

Justification: How God Declares Sinners Righteous

September 27 & 28, 2014

Steve DeWitt

It was 1513. A monk named Martin Luther served a German outpost town called Wittenberg. He was a brilliant but spiritually tortured soul who went through monastic training severely burdened by his sense of the holiness and wrath of God. He used a German word to describe how he felt: *Anfechtung*, meaning "holy terror." He experienced these terrors as he thought about God and his own sense of sinfulness. He described his spiritual dread: "So great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them...In this moment...the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed." (Martin Luther, *Anfechtungen*, 31:129)

Stories are legendary of how fastidious Luther was in his attempts to please God by strict obedience. He would go to the confessional box for hours and confess any sin he could think of. One priest listening to him in the confessional booth told him to leave and not come back until he had a real sin to confess.

What did Luther feel? Where did his *Anfechtung* come from? Luther sensed in his conscience that all was not well between him and God. He knew he was not accepted before God. How could he stand eternally before a righteous God? Was hell his eternal destiny? In 1513 Luther began to meditate on Romans 1:17 (ESV), "*the righteous shall live by faith.*" Slowly it began to dawn in his heart that the message of the Bible was that there was a way for sinners to be righteous before God. Not by all his attempts to be righteous. The just don't live eternally by their own righteous efforts, "*the righteous shall live by faith.*" This truth sprouted in his heart and through his teaching to all of Germany and Europe. The Reformation literally changed Europe and the course of all human history.

We are doing a three-week series on justification. This is week two. In week one we asked, why should we care about this? The big reason is the wrath of God. This is where Paul begins in Romans 1:18, "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.*" Does it seem like we are all a breath away from God's wrath? No. We live our lives. It seems normal. Nothing to fear it seems. We do our school, our work, our family. Life goes on. *Que sera, sera*. But like the ancient city of Pompeii, we are all living next to a volcano—only this volcano is God—an eternal volcano of anger against us and our sin.

Justification is about that first millisecond after death when we leave this reality and step into the next. There to greet us is the divine Vesuvius, resplendent and dreadful in his holiness and power. The only thing that will matter in that moment is whether I am righteous in his sight or not. The one means eternal love and eternal life. The other is eternal judgment and eternal hell. Justification asks, *are you ready?*

What is Justification?

Man's biggest problem is God. God is holy. God is morally pure. God is completely righteous. Why is God our problem? We are unrighteous. As Romans 1:18 says that the wrath of God is revealed against all our moral unrighteousness. The main word the Bible uses for this is sin. "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23). As such, we are accountable to the righteous moral judgment of a perfectly righteous God.

Before Him we have no righteous standing, no acceptance, no life. Our lack of acceptance is our lack of righteousness stemming from our sin. How do we get rid of the guilt of our sin AND gain the full righteousness God's holiness requires?

"And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." (Romans 4:5) Look at that word "justified." It is a legal word. It's a word that lawyers and judges use. You know the moment if you've ever been in court or watch one of the legal dramas. The jury or judge deliberates the evidence. Then the time comes for the reading of the verdict. "Would the accused stand?" Then the verdict is read, "We the jury do find John Smith guilty...or innocent." It is always a poignant moment. What is a verdict? Declaring someone guilty or acquitted.

Put that into Romans 4:5, *"to the man who does not work."* This refers to works in terms of man's efforts to be righteous before God. This is sometimes called "good works" or "righteousness" but really is just all man's efforts, conscientious, religious, whatever. The one who is justified does not trust or believe his own works are sufficient. He stops trusting those. Rather he *believes in him who justifies the ungodly*. God declares the guilty innocent.

Do you see the paradox? Justify means declare righteous. In the text, God is the one who declares unrighteous people righteous. This sounds all wrong. Judges are supposed to declare the innocent innocent; not declare the guilty innocent. That sounds like "opposite" day. Oxymoron day. For us it would be like:

- Declaring dirt clean
- Declaring liver and onions delicious
- Declaring Krispy Kreme donuts good for you
- Declaring Northwest Indiana winters balmy and delightful
- Declaring a root canal the highlight of our week
- Declaring the Cubs World Series champions

Is God duplicitous? Wouldn't calling unrighteous people righteous be a lie—indeed compromise God's own righteous standing?

Now we are into the glory and the complexity of how God saved us. Peeling away justification is like opening the hood on an Italian sports car. We know it goes fast but looking under the hood shows us how it does so. Under the hood of justification are three turbocharged cylinders: *the cross, imputation, and faith*. These three are how God righteously can declare unrighteous people righteous.

The cross

By cross we mean specifically Jesus Christ's first century death on a Roman cross. We rightly see it as the ultimate expression of love and personal sacrifice for others. But at its core, the cross is about a legal transaction—not of money or land or material possessions—it's a transaction of *righteousness*. Righteousness is not a material commodity, but it is a spiritual one. God has it. When he created us, we had it. When Adam and Eve sinned, the whole human race lost it. Without it, we have no standing before God. We only have condemnation. Since righteousness is what we need, where can we get it? The Law couldn't give it. Our attempted good works don't give it. Manmade religion can't give it. But God can. God provides righteousness from a completely unexpected source—the life and the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Before you think in terms of his death you have think in terms of his life. From the very beginning Jesus was morally positioned to be righteous. We celebrate it every Christmas. Jesus was born of a virgin, thereby not inheriting Adam's guilt. Just like us, he was born under the Law. Just like us, he was obligated to fulfill it. *Unlike us*, he did so perfectly. Jesus completely fulfilled the Law. He never violated it in thought, word, or deed. He fulfilled it and the spirit of it in all that he did. Jesus lived a morally perfect life.

But how could Jesus die? Death is for lawbreakers. It is the wages of sin. Jesus was a law keeper. The unfolding glory of God's purpose to save sinners reveals that God's justice allows for substitutes. As long as the penalty is paid in full, the penalty that one person deserves can be paid for by another. It's like a businessman who is owed a large sum of money. As long as that debt is paid, it doesn't matter if the debtor pays it, the debtor's parents pay it, or the debtor's insurance policy pays it. If the debt is paid, the debt is paid.

Because Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law, he did not die for his own sin. He couldn't. But he could die for someone else's sin. *What if Jesus' worth as a payment was based on his worth as a person?* He is the Son of God. If Bill Gates decides to take a kindergarten class out for ice cream, should those children worry if his credit card can cover the bill? No. Why? He's Bill Gates. Should sinners wonder if Jesus' death payment is enough for our sin? No. Why? He is the Son of God. His payment on our behalf fully covers all guilt debt of our sin.

But the question has to be asked, how does Jesus' death on a cross connect me personally with what he did?

Imputation (double)

"His faith was counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:22)

Counted. The word is a legal financial word that means "to credit; to credit an account." You probably do this all the time. If you bank online, to pay bills you will likely transfer money from your savings into your checking—enough to cover the bill. Try saying this when you go to the bank: "I'd like to impute money into my checking account." They may think you are there to rob them. No. It just means *to transfer*. "Why did you say impute?" "Because I am a theologian!"

In imputation, God legally transferred the guilt of our unrighteousness to Jesus on the cross and, when we believe, he transfers Jesus' righteousness to our eternal moral account.

- *"That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness.' But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."* (Romans 4:22-25)
- *"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men."* (Romans 5:18)
- *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Corinthians 5:21)

This last verse says it so brilliantly simple. God made him sin. *Who?* Jesus. The holy One. *Made him sin? How?* On the cross God legally imputed to him our moral guilt. *Was he*

guilty? No. But in God's eyes as he hung there? Yes. Jesus became our substitute. Jesus became guilty. Jesus became what he was not by the imputing, or transferring of God.

Taking our guilt away isn't enough to save us. If this was all that God did we still are not righteous. We just aren't guilty. We're just back to zero. But to stand before God we must be fully righteous. It's like asking what it takes to get into Harvard. Do you just have to get rid of the *F's* on your record? No. To get into Harvard you need a whole lot of *A's*.

That is the second part of the verse. "*So that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" This is the second imputation. In the first, he takes our guilt and imputes it to Jesus' account. This is why as Jesus hung on the cross, the sky grew black and Jesus cried out, "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34) What was the answer to Jesus' crying question? From the perspective of God the Father, God the Son was morally unrighteous as he hung there. God treated him like we deserve to be treated. Jesus felt Vesuvius wrath.

But this is only half of imputation. Not only can guilt be imputed, but so can righteousness. "*His faith is counted as righteousness.*" (Romans 4:5) When I put my hope and personal faith in Jesus, God imputes the full obedience of Jesus to the Law over to my moral account. Now, from God's perspective, though ungodly, I am seen eternally as fully righteous. The result of this double imputation is that Jesus was in a category of sin he didn't deserve and we are in a category of righteousness we don't deserve.

So how does something so completely unfair done by God not make him liable for wrongdoing? Or in terms of Romans 3, how can God be both *just* and *justifier*?

Let's go back to Jesus and the cross. The cross is a statement of value both on the greatness of God's holy justice and the greatness of our debt to God. Only the perfect and infinitely valuable life of the Son of God could sufficiently pay that price. Jesus' *voluntary* substitutionary death allows God to fully uphold his justice while making a way for sinners to be declared what they are not—righteous. *The Law* is fulfilled in Christ's perfect life. *God's justice* is satisfied in Jesus' death. *God's glory* is magnified as God mercifully declares the sinner righteous while simultaneously maintaining his own glorious holiness. Brilliant!

I was asked this week, are Christians under the wrath of God?

What about God's wrath after we are declared righteous?

"*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*" (Romans 8:1)

How can this be? Because God promises to always "reckon" us, think about us, evaluate us as fully righteous. Indeed, as righteous as Jesus was and is righteous.

Remember, this is God declaring us something we are not. If you think, *wow, awesome, I'm righteous!* No you're not! We all know you are not righteous. That's the wonder of it. Indwelling sin means sin is an ongoing presence in the Christian until we die. We are still sinners but God promises to always "count" us as righteous and never see us as anything other than perfectly moral human beings for all eternity. There is no condemnation. No condemnation tomorrow, no condemnation ever!

Romans 8 asks, if the one who does the condemning is the one who does the justifying, then who is there to further condemn us? The only voice that matters has declared us righteous.

Are Christians under the wrath of God? Never. Ever. Ever. Ever. Ever. Ever. Ever again. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

- "No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine." (Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be?*)
- "No guilt in life no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from His hand. Till he returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand." (Stuart Townend & Keith Getty, *In Christ Alone*)

What do we do? We marvel. We worship. We wonder. And one millisecond after we die and see the effulgent majesty of Almighty God, *NO CONDEMNATION* will be a joy beyond all measure.

Faith

"And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." (Romans 4:5)

Why did God choose faith as the means by which he would impute Christ's righteousness? Because faith is the direct opposite of man's natural desire in salvation. We want to justify ourselves by being wonderful people or doing wonderful things. We desperately want some part in it. Some role. Something that I can say, *look what I did!* By making faith the required means and then giving faith to the sinner as a gift, it eliminates any possible glory to man and insures that all glory goes to God.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This can all seem unfair IF we think all people deserve to be saved. But the Bible says *"None is righteous, no, not one."* (Romans 3:10) There is none who deserve to be saved, no, not one. God doesn't owe us anything but what our sins deserve. Condemnation. Wrath. Hell forever.

But God chooses in love to save us completely by his grace. Through Jesus he makes saving righteousness available to all. By making faith the instrument of salvation, he insures *that for everyone who goes to hell, it's their fault and everyone who goes to heaven is God's fault.*

Where the personal rubber meets your personal road is whether you personally have believed in Jesus. Are you under condemnation or not? What will your death reveal one millisecond on the other side? Will you enter that eternal reality as a sinner who God reckons a sinner or as a sinner who God reckons a saint?

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

© 2014 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.