

## Justification By Faith

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THE question before us is — “How can man be just with God?” No question that relates to man’s condition can be of greater importance than this.

As we approach the study of this topic, there are two great truths which we must note. These are the two biblical presuppositions of the doctrine of justification by faith: firstly, the absolute holiness and perfection of God, and secondly, the sinfulness and lost estate of men. We have these before us in Isaiah’s vision, recorded in chapter 6. In fact they confront us everywhere in the Bible from the third chapter of Genesis onwards. In the light of these truths the question is: How can man, a lost sinner, become right with the infinitely holy God? He demands a perfect righteousness, saying, “Be ye holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” We have no holiness to present. In both Testaments this is emphasised. The psalmist says: “Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight no man living is righteous” (Psalm 143:2), and the prophet Isaiah says: “We are all become as one that is unclean and all our righteousnesses are as a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64: 6 R.V.). As for the witness of the New Testament it is sufficient to mention the apostle Paul’s tremendous arraignment of the whole world, both Gentiles and Jews, as all under the judgment of God — all condemned — for all had sinned and come short of the glory of God.

In discussing the Bible teaching on justification, it is necessary to say a word or two about the meaning of the word “justify”. In an address at the Irish Baptist College a few years ago Professor John Murray declared that it was one of the perversities of the controversy that it should ever have turned on the meaning of the word “justify”. Roman Catholic authorities have taken it to mean a *process* of making righteous, whereas orthodox Protestant theologians take it as an *act* of God’s free grace declaring or pronouncing righteous the sinner who believes. There should never have been the slightest doubt about the meaning of the word. The Arndt and Gingrich Lexicon says the word “justify” is used by Paul “almost exclusively of God’s judgment” or God’s verdict. The situation is much the same with the Hebrew word for justify (*tsadaq*) especially in its Hiphil form. I need not spend time on this point, except to say that Lutherans like Arndt and Gingrich, a Calvinist like John Murray, an Anglican like Alfred Plummer, and a Roman Catholic like Hans Kung all agree that in Paul the word means “to declare to be righteous.”

### I. JUSTIFICATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Here we are not to look for the full Pauline doctrine of justification, but we have anticipations of it. We find in the Old Testament the following features:

(1) The idea appears of a righteousness not of works — a righteousness which comes from God. In Isaiah 45:25 we read, “In Jehovah shall all the seed of Israel be justified and shall glory.” In Isaiah 53 we have the idea of justification based on atonement: “By the knowledge of himself shall my righteous servant *justify* many.” In Jeremiah 33: 16 the Lord says of Zion: “This is the name whereby she shall be called, The Lord our righteousness.”

(2) The Old Testament bears witness to the imputation of righteousness in a negative fashion, namely, in its reference to the non-imputation of sin: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity” (Psalm 32:1-2).

(3) There is also witness to this concept indirectly in that the Old Testament religion is one of faith. We are not to look for the full apostolic statement of justification; the real question is: Does the Old Testament teach salvation by works or salvation by grace? There should be no doubt about the answer. Faith is the centre of that religion on its subjective side.

We may note two Old Testament statements to which the New Testament appeals in this matter. The first is in Genesis 15: 6, “he (Abraham) believed in Jehovah and he reckoned it to him for righteousness.” Abraham renounced all hope in himself in response to a promise which could only be brought to pass by divine power. The other statement is found in Habbakuk 2:4, “the just shall live by faith”. Here, as over against the pride and glorying of the Chaldeans, there is set active trust in a sovereign God in a situation humanly hopeless. There is no doubt that the New Testament suffuses this statement with a fulness of meaning that could not have been so plain to the saints of those times. One is reminded of B. B. Warfield’s comparison of the Old Testament to a room richly furnished but dimly lit. The introducing of the fuller light of the New Testament reveals the riches that are already there.

Among Old Testament passages bearing on justification we should not pass over the third chapter of Zechariah, where there is a scene like that in a law-court. Joshua, the high priest (the representative of the people), is arraigned as it were before the tribunal of God — clothed in filthy garments indicative of guilt — and Satan stands at his right hand as his accuser. Yet Jehovah rebukes Satan and orders the removal of the filthy garments and the provision of rich apparel, while the angel of the Lord looks on approvingly. What a picture is this of the removal of sin and the provision of a wondrous change of raiment.

## II. JUSTIFICATION IN THE GOSPELS

Now we come to the Gospels. We must remember that with the Jews in our Lord's ministry "the dead letter of the law had taken the place of the living God" (Geerhardus Vos). Their religion was self-centred — a religion too of outward observance. So their hearts had become a fertile soil for self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

We must remind ourselves too that in the Gospels — as in the Old Testament — we are not to expect the full statement of the doctrine of justification. The death of Christ and its atoning significance lie at the basis of the doctrine and that death had not yet taken place. So it is "historically unwarrantable" to read into the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, where the latter "went down to his house justified rather than the other", the whole doctrine of imputed righteousness. The same applies to the parable of the wedding feast and the wedding garment. In the teaching of Jesus there is not a sharp distinction between imputed righteousness and the righteousness of inward life and conduct. Indeed in the Gospels righteousness generally refers to conformity of heart and life to the will of God. Yet Paul's teaching was anticipated in the teaching of Jesus in three respects: Jesus emphasised that, in the pursuit of righteousness, the satisfaction of God should be the chief concern. This idea carried to its logical conclusion would demand a God-provided righteousness.

Jesus affirmed that the righteousness demanded by God is vastly above the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. He said this in the Sermon on the Mount. We read also of a rich young ruler who claimed to have fulfilled the commandments, but whose standard was really far too low, for the true standard was the holiness of God.

Jesus affirmed that this righteousness is obtained by true disciples — such as hunger for it, He said, shall be filled. It is for disciples only and so rests on acceptance with God which (and this is particularly clear in the Gospel of John) is by faith in Christ.

### III. JUSTIFICATION IN THE EPISTLES

As we come to the teaching of the Epistles, and particularly those of Paul, we should note in passing the progressive nature of revelation: it is like the harvest — first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.

Paul "uses the conception (of justification) so frequently", says Dr. Leon Morris, "that we are compelled to think that with him it was a dominant idea" (*Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, p. 224). In Romans 1:16-18 Paul states the great theme of this Epistle. It is "the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth . . . for therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith to faith . . . for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."

He speaks of it again in Romans chapter 3: "Now apart from the law a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all who believe . . . that he might be just and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus . . ." Again in chapter 5: "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God." And later in the

chapter he adds: “they that receive the abundance of grace and the *gift of righteousness* reign in life through Christ Jesus . . . for as through one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made (constituted) righteous.”

In 1 Corinthians 1:30 we read of Christ Jesus being made unto us wisdom from God and righteousness. In 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul is speaking of the “ministry of reconciliation”, he gives us the heart of the message of this ministry in verse 21: “Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” In Philippians 3:8-9 Paul counts all but loss that “I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God (*ek theou*) by faith.”

The righteousness of which Paul speaks is emphatically a divine righteousness — “one characterised by the perfection belonging to all that God is and does” (John Murray). It is *revealed* to us — if God did not reveal it, we would know nothing of it. It is identified with the “obedience” of Christ, and is credited to those who believe, so that by His perfect obedience they are constituted righteous in the sight of God.

#### IV. LUTHER ON JUSTIFICATION

Four hundred and fifty years ago Luther nailed his theses on the church door. There is no mention of justification by faith in the theses; but if from this fact the conclusion is drawn that Luther knew nothing at this time of this great truth, the conclusion is false. It is clear from his lectures — on Romans during 1515-16 and on Galatians during 15:16-17 — that he did, and also from his letters of that period.

Luther was not yet, of course, emancipated from Rome. This is apparent in the theses themselves — he had not cast off the Pope, belief in purgatory was still implied, and he declared himself, not so much against indulgences, as against the *abuse* of indulgences. When the theses were re-published in his Collected Works in 1545, he wrote in the preface: “I allow them to stand that by them it may appear how weak I was and in what a fluctuating state of mind when I began this business.”

Another acknowledgement must be made: that unfortunately Luther was not precise in his statement of the doctrine. Let me give a few quotations which illustrate this fact:

(1) From his lectures on Galatians delivered in 1516 (published in 1519): “You will not be a Christian unless you cast away your own righteousness and *rely on faith alone*.” (on 3:8); “*on the basis of faith* grace and the blessing of justification would be given to all who believe on Him.” (on 3:12).

(2) From the lectures on Galatians of 1531 (published in 1535): on chapter 3 verse 6, he says, “faith begins righteousness and imputation perfects it till the

day of Christ” . . . “These two things make Christian righteousness perfect: the first is faith in the heart, which is a divinely granted gift . . . ; the second is that God reckons this imperfect faith as perfect righteousness for the sake of Christ, His Son.”

Dealing with the forgiveness of sin, from the same verse, he says: “This is accomplished by imputation on account of the faith by which I begin to take hold of Christ; and on His account God reckons imperfect righteousness as perfect righteousness and sin as not sin, even though it really is sin.” He defines Christian righteousness as “a divine imputation or reckoning as righteousness or to righteousness, for the sake of our faith in Christ or for the sake of Christ.”

Luther has a better statement in the lectures on Romans (of 15:15-16), where he writes of Christ taking away all our sins “and in exchange His righteousness is ours.” (on Romans 3:30).

It is evident that Luther lacked clarity on the relationship of faith to justification. It is false to say, as he does say at points, that we are justified “on the basis of faith”. We are no more justified on that basis than on the basis of our works. The New Testament never says that we are justified *on account of* our faith. The sole *meritorious* ground of our justification is Christ and His righteousness. Faith is the *instrumental* cause — it is like the hand of a beggar stretched out to receive an alms. It has no merit, for it is a self-renouncing grace, renouncing all human merit.

## V. CALVIN ON JUSTIFICATION

Calvin is more precise. He says, “We simply explain justification to be an acceptance, by which God receives us into His favour and esteems us as righteous persons; and we say that this consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ” . . . “If faith were to justify of itself, or by an intrinsic efficacy, . . . being always weak and imperfect, it never could effect this but in part; and thus it would be a defective justification, which would only confer on us a partial salvation” (*Institutes* III. 11).

Calvin closes this same chapter by saying that “we obtain justification before God solely by the intervention of the righteousness of Christ” and adding a beautiful illustration from Ambrose of Milan: “Ambrose appears to me to have most elegantly adverted to the blessing of Jacob as an illustration of this righteousness when he says, ‘that as he who did not merit the birthright in himself personated his brother, put on his garments which gave forth a most pleasant odour, and thus introduced himself to his father that he might receive a blessing to his advantage, though under the person of another, so we conceal ourselves under the precious purity of Christ, our firstborn brother, that we may obtain an attestation of righteousness from the presence of God’.”

Calvin is much clearer on this point than Luther. It is true that he often speaks as if justification consisted solely in pardon or remission of sin. However, as William Cunningham points out, he did so simply “to deny and exclude the popish doctrine of justification” which makes it include not only remission but a change of character. But there is no doubt that he based both pardon and acceptance with God solely on the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith.

## VI. THE PRESENT-DAY STATE OF OPINION

Many believers in our day stress the *penalty-paying* aspect of the work of Christ (sometimes called His “passive obedience”), but fail to emphasise or even recognise the *law-keeping* aspect (sometimes called His “active obedience”). The Bible stresses both aspects. Both are included in “the obedience of the One” through which many are made righteous (Romans 5:19) — the obedience which culminated in His blood-shedding on the cross.

It was to Christ’s “active obedience” that Spurgeon referred when he said: “I know I cannot enter heaven unless I have a perfect righteousness; I am absolutely sure I shall never have one of my own, for I find sin every day; but then Christ had a perfect righteousness, and He said, ‘There, take my garment, put it on . . .’” It was to this also that Gresham Machen referred when he sent his last message by telegram from his death-bed: “I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”

There is, however, a much more serious departure than that of neglecting Christ’s active obedience. In a large section of Protestantism this doctrine of justification, which Luther termed “the doctrine of the standing or the falling of the Church”, has been utterly abandoned. It is disliked and in some quarters even detested. Not long ago when a leading Anglican was giving his assent to the Articles of his church, he had a tilt at the Articles dealing with justification.

Of course, someone will point us, for our consolation, to Rome’s new stance. Have you not heard, they say, of Professor Hans Kung who in a recent volume defines “justify” as “pronounce righteous” and makes mention of “justification by faith alone”. Admittedly Hans Kung uses some Protestant language in the article referred to which appears in *Christianity Divided* (published by Sheed and Ward). But we refuse to be comforted, and for three reasons:

(1) Hans Kung has also written a book in which he seeks to make out that the Council of Trent was in substantial agreement with the Protestant Reformers! Four centuries have gone by and it has been left to Hans Kung to make this incredible discovery! In fact, however, he has attempted the same impossible feat as John Henry Newman in Tract 90, namely, the feat of reconciling the doctrines of the Reformation with those of the Counter-Reformation.

(2) Even in the article referred to in *Christianity Divided*, while Hans Kung uses Protestant language, he also uses language inconsistent with the Protestant Reformed faith. He writes, “By being cleansed in the same baptism we have been justified *and* sanctified” (italics his). And in spite of disclaiming at one point the confusing of justification and sanctification, at another point he seems still guilty of that old Roman error when he says, “when God declares a man just, he draws him into the righteousness of God and thus effects a transformation of man’s very being.”

(3) It is also very much in order to point out that there has been no repudiation — but rather the opposite — of the Canons of the Council of Trent by Hans Kung, and the same could be said for the Second Vatican Council. And the Canons of Trent are full of ambiguity on this vital doctrine of justification — and also full of anathemas which seem to be aimed at the Reformers *and* their doctrines.

So then we are called upon in *our* day to do battle *for* this truth, to proclaim it and glory in it, as the Reformers did. It was for this very doctrine that the apostle Paul made such a stand in the Epistle to the Galatians. He “yielded by way of subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with us”. Yea, he pronounced the tremendous anathema of God upon those undermining it. He did this out of a passionate love for the truth and for the souls of men. May the same love mark us today!

If some reader is not yet arrayed in the spotless robe of the Redeemer’s righteousness, let him come, like Bunyan’s pilgrim to the cross, to receive pardon of all his sins and a wondrous “change of raiment”. Then he can go on his way with a song on his lips and in the strength of the Lord over hills of difficulty and through valleys of shadow till at last he passes triumphant into the city of God.

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