



Doctrine of Salvation

Justification & Adoption¹

Explanation and Scriptural Basis

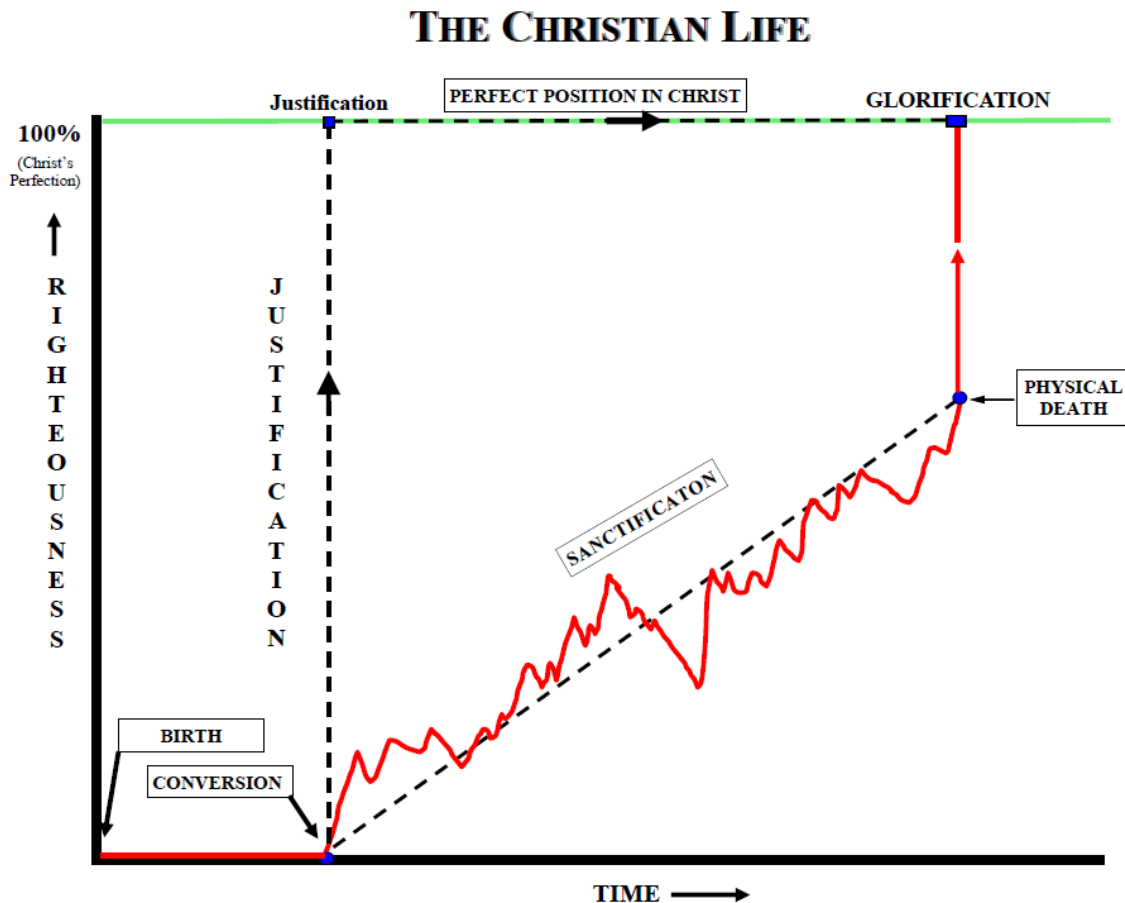
- In recent lessons, we have discussed the gospel call (in which God calls us to trust in Christ for salvation), regeneration (in which God imparts new spiritual life to us), and conversion (in which we respond to the gospel call in repentance for sin and faith in Christ for salvation). *But what about the guilt of our sin?*
- The biblical word used to describe the declaration of God for us that we are “right” with him is justification. A right understanding of justification is crucial to the whole Christian faith. Once Martin Luther realized the truth of justification by faith alone, he became a Christian and overflowed with the newfound joy of the gospel.
- When Paul gives an overview of the process by which God applies salvation to us, he mentions justification explicitly: “Those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also *justified*; and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom 8:30).
- After effective calling and the response that it initiates on our part, the next step in the application of salvation is “justification.” Here Paul mentions that this is something that God himself does: “Those whom he called *he also justified*.”
- Paul quite clearly teaches that this justification comes *after* our faith and *as God’s response to* our faith. He says that God “justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26), and that “a man is *justified by faith* apart from works of law” (Rom 3:28). See also Rom 5:1 and Gal 2:16.
- **Definition of justification:** *Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.*

Justification Includes a **Legal Declaration** by God

- The use of the word *justify* in the Bible indicates that justification is a legal declaration by God. This is seen in verses like Rom 3:20, 26, 28; 5:1; 8:30; 10:4, 10; Gal 2:16; 3:24.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). This lesson outline contains content directly quoted or adapted from chapter 22 of Grudem.

- The meaning of this word comes out particularly clearly in Rom 4:5: “To one who does not work but trusts him who *justifies the ungodly*, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.” In this verse, Paul means that God declares the ungodly to be righteous in his sight, not on the basis of their good works, but in response to their faith.
- The idea that justification is a legal declaration is also quite evident when justification is contrasted with condemnation.
 - Paul says, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who *justifies*; who is to condemn?” (Rom 8:33–34).
 - To condemn someone is to declare that person guilty.
 - The opposite of condemnation is justification, which, in this context, must mean “to declare someone not guilty.”
 - In this sense of “*declare to be righteous*” or “*declare to be not guilty*,” Paul uses the word to speak of God’s declaration that we, though guilty sinners, are nonetheless righteous in his sight. It is important to emphasize that this legal declaration in itself does not change our internal nature or character at all.



God Declares Us to Be Just in His Sight

- In God's declaration of justification, he specifically declares that we are *just in his sight*. This declaration involves two aspects.
 - First, it means that he declares that we have no penalty to pay for sin, including past, present, and future sins. See Rom 8:1: "There is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus."
 - In this sense, those who are justified have no penalty to pay for sin. This means that we are not subject to any charge of guilt or condemnation (see Rom 8:33–34). In God's act of justification, he grants us full forgiveness of sins.
 - But if God merely declared us to be *forgiven from our sins*, that would not solve our problems entirely, for it would only make us morally neutral before God. We would be in the state that Adam was in before he had done anything right or wrong in God's sight—he was not guilty before God, but neither had he earned a record of righteousness before God.
 - So, forgiveness of sins is only one aspect of justification.
 - The second aspect of justification is that God must declare us not to be merely neutral in his sight, but actually to be *righteous* in his sight.
 - The OT sometimes spoke of God as giving such righteousness to his people even though they had not earned it themselves. See Isa 61:10.
 - But Paul speaks more specifically about this in the NT. See Rom 3:21 – 22; 4:3; 5:19.
- But questions then arise: how can God declare that we have no penalty to pay for sin and that we have the merits of perfect righteousness if we are in fact guilty sinners? How can God declare us to be not guilty but righteous when in fact we are unrighteous? The answer is our next point!

God Can Declare Us to Be Just Because He Imputes Christ's Righteousness to Us

- When we say that God *imputes* Christ's righteousness to us, it means that God thinks of Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, or regards it as belonging to us. He "reckons" (or "credits") it to our account. See Rom 4:3 (quoting Gen 15:6).
 - In this way, by faith Christ's righteousness became ours.
 - Paul says that we are those who have received the "free gift of righteousness" (Rom 5:17).

- This is the third time in studying the doctrines of Scripture that we have encountered the idea of imputing guilt or righteousness.
 - First, when Adam sinned, his guilt was imputed to us; God the Father viewed it as belonging to us, and therefore it did.
 - Second, when Christ suffered and died for our sins, our sin was imputed to Christ; God thought of it as belonging to him, and he paid the penalty for it. See 2 Cor 5:21.
 - Now, in the doctrine of justification we see imputation for the third time. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, and therefore God thinks of it as belonging to us. It is not our own righteousness, but Christ's righteousness, that is freely given to us. See 1 Cor 1:30; Phil 3:9; Rom 3:21–22.
- It is essential to the heart of the gospel to insist that God declares us to be just or righteous not on the basis of our actual condition of holiness, but rather on the basis of Christ's perfect holiness, which God thinks of as belonging to us. It's a gift of grace (Rom 6:23).

Justification Comes to Us Entirely by God's Grace, Not on Account of Any Merit in Ourselves

- After Paul explains in Rom 1:18–3:20 that no one will ever be able to make himself righteous before God, he goes on to explain that “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified *by his grace as a gift*, though the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23–24).
 - God's “grace” means his “unmerited favor” or “generosity.” Because we are completely unable to earn favor with God, the only way we could be declared righteous is if God freely provides salvation for us by grace, totally apart from our work. See Eph 2:8–9; cf. Titus 3:7.
 - God did not have any obligation to impute our sin to Christ or to impute Christ's righteousness to us; it was only because of his grace that he did this. For this reason, we say that justification comes by *grace alone*, not by grace plus some merit on our part.

God Justifies Us Through Our Faith in Christ

- Faith is an instrument to obtain justification, but it has no merit in itself.
 - Scripture never says that we are justified because of the inherent goodness of our faith, as if our faith has merit before God. It never allows us to think that our faith in itself earns favor with God.

- Rather, Scripture says that we are justified “by means of” our faith, understanding faith to be the instrument through which justification is given to us, not at all an activity that earns us God’s grace. Rather, we are justified solely because of the merits of Christ’s work (Rom 5:17–19).
- Why did God choose faith as the instrument for receiving justification?
 - It is apparently because *faith* is the one attitude of heart that is the exact opposite of depending on ourselves.
 - When we come to Christ, we essentially say, “I give up! I will not depend on myself or my own good works any longer. I think that I can never make myself righteous before God. Therefore, Jesus, I trust you and depend on you completely to give me a righteous standing before God.”
 - See Rom 4:16; Eph 2:8–9; Gal 2:16; 3:11; 5:4.
- Practical implications of justification by faith alone.
 - First, this doctrine enables us to offer genuine *hope* to unbelievers who know they could never make themselves righteous before God. If salvation is a free gift to be received through faith *alone*, then anyone who hears the gospel may hope that eternal life is freely offered and may be obtained.
 - Second, this doctrine gives us confidence that God will never make us pay the penalty for sins that have been forgiven on Christ’s merits.
 - Of course, we may continue to suffer the ordinary *consequences* of sin (e.g. like a thief who is justified may still have to go to jail to pay the penalty for his crime).
 - Moreover, God may *discipline* us if we continue to act in ways that are disobedient to him (see Heb 12:5–11), doing this out of love and for our own good.
 - But God never can or will *take vengeance* on us for past sins or *make us pay the penalty* that is due for them or *punish us out of wrath* and *for the purpose of doing us harm*. See Rom 8:1.
 - This fact should give us a great sense of joy and confidence before God that we are accepted by him and that we stand before him as “not guilty” but “righteous” forever.

Adoption

- In addition to justification, there is another amazing privilege that God gives us at the time we become Christians, the privilege of *adoption*.
- **Definition of adoption:** *Adoption is an act of God whereby he makes us members of his family.*

- Although adoption is a privilege that comes to us at the time we become Christians (John 1:12; Gal 3:26; 1 John 3:1–2), it is, nevertheless, a privilege that is distinct from justification and distinct from regeneration.
 - For example, God could have given us justification without the privileges of adoption into his family, for he could have forgiven our sins and given us right legal standing before him without making us his children.
 - Similarly, he could have made us spiritually alive through regeneration and yet not members of his family with the special privileges of family members. The biblical teaching on adoption focuses much more on the personal relationship that salvation gives us with God and with his people.
- John mentions adoption at the beginning of his gospel, where he says, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power *to become children of God*” (John 1:12). By contrast, those who do not believe in Christ are not children of God or adopted into his family but are “children of wrath” (Eph 2:3) and “sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2; 5:6). The NT epistles also bear repeated testimony to the fact that we are not God’s children in a special sense, members of his family. See Rom 8:14–17.
- But if we are God’s children, are we then related to one another as family members? Certainly so. In fact, this adoption into God’s family makes us partakers together in *one family* even with the believing Jews of the OT, for Paul says that we are Abraham’s children as well (Rom 9:7–8; Gal 4:28, 31; cf. 1 Pet 3:6).
- Although the NT says that we are *now* God’s children (1 John 3:2), we should also note that there is another sense in which our adoption is still future because we will not receive the full benefits and privileges of adoption until Christ returns and we have new resurrection bodies. See Rom 8:23.

Questions for Personal Application

- Are you confident that God has declared you “not guilty” forever in his sight? Do you know when that happened in your life? Did you do or think anything that resulted in God’s justifying of you?
- If you think of yourself standing before God on the day of judgment, would you think that it is enough simply to have your sins all forgiven, or would you also feel a need to have the righteousness of Christ credited to your account?
- Have you ever wondered if God is still continuing to punish you from time to time for sins you have done in the past, even long ago? How does the doctrine of justification help you deal with those feelings?
- How many benefits can you think of that come to you because you are a member of God’s family?