
JUSTIFYING OUR EXISTENCE

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George Bernard Shaw described life in startling terms when he wrote in one of his plays: “The lives which have no use, no meaning, no purpose, will fade out. You will have to justify your existence or perish.” In our global, information age of limitless possibilities, the *freedom* to be *anything* has turned into the *expectation* to be *everything*. As a result, many of us feel relentless pressure to justify our existence or perish. So we try to establish our value by making good grades, achieving our goals, enhancing our sex appeal, being authentic, serving others, or perhaps simply improving our Facebook profile. But despite our attempts to prove our worth, we never seem to measure up. Christianity acknowledges our predicament and challenges us to see that the justification we crave cannot be achieved by ourselves through our own efforts, but can only be received from God as a gift.

WHAT JUSTIFICATION IS

So what is justification? The justification (or righteousness) of God is a rich term in Scripture that describes an *attribute* God possesses, an *action* he performs, and a *status* he bestows. Technically, justification is a word borrowed from the world of law whose opposite is condemnation. To condemn means to declare someone “guilty,” but to justify means to declare someone “not guilty,” “innocent,” or “righteous.” But if we want to understand justification more fully, perhaps the best place to look is to Jesus himself who tells a story to draw out its meaning in Luke 18.9-14.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Tax collectors were the notoriously corrupt mobsters of the first century because they collaborated with the Romans occupying Palestine to extort money from their own people. Pharisees, by contrast, were almost as widely popular as tax collectors were despised because the Pharisees refused to compromise on either political or moral grounds. Everything that the Pharisee said about himself, therefore, was true. He was faithful in his relationships and devout in his religious practice. He was concerned about issues of justice and, unlike the tax collector, he would never have dreamed of taking advantage of others by extortion.

It seems obvious, therefore, which of these two men deserves God’s approval and acceptance. The Old Testament taught that judges should justify the innocent and condemn the guilty, meaning they should declare the innocent person “innocent” and the guilty person “guilty.” Anything less than this would be utterly reprehensible to God and a serious miscarriage of justice. So why does Jesus make the shocking claim that the self-avowed guilty man went home justified rather than the other?

Both men went up to the temple to pray to God, but the difference between the two was that the Pharisee tried to justify himself whereas the tax collector knew that he couldn’t. The Pharisee proudly relied on himself and his own merit but the tax collector humbly relied on God and his mercy. That is the key. The Pharisee may have performed well outwardly, but he failed to consider the attitudes of self-righteousness, judgmentalism, and hypocrisy lurking within himself. The tax collector, by contrast, saw himself for what he really was. He recognized the ways in which he had offended God, and so he prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” God responded by acquitting him and sending him home justified.

HOW JUSTIFICATION COMES TO US

But how does God justify us? How can God “justify the ungodly” as the Apostle Paul claims in Romans 4.5? The tax collector could have only guessed, but we can know for certain because the way in which God justifies the tax collector is the same way in which God justifies us. When the tax collector prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” he literally asks, “God, let me be atoned” or “God, let my sins be covered.” And that is precisely what God does. On the cross Jesus takes our place and dies as our substitute so that he might cover our sin.

Paul summed up this amazing exchange in 2 Corinthians 5.21 when he writes, “God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God.” God charges our sin to Jesus so that he might charge Jesus’ righteousness to us. In other words, God counts Jesus, the truly innocent one, “guilty” so that he might count us, the truly guilty ones, “innocent.” When God justifies us, the ultimate verdict of the last day breaks into the present so that we can experience God’s full forgiveness and acceptance now. And as Paul suggests in Romans 3, this is how God displays his just character and showcases his faithful commitment to rescue fallen humanity.

So what do we need to do in order to be justified? Nothing at all! All we must do is recognize our need for Jesus and receive what he has done for us. And the way in which we do this is through faith. Faith is the means by which the benefits of what Jesus did “there and then” in history become ours “here and now” in the present. But it is important to realize that our faith does not add or contribute anything to our justification. The whole point is that we cannot justify ourselves! Faith receives what God gives, and what God gives is himself. As Luther put it, faith takes hold of Christ just as a ring encloses a jewel. Faith simply receives Christ and along with him all the sparkling beauties of his gospel.

The critical factor, therefore, is not the *strength* of our faith, but the *object* of our faith. When we lay hold of Christ, faith unites us so profoundly to him that everything that is true of him becomes true of us. Luther used the metaphor of marriage to illustrate how this works. He writes that when a bride and groom are married everything they have – the good as well as the bad - they hold in common. In the analogy Luther colorfully describes us as an unfaithful bride and Jesus is our groom, but when faith comes between us, everything that is ours becomes Christ’s and everything that is Christ’s becomes ours. Jesus, therefore, takes our sin and guilt and gives us his righteousness and innocence.

Some people, however, object to justification because it sounds too easy and seems to undermine our responsibility. Others embrace it because they think it gives us license to do whatever we want. Voltaire humorously captured this sentiment when he said, “I like to sin, God likes to forgive, really the world is admirably arranged.” But both of these responses, however amusing, demonstrate our failure to understand God’s grace because justification always leads to a changed life. Jesus not only takes away our death, but also gives us his life, and those who have received his life are never the same again. They will inevitably begin to live according to the new patterns and values that Jesus perfectly demonstrated for us. That is why Calvin said, “We are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone.” The faith that leads to justification always evidences itself in new ways of living.

When we see the beauty of what God has done for us in the gospel we cannot help but respond by living for him. But the motivation for why we serve God is now completely different. We do not strive to please God out of guilt or obligation in order to earn his love - because we already have it! Instead we love and serve God out of joy and gratitude for what he has first done for us in Christ. Of course we will struggle to live out our new identity all our lives, but no matter what setbacks or failures we experience, nothing can take away our standing before God. If we did not do anything to earn God’s acceptance, then we cannot do anything to lose it either.

WHY JUSTIFICATION MATTERS

We may know what justification is and how it comes to us, but why does it matter? What difference does it really make? Justification is acutely relevant because it transforms not only the way we relate to God, but also the way we relate to others and to ourselves.

RELATING TO GOD

First, justification transforms the way we relate to God. We have already seen that our sin was transferred to Jesus so that his righteousness might be transferred to us. And the word “righteous” is a relational word. It not only means that we are declared innocent, but that we are brought into a right relationship. There is nothing obstructing our relationship with God. There is nothing standing between us. This shows us that justification involves far more than mere forgiveness. Forgiveness is primarily negative because it pardons us for our failures, but justification is primarily positive because it welcomes us into relationship. When we are united to Christ by faith, God adopts us into his family and treats us not as our sinful record deserves, but as Jesus’ perfect record deserves. It is almost too incredible to believe. All the love, acceptance, praise, and delight that the Father has for his Son, he now showers upon us as his adopted children.

We need to hear this again and again because we might be tempted to think that God forgives us because of what Christ has done, but will continue to accept us only if we work hard to obey him by avoiding sin and doing the right thing. Like any child we can grieve our heavenly Father, but justification shows us that God’s forgiveness as well as continued acceptance is based solely on the finished work of Christ and not the poor choices we may make. God’s acceptance is not conditional. He does not love us *because* of who we are. Nor is his acceptance merely unconditional. He does not love us as we are. His acceptance is *contra*-conditional. He loves us *despite* who we are. As Luther so beautifully expresses it, God does not love us because we are qualified, but he qualifies us because he loves us.

RELATING TO OTHERS

Secondly, justification transforms the way we relate to others. One of the sharpest contemporary critiques of religion is that religious faith leads to the exclusion of those who do not share the same views. That is why one author, for example, rejects religion in all its forms as “an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred.” Jesus, however, was not naïve. He recognized the problem of human oppression, particularly as a result of religious faith. After all, he directed the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee to self-righteous people who treated others with contempt. But Jesus told the parable in order to show that justification by grace alone through faith alone not only heals our relationship with God, but also provides us with the ability to embrace others in genuine humility and love.

The problem with self-justification is that it makes us radically insecure because we are never sure if we have ever done enough. As a result, we are driven to compare ourselves to other people and to marginalize and exclude others in order to prop up our unstable sense of significance and security. But if we believe that God loves, accepts, and welcomes us on the basis of what Jesus has done for us rather than what we have done for ourselves, then it is impossible to turn our faith into a factor that leads us to oppress others. If we believe that God relates to us on the basis of grace rather than merit then we know that we are no better than anyone else. And the more we understand our need for God’s compassion, the more we will be able to extend compassion to others.

RELATING TO OURSELVES

Lastly, justification transforms the way we relate to ourselves. Some of us do not have any trouble accepting others or believing that God accepts us despite our shortcomings and flaws. Our problem, instead, is that we cannot accept ourselves. We are never satisfied because we never seem to live up to our expectations. We are haunted by our ceaseless self-evaluation. But justification is the key not only to relating to God and others, but also to ourselves. It is only as we see who we are in Christ that we will be able to silence what one writer calls “the inner murmur of self-reproach.” If the perfect and holy God of the universe accepts and approves us then we no longer have to prove our worth to anyone, including ourselves, because we have already received the praise and adulation from the one whose opinion matters most. We can finally learn to accept ourselves by resting in God’s acceptance of us. Only justification as a gift of God’s grace can put an end to all our attempts to justify our existence to God, to others, and even to ourselves.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

So where do we go from here? Some of us may be offended by justification. It is insulting to be told that we cannot earn our way no matter how hard we try. Sure, we may not be perfect, but we believe we are good enough for God to be pleased with us. To others of us, justification comes as a relief. We have tried and failed to prove our worth, and we long to be accepted by God despite our imperfect performance. But to all of us, Jesus issues a message of both warning and welcome at the end of his parable: Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted. Jesus calls us honestly to evaluate not only our external actions, but also our internal attitudes, desires, and motivations, and in so doing, to set aside our encroaching pride and humbly receive what Jesus has done for us by faith. In effect, Jesus urges us to make the words of the hymn our own: “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.” As we do, we find that God gives us a life of use, meaning, and purpose that will never fade out.