

JUSTIFICATION

D. Justification

I. *The Meaning of Justification*

1. Relatively

It is a change in a man's relation or standing before God. It has to do with relations that have been disturbed by sin, and these relations are personal. It is a change from guilt and condemnation to acquittal and acceptance. Regeneration has to do with the change of the believer's nature; justification, with the change of his standing before God. Regeneration is subjective; justification is objective. The former has to do with man's state; the latter, with his standing.

2. According to the Language and Usage of the Scriptures

According to Deut. 25:1 it means to declare, or to cause to appear innocent or righteous; Rom. 4:2–8: to reckon righteous; Psa. 32:2: not to impute iniquity. One thing at least is clear from these verses, and that is, that to justify does not mean to *make* one righteous. Neither the Hebrew nor Greek words will bear such meaning. To justify means to set forth as righteous; to declare righteous in a legal sense; to put a person in a right relation. It does not deal, at least not directly, with character or conduct; it is a question of relationship. Of course both character and conduct will be conditioned and controlled by this relationship. No real righteousness on the part of the person justified is to be asserted, but that person is declared to be righteous and is treated as such. Strictly speaking then, justification is the judicial act of God whereby those who put faith in Christ are declared righteous in His eyes, and free from guilt and punishment.

3. Justification Consists of Two Elements

(a) The Forgiveness of Sin, and the Removal of Its Guilt and Punishment

It is difficult for us to understand God's feeling towards sin. To us forgiveness seems easy, largely because we are indifferent towards sin. But to a holy God it is different. Even men sometimes find it hard to forgive when wronged. Nevertheless God gladly forgives.

Micah 7:18, 19—"Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger forever, because he delighteth in mercy ... he will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." See also Psa. 130:4. What a wondrous forgiveness!

Forgiveness may be considered as the cessation of the moral anger and resentment of God against sin; or as a release from the guilt of sin which oppresses the conscience; or, again, as a remission of the punishment of sin, which is eternal death.

In justification, then, all our sins are forgiven, and the guilt and punishment thereof removed (Acts 13:38, 39; Rom. 8:1). God sees the believer as without sin and guilt in Christ (Num. 23:21; Rom. 8:33, 34).

(b) The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness, and Restoration to God's Favor

The forgiven sinner is not like the discharged prisoner who has served out his term and is discharged from further punishment, but with no rights of citizenship. No, justification means much more than acquittal. The repentant sinner receives back in his pardon, the full rights of citizenship. The Society of Friends called themselves Friends, not because they were friends one to another but because, being justified, they counted themselves friends of God as was Abraham (2 Chron. 20:7, James 2:23). There is also the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ to the sinner. His righteousness is “unto all and upon all them that believe” (Rom. 3:22). See Rom. 5:17–21; 1 Cor. 1:30. For illustration, see Philemon 18.

II. The Method of Justification

1. Negatively: Not by Works of the Law

Rom. 3:20—“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” “Therefore” implies that a judicial trial has taken place and a judgment pronounced. At the bar of God no man can be counted righteous in His sight because of his obedience to law. The burden of the Epistle to the Romans is to set forth this great truth. As a means of establishing right relations with God the law is totally insufficient. There is no salvation *by* character. What men need is salvation *from* character.

The reason why the law cannot justify is here stated: “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” The law can open the sinner’s eyes to his sin, but it cannot remove it. Indeed, it was never intended to remove it, but to intensify it. The law simply defines sin, and makes it sinful, yea, exceedingly sinful, but it does not emancipate from it. Gal. 3:10 gives us a further reason why justification cannot take place by obedience to the law. The law demands perfect and continual obedience: “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” No man can render a perfect and perpetual obedience, therefore justification by obedience to the law is impossible. The only thing the law can do is to stop the mouth of every man, and declare him guilty before God (Rom. 3:19, 20).

Gal. 2:16, and 3:10, Rom. 3:28, are very explicit in their denial of justification by law. It is a question of Moses or Christ, works or faith, law or promise, doing or believing, wages or a free gift.

2. Positively: by God’s Free Grace—The Origin or Source of Justification

Rom. 3:24—“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” “Freely” denotes that it is granted without anything done on our part to merit or deserve it. From the contents of the epistle up to this point it must be clearly evident that if men, sinful and sinning, are to be justified at all, it must be “by his free grace.”

3. By the Blood of Jesus Christ—The Ground of Justification

Rom. 3:24—“Being justified ... through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” 5:9—“Much more then, being now justified by his blood.” 2 Cor. 5:21 (R. V.)—“Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” The bloodshedding of Christ is here connected with justification. It is impossible to get rid of this double idea from this passage. The sacrifices of the Old Testament were more than a meaningless butchery—“Without shedding of blood is no remission” of sin (Heb. 9:22). The great sacrifice of the New Testament, the death of Jesus Christ, was something more than the death of a martyr—men are “justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9).

4. By Believing in Jesus Christ—The Condition of Justification

Gal. 2:16—“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ,” or as the Revised Version margin has it: “But only through faith in Jesus Christ.” Rom. 3:26—“To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness; that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” “Him that believeth in Jesus” is contrasted with “as many as are of the works of the law” (Gal. 3:10). When Paul in Romans 4:5 says: “Now to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly,” he gives the deathblow to Jewish righteousness. “His faith is counted for righteousness”; that pictures the man who, despairing of all dependence upon his works, casts himself unreservedly upon the mercy of God, as set forth in Jesus Christ, for his justification. Thus it comes to pass that “all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). The best of men need to be saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and the worst need only that. As there is no difference in the need, neither is there in the method of its application. On this common ground all saved sinners meet, and will stand forever. The first step, then, in justification is to despair of works; the second, to believe on him that justifieth the ungodly.

We are not to slight good works, for they have their place, but they follow, not precede justification. The workingman is not the justified man, but the justified man is the workingman. Works are not meritorious, but they meet with their reward in the life of the justified. The tree *shows* its life by its fruits, but it was alive before the fruit or even the leaves appeared. (See under Faith, The Relation of Faith to Works, for further suggestions regarding the relation between faith and works.)

Summing up we may say that men are justified *judicially* by God (Rom. 8:33); *meritoriously* by Christ (Isa. 53:11); *mediately* by faith (Rom. 5:1); *evidentially* by works (James 2:14, 18–24).