

Justification

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Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was perhaps the most widely known minister in recent church history. Known as the Prince of Preachers” Spurgeon preached to over 5,000 people at every service of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for more than thirty years. He wrote or edited more than 200 complete books and thousands of his sermons have been reprinted. His writings are timeless, because they are solidly based on the Scriptures, making them as vivid and soul uplifting as when they were penned nearly a century ago.

“HOW shall man be just with God?” (Job 9:2) is a question of infinite importance to every child of Adam; a question, however, which could never have been answered if Jehovah had not manifested his sovereign grace towards his apostate creatures. Far from being a merely speculative point, it permeates the whole system of Christianity, and lies at the foundation of personal religion, and of all right views of the character and moral government of God. Whatever, else may be considered indifferent or non-essential this cannot be: it is a capital article of that faith which was once for all delivered to the saints, and a mistake here may prove eternally fatal. Well might Luther call it “the article of a standing or falling church,” *i.e.*, the article on the reception or rejection of which the stability or subversion of the church depended. This then is the subject to which we invite the attention of our readers in this paper.

THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

The term *justification* is *forensic*, referring to the proceedings in a court of judicature, and signifies *the declaring a person righteous according to law*. It is not the making a person righteous by the infusion of holy habits, or by an inherent change from sin to holiness, this is sanctification; but the act of a judge pronouncing the party acquitted from all judicial charges. This is the sense in which the words *just* and *justify* are used in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. For example it is said, “If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous and condemn the wicked” (Deut. 25:1). Here it is evident that to justify the righteous, signifies not to *make* him righteous but to *adjudge* him to be so, just as to condemn the wicked is *not to make* him wicked but to *declare* him to be so. See also Prov. 17:15; Psalm 143:2; Luke 7:29-35; Rom. 2:13, and chapter 8:33. We

must not confound justification with the doctrine of sanctification, for though inseparably connected, they are quite distinct and widely different, and ought, when we are treating of the way of a sinner's acceptance with God, to be kept apart. Justification respects the person in a legal sense, is a single act of grace, and terminates in a change of state. Sanctification regards him in a physical sense, is a continued work of grace, and terminates in a change of character. The former is by the work of Christ *without us*; the latter is by the work of the Spirit *within us*. That precedes as a cause; this follows as an effect. Justification, then, is a change of state in the eye of the law and of the lawgiver. It includes pardon, but it is something more than mere pardon. Among men and before an earthly tribunal these two things are opposed to each other, for an individual cannot be at the same time pardoned and justified; but before the bar of God, he who is pardoned is justified, and he who is justified is pardoned. When a person is pardoned, he is considered as a transgressor, but when he is justified, he is considered as *righteous*. A criminal when pardoned is freed from an obligation to suffer death for his crimes; but he that is justified is *declared worthy of life* as an innocent person. There are then two constituent parts in this justification; there is the pardon of sin and the acceptance of our persons; a removal of guilt and condemnation and a right to life.

THE GROUNDS OF JUSTIFICATION

If justification is, as we have seen, a judicial sentence, absolving man from guilt and accepting him as righteous, such a sentence can be passed only on *some valid grounds*, some just cause shown, for he who justifies is God, the holy and righteous Judge. How then shall, man be just with God? I answer, Not on the ground of *innocence*, for all are by nature under guilt and condemnation. In the first three chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, where the doctrine of justification is logically discussed, the apostle Paul established it as an undeniable truth, that every man in his natural state lies under the just condemnation of God as a rebel against him in all the *three ways* in which he has been pleased to reveal himself, whether by the works of creation, the work of the law written on the heart, or by the revelation of grace. It has been well remarked that God having purposed to establish but *one way* of justification for all men has permitted in his providence that all should be guilty. For if there had been any excepted, there would have been two different methods of justification, and consequently two true religions, and two true churches, and believers would not have that oneness of communion which grace produces. "The Scripture hath concluded all under sin." Not on the ground of *human desert*. The apostle Paul having proved by an appeal to undeniable facts that the Gentiles and the Jews were both guilty before God, he draws the following obvious and inevitable conclusion. "Therefore by the deeds of the Law, there shall no flesh be justified in his sight;" *i.e.*, by our own obedience to it, however sincere, shall no flesh be justified, accepted of God, and pronounced righteous. No law, human or divine, can justify the transgression, and the law of God far from justifying the offender denounces utter destruction against him. "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." We

see from this that there is no acceptance with God on the ground of law without perfect obedience. Such an obedience none of the human race can possibly exhibit, and hence it follows that man cannot procure his own justification. There are two ways in which he might attempt it, but neither jointly nor severally could he accomplish it. First, by a voluntary return to his *former* obedience. But this he could not do. He has by his sin lost his original power, and a return to obedience is an act of greater power than a persistency in the way of it. As man could not effect his own justification, so he *would not* attempt it. He is entirely alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in him, because of the hardness of his heart. "He possesseth a carnal mind which is enmity against God, which is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

Secondly, man must make *satisfaction to justice*. This, added to obedience, would effect restitution and result in justification. But as a return to obedience is impossible, so was satisfaction for the injury done to the moral government of God by his rebellion. All that he could do under any circumstances was due from him in *that instant* of time in which it was performed. Impossible then that by anything a man can do well, he should make satisfaction for anything he has done ill. An old debt cannot be discharged by ready-money payments for the future. Man, sinful man, then, cannot merit his own justification. I notice, lastly, that justification cannot take place on *the ground of compromise*. A man must be justified wholly by law or wholly by grace. If by law, he must keep the law perfectly; if by grace, he must trust exclusively on the merit of another. There can be no compromise, no commixture. Paul's strong language in reference to the Galatian perverters of the gospel is applicable here, "Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." Paul excludes all works of every kind, works before and after conversion, works moral and works ceremonial, yea, he even excludes the works of Abraham, the father of believers. (See Rom. 4:2; Rom. 11:6; Titus 3:5; 2 Tim. 19.)

What, then, is the meritorious ground of a sinner's justification? If all mankind are sinners under condemnation, if the supreme Governor of the world neither will nor can justify any without a perfect righteousness, and if such a righteousness cannot possibly be exhibited by man, it is absolutely necessary that righteousness wrought out by a substitute should be imputed to us or placed to our account. Where, then, but in the *finished work* of Immanuel, can we find this vicarious, law-magnifying, justice-satisfying, God-honouring righteousness? "Deliver him from going down into the pit, for I have found a ransom." The justice of God had been trampled upon, and it must be satisfied; the law of God had been violated, and it must be fulfilled; the debt had been contracted, and it must be discharged; heaven had been lost, and it must be regained; therefore on restoring the sinner, the lost sinner, God must, he cannot but have respect to every attribute of his offended majesty, to every requirement of his unalterable law. In no other way could the forfeitures of the law be restored, in no other way could mercy be sent to the guilty. God sends his own Son, Christ undertakes our desperate cause and says, "Lo I come to do thy will, O God." In order to do this he assumes our nature, that as our kinsman redeemer, he might have the right to redemption. Justice recognises him as the sinner's surety, and exacts from him the full penalty due to sin. God puts the cup of

wrath into his hand, and Jesus drains it to the very last dregs. The sword awakes against Jehovah's fellow; the shepherd is smitten that the sheep might go free. Hence he said to the representatives of justice, "If ye seek me, let these go their way." "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed." "Christ," says the apostle, "redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." Nor is this all. If nothing beyond the suffering of the penalty of the law had taken place, men would only have been released from the punishment due to sin. If they were to obtain the reward of obedience, its precepts must also be obeyed; and this was accomplished to the utmost by Jesus Christ. To every requirement of God's holy law he yielded a complete and sinless obedience; every command it enjoined as well as every prohibition it contains were in all respects fully honoured by him. The righteousness of Jesus therefore is twofold, consisting in his spotless obedience and meritorious sufferings, and this is that very righteousness by which sinners are justified before God. To this and to this only the Moral Governor of the universe has respect, when he pronounces the sinner just and acquits him in judgment. "Surely shall one say, In the Lord have I righteousness and strength. In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory." "He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." "By the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." This obedience of the Son of God conferred more honour on the law and on the lawgiver than could have resulted from the obedience of the whole human race had Adam never sinned.

**"Jesus, thy blood and righteousness,
My beauty are, my glorious dress,
Midst flaming worlds in these array'd,
With joy shall I lift up my head."**

THE MEANS OF JUSTIFICATION

How does a sinner obtain an interest in this righteousness in order to justification? The Scriptures are very clear on this. Simply by faith. (See Rom. 3:21-28; 4:4, 24, 25; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; Acts 13:38, 39.) Faith is the divinely-appointed medium of union to Christ, whose righteousness is imputed to the believer: "Even as David describeth the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord imputeth righteousness without works." It is of the nature of faith to lead the sinner away from self, self-confidence and self-righteousness, to the finished work of Jesus. Hence we are said to be justified by faith, not by love or humility, or any other grace, but by faith only because faith is opposed to all works, and all graces too in the matter of our justification. Yet not for faith, or on account of faith, as if faith itself were our righteousness or that for the sake of which we are justified. This is obvious from the following considerations. No man's faith is perfect, and if it were it would not be equal to the demands of the law. That obedience by which the sinner is justified is called the *righteousness of faith*, *righteousness by faith*, and is represented as revealed *to faith*. Consequently, it cannot be faith itself. This is apparent from Phil. 3:9. Again, if we are justified *by the act* of believing, then, as there are

degrees of *faith*, some believers are justified by a more and some by a less perfect righteousness, in exact, proportion to the strength or weakness of their faith; which is absurd. Faith is as necessary in justification as the righteousness of Christ, but necessary for a different purpose. Faith is the hand by which we lay hold on Christ, the eye that looks to Christ, the ear that hears the voice of Christ, the feet that run in compliance with Christ's invitation, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I shall only add that this justification which is by faith, is *perfect and complete* at once, the moment a sinner believes in Jesus, so that he may triumphantly challenge the universe to lay anything to his charge: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth, Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." It is also *irreversible* and *everlasting*; once justified, the believer can no more come under condemnation. "There is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus. Whom he hath justified, he hath also glorified" (Rom. 8:1, 30). No justified person now dead ever failed to reach glory, and all believers are kept by the power of God unto final and eternal salvation.

THE EVIDENCES OF JUSTIFICATION

Lastly, their justification is evidenced by good works (Titus 3:8; Micah 6:8; James 2:17, 18, 26). Hence the decisions of the final judgment will be *according to men's works* (Matt. 25: 34-46). Observe, however, that though it is said that men shall be judged according to their works, it is not said that any one shall be justified *on account of his works*. The righteous are brought unto the judgment to be there *manifested and acknowledged* as the Lord's people. Justified already in God's sight and in their own, they are now to be justified in the sight of men and angels, and that in such a way that the *equity* of the divine procedure will be apparent to all. Hence, then, works are appealed to as *fruits* and evidences of their union to Christ whose righteousness justified them. The sum of the whole is this: we are justified *freely* by God's grace, *meritoriously* by Christ's righteousness, *instrumentally* by faith, and *evidentially* by good works.

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