

Session 4

Chapter 4 Justification (Part A)

A good question to begin this study is, “Justified from what?”
To address this matter, this section is divided into three sections:

- The first section discusses the historical context in which the doctrine of justification was “discovered” by Martin Luther.
- The second section addresses the theology of justification.
- The third section presents a new teaching on justification, called “The New Perspective,” that challenges the traditional understanding of justification. Its main advocate is a British theologian, N. T. Wright.



I. The Historical Context in which the Doctrine of Justification was Discovered

A. What troubled Martin Luther (of Wittenberg, Germany, 1483-1546)

1. Background

- a. Luther lived during the period when the Roman Catholic Church purposefully kept people in ignorance regarding what the Scripture actually taught.

For instance, the Bible wasn't allowed to be translated into the vernacular tongues even as late as the 15th century.

- b. As a result, people were led to believe in doctrines (e.g., purgatory) and engage in practices (e.g., indulgences) that the Scripture didn't teach; subsequently, the gospel was lost in the Church!

2. What the Church taught

- a. The priest is the mediator between God and men.
- b. Both the Bible and tradition are sources and rules of faith.
- c. Indulgence reduces one's time spent in purgatory because it completely forgives sins; repentance, therefore, is unnecessary.

3. These teachings affected Luther, an Augustinian monk, who was particularly troubled with Romans 1:17,

“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.””

B. How Luther understood Romans 1:17 up until 1517

1. He feared that if he did not measure up to the righteous standard of God, his soul was in danger of damnation; thus, Luther hoped that an ascetic life would afford him a better chance of salvation.
 - a. Thus, he regularly appealed to 21 saints and directed his prayers to three of them every morning in order to include all of them in his week's devotions.
 - b. "He endured such agony of mind that, had it lasted for 5 [more] minutes, he must have died under the strain. Once for a whole fortnight he neither ate, nor drank, nor slept."¹
2. The result of his tortuous devotion was very disappointing; he found no peace of mind either as a monk or as a priest.
 - a. No matter how diligently he fasted, prayed, and punished himself, his sense of unworthiness persisted²; his sense of sinfulness overwhelmed him.
 - b. To a friend he lamented, "Oh, my sin! my sins! my sins! . . . How could, I ever achieve the kind of holiness that would turn away the anger of God against me?"
3. Thus, it led Luther to write, "'The justice of God' had filled me with hate."



C. Luther's discovery

Night and day Luther continued to ponder until he saw the "connection between the righteousness of God and the statement that 'the righteous shall live by faith.'"

In 1514, Luther finally "discovered" the true meaning of Romans 1:17.

1. First, he discovered that the righteousness of God is not something humans can earn but is imputed unto them on account of Christ.

Luther wrote: "Then I grasped that the [righteousness] of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies [the sinners] through faith [in the person and work of Christ.]"

2. As a result, he was filled with love and joy upon realizing that God



¹ S. M. Houghton, *Sketches from Church History* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1980), pp. 80-1.

² Thomas H. Greer, *A Brief History of the Western World*, 4th ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980), p. 309.

did all the work for us. He conveyed this exuberance when he wrote:



“Whereupon I felt myself to be reborn and have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning and whereas before the ‘righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.”

D. Luther’s spiritual journey looks very much like that of Apostle Paul

1. Paul’s spiritual struggle.

Tried to gain righteousness by keeping all the laws; felt that he was doing <i>very</i> well.	<i>“As for righteousness based on the law, faultless”</i> (Phil. 3:6).
After the conversion, agonized over “hav[ing] the desire to do what is good but . . . cannot carry it out” (Rom. 7:18).	<i>“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”</i> (Rom. 7:24).
Finally liberated upon firmly placing faith and trust in Christ (“Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ.”)	<i>“No one is justified be-fore God by the Law, because ‘The righteous will live by faith’”</i> (Gal. 3:11).

2. Paul’s famous Galatians 2:20: *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

- a. What it does not mean: Giving up something for Christ (e.g., bad habits, valuable things, etc.) to attain a victorious Christian living
- b. What it really means: Giving up attempts to justify myself before God with my meritorious work.

Gal. 2:21: “I do not set aside the grade of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.”

Discussion¹: Have you ever tried to justify yourself before God? How did you do it? How did it make you feel? How did you resolve it?

II. The Theology of Justification

A. Justification in a nutshell

1. Justification is a one-time judicial or forensic act of acquittal; that is to say, to the guilty individual who deserves the death penalty (Rom. 6:23), God the Judge declares, “Not guilty.”



- a. God the Judge is able to free the guilty person because “the wages of [his] sins” (Rom. 6:23) are transferred to his perfect substitute, the sinless Jesus Christ.
- b. This was played out countless times during the OT era when the sins of the people were transferred to innocent animals that were, then, sacrificed to atone for the sins of the guilty person.



Lev. 4:27-29, 31^b: “If any member of the community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD’s commands, when they realize their guilt²⁸ and the sin they have committed becomes known, they must bring as their offering for the sin they committed a female goat without defect.²⁹ They are to lay their hand on the head of the sin offering and slaughter it at the place of the burnt offering. . . .³⁰ In this way the priest will make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven.”

2. In light of this, justification is the culmination of God’s activity on behalf of guilty sinners whereby He goes forth in power to forgive and deliver them in the present time from judgment by His grace.³
3. What justification is to the sinners’ standing before God the Judge who forgives him (an act of mercy: not getting the punishment that you deserve), is what adoption is to the sinners’ relationship to God the Father who just accepted him (an act of grace: receiving a gift that you don’t deserve).

Upon believing in the person and work of Jesus, they are adopted into the family of God. Jesus states, “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12).

4. What justification is not.

However, justification does not mean that the justified is now morally and ethically righteous; neither does it mean that the adopted son is a “nice” person from the outset.

- a. Positionally and legally, the forgiven person is free from all the charges that stood against him before; the legally adopted son is a son no matter how he behaves.
- b. Inwardly, the justified and the adopted son now begins the process of becoming inherently righteous in their thoughts, values and actions (i.e., progressive sanctification).

³ Alan F. John, *Romans: The Freedom Letter* Vol., 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976)

- c. This is to say, the regeneration, through which the Holy Spirit begins dwelling in the justified, will commence the moral activity of sanctification.

B. Two key elements of justification

The intent of the law and debt cancellation

1. The intent of the law.

To be justified, the guilty individual must first admit his transgression.

- a. For many, this is difficult to do because they may not feel much like a sinner. That's because they compare their morality and character to the most unscrupulous and immoral person they know.
- b. However, all it takes for one to be a lawbreaker is to break just one law of God.



James states:

“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker” (James 2:10-1).

- c. Many people may not have committed the sins mentioned in the James passages, but everyone has committed one of the following sins more than once:
 - Sin of lust in the heart: “You have heard that it was said, 'Don't commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who look at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27-8).
 - Sin of omission: “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins” (James 4:17).
 - Sin of favoritism: “But if you show favoritism you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers” (James 2:9).



- d. The major intent of the law, then, is to show that “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

e.g., you shall not steal → you stole → therefore, you are a lawbreaker.

- (1) That's how Paul came to recognize that he was a sinner because the law revealed that he had a greedy heart.

He says: “Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet” (Rom 7:7).



(2) Paul added, “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).

This means that the law’s intent is to induce people to become aware of their sinfulness and imperfection so that when Christ is presented to them, they would believe and trust Him for the forgiveness of their sins.

2. Debt cancellation.

This concept is clearly taught in the parable in Matt. 18:23-27:

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.”

- a. The master in the story represents God; the indebted servant is the sinner.
- b. The 10,000 talents (\$20+ million) owed to the master symbolizes the depth and magnitude of our sins committed against God; it’s an unpayable amount.

This is another way of saying that salvation cannot be attained “as a result of works” (Eph. 2:8-9) because no “righteous things we had done” (Tit. 3:4) can cancel out the actual amount of debt owed.

- c. Cancelling the unpayable debt means that God has unilaterally forgiven our sins; accepting this offer of cancellation in faith makes us “guilt-free,” or justified from the charges of spiritual indebtedness.

In light of this parable, Romans 4:4-5 can be read in the following manner:

Now when man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift,

but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work (*repay*) but trusts God who justifies the wicked (*cancels the debt owed by the debtor*), his faith is credited as righteousness.



- d. God is able to do this because of the ultimate atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

(1) The act of forgiving the 10,000 talents by the master represents Jesus' sacrifice of himself whose shed blood resulted in permanent forgiveness of sins (Heb. 9:22).

(2) Only the blood of Christ is able "to take away the sins of many people" (Heb. 9:28) because it is not corrupted by sins (discussed later).

2. The rest of the parable shows that the justified person, in a legal sense, does not yet possess a righteous heart.



Matt. 18:28-35: But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had *mercy* on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'

- a. The concept of mercy is clearly depicted in this parable. The servant, who owes the 10,000 talents, deserves to be punished for not repaying it.

(1) However, the master does not treat him according to what his deed warrants; he says to him, "I had mercy on you," meaning he didn't inflict the punishment that the servant deserved.

(2) Seen from this angle, justification (exculpating the guilty individual) is a merciful act of God.

- b. This parable further shows that God's discipline (i.e., a symbolic meaning of "tortured") is one of the key means to transform the unrighteous heart to be righteous so that the justified can be merciful to others.

Discussion²: Forgiving others is a clearest sign that we understand that we have been mercifully justified by God; however, sometimes, forgiveness is hard. How have you struggled with this matter of forgiveness?

Homework 4

Read over the material covered in the last class and the additional Bible reading (if any). If you have any questions, please note them here and ask me later.

1. How did Luther understand Romans 1:17 before his change and how did he understand it afterward?
2. Describe justification in its legal sense.