

The Doctrine of Justification

The doctrine of justification has a central role in church history and in distinguishing biblical Christianity from all other religions. A discussion about the gospel and its salvation must address the meaning and significance of this doctrine. An incorrect understanding of justification can corrupt the gospel, undermine the foundation of the Christian life, and make assurance of salvation impossible.

A biblical definition

Though not apparent in the English language, the Greek shows the relationship between the ideas of justification and righteousness. The Greek word for *justification* is *dikaïosunē*, *righteous* is *dikaïos*, *righteousness* is *dikaïōsis*, the verb *justify* is *dikaioō*, and *justification* is *dikaïosis*. When not used for eternal salvation, the Bible sometimes uses *justified* or *justification* to mean *vindicated*, *right*, or *righteous* before others (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:29, 35; 10:29; 16:15; Rom 3:4; 4:2; James 2:21, 24 will be discussed below).

When used for eternal salvation, justification refers to being vindicated before God such that we have a new legal standing with Him because He declares that we are no longer guilty as sinners. Not only is guilt and its condemnation removed, but God's righteousness is imputed (credited, assigned) to us. We read in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (cf. Rom. 5:15-19). Of course, this verse is not saying that Christ actually became sinful, but our sins were imputed to Him. In justification, we do not become internally righteous, but have Christ's righteousness imputed to us or credited to our account before God (Rom. 4:3-4, 6, 8-11, 22-24). Justification happens in an instant and results in the basis, power, and motivation to grow in practical righteousness, which is called progressive sanctification.

To summarize, justification is God's legal act by which an unrighteous sinner who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior is declared righteous before God, because Christ's righteousness is imputed to him.

A legal definition

The concept and language of justification is from the courtroom. As Judge, God declares that the sinner is now legally acceptable because divine justice has been satisfied by Jesus Christ. This verdict does not make the sinner *become* righteous any more than a judge's verdict of "guilty" makes a person become evil. God declares a sinner righteous in legal standing, though he remains unrighteous experientially (compare Luke 7:29 where God is declared righteous – He is not *made* righteous!).

There are both negative and positive aspects to justification. Negatively, judgment for our sins is cancelled so that we no longer face condemnation (Rom. 8:33-34). Positively, we gain a new righteous standing before God and are forgiven (Rom. 4:6-8). God views us as righteous by virtue of having Christ's righteousness imputed to us (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9).

How we can be justified

As sinners, we can be justified only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 3:24a says, "having been justified freely by His grace..." God's free gift of grace excludes human works or merit (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). Then Romans 3:24b explains what makes justification free: "...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The word *redemption* speaks of the price that was paid when Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. So the basis for our justification is God's gracious gift of His Son for our sins. We obtain this grace "through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 3:22; cf. Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8). That faith is our conviction that what God has said about our eternal salvation through Christ as Savior is true.

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It accepts God's promise of eternal salvation. The Bible clearly teaches that we cannot be saved by works or human merit (Rom. 3:28; 4:5; Gal. 2:16).

James 2:21-24 is often used to argue that Abraham was justified before God by works not just faith. But this is not speaking of forensic justification before God. Abraham was justified *before men* when he offered up Isaac. He was justified before God through faith (Gen. 15:6) long before he offered Isaac (Gen. 22).

Unbiblical views of justification

Not all accept this biblical understanding of justification. Roman Catholicism teaches that justification is an initial infusion of God's righteousness at baptism that grows in a person to make him righteous. A person cannot know in this life if he is fully justified, because it is not a legal pronouncement, but a reward earned by good works and hopefully bestowed at death.

In departure from Roman Catholicism, Reformation doctrine traditionally taught that justification is an instantaneous declaration of forensic (legal) righteousness before God. However, some Reformed theologians now propose a two-part justification: *Initial* justification when God declares someone righteous based on faith in Christ as Savior, and *final* or *future* justification when God judges whether that person's works validate their initial justification. Without the latter, there is no eternal salvation.

Another recent view of justification popularized by Norman Tom ("N. T.") Wright proposes that justification is not a legal declaration or imputation of God's righteousness, but God's declaration that one is accepted into the covenant family of Abraham, viewed as the church. Faith evidenced by works proves that one is already a member of that community and therefore God declares him "justified."

There are many problems with these aberrant views. Foremost is the diminution of Christ's work on the cross. If final justification involves works in any way, then Christ did not do enough to pay for our sins. These views also blatantly contradict the Bible passages that say we cannot be saved by works, whether they are added to the front end or the back end of salvation. In addition, the Bible clearly shows that when we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior for eternal life, we have that life. We will not be condemned or die eternally (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:26). Finally, these views contradict the biblical affirmations of a final and instantaneous justification when we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior (cf. Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 6:11).

Why a correct understanding of justification is important

There are many reasons why a correct view of justification is central to biblical Christianity. First, it maintains a clear gospel of grace without the addition of works at any time. Second, it helps us understand our new position before God as a basis and motivation for growing in godliness (sanctification). Third, it gives the believer in Christ assurance of salvation based on the sure promise of God that those who believe are justified and possess eternal life (Rom. 5:1). Fourth, the believer need never fear condemnation (Rom. 8:33-34). Fifth, it helps us understand the distinction between justification and sanctification, which is so often confused when interpreting Bible texts.

Conclusion

Justification by grace through faith separates biblical Christianity from every other religion. It separated Protestants from Roman Catholics in the Reformation. If it is surrendered, the Christian religion becomes like every other performance-based religion of the world. It is a doctrine important enough to understand, teach, defend, and celebrate.