
 BACK TO THE BASICS: JUSTIFICATION AND ASSURANCE

Justification:

David Wells on the importance of the doctrine:

From the time of the Reformation, justification by grace alone and received through faith alone has been considered the central, defining motif in this New Testament gospel. It was upon this doctrine, Luther declared, that the church stands or falls.¹

James White:

How does one go from being the enemy of God to being at peace with God? This is what justification is about.

When Christians are continually thankful for and amazed at the grace of God that has brought them into a state where they stand righteous before God, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, then it can be safely said that those Christians, and therefore, the church, are thinking properly and are concentrating on the important issues.²

Luther:

If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.³

Soteriological mathmatics:

There are two oft-repeated errors that plague the doctrine of salvation:

1. *Adding* works to the gaining or maintaining of salvation
2. *Subtracting* works from the results of salvation

When studying justification, we wrestle with the first of those two errors: a tragic tendency to add works to the gaining or maintaining of salvation.

Four views of justification:

1. Roman Catholic
2. New Perspective on Paul
3. Popular Protestant
4. Traditional Protestant

¹ David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 198.

² James White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 2001), 64.

³ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 77, as quote in John Piper, *Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2000), 84.

The watershed: to be *declared* innocent
or
to be *made* innocent?

1. The Roman Catholic view:

To be justified means to be *made* righteous or to be *made* innocent.

Infused righteousness: At the moment of salvation, God infuses or weaves into you an actual sinless holiness. At that moment, you are perfectly innocent *in actual practice*.

Question: How long does that actual innocence last?

Having been placed at the pinnacle of purity, the Catholic view says that you spend the rest of your life sliding, away from that initial starting point. But because God *made* you righteous, you have both the ability and responsibility to maintain that right standing with Him.

Results: penance and purgatory (ways of making up for your failure to maintain your flawless, infused righteousness)

The Council of Trent on justification

The means of justification is the *sacrament of baptism*.⁴

*Those who, by sin have fallen from the received grace of justification may be again justified ... through the sacrament of penance.*⁵

In the Roman Catholic view, salvation is *obtained* by water baptism and *maintained* by the works of penance.

*If anyone says ... that the debt of eternal punishment is so blotted out that there remains no debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world or in the next in Purgatory ... let him be anathema.*⁶

When Jesus cried out on the cross, "It is finished," it wasn't finished.

Summary:

⁴ As quoted in "Long Before Luther: Jesus and the Doctrine of Justification," John MacArthur, in *Justification by Faith Alone*, ed. by Don Kistler (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995) 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

The Roman Catholic view of salvation promotes an insufficient Christ, an inadequate cross, and a salvation that fails to protect you from God's wrath. All that comes from defining justification as God *makes* you righteous.

2. The New Perspective on Paul

Key proponents: E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, N. T. Wright

Evaluation:

*The soteriological sympathies of the NPP, to the degree that these sympathies exist, are not with Protestantism, but with Roman Catholicism.*⁷

*The de-protestantization of Protestantism continues at a fast pace.*⁸

Details:

- The NPP denies that second Temple Judaism (Judaism leading up to and including the NT era) was legalistic in its view of salvation; therefore, Paul should not be interpreted as writing against legalism.
- The NPP's key proponents deny the Pauline authorship of many of Paul's NT epistles (especially Ephesians and Titus). This allows them to limit the *works* of "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Rom 3:20) merely to Jewish ceremonial rituals such as circumcision and Sabbath-keeping. By excluding Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:4-5 from the canon, the founders of the NPP teach that by the *moral* works of the law one *is* justified.
- In the NPP, justification is by faithfulness, not by faith.

Waters' summary:

*Wright and Dunn ... see the ground of the believer's acceptance with God as the believer's covenantal faithfulness. This ground, then, consists of presumably infused but certainly not imputed grace. This is true of future justification in Wright, who claims that "justification, at the last, will be on the basis of performance, not possession."*⁹

3. Popular Protestant views

Summarised:

- Right standing before God (i.e., justification) is maintained by my ability to confess every sin I commit after my conversion.

⁷Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspective on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2004), xi.

⁸ White, 15.

⁹ Waters, 171.

- Right standing before God is maintained by my ability to live obediently enough to keep God happy with me so that I don't lose my salvation.

The result: fear, uncertainty, condemnation, and lack of assurance.

CJ Mahaney: Warning signs of holding these deficient views of justification:

- Do you relate to God as if you were on a kind of permanent probation...?
- When you come to worship do you maintain a "respectful distance" from God, as if He were a fascinating but ill-tempered celebrity...?
- Are you more aware of your sin than you are of God's grace, given you through the cross?

Mahaney's conclusion:

*Don't buy the lie that cultivating condemnation and wallowing in your shame is somehow pleasing to God, or that constant low-grade guilt will somehow promote holiness and spiritual maturity. It's just the opposite! God is glorified when we believe with all our hearts that those who trust in Christ can never be condemned.*¹⁰

Leon Morris:

*Because justification is an act of God rather than of man there is an assurance about it which means that it is not presumptuous to speak of being justified now.*¹¹

4. The Traditional Protestant view

Definition:

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight. (Grudem, Systematic Theology, 723)

God declares you righteous or innocent by imputing to you the righteousness of Christ, even though you aren't righteous in actual practice. God doesn't *infuse* righteousness in justification; He forgives and *imputes* or credits Christ's righteousness to your account. In other words, in justification there is a change of status with God, not a change in practice.

Justification and Sanctification:

Of course, the Holy Spirit immediately goes to work on a believer in a process the Bible calls *sanctification*, making you more righteous in practice. However, your

¹⁰ CJ Mahaney, *The Cross-Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2002), 39, emphasis original.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1955, 1960, 1965), 283.

relative success or failure in the process of sanctification doesn't change your status of being declared innocent based on Christ's righteousness.

Mahaney:

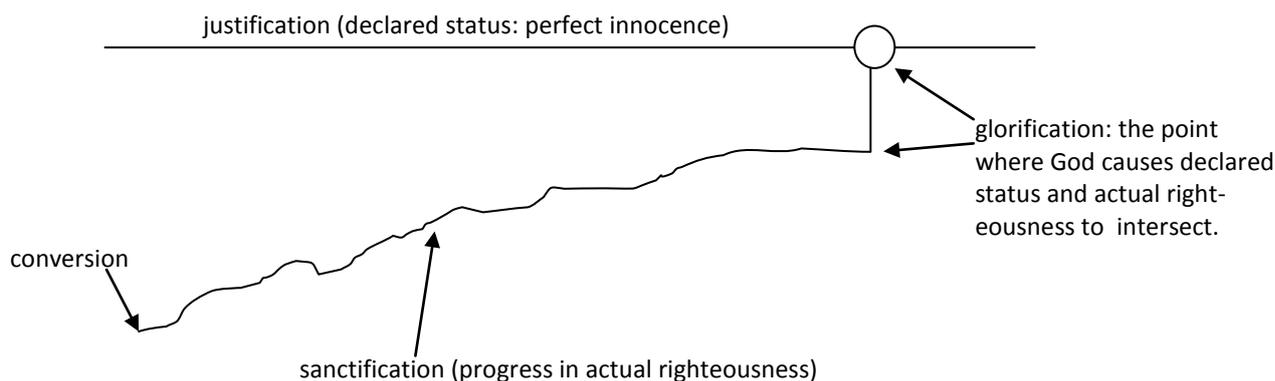
*[H]ere's the mistake the legalist makes. He confuses his own ongoing participation in the process of sanctification with God's finished work in justification. Jesus' work, not mine, is the basis of my forgiveness and acceptance by God.*¹²

White:

*To make any action of man (including the action of faith) the basis of justification is to take away from the righteousness of Christ, which is the true basis of Christian justification.*¹³

Conclusion: Justification leads inevitably to sanctification, but we should not intermingle or confuse the two.

A Diagram



Question:

Which of these four views is correct?

Since the word *dikaioo* (to justify) can bear either meaning (to be declared or to be made righteous), how does Paul use the word *justify* in key texts such as Romans 3:20 and 3:24?

Key OT uses of the word *justify*: to *make* innocent or to *declare* innocent?

Exodus 23:6-7
Proverbs 17:15

Deut 25:1
Isaiah 5:23

¹² Mahaney, 33, 35.

¹³ White, 66.

Conclusion: When the word *justify* is used in a **courtroom** setting, it clearly means to ***declare innocent***.

Two OT texts that illustrate that declared righteous usage:

Genesis 15:6 Isaiah 53:11

In Romans, did Paul use the word *justify* in this forensic or courtroom manner?

Romans 3:3-4 Romans 8:31-34

When Paul asks these questions in Romans 8, where are you standing? In the courtroom.

White:

*One who has been justified stands before God uncondemned and uncondemnable—not because of what he is in himself, but because of what Christ is in him.*¹⁴

The blessed result:

When Christians and their preachers go back to the basics of justification, not only is the gospel protected, but true believers rejoice in the certainty of salvation.

Jerry Bridges:

*The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it.*¹⁵

God wants the unsaved to be sure they're not saved, He also wants the saved to be sure that they are saved:

- *Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Luther:

If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.

¹⁴ White, 98.

¹⁵ Jerry Bridges, *The Disciplines of Grace* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress, 1994), 46, as quoted in Mahaney, *The Cross-Centered Life*, 15.