



Kerrville Bible Church

What We Teach – A Journey Through the KBC Doctrinal Statement “The Doctrine of Justification” – January 30, 2022

JUSTIFICATION: We teach that justification is the one-time judicial act of God (Romans 8:33) whereby He declares righteous those who repent of their sins (Isaiah 55:6-7; Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 11:18; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:10), turn to Christ in faith (Acts 16:31; 20:21; Romans 1:16; 3:22,26; Galatians 3:22), and confess Him as Lord (Romans 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11). This righteousness is apart from any virtue or work of man (Romans 3:20; 4:6). Justification is grounded upon the imputation of both the believer’s sins to Christ (Colossians 2:14; 1 Peter 2:24) and Christ’s righteousness to the believer (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21), so that God “would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26). Justification includes the full forgiveness of all the believer’s sins and results in him having the very standing of Christ before the Father, loved as Christ is loved, one with Him forever (John 5:24, 17:23; Acts 13:39; Romans 5:1; 1 Corinthians 3:21-23; Ephesians 1:3; Colossians 2:10; 2 Peter 3:18; 1 John 4:17, 5:11-13).

We teach that the basis of the believer’s justification is the righteous life, death and resurrection of Christ. Christ’s righteousness that is imputed to believers consists in first, His perfect obedience to all of God’s commands, attaining to the perfect standard of God’s righteousness in thought, word and deed (Isaiah 53:9, 11; Matthew 3:15; Romans 3:21-22; 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 4:15); and secondly, His obedient death on the cross (Philippians 2:8). It is this perfect righteousness, both in His life and death, with which believers are clothed in union with Christ and which is the sole ground of their acceptance with God (Galatians 3:27; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21). We teach that in justification, righteousness is not infused or imparted into the believer, nor is it attained by his own virtue or work (Romans 3:20; 4:6; 5:18-19). Rather, the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer through the means of faith (Romans 3:28; 4:4-5; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9).

In the previous several weeks we’ve studied what is called the doctrine of Soteriology, that is, the doctrine of Salvation. We’ve learned about election, redemption, regeneration, and repentance with it’s connection to faith. I suppose even before then we laid the foundation for establishing the reason for salvation, that man was created innocent and sinless, but fell in the Garden and experienced the consequences of sin – corruption of every fiber of his being, separation from God, difficulty in his relationships with fellow man, and the corruption of the created world.

This morning we will be considering the doctrine of justification.

Justification means that God legally declares we are no longer deemed guilty under the divine law but are forgiven and counted righteous in God’s sight.

In justification, God provides the answer to man’s most basic theological and religious question: How can sinners come to be in a right relationship of good standing with the Holy God of the universe?

God is perfectly righteous. John says he is light and in him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). God is entirely holy, free from any defect or moral impurity. On the other hand, all of mankind has sinned against God and therefore falls short of that holy standard (**Romans 3:23 says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**). Our sin makes us the very darkness that has no fellowship with the God of light. All men who have broken his law - and that is all men who have ever existed with the exception of Jesus Christ - have incurred the penalty for their crimes of sin: death and condemnation. So, if we condemned sinners are to have any good news at all, any hope at all, then the consequences created by our breaking of the law must be overcome. Well, how can that be?

In every age of human history, religion has answered that question by saying we can overcome these consequences by being good people. Various religious systems concoct lists of rituals and ceremonies that must be performed to achieve a measure of righteousness that will somehow carry the day in the courtroom of God. That all who were ever born will be judged on a sliding scale and as long as we can be better than the average we're in good shape. How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm basically a good person. Sure I've done a few things wrong, but it's not like I've ever murdered someone."

And yet Jesus says that if man is to enter heaven, he needs a righteousness that surpasses even the most religiously devout people. In fact, he goes even further and says, "**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect**" (Matt. 5:48). If man is to be reconciled to God, he does not just need to be a good person; he needs to be a perfect person. He needs a perfect righteousness, for God himself is perfect and requires perfection.

At the very outset, then, it is necessary to understand that salvation is a matter of righteousness. People are condemned to eternal spiritual death because they lack the righteousness that a perfectly holy God possesses and requires for fellowship with him. And the only way sinners are ever reconciled to God is through being given the righteousness that belongs to God himself. That is why the thesis statement of the book of Romans—the most thorough treatment on justification in all Scripture—takes up this theme of righteousness. The gospel is "**the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**" precisely because "**in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith**" (Rom. 1:16–17). The gospel saves because God gives his very own righteousness to man. The rest of the New Testament attests to this truth as well.

Thus it is plain that the doctrine of justification flows from the very heart of the gospel and the soul of Christianity itself. It is, as Martin Luther said, the article by which the church stands or falls, for it concerns the only way sinful man can be declared righteous in God's sight. Man's answer is always to try to order his life by some moral or ritualistic standard; if he does that successfully, he can contribute something to his salvation and thus achieve a righteousness acceptable to his god. Yet the Bible consistently denies that anyone can be justified by works. Rather, salvation is God's righteousness imputed to the believer by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone:

Romans 3:21, NASB

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Galatians 2:16 NASB

...Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

The distinction could not be clearer. In these passages, the apostle Paul is contrasting biblical Christianity with Judaism in particular, but what he says about Judaism can be applied to every other religious system in the world. There have only ever been two religions:

1. The religion of human achievement, by which man works to contribute to his own righteousness, and
2. The religion of divine accomplishment, whereby God accomplishes righteousness by the holy life and substitutionary death of the Son of God and then freely gives that righteousness as a gift through faith alone.

This is the greatest distinctive between Christianity and all other religions.

The religion of human achievement encompasses every other religious system in the history of mankind—from the pursuit of nirvana in Buddhism, to the five pillars of Islam, to the sacraments and acts of penance of Roman Catholicism. Biblical Christianity is the lone religion of divine accomplishment. Because Christians are justified by faith alone, their standing before God is not in any way related to personal merit. Good works and practical holiness are not the grounds for acceptance with God. God receives as righteous those who believe, not because of any good thing he sees in them—not even because of his own sanctifying work in their lives—but solely on the basis of Christ's righteousness, which is graciously reckoned to their account through faith alone. As Paul says, "To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5).

I gave a basic definition of justification earlier, but let me do so again and we'll unpack this more detailed explanation during the rest of our time together this morning:

Justification is that instantaneous act of God whereby, as a gift of his grace, he imputes to a believing sinner the full and perfect righteousness of Christ through faith alone and legally declares him perfectly righteous in his sight, forgiving the sinner of all unrighteousness and thus delivering him from all condemnation.

It is important to note at the outset that the term justification is a legal declaration of righteousness. It is not an actual impartation or infusion of righteousness. It describes what God declares about the believer, not what he does to change the believer. In fact, justification itself effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner's nature or character. It is an instantaneous change of one's status before God, not a gradual transformation that takes place within the one who is justified.

Legal declarations like this are fairly common in everyday life. When a minister declares, "By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife," there is an instant change in the legal status of the couple standing before him. Seconds before, the law regarded them as two distinct individuals. Yet on the basis of this pronouncement, their legal status before God and in society changes entirely. And while that declaration has profound meaning and life transforming implications, nothing about the couple's character or nature changes as a result of the minister's words. They are the same two people with the same sets of unique attributes, dreams, problems, sinful natures, and hopeful expectations as they were before they entered the marriage ceremony. It is a legal declaration only.

Here is another example, when a jury foreman announces to the court that a defendant is not guilty, the legal status of the defendant changes instantly. Seconds before, the law regarded him as "the accused," innocent until proven guilty. But as a result of the foreman's verdict, he is not guilty in the eyes of the law. Yet the jury's verdict does not make the man not guilty; his own actions are the basis of his guilt or innocence. Neither does it declare his life free from any and all evil. The foreman's announcement simply declares the defendant's status before the law. In a similar way, the justification spoken of in Scripture is God's divine verdict of "not guilty—fully righteous" pronounced on the sinner. **In the case of justification, it is not that the accused is innocent but that another has paid in full the penalty for his crimes.**

Disagreement over the nature of justification was one of the key debates of the Protestant Reformation, and it still divides biblical Christianity and Roman Catholicism to this day. Roman Catholic theology teaches that justification is not merely a legal declaration but transformative. In other words, according to Roman Catholic teaching, "to justify" does not mean "to declare righteous" but "to make righteous." Now, it is true that the saving grace of God is transformative; those who are declared righteous in conversion will be progressively made righteous throughout the course of their Christian lives. That is the topic of discussion next week regarding Sanctification. But by failing to distinguish these two related yet *distinct* applications of redemption, Roman Catholicism collapses sanctification into justification. The inevitable and unfortunate consequence is that the believer's own imperfect righteousness replaces the perfect righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of justification.

This is why failing to understand the nature of justification as a legal declaration and not a transformative process destroys the very foundation of the gospel.

Justification is Grounded in Imputed Righteousness

So we've said that God declares the sinner forgiven and now fully righteous, but how is such a declaration by God just? Proverbs 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked . . . [is] an abomination to the Lord ." All mankind is wicked. We are lawbreakers, deserving God's condemnation, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Yet, Romans 4:5 explicitly says that God justifies the ungodly . How can God declare to be righteous those who are actually guilty, and not, as Proverbs 17:15 says, participate in something abominable?

How can God be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26)? The answer to that question is the doctrine of imputation. God's declarative act of justification is based on his fundamental act of imputation. This is a twofold act; God imputes—that is, counts, credits, or reckons—our sin to Christ and punishes him in our place, and he imputes Christ's righteousness to believers and grants them eternal life in him.

Forgiveness of Sins: The Imputation of Our Sin to Christ

First, God imputes our sin to Christ: "For our sake he [the Father] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). Now, in what sense did the Father "make" the Son "sin" on our behalf? In only one sense: the Father counted Jesus to have committed all the sins of all those who would ever repent and believe in him. He did not actually make Jesus a sinner; it would be blasphemous to suggest that the God man was actually made a sinner, for God cannot sin. Instead, since justification is a legal declaration, as we've noted already, the Father judicially reckoned Christ to have committed the sins of those for whom he was giving himself as a substitute. Just as the scapegoat bore the guilt of Israel when Aaron confessed the people's sins over the head of the goat (Lev. 16:21), so "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6), such that Christ actually "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24; cf. Isa. 53:4–6).

And just as the blood of the goat of the sin offering was sprinkled on the mercy seat to propitiate - or to satisfy and atone for - God's wrath, so also was Christ "put forward as a propitiation by his blood" (Rom. 3:25).

Though innumerable sinners will escape divine punishment, no sin will ever go unpunished, for every sin of the elect has been reckoned to Christ and punished in him on the cross. In this way divine justice is satisfied.

Sin has not merely been dismissed or swept under the rug; it has been justly punished in a substitute. This is the gospel through which God demonstrates his righteousness, "so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Therefore, because the believer's sins have been imputed to and punished in Christ, they are not counted against him. As Paul quotes David's words from Psalm 32, "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" (Rom. 4:7–8). Because they have been counted, or imputed, to Christ, the

believer's sins are not imputed to (or counted against) him. They are forgiven and covered. Therefore, the justified believer faces no condemnation (Rom. 8:1, 33–34) but enjoys peace with God (Rom. 5:1) and the sure hope of eternal life (Rom. 8:30; Titus 3:7).

Provision of Righteousness: The Imputation of Christ's Righteousness to Us

But the forgiveness of sins is not all that God accomplishes in his work of justification. In fact, if the only benefit believers received in justification were the forgiveness of our sins, we could not be saved. Think about that...

The old Sunday school definition of justification—"just as if I'd never sinned"—is inadequate and falls short, because salvation is not merely a matter of sinlessness or innocence but is also a matter of righteousness (Matt. 5:20, 48). The law of God, which man broke, thereby incurring the death penalty (Rom. 6:23), carries both positive obedience to his commands and the necessary punishment for falling short of perfect obedience. That is to say, God's law requires both:

- (1) that his creatures perform certain duties suitable to his righteousness and
- (2) that they undergo a certain punishment if they fail to perform those duties.

Man has failed to do both. We do not live lives of perfect righteousness, walking in obedience to God in all things, loving him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Neither could we pay the penalty that our disobedience demands without perishing eternally in hell. Therefore, if we are to be saved, our substitute must not only pay our penalty by absorbing the wrath of God against our sin but must also obey all the positive demands of the law that were required of us.

Without the positive provision of righteousness, mere forgiveness would leave us in a state of innocence or moral neutrality, as Adam was before the fall—reckoned as never having sinned but as never having obeyed either. For this reason, Scripture speaks of the justified sinner being counted righteous in addition to being forgiven. God's people testify to this in **Isaiah 61:10**: "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, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." In fact, salvation is described in terms of imputed righteousness as early as God's dealings with Abraham. **Genesis 15:6** says that Abraham "believed the Lord , and he counted it to him as righteousness".

This is best stated by Paul in **2 Corinthians 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."

So How Does Justification Come to Us? – By Faith Alone

Christ's accomplishment of redemption—both in paying for sin and providing righteousness—occurred two thousand years ago, apart from any human influence. His work was objective, external to you and me. Therefore, the question that must be answered is, how can the objective work of Christ be applied to me personally? By what means can my sins be imputed to Christ and his righteousness be imputed to me? The answer Scripture consistently gives is that

we are justified through faith alone apart from works. Faith unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection, so that his punishment counts for our punishment and his righteousness counts for our righteousness.

We read it already, but it is worth a second time:

...Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. (Galatians 2:16, NASB)

And Paul also tells us in Romans 4:16 as to why justification is by faith alone and not works: For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace,... (Romans 4:16, NASB)

So far from being the currency by which we purchase salvation from God, faith is uniquely suited to grace because it is nothing more than the outstretched arm and the empty hand that says, "I have nothing! I am bankrupt of any spiritual resources or ability! Lord, I receive your gift of salvation in Christ."

Isaiah 53 - The Suffering Servant

1Who has believed our report?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,

And like a root out of dry ground;

He has no *stately* form or majesty

That we would look at Him,

Nor an appearance that we would take pleasure in Him.

3He was despised and abandoned by men,

A man of great pain and familiar with sickness;

And like one from whom *people* hide their faces,

He was despised, and we had no regard for Him.

4However, *it was* our sicknesses *that* He Himself bore,

And our pains *that* He carried;

Yet we ourselves assumed that He had been afflicted,

Struck down by God, and humiliated.

5But He was pierced for our offenses,

He was crushed for our wrongdoings;

The punishment for our well-being *was laid* upon Him,

And by His wounds we are healed.

6All of us, like sheep, have gone astray,

Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the wrongdoing of us all
To fall on Him.

7He was oppressed and afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.

8By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off from the land of the living
For the wrongdoing of my people, to whom the blow was due?

9And His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

10But the LORD desired
To crush Him, causing *Him* grief;
If He renders Himself *as* a guilt offering,
He will see *His* offspring,
He will prolong *His* days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.

11As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see *it and* be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
For He will bear their wrongdoings.

12Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the plunder with the strong,
Because He poured out His life unto death,
And was counted with wrongdoers;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the wrongdoers.