

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation
Lecture 12
Different Views of Justification

We've been talking about the doctrine of salvation. Today we begin a new subsection on the doctrine of justification.

The key term in this section is, of course, the term "to justify," which is the Greek word *dikaioō*. This means to put into a right relationship with God. Justification is that act of God whereby he puts us into a right relationship with him. However, Protestants and Catholics have traditionally had very different understandings of justification.

Let's look at some of the different views of justification. Let's talk first about the view of the Protestant Reformers.

The traditional Protestant Reformation understanding of justification is that justification is a *forensic* term. That is to say, it is a judicial act of God. We are not made righteous in the sense that we suddenly become virtuous people, selfless and loving; rather we are declared righteous, much as in a court of law the jury might declare the accused not guilty.

Similarly, in justification God declares us *righteous* – to be justified before him – even if our immediate experience or moral character is not yet transformed into that new legal standing.

So "justification" may be defined as that judicial act of God's free mercy whereby he pronounces sinners condemned under the law guiltless, constitutes them as righteous, once for all, in the righteousness of Christ – on the ground of his atoning work by grace through faith alone apart from works–, and assures them of a full pardon, acceptance in his sight, adoption as sons, heirs of eternal life, and citizenship in his Kingdom.

This forensic, or judicial, understanding of justification is based in texts like Romans 4:2-8. There Paul writes,

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin."

And then in Romans 4:23-25 Paul goes on to say,

But the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

In Galatians 3, Paul gives a pithy summary of this same truth. In Galatians 3:6 Paul says, “Thus Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’” Notice the forensic language that is employed in this passage. It is not that Abraham was suddenly transformed into a virtuous and moral man. Rather, because he had faith in God, because he believed God’s promises, he was counted as being righteous. The language is reminiscent of the way a merchant settles his accounts. So this is a declaration that Abraham is righteous on the basis of the exercise of his faith. By his faith he was reckoned, or accounted, by God as righteous wholly apart from any works that he did. Similarly, Paul says “for us who believe” (that is to say, believe in Jesus Christ as Lord) “our faith will be reckoned as righteousness.” We will be counted as righteous in view of our faith in Christ – not because of any good works that we’ve done, but simply because we have placed our trust in him.

This forensic, or judicial, understanding of justification on the part of the Protestant Reformers stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic view of justification, as well as to a very recent view called the New Perspective on Paul. Let’s talk first about the contrast with the traditional Roman Catholic view of justification.

In the traditional understanding of Catholic theology, justification is not simply a judicial declaration that one is forgiven and counted righteous by God. Rather, it is the actual imparting of moral righteousness to the believer. During the Council of Trent, which was held between 1546 to 1563, the Roman Catholic Church promulgated the doctrine that righteousness is something that is intrinsic to the believer – that God makes the believer himself morally righteous. This is in opposition to Luther who claimed that righteousness is something declared by God and is imputed to the believer.

At Trent it was declared righteousness is intrinsic to me as a believer. It is not extrinsic; it is rather intrinsic to me. God actually makes me righteous. It is my righteousness that I come to possess. By contrast, on the Reformers’ view, righteousness is extrinsic, not intrinsic. It is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to you. It is not your righteousness that God produces. Rather, it is extrinsic in contrast to Trent which treats it as intrinsic.

Similarly, at Trent the believer is said to be actually made righteous, not simply declared to be righteous, whereas, for the Protestant Reformers, the believer is declared to be righteous by God on the basis of his faith. The difference is that on the Roman Catholic

view righteousness is *imparted* to or *infused in* the believer, whereas on the Reformation view righteousness is legally *imputed* to the believer. On the Roman Catholic view righteousness is actually imparted to the believer – he becomes a righteous person – whereas on the Reformers’ view it is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to the believer, credited to his account, so to speak.

On the Roman Catholic view justification is thus both an event and a process. It begins with the first impartation or infusion of righteousness, and then God imparts more and more righteousness over time. You become more and more justified before him as you increase in righteousness by receiving God’s grace through the sacraments provided by the church. By contrast, on the Reformers’ view justification is not a process.

Sanctification is a process; but justification is not. Justification is something that is declared by God and is complete and over and done with when a person turns to Christ in faith. He is declared righteous and his sins are forgiven. It is not a process that transpires over time.

So if we look at some of the statements from the Council of Trent, I think we can get a clear understanding of the Roman Catholic perspective. At the Council of Trent, they provide the following brief description of the justification of the sinner and its mode in the state of grace. This is what the Council says,

In which words is given a brief description of the justification of the sinner, as being a translation from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

So justification is this translation out of the state of corruption and condemnation that we are in as a result of Adam’s Fall and into the state of grace. Such an affirmation could be made, I think, by the Protestant Reformers as well, so long as one is talking about a change of legal status.

But in chapter 7, the Council goes on to explain in what the justification of the sinner consists. It says,

This disposition or preparation [that is, the preparation of the human will by God’s prevenient grace to place one’s faith in Christ] is followed by justification itself, which is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to hope of life everlasting.

So you can see that justification involves the sanctification of the inner man through God’s grace. It goes on to say,

. . . the single formal cause is the justice of God [that is, the righteousness of God], not that by which He Himself is just, but that by which He makes us just, that, namely, with which we being endowed by Him, are renewed in the spirit of our mind, and not only are we reputed but we are truly called and are just, receiving justice [or righteousness] within us, each one according to his own measure, which the Holy Ghost distributes to everyone as He wills, and according to each one's disposition and cooperation.

So the righteousness of God is actually imparted to the believer. It is this renewal and making of righteousness within the believer.

Finally, in chapter 10, Trent speaks of the increase of this justification which we've received. The Council says,

Having, therefore, been thus justified and made the friends and domestics of God, advancing from virtue to virtue, they are renewed, as the Apostle says, day by day, that is, mortifying the members of their flesh, and presenting them as instruments of justice [or righteousness] unto sanctification, they, through the observance of 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 . . .

So you actually get more justification as time goes on and as you grow in the grace of God. Your justification increases. In canon 24, the Council says,

If anyone says that the justice [or righteousness] received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema.

So the Council here condemns those who, like the Protestant Reformers, say that one's justification before God is not increased by the good works that you do, that these good works are the fruit or the signs of justification. The Catholic view is, no, these good works that you do as a Christian are the cause of the increase of your justification.

I think you can see that justification in the Roman Catholic view is thus very different than the Reformers' view. It is not a judicial or forensic act or declaration on God's part; it is a kind of moral transformation that begins in the believer when he places his faith in Christ and which is then increased or augmented as that believer participates in the sacraments of the church and leads an obedient life to Christ.

Next time we'll have a look at yet another perspective on justification, the so-called New Perspective on Paul. In the meantime, may you walk with him this week.¹

¹ □ Total Running Time: 17:56 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)