

Right with God



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First published, 2014. Second edition, 2017. Third edition, 2022.

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1

Why Bother about Justification?

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

Meningitis remains a deadly disease in children. Thankfully the number of cases of meningitis has decreased over the past twenty years or so, mostly due to immunisation.

However, this dreaded infection is not completely eradicated because we do not yet have vaccines that cover all the different microbes that cause meningitis. Moreover, some parents fail to immunize their children either out of neglect or fear. It is heartbreaking when a child dies of an infection that could have been easily prevented.

Spiritually, it is even more tragic if we neglect the gospel message of salvation by faith in Christ Jesus.

We cannot afford to ignore what the Word of God teaches on justification, that is, how to become right with God. The consequences in this life and beyond are most terrible.

Why then should we bother about justification? What does it mean anyway? Isn't that the doctrine that caused so much trouble in Europe during the Protestant Reformation? Why should I care about a doctrine that resulted in so much strife and division within Christianity? Is it not far more important for me to concentrate on my job and family, and for Christians to work for unity and mutual understanding?

I can think of three good reasons why we should bother about what the Bible teaches on justification, indeed, why we should take it most seriously.

1. We're already infected with sin

We have broken the law of God, and therefore we are guilty before him. We may not yet feel the full force of the consequences of sin, but nonetheless, sin separates us from God, from whom and in whom alone we can find life, meaning and joy. We need justification more than our daily food.

2. There is a cure for sin

The cure for sin comes to us in the message of the gospel. It may not be popular or fashionable in our society, but it is nonetheless, 'the power of God for salvation.' There is a way of escape and freedom from guilt and perdition. Justification is available to us today.

3. If untreated, sin kills

Maybe we may go through this short life without too much trouble, and even enjoy a comfortable lifestyle and much pleasure. Ultimately, if we die in sin, there is no escaping from the wrath of God. Judgement is coming. The gospel, unless it is embraced now, is of no use beyond the grave. There is no justification in hell.

That's why we should bother about justification. We can't afford to neglect this message from heaven, nor should we be afraid to receive it. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to us also if we believe in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

2

The Meaning of Justification

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord
(Proverbs 17:15).

We naturally feel outraged in the face of injustice. God, who is perfectly just, detests injustice even more than we do.

The judges' role is simple; they should be fair and impartial. 'If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, then the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked' (Deut. 25:1). After considering the evidence, the judge should decide if the accused is guilty of violating the law. If so, he should pronounce a sentence of guilt. The judge should *condemn* the wicked. On the other hand, if the accused had abided by the standard of the law, the judge should *justify* him. He should pronounce him righteous and free him from any penalty. That is justice.

On the contrary, it is a blatant injustice when a judge ‘justifies the wicked’ or ‘condemns the righteous,’ as sometimes happens in human courts. ‘He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord’ (Proverbs 17:15). We can be sure that this will never happen in God’s court.

But that is not very comforting to us since we are all law-breakers. We have all sinned. We have all disobeyed God’s commandments. Yet, amazingly, the Bible speak of *God justifying the ungodly!*

What does that mean? Does it mean that God makes us righteous? No. To justify does not mean ‘to make righteous,’ but as we saw, justification is a judicial sentence, a declaration that the person is ‘righteous’ and ‘not guilty.’ If ‘justifying the wicked’ means that the judge makes him righteous, surely that would be a good thing to do, and not ‘an abomination’ to the Lord. But that’s not the judge’s work. He does not make the accused either good or bad, but simply pronounces a sentence on him.

‘To justify’ is the very opposite of ‘to condemn.’ When a judge condemns a criminal, he does not make him bad, but simply states what he really is. Similarly, when a

judge justifies a person, he does not make him innocent but simply declares that he is so. Justification, then, does not mean 'to make righteous' but 'to declare righteous.'

The implication is most serious. We can never be justified before God if he simply deals with us on the basis of justice alone. God would be unjust and untrue if he declared us righteous. With the psalmist, we must admit before him, 'If you, o Lord, should mark iniquities, o Lord, who could stand?' (Psalms 130:3).

None of us will be justified on account of our moral record. We must appeal to God's mercy and grace, and yet we know that God cannot and will never be unjust in his dealing with us. Is there a solution to this dilemma? Yes, justice and mercy embrace each other in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God acts both as a Judge and as a Redeemer, in perfect justice and amazing grace.

3

Facing Justice

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God but the doers of the law who will be justified (Romans 2:13).

Let's say that I'm charged before a magistrate for over-speeding and reckless driving. My defence lawyer argues that I had passed my driving test, I possess a valid driving licence, and I am fully conversant with the traffic code, including the speed limit. Moreover, I do not always drive recklessly, and other drivers are much worse than me.

Would that get me off the hook? Hardly!

On the contrary, since I know the law so well, I am even more accountable and, having ignored the traffic regulations, I am all the more guilty of breaking the law.

We all know the law of God. The moral precepts of the law are written in our conscience. We know that it is wrong to steal because we don't want anyone to take

our possessions. We know it's wrong to lie because we want others to tell us the truth. Moreover, many of us who were brought up in a Christian family have been taught from our childhood the Ten Commandments and the moral teaching of the Bible.

We are responsible to obey the law of God because he made us moral beings, able to discern good from evil. We are indebted to God, our Maker and Master, for creating and sustaining our life, and therefore we should gladly submit to his authority and rule.

But we must squarely face the question of whether or not we have obeyed him perfectly as we ought to. Am I righteous before God or am I guilty?

It would be foolish for me to argue that I'm righteous because I know what is good and what is bad. The knowledge of the law makes me accountable but it does not make me righteous. If I had always obeyed God's law perfectly, then yes, I will be declared righteous by God. The doers of the law will be justified. That is justice pure and simple.

However, I delude myself if I hope that God will ultimately justify me on account of my performance. Can the Judge of the universe pronounce me righteous considering that I have so often broken his law?

I have no valid defence. I know what is good and evil, but I have often failed to do what I should have done, and I have often done what I should have avoided. It is no use comparing myself with people who are worse than me. I am still a law-breaker. Nor can I appeal to my good deeds; they don't wipe away my misdeeds.

Justice is not good news for us. It would have been if we were perfect. But we must admit before God that we are law-breakers and guilty, and that God is perfectly just to condemn and punish us. At this point we can only appeal for mercy ... and then the door will be opened to the astounding grace of God in Christ Jesus his Son.

4

Justified in Christ

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:19).

In 1964 the then Prime Minister, George Borg Olivier, obtained the independence of my country, Malta, from British colonial rule. The action of this man affected the entire nation; he also influenced people like me who were not yet born at that time. Because of him, I am a citizen of an independent nation.

We can all think of historical people, whom we never met or knew, that have left some sort of impact, whether good or bad, on our present state.

More than any other, two men had a profound impact on the human race. They are Adam, the first man, and Jesus Christ, whom the Bible calls 'the last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45).

Adam stands in a representative position as the head of humanity, as the Bible teaches in Romans 5:12-21. All humanity is bound up with Adam's sin. In Adam all sinned. All stand condemned; all die. 'One trespass led to condemnation for all men ... by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners' (Romans 5:18-19). When Adam fell, all humanity fell with him.

Some people find this concept strange and unacceptable. Why should we carry the blame for someone else's sin?

Perhaps the objection reflects the individualistic mentality of our modern Western culture. Yet we too have our representatives in government. Indeed, politicians often do not reflect the will of the people who elect them. Nonetheless, our representative head, Adam, has chosen for us with which we all agree because we have chosen to disobey God not once but countless times.

Moreover, if we fail to see the disastrous consequences of Adam's sin on all of humanity, we will not appreciate the work of Jesus Christ for his people.

For just as 'in Adam' all die, so 'in Christ' all will be made alive. As 'in Adam' all sinned, so 'in Christ', all are righteous. 'Therefore, as one trespass led to

condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (Romans 5:18-19).

Humanity is thus divided into two groups – the first, headed by Adam, stands guilty and condemned; the second, the new humanity led by Jesus Christ, stands righteous, justified and alive in him.

All of us belong to the first group by natural descent. Not all, however, are 'in Christ.' Only those who by grace have believed in Christ are set free from the present evil world and given the gift of righteousness and life which Christ has earned for us by his perfect obedience and death on the cross.

5

Fixing our Moral Account

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).

I wonder what went through the mind of Onesimus, a runaway slave, as he travelled on the way back to his master from Rome to the city of Colosse. ‘Will he receive me gracefully?’ he may have thought, ‘Or will he punish me as masters usually do when fugitive slaves are caught?’ His only hope was a short letter tucked away in his cloak.

Onesimus had fled from his master, Philemon, after he had possibly stolen money from him. He ended up in Rome where he met the apostle Paul and became a Christian. Paul knew that Onesimus had to go back to his master to settle his wrongdoings. So Paul gave him a letter appealing to Philemon to receive him back, ‘So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes

you anything, charge that to my account' (Philemon 1:17-18).

Paul gives Philemon a double reason why he should forgive and welcome his servant. Paul asks the master to forgive his servant and promised to pay himself for any wrongdoings. 'Charge that to my account,' Paul assured him. Furthermore, Paul pleads with Philemon to receive his servant 'as you would receive me'. In other words, 'treat this dear friend of mine in the same way that you would take care of me.'

As we travel along life's road that leads us back to our Maker, we too ought to think about that momentous appointment. We too are fugitives, we have run away from God by our sinful thoughts and actions. Will God welcome us, or will he reject and punish us for our many sins?

It all depends on whether or not we carry in our heart a special letter, the gospel message written in the Holy Scriptures: 'To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin' (Romans 4:5-8).

Here is God's double promise to us who believe in Jesus: God looks at our moral record and cancels all our debts, he does not count our sins against us any longer. Moreover, God credits righteousness to our account, even though we did not work for it. He 'counts righteousness apart from works.'

Elsewhere the Scriptures tell us how God could be so gracious to us, undeserving sinners. The sins God forgives were taken away by his Son. 'The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isaiah 53:6). 'For our sake (God) made him to be sin who knew no sin.' On the cross, Jesus gave his life as a sin-offering to God. Effectively Jesus told his Father, 'Charge that to my account.'

Moreover, God is well pleased with his Son for Jesus has always obeyed his Father's will. Jesus is perfectly righteous and God credits his righteousness to our account. We are made righteous 'in him' (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus intercedes for us who are united to him by faith, and in effect appeals to the Father, 'Receive them as you would receive me.'

The Bible does not tell us the outcome of the meeting between Onesimus and Philemon, but we can be certain that if we believe in the Lord Jesus, God will embrace us with the same love that the Father has for his beloved Son.

6

The Righteousness of God

For in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith' (Romans 1:17).

In one of his parables (Matthew 22:1-14), our Lord tells the story of a king who organized the wedding feast for his son. As the king was greeting and meeting the guests, he noticed a man who was not dressed up for the occasion. 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' the king asked him. The wretched guy was speechless and he was thrown out.

What about us? We must be properly dressed when we come in the presence of God. He is holy and righteous and we must be dressed in righteousness to stand before him.

Two dresses are hanging in the spiritual wardrobe to choose from. The Bible calls them 'our righteousness' and 'the righteousness of God.'

About our righteousness the Bible is not very flattering:

*We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted
garment.*

*We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away
(Isaiah 64:6).*

This righteousness is 'ours' because we have worked for it by our obedience to God's law. However, we have not obeyed God as we ought and so we are polluted with many sins. Even our righteousness is unclean in God's eyes. Our best efforts are like filthy rags.

On the other hand, God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel and it is most beautiful. Christ worked this righteousness by his perfect obedience to the law of God. Jesus obeyed the Father's will perfectly even to the point of death on a cross. Jesus' righteousness is what we need to be made acceptable before God. 'By the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (Romans 5:19).

The apostle Paul was a very devout and religious person. He could have bragged about his faultlessness in keeping the law (Philippians 3:6). As a child of God, he didn't. He willingly forsook all his righteousness so

that he would be clothed with the righteousness provided by God in Christ. Paul yearned to 'be found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith' (Philippians 3:9).

The righteousness of God is given to us by faith when we entrust our salvation in the hands of the Lord Jesus.

Can we imagine the shame and despair we would experience if we appear before God dressed in the polluted garments of our righteousness? Like the man in the parable, we will be thrown out to the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We must take off and throw away the clothes of our righteousness. Instead, we should put on the righteousness of Christ so that we may be dressed properly in the presence of God. Then we may gladly rejoice and sing of God's amazing grace to us:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness
(Isaiah 61:1).*

7

Justified by Jesus' Blood

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood,
much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God
(Romans 5:9)

Justice demands that law-breakers should be condemned while the innocent should be acquitted and set free. God underlines this basic principle by instructing judges to 'justify the righteous and condemn the wicked' (Deuteronomy 25:1).

How then should we understand this scripture, and in particular the statement, 'justified by his blood'? 'Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God' (Romans 5:9).

The 'justified' are believers in Jesus Christ, but as we all know, Christians are neither innocent nor sinless. They still break the Law of God to a greater or lesser extent. The most devout Christian humbly confesses

with the rest of God's people, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8). Yet God says that they are justified. The divine Judge acquits them and sets them free from every penalty. Isn't that a breach of justice? Shouldn't they, being law-breakers, be condemned and punished?

Moreover, 'his blood' refers to the Son of God who was crucified on the cross. Now Jesus is immaculate, sinless, innocent, just; he is the Holy One of God. Why should he be killed? Jesus should have been justified; he should have never been put to death because he has consistently obeyed God's Law perfectly.

We cannot say that Christ's death was merely a murder or an injustice committed by evil men. It was more than that. The Bible says that 'it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief' (Isaiah 53:10). Jesus was 'delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (Acts 2:23). God planned his Son's death from eternity and sent him to the world for that very purpose.

Why then did the Righteous One die? What guilt was he carrying on his shoulders? His own? Most certainly not, for he was without sin.

Whose sins, then? Christ died for the sins of others! All who believe in him can joyfully say, 'God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). We admit that as sinners we deserve a sentence of condemnation and the punishment of death in hell forever. Instead, God transferred his people's sins onto his Son; he was condemned and castigated instead of them. By his death, Christ made satisfaction to the law and justice of God. That is why the Bible declares that we are *justified by his blood*. God can justly free his people from hell because their Saviour was punished by death in their place.

What do you see when you look back at the Crucified One? Do you see your substitute dying for your sins? Can you honestly repeat the blessed words, 'I am justified by his blood'?

8

Just and Justifier

It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26)

There are some things God cannot do. The all-powerful God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18). He cannot deny himself by acting contrary to his holy nature (2 Timothy 2:13). There is no injustice with God (2 Chronicles 19:7). He must therefore be just in the condemnation of the wicked. He must also be just in the salvation of his people. He cannot simply close an eye and pretend to forget all about our sins to be good to us.

Picture the scene. A criminal is brought before a judge. As the judge examines the evidence, it becomes clear that the accused is guilty of breaking the law and that he deserves punishment. However, in his final ruling, the judge says, 'I know that you are guilty, I know that you deserve punishment, but I want to be good to you.'

I don't care what the law demands; I will let you go free.'

What shall we say about that judge? We may say that he is capricious, incompetent, corrupt and unjust ... but most certainly we cannot say that this judge is good! He is not doing his job as he ought to.

But let us imagine that in his sentence the judge declares that the man is guilty and he orders him to pay a hefty fine as demanded by the law. That is justice plain and simple. The man replies that he has no means to pay the penalty. At that moment the judge answers, 'Justice must be satisfied. The penalty must be paid. I also want to be kind to you. I have asked my son, and he has gladly agreed, to pay your penalty in full. Therefore you can go free.' In so doing the judge is showing himself to be both just and good!

That, and much more, is what God does to his people. He justifies them freely by his grace, even though they are undeserving. He does so only based on the redemption in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24). Jesus bought their freedom by paying the penalty demanded by the law. He died for their sins.

That is why the Scriptures gloriously declare that God is *just* and the *justifier* of those who believe in Jesus

(Romans 3:26). God is the 'justifier' – he frees the ungodly who believes in Jesus from their guilt and the punishment in hell. God is also 'just' in showing such mercy – for he sent his Son to die on the cross to fulfil the law's demands on their behalf.

There are also some things that we cannot do! We cannot escape from the justice of God. Our sins must be punished – either in hell or on the cross. But this, by God's grace, we can do: we can confess our sin before him, admit our guilt, and appeal to his mercy and justice in Christ. We can look up to the cross of Jesus, the grand manifestation of the love and righteousness of God, and entrust our souls to him.

9

The Purpose of the Law

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin
(Romans 3:20)

The Bible could not be more clear on this subject. ‘By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.’ God will never declare any person righteous on the basis of his obedience to the law. Yet many people presume that they will be alright in the end if they had generally lived a good life.

This is a fatal mistake. The law was not given to save us. Not a single person will ever be justified by the works of the law. You and I will not be justified by the law either. And that for a very simple reason: ‘since through the law there comes knowledge of sin.’

The law is upright; our moral record is not. The law is a straight ruler; our life is a crooked line. The ruler cannot make the line straight, it simply shows that it is not. The

law does not justify us, it simply shows that we have failed to abide by God's moral standards, and as such, it can only convict and condemn us.

The law is like a mirror. Looking in the mirror of God's law we see our faces stained and dirty with sin. In one way or another, we have broken every one of the Ten Commandments. We have disobeyed God in so many different ways. We did not always love God with all our heart, nor give him thanks and glorify him as we should. We have placed our will and our interests before him, and we have desired wealth, health and prosperity more than God himself. We have been disobedient to our parents, we have not always been pure, honest, kind and truthful.

God's verdict on the entire world is final: 'None is righteous, no, not one' (Romans 3:10). That includes us. God says that we are not righteous. He gave the law 'so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God' (Romans 3:19). We have no excuses; we had better shut our mouth and hang our head in shame before him.

That is as far as the law can take us. The law cannot cleanse us, just as a man cannot clean his face with a mirror. Nonetheless, the mirror would have served a

very useful purpose if the man, having realized his problem, washes his face with soap and water. In the same way, God's law is indispensable to persuade us of our greatest spiritual need. The law convicts us of sin, reveals our guilt and it threatens us with everlasting punishment. Well might we feel terrified by the law of God!

Yet we should not despair. Conscious of our sin, we should flee to God, without any pretension of personal merit, and humbly plead for mercy. We can take heart and come to God whose law we have broken, for we know that he 'sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law' (Galatians 4:4-5). God sent Jesus to do for us what the law could never do; he came to redeem and free us from sin.

Our spiritual journey begins at Mount Sinai. There we tremble in fear amid the thunders and fire of God's law. We run away in search of shelter and salvation, and by God's grace, we are led to Golgotha, to the cross of Jesus. There, in Christ alone, we find our justification.

10

Justified by Grace

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24)

Grace is beautiful. It captures the goodness and kindness of God's heart towards his people.

What does 'grace' really mean? The Bible contrasts grace with the wages or payment that a worker receives for his work. 'Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt' (Romans 4:4). The worker merits his payment. Grace is the very opposite of merit; it is a gift, an unmerited favour.

So when the Bible says that we are justified by grace it means that we do not deserve it. On the contrary, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' We have not obeyed his law, and as such we all deserve to be condemned. Yet God justifies some of these same

people who deserve the punishment of hell. That is grace.

We cannot work, maybe with God's help, to merit our justification or at least part of it. If we had to contribute any merit to our justification, it could not be said any longer that we are justified by grace. As the Bible says elsewhere, 'if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace' (Romans 11:6).

But justification is purely by grace as the Bible declares. 'Justified by his grace as a gift.' It is a free gift. God justifies believers not because he is somehow obliged to do so, nor is he in any way indebted to them, but simply because he wants to be good to undeserving sinners. They do not pay anything, they do not labour to obtain our justification.

Not that justification is cheap! It does not cost *man* anything; as for God, he gave his beloved Son to pay for this priceless gift. Justification is 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.' The Son of God purchased the freedom of his people with his precious blood.

Any attempt to add human obedience to the law to merit justification is a denial of both grace and the

efficacy of the cross of Christ. 'I do not nullify the grace of God,' says the apostle Paul, 'for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose' (Galatians 2:21).

As Christian believers, we do not even dream of rejecting grace or of doubting the power of the cross. We will never stop praising God for forgiving us the punishment we deserved, for sending his Son to die on the cross in our place, and for declaring us righteous for Jesus' sake. He saved us 'to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved' (Ephesians 1:6). It is no wonder that grace will be the theme of our joyous song for all eternity.

11

Justified by Faith

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ
(Galatians 2:16)

Food provides nourishment to our bodies but it will not do us any good until we take it and eat it. Jesus, the living Bread, gives eternal life and forgiveness, but again, we will not experience any of his saving benefits until and unless we believe in him.

The Scriptures repeatedly affirms that we are justified by faith. The Bible states that ‘everyone who believes is justified’ (Acts 13:39); the sinner is justified ‘through faith’ (Romans 3:25); ‘justified by faith’ (Romans 3:28); God justifies ‘by faith’ and ‘through faith’ (Romans 3:30); ‘justified by faith’ (Romans 5:1); a man is ‘justified by faith’ (Galatians 2:16); God justifies ‘by faith’ (Galatians 3:8); righteousness is ‘through faith’ and ‘by faith’ (Philippians 3:9).

Faith requires, first of all, true knowledge of Jesus Christ. The apostle asks, ‘How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?’ (Romans 10:14). We are not called to believe in just about anything we fancy, but to believe in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, who became man, died for our sins, was buried and resurrected on the third day.

Moreover, faith implies assent, or agreement with the message of the gospel. Many people have heard about Christ but remain unconvinced about the truth of the message. They may know the facts but they do not accept them. On the other hand, those who believe are ‘fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised’ (Romans 4:21). Since God promises salvation to those who come to Christ, they take God at his word, fully convinced that his word is reliable and true.

Finally, faith is expressed in trust, relying and resting on Christ for salvation. Paul reminded the apostle Peter that they were both convinced that a person is justified by faith in Christ – and so, they ‘believed in Christ Jesus’ for their justification. Their knowledge of the gospel, which they believed to be true, led them to put their trust in Jesus.

My son was playing in his grandfather's garden. He was a young toddler at that time, eager to discover the world around him – and as any parent knows, that spells danger! To my horror, I looked to find that he had climbed on the roof of the shed. The little boy was at the very edge and he was in danger of falling at any moment. Running to his aid, I stood beneath him with open arms and said, ‘John, come!’ And he did. He simply jumped off into the safety of my arms.

I don’t know what went through his mind, but evidently he was confident that I was strong enough to catch him and that I would not let him fall to the ground. Or perhaps he didn’t think much at all; he simply trusted me.

That is what we are called to do. Jesus can save to the uttermost those who come to God through him. When we hear his voice in the gospel calling us, ‘Come!’ we should jump into his arms with child-like faith. We should entrust ourselves to him, and he will certainly save us from condemnation and the danger of eternal punishment, for the Scriptures assure us that God is ‘the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’ (Romans 3:26).

12

The Sufficiency of Faith

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

The Bible teaches clearly that a person is justified by faith. But is faith sufficient? Is faith enough to make us right with God, or do we need to add something more - such as the merits of our work?

The Bible answers this important question directly. 'We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law' (Romans 3:28), and again, 'Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness' (Romans 4:4-5).

What an amazing statement! It is the person 'who does not work but believes' who is justified. The Bible does not say that God justifies the man who both works and

believes. God justifies the one who believes and does not work!

Surely the Apostle Paul does not mean that a Christian should not do good works during his life. That would be contradictory to what he and the rest of the Bible emphasize over and over again. But what does he mean? In what sense then are works excluded?

Paul leaves out human works as the basis for justification. He does not allow the addition of a single tiny bit of human effort to that end. This is hard for human pride to accept! If I want to be justified I need to come to God empty-handed, believing in him, without claiming any merit for any good that I may have done or any good that I will do during my Christian life. If it was not so, if I contribute any merit of my own, justification would not be a matter of grace or favour on God's part.

Imagine a poor beggar sitting in a corner, destitute, hungry and thirsty. You pity him. So you go to a food outlet and buy him a meal and a warm drink. When you offer him the gift this man insists on giving you a few coins. You would not accept any money, would you, because you want to help him as an act of generosity and kindness. You simply want him to take the food,

thank you and eat! God wants us to receive the gift of righteousness by faith and enjoy it with gratitude in our hearts. He is not asking us for any payment whatsoever.

Faith points away from ourselves and our merits; faith points to Christ, who by his sinless life and sacrifice on the cross had procured the gift of righteousness for his people. Faith says, "Though I'm not worthy, though I am guilty, I am fully convinced that Christ takes away all my sins, and therefore God declares me righteous for his sake. With all my heart I trust in him alone."

Faith is the hand that receives from God the gift of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Faith is sufficient because it takes hold of Christ, and he is all we need to stand righteous before God. The Lord himself is our righteousness. Faith is the hand that receives from God the gift of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Faith is sufficient because it takes hold of Christ, and he is all we need to stand righteous before God. The Lord himself is our righteousness.

13

Faith and Baptism

Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? (Acts 10:47)

How is a person justified - is it through faith or by baptism?

Every new believer has the duty to submit to the rite of baptism as ordained by the Lord Jesus. But we ask, did the Lord institute baptism as the means to obtain justification or is it a sign of spiritual cleansing which is accomplished by faith in him? While several scriptures teach plainly that we are justified by faith, it is never affirmed that a person is justified by baptism. So it seems reasonable to suppose that baptism signifies justification that had been previously received through faith.

It is profitable to look at Cornelius' conversion experience as a 'test case' in this regard. Is salvation obtained by baptism, or is it received by faith, and

followed by baptism? Cornelius' story is carefully sketched out in the book of Acts because he and his relatives were the first Gentile converts admitted into the church. (Please read Acts chapter 10; 11:1-18 and 15:7-11).

An angel told Cornelius to send for Simon Peter, who 'will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household' (Acts 11:14). Cornelius' family and friends gathered together to hear what Peter had to say. The apostle preached the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, promising that 'everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name' (Acts 10:43). As he spoke, the Holy Spirit came upon the group. Peter and the Jewish Christians were amazed because they realized that God had welcomed the Gentiles into the church.

After visiting Cornelius, the apostle Peter had to defend his actions before the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem to explain why he had entered a Gentile's house and received Gentiles into the church (Acts 11). Several years later Peter refers again to that momentous event at the Council of Jerusalem:

'Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles

should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us (Jews), and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:7-9).

So we know that while hearing the gospel, Cornelius and the Gentiles believed in Christ and that God purified their hearts by faith. What should the apostle Peter have done in that situation? He reasoned: 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (Acts 10:47). Naturally, Peter ordered the baptism of the new converts.

Please note that they were baptized *after* hearing the Gospel. They were baptized *after* believing in Christ. They were baptized *after* receiving the Spirit. They were baptized *after* their hearts were purified by faith.

We cannot dismiss this clear example as an exceptional case. The apostle Peter himself presents it as the model of salvation to all people. He declared before the Jerusalem council: 'We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we (Jews) shall be saved in the same manner as they (Cornelius and the other Gentiles)' (Acts 15:11).

This then is the biblical pattern for all people, whether Jews or Gentiles. We must first hear the gospel message about the Lord Jesus Christ. We are forgiven and purified by faith in Christ, followed by baptism to signify this amazing truth.

14

Faith Workings through Love

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

Justification is one aspect of God's purpose in our salvation. The Lord wants to forgive our sins and save us from the condemnation and punishment in hell. But that is not all. God also wants to save his people from the filth and practice of sin. The Father wants his children to be holy as he is holy. So from the very moment that he justifies them, he also renews their heart and begins a life-long project to shape them in the image of his Son. This aspect of salvation is called sanctification.

In other words, justification has to do with our legal standing. God declares the believer righteous for Christ's sake. Sanctification has to do with our character and behaviour; God wants his people to become righteous.

While justification is based on the work of Christ on the cross on our behalf, and not on the merits of our works, sanctification involves the renewing of our thoughts, desires, speech and actions. God teaches and enables us to do good works in obedience to his will. We can only become righteous through our obedience, our good works, and not simply by faith alone.

These two aspects of salvation must be distinguished, but they cannot be separated. A person cannot be justified unless he is also in the process of sanctification. On the other hand, one cannot perform a single good work as long as he remains in sin. No matter what an enemy of God does (for that is what the Bible calls them who are not yet justified), he cannot please the Lord. First, he must be reconciled and justified. Then God is well pleased with the good works of his children, albeit their imperfections. He must first be justified by faith, apart from his works, and only then can he begin to do good works.

So just as it would be a fatal error to presume that we can add any merits of our works for justification, it would be equally fatal if we presume to be saved if our faith is alone, barren and fruitless. The apostle who taught us that God justifies him who 'does not work but believes' has also taught us that in our Christian

experience what matters is 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). For justification faith *works not*; for holy living faith *works tirelessly*, loving God and neighbour in response to the amazing love the believer has received.

James says the same thing. 'What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?' (James 2:14). He tests the profession of faith by the fruit it produces. If works are absent, faith is dead. Dead faith does not justify. Thus he concludes that 'a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' (2:24). The person who claims to have faith without any evidence of works and godly life is fooling himself and is in peril of eternal perdition.

We have two questions before us. The first one is this, 'How can a sinner be justified before God?' The answer is, 'By faith alone in Christ alone, not on account of the merit of our works.' The second question is, 'How do we know that faith is real?' The answer is, 'Faith is known by its fruit, the good works that follow justification.'

We will do well to ponder these questions before God. Let us not rest until we discard all self-confidence, and

rely by faith on Christ alone and in his cross for our justification. But let us not think that we have faith unless we experience God's transforming power in us as evidenced by sincere love, holiness and an abundance of good works.

15

The Final Judgement

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have
peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ
(Romans 5:1)

God has fixed a day when he will judge us all according to our works.

Those who die without a Saviour need not wait until that momentous appointment to know the divine sentence upon them. God warns that 'whoever does not believe (in the Son) is condemned already' (John 3:18). They stand condemned even now because they remain burdened with their sins. That Day will simply seal their doom forever and they will be punished according to their evil deeds.

Among the damned, there will be those who called Jesus 'Lord' but who had continued to live in sin. These 'Christians' claimed to have faith in Jesus but their life was devoid of good works. 'I never knew you;

depart from me, you workers of lawlessness' - these will be the last words they ever hear from the mouth of Jesus (Matthew 7:23).

On the other hand, God's children are recognized by their good works. There will be 'glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good' (Romans 2:10). The Lord will also reward them according to their works. 'Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done' (Revelation 22:12). If we are Christians, today is our opportunity to work fervently for the Lord; on that Day he will not forget our labour of love.

This does not mean that we are justified on account of our works. For us who believe in Jesus, God has already pronounced a sentence in our favour during our life on earth. 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 5:1). Justification is a present reality. The Scriptures reassure us that we are already right with God. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1).

But what about our sins – for we readily admit that we often break God's law. Will he accuse or punish us for them? No, not at all, for God will not go back on his

word; he has forgiven our sins and promised not to bring them up again. 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more' (Hebrews 10:17). He will not remember our sins on that day.

Though we are guilty and deserve punishment, yet we will escape the wrath of God because we are justified by the blood of Christ. God did not forgive our sins capriciously but on account of the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

God's children are not terrified by the Day of the Lord. For us who believe and love the Lord Jesus, it is not the day of condemnation and doom, but our graduation day, or even better, the long-awaited meeting with our beloved Spouse. The church eagerly prays for the Lord to hasten his return, 'Come, Lord Jesus,' and rejoices when she hears his promise, 'Behold I come quickly!

16

Two Errors to Avoid

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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

While most Christians would say that faith is necessary for salvation, there is significant disagreement about the legitimate place of good works.

Some would add works to faith as the means of justification. They would not say that they are saved by works alone; they still believe in Christ, and in his death on the cross and resurrection. They would also affirm the necessity of grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to perform good works so that, ultimately, they will be judged to have fulfilled the law of God and that they merit eternal life. This is basically the position of faithful Catholics.

Others will exclude works completely. Justification is by faith alone, and by that, they mean that works have nothing to do with salvation whatsoever. They may encourage believers to live a godly life and do good works, but if such works are absent, they still insist that such a person is justified. Indeed if someone has 'received Christ by faith' and his life remains unchanged or even dominated by sin, even so, they teach that this person will spend eternity in heaven. This view, sometimes called 'easy believism,' is not uncommon among Evangelicals.

Both views are in error. The Bible teaches that salvation is 'by grace through faith' – and it specifically excludes our works as the basis for salvation – 'not of yourselves, it is a gift of God'. The Bible is even more emphatic and explicit: 'not of works lest any man should boast'. A child can understand that simple statement, but then, it can also be easily twisted. So the Scripture immediately guards against the exclusion of works by telling us that the saved are 'created in Christ Jesus for good works' (Ephesians 2:8-10). Works are not the means but the fruit of salvation.

Those who profess to believe in Christ but continue to live in sexual immorality, drunkenness, resentment, dishonesty or any form of unrighteousness, will not

enter the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:6,10). It does not take some gross sin to keep one out of heaven. It is enough to do nothing. Christ calls such a person slothful, and his final condemnation is not left uncertain: 'Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:14-30).

On the other hand, it is dangerous to rest on our works, even in part, as the basis for our justification. The Pharisee who went to the temple to pray was a devout Jew who believed in the true and living God. He endeavoured to obey the Law and do good works. Moreover, he did not consider that his moral achievements were reached by his natural strength. He thanked God for his goodness. He was basing his justification on faith *and* works which he performed by the grace of God. However, in Jesus' estimation, he was trusting *in himself* that he was righteous. Sadly he went home unjustified. Pride had blinded him to his sin and guilt; he looked to himself instead of turning his eyes to God where he could find mercy.

May God help us avoid both deadly errors – I will not depend at all on my works for justification, neither now nor ever; I entrust myself solely to Christ by faith for I am convinced that God justifies me on the basis of his

Son's righteousness and the sacrifice on the cross. And since I am accepted by God and given a new heart, I dedicate myself to good works for his glory, thus showing that my faith is alive and that his saving work in me is real.

17

Summary

The biblical **doctrine** of justification teaches how a guilty sinner is acquitted and declared righteous by God through faith in Christ.

We are created moral beings and are **accountable** to God for our deeds. We ought to obey God's law whether written in our conscience or the Holy Scriptures.

All people, Jews and Gentiles, have **disobeyed** God – first, in our representative head, our father Adam, who disobeyed God's command and brought condemnation and death on himself and all humanity. We are also responsible for our many personal sins which pile guilt upon guilt upon our heads.

God's ruling on humanity is fearful and just: all have sinned, all are in **peril** of eternal condemnation and eternal perdition. For our sins, we merit death and the fire of hell.

We cannot be justified by the works of the **law**. The law demands perfection, and we have missed the mark. The law condemns us, exposes our sins, and if rightly used, it brings us to a point where we despair of ourselves and turn to Christ for justification.

Justification is an act of **God** the Father. Negatively God does not count the sins of his people against them; positively he imputes to them righteousness which they did not work for.

God can be just and yet justify sinners because of **Christ**, the incarnate eternal Son of God, who became the representative head and Saviour of his people. Jesus perfectly obeyed the divine Law throughout his life, and finally he gave himself as a sacrifice to pay the full penalty for their sins. God puts their sins on Christ, for which he died on the cross; God puts Christ's righteousness to their account. Believers are righteous in Christ.

Justification is given freely by **grace**, God's unmerited favour, not for any merit of our works. The payment, or redemption, for our justification, was made by Christ on the cross. Justification is free to us; for God, the cost was the life of his Son.

Justification is received by **faith** alone in Christ, that is, by faith apart from the merit of our works. Faith implies the complete rejection of any personal merit, confidence in the promise of God, a sure belief in the sufficiency of his death and resurrection, and complete trust and reliance on Christ for justification.

An idle, barren 'faith' cannot save because it is dead. The faith that justifies is living, working and fruitful. The **works** that follow justification are the indispensable evidence and necessary fruit of faith, for which God also rewards his children. Yet these works are not the basis for our justification; believers are justified on account of Christ's work, not their own.

Justification is the legal aspect of salvation – an act of God who *declares* believers righteous for Christ's sake. The other aspect of salvation is **sanctification**. It is the life-long process of *making* believers righteous in their thoughts, words and deeds. God changes the heart, teaches, enables and disciplines his children to shun sin and pursue holiness and righteousness. The two aspects are distinct but inseparable; if one is absent, the other is absent too.

Every individual Christian is fully **justified** from the moment of faith, throughout his life and in all eternity,

based on Christ's righteousness, and will therefore never be condemned in judgement.

The church is duty-bound to guard and proclaim the **gospel** of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. It is God's good news and only hope to a lost and guilty world; the same blessed truth gives liberty, life and joy to God's people.

Every individual should earnestly **apply** the doctrine to himself. Humble yourself and come before God with a broken heart, admitting your guilt and shame. Plead with God for mercy and grace, that for Christ's sake, he will take away your sins and count you righteous in his Beloved Son.

May God be eternally praised and **glorified** for his wisdom, justice and grace in the justification of his people, the church, through Christ Jesus his Son. Amen!