

The Great Exchange

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (v. 5).

- Romans 4:1–8

Paul’s reference to the grace of justification in Titus 3:7 provides us with a good opportunity to pause our study of this epistle and examine the doctrine of justification more systematically, taking all of Scripture into account. Dr. R.C. Sproul’s teaching series *Justification by Faith Alone* will be the basis for our study as we consider justification in greater detail.

Fundamentally, justification is a legal declaration wherein God the Father pronounces us righteous through faith alone based on the merit of Christ alone. The righteousness that is imputed to our account is an alien righteousness, one that is wholly outside of ourselves. We are not justified based on the good works that we do but on the good works that Jesus has done.

Martin Luther spoke of Christians as *simul iustus et peccator*, which is Latin for “at the same time righteous and sinner.” This phrase maintains that we possess an alien, or foreign, righteousness. In a legal and positional sense, we are righteous once we are justified because God looks at us and sees the perfect righteousness of Christ. Yet this righteousness is not something within ourselves or something we do but instead is a declared righteousness. That is why at the same time, in an existential and experiential sense, we are still sinners, working to put sin to death. Justification eliminates the legal punishment due our sin (Rom. 8:1–4); nevertheless, sin is still present in us until we are glorified (7:7–25).

Because of imputation, God views us as righteous in Christ. Imputation means “to credit or count something toward an account,” and the idea is used in today’s passage. As Romans 4:5 tells us, when we put our faith in Christ, we are “counted” as righteous. That is, the perfect righteousness earned by Jesus is imputed to us. In turn, our sins are imputed to Jesus who made satisfaction for them by bearing the wrath of God against His people on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21).

God’s law tells us that we can never be good enough to be righteous in His sight. The gospel tells us that Christ is perfectly righteous and that by faith alone His righteousness is credited to us (Gal. 2:15–16). By grace and through faith alone our Creator accepts us if and only if we are in Christ.

Coram Deo

The doctrine of imputation is under serious fire in our day, but it must never be negotiated. If we make our works part of our justification in any way, then we lay an unbearable burden on ourselves because then we are “obligated to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). Yet Christ has kept the commandments of God perfectly, and we must simply trust in His obedience to be justified. Let us rest on Him today and know that if we are in Jesus, all is forgiven.

Passages for Further Study

Isaiah 53:11

Zechariah 3:1–5

1 Corinthians 1:30

2 Corinthians 5:21