

# The Biblical Doctrine of Justification

## How Can I Be Right With God?

Covenant Life College

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### Session 3

### The Crucial Concept of Imputation: Paul and James on Justifying Faith

#### Review

- In Session 1, we located the doctrine of justification within the doctrine of salvation and defined it as

“an act of God’s free grace, by which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 33).

- This doctrine safeguards the gospel by making it clear that a man is justified not by any works he may perform, but through the instrument of faith *alone* (Galatians 2.16).
- We have insisted that justification does not refer to a change in moral character or any inward righteousness inhering in the individual but does refer to a change in status or standing before God, the righteous Judge (Romans 4.5).
- Justification is a declaration or pronouncement of one’s righteous status before a holy God including the forgiveness of sins and the acquisition of the positive righteousness of Jesus Christ by imputation (Romans 3.21-24; 4.6-8; 8.1).
- The source of this justification is God’s grace alone. Its ground is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ alone. And it is received through faith alone (Romans 3.24-25).

“The most basic issue we face as fallen human beings is the issue of how we as unjust sinners can hope to survive a judgment before the court of an absolutely holy and just God...

“The two competing theories in answer to this question that have fueled such serious controversy are the Roman Catholic and Protestant Reformation theories. These are not the only theories that have been advanced in history but they are the chief views that have clashed. The controversy over the doctrine of justification in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century was surely the most volatile and divisive in church history...

“In simple terms the issue boils down to this: Are we justified by a *process* by which we become *actually just* or are we justified by a *declarative* act by which we are *counted* or *reckoned* to be just by God? Are we *declared* just or are we *made* just by justification?”<sup>1</sup>

- I. Imputation defined (*logizomai*)
  - A. *Imputation* refers to the act of God in which He counts sinners as righteous through their faith in Christ on the basis of his redemptive work and perfect obedience in his life and death.
  - B. The word itself means *to reckon to the account of another*. (Philemon 18, “... charge that to my account.”) Synonyms are *reckon, credit, count*. To impute is

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Justification by Faith Alone*, Ed. Don Kistler, Soli Deo Gloria, Morgan, PA, 1995, pages 24-5.

to regard as belonging to, therefore to cause it to belong to someone. E.g. God counted Adam's guilt as belonging to us. Since He is the ultimate Judge and his thoughts are always true, it *does* belong to us.

- C. Found in three important theological connections
  - 1. The imputation of Adam's sin to mankind (Romans 5.12-21). Original/inherited sin.
  - 2. The imputation of man's sin to Christ (Isaiah 53.5-6, 11-12; 2 Corinthians 5.21; 1 Peter 2.24).
  - 3. The imputation of the righteousness of God to believers in Christ (cf. Romans 3.21-5.21; 4.3).

## II. Contrasted with *infusion*

- A. *Infusion* helps us understand the Roman Catholic view of justification.
- B. It refers to an idea of justification whereby God actually puts his righteousness into us and changes our moral character, thus *making us* righteous (as contrasted with being *declared* righteous).
- C. In this way, justification is fused (confused) with sanctification and even regeneration.
- D. In the Roman Catholic view, for justification to begin, a person must be baptized. Then (the adult) must continue to have faith. And this must not be merely *fiduciary faith* (trust in Christ alone), but faith in the entire divine revelation of truth, that is the teaching of the R. Catholic Church.
- E. Baptism is the primary instrumental cause of justification in this system. But since we all sin and make shipwreck of our faith, we must then make use of "the second plank," the instrument of justification—the sacrament of penance.
- F. The problem is more than just semantics. For if justification is not clearly distinguished from sanctification, we will lose sight of the gospel of grace as Paul showed in his letter to the Galatians. Justification becomes a combination of God's work and ours. Justification then admits of varying degrees—it can increase or decrease depending on my obedience. But if this is the case, how may I know if I am sufficiently justified? I can never be sure whether or not I am in a state of grace. 'Works-righteousness' is the inevitable result of this, however much I may try to appeal to sacramental grace. This was precisely Luther's dilemma.
- G. "A true view of justification is the dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation by faith alone and all other false gospels based on works."<sup>2</sup>

## III. Paul and James on justifying faith

- A. The apparent problem: Paul says, "a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3.28), while James says, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2.24). See James 2.14-26.
- B. "Three possibilities have been suggested: 1) James is combating Paul's teaching; 2) James is combating an antinomian misconception of Paul's teaching about justification; 3) they are dealing with different problems and therefore do not contradict each other."<sup>3</sup> Since James was most likely written before Romans, the third solution is most likely.<sup>4</sup>
- C. Paul was treating the problem of those who were trusting in their own righteousness and how God justifies the ungodly. James was dealing with those who make a mere profession of faith. "... Paul was dealing with people who wanted to make sanctification part of the basis for their justification, whereas James was dealing with people who wanted to be justified without being sanctified."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan Publishing, 1994, p. 722.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *Saved By Grace*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1989, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2001, p. 203.

- D. This apparent contradiction can help us see something that Calvin said. “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”<sup>6</sup>
- E. The doctrine of justification through faith alone should issue forth in a life that demonstrates righteousness in increasing measure. God justifies the person who is regenerate and believes, but not on the basis of his regeneration and faith. He justifies on the basis of Christ’s redemptive work.
- F. The verb *justify* can be understood in different ways. James is using it in a sense different from Paul. James is using ‘justify’ in the sense ‘to demonstrate or show to be right.’ If I try to justify my actions, I am trying to show that my actions are appropriate (cf. Matthew 11.19).
- G. In James 2, his point is that mere intellectual agreement is not sufficient (2.18-19).
- H. James says that a person is shown to be righteous when his works bear witness to his faith. He uses Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac as an illustration of how works demonstrate righteousness (James 2.21). But recall that this event recorded in Genesis 22 took place long after Genesis 15.6 when “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”
- I. In Paul’s case it is God who declares the believer righteous. In James case it is the believer’s works which declare him righteous by demonstrating that his faith is genuine.<sup>7</sup>
- J. Thus they both agree that a person is justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that *is* alone.

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<sup>6</sup> As quoted in Hoekema, p. 162.

<sup>7</sup> Ryken, p. 203.