

Lesson 73: Chapter 11: Paragraph 1-2: Justification

OUTLINE

The nature of justification
The ground of justification
The instrument of justification

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the doctrine of justification. Martin Luther said, 'The church stands, if this article stands, and the church falls if it falls.' Calvin called it, 'the primary article of the Christian religion.' 'The main hinge on which religion turns' and 'the principle article of the whole doctrine of salvation and the foundation of all religion.'¹ Justification concerns itself with the most important of questions, how can I as a sinner be righteous before a holy God? To be justified by faith is to be credited as righteous by God through faith, not for any of my own righteousness but because of Christ and His righteousness. Martin Boos, a Roman Catholic priest had this lesson taught to him by a woman on her death bed, he writes, 'In 1788 or 1789 I visited a sick person, who was respected for her deep humility and exemplary piety. I said to her, 'You will die very peacefully and happily'. 'Why so?' she asked. 'Because you have led,' I replied, 'such a pious and holy life'. The good woman smiled at my words and said, 'If I leave the world relying on my own piety, I am sure I shall be lost. But relying on Jesus my Saviour, I can die in comfort! How could I stand before the divine tribunal, where everyone must give an account even of her idle words? Which of our actions and virtues would not be wanting if laid in the divine balances? No, if Christ had not died for me, if he had not made satisfaction for me, I should have been lost forever, notwithstanding all my good works and pious conduct. He is my hope, my salvation, and my eternal happiness.' (Murray, Old Evangelicalism, p99). That is what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ. Martin Boos himself practiced asceticism and penance for sin after the Roman Catholic fashion and, like Martin Luther, found no peace. He later came to believe in Justification by faith and was persecuted by the RCC for believing and preaching it, and he preached it to great effect. Peace in death; assurance in life; comfort in sorrow; joy in trials; strength against temptation; liberty in prayer; fervour in worship; truth to fight the devil's lies; a balm for the conscience, motivation for holiness, a fire for preaching to the lost, this and much more are the effects of this glorious doctrine.

Paul in romans 5:1 hints at this critical link between justification and every other benefit. 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' Because of justification by faith many benefits are ours. He lists them in 5:1-11. Peace with God; access to God; we stand in grace not law; we rejoice in trials; we know God's love for us; we are saved from the wrath of God; we rejoice in God Himself. Today we get to explore this doctrine which acts as the foundation for every other benefits we receive in Christ.

Today we will be looking at paragraphs 1 and 2 of the confession:
'Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and

¹ Horton, Justification Vol. 1, p43.

accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on him, and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.'

'Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.'

There is a lot packed into these paragraphs we will be gathering the data under three headings, the nature of justification; the ground of justification; and the instrument of justification.

The nature of justification

'Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous.' Paragraph 1 begins with two things that justification isn't; and two things that it is. The verdict of righteous by God as judge is not earned it is free. The prooftext offered is Rom. 3:24 where Paul says we are 'are justified by his grace as a gift.' Justification is not for good people but for sinners, we do not prepare ourselves by being good to try and persuade God that we are worthy, it is free not earned, by grace not works. Secondly, justification is not by infusion but by imputation. Here the confession is tackling the prevailing view of the RCC. Here is a quick summary of their view of salvation where we see justification in their minds is actually linked to sanctification. Justification is a word borrowed from the law courts, and it is an action on God's part where He declares us to be not guilty and righteous, while we are still sinners. It is describing a change in status not in being. RCs see it differently, they think that this is not right, but that God does not only forgive us, but justification includes a change in being as well. They have three distinct phases in justification.

"For Rome, baptism infuses a new habit or disposition into the soul, negatively, washing away original sin and (in the case of adults) actual sins up to that point, and positively, strengthening the soul to cooperate with grace. This baptismal regeneration is called the 'first justification' and is said to be followed by an increase in inherent holiness through cooperation with grace and merit [second justification]. At any stage along the way, this justification (as an infused habit) may be lost, but there is in most cases the possibility of renewing one's beginning in justification through the sacrament of penance."²

Last rites would then cleanse the sinner of any final venial sins he had committed before he dies. However, the Catholic Church still teaches that

² Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: a systematic theology for pilgrims on the way*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan: 2011), 562-3. (square brackets mine)

though these sins are forgiven they must still be punished in purgatory, Philip H. Eveson commenting on 1992 New Roman Catechism writes:

“Everyday or ‘venial’ sins, so Rome teaches, are not like ‘mortal’ or ‘deadly sins; they are not as serious and do not bring eternal punishment. Though they are forgiven, the Catechism says it is still necessary to be purified from these sins through temporal punishment. The punishment may be here on earth or after death in purgatory. An indulgence is said to free a person in part or wholly from temporal punishment depending on whether it is a plenary or partial indulgence. ‘An indulgence is obtained through the Church who.... intervenes in favour of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of temporal punishments due for their sins.’ ‘Since the faithful departed now being purified (i.e. in purgatory) are also members of the same communion of saints, one way we can help them is to obtain indulgences for them, so that the temporal punishments due for their sins may be remitted.’”³

The RCC is tricky in its language and even evangelical Christians have fallen for the claim that there is no real difference to talk about. The Roman Catholic Church makes claims that it believes that we are justified by grace through faith. However, what is missing is the word ‘alone’. They believe that a God’s unmerited grace gives us our first justification in baptism, but it is our cooperation with infused grace that will determine whether we are able to add to our own justification by our works of love. And it is the acts of the church and the merits of the saints which secures, along with Christ’s righteousness our final removal from purgatory. Their version of salvation may start with grace, but that is where it ends, once you are in it is all up to you to complete your own justification, with an almost inevitable period in purgatory. The confession is stating that justification is not describing the internal actions of God’s Spirit bringing about sanctification, but a new legal status that is given as a gift when we believe. It should be noted that when Paul describes justification in Romans we often find it in a legal context, Rom. 3:19-20; is contrasted with an opposite legal term condemnation, 5:16; and is defended as not being able to bring legal charges against God’s elect, Rom. 8:33-34. The LXX also uses the same Greek word for justification in legal settings, e.g. Ex. 23:6-7; Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15. Justification is not merely a legal metaphor where some like N.T. Wright suggest you could conceive of salvation in other terms as well, no it actually a legal act where God as the judge is acting in a legal capacity declaring a legal status over us. The RCC agree that it is forensic but instead of God ruling us as righteous through accounting Christ righteousness as ours, they see God as judge evaluating our spirit wrought works and these contribute to our final legal standing.

It is not earned; and it is not infused. The confession then goes on to give 2 positive statements, justification includes pardon/non-imputation of sin; and it includes being accounted and accepted as righteous, not in ourselves but in our substitute Christ. The prooftext for justification including pardon/the non-imputation of sin is Rom. 4:7-8, ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord

³ Philip H Eveson, *The Great Exchange: Justification by Faith Alone—in light of recent thought*, (Epsom, Surrey, Day One Publishers:1998), 86.

will not count his sin.' We have no sin in God's sight, we are whiter than snow, as far as the east is from the west He has removed our transgressions from us. Like criminals granted an amnesty we do not have our sinned held against us. But this is only half of our justification. We are also accepted and accounted as righteous, not on account of anything in us that or that do, but because of Christ. Christ becomes our righteousness. Our righteousness is not in ourselves but Him, it is not native but alien. These two truths make up the two parts of what Martin Luther called the great exchange. 2 Cor. 5:21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

Let us explore this further under our next point,

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'by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, they receiving and resting on him, and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.' We see here that the ground of our justification is God imputing righteousness to us, not the righteousness of the faith act, and we will circle back to this soon; but rather imputing the obedience of Christ to us, this is expanded by the 1689 following the Savoy which added the WCF, as the active and passive obedience of Christ. To put it another way. God declares us righteous because of works. Not the works wrought in us, by us, not even the act of believing in Christ; no, we are saved by the works of Christ's death and life as they are imputed/credited to us. Rom. 5:17-19 is pointed to to show that just as we were made guilty by an imputed guilt in Adam, and damned and brought under condemnation by another's sin; in the same way we are saved by the works of another as His works are given to us as a gift, 'For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ 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.' Christ's active obedience is His perfecting fulfilling of the law of God to love God and neighbour; and His passive obedience from the Latin word for suffering is speaking of all that Jesus suffered as our substitute to pay our sin debt. These two aspects of Christ's obedience make up the righteousness that is gifted to us freely, that is received by faith, and God credits to us as ours for righteousness. Another proof-text offered is Phil. 3:8-9 where Paul disavows any of his own righteousness and relies on the righteousness that comes to Him as a gift from God and received by faith, 'Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, 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.'

2 Cor 5:21 shows us how this occurs, how there is a two way imputation. Our sin is credited to Christ. The text says He became sin, this was by the addition of our external legal status, the guilt of our sins, not by any change in His internal being. Now that we see how it is possible to be a sinner and holy at the same time in Christ we now need to see how we can be holy and a sinner at the same time. Luther discovered this important truth and summed it up in a Latin phrase, *Simil Justus Et Peccator*, this means that we are simultaneously righteous and sinner. Christ was righteous by nature and a sinner by imputation, we are the reverse, we are a sinner by nature and receive a righteousness in the same way that Jesus received our sin, externally but really. He was righteous and had sin added to Him, we are sinners and have righteousness added to us. Just as Jesus was not made a sinner by nature but only by an imputed guilt, and was thereby pronounced guilty. Likewise we are not declared righteous by virtue of a change in our natures but by a change in legal status. Just as our sin was counted as His and He was punished so His righteousness is counted as ours and we are saved. Luther called this exchange of sin for righteousness the Great/Marvellous Exchange. Thomas Brooks captures this exchange when he writes on our behalf as if we were talking to Christ. 'I am Thy sin, and Thou art my righteousness; I am Thy curse and Thou art my blessing; I am Thy death and Thou art my life; I am the wrath of God to Thee, and Thou art the love of God to me; I am Thy hell, and Thou art my heaven.' This is the great mystery of Christianity. If you can understand how Christ became sin and yet was still righteous then you can understand how you are righteous and yet still a sinner.

You are not sinner or saint, but sinner and saint because Christ was holy and sin at the same time, but not in the same way. In this way God's requirements of being holy as He is holy are fulfilled even while we are still sinners. The declaration of righteousness is not the description of something that is ours but something that is Christ's. We are being made new, we are putting away sin but we are far from perfection and will not attain to it until we are glorified and our sinful natures are removed, but our righteousness is not resident within ourselves nor does it depend upon anything we do. We are justified by another's imputed righteousness just as Christ was condemned by another's imputed sin. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because He has taken all the condemnation upon Himself. There is no more punishment left to be poured out upon our sins because Christ drank it all for us.

The instrument of justification

Now notice the order in which things are dealt with in this paragraph, notice that God is the acting agent, and Christ's righteousness is what is imputed to us. So that when we come to talk about faith at the end of paragraph one the confession has already in this emphasis avoided an error. If you take the words, 'we are justified by faith' in a literal sense it can appear as if it is our faith that we offer to God as a work to justify us. That instead of demanding all the works of the law, God has lowered the bar and all we offer to Him is the single work of faith. The confession is steering us away from this understanding and specifically stresses that our faith is a receiving act, not a giving act; an act of looking to Christ and what He has done, not to our own act of faith. Look at the last line in paragraph 1, "Those thus

justified receive and rest by faith upon Christ's righteousness; and this faith they have, not of themselves, but as the gift of God." The object of our faith is upon works, but not our works, but the works of Christ. We put our confidence in His righteousness, his life and death, as the only thing that can make us holy in the sight of God. To get at the meaning of 'faith' you can think of the synonyms 'trust,' 'lean,' 'rely,' 'put your confidence for holiness in,' all these highlight that faith is a passive act of receiving not giving. In faith we do not look at ourselves and the strength of our belief, but we look away from ourselves putting our confidence not in any strength we might have, but as Christ's gift of righteousness as the only hope for acquittal in God's court.

We are also told that this ability to look to Christ, and see in Him a righteousness sufficient to justify us, is a gift. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Eph 2:8-9 is the textual reference given us in the confession. And we recognise that because we are naturally sinners, and turn to ourselves and not God for salvation, to sin and not holiness, self-reliance and not God. Since everything in us resists the Gospel, and no one comes to God unless he is drawn, we can see why faith is a gift.

The first line of paragraph 2 emphasizes that we are justified by faith alone, "The faith which receives and rests on Christ and His righteousness is the sole means of justification." Because Christ's righteousness lacks nothing, because it on its own is sufficient to satisfy all the requirements of God's law, both positively and negatively, we do not add anything to our faith to justify us. Faith stands alone because the righteousness of Christ that we are trusting in is sufficient. Christ said on the cross, 'it is finished,' and we now rest in Christ, not work in Him. He is our Sabbath rest in this regard.

But what about sanctification and holiness, you might ask? Well the next line in paragraph 2 answers this concern, 'Yet it is never alone in the person justified, but it is invariably accompanied by all other saving graces. Nor is it a dead faith, for it works by love.' Our faith does not work to save itself, but it works because it is saved. 'I cannot work my soul to save, for that my Lord has done, but I will work like any slave for love of God's dear Son.' If someone is truly born again, and the faith they exercise in Christ is the result of God's gift in His effectual call, then from the same root will flow the inevitable life of holiness.

Let me end with John Bunyan's testimony and how this truth of Christ's righteousness as He helped him come out from a heavy burden of guilt and condemnation: "One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [=lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my

righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, "The same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb. 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful scriptures of God [about the unforgivable sin] left off to trouble me; now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God." (Piper).