of us. Here is the necessary starting point of justification, our natural spiritual condition as God sees it. We must see our eternal destiny as God sees it. The whole world and everyone in it lies under this condemnation from God.

Does it feel like it? I have to say no. We generally feel good about ourselves and view a low self-esteem as a big problem. We know bad people or read about them, but we don't put ourselves in that category. It's like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon where everybody there is above average. We all rate ourselves morally above average. Besides, we're just living life. We go to work. We go to school. We may raise a family. We try to be good citizens. Be nice to people. Romans 3 seems to be referring to people much different from us.

Yet, the reality is that people are born and they die and only then is there the sudden realization that the whole of our lives were lived with blindness to our impending and eternal doom.

I've been able to experience and tour the ancient city of Pompeii, Italy. If you know the story, Pompeii was a thriving Roman city right next to Mt. Vesuvius. They didn't have modern geological monitoring. They were living normal Roman lives unaware that lava and pressure were building in the volcano next door. In 79 AD, suddenly the mountain erupted and a suffocating layer of ash and fire descended on Pompeii. Within moments, a major city was gone. I toured the city. The shapes of the bodies of people buried there were preserved in the ash (see below).



Some of them were clutching their gold and jewelry. Others were holding one another. It is truly haunting. These were real people. We think, if only they realized what was about to happen they could have prepared themselves.

Scripture says that we are all living next to a spiritual Mt. Vesuvius. We are doing pretty much normal life day after day. If only we realized what is about to happen. The burning, churning wrath of God is but moments from falling down upon us. The moment death grips us is our Pompeii moment. Does it feel like it? No. We live our lives. But Scripture says, "*It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*" (Hebrews 9:27)

It is astounding to realize it. Average Joe. Average Jane. Scurrying about their business. Doing their life. Then all of a sudden, the heart attack. The head-on crash. The long life ended by cancer. The whatever. To die is to leave this reality and step into the next. There is that first millisecond after we die when the reality of eternity and Almighty God strikes the individual who just moments before was driving their car or watching TV. *Eternity! God! Heaven and Hell!* That moment is the ultimate reality check. This life is the shadow; that is the eternal reality. What awaits the sinner? A Mt. Vesuvius called Almighty God whose anger against unrighteousness created the need for hell. This leads Scripture to admonish:

- "*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" (Matthew 10:28)
- "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*" (Hebrews 10:31)

Estimates are that 250,000 people in the world die every day; 10,000 since the beginning of this sermon. Every death has the reality check—the splendor of God’s holiness and wrath and realizing a holy and awful dread as they “fall into the hands of the living God.” *I thought this was a message about justification?* Justification is all about that first millisecond after you die. Are you ready?

While one aspect of salvation, justification is particularly personal because it deals with our personal guilt.

Justification is Christianity’s answer to the basic religious questions, *How can I know God? What is the path to God? How do I deal with my guilt?*

Religion defines the terms differently and even defines God differently. But all struggle to answer convincingly to the human conscience this sense we have that all is not right between God and us.

The doctrine of justification stops being an ethereal doctrine and becomes personal when I realize its connection to my personal guilt. Jesus told a story like this in Luke—a tax collector and a Pharisee went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed a prayer praising God that he was better than most men. The tax collector, realizing his personal sin and guilt, prayed a humble prayer, *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!* (Luke 18:13) Jesus adds this commentary, "*I tell you, this man [the sinner] went down to his house justified rather than the other [the Pharisee].*" (Luke 18:14, clarification added) Justification is, and must be, personal.

What is Justification?

Let’s start NOT where you expect. Rather than starting in Romans, let’s start briefly in the Old Testament. God established a covenant with Israel that included moral stipulations and

strict rules regarding how he was to be worshiped and obeyed. This is referred to as the Law. Last spring we studied a summary of the Law called the Ten Commandments. The Law of God is God's righteous standard. They are not suggestions or good ideas; they are absolute moral parameters against which all human beings will be eternally judged.

God also established an approach to him in worship known as the Levitical system. There was a tabernacle and later a temple. The design of the structure included an outer court, an inner court, and the holy of holies. The high priest could only enter the holy of holies—the very presence of God—once a year. There he would offer sacrifices for the atonement of the sins of the nation. There was a system of sacrifices for various kinds of sins. Blood. Sacrifice. Sin. The whole thing was a bloody mess.

Why? Why all these bull and goat sacrifices? Does God need dead animals to be vindicated? All of it was to make it clear that God is holy and we are not. The veil in the Holy Place meant we did not have access to God. We needed something to permanently get rid of our guilt and eternally grant us righteousness—a righteousness we don't have and even our best efforts don't provide us. The writer of Hebrews summarizes it this way, *"For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."* (Hebrews 10:4)

Bulls and goats can't provide what sinners need. ***Sinners need eternal forgiveness and eternal righteousness to stand eternally before a holy God.*** How? From where? How do we get this? If we don't, it is hell forever.

This is where justification steps into our most desperate need.

- *"Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."* (Galatians 2:16)
- *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 3:21-24)

Galatians 2 makes it clear again, the righteousness we need to stand before God can't come through our attempts to obey the law. Self-righteousness will not save us. The righteousness that can save us is apart from the law. It comes from God in a different way. In Romans 3:22, it comes *"through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."*

Both passages use the same word to describe how eternal right standing before God can come to the sinner. Justification. It's a long word but don't be scared. It literally means, *to pronounce or declare something righteous*. The Law can't declare us righteous; it can only condemn us. But God can. Let's look at the verses.

It is "by his grace"

Grace means gift. Grace means getting something I don't deserve. The justifying declaration of God for the sinner is completely out of his kindness and love and in no way based on the sinner deserving it. If I deserve it, I earned it. If not, it is grace.

It is “through faith in Jesus Christ”

Faith is the means or instrument through which this righteous declaration comes. This faith is not itself a work but rather is the open hand receiving. Notice faith’s object is not faith but Jesus. This is shorthand for the gospel about Jesus. His person as God and man. His work dying bearing our guilt on the cross and his resurrection.

It is available “to all who believe”

Justification is not exclusive. It is not just for Jews or just Gentiles but any who believe. Remember this is a three-part series, so we will unpack this further, but to summarize, here is the Westminster Catechism,

“Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.”

The result of God’s justification of the sinner is that the sinner, while still a sinner, is treated eternally by God as a morally perfect human being.

This sounds too wonderful to be true, doesn’t it? Most religions say, try more. Work harder. Do this. Do that. Christianity says the complete opposite. Stop trying! Stop trusting how good you are! The impulse to self-justify by my own actions itself is human pride. Jesus has done the work for us. He has lived a perfectly righteous life and his very righteousness is made available to all who believe in him.

So God makes me righteous? No. Here is a key point. In justification, God doesn’t make us righteous. We still fall short of the glory of God all the time and every day. The miracle here is that God declares us righteous anyway.

Here we are fighting an old Sunday school definition of justification: *just as if I’d never sinned*. Sounds nice but it robs justification of its true glory. It is not just as if I’d never sinned. It is *in spite of* all my sin. In spite of all my rebellion. In spite of all my doing the wrong thing and failures to do the right and loving thing. In spite of the massive pile of guilt even the most moral person here has created. Despite my sin against him, he justifies anyway. Justification is a moment—a declaration of eternal righteousness for anyone who places their faith in Jesus Christ.

“Turning away our view from our own works, it bids us look only to the mercy of God and the perfection of Christ. The order of justification which it sets before us is this: first, God of his mere gratuitous goodness is pleased to embrace the sinner, in whom he sees nothing that can move him to mercy but wretchedness, because he sees him altogether naked and destitute of good works. He, therefore, seeks the cause of kindness in himself, that thus he may affect the sinner by a sense of his goodness, and induce him, in distrust of his own works, to cast himself entirely upon his mercy for salvation. This is the meaning of faith by which the sinner comes into the possession of salvation, when, according to the doctrine of the Gospel, he perceives that he is reconciled by God; when, by the intercession of Christ, he obtains the pardon of his sins, and is justified; and, though renewed by the Spirit of God, considers that, instead of leaning on his own works, he must look solely to the righteousness which is treasured up for him in Christ.” (John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*)

This places the sinner in an eternal category he doesn't deserve to be in. All his guilt is taken away. God makes an eternal commitment to view him as a morally perfect human being. You protest, "*But I'm not morally perfect!*" We know you're not. The friends you grew up with know you're not. Your family knows you're not. If you put your faith in Jesus, there's only one person who doesn't know that and that's God. Better said, of his own grace, he freely and lovingly chooses not to know it, not to remember it, not to ever hold it against you. He has declared you not simply morally neutral, but positively and eternally righteous. That is justification.

This is the answer to the either damning or delightful reality check at death. The Pompeii moment. The sudden-pain-in-your-chest, slump-to-the-ground, here-you-go moment. That millisecond on the other side of death where the sudden view is of the majesty of Almighty God, the beauty of heaven, the terror of hell, and the question that determines our eternal destiny. Perfectly righteous or not. Heaven or not. Eternal life or not.

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