

Salvation - Justification by Faith

What Is Justification, and Why Is It Important?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

The doctrine of justification by faith is one of the most important in the Bible, but one that is too little taught today. It is only when we really grasp this doctrine that we begin to comprehend the true nature and infinite extent of God's saving grace toward hopeless sinners.

God's Gracious Act

Justification is God's gracious act of completely pardoning our sins, and giving us a perfect righteousness that is not our own, based solely on the perfect obedience and atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 3:24, 4:5-8, 5:1-2, 5:17-19).

God's Law-Court Decision

Justification is the "great exchange" of our sins for Christ's righteousness made possible by His shed blood (2 Corinthians 5:21). Justification is received by the instrument of faith (mere belief) in Christ alone, apart from works (Romans 3:28, 4:1-7; Galatians 2:16, 3:11). Justification occurs only once, and can never be lost (Hebrews 10:14) since it is not a process but a forensic (law-court) act of God. This is indicated by the very nature and use of the Greek word *dikaoo* (to declare righteous) throughout the New Testament. The believer's state of justification is consistently spoken of in the original language as a present state, and in the passive voice — in other words, something that has been done to the believer, not something the believer does, or cooperates in.

Double Imputation

In the "great exchange" of justification, our sins are imputed to Christ, and His perfect righteousness is imputed to us. Among the passages that clearly teach this are Isaiah 53:6, Romans 5:12-19, Romans 6:9-11, 1 Corinthians 1:30, and 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Christ's Righteous Act

Romans 5:18 speaks of the obedience of Christ as "one righteous act." In context, and in light of the rest of Scripture, this phrase speaks of both His active obedience (manifested primarily in His perfect law-keeping) and His passive obedience (His atoning sacrifice for sin). The two kinds of obedience are inseparable for our salvation.

Christ's active obedience not only qualified Him as both perfect Priest and perfect Sacrifice (Hebrews 4:14-15, 7:26-27), it also merited a perfect righteousness that is imputed to God's people in their justification (Romans 3:21-22, 4:5-8; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ's active obedience fulfilled the covenant with God that Adam failed to keep and thus plunged all mankind into sin. Christ's passive obedience forever propitiated (appeased) the wrath of God against sinners as a consequence of both their possession of original sin in Adam's fall, and their own individual sinful acts (Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10).

Justification Through Grace Alone

Our justification is not by works of righteousness that we have done, but by God's saving mercy (Titus 3:5). Our good works as believers are the demonstration of the fact that we possess saving faith and that the Holy Spirit is living within us (John 8:39, Ephesians 1:13-14, 2:10; James 2:14-26). Our good works are not in any sense the instrument of our justification (Galatians 2:16).

Justification by Faith Alone

Our justification is by the instrument of faith in Christ alone. Galatians 2:16 states this clearly: "A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ." Ephesians 2:8-9 states that we are saved by grace through faith, and that even saving faith is the gift of God and not of ourselves. Acts 13:38-39 states that the law could not possibly justify us before God. The Apostle Paul states in Philippians 3:9 that he is in Christ not because he possessed a righteousness of his own from the law, but because he possessed the imputed righteousness of Christ by faith.

Christ Our Advocate

It is for these reasons that when we sin, "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). He is truly *Jehovah Tsidkenu*, "the Lord our Righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6), and the eternal dwelling place of the saints shall be called by that name (Jeremiah 33:16).

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Several readers have contacted us in a state of confusion about the preaching of Dr. John MacArthur on this subject.

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