

Session 5 - Justification

Justify, justification and justified are all words you will come across as you read the Bible. We are probably most accustomed to using the words to mean the process of arguing that a particular action was correct and giving the reasons for it, often if we have been challenged about it. This meaning is found in the Bible, mostly but not exclusively in the Old Testament. Within Christian doctrine justification means to be acquitted or declared righteous in God's sight.

The few examples in the New Testament of the first usage include the teacher of the Law trying to justify himself by pushing Jesus further with his questioning (Luke10:29) and Jesus challenging the Pharisees over their misapplications of the Law in Luke16:15.

The question of a man being righteous before God is raised very early on in the Old Testament. Bildad asks, in a book set in the times of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob),

“How can a man be justified with God?” Job25:4 (KJV)

It is not until the New testament that we get a clear answer to Job's question. Paul's teaching of justification is quite extensive, but James also wrote on the subject. I will quote from both but especially from Paul who gives the most detailed argument on the subject in Romans ch 3-6. It might be helpful to read through these chapters first. Within this session, however, I will start with Jesus' teaching and specifically with his parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke18:9-14. Here Jesus contrasts those who are confident of their own righteousness with those who know they are unrighteous sinners. The Pharisee proclaims before that he is thankful for his righteousness as evidenced by his following of the Law. The tax-collector has no illusion of righteousness. He repents before God. Jesus says of the tax-collector,

***“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.”
Luke18:14***

So we have here three basic requirements for being justified before God; recognition of sin, repentance, reliance on God's mercy. Any of these would lead us to be humble before God, let alone all three. The Bible teaches clearly and consistently that we are sinners by nature, that we sin repeatedly and that we bear the guilt for our sins.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.”

1Jn1:8-10

This is an awful position for us to be in, but the Bible also teaches that it was to cleanse us from sin that Jesus died, shedding his blood for our cleansing,

“...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”
1Jn1:7

John writes that,

“He (Jesus) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”
1Jn2:2

I dealt in the session on salvation with the universality that this verse could imply, so I am not going to deal with it again here. Instead I want to move straight to the connected question as to how we obtain justification through the blood of Jesus. It might be sufficient to simply quote Paul,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast.”
Eph2:8

But then we are just pitting one verse against another and this is not the right way to understand the Bible. So we will look at Paul's main teaching on justification in Romans chapters 1-8. At the beginning of Romans, Paul is anxious to clarify that he has been appointed by God's grace as an apostle to bring the gospel to Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and non-Greeks, in other words to all people. He sets out the position of all people, whether they have the Law (of Moses) or not, that they are under judgement and in danger of perishing.

“All who sin apart from the law, will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.” Rom2:12

Later in the letter, Paul quotes, amongst other verses, two Psalms (14 & 53), to demonstrate the power that sin holds over all men.

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Rom3:10-12

Paul goes on to say that the law does not declare anyone righteous, rather it brings our sins before us. This would be a miserable state, but the gospel brings hope to all people.

“But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith

in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” Rom3:21-26

It is clear that Paul is teaching that justification is God's prerogative. He gives it by grace through faith to all who believe in Jesus. This is a vitally important passage in the understanding of justification (being declared righteous before God). The Reformers were clear about the fundamental importance of this doctrine. Luther wrote of this in the Smalcald Articles, an early summary of Lutheran principles, and Calvin in his Institutes

“The first and chief article is this: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans3:24-25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John1:29), and God has laid on him, the iniquity of us all (Isaiah53:6). All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace (Eph2:8,9), through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans3:23-28). This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law or merit. Therefore it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us... Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls (Mark13:31)”
Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles (First Article)

“The doctrine of Justification is now to be fully discussed, and discussed under the conviction, that as it is the principal ground on which religion must be supported, so it requires greater care and attention. For unless you understand first of all what your position is before God, and what the judgement he passes upon you, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid, or on which piety towards God can be reared.” John Calvin; Institutes 3.1

We cannot leave this study without considering the place of works and the apparent contradiction between the letter of James and the teaching found in Paul's letters. I'm going to begin with Paul. Early on in his ministry Paul was prompted by the Holy Spirit to write to the Galatian church to correct false teaching there. Essentially there were some who were teaching, in disregard of the declaration of the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts), that it was necessary to keep the law in order to be justified. Paul is very straightforward in opposition to this false teaching.

“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So, we too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the

***works of the law, because by the works of the law no-one will be justified.”
Gal2:15-17***

He is direct in his condemnation of this false teaching.

“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” Gal5:4

Now recently some in the “New Perspectives on Paul” grouping have suggested that Paul had in mind here only the works of the law, a phrase he does frequently use, such as circumcision and other rituals. In doing this they leave the door open to the suggestion that works somehow play a part in justification. Now, while it may be true to suggest that it is only in this limited sense that Paul is teaching against the then current heresy, the statements about justification by faith stand on their own against any suggestion that there is some way of earning our justification, of working our way to heaven.

Romans3:21-26 is a key passage and was quoted earlier. In chapter 4 Paul goes on to show that Abraham was credited with righteousness because he believed God. He reminds us that we are Abraham's offspring by faith and heirs of God's promise to him.

“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all” Rom4:16

In chapter 5 Paul begins by saying we ***“have been justified by faith” (Rom5:1)***, that ***“we have now been justified by his blood” (Rom5:9)*** and that we ***“were reconciled to him through the death of his Son”(Rom5:10)***. All of this, Paul asserts was done for us while we were God's enemies and it must therefore follow that if this was done by the death of Jesus, it must be solely by that death and not by any works subsequently completed.

Romans 8 begins with the triumphant proclamation that we are not condemned because Jesus has freed us from the law, that he became a sin offering so that we should be righteous. We are free from law and condemnation, but Paul is clear that we are under an obligation to live by the Spirit, not an obligation to the law. This, it seems to me, is where works come in. We are justified by faith. We receive the Holy Spirit and we live in him. This means we live a life as children of God, which will result in the growth of the fruits of the Spirit in our lives and these fruits will overflow into good works. That is why James is able to ask,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?” Jas2:14

Faith which is genuine will result in a changed life and an attitude of love to others which means we will care for them in practical ways. So faith is active in shaping our actions.

“... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” Jas2:14

Notice though that here also the action flows from the faith. Works do not accompany faith as a requirement for justification. Works are a natural outflow from the faith by which we are justified. Works are the evidence of our faith. So James challenges us

***“Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my works.”
Jas2:18***

This is James' way of saying the same as Paul when he writes about serving one another humbly in love, or conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Jesus expects us to be his disciples, to follow him and imitate his love for others.