

Justification: Declared Righteous and So Much More

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As many of you know, I am a big fan of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movie series. I have *The Hobbit* already on my calendar in December and can't wait. In *The Lord of the Rings* series, there is a powerful scene in which the king in exile, Aragorn, is challenged by Lord Elrond, to fulfill his destiny and become the high king. Aragorn feared this, but Elrond meets him, gives him a sword of power, and says, "Put aside the Ranger; become who you were born to be." It's a real testosterone moment in the movie and Aragorn does so in *The Return of the King*.

Are you enjoying our series on justification? It's a truth so important that Luther called it the doctrine on which the church rises or falls. It's the doctrine the Apostle Paul centered his most extensive teaching letter upon (Romans). Because the Holy Spirit inspired him to do so, justification is really important in the eyes of God as well. I have received such affirming and encouraging response from it. God seems to be smiling on the series so we are extending it another three weeks. Today we look at justification and God's purpose to turn us from the Ranger and become who we were born to be.

Let's remind ourselves of what justification is. A holy God declares guilty sinners righteous. We have explored how God did it through Jesus, the cross, imputation, and by faith. This is Christianity's answer to the heart-cry of every human being whose conscience tells us we are guilty, that everything is not okay between us and God. It distinguishes Christianity from all the other major religions of the world which require man to do something to be "saved." Christianity says Jesus did what we couldn't do. He fulfilled the Law and died in our place.

While justification itself is wonderful, justification by itself is not. Justification is one facet of how God redeems sinners. It is an essential one, but by itself it doesn't save us. We see this in Romans 8:

"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Romans 8:29-30)

Verse 30 is often called *the golden chain* of salvation. Each link is necessary but is linked to another. I want to focus on three absolutely necessary facets that work with justification to accomplish our salvation.

Resurrection: the Justification of Jesus (and us)

"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 4:24-25)

We typically think about resurrection as Jesus conquering death for him and for us. That is wonderfully true. 1 Corinthians 15 is an entire chapter on the resurrection as Jesus conquering death. But this passage ties Jesus' resurrection to our justification. What do you think is the connection?

"He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." (Romans 4:25)

How many of you like to multitask—that feeling that while you are doing one thing you are also doing something else? How many of you call family or friends while driving in the car? I do. I like it. I have to drive and I can enjoy conversation too. How many of you check email during church? Multitasking—the accomplishing of more than one thing at the same time.

God is the great multitasker. Multiple layers of meaning and purposes were accomplished at the same time and in the same event. The cross is the ultimate example as in one event he fulfills prophecy, exacts justice, displays mercy, fulfills the Law, unveils his love, glorifies the Son, conquers Satan, redeems sinners, and creates a path to salvation for all who believe. Amazing redemptive multitasking.

The resurrection of Jesus is God multitasking. How? Let's go back to the story. As Jesus hung on the cross, what was God the Father's verdict over him? *Guilty! Sinner!* Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) What was happening? God imputed to Jesus our moral guilt and Jesus was legally guilty before God. God treated him with the wrath we deserve. He was legally guilty. He died for our sins.

If death was the end of it, we simply have to agree with God's decree. Jesus was a guilty man. He died because he was guilty. Death was God's final verdict.

But here is where resurrection has everything to do with justification. On the third day after his death, God exerted power that he alone has to raise Jesus from the dead. Would he have done that if Jesus was still guilty? *In justification God declares us righteous. In the resurrection God declares Jesus righteous. Jesus, I declare you not guilty! Arise!* And Jesus did arise.

The text says he was *raised for our justification*. (Romans 4:25) How? Let's say Jesus died and stayed dead. Let's say they found a sarcophagus somewhere with bones in it and it read, *Jesus of Nazareth*. What would that do to Christianity? The whole thing collapses and one reason it does is we wouldn't know if God accepted Jesus or not. He's still dead.

How could God tell us that Jesus' sacrifice was accepted? That his death paid the penalty in full? That Jesus is once again declared righteous? What better way to say it than to raise him from the dead? He died for our transgressions and was raised to life for our righteousness.

In a few weeks we are doing our annual church history weekend and I'm gearing up to do a biographical message on C.S. Lewis. I hope you come. It makes me think of C.S. Lewis' depiction of this in the children's series *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The Great Lion, Aslan, died in the traitor boy, Edmund's, place. The Witch killed him on the Great Stone Tablet. The girls Susan and Lucy are devastated but, in a surprise twist, Aslan is raised to life. Susan and Lucy are beyond joyous but ask, how could this happen? Aslan explains:

"It means that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes only back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, in the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards." (C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Chapter 15)

How did Susan and Lucy know Edmund's guilt was gone? Aslan was alive again. Resurrection proves justification.

It would be a great mistake to think justification is all that God does to save us. Allow me to draw an analogy from the news. As most of us know, Ebola is dominating the news right now. It's scary stuff. This past week a hospital in Dallas blew it. A patient with Ebola came to their hospital. They saw him. They gave him some drugs. They said he seemed okay. And they released him. The paperwork probably said something like, *symptoms treatable*. They declared him healthy enough to be released. Declaring him legally healthy was not what that guy needed. He had a virus. He was suffering from it. He needed the virus removed.

No analogy is perfect, but if justification is a declaration of spiritual health, why are we still sick? *Thank you but what about the actual presence of the virus?* We are suffering here from the effects of a virus far more deadly than Ebola. We are suffering from sin's effect. *Declaring us healthy in your eyes is great but can you do something to make us actually healthy? Righteous in experience? Please?*

Regeneration/New Birth: the Spiritual Start of Something Great

Let's go back to Romans 8:29, "*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*"

Way back before Jesus' incarnation and even before creation, God purposed to conform all who believed in Jesus into the very likeness of Jesus. This doesn't mean we physically look like him, but spiritually, our attitudes, our motives, our values, our loves, our priorities, every little dimension of who we are, God wants to root out the effects of sin and replace it with what healthy looks like. Jesus is the picture of health.

But how do you do that? Quarantine? Spiritual antibiotics? Spiritual chemotherapy? God's plan is way more radical than that. This transformation requires an actual new birth. A whole new start. A complete do-over. The theological word for this is *regeneration*.

- "*Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'*" (John 3:3)
- "*He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*" (Titus 3:5)

Let's focus on the Titus verse a little. The first part describes the mercy of God in justifying us according to his mercy—not our works; not our doing—but God's doing on our behalf. Notice that the last clause explains the first. "*He saved us...by the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*" What Jesus calls born again, Paul calls regeneration.

God's solution? A complete reboot. A whole new start. *By the washing of regeneration*. Regeneration is God creating a whole new nature in us. A new life. A new heart. A new power and desire to live to please God. The old nature delights in sin and cannot please God. The new nature delights in righteous living and wants very much to please God. This means for the Christian, sin is no longer our master and we no longer have to live under its bondage.

This new birth is only the first step. "*By the washing of regeneration **and renewal by the Holy Spirit.***"

Sanctification: Becoming What We Were Born (Again) to Be

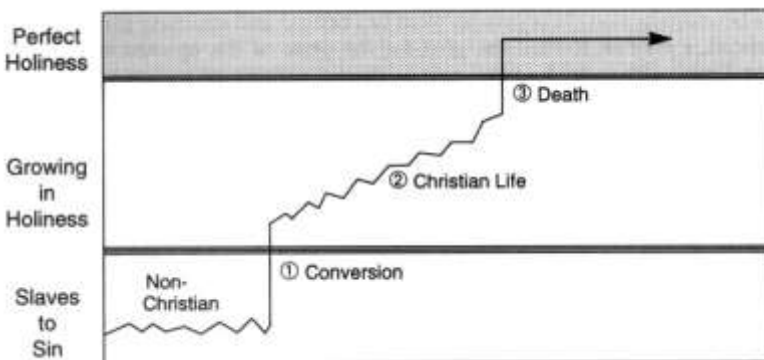
- "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:11)
- "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." (Romans 6:6)
- "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." (1 Thessalonians 4:3)
- "Predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Romans 8:29)

Justification is judicial change. Sanctification is God's process of making us holy and freeing us from sin's damning effects upon us. In justification, God declares us righteous; in sanctification he makes us righteous. This is practical righteousness; lived out righteousness. It is arduous, day in, day out, filled with failures and successes, ups and downs, slowly changing us into the likeness of His Son.

Scripture tells us that sanctification is not the grounds of our justification but it is the evidence of it. Change. Obedience. Every day under and needing grace, failing, falling, but never quitting and slowly conforming. I particularly like J.C. Ryle on this,

"When people talk of having received 'such a blessing', and of having found 'the higher life', after hearing some earnest advocate of 'holiness by faith and self-consecration', while their families and friends see no improvement and no increased sanctity in their daily tempers and behavior, immense harm is done to the cause of Christ. True holiness, we surely ought to remember, does not consist merely of inward sensations and impressions. It is much more than tears, and sighs, and bodily excitement, and a quickened pulse, and a passionate feeling of attachment to our own favorite preachers and our own religious party, and a readiness to quarrel with everyone who does not agree with us. It is something of the 'image of Christ', which can be seen and observed by others in our private life, and habits, and character, and doings." (J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, quoted in Ferguson p. 132.)

Look at this graph from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*:



I think this is a great picture of what we're talking about here. What is sanctification? How does God go about working this change? You'll see the bottom level here, this is life before Christ. This is me as I naturally am. I am born a sinner and as a sinner, as a non-Christian, I have my ups and downs—I help old ladies cross the street, I take cookies to my neighbor, but I also do some other not-so-good things, but it doesn't matter because the good things that I do merit no favor with God. I still go to hell.

What do I need? I need to trust in Christ. I need to believe, and that is what that conversion is. Suddenly, when I do that, I step into a whole new realm; a realm where I am declared righteous by God, and I increasingly grow in this righteousness daily. And yes, there are some ups and downs—I have days where I look like Jesus; I have days where I look like Satan. But I am still moving up and to the right. I am generally, increasingly, overall becoming somebody that I was not before. I am becoming sanctified; righteous in the day-to-day of life. Do I ever achieve perfection in this life? No, I do not. But when I die, the Bible says that we shed this body of sin and we are given a whole new body—with no sin nature. And we live in perfect holiness and righteousness forever. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

Now I want you to look back at that chart and ask yourself, *where am I on it?* If you decide that you are in the basement, what should you do? Believe in Jesus and be saved! Turn from your sins, trust what Christ has done for you on the cross and receive a declaration of righteousness known as justification from God and get the gift of eternal life.

Now if you're a Christian here and you look at this and you say, *this week I'm kind of on an upswing*; the person next to you, may say they are on a downward slope. You may question whether or not you are saved. But the big question is, *are you changing?* It may be feeble and small, but are you changing? Do you desire that?

Still others of you may say, *I think I'm in the upper section*. Are you dead? Until death, none of us are in the upper section. Where are you on that chart?

Grudem gives us another chart:

Justification

*Legal standing
Once for all time
Entirely God's Work
Perfect in this life
The same in all Christians*

Sanctification

*Internal condition
Continuous throughout life
We cooperate
Not perfect in this life
Greater in some than in others*

What is the organic connection between these? As one staff member told me this week, sanctification feeds every day on justification. The fact that God has graciously declared us righteous is the energy and the food that empowers and motivates my desire to obey God. As the puritans said it, *we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day*. The more I realize what God has done to save me, the more I want to be who God wants me to be.

Regeneration and sanctification are great news for us sinners. God wants to save us completely and not allow sin victory in any aspect of our lives.

- *"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."* (Philippians 1:6)
- *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* (Philippians 2:12-13)

I read a great illustration of this which fits my life right now. With a 16-month-old daughter in the house, it's like having a pet parrot. What we say, she tries to say. What we do, she

tries to do. This creates little moments of hilarity every day. "What does a cow say?" She'll say "moo," not because she understands cows and mooing but because every time we say "cow," she says "moo" and we applaud. I do an elephant impersonation where I lift my arm. So when she's an elephant in a book, she lifts her arm. It's totally cute. She's picking up things by what we say and do.

But why do kids so resemble their parents? It goes beyond imitation. We birthed her. Our very nature is within her. This writer adds,

*"In like manner we may carefully copy the traits of Christ's character, looking at him outside of us, as a painter looks at his mode; we may do better still—we may, by prayer and the reading of the Word, live daily in his company, and receive the impress of his influence; but, if our imitation of him is to be the deepest and most thorough, something more is necessary; he must be in us, as the mother is in her child, having communicated his own nature to us in the new birth." (James Stalker, as quoted in *The Beauty of Jesus* by Clifford Pond, p. 141)*

Justification declares us righteous. Regeneration creates spiritual life to want righteousness. Sanctification slowly makes us righteous and in doing so, conforms us to the likeness of our totally righteous and resurrected Savior. *"Put aside the Ranger, become who you were born (again) to be."*

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