

The Elements of Justification

In the beginning of the Puritan era, Christians were seeking to continue to define and purify their doctrine and drew up several *catechisms* and various *confessions* of faith in order to define the parameters of their faith. In 1646 the Church of England, by the minds and hands of the Westminster Assembly, drew up their own confession which was called the **Westminster Confession of Faith**. From this confession, both Baptist and Congregation Churches also drew up confessions which were actually just modified arrangements of the Westminster. Later the Westminster was officially adopted by the Presbyterians and the Church of Scotland and so most Protestant branches of Christianity had roots which sprung from this comprehensive confession of faith. At this time, Christians were also busy writing catechisms to have standards for teaching the faith to future generations. From these efforts many great catechisms were developed including one that the Westminster Assembly drew up which is called the Westminster Larger and Shorter catechisms. These documents were very helpful in defining many of the different aspects of biblical doctrine. Now concerning the doctrine of Justification, the Westminster catechism asks in question number 32....

Q. What is Justification.

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, (Rom 3:24, Eph 1:7) and accepts us as righteous in His sight (2 Cor 5:21) only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, (Rom 5:19) and received by faith alone. (Gal 2:16, Phil 3:9)

Now this statement gets right to the heart of what Justification in the biblical sense really is. It is broken down into four parts as follows....

- **Justification is an act of God's free grace** - God's work, given freely(at no cost to the beneficiary, flowing from the gracious character of God)
- **wherein he pardons all our sins** – It is a legal(forensic) term dealing with Law and includes pardon from sin, God is pictured as Judge
- **and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us** – Righteousness is also a legal(forensic) matter which comes by imputation
- **and received by faith alone** – Faith is seen as the means of reception or appropriation

This description of Justification speaks to us clearly about the basic *elements* of Justification. They tell us of the nature of Justification, of what it is like and how it functions in God's plan of Redemption. With these elements in mind, let us look a little closer and understand how these are described in the Bible.

Justification is an act of God's free grace – The Scripture clearly ascribes justification as being an act of God.

Romans 8:33 - 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? **God is the one who justifies**; NASB

Galatians 3:8 - 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that **God would justify the Gentiles by faith**, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." NASB

As the Scripture describes this act, it also clearly describes it as flowing from God's gracious character and identifies it as a free gift (at no cost) given to the beneficiary. Justification in the Bible is always free and always associated with God's grace.

Romans 3:24-26 - 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, that **He might be just and the justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus. NASB

Romans 5:16-17 - 16 And **the gift** is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand **the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification**. 17 For if by the transgression of the one,

death reigned through the one, much more those who receive **the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness** will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. NASB

Titus 3:5-7 - 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, **but according to His mercy**, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 **that being justified by His grace** we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. NASB

wherein he pardons all our sins – Justification consists first in God pardoning our sins. It is a legal (forensic) term dealing with Law and God is pictured as the Judge. One of God's attributes is Justice as He is seen as holy and just, ruling over the world with justice! Throughout the Scripture God is seen as the only Lawgiver and Judge.

Genesis 18:25 - 25 "Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! **Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"** NASB

Isaiah 33:20 - 2 For **the Lord is our judge, The Lord is our lawgiver**, The Lord is our king; He will save us NASB

James 4:12 - 12 **There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One** who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor? NASB

In this sense, our sins are brought ultimately and finally to the authority of the Judge of all the earth to be dealt with in finality. Justification concerning our sins before God then is a legal or forensic proceeding in God's tribunal. It is here where we receive a **pardon from God** which means a release from the *penalty* of our offenses, a free remission of the penalty or consequences of sin. We are therefore set free from the bondage or power of sin, because the consequences of the Law have been foregone by the Lawgiver and Judge.

1 Corinthians 15:56-57 - 56 The sting of death is sin, and **the power of sin is the law**; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. NASB

Romans 8:1-2 - 1 There is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For **the law of the Spirit of life** in Christ Jesus has set you free from **the law of sin and of death**. NASB

This does not mean we are not guilty, but that the consequences of our guilt have been foregone or remitted, paid in full by our Redeemer. This is called **expiation**. Our guilt then can remain no longer, it is removed by way of its penalties and consequences being pardoned by the Judge. This pardon of justification is a *declarative act* on the part of God. It is a *final* pronouncement of the commuting of the sentence of death.

John 8:36 - 36 "If therefore the Son shall make you free, **you shall be free indeed**. NASB

and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us – Apart from the removal of the consequences and subsequently our guilt, we are also credited with a positive righteousness in this Justification. We are said to now possess the righteousness of God. This righteousness means, **right-standing** with God or acceptable in His sight. Because the penalties of sin have been satisfied by Christ's payment at Calvary, we are free from any accusation or blemish of any kind.

Colossians 1:21-22 - 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to **present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-**

Now this righteousness is the righteousness that God both *requires* and *provides* in Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:30-31 - 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, **who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption**, 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." NASB

Romans 5:19 - 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so **through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous**. NASB

2 Corinthians 5:21 - 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, **that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**. NASB

Because of Christ's obedience and fulfillment of the Law, we are now *reckoned* or counted as righteous in God's sight. Our righteousness is "*in Him*" (2 Cor 5:21) and "*through Him*" (Rom 5:19). Christ is counted as our Righteousness (1 Cor 1:30). This righteousness that we possess before God then, is not our own inherent righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ Himself.

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Philippians 3:9-10 - 9 and may be found **in Him, not having a righteousness of my own** derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in **Christ, the righteousness which comes from God** on the basis of faith, NASB

and received by faith alone – This righteousness then becomes ours by simply trusting in or looking to Christ for it. This believing or trusting is what the Bible calls faith. It is through this faith that this righteousness is imputed or reckoned to us.

Romans 4:5 - 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, **his faith is reckoned as righteousness**, NASB

Romans 3:21-24 - 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; NASB

This very simple concept is portrayed very clearly in Scripture and provides for us, through the merits of Christ, both righteousness (right-standing with God) and justification (declared righteous in His sight).

Romans 10:4 - 4 For Christ is the end of the law **for righteousness to everyone who believes**. NASB

Romans 3:28 - 28 For we maintain that **a man is justified by faith** apart from works of the Law. NASB

Justification in the Confessions

For a bit more insight, consider the profound wording of some statements of Justification from both the **Westminster** and the **1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith**. Both the Westminster and 1689 Baptist Confession read identically. These confessions provide a rich learning experience and are excellent fodder for family Bible study and discussion;

CHAP. XI. Of Justification.

1. 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; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone, not by imputing faith it self, 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.

2. 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.

3. Christ by his obedience, and death, did fully discharge the debt of all; and did by the sacrifice of himself, in the blood of his cross, undergoing in their stead, the penalty due unto them: make a proper, real and full satisfaction to Gods justice in their behalf: yet inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his Obedience and Satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for any thing in them; their Justification is only of Free Grace, that both the exact justice and rich Grace of God, might be glorified in the Justification of sinners.