

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—  
*Lesson 29—Our Justification, Q. 33, Part 2*

**Understanding Justification**

- I. What is justification? Rom 4.1-8
  - A. The Author of justification
    1. The *Author* of justification is God, Rom 8.33
    2. The *recipients* of justification are all those *sinners* whom God effectually calls, Rom 4.5; 8.30
  - B. What it is and what it is not
    1. Justification is a legal term referring to a judicial *act* in the Court of Heaven in which God, as Judge, *pronounces* a sinner to be righteous in His sight.
    2. Being a declaration, it happens in an instant and is completed at once. It's not a process, a work effected over time (like sanctification), but a sudden, instantaneous act of God.
    3. Being a *pronouncement* about a man, justification does not *make* a man righteous. Rather, it *pronounces* him righteous, in God's court—and of course, on acceptable, righteous grounds.
    4. Being an act of God *about* a sinner and taking place *outside* of him in God's *judgment* of him, justification *is not* a change of a man's *nature*, a change on the inside (that's what God does in sanctification), but rather a change, *forensically or legally*, in his *standing* toward the law and court of God.
      - a) This means: in our justification, Judgement Day has already taken place. It took place *historically* when our Federal Representative was raised from the dead (Rom 4.25; Isa 50.5-9) and *experientially* when we believed (Rom 4.3-4; 5.1; Mt 25.33-34; cf. Q.38).
- II. Justification has two critical elements: *pardon of sin* and *accounting and accepting as righteous*
  - A. Although justification is a *single* act, *two* things are necessarily involved in the pronouncement:
    1. The sinner is pardoned and forgiven of all his sins. The guilt of all his sins is *removed* so that he's no longer obligated to bear the punishment of sin, which is death (Rom 6.23; 8.1).
      - a) Moreover, we must understand that this pronouncement extends to all his sins and all their aggravations, Jer 33.8. All the sins of the believer are *at once* pardoned in his justification. His *past* sins are forgiven and his *future* sins will not be imputed to him, so that he *cannot* come into condemnation (Ps 32.1-2; Jn 5.24; Rom 8.1-3; Heb 8.12).
      - b) **John Dick**, To *pardon* a sinner is to declare that "although he's violated the law, it will not have its course upon him; but he shall be exempted from the fatal effects of his transgressions and be treated as if he were innocent, Isa 44.22; 43.25; 38.17; Mic 7.19; Ps 32.2; Jer 50.20."
      - c) The pardon of sin granted in justification is *irrevocable*. It can't but be since it takes in *all* the sins and *all* the guilt of the sinner, both past, present, and future. In justification, a foundation is laid for the *permanent* exercise of God's mercy and good-will towards believers in the inexhaustible efficacy of the atonement of His Son.
    2. But the *forgiveness of sins* isn't the only blessing granted in justification.
      - a) In justification the sinner is also *accounted perfectly righteous before God and accepted as if he had perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law of God*.
      - b) The *justified sinner* is not only *no longer liable* to punishment but also has a *right* to all the immunities and rewards which follow perfect conformity to the law of God, Rom 5.1; Acts 26.18
      - c) **Dick**, "Pardon frees the sinner from the pains of hell, but gives him no right to the happiness of heaven. He must somehow be possessed of a complete righteousness which can answer all the *demands* of the law before he can be *accepted* by his Maker and obtain the inheritance."
- III. The grounds of justification
  - A. There are two ways in which a man might become righteous.

1. By personal obedience. But after the fall, this is impossible, 1Kgs 8.46; Rom 3.20, 28; Gal 2.16; 3.10
  2. By *imputation*. In this case, one acts as a *Surety* for a debtor. He takes his place, comes under his obligations, and fulfills them in his name. And if he does it, the obedience of this Surety is then credited to the man indebted. \*According to Scripture, this is how believers are justified. The perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, who became their Surety and undertook all their obligations, is imputed or credited to them by God, WSC 33
- B. And so in imputation, God justifies the ungodly (Rom 4.5), *by* a righteousness not their own (Phil 3.9), *by* grace alone (Rom 3.24; Eph 2.8), *so that* no man may boast (Rom 3.27; Eph 2.8-9).
- C. *In imputation* God doesn't reckon that the sinner has performed the law *himself*—that would be justification by works, which, with regard to sinners, would not be a judgment according to truth.
1. Rather, He *accounts* or *credits* the righteousness of Christ *to* them *for* their justification, justifying them without and apart from their works (Rom 4.5). He treats the sinner *as if* he were *legally* righteous *because* the righteousness of Christ has been *legally credited* to him.
- IV. The *pardon* of sin and the *accepting* as righteousness are distinct, but inseparable. The *imputation* of Christ's righteousness to the sinner is the foundation of *both* his pardon and his reconciliation to God.
- A. The righteousness of Christ has both an active and a passive dimension, *active* in His obedience to the *precepts* of the law and *passive* in His obedience to the *penalties* of the law and it's \*this *whole and complete* righteous that's imputed to the sinner in justification. This imputed whole righteousness at once *secures both* his pardon (because the penalty's been fully paid by Christ as his Surety) *and* his acceptance (because all the precepts were fully obeyed by Christ as his Surety).
- B. Thus the righteousness in which we stand before God as justified is *never* our own *personal* righteousness. It remains Christ's perfect and inviolable righteousness, but it is irrevocably imputed to us by God *so that* we are ever treated judicially *both* as if we had never sinned and as if we had perfectly kept all the demands of God's holy law.
- V. The receiving of justification
- A. This benefit is the fruit of our being united to Christ in our effectual calling. It's effected sovereignly by the Spirit's supernatural work. But it's received by us through the means of faith in Christ as the gospel offers Him to us, Gal 2.16; Rom 4.5
1. Faith is the *instrument of receiving* Christ and His righteousness because faith, by nature, is a going out of oneself to rest on another. Faith therefore presupposes the absence of that which is needed in the person who acts in faith.
  2. The faith by which a sinner is justified is a purposed looking outside of oneself and unto Christ. Justifying faith is a conscious *self-abandoning* for any ground of righteousness before God and a *Christ-receiving* as the whole ground of righteousness before God.
- B. Moreover, the faith by which a sinner receives Christ is not something he suddenly musters within himself, but is the free gift of God given to all those whom He effectually calls, Phil 1.29; Eph 2.8; Acts 14.27.

### Reflections

- I. The doctrine of justification before God by faith alone in Christ alone because of grace alone is one of the most precious truths of the Christian faith. It's fundamental to our eternal hope and critical to every part and link of the Christian life. It is the perpetual cause of our praise to God and our humbling ourselves in the dust as unworthy sinners.
- II. The reason 1Jn 1.9 says God is just to forgive us, is because Christ has fully paid our debt, Isa 53.11; Rom 5.8-10; 2Cor 5.21; Gal 3.13; Eph 5.2
  - A. In the salvation of sinners by the cross of Christ, God's justice and grace meet and kiss each other.
  - B. Salvation is of grace; but this grace comes to us in a way of righteousness. It is grace to us; but it was brought about in such a way that all our debt was paid.
- III. There's no reason to look for anything in yourself to justify or warrant the justification you've received. Your justification is a matter of free and sovereign grace. Exalt the Lord, sing His praise, tell of His grace, and love His Son.