

Justified! Romans 3:18-26

Portions adapted from: "Justification--The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls" D. Marion Clark @ SermonCentral.com

Well, we have somewhat peacefully installed our next American President; one who completely defies the political concept of "business as usual;" one who is either adored or abhorred—with very few in the middle—clearly highlighting the divisive spirit currently ruling our land. Who knows what these next few years will bring? It is amazing how a single person, even a single act, can change the course of human history. Such as, five hundred years ago, when an obscure monk was used by God to bring about the most momentous change in the church since it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, 1,200 hundred years earlier.

On October 31, All Hallows' Eve, Martin Luther, Augustinian monk and professor at the university in Wittenberg nailed a manuscript listing 95 points of protest to the church door (which served as the university's notice board). These protests had been written in Latin and invited debate among the university's scholars of a specific corrupt practice—the selling of indulgences—whereby the church officially forgave yours or a loved one's sins in exchange for a contribution toward helping to build St. Peter's basilica in Rome. Luther's protest was prompted by a leading indulgence marketer named Johann Tetzel who was walking through the town chanting. "*Once a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs!*" Other than a scholarly debate with his colleagues, Luther expected little reaction. Instead, someone took down the document, translated it into German, and distributed it across the region. It was the original social media viral event, and so began the Reformation.

That one act began a chain of events which culminated in the breakup of the Roman Catholic Church and the birthing of the Protestant Church.

The selling of indulgences was part of what would become the central issue of the Reformation, something over which these two churches remain divided to this day, namely the idea of **justification**. **What does it mean to be justified before God and how does one become justified?** This is the doctrine that the Reformers proclaimed and upon which the church either stands or falls.

since **ALL** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now **justified** by his **grace** as a **gift**, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus,
Romans 3:23, 24

And this idea, of God freely justifying sinners, which first moved Martin Luther and all the Reformers after him, came directly from the Romans passage we just read today.

Martin Luther claimed that this portion of Scripture, “*was the chief point and very central place of this epistle and the whole Bible.*” And while some might argue for a greater importance of other scriptures, it is hard to dispute that within these eight compact verses can be found profound summaries of

- The righteousness and justice of God
- Sin
- Faith
- Grace
- Redemption
- Forgiveness
- The work of God’s son, Jesus the Christ (our Messiah).
- And most importantly of what it means to be **justified**.

For these reasons, I urge you to return to this portion of Scripture this afternoon and this coming week, to read through it multiple times, to meditate on each of its ideas, and to **think long and hard about what it means for you now to be *justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*** It was through a renewed understanding of this idea of justification that the Reformation was first born, and can be reborn. And without any exaggeration is also your only hope of salvation; of being truly and freely forgiven those sins for which Tetzl would gladly have sold you a piece of paper.

But before we can even accept the good news of God’s gift of justification, we must first acknowledge the bad news--why we so desperately need it. We will never fully appreciate what it means to be justified until we comprehend what it would be like to stand before God as an unjustified sinner. It is for this reason that Paul began his gospel message not talking about the love of God but about His wrath. It is also important to notice how often he uses this word “**ALL,**” or its variations, to remind you that you are included in the group he is talking about.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ALL ungodliness and wickedness (Romans 1:18)

When was the last time you thought about the “wrath of God”? We don’t use the word “wrath” very often because it means so much more than being simply disturbed, or disappointed, or even very angry. Merriam Webster defines “wrath” as *strong vengeful anger or indignation; retributory punishment for an offense or a crime; divine chastisement.* That is why the word is seldom applied to humans, for few us have, enough power, enough stature, enough anger, to be truly wrathful. But apply this word to the maker of our universe, the creator of stars, and black holes, and super novas...

the one who will one day sit as our judge: God's wrath is not something you want to face.

Then attach this idea of God's wrath falling on **ALL** the ungodly, to Paul's conclusion that **ALL** of humanity stands guilty, unjustified, before him and you begin to get a sense of the desperate state we are in

whatever the law says, it speaks to
[**ALL**] those who are under the law, so that
EVERY MOUTH may be silenced,
and the **WHOLE WORLD**
may be held accountable to God. ...

For **NO HUMAN BEING**
will be justified in his sight
by deeds prescribed by the law,
for through the law
comes the **knowledge of sin**
Romans 3:19-20

It is this bad news, which is where we concluded last week, that even us good, religious types, must understand about ourselves before we can accept the good news that God, Jesus, and Paul would share with us. So to further clarify our position before God without His justification, we read ...

ALL have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God
Romans 3:23

[and] the wages of sin is death
Romans 6:23

Now, as unjustified sinners who have by our lives earned only death and God's wrath, we are ready to hear His wonderful answer for our condition.

But now, irrespective of law,
the righteousness of God
has been disclosed,
and is attested to by the law
and the prophets

Romans 3:21

Since all we can accomplish by keeping the law with regards to our salvation is the knowledge that we have failed, *for through the law [only] comes the knowledge of sin*, we need to know where to turn next. And God does not leave us wondering. He tells us where to turn next.

This reminds me of the Lifelock commercials on TV. Remember the one where the bank is being robbed while a man in a guard uniform does nothing except to tell the bank workers, *"oh I am not a security guard. I am a security monitor. I only tell people if there is a robbery...There is a robbery."* And the tagline to this commercial is, *"why would you monitor something if you don't do anything about it?"* That's a good question, why would God bother giving us the Law to inform us of our helpless guilt before His coming wrath, if He wasn't going to do something about it? This is actually what He has intended all along: **giving us a means of being justified that is not based on our failed attempts to keep the Law**. And He now informs us that, together with the words of the prophets, the Law was actually designed to bring us to this place of personal recognition of our own helplessness. We have failed, we cannot keep the Law, standing alone we are **ALL** doomed to face God's wrath: Jew, Gentile, saint and sinner.

Then God shows us the alternative that He offers--His righteousness is made freely available to **ALL** who accept it as a gift by putting their faith in the redemption provided for us by Jesus Christ.

since **ALL** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now **justified** by his **grace** as a **gift**, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **sacrifice of atonement** by his blood, effective through **faith** Romans 3:23-25

Now here is where things get technical. “**Justified**” is a legal term. It means to be declared righteous: ***just as if I had never sinned***. And **redemption** is a slave market term, it means ransoming, paying the fine—usually a very steep one—to release a captive slave or free a prisoner.

God acting solely by the **grace** that He extends to us, **forgives**, redeems, and ransoms us out of our slavery, out of our condemnation under the law and His own pending wrath. We do not have to win any contest or raise our test scores. He is able to do this for us because of what Jesus did for Him and us.

Here are two definitions worth remembering.

GRACE is getting
what we do not deserve.
MERCY is
not getting what we do deserve.

What is it that Christ did for us? Or rather, what mission did God send Jesus on? God sent Jesus into our world to pay the penalty for our sin. Jesus did this by offering himself to die in our place, he became the “**sacrifice of atonement**” before God that was necessary to pay the penalty and remove the sentence of condemnation which held us captive. Christ did the work; we place our faith in this work, so that God can **justify** us. Thus Tetzl was actually pretending to sell what Christ had already freely provided for all who would accept it by faith not by fee. Now that’s really a sales scam--right up there with selling ice to Eskimos, or bottled water, Christians paying a priest for a forgiveness that had already been purchased by Christ.

And this brings us to the legal maneuver by which our holy God, who must judge and punish sin, can remain holy while forgiving sinners: **Justification**.

God did this to show his righteousness ...
to prove at the present time that
He himself is righteous [while]
He justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.
(Romans 3:25)

Why did God have to send his own Son to die in order to forgive us?

The answer is this. If God simply forgave sin—without any penalty, He would no longer be righteous Himself. If a judge were to free a man judged to be guilty, he might be considered a merciful judge, but he would not be regarded as a righteous judge. Indeed, the victims of the guilty man’s crime would rightly label the judge as unrighteous. But God first pronounces the penalty and then He pays the penalty Himself. By doing this God remains just—He maintains His own righteousness—while being able to justify and redeem us guilty, ungodly people who accept His gift (Romans 4:5). So Romans 8:1 can joyously declare,

“There is therefore now
no condemnation for those
who are in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 8:1

The story is told of a small town judge whose teenage son was caught speeding and driving recklessly. The boy was brought immediately before the judge. But before he could say, *“Dad let me explain,”* he was immediately cut off and told, *“young man when you stand before this bench, you call me Judge, or Your Honor.”* With the evidence presented, the boy pleaded guilty and the judge handed down his sentence: you must pay \$200 or spend 20 days in jail. *“But Dad, I mean Your Honor, you know I don’t have that kind of money and in going to jail, I’ll miss school and would lose my job.”* *“Sorry, young man,”* the Judge said, *“a crime had been committed and the fine must be paid.”* And he brought down his gavel declaring the case closed, court dismissed. But then ... he rises from his judge’s seat, takes off his judge’s robes, goes down to the bailiff’s window, takes out his check book and personally pays the fine. Then turning to the young man, he puts his arm around his shoulder and says, *“Let’s go home son.”*

That is how God justifies us. When we guilty sinners—those who have put our trust in Jesus Christ—stand before God the judge, He sees the payment as already having been made for us by Jesus and so He can declare us forgiven and claim us once again as His own children. It is as if we have tapped into Jesus’ personal checking account of holiness—drawing out the necessary payment for our sin from his wealth. We never earned this; yet it has been freely given to us.

Is our justification legal? Yes it is. According to ancient law an innocent person can pay the penalty for a guilty one. Was our redemption costly? Yes. Jesus paid for us with his own life.

When I was growing up as a good little Presbyterian, not understanding what it means to be justified, I lived more according to the Catholic concept of salvation. No, I did not revere Mary or eat fish on Fridays, but I would have answered anyone asking me if I were going to heaven: *“I think so. I believe in Jesus and... I try to be good, and I go to*

church." I had this image of God as an old man in a long white robe holding a pair of scales on which my good and bad deeds, my assets and debts were weighed against each other; God looked sort of like Father Time but with an attitude. It seemed like hard work to build up the assets and easy to build up the debts. How good did I need to be to outweigh a bad deed? Not being a Catholic, I did not have purgatory to fall back on, so for me it would be either heaven or hell. Later in life, hoping for forgiveness, I certainly would have been a customer to whom Tetzal would gladly sell.

Basically, I believed what many of us still seemingly come to believe even in Protestant churches. Somehow, we have lost the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. Perhaps that is why many churches have fallen and denominations continue to decline. We have turned the gospel—the good news—back into another form of law-keeping. Do this, don't do that, if you want to earn God's favor. Perhaps that is why even we evangelicals have become Pharisees who turn up our noses at those unbelievers and sinners "out there." We have confused the righteousness that Christ has freely, undeservedly, and unreservedly, given us with a righteousness that we think we are earning and which we consider makes us better than others.

What happens when a church and her people have a solid grasp on the doctrine of **justification**? What happens when we understand that we have been justified by the grace of God based on the righteous work of Christ which we hold onto by faith?

It means that we can wake up each day with the knowledge that whatever happens that day or did happen the day before, there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus; we are accepted before God in the righteousness of Christ. We belong to him; we will not be cast out.

Will this make us lazy and even degenerate as critics claim? It could for anyone who only has head knowledge of justification. But for those who know such a doctrine in the center of their hearts; who understand what it is to be a condemned offender, waiting for the verdict of guilty to be pronounced, and yet hears "not guilty" proclaimed—such knowledge leads to the truly abundant life that Jesus promised.

- It leads to wanting to do what is right,
- wanting to do what pleases our holy God,
- wanting to be righteous.

It is to live not shackled with chains of dos and don'ts, but to live as one whose chains have fallen off so that we may freely, joyfully follow our Savior and Lord.

It is to see ourselves in other sinners, knowing that we are no better than anyone else without Christ. We are not more righteous than our neighbor; we are not more deserving of the grace of God. There is no distinction: all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Why should any of us receive the gift of justification? This is a mystery. But it is such a wondrous gift that it is worth sharing with others. It is worth

living such a life that others will be attracted to it. It is such a humbling gift, that we should love everyone especially our enemies. We should never be filled with envy, never with animosity, never with pride.

Understanding **justification** keeps us centered on what matters. The gospel is not the good news that Jesus will solve all of our earthly problems.

- Can He make you happier than you are now? Yes. But following Him can create a whole set of new troubles you would not have had.
- Can He fill the emptiness of your heart? Definitely. But being a believer in the midst of trials and persecution can still feel lonely.
- Can following Him lead to a more successful life? It can--if you have been lazy and have cheated throughout your life. But following Jesus can also lead to losing your job, and it certainly does not shield you from the illnesses and troubles that everyone else goes through.
- Can believing in Him help with overcoming sin? Sure. But you will also become more aware of sin that earlier you had ignored.

Here is the one thing that your understanding of justification will do for you: it will make you realize that the one thing that matters most is the one thing that is most secure—your eternal, full acceptance before God, the holy, righteous Judge, who loves you so much that He sent his own Son into your fallen world, to find you and redeem you from your slavery to death and sin so that He may claim you as His own.

Is that not amazing grace? You, Christian, you need to remind yourself of this the next time you are tempted to ask God what He has done for you lately; the next time you are tempted to ask God what it was that caused you to deserve the latest trouble in your life. Remember what you truly deserve and that instead you have been **justified** in Christ Jesus.

And, you who have yet to turn to Christ in faith, perhaps you have always considered yourself a Christian because you believe there is a God and you try to be a pretty good person. Perhaps you know that you have never believed. Whatever your story, is this not a gift worth accepting? Or will you continue on, hoping you are doing enough to get by whenever that unknown time comes to appear before your Maker?

Why not let God take off your rags of self-righteousness and sin so He may clothe you in the righteousness of Jesus Christ? He is willing to make that exchange with you, whoever you are, whatever you have done. No condemnation. Fully justified.

And, what better time than this New Year, to take that step of faith which can change your world forever?