



The ground or basis for justification

This article takes up the question of the ground or basis of our justification. It begins with a classic statement of the doctrine from the Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A. 60.

Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; that is, though my conscience accuse me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil, yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.

Upon what is it based?

If justification has to do with our standing and acceptance before God — as I argued in a previous article — the most crucial question that we face is: upon what is it based? This is the key issue, the fundamental matter. It was so at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and it remains so to this day. Upon what ground can we find acceptance with God and enjoy right standing with Him?

In answer to this question, the Scriptures teach that, when God justifies the ungodly, when God declares us to be acceptable to Himself, He does so on the basis of the obedience and suffering of Jesus Christ. He does so only upon the basis of that righteousness, which is in Christ Jesus, which He grants and imputes to us as a free gift of His grace. No righteousness that is ours, no work of the law that we have done, nothing that we present — can make us acceptable to God. Our justification is wholly and exclusively based upon the work of Christ who has become our righteousness from God (1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9).

In *Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof puts this well in his short definition of justification:

"Justification is a judicial act of God, in which God declares, on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that all of the claims of the law (both in terms of what the law demands of us in the way of positive obedience and the lawbreaker's liability to condemnation and death) are satisfied with respect to the sinner."

Now at this point we sometimes make a very serious mistake in our understanding of justification. We are so keenly interested in saying that it is by grace alone and apart from works of the law that we give the impression that God justifies sinners at the expense of His own righteousness. We give credence to the idea that God somehow violates justice in clearing the guilty. But the Scriptures teach that God will in no way clear the guilty. He is of purer eyes than to look upon evil. And so the question in understanding the basis of our justification is: how is it possible that God can be just — while honoring and respecting the demands of His own law in which His righteousness is exhibited — and at the same time regard forgiven, ungodly, undeserving sinners as acceptable to himself?

The answer to that question is this: God satisfies His justice; He sees to it that the wages of sin are paid through the redemption provided for us through the blood of Christ. He sees to it that the obligation of the law is fulfilled by way of the obedience of another, our mediator Jesus Christ, the one Man who by His one act of righteousness constituted righteous those who are His (Romans

5:18-19). Though there are many Scriptural passages that teach this, I will cite only three by way of illustration.

Scriptural passages

Romans 3:24-26

In Romans 3, verses 24 through 26, the apostle Paul speaks of our *"being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."*

Now the thing upon which the apostle Paul especially focuses in these verses is the propitiatory sacrifice of our Lord Jesus, His substitutionary endurance of the just displeasure of God against the sinner. God demonstrated His justice in not excusing sin, in not forever passing over sin, but, in the fullness of time, pronouncing at the cross of Christ that we are guilty and are liable to the law's condemnation and sentence of death. Who, according to this passage, assumed the place of the guilty? Who shouldered the burden of sin for us? Who was bruised for our iniquities? Our Lord Jesus Christ! He took our place and suffered the law's penalty on our behalf.

The *Heidelberg Catechism*, when the question is asked concerning the basis of our justification, echoes the teaching of this passage when it speaks of God granting and imputing to us the perfect righteousness, satisfaction, and obedience of Jesus Christ. And so what the apostle Paul is telling us here in these verses is that the ground upon which God justifies us is the atoning work of Jesus Christ. This atoning work, he maintains, is an expression of God's grace and kindness toward us. It is not something that we have earned or deserved. On the contrary, it is a free gift of God's grace toward us. That's why, in the early portion of Romans 4, he goes on to draw a contrast between the laborer who is paid a just wage due him for his labor and the recipient of a free gift. Our justification is not like a wage earned by a laborer, but it is a free gift of God's grace. Thus, to introduce works as a basis for our justification would contradict the grace of God and make the atoning sacrifice of Christ of no effect.

Romans 4:25

But now if you go over to verse 25 in Romans 4, the apostle provides a very brief statement of the way in which our justification is based solely upon the work of Christ. Christ, he declares, *"was delivered up for our transgressions, and was raised for our justification."*

So as far as Christ's relation to the law's demand was concerned, He was wholly righteous. He came to fulfill all righteousness, and so He did. Thus, before God's judgment seat, the sentence of which He was worthy was undeniably that of "innocent, not guilty." But this is the marvel of God's grace toward us in Christ: He substituted Himself for us — He was delivered over to death on account of our transgressions. We broke the law; Christ kept it. We deserved to bear its penalty; Christ took the penalty. This is the ground under our feet, says the apostle, when it comes to our justification. The demands of God's law — that we live before Him in obedience, that we suffer the consequence of our disobedience — have been shouldered by another. Christ has assumed these obligations. And, because He assumed these obligations for us, fulfilling all righteousness, He was raised for our justification. In His resurrection, we hear God the Father's verdict, His amen to Christ's *"It is finished."* His resurrection declares to us that our warfare is over, our sins have been fully paid for, the price of our redemption has been met. The Father shows His regard for us in raising His Son from the dead — for our justification! Christ's resurrection declares the Father's verdict regarding us.

Romans 5:18-19

The last Scripture proof that I will mention is in Romans chapter 5, verses 18 and 19: *"So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness, there resulted justification of life to all men."* These verses stand in the context of a

chapter describing the parallel and analogy between the first and the second Adams. Through the sin and disobedience of the first Adam, all have become sinners and are liable to condemnation and death. However, through the obedience of the second Adam, many have been constituted righteous and are heirs of life eternal.¹

Nothing could be more clear from these verses than that it was not by our obedience or righteousness that we are justified. Nothing that we bring of ourselves before God commends us to His favor. Rather, it was by the act of another, the obedience of Jesus Christ, that we are constituted righteous, no longer liable to that condemnation that brings death.²

In short, the situation is exactly as Louis Berkhof describes it in his definition of justification. On the basis of the righteousness of Christ, God declares that all of the demands of His law have been fully satisfied for us. Not only has Christ kept the law for us, but He has suffered its curse (compare Galatians 3:20). Thus, it is by grace alone (*sola gratia*) for the sake of Christ alone (*sola Christo*) that God declares us acceptable to Him. Now, of course, the negative side of that, to which I will not give special attention, is the repeated emphasis in the Scriptures that our justification is not by works. None of us has or could ever begin to satisfy for our sins. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life. None of us could ever begin to fulfill all righteousness and thus commend ourselves to God's favor. The good news, however, is that this has been accomplished for us by our Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I sometimes wonder whether we have scarcely begun to appreciate what good news this is for sinners like you and me. Do we realize that, in our justification, God doesn't simply say that He finds us tolerable? The situation for us is much better than that: in justification, God declares us acceptable, well-pleasing to Him. At the risk of an irreverent anthropomorphism, we must understand that, when God justifies us, He doesn't hold His nose or avert His eyes as though we were repugnant to Him as sinners. No, He sees us as we truly are: clothed, dressed, adorned with the garment of Christ's righteousness. So that we are altogether lovely to Him! So that we are as approved of Him as Christ is!

I have to return at this point to the language of the Heidelberg Catechism. When God grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, He regards me *"as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me, if I only accept such benefit with a believing heart."* The truth and comfort of our justification on the basis of the work of Christ is put beautifully by Luther in his great sermon on "two kinds of righteousness." He describes it this way:

"The bridegroom has nothing that is his only. The bride has a full part in everything that is the bridegroom's. So the living, the dying, the working, the suffering, all of that which is Christ has become ours. We have a full share in it. We have a part in it. We are adorned with it. The two have become one."

Conclusion

All of this means that, in the doctrine of our free justification on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, we have to do with nothing less than the gospel. Wherein does this gospel consist? It consists in the praise of Christ alone, whose righteousness is sufficient to our need and the only ground of our confidence before God.

Sometimes there is, in this connection, a profound misunderstanding of what was at stake in the Reformation. Some say that the basic question of the Reformation was, how can I, a sinner, find acceptance and be at peace with God? But this is only a half-truth at best, perhaps a serious distortion at worst. It would be better to say that the basic question of the Reformation was, how can the church restore to her preaching a proper appreciation for God's unmerited grace toward us in Christ? For the point is not so much, how can I find peace with God?, as it is, how can I give proper praise to God's righteousness in Christ? *"Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord!"*

For this reason, when Calvin considers the two primary implications of the doctrine of our free justification, the first implication he emphasizes is this: the doctrine of free justification demands

that we not divide between God and ourselves what belongs to God alone. This is the heart of the Reformation's testimony regarding God's grace in Christ: Let God be God, the One who justifies the ungodly for the sake of the work of Christ alone.

Cornelis P Venema

© 2014

www.christianstudylibrary.org

¹ I am not interested here in dealing with the "apparent" universalism of verse 18, which speaks of "justification of life to all men." It should only be noted that, in the context, the apostle makes it quite clear that only those who through faith are joined to Christ benefit from His saving work

² Though I am not devoting any special attention in this article to the alternative view of the ground of justification in Roman Catholic teaching, a comment on this alternative is in order at this point. According to the classic statement of the doctrine at the Council of Trent, the righteousness on account of which we are justified, though it derives from the working of God's grace infused into us through the sacrament of baptism, is our own righteousness. Our being renewed in the way of Christian obedience and righteousness (to be sure, produced by God's grace in us) becomes a significant part of the ground for our justification by God. For this reason, those who obey the commandments of God and of the church, "faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified" (emphasis mine, Sixth Session, Chap. 10). This has two very serious consequences: first, Christ alone is no longer my righteousness before God; and second, I cannot have any assurance of salvation (unless by special dispensation and revelation) since my own righteousness can scarcely provide me any sure footing in the presence of God!