

## CHAPTER FIVE

# JUSTIFIED BY CHRIST

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**B**efore Martin Luther became famous for his pivotal role in the Reformation, he was known throughout Europe as a brilliant student of law. What affected this Augustinian monk most was his study of God's law in Scripture. As he meditated on the commands of God, he became very aware of the wrath of God. Whenever he studied the person and work of Jesus Christ he knew that this was the righteous One who would ultimately judge him.

That persistent realization plagued Luther with an overwhelming sense of guilt. While his contemporaries spent minutes confessing their sin, he spent hours. Some thought he was mentally unstable.

Theologian Anthony Hoekema describes the mental anguish leading up to Luther's great theological discovery:

Martin Luther had tried everything: sleeping on hard floors, going without food, even climbing a staircase in Rome on his hands and knees—but to no avail. His teachers at the monastery told him that he was doing enough to have peace of soul. But he had no peace. His sense of sin was too deep.

He had been studying the Psalms. They often mentioned “the righteousness of God.” But this term bothered him. He thought it meant God's punitive righteousness, whereby he punishes sinners. And Luther knew that he was a sinner. So when he saw the word *righteousness* in the Bible, he saw red.

One day he opened to the Book of Romans. There he read about the gospel of Christ which is the power of God for salvation (1:16). This was good news! But the next verse said, “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed”—there was that bad

“ Justification is indeed God’s answer to the most important of all human questions: How can a man or a woman become right with God? We are not right with God in ourselves. We are under God’s wrath. Justification is vital, because we must become right with God or perish eternally ...The difficulty is that most people today do not actually feel a need in this area. Martin Luther did; it is what haunted him. He knew he was not right with God, and he anticipated a confrontation with an angry God at the final judgment. God showed him that he could experience a right relationship with God through the work of Jesus Christ. But who feels the intensity of Luther’s anguish today?<sup>1</sup> ”

— James Montgomery Boice

word *righteousness* again! And Luther’s depression returned. It got worse when he went on to read about the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all the unrighteousness of men (v.18).

So Luther again turned to verse 17. How could Paul have written such terrible words?...Suddenly the light dawned on him. The “righteousness of God” Paul here had in mind was not God’s punitive justice which leads him to punish sinners, but rather a righteousness which *God gives* to the needy

sinner, and which that sinner accepts by *faith*. This was a spotless and perfect righteousness, earned by Christ, which God graciously bestows on all who believe. No longer did Luther need to seek the basis for peace of soul in himself, in his own good works. Now he could look away from himself to Christ, and live by faith instead of groveling in fear. At that moment, the Protestant Reformation was born.<sup>2</sup>

Luther would go on to say that the doctrine of justification is the article by which the Church stands or falls. “This article is the head and cornerstone of the Church which alone begets, nourishes, builds, and protects the Church. Without it the church of God could not subsist for one hour.”<sup>3</sup> At another point he added, “If the article of justification be once lost, then is all true Christian doctrine lost.”<sup>4</sup>

Luther’s fear of God’s wrath was justified, as we learned in the previous chapter. All Christians need to remember who and what they once were: evil in their behavior, enemies of God, completely alienated from him, and objects of his wrath. But identifying with the past has value only to the extent that it makes us more aware of and amazed about our present position in Christ. We must recognize who we *now are* by God’s gracious gift of justification.

Those who have received Christ’s justifying work have

#### **Meditate on Romans**

**1:17.** What key phrase in this verse revolutionized Martin Luther’s understanding of salvation? How does it affect you?

experienced a dramatic, extraordinary change. We have been justified by faith through the amazing grace of Almighty God. Without an accurate and experiential knowledge of justification the Church “could not subsist for one hour”...at least not with any degree of authenticity. Neither could we.

## Position or Process?

Justification is a legal term that means “to pronounce or declare righteous.” Hoekema defines justification as “a permanent change in our judicial relation to God whereby we are absolved from the charge of guilt, and whereby God forgives all our sins on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Though we are guilty before the holy Judge of all, having violated his law and deserving his wrath, he has declared us righteous. How? On the basis of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the Cross. Only the Cross can make us acceptable before God.

Justification is a gift we receive from God, not something we achieve or accomplish. We aren’t responsible or capable of contributing to our justification before God. This righteous status cannot be earned or deserved, only accepted and appreciated. We receive what Christ and Christ alone has accomplished for us.

In order to fully understand this breathtaking truth, it’s essential that we differentiate between justification and sanctification. Although these two doctrines are inseparable, we must distinguish between their respective roles in the life of faith.

Justification means we are *declared* righteous. Sanctification means we are being *made* righteous. (Comprehend that difference alone and your life will never be the same!) Justification is the *gift* of righteousness; sanctification is

the *practice* of righteousness. Perhaps most critically, justification is a *position*—established immediately and completely upon conversion—whereas sanctification is a *process* of internal change and character development that begins at regeneration and continues as long as we live. “In Scripture,” writes Sinclair Ferguson, “to justify does not mean to make righteous in the sense of changing a person’s character. It means to constitute

**For Further Study:** At the moment Jesus died on the Cross, the temple curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was supernaturally ripped in two. To understand the awesome significance of that act, read Hebrews 9:1-14.

““ Nobody has understood Christianity who does not understand this word. It is the word “justified.”<sup>6</sup>

— John Stott

“ Justification is an ACT. It is not a work, or series of acts. It is not progressive. The weakest believer and the strongest saint are alike and equally justified. Justification admits no degrees. A man is either wholly justified or wholly condemned in the sight of God.<sup>8</sup> ”

— William S. Plumer

righteous and to do so by declaration.”<sup>7</sup>

Justification isn't a process. It is a declaration, a divine decree which cannot be challenged, altered, or appealed. Paul emphatically states, “Therefore since we *have been* justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus

Christ” (Ro 5:1, emphasis added). This glorious transformation doesn't take place by degrees, nor does it fluctuate. You're not more justified during certain periods than you are at others. You'll never be more justified than you are at this time. That's worth repeating: *You'll never be*

*more justified than you are at this time.* To top it off, no one in history has ever been more justified than you are now. Not Martin Luther, not Paul—nobody.

Numerous Christians confuse the doctrines of justification and sanctification and are subsequently robbed of the full benefits this great salvation entails. It is imperative that we understand the difference between our position (justification) and our practice (sanctification). While sanctification is both the *evidence* and *objective* of our justification, it should never be viewed as the *grounds* for our justification before God, regardless of how mature we become. We are incapable of adding to what Christ has accomplished. As Alister McGrath states, “The only thing we could really be said to contribute to our justification is the sin God so graciously forgives.” We are justified by grace alone.<sup>9</sup>

**1** Have you been robbed of the benefits of your great salvation? Take the following True/False quiz to make sure you fully understand the difference between justification and sanctification.

(Answers printed upside down at bottom of page.)

- Justification is the by-product of sanctification. **T F**
- Sanctification is a life-long process. **T F**
- God's love for us grows in proportion to our maturity. **T F**
- Justification refers to our position in Christ; sanctification refers to a process. **T F**
- Breaking sinful habits makes us more righteous. **T F**
- Spiritual growth is good evidence that we've been justified. **T F**

### Frustrating and Futile

The doctrine of justification needs to be constantly reinforced and reviewed, as Martin Luther was well aware. His typically blunt advice? “Beat it into their heads continually.”<sup>10</sup> In addition to such persistent repetition from

ANSWERS: F, F, T, T, F, F, T, F, T, F, T

our leaders, we need to be applying and appreciating the truth of justification in our lives on a daily basis. If we don't, we will find ourselves susceptible to one of the Church's most subtle and serious enemies: legalism.

“ The glory of the gospel is that God has declared Christians to be rightly related to him in spite of their sin. But our greatest temptation and mistake is to try to smuggle character into his work of grace. How easily we fall into the trap of assuming that we only remain justified so long as there are grounds in our character for that justification. But Paul's teaching is that nothing we do ever contributes to our justification.<sup>11</sup> ”

— Sinclair Ferguson

Legalism involves seeking to earn God's acceptance through our own obedience. We only have two options: either receive righteousness as a God-given gift or try to generate our own. Legalism is the attempt to be justified through some source other than Jesus Christ and his finished work.

To adhere to legalism is to believe that the Cross was either unnecessary or insufficient (Gal 2:21, 5:2). That

is an accurate interpretation of your motive and actions, even if you still ascribe mentally to the necessity of Christ's sacrifice. In our legitimate pursuit of obedience and maturity legalism slowly and subtly overtakes us, and we begin to substitute our works for his finished work. The result is either arrogance or condemnation. Instead of growing in grace we abandon grace. That was Paul's assessment of the Galatian church when he wrote, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal 5:4).

If you've ever attempted to live this way you may have learned by now that legalism is as futile as it is frustrating. Every legalistic attempt at righteousness inevitably ends in failure. Over the years I've learned to recognize some unmistakable signs of the presence of legalism. Here are a few of them:

- You are more aware of your past sin than of the person and finished work of Christ.

- You live thinking, believing, and feeling that God is disappointed with you rather than delighting in you. You assume God's acceptance depends on your obedience.

- You lack joy. This is often the first indication of the presence of legalism. Condemnation is the result of pondering our deficiency; joy is the result of considering his sufficiency.

Have you been ensnared by the subtle presence of legalism? If so, beware. It tends to spread rather than remain restricted (Gal 5:9). Legalism must be removed.

**For Further Study:** To appreciate the extent of Paul's concern about legalism, read Galatians 1:6-9, 2:21, 3:1-4, 3:10, 4:8-11, 4:19-20, 5:2-4, and 5:7-12.

“ The issue in the Galatian church was not obedience to the moral law of God; rather, it was *reliance* on the moral law... for salvation.<sup>12</sup> ”

— Jerry Bridges

The only effective way to uproot legalism is with the doctrine of justification. If you've neglected or ignored this doctrine, then take whatever dramatic action is necessary to change. Set aside time each day to review,

rehearse, and rejoice in this great, objective, positional truth. Restrict your spiritual diet to the study of justification until you are certain of God's acceptance, secure in his love, and free from legalism and condemnation.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the single most decisive event in history. Accurately has Sinclair Ferguson stated the following:

When we think of Christ dying on the Cross we are shown the lengths to which God's love goes in order to win us back to himself...He is saying to us: I love you this much...The Cross is the heart of the gospel. It makes the gospel good news: Christ died for us. He has stood in our place before God's judgment seat. He has borne our sins. God has done something on the Cross we could never do for ourselves...The reason we lack assurance of his grace is because we fail to focus on that spot where he has revealed it.<sup>13</sup>

Where will you focus your attention? Will it be on past sin, your present emotional state, or areas of character in which you still need to grow? Or will you focus on the finished work of Christ? Legalism need not motivate you. Condemnation need not torment you. God has justified you.

## Don't Argue with the Judge

Intellectually understanding the doctrine of justification is in itself insufficient. God intends that we be transformed—totally, genuinely, and permanently transformed by this central doctrine. J.I. Packer has insightfully stated, “The issue is not, can one state the doctrine with full biblical accuracy (that, as we have seen, is a task that demands care), but, does one know its reality in experience.”<sup>14</sup>

Our goal in writing this book is not primarily that you learn how to articulate this great doctrine but that you be *changed* by it, that your understanding results in personal freedom from legalism and condemnation as well as an

### Meditate on Romans

**7:14-25.** Once we come to grips with our own wretchedness we'll find it much harder to be tempted by legalism.

### For Further Study:

What two categories of people are described in James 1:22-25? Which group does God promise to bless?

**2** Colossians 2:13-15 reveals the enormous debt we owed God. What did Jesus do to the law's "invoice"?

ever-increasing passion and love for Jesus Christ. It's possible to be aware of justification by grace without being personally affected. We need to appreciate and apply this magnificent truth each and every day.

The story I'm about to relate has been a powerful lesson for me as I have sought to appropriate the doctrine of justification. During my pre-conver-

sion days as a college freshman I was arrested for possession of marijuana. The details of the trial are still vivid in my mind. As I sat in the courtroom facing the judge, I

tried my best to look both sincere and sorrowful, but I was just scared. I knew there was an excellent chance that I would be convicted and even charged with additional violations.

As it turned out, my case never progressed beyond the first witness. Because officials had searched my dorm room without the necessary

“ It is never enough to know simply that Christ died, or even why he died. Such knowledge is the result of a “merely historical faith” that cannot save...Only when we realize that Christ was given *pro me, pro nobis* (“for me,” “for us”) have we discerned the import of Christ's accomplishment.<sup>15</sup> ”

— Timothy George

legal documents, argued my lawyer, the court would have to drop the charge.

The judge sat listening stoically as the prosecution objected and reiterated the evidence against me. Finally, he looked down at me. The man was obviously frustrated. Powerless to give anything more than a reprimand, he lectured me in the strongest possible terms.

I tried to appear contrite. I nodded my head at each statement. But I don't remember a thing he said—I was too excited about the fact that he was going to let me go.

When I stood trial I knew I was guilty. I think everyone knew. But when the judge released me I didn't argue with him. I didn't appeal and plead with the judge to continue the case. I didn't request that he overlook the legal technicality and allow the prosecution to proceed. For once, I gladly deferred to someone with greater authority. If the judge wanted to dismiss the violation, I would happily accept his decision.

Each of us stands guilty before the Judge of all. But our crime against him is in a totally different league than my misdemeanor. And though I escaped on a technicality, we have been declared righteous on the basis of Christ's pre-

**Meditate on**

**Deuteronomy 31:8.**

Rather than break this wonderful promise to us (even though we never deserved such a guarantee), God forsook his own Son.

“ The Christian life involves not just believing something about Christ but also believing something about ourselves... Our faith in Christ must include believing that we are exactly what the Bible says we are.

— Anthony Hoekema

meditated and substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus Christ voluntarily and purposefully laid down his life so God could remain just while justifying the guilty—you and me. God has declared us righteous. All that remains is the issue of whether or not we will receive this pro-

nouncement. The choice confronts us daily, often multiple times in a given day: Will we receive justification by faith because of the declaration by God, or will we allow condemnation and legalism to control us as we depend on our emotions and obedience?

Determine that your unstable and unpredictable emotions will not dictate or deceive you. Do not allow them to be the final authority in your life. Believe what God says about you. If you're wise you will follow my example: Don't argue with the Judge.

### **Forsaken for Our Forgiveness**

The God who created you accepts you. His Son voluntarily faced the unimaginable horror of the Cross, forsaken by God the Father and by man, in order to justify you. He was forsaken so we might be forgiven. He experienced separation so we might forever be secure in God's love. He endured the wrath of God so that we would never have to. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Ro 4:25). You have been justified!

Is it any wonder the Reformation changed Church history? There is no way to confine this doctrine. Once it is let loose it will change the life of every one it touches—including your own. ■

#### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. On page 52 the author writes, "You'll never be more justified than you are at this time." What effect does this have on your efforts to live a life that pleases God?
2. Quietly meditate for a minute or two on the Cross. How



do you think Jesus felt when he realized God had forsaken him?

3. Is it possible to focus *too* much on conforming to the image of Christ?

4. What makes legalism such a subtle heresy?

5. How can we balance the doctrines of justification and sanctification without tilting toward legalism or license?

6. What one thing can we contribute to our justification? (Hint: It's nothing to brag about!)

**RECOMMENDED READING** *The Cross of Christ* by John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986)

*The Discipline of Grace* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994)

*The Atonement* by Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984)

#### NOTES

1. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Vol. I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 380, 447.
2. Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1989), p. 152.
3. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 80.
4. John R.W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), p. 60.
5. Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, p. 178.
6. John R.W. Stott, *Only One Way*, p. 59.
7. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, p. 72.
8. William S. Plumer, *The Grace of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1853), p. 195.
9. Alister McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p. 132.
10. John R.W. Stott, *Only One Way*, p. 59.
11. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, p. 82–83.
12. Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), p. 98.
13. Sinclair Ferguson, *Grow in Grace* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), p. 56, 58–59.
14. J.I. Packer, *God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 147.
15. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), p. 59.