

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Systematic Theology of

Justification

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The Meaning of Justification

1. Justification is judicial, not experiential.

Justification means to declare righteous, not to make righteous (in the sense of transforming one's character to be righteous). It is a metaphor from the law court, where a judge pronounces someone as either guilty or not guilty. Paul contrasts condemning (pronouncing guilty) and justifying (pronouncing not guilty but righteous) in [Romans 8:33–34](#): “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?” (cf. [Rom. 5:18; 8:1](#)). God “justifies the ungodly” ([Rom. 4:5](#)) in that he legally declares ungodly people to be innocent and righteous—not in that he transforms ungodly people into godly people.¹

¹ Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 4, Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 204–9.

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2. *Justification includes forgiveness* ([Rom. 4:6–8](#)).

When God justifies believing sinners, he forgives those sinners' "lawless deeds" and covers their sins and no longer will count their sins against them.

3. *Justification includes imputation* ([Rom. 4:1–8](#); [5:15–19](#)).

Justification is a blessing because God imputes Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner. God does not merely cancel a sinner's guilt and declare that the sinner is innocent (neutral). God imputes Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner's account and declares that the sinner is righteous (positive).² That is why "the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works" experiences a "blessing" ([Rom. 4:6](#); cf. [Rom. 4:7–9](#)): "As by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made [i.e., have the status of] righteous" ([Rom. 5:19](#)).

4. *Justification is vertical, not horizontal* ([Rom. 1:17](#); [3:21–26](#); [9:30–10:13](#); et al).

Contrary to the New Perspective on Paul, justification is fundamentally about how sinful humans relate to the righteous God, not to other humans. It is primarily about soteriology, not ecclesiology.³

The Need for Justification

5. *Justification is necessary because all humans without exception are sinners under God's condemning wrath* ([Rom. 1:18–3:20](#)).

"None is righteous, no, not one" ([Rom. 3:10](#)). No one can stand before God as righteous on his or her own merits.

² Many Protestant theologians contrast forgiveness with the imputation of Christ's righteousness and then argue that forgiveness alone does not solve the plight of sinners (e.g., Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 725–26). That is not wrong, but Vickers explains, "It is biblically sound to think of forgiveness itself as a positive standing before God. The sacrificial texts in the Pentateuch, for instance, consistently refer to a person being forgiven as a result of sacrifices offered. . . . The Old Testament does not have a sense of 'mere' forgiveness, but often speaks exclusively in terms of forgiveness to describe what people need from God, desire from God, and what God promises to give or warns that he will withhold. Forgiveness is presented as that which is needed for a restored relationship with God." Vickers qualifies, "There is a sense . . . in which we can speak legitimately of needing a 'positive standing,' and mean by that, something besides forgiveness when speaking of Christ's fulfilling the role of second Adam." *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness*, 108, 200.

³ Cf. Andrew Michael Hassler, "Justification and the Individual in the Wake of the New Perspective on Paul" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

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Justification ultimately glorifies God. A goal of justification is to enable guilty sinners to stand before the righteous God as righteous.

The Basis of Justification

6. Justification is based on God's imputing Christ's righteousness to believing sinners ([Rom. 4:1–8; 5:15–19](#))—which is possible because of propitiation ([Rom. 3:25–26](#)).

(On forgiveness and imputation, see statements 2–3 above.) How can God be a just judge (i.e., a judge who is morally right and fair) if he declares that guilty people are not only innocent but righteous? Because justification depends on propitiation—that is, Jesus's sacrificial death propitiates God the Father. Jesus satisfies God's righteous wrath against us and turns it into favor. We are justified by Jesus's blood—that is, based on his sacrificial, substitutionary death ([Rom. 5:9](#)). The righteous God *righteously* righteouses the unrighteous. Justification vindicates God in justifying the ungodly because of propitiation.

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7. Justification is based on God's imputing Christ's righteousness to believing sinners ([Rom. 4:1–8; 5:15–19](#))—which is possible because God raised Christ from the dead ([Rom. 4:24–25](#)).

God raised Christ from the dead to publicly vindicate him and thus take care of or confirm our justification. Charles Hodge infers from [Romans 4:24–25](#) (and [1 Cor. 15:17](#)), “The resurrection of Christ was necessary for our justification, inasmuch as it was the formal acceptance of his sufferings, as the expiation for our sins.”⁴ John Murray similarly infers, “The resurrection of Jesus is viewed as that which lays the basis for this justification.”⁵

8. Justification is based on God's imputing Christ's righteousness to believing sinners ([Rom. 4:1–8; 5:15–19](#))—which is possible because of union with Christ ([Rom. 3:24; 5:12–21; 8:1](#)).

⁴ Hodge, *Romans*, 103.

⁵ Murray, *Romans*, 1:55–56.

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“Union with Christ,” Marcus Johnson observes, “provides the basis for our justification.”⁶ This is related to the previous statements about propitiation and resurrection. Christ’s propitiation and resurrection benefit believing sinners because they are united to Christ. Brian Vickers ends his careful study of imputation by agreeing with J. Gresham Machen that there is no hope without Christ’s active obedience:

Christ’s fulfilling of all righteousness—his obedience to the Father’s will and commands in his role as the second Adam, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection that vindicates the cross and ushers in a new eschatological era—becomes ours by faith in union with him. It is on this basis that a believer is reckoned righteous.⁷

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The Means of Justification

9. Justification is a gracious gift that sinful humans cannot earn (Rom. 2:5–16; 3:9–20, 24, 27–28; 4:1–5; 5:16–17; 9:30–10:5).

The means of justification is not our good works. We are justified δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι—freely (i.e., as a gift, without payment) by his grace ([Rom. 3:24](#)). Sinners cannot merit a right standing before God based on their works, so they cannot boast before God ([Rom. 4:2](#)). Calvin infers a universal principle: “Whoever glories in himself, glories against God.”⁸ “In every age of human history,” explain John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, “religion has answered that we can get to heaven by being good people. The various religious systems of the world concoct lists of rituals and ceremonies that must be performed to achieve a measure of righteousness that might avail in the courtroom of God.”⁹ “A true view of justification,” asserts Grudem, “is the dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation by faith alone and all false gospels of salvation based on good works.”¹⁰

⁶ Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 90. Johnson defends that thesis on pp. 90–114.

⁷ Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness*, 237; italics added. Cf. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 56–59. See also chap. 15, by David VanDrunen, in this book.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 765.

⁹ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 609.

¹⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 722. One qualification: some world religions have aspects to them that are similar in some ways to sola fide and sola gratia. For a nuanced answer to the question “Is ‘salvation by grace through faith’ unique to Christianity?” see Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 135–61.

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10. Justification is accessible by faith alone in Christ alone (Rom. 1:17; 3:22, 25; 4:3–5, 9–25; 5:1–2; 9:30–10:13).

The means of justification is faith in Christ. Faith is instrumental. Being justified does not include works, and the object of faith does not include oneself or anyone else other than God in Christ: “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” ([Rom. 4:5](#)). John Piper remarks, “[Romans 4:5](#) is perhaps the most important verse on justification by faith alone in all the New Testament.”¹¹

11. Justification occurs through redemption ([Rom. 3:24](#)).

We are justified “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” ([Rom. 3:24](#)). The human means of justification is faith; the divine means is redemption.

The Accessibility of Justification

12. Justification is accessible to everyone without ethnic distinction (Rom. 3:22–23, 29–30; 4:9–17; 10:11–13).

“There is no distinction between Jew and Greek. ... ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” ([Rom. 10:12–13](#)).

The Results of Justification

13. Justification is now inseparably connected to freedom from the law ([Rom. 3:19–21; 7:1–25; 9:30–10:13](#)).

God’s people are now under the new covenant and not the Mosaic law-covenant.¹² Justification now fulfills the law (Rom. 3:21, 31; 8:4). The Old Testament prophetically testifies to the salvation-historical shift that occurred with Christ’s death that made the Mosaic law-covenant obsolete. Now God’s people uphold the law “by this faith” ([Rom. 3:31](#)).

¹¹ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*, in Mathis and Taylor, *Collected Works of John Piper*, 3:181.

¹² Douglas Moo, “The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses: A Modified Lutheran View,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 319–76 (also 83–90, 165–73, 218–25, 309–15); Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law, 40 Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2010); Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 427–59.

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14. *Justification is inseparably connected to peace with God* ([Rom. 5:1](#)).

While the justification metaphor is judicial, the reconciliation metaphor is relational. Before being justified, a sinner is God's enemy and is under God's wrath. After being justified, a sinner is God's friend and has peace with God.

15. *Justification is inseparably connected to the most deeply rooted and satisfying rejoicing* ([Rom. 5:2–11](#)).

Those who are justified rejoice in the hope of the glory of God ([Rom. 5:2](#)), in their sufferings ([Rom. 5:3–10](#)), and in God himself ([Rom. 5:11](#)). Justification is good news not primarily because God forgives our sins and we escape God's wrath. Justification is good news primarily because it enables us to enjoy God himself. Piper explains:

Justification is not an end in itself. Neither is the forgiveness of sins or the imputation of righteousness. Neither is escape from hell or entrance into heaven or freedom from disease or liberation from bondage or eternal life or justice or mercy or the beauties of a pain-free world. None of these facets of the gospel-diamond is the chief good or highest goal of the gospel. Only one thing is: seeing and savoring God himself, being changed into the image of his Son so that more and more we delight in and display God's infinite beauty and worth.¹³

16. *Justification is inseparably connected to progressive sanctification* ([Rom. 6:1–23](#)).

For Roman Catholics, "faith + works → justification," and for Protestants, "faith → justification + works" (where "→" means results in or leads to).¹⁴ But even some Protestants—especially advocates of higher life theology—separate justification from transformation.¹⁵ "The whole point of [Romans 6](#)," though, is this: "God not only frees us from sin's penalty (justification), but He frees us from sin's tyranny as well (sanctification)."¹⁶ "A major flaw" with how higher life theology interprets [Romans 6](#) is

¹³ John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself*, in Mathis and Taylor, *Collected Works of John Piper*, 6:291.

¹⁴ John Gerstner, quoted in R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 155. For explanations and evangelical critiques of how Roman Catholicism understands justification, see R. C. Sproul, *Are We Together? A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2012), 29–50; J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 349–87; Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 431–45; Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 209–38. See also chap. 24, by Leonardo De Chirico, in this book.

¹⁵ On higher life theology, see Andrew David Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came From, What It Is, and Why It's Harmful* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017).

¹⁶ John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel according to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 121.

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that “Paul is not telling believers *how* a justified person can lead a holy life, but *why* he *must* lead a holy life.”¹⁷

Progressive sanctification is distinct yet inseparable from justification. Faith alone justifies, but the faith that justifies is never alone. God’s grace through the power of his Spirit ensures that the same faith that justifies a Christian also progressively sanctifies a Christian. As Jonathan Pratt states, “Fruit-bearing necessarily and inevitably flows from justification.”¹⁸

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17. Justification is inseparably connected to assurance that God will finish what he planned, accomplished, and applied ([Rom. 8:28–39](#)).

God *planned* to save his people—he foreknew and predestined them. God *accomplished* his plan through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. He *applied* his plan—he effectually called and justified his people. And God will finish what he started—he will glorify them.¹⁹ Since God is for us, absolutely nothing can be against us ([Rom. 8:31](#))!

The Future of Justification

18. Justification is definitive and will be final when God publicly vindicates believers.

When God initially justifies a believer, that justification is definitive and once for all time. But it is private. When God resurrects believers in the future, he will publicly vindicate them at the last judgment. This is clearer in Galatians than in Romans,²⁰ but some passages in Romans could refer to that final justification (Rom. 2:13; 5:18; 8:30, 32–34).²¹

The Goal of Justification

19. Justification ultimately glorifies God.

A goal of justification is to enable guilty sinners to stand before the righteous God as righteous. But that is not its ultimate goal. Justification occurs ultimately to glorify God. That is why [Romans 1–8](#) ends by praising God for the results of justification—namely,

¹⁷ William W. Combs, “The Disjunction between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *DBSJ* 6 (2001): 34.

¹⁸ That is the (persuasive) thesis of Jonathan R. Pratt, “The Relationship between Justification and Spiritual Fruit in [Romans 5–8](#),” *Them* 34, no. 2 (2009): 162–78.

¹⁹ See John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955). The title of that excellent book could be even better by adding the verb planned—that is, *Redemption Planned, Accomplished, and Applied*.

²⁰ See Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 60–62.

²¹ See Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 469–526, esp. 498–504; Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 153–57.

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that since God is for us, nothing can be against us ([Rom. 8:31–39](#)). That is why [Romans 9–11](#) ends by praising God for his deep riches, wisdom, and knowledge regarding how he saves his people throughout history ([Rom. 11:33–36](#)). That is why the letter ends by praising God for his righteousness that is now manifested apart from the law-covenant and to which the Law and the Prophets testify ([Rom. 3:21](#)):

According to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. ([Romans 16:25–27](#))

In short, “From him and through him and to him are all things”—especially our justification. “To him be glory forever. Amen” ([Rom. 11:36](#)).

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