



Grasping the Biblical Reality of Justification

The following excerpts are taken from Guy Waters book:
A Christian's Pocket Guide to Being Made Right With God
(adapted slightly by Dan Smythe for the Romans NISS study)

Let's give some thought to what the word 'justification' (which literally means: 'to be *declared* righteous') is trying to say. Here are the things we must keep in mind:

- There is a holy and just God.
- There is our sin.
- There is our accountability to God for our sin.
- There is a place where sinners go for punishment and never leave. In that word are dark and sober realities.

But there is something else in the word 'justification,' namely the fact that:

- There is the love of God the Father for sinners—as rich and as deep as it is incomprehensible.
- There is the Son of God stooping an infinite distance to come into this world—one who was born to die.
- There is the self-giving of Jesus Christ at the cross.
- There is the Spirit of Christ, uniting the sinner to the Savior, and clothing the sinner in 'righteousness divine.' Out of the darkness and shadows emerge beams of light.

Scripture reveals to us that justification is God's 'solution' to our 'problem' of sin and His holy wrath that in His righteousness comes against it. The *problem* that occasions justification is sin and God's resultant wrath.

Many people today, even people in the church, look at most human beings as basically good people who sometimes do bad things. Some of us, they say, do more bad things than others. Those of us whose good works outnumber or outweigh our bad works will enjoy the favor of the Deity. Those of us whose bad works outweigh our good works will suffer the displeasure of the Deity.

Of course, most people believe that they are good. They believe that their track record of performance is good enough to receive the blessing of God. To be sure, there are some who will fall short. Those who will meet the divine displeasure, however, are notoriously wicked criminals and tyrants—the kind of people we read about in the newspapers and see on the evening news.

This is not to say that people who have this outlook on humanity can have no sense of divine mercy. They may admit that the Deity is favorably inclined to receive and to accept individuals who, though not perfect, are basically good. They may presume that the Deity graciously overlooks their transgressions and failings. But the prevailing basis of the Deity's acceptance of them is the life lived.

In theological terms, what we have just described is a doctrine of justification by works. This doctrine says that a person is accepted before God on the basis of his performance. God rewards that person with life and blessing because that person's life merits that reward. It is as though Adam had never fallen, and sin had never entered the world through Adam. The prevalence of this doctrine shows how deeply engrained the principle 'do this and you will live' (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12) is upon the hearts of Adam's descendants.

The Bible's testimony, however, is that a sinner's track record can never merit the favor of a holy God. On the contrary, that track record can only bring him under the condemnation of God. The Bible explains how this is so in two ways. First, it gives us an *empirical* assessment of the human condition. It surveys the human landscape and gives us God's assessment of human behaviors, words, thoughts, choices, and desires. Second, it gives us what we might call an *historical* account of the human condition. The Bible answers the questions, 'Why are we the way that we are? Why is it that people are so attached to sin?'

The Empirical Assessment

One of the most extensive surveys of human sinfulness is in the opening chapters of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans. Paul summarizes his survey at Romans 3:9–11, 'What then? Are we Jews any better off [than the Gentiles, or non-Jews]? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."'

Paul comes to this conclusion by focusing on the Gentiles, on the one hand, and on the Jews, on the other. Paul insists that all people, even the Gentiles, know God through the world that God made (Rom. 1:20–21). Furthermore, their consciences bear witness to the righteous law of God (Rom. 2:14–15). God has given all people an innate sense of right and wrong. They are aware that wrongdoers 'deserve to die' (Rom. 1:32).

One might think that people who know the difference between right and wrong and who know the consequences for wrongdoing would live the way that God wants them to live. After all, many in our world today tell us that education is the solution to society's problems.

Paul's statements are a splash of cold water in the face. He calls people 'haters of God' (Rom. 1:30). Hating God, they hate one another (Rom. 1:29–31). What's more, they are 'inventors of evil' (Rom. 1:30). Never satisfied, always bored, they are in a frenzied race to find newer and newer ways to sin. Rather than making them better, the knowledge of God leaves sinners worse off than if they had never known God in the first place.

What about the Jews? Perhaps they are better off than the Gentiles. After all, they have received the Torah, the law of Moses. They have received the sign of God's covenant, circumcision. Surely they must be in a better position than the Gentiles.

Paul's assessment of the Jews is sobering. Simply having the law or receiving circumcision cannot put a person into God's favor. It is not that Paul discounts the law and circumcision (Rom. 3:1). They are valuable, but they cannot deliver a sinner from the righteous judgment of God. The Jew who sins will be held accountable for his sins (Rom. 2:1–10). If he perfectly and continually observed all the requirements of the law, then God could accept him on that basis (Rom. 2:13). The problem, of course, is that he does not keep the law perfectly. Simply 'hearing the law' will be of no value to bring him into God's favor. 'Doing the law' is what counts.

Is Paul singling out Jews for bad treatment? Is this anti-Semitism? No. Paul, after all, is a Jew himself. He loves his people greatly (see Rom. 9:1–3). He is addressing a problem that uniquely arises within God’s people. We could put Paul’s point in contemporary terms. Let us say a person is baptized, faithfully attends church services, and daily reads the Bible. Paul is saying that these things cannot bring that person into God’s favor. They can’t bring him into God’s favor because God requires a perfect record to enter into His favor (Rom. 2:13, 26–27), and no member of God’s people can produce that perfect record.

God shows no favoritism, Paul says. He will not give the Jews special treatment simply because they are His chosen people. God is just. He has one standard for every human being, Jew or Gentile. In fact, if a Gentile were ever to keep the law perfectly, he would rise up to condemn the Jew (Rom. 2:25–29)!

So where does this put us? Paul tells us that just as perfectly keeping the law would bring life, sin brings death (Rom. 6:23). What does the law do for sinners? It cannot bring life. Instead, the law makes us aware of our sins (Rom. 3:20).

The Historical Explanation

Why are we this way? Why is it that ‘none is righteous, no, not one’ (Rom. 3:10)? Were people always this way?

The Scripture gives us the answer to these questions. We are the way that we are because of Adam. We are each guilty of Adam’s first sin, and we are therefore each born corrupt. The apostle Paul states this truth most succinctly at 1 Corinthians 15:22, (‘in Adam all die’) but develops it most thoroughly at Romans 5:12–21. In this passage, Paul declares, ‘Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...’ (Rom. 5:12). He traces the origin of sin in all people, excepting Jesus, to the ‘one sin’ of the ‘one man.’

Paul is thinking about the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1–7). In the verses following Romans 5:12, Paul wants to be sure that we do not misunderstand what he is saying. When Paul says ‘all sinned’ (5:12), he is not saying that we are sinners because we have followed in Adam’s footsteps by choosing to sin also. People are not born good and then led astray because they are exposed to countless bad examples. This is why Paul says that ‘death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam’ (5:14).

So we see that sin and death did not enter the world because people imitate Adam’s bad example. Yet, we have still not answered the question of where sin and death originate. Paul tells us that Adam’s descendants, excepting Jesus, were held responsible for Adam’s sin. The guilt of Adam’s sin was transferred or ‘imputed’ to Adam’s posterity. This is what Paul says at Romans 5:18, ‘One trespass led to condemnation for all men,’ and at Romans 5:19, ‘For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made [appointed by his representation] sinners.’

Paul presses this point throughout this passage. From the one man, Adam, and his one sin has come ‘death’ (5:15, 17) and ‘condemnation’ (5:16, 18). We are dead and condemned because Adam’s descendants were made [appointed by his representation] sinners (5:19). Death and condemnation did not come, Paul argues here, because of our individual wrongdoing. In fact, they came independently of our activities. They came because of the sin of Adam.

This raises the question, 'Why is Adam's sin our sin? Is it fair that God should punish me for something that someone else did?' This is an important question. God's integrity is at stake.

The answer to the question of fairness is, 'yes, it is fair for God to transfer the consequences of Adam's sin to you and to me.' Why? To answer that question, we need to see that the Scripture teaches that God established a union between Adam and his descendants, excepting Jesus. This is something different than the biological union that Adam has with every human being. This union is what we might call a *representative* union. God set Adam apart to represent his descendants. He stands in for them in such a way that his actions become their actions. Let us suppose that Adam had obeyed God in the Garden of Eden. God would have counted that obedience to be our obedience. From birth, we would have lived in God's favor. We would never have known sin. But Adam didn't obey. Adam sinned. That is why God counted Adam's sin to be our sin.

So why was it fair for God to count Adam's sin to be our sin? God is our Sovereign Maker and we are His creatures. He is free to do with us as He pleases. He was just in establishing this representative union between Adam and his descendants, excepting Jesus. And if God was just in establishing this relationship, He was certainly just in transferring Adam's action to those in relationship with Adam—people like you and me.

You may have noticed something in our discussion. We have said that the union between Adam and his descendants, excluded Jesus. There is one descendant of Adam who is not 'in Adam'—Jesus. As a result, the consequences of Adam's sin were not transferred to Jesus. Jesus, to be sure, is a true and complete human being. He is, according to His humanity, descended from Adam through Mary, His mother. But because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by a human father, Jesus was not 'in Adam.' This is why the sin of Adam was not imputed to Jesus.

So Jesus was and is truly and fully human. Why is it that He was not 'in Adam'? It is because He is the 'Second Adam' or 'the Last Adam' (see 1 Cor. 15:47, 45). Because He is the Second Adam, He is uniquely qualified to save sinful sons of Adam. Because He is not 'in Adam,' He does not need the salvation for Himself that you and I need. Because He is a representative person, His work can deliver those whom He represents. He can save sinners from their sin!

We are now prepared to answer the question—why is humanity universally depraved? Why is it that we are *by nature* sinners? The answer is that from the moment of our conception, we are guilty of Adam's first sin. We are condemned independently of our own activity. It is because of the guilt of this one sin that we are sinners from conception. Just as Adam was punished for his first sin with a sinful nature, God justly punishes us for the guilt of Adam's sin by creating us with a depraved nature.

The tragedy of our condition is that we are unable to change ourselves. We are 'dead in trespasses and sins' (Eph. 2:1). Spiritually speaking, there is no life or health in us. We have as much ability to move towards God as a corpse has strength to arise from the grave.

If there is any hope for salvation, it must come entirely from outside of us. It must come solely by the initiative of God. The good news of the gospel is that God, in His sovereign mercy, has purposed to save sinners through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Salvation answers the problem of sin which brought forth the even greater problem of God's holy wrath. Now that we better understand our problem, we can better understand salvation. One important aspect of salvation is justification.

Justification is an 'act.' It is a courtroom verdict. We are the defendants, and charges have been filed against us. The judge passes his verdict. There are only two verdicts available to the judge. One of these verdicts is 'condemned,' and the other is 'justified.' If we are 'condemned,' then the judge has pronounced us 'guilty.' If we are 'justified,' then the judge has pronounced us 'righteous.'

God's courtroom is both like and unlike human courtrooms. In both God's courtroom and a human courtroom, the defendant may be found 'guilty.' But whereas in a human courtroom, the defendant may be found 'innocent' (free from blame), in God's courtroom, the defendant may be found *positively* 'righteous.'

We see these two mutually exclusive verdicts ('condemned' / 'justified') paired at Romans 8:33–34, 'Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? ...' Romans 5:16 shows us the same thing, 'For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.'

It is important to stress that by 'justification' the Scripture means a verdict that God *declares* concerning us. Justification is *not a change* that God makes *in* us. In fact, it is not even the combination of a verdict and an inward change. Justification is strictly a legal *declaration*.

Justification is an 'act,' a *verdict* that is declared. What is God declaring about the justified person? He is declaring two things. First, all our sins are pardoned. Even though we are guilty of sin, God forgives us. Second, He declares that we are now to be treated as righteous persons forevermore. Let us look at each of these two parts of justification. If we look carefully, we will see that each part corresponds to a specific aspect of our problem as sinners.

Our first problem is that we have violated the law of God and thus brought His holy wrath against us. As transgressors we are subject to the penalty of the law. One word that the Bible uses to describe the law's penalty is 'curse.' As sinners we stand under the curse of the law, 'For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them"' (Gal. 3:10 quoting Deut. 27:26). Christ, however, has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). In other words, on the cross, Christ took His people's curse upon Himself. He answered all that God's justice demanded of them.

God therefore does not count the sins of God's people against them, and He justly pardons or forgives all their sins. This is why David says, '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 quoting Ps. 32:1–2).

The beauty of justification is that believers do not receive the pardon of only *some* of their sins. Rather, God has 'forgiven us *all* our trespasses' because of what His Son did on the cross (Col. 2:13). This is why believers have assurance that 'if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins ...' (1 John 1:9).

Notice how Scripture emphasizes God's justice in the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 3:21–26). If God were to excuse our sins without answering the demands of justice on those sins, God would Himself commit an injustice of cosmic proportions. The Bible emphasizes that the forgiveness of sins is a just act because Christ paid for those sins on the cross. In fact, since Christ has paid for the believer's sins, it would now be *unjust* were God to refuse to pardon them.

There is a second problem that we have. We have failed to obey the whole law. The law says, 'Do this and you will live' (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5). Because we fail to keep the whole law, we are unable to enter into 'life.' To receive pardon is an unspeakable mercy. Pardon, however, is *insufficient* to bring a person into divine favor. Pardon renders an objectionable person non-objectionable, but it does nothing to *commend* this person to God.

Let us illustrate by a mathematical analogy. Pardon removes a person from the negative column and places him at 'zero.' Pardon, however, does not thereby render a person acceptable. It does not transfer him into the positive column.

The glory of justification is that the sinner is declared '*righteous.*' In Christ, the justified sinner becomes the 'righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). Justification means that the 'righteousness of God' becomes the sinner's (Rom. 3:20ff.). In Christ we 'receive... the free gift of righteousness' (Rom. 5:17). Consequently, the sinner in justification is declared righteous. This is why the apostle Paul pauses, in a discussion about justification, to say 'the righteous shall live by faith' (Gal. 3:11 quoting Hab. 2:4b).

How is it that the sinner can be accepted and accounted righteous before a holy God? We have already seen the Scripture's teaching that the sins of the sinner are imputed to Christ, who answered all the demands of divine justice, fully satisfying divine justice on behalf of His people. That satisfaction is transferred or imputed to the believer. This satisfaction is part of the believer's righteousness in justification.

The Scripture also teaches that the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ is transferred or imputed to the sinner for his justification. Paul writes in Romans, 'by the one Man's obedience the many will be made [appointed by His representation] righteous' (5:19). Justification is not pardon only, as precious as the pardon of sins is to the believer. Justification is more. It is the declaration that a sinner is now 'righteous' because both the obedience as well as the satisfaction of Christ have become his.

Before we consider the 'instrument' of justification, let us ask a question that sometimes arises at this point in the discussion. Why is it that the work of Christ can come into the possession of the believer? Is it right for God to pardon the sins of the justified believer and to declare him righteous because of what someone else has done for him?

The reason that it is right for God to impute the righteousness of Jesus Christ to sinners is precisely the same reason why it was right for God to impute the first sin of Adam to his posterity. That reason is *the union* that exists between the First Adam and those whom *he* represents; and between the Second Adam and those whom *He* represents. In other words, the union between Christ and His people means that God justly imputes their sins *to Him* and His righteousness *to them*.

Two passages will help us to see this truth more clearly. The first passage is 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'. Whom does Paul have in mind in this passage? He is thinking of two parties, Christ (5:20) and believers.

Paul tells us that Christ 'knew no sin.' He is affirming the sinlessness of Jesus Christ. Christ committed no sins and did not have a sinful nature. Although Paul does not say it, he assumes that we are sinners. We are sinners by nature as well as by the things that we think, say, and do.

Paul says something that might startle us. God ‘made [Jesus] to be sin.’ What does the apostle mean? He cannot mean that Jesus *became sinful* in the sense that He acquired a personal experience with sin. After all, Paul says, He ‘knew no sin.’

The clue is found in the phrase ‘for our sake.’ He was ‘made to be sin’ because our sins were laid upon Him or *reckoned* to Him. In other words, our sins were transferred to the one who is personally righteous, so that He is justly reckoned to be sin. Jesus does not, however, thereby personally become a sinner. He is a sin-bearer. It is as a sin-bearer that He is reckoned to be ‘sin.’ Our sins were imputed to Him.

Paul says more in 2 Corinthians 5:21: ‘so that in [Christ] we might become [appointed by His representation] the righteousness of God.’ Believers become the ‘righteousness of God.’ In what sense does Paul say that we do this? We become the righteousness of God in precisely the same way that God made Christ to be sin. We become the righteousness of God by transfer or imputation. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer even as his sins are imputed to the Savior. Just as Jesus did not become sinful when He was ‘made to be sin,’ so also we do not become the righteousness of Christ’ because of a *change* that God makes *in us*. To use technical language for a moment, our righteousness in justification is not infused or inwrought. Rather, our righteousness in justification is imputed to us in precisely the same fashion that our sins were imputed to Jesus Christ. This is why this passage has been rightly called the ‘Great Exchange’—our sins are exchanged for Christ’s righteousness. Christ bears our sins and gives us His righteousness.

Paul not only tells us *that* this exchange happens, but he also tells us *how* it happens. He tells us how it happens when he uses the words ‘in Him.’ It is because the sinner is ‘in Christ,’ *in union with* Jesus Christ, that his sins are imputed to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the sinner. Union is the foundation for imputation. It is precisely because the believer is in union with Christ that his sins are imputed to Christ and that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to him.

One other passage where the Scripture helps us to see that the righteousness of Christ is transferred to those in union with Jesus Christ is Romans 5:12–21. Paul tells us that Christ’s righteousness is transferred to those whom He represents in precisely the same way that Adam’s sin was transferred to those whom he represents. Just as God condemned those in Adam because the sin of Adam was transferred or imputed to them, God justifies those in Christ because the work of Jesus Christ is transferred or imputed to them (see especially Rom. 5:16, 18–19). The transfer of the actions of each representative head takes place in the context of the union that exists between the representative and the represented.

The Instrument of Justification

Let us return to our definition of justification. We have seen that justification belongs in the courtroom. Justification is a verdict pronounced by the Divine Judge. The verdict concerns sinners who already stand justly condemned for their sins which have elicited God’s holy wrath. In this verdict, God declares that all of their sins are pardoned. He also declares that they are righteous persons. The reason that God makes this verdict is that the righteousness of Jesus Christ belongs to them. God has transferred the righteousness of His Son to those persons whom His Son represents.

How do we come to lay hold of the righteousness of Jesus Christ? Faith is the way we receive the righteousness of Christ for justification. The Bible teaches that we are justified 'through faith.' We are not justified 'because of faith' or 'on account of faith' (see Rom. 3:28, 9:30; Gal. 2:16). Let us think about why this is so. What would it mean if a person were justified 'because of faith' or 'on account of faith'? It could mean that God transfers the righteousness of Jesus in response to our faith. That would turn Christ's righteousness into God's reward for our faith. Or it could mean that our faith in Christ is the reason why God justifies us. That would mean that we have contributed something towards our justification. But the Scripture says that justification is a 'free gift' and comes by the 'grace of God' (Rom. 5:15). We could never be justified *because* of our faith. Instead we are justified 'by faith' or 'through faith.' Faith is the 'instrument' of justification.

What does the Bible mean when it says that we are not justified 'by works' (Gal. 2:16, Rom. 3:28)? It means that nothing that we have done, are doing, or will do contributes to the basis of God's verdict of: 'justified.' God does not look on our activity when He justifies us. Instead, He looks only to the perfect work of Jesus. He does not justify us because of what we do. He justifies us because of what Christ did.

We might put it this way: justification is very much by works... not our works, but the work of Christ! Because justification is based upon the works of Christ alone, our own works are completely excluded from the basis of our justification.

What does faith do in justification? Faith in justification receives. Faith comes empty-handed and receives what God has done in Christ. It is the outstretched hand of the beggar receiving the morsel or coin freely given to him.

Could we say that we have at least contributed faith to *the basis* of our justification? Is faith a way of sneaking our works in through the back door of justification? No. By definition, faith adds nothing to what Christ has done for His people in justification. When God justifies us, He only looks at what Christ has done. Faith does not supplement what Christ has done for us. Faith, *which is itself the gift of God* to our need (Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8), simply receives what Christ has done for us.