

Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith

#5: Justification...At Peace with God

Romans 5:1-2,8-11 and Titus 3:3-7 (both NRSV)

By John Gill

The year was 1505. A young man was traveling from his home to the university at Erfurt, Germany, where he was studying to become a lawyer. To an outside observer, his life was perfect. But in his heart, he felt a restlessness, and an aching void. He knew that his relationship with God was not what it should have been. As he walked, he wondered to himself, "Would I be acceptable to God if I were to appear before His judgment seat?"

Suddenly a violent thunderstorm filled the sky. A bolt of lightning struck very near to where the young man had been standing and threw him to the ground. Breathless and terrified, he cried out, "God, save me!" He was so fearful of the angry storm that he made a vow to God: "If You will spare my life, I will become a monk." After the storm passed and He was still alive, the student left the university and entered a monastery, hoping to find inner peace with God.

Yet he was still extremely troubled. He had left his family and worldly possessions to serve God in the cloistered life of a monastery, but he STILL could find no peace. His sins weighed terribly on his soul. He was tormented by fear of damnation and eternal punishment. He repented of his sins as best he knew how, but still found it impossible to believe that God had ACTUALLY pardoned him. He felt that the only way to become acceptable to God was to live a sin-free life.

He tried, but he always fell short. Then, after seven years in the monastery, he had the opportunity to travel to Rome to transact some business with the Pope. The spiritually troubled monk hoped that this trip to the very heart of the church he loved would make some difference in how he felt. But Rome was a disappointment to him. Instead of finding a church of exemplary devotion and conduct, he found a very worldly church corrupted by greed and arrogance.

His faith shaken, he made his way to the cathedral and began climbing the "Scala Sancta" (the sacred steps), where pilgrims to Rome often did penance for their sins. As he climbed the stairs on his knees, he kissed each one, as was the custom. However, within a few minutes, the absurdity of what he was doing became clear to him. Then, a verse of Scripture began to ring in his mind, "The just shall live...by FAITH." What was he doing kissing those stairs, he wondered... "THE JUST SHALL LIVE...BY **FAITH!**"

Thus began the transformation in the life of...Martin Luther, the man who launched the Protestant Reformation that changed, not only the church, but the world, forever.

What Martin Luther experienced in the 16th century, John Wesley also experienced in the 18th. Like Luther, Wesley felt an anxiety in HIS heart; he lacked peace in HIS soul....a peace that only came to him at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738, when he felt his "*heart strangely warmed.*"

Both Luther and Wesley were haunted by the same question: "How can a person find peace with God?" --or-- "How can a person be 'justified' (or made right) before God?"

This is the next stop along John Wesley's "Path of Salvation," which we have been considering each Sunday of our sermon series. We've looked at our **original sin**, the **prevenient grace** of God at work in our lives, the necessity of **repentance**, and now, **JUSTIFICATION** by faith.

What do we mean by “Justification?” “Justification” is one of those “church words” we hear thrown around a lot without knowing exactly what it means. If I were to call on you this morning to ask you to define “justification,” could you do it? I believe most of us would have a problem doing that.

That’s too bad, when you stop to consider what Wesley said about the importance of justification: “Justification,” said Wesley, “*is the beginning of the Christian life.*” He has even described it as “*the foundational doctrine of the church.*” According to Wesley, justification is an essential step along our path to salvation.”

He described its role by using the analogy of a house: He said, “Repentance (is the) **porch** of religion, leading to the **door** (of Justification), through which the **house** of Sanctification is entered.” So, if Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, believed that justification is the KEY to faith, it would behoove us to know a little about it, don’t you think?

Well, what exactly IS “Justification,” anyway? As you probably already guessed from the story of Martin Luther’s experience, **“Justification” is the process of being “put right” with God.** (repeat)

As we already know from our previous sermons in this series; -- because of our sin, we are **separated** from God, we are **estranged** from God, we are **at war** with God. All of us long to be “put right” with God... to know that “peace which passes understanding.” We want to be in right-relationship with God, just as He created us to be.

But, **HOW** do we find that “**PEACE?**” How can we be in right-relationship with God? That is exactly what the young Martin Luther wanted to know... It’s what John Wesley longed to find... It is what EACH of US search for – how to find peace with God. And what **they** discovered, **you and I** will discover, too.

In trying to understand why justification is so important to our faith journey, there are three essential truths that we need to consider... three ways in which “justification” is Good News for us. (It just so happens that they all begin with the letter “F.”)

The first Good News for us is that Justification is FREE. We cannot justify ourselves, no matter how hard we may try. Like everything else along our journey of faith, justification is a gift of God’s grace, just waiting for us to accept. Justification is the common word we use to describe what God does freely – for us – through grace.

The term “justification” is actually a metaphor that comes to us primarily from the courtroom (“justification” is a form of the word “justice,” after all), and it reminds us that ultimately we will ALL stand before God, our “Judge,” and have to answer for our sins. Therefore the central questions of “justification” are these: “*How can we as sinners stand in the presence of a pure and holy God?*” “*How can we get into a right-relationship with God?*” “*How can we escape the feeling of fear in the presence of God ...the sense of estrangement? ...of judgment?*”

The Jewish faith answered those questions this way: “A person can attain a right-relationship with God (so they said) by keeping the law.” That’s what they believed the Old Testament taught: By fulfilling all the works of the law, a person will be “right” with God. That’s what is sometimes called “works righteousness” ...that we can be made right by what we do.

However, there is a problem: This **sounds** great, ...but it doesn’t work! In fact, far from saving us, the law condemns us, because no one can live in perfect obedience, keeping every law. So, for anyone who holds the position of work’s righteousness, there CAN BE NO justification. We are NEVER justified by our works. Justification comes to us as a free gift. It is graciously offered to us by a gracious God. All we have to do... is accept the gift.

In the 1930's, Dizzy Dean was the pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals. Back then, America was primarily a rural nation, and Dizzy was a small town country boy, who came to the Big Leagues with a blazing fast ball, and a unique homespun humor. Certainly, part of Dean's appeal was his naiveté.

When he first joined the St. Louis Cardinal's "Gashouse Gang" in 1930, the team traveled to another city to play a game. At the hotel, Dizzy rode up to the seventh floor in the elevator. It was probably the first time in his life Dizzy had ever stayed in a hotel. When the elevator emptied on Dizzy's floor, he noticed that one of the others gave a tip to the bellboy. Dean asked the man why he had paid the bellboy. "That was for my elevator ride," the man replied. "They didn't charge ME?" Dizzy pointed out. "Oh, they know you are with the team, so they just put it on the team's account."

Even though the elevator cost was paid for him by the team, for the next three days, Dizzy climbed all seven flights of stairs to get to his room.

GOOD NEWS! The price for our justification has been placed on the account of another. We can't *buy* it, *earn* it, or *merit* it. We can only *accept* it. So, the first Good News is that our justification is paid by Jesus - it is **free** for the asking!

The second essential truth about Justification (which is Good News to our ears) is this: Not only is it FREE, but when we are justified, we are **FORGIVEN** of our sins.

The Christian answer to the question of Justification (or, being put-right with God) is to trust... NOT in our own ability to keep the law... NOT in our own merits; but ONLY in the merits of the Cross of Jesus Christ! As Christians, our only recourse in being justified before God is to "throw ourselves on the mercy of the court" of God, for only HE can make us worthy to stand in His presence.

You see, it is only through the "atoning" work of Christ on the Cross that our sins can be forgiven. As John writes in his first letter, "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous." Jesus is our "Advocate" with the Father who will intercede on our behalf.

In a magazine cartoon some time ago, two men dressed in business suits, one carrying a briefcase, are standing in the clouds of heaven at the Pearly Gates, at the desk of St. Peter. Peter has a pen in his hand, and the "Book of Life" open before him. Evidently, Peter is preparing to hear them make their case as to why Peter should let them into heaven. Then one of the men says, "*My name is Howard C. Freswell, ...and this is Arthur Templeton, my attorney.*"

When we stand before God, we ALL need someone to represent us, to be our "advocate" before God, because we all are guilty. For Christians, JESUS promises to stand by our side on the Last Day and vouch for us – to be our "Advocate" – before His Father.

You see, it is **only** based upon the merits of Christ and his cross that you and I can stand before God on Judgment Day and be declared, "NOT guilty." It is only through the atoning work of Christ... (the "at-one" – ing work of Christ)... that we can be "at one" with God. Friends, THAT is what justification means... FORGIVENESS of our sins, THROUGH FAITH in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther experienced the justification we are talking about. Later in life, Luther had a dream – a vision – maybe a nightmare ... (he wasn't sure WHAT it was!) But he was awakened in the middle of the night to see, standing at the foot of his bed, a figure he believed to be none other than the devil himself. Satan had a scroll,

and on that scroll were written all the sins Luther had ever committed. The devil was reading them, one sin after another. Pointing his fiery-finger into Luther's face, he condemned and accused him, asking, "What hope of heaven do you have?" Luther felt at that moment his soul was slipping down into hell.

Then the Lord intervened, speaking to Luther: "Tell the devil to unroll the rest of the scroll." Luther instructed the devil, "Unroll the scroll entirely." The devil refused. Luther then commanded, "In the name of Jesus, unroll the scroll!" Reluctantly, Satan unrolled it. There, printed across the bottom in crimson ink were these words: "This entire sin-account of Martin Luther, 'paid in full' by the blood of Jesus Christ!"

The Good News of Justification is that OUR "sin-account" is "paid in full," and we are forgiven!

The final Good News about Justification is the most remarkable of all... Yes, it is FREE; and yes, our sins are FORGIVEN. But most remarkably, once forgiven, our sins are **FORGOTTEN**. When we are justified by the gracious act of God, God declares that we are *righteous saints* through Jesus Christ, NOT just *pardoned sinners*. As a result of Justification, God sees the Christian... just as though he had never sinned!

A woman reminded her husband of a past wrong he had done to her. He said, "I thought you said you had **forgiven and forgotten** that!" She said, "Yes I have. But I don't want YOU to **forget** that I have forgiven and forgotten!" Thank goodness our God both forgives AND forgets!

We usually think of God as being all-knowing, and He is. But, praise God, our God is a "forgetful" God! When we confess our sin and He justifies us through our faith in Jesus Christ, God literally wipes that sin from His memory.

As King David wrote in Psalm 103, "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." (vs. 11-12)

Like computer files no longer needed, God presses "delete," and the record of those sins is wiped out. And so, we are free to live a new life in Christ. We can start over with a clean slate knowing that we have been reconciled to God.

John Newton's life was a testimony to the willingness of God to forgive and forget our sins. It was the early years of the 18th century. Newton's life got off to a rough start. He quit school and joined his father's ship crew at age 11. His early years were an endless cycle of sinful living. He worked in the cruel business of slave-trading, and eventually became the captain of his own slave ship. His life was filled with debauchery and every kind of sacrilege against God.

However, God's prevenient grace was at work in the life of this lost soul. During a stormy trip across the Atlantic, Newton believed that his life was soon to be over. He began reading the 14th century spiritual classic, Imitation of Christ by Thomas A Kempis, and began to wrestle with the claim of the Gospel on his life. There in the midst of the storm he surrendered to Christ. He felt God's forgiveness, and knew in his heart that God ALSO had forgotten his past.

Newton's life changed. Eventually he became a great preacher and often testified about the "Amazing Grace" of God that "saved a wretch" like him. And, yes, you guessed right: It was John Newton who wrote his own autobiography when he penned the words to the most popular hymn of all time:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me,

I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Yes, the Good News of Justification is that our God both forgives... AND forgets!

Justification: At Peace with God... Is your soul "at peace" with God? Do you KNOW that your sins are covered by the blood of Christ? Have you experienced the joy of new-life made possible because God is willing to forgive... and forget?

If not, what are you waiting for?

All you have to do – is ask.

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*"Therefore, since we are justified by faith,
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ;
through whom we have obtained access to this grace
in which we stand."*

- The Apostle Paul