

## **Doctrinal Statements (3): Justification**

In 1511 an Augustinian monk, disillusioned and disappointed with the corruption he was witnessing in the established church, visited the Sancta Scala (The Holy Stairs) in Rome. On his knees halfway up the 28 stairs the Scripture came to him with electrifying clarity, “The just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17). He rose, stood to his full height, and slowly made his way down the stairs. The doctrine of justification became the pivot of what we know as the Reformation, leading Martin Luther to declare, “For when the article of justification has fallen, everything has fallen. This is the chief article from which all other doctrines have flowed.”

### **The Demand for Justification**

The demand for justification is a consequence of the sentence pronounced in Romans 3:19: “All the world may become guilty before God.” In the argument which Paul has advanced in this book, he has identified the reprobate (Rom 1:19-32), the rationalist (2:1-16), and the ritualist (2:17-3:8). All are brought to stand before God, all have received the witness of creation (1:20), conscience (2:15), and the Scriptures (3:10). There are 14 indictments brought as charges against them (3:10-18). The Judge announces the sentence: all mankind, both Jew and Gentile, stand guilty before God.

It has often been noted that the question of Bildad the Shuhite, “How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?” (Job 25:4), was never fully answered until Paul wrote the book of Romans. The section from Romans 3:20 to 5:21 shows how the demand for justification is met and how the condemned can be declared righteous.

### **The Definition of Justification**

Justification has been defined as “making a person righteous.” This is an incorrect view of this Bible doctrine. Those who teach this view see justification as a process and people are continually being justified, until at a final judgment before God a verdict is reached. Justification in the Bible is never viewed as making a person righteous. It is always viewed as declaring a person righteous. The moment a person accepts Christ by faith, he is declared righteous by God: “justified freely by His grace” (Rom 3:24).

### **The Distinctiveness of Justification**

Justification is linked with sanctification. While they are distinct terms and should be distinguished they should never be separated. Justification declares a person righteous and happens instantly. Sanctification has a positional aspect (1Cor 6:11) but is also something which continues (1Thes 4:3, 7). A Christian can become more holy but can never be more justified. Justification does not change me personally, it changes me positionally. Justification relates to my position, sanctification relates to my practice.

The details of justification

As noted, Romans 3:24 makes it clear that we are “justified freely by His grace.” The word translated “freely” in this text is translated “for nought” in 2 Thessalonians 3:8. Justification is a gift, without payment. It is also translated “without a cause” in John 15:25. God finds no reason, no cause, and no basis in the sinner for declaring him righteous. The basis for justification is God’s grace.

The instrument or means of justification is faith. This is clear from Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God.” Faith is taking God at His Word; it does not contribute to justification, nor is it meritorious on behalf of the sinner. Faith does not add anything to justification, nor is it a gift. It is simply the instrument which brings us into the standing of justification. In Romans 5:1-11 note the reference to “we have.” We have peace with God, a standing in grace, hope of the glory of God, we rejoice in our sufferings, we shall be saved through Christ and we rejoice in God. The words translated “rejoice” in verse two and “glory” in verse three literally mean “to boast.” This also links with verse 11 where the same word is translated “joy.” These show how much Paul enjoyed this cornucopia of Biblical truth.

The ground of justification is the blood of Christ. “Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (Rom 5:9). It is interesting to notice that we are “now” justified, but “we shall be saved.” Presently, we have already been justified, but we are also assured of salvation not only from tribulation wrath but also eternal wrath. We are justified at the cost of “His blood.” This signifies the sacrificial aspect of the death of Christ.

## **The Display of Justification**

Most will be aware of Martin Luther’s famous quote regarding the book of James. He is quoted as saying “it is an epistle of straw.” He could not reconcile the justification by works spoken of by James and Paul’s description of justification by faith. “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified and not by faith only” (James 2:24). Is there a contradiction between Paul and James on this subject? The simple answer is, “no.” James reminds us that works confirmed the faith of Abraham and Rahab. The works of both were the consequences of their faith, not the reason why they were declared righteous. Abraham was already a believer before he offered Isaac; likewise, Rahab was already justified before she received the spies with peace.

In conclusion, I was once guilty, under judgment to God. By faith in Christ, I have been declared righteous by God, my position has been changed irrevocably, and my destiny changed eternally. I rejoice to sing:

*O joy of the justified, joy of the free!  
I’m washed in that crimson tide opened for me;  
In Christ my Redeemer, rejoicing I stand,  
And point to the print of the nail in His Hand.*