

Big Gospel Words: Justification

Luke 23:32-43

Nathan Gray

21.04.24

Introduction

In November 2023, my friend Billy died in a car crash at the age of 19. Thank you for the support you showed me and Tori during that time. We really valued your concern and prayers. If I may be vulnerable, since then, I have been really struggling with a fear of death. It's more a fear of the unknown than a fear of death itself. Billy died so young and so suddenly, and I don't know when or how it's going to happen to me, and that really scares me. Not that I would want to know.

Why do I share this with you? My hope is not that you'll share my fear but that you'll share my comfort. As I began preparing this sermon and considered how justification was meaningful to me, I realised that this amazing doctrine helps me to fight that fear.

Justification is not an academic subject that is only relevant to scholars. No, it is a universally and immediately relevant declaration of freedom for those who have faith in Jesus. They are declared innocent and righteous despite being guilty of sin. They will not face God's wrath against sin when they die. I don't know when I will die and I might fear that day for the rest of my life, but I hold onto this wonderful truth. Jesus Christ died and rose to life to pay the penalty of my sin and credit me his righteousness so that I may be justified and see my saviour face to face when I die.

My desire and prayer for this sermon is that you too will be comforted by this wonderful truth. We're going to look at justification together in three stages. What is justification? What does it look like? And what does it mean for me?

What is justification?

So, what is justification? Thankfully, this question has been simply and concisely answered by some very smart people. If you have not come across the Westminster Shorter Catechism, I recommend that you check it out. It was written in the 17th century by a group of theologians to teach children the Christian faith through short questions and answers. I recently came across this lovely, illustrated version. To give you a flavour of how it works, Question 1 says, 'What is man's foremost purpose in life?' 'Man's foremost purpose in life is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.'

But we want to turn to Question 33, 'What is justification?' 'Justification is an act of God's free grace by which He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight through the righteousness of Christ which is counted to us and received by faith alone.'

Let me draw out four essential elements from that answer.

Number 1 – We have committed sin. We have all broken and fallen short of God's perfect and healthy moral law. Romans 3:22-23 says, *'There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.'* There are no racial, religious or any other distinctions which make any human being morally better than another. We are all equally guilty of sin.

Number 2 – We are not right with God. The Bible says that God is righteous. What does it mean by that? Deuteronomy 32:4 says, *'His works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.'* In contrast, the Bible says we are unrighteous. Psalm 14:3 says, *'All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.'* It's not just that we have got things wrong, but we are fundamentally at odds with God. We want to live our way and we don't want to live God's way.

It's important to recognise and distinguish these two problems because they're two problems that require two solutions. As the Catechism states, we need pardoning and making righteous, because there are eternal consequences if we aren't. Thankfully...

Number 3 – We can be justified by Jesus.

Justification is a legal defence. A lawyer might defend their client by saying their actions were justified because there was no criminal intent. For example, in 2018, 78-year-old Richard Osborn-Brooks discovered two intruders in his home and, after a struggle, one of them was fatally stabbed. Mr Osborn-Brooks did stab the intruder, but it was an act of self-defence, likely out of fear, with no prior intention or malintent whatsoever. So, he was ruled as justified in his actions.

Unlike Mr Osborn-Brooks, we can't plead self-defence or any other mitigating circumstance for that matter. We don't have a justification for our intentional sin or our refusal to follow God's way. The only way we can be justified is if our justification comes from outside of ourselves.

This is where God's free and wonderful grace comes in. Despite our defiance against him, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to justify us. How can

Jesus be our justification? Well, unlike us, Jesus obeyed God's law perfectly throughout his life, he never sinned, and he was truly righteous. Then, he willingly followed the Father's plan and let himself be wrongly executed by the Romans. Because, on the cross, he took our sin on himself and suffered our punishment in our place. 1 John 2:2 says, *'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.'* 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, *'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'*

This is the glory and the brilliance of the cross. Jesus' sacrifice was not a one-dimensional payment for sins. Romans 5:18-19 tells us, *'Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.'*

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's direct rule to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Through that disobedience, sin entered the world. It would be very easy to pin the blame for all sin on them but the Bible says that they represent us. If we're honest, we know, if we were in their shoes, we would do exactly the same thing.

But now, in the risen and living Jesus, we can have a new representative. Rather than identify with the disobedience of Adam and Eve, we can be represented by Jesus Christ and his perfect obedience and righteousness. If we put our faith in Jesus' sacrifice for us, God will credit Jesus' righteousness to our account.

It's a bit like watching a football game from the sofa. There is nothing I can do to affect the game. I don't have the talent to be in the game, and no amount of yelling at my TV screen will change the manager's tactics or the player's performances. But because of my faith in that team, when they win, I get to share in the joy and the victory. In a similar way, through faith in Jesus, we can share in his righteousness.

Number 4 – We are justified by faith. In Romans 3, Paul really hammers this message home. *'This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith... he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.'* (v22, 25, 26) The message is clear. There is no other way by which we receive our justification from Jesus. We cannot earn it or pay for it, only receive it, through faith in Jesus Christ.

What does justification look like?

If you have a Bible with you, now is the moment to turn to Luke 23 as we consider what justification looks like. Thank you Jessica for reading this out for us. This incredible story helps to illustrate some of those key elements of justification we just looked at.

Unusually, I don't want to focus on Jesus in this passage, though he sure plays a major part. Verses 32-33 say, *'Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him [Jesus] to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.'*

We don't know much about these other men but their execution gives us a pretty big clue. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves and criminals of the lowest type. One commentator speculated that their crime was an armed robbery involving murder, that sort of offence. They are not good men, they are not wrongly accused. By the Roman legal system, they deserve their punishment.

As the three men hang there, people begin to throw insults at Jesus. Verse 35, *'The rulers even sneered at him.'* Verse 36, *'The soldiers also came up and mocked him.'* Verse 39, *'One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him.'* We discover in Mark's Gospel that both criminals join the flurry of insults. Mark 15:32 says, *'Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.'*

Despite all these insults, Jesus remains calm. He does not give in to his suffering and emotionally lash out. He does not copy the criminals in their desperate and anguished sarcasm. Jesus is dying with dignity in a way that was uncommon for those who were crucified. On top of that, Jesus verbally prays for those killing him. In verse 34, Jesus says, *'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'* What incredible compassion to care about the souls of those who are killing you!

And this compassion has an impact. Seeing Jesus' dignified example, one of the criminals has a change of heart. He hears the continued insults of the other criminal but, rather than join in, this time he rebukes him. From verse 40, *"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."*

Whilst his statement doesn't explicitly declare faith in Jesus as his saviour, he does reveal a good understanding of the gospel. He professes a fear of God, he

admits his guilt, and he accepts that he justly deserves punishment. He knows Jesus is innocent, he identifies Jesus as a king, and he hopes to be a part of Jesus' kingdom. This is an extraordinary speech from a man who was insulting Jesus a moment ago. He has clearly meditated on how Jesus has acted, what Jesus has said, and what is being said about Jesus to bring him to these conclusions.

However deep or desperate his faith is, it isn't up to us to judge because Jesus confirms his faith and assures him of salvation. Imagine the criminal's relief when Jesus says in verse 43, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."* Dale Ralph Davis describes this moment beautifully, 'Jesus speaks to him of something certain, something immediate, something personal and of something wonderful. The most hopeless cases seem to receive the firmest assurance.'

This is a man confronted with the reality of his sins and their punishment. But, by the grace of God, he understands that he cannot justify himself. So he puts his faith in Jesus and is assured of paradise. From the guiltiest of sinners, legally condemned and punished, with only hours left of his life before he faces physical and spiritual death, this man finds himself justified; assured of a right standing before God, not because of anything he has done, but because of what Jesus was doing on that cross. It is a truly incredible moment in history which gives us immense hope and comfort. If that wicked man, in the last moments of his life, can be justified by faith in Jesus, we can be justified too.

What does justification mean for me?

I hope it is already clear what justification means for us, but I want to finish by highlighting the two major ways it can and should affect us today.

Firstly, if I haven't got the point across already, the main concern of justification is to **have faith**. If we want to be right with God, we must have faith in Jesus. That is the only thing that is going to justify us. There is no other way.

As I was getting on the bus the other day, a gentleman was loudly explaining why something he had said wasn't rude. He claimed that he wasn't like that, he'd just snapped. His final words in this conversation were "I'm a nice person really." How often do we justify ourselves with those words? Maybe not those words specifically but something along the lines of "Overall, I'm a good person." If you put everyone in a line by their percentage of good deeds vs bad deeds, I must be in the top half. And the top half goes to heaven and the bottom half to hell, right?

No. This represents a major misunderstanding of the gospel. God doesn't say you need to be over 50% good, he says you need to be 100% good like he is. You have to be perfect because God hates injustice and evil far more than we do. And now we have a problem as I have already shared because none of us are so morally pure that we can declare that we are righteous. In Romans 3:10, Paul writes, *'There is no one righteous, not even one.'* We might be good by human standards, we might sit somewhere between the kindly, hardworking cashier and the generous charity of Mother Teresa, but none of us are as good as God. I argue all this to prove that our justification has to come from outside of ourselves, we cannot justify ourselves. I hope I have clearly explained how faith in Jesus' sacrificial death wipes our slates clean and makes us right with God.

Why do we want to be right with God? Psalm 37 says, *'The blameless spend their days under the Lord's care, and their inheritance will endure forever. In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.'* (v18-19) *'The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.'* (v23-24) *'The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.'* (v39-40).

All this is available to the person who has faith in Jesus. Justification is not a cold, unemotional, transactional concept. It is the abundantly generous and sacrificial method by which God loves us, accepts us into his kingdom and places us under his care. It is freedom, forgiveness, and peace for the believer. It is earthly and eternal confidence. I hope that if you haven't put your faith in Jesus yet, you will strongly consider it this morning.

Secondly, justification can give us **confidence**. If my appeal to have faith was mainly for unbelievers, then this is my encouragement for believers. Maybe you are like me and death terrifies you. Maybe you have doubts about whether God really loves you. Maybe you are not confident that you are saved from your sins.

This is where I find the definitive language of justification comforting. I am legally and officially declared forgiven and righteous by God and nothing will change that. My place in heaven is secure. My standing before God is certain. I am justified because of my faith in Jesus. Let us preach that to ourselves every morning. "I am justified because of my faith in Jesus." This is our certain hope in any uncertainty before God. This is our comfort in any fear of the future. This is our confidence that God loves us. This is what God did for us by sheer grace.

We mustn't let this confidence become arrogant though. We should keep a balance of confidence and humility. We were desperately in need of justification

and we still get things wrong. But we are sinners saved by grace. We are sinners justified by the grace of God. God wants us to be a part of his kingdom and he willed it so, so let us be assured and confidently take hold of the hope he has given us.

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:3-7)

Amen.

Prayer

Almighty Father in heaven, thank you for sending your Son to die on the cross for our justification. Thank you for the confidence this brings us. Our sins are thrown to the bottom of the ocean. In your eyes, our poor example is replaced by Jesus' perfect righteousness. By the work of the Spirit, may this comforting truth settle on our hearts and balm our aches. If we have not put our faith in you yet, please soften our hearts to trust in Jesus' sacrifice for us and receive our justification. May all this be for your glory alone and always. Amen.