

Justification

Justification is the declaring of a person to be just or righteous. It is a legal term signifying acquittal, a fact that makes it unpalatable to many in our day. We tend to distrust legalism and thus we dismiss anything that savors of a legalistic approach. We should be clear that our hesitation was not shared by the biblical writers.

In their day it was axiomatic that a wealthy and important citizen would not be treated in a law court in the same way as an insignificant person. Indeed this was sometimes written into the statutes and, for example, in the ancient Code of Hammurabi it is laid down that if a citizen knocked out the tooth of another citizen his own tooth should be knocked out.

But if the victim was a vassal it sufficed to pay a small fine. Nobody expected strict justice in human tribunals but the biblical writers were sure that God is a God of justice. Throughout the Bible justice is a category of fundamental importance.

It mattered to the biblical writers that God is a God of perfect justice, a truth expressed in Abraham's question, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ([Gen18:25](#)). God can be relied on to act in perfect justice and without giving preference to the wealthy and the highly placed in our human societies.

"The Lord takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people. The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people" ([Isa 3:13-14](#)). Over and over the punishment of evil is put in legal terms ([Exod 6:6](#) ; [7:4](#)) and specifically Israel's sin is brought out with the use of legal imagery ([Micah 6:1-2](#)).

Accordingly it is not surprising that salvation is often viewed in legal terms. The basic question in all religion is, "How can sinful people be just (i.e., be justified) before the holy God?" Justification is a legal term with a meaning like "acquittal"; in religion it points to the process whereby a person is declared to be right before God.

That person should be an upright and good person, but justification does not point to qualities like these. That is rather the content of sanctification. Justification points to the acquittal of one who is tried before God. In both the Old Testament and the New the question receives a good deal of attention and in both it is clear that people cannot bring about their justification by their own efforts. The legal force of the terminology is clear when Job exclaims, "Now that I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated" ([Job 13:18](#)).

Justification (*dikaiosis* [[dikaiivwsi](#)]) is connected linguistically with righteousness (*dikaioisune* [[dikaiosvnh](#)]); in the first century it is clear that all the words with this root were concerned with conformity to a standard of right. And in Scripture it is not too much to say that righteousness is basically a legal term. The law that mattered was, of course, the law of God, so that righteousness signified conformity to the law of God.

The Old Testament. We do not find the full New Testament doctrine of justification by faith in the Old Testament, but we do find teachings that agree with it and that in due course were taken up into that doctrine. Thus it is made clear that sin is universal, but that God provides forgiveness. For the first point, "All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" ([Psalm 14:3](#)). And when God looks down from heaven he sees that "they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" ([Psalm 53:2-3](#)). Many such

passages could be cited. And for the second point, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness" ([Psalm 130:3-4](#)). The end of Micah's prophecy emphasizes that God is a God "who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance" and that he "delights to show mercy" ([7:18-20](#)).

Sometimes we find the thought that God imputes righteousness to people. He did this to Abraham, who believed God "and he credited it to him as righteousness" ([Gen 15:6](#)). Again Phinehas took decisive action so that the plague was checked and "This was credited to him as righteousness" ([Psalm 106:31](#) ; Phinehas is described in the words, "as zealous as I am for my honor among them," [Num 25:11](#)). And the prophet can say, "He who vindicates (or justifies) me is near" ([Isa 50:8](#)).

The New Testament. When we turn to the New Testament we must be clear that the righteousness and justification terminology is to be understood in the light of its Hebrew background, not in terms of contemporary Greek ideas. We see this, for example, in the words of Jesus who speaks of people giving account on the day of judgment: "by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" ([Matt 12:37](#) ; the word NIV translates "acquitted" is the one Paul normally uses for "justified"). Those acquitted on the day of judgment are spoken of as "the righteous" ([Matt 25:37](#) ; they go into "eternal life," v. 46).

The verb translated "to justify" clearly means "to declare righteous." It is used of God in a quotation, which the New International Version renders "So that you may be proved right when you speak" ([Rom 3:4](#) ; the NRSV has more exactly, "So that you may be justified in your words"). Now God cannot be "made righteous"; the expression obviously means "shown to be righteous" and this helps us see that when the word is applied to believers it does not mean "made righteous"; it signifies "declared righteous," "shown to be in the right," or the like.

Paul is fond of the concept of justification; indeed for him it is the characteristic way of referring to the central truth of the gospel. He makes much more use of the concept than do the other writers of the New Testament.

This does not mean that he has a different understanding of the gospel; it is the same gospel that he proclaims, the gospel that the death of Christ on the cross has opened a way of salvation for sinners. But he uses the concept of justification to express it whereas the other writers prefer other terms. He says, "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" ([Rom 5:19](#)).

We should not understand "were made sinners" in any such sense as "were compelled to be sinners." It signifies "were constituted sinners," "were reckoned as sinners." Paul is saying that the whole human race is caught up in the effect of Adam's sin; now all are sinners. Paul speaks of God "who justifies the wicked" ([Rom 4:5](#)): it is not people who have merited their salvation of whom he writes, but people who had no claim on salvation. It was "while we were still sinners" that Christ died for us ([Rom 5:8](#)). But the effect of Christ's saving work is that now all believers are "made righteous," "accepted by God as righteous."

Paul insists that people are not justified by what they themselves do. Justification is not the result of the infusion of new life into people, but comes about when they believe. The apostle points to the important example of Abraham, the great forbear of the Jewish race, as one who was not justified by works ([Rom 4:2-3](#)). And, of course, if Abraham was not justified by works, then who could possibly be? Specifically Paul says, "a man is not justified by observing the law"; indeed, "by observing the law no one will be justified" ([Gal 2:16](#) ; cf. also [Gal 3:11](#)).

There is something of a problem in that, whereas Paul says quite plainly that justification is by faith and not by works, James holds that "a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone" ([2:24](#)). James chooses Abraham and Rahab as examples of people who were justified by works ([James 2:21](#) [James 2:25](#)). He points out that Abraham "offered his son Isaac on the altar" and that Rahab lodged the spies and sent them away.

But we should notice that both these Old Testament worthies are elsewhere singled out as examples of faith. Paul cited Abraham to establish the truth that we are justified by faith rather than by works. Indeed, he quotes Scripture, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" ([Rom 4:3](#) , citing [Gen 15:6](#) ; he cites it again in v. 22).

In Romans 4 Paul has a strong argument that it was not works that commended the patriarch to God, but faith: Abraham is, for Paul, the classic example of a man who believed and who was accepted by God because of his faith. And the writer to the Hebrews says plainly that it was "by faith" that Rahab welcomed the spies ([Heb 11:31](#)).

If we look more closely at what James says we see that he is not arguing for works in the absence of faith, but rather for works as the evidence of faith. "Show me your faith without deeds, " he writes, "and I will show you my faith by what I do" ([2:18](#)) and goes on to cite the demons who believe that there is one God as examples of the kind of faith he deprecates.

James is sure that saving faith transforms the believer so that good works necessarily follow; and he complains about people who say they have faith, but whose lives show quite plainly that they have not been saved. When people have saving faith God transforms their lives and James' point is that in the absence of this transformation we have no reason for thinking that those who profess to be believers really have saving faith.

We should not overlook the fact that James as well as Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 to make it clear that Abraham was justified by faith. And we should bear in mind that this was many years before he offered Isaac on the altar; indeed it was before Isaac was born. While the offering of Isaac showed that Abraham was justified, his justification, even on James' premises, took place long before the act that showed its presence.

And we must say much the same about Paul. He certainly calls vigorously for faith, but he calls equally vigorously for lives of Christian service. And when he writes, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" ([Gal 5:6](#)), he is saying something with which James would surely agree. For James says, "I will show you my faith by what I do" ([2:18](#)).

Paul continually emphasizes the importance of justification by faith. In his sermon at Antioch in Pisidia he points out that "through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you" and immediately adds, "Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" ([Acts 13:38-39](#)). More than once he quotes the words from Habbakuk 2:4, "the righteous will live by faith" ([Rom 1:17](#) ; [Gal 3:11](#) ; cf. also [Gal 2:16](#) ; [Heb 10:38](#)). He says explicitly that justification is by faith and not by observing the law ([Rom 3:28](#)), or simply that "we have been justified through faith" ([Rom 5:1](#)).

Paul does not, of course, argue that faith is a meritorious act that of itself brings about justification. He is not saying that if we believe strongly enough we somehow get rid of our sins. But real faith means trust in God and when we trust God we are open to the divine power that works in us to make us the sort of people we ought to be and to accomplish the divine purpose. When we insist on our own moral performance we cut ourselves off from the good that God works in believers.

At the center of Paul's religion is the cross of Jesus, and faith means trusting the crucified Lord. Thus Paul says that Jesus "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" ([Rom 4:25](#)). We should not, of course, put too strong a distinction between the effects of Jesus' death and the effects of his resurrection.

Paul is saying that Jesus' death and resurrection meant a complete dealing with sins and a perfectly accomplished justification. We are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" ([Rom 3:24](#)), which means that Jesus' atoning death is critically important in our justification. Similarly we are justified "by his grace" ([Rom 3:24](#)), "by his blood" ([Rom 5:9](#)), "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" ([1 Cor 6:11](#)), and "in Christ" ([Gal 2:17](#)), which are all ways of saying that it is the saving work of Jesus that brings about the justification of sinners.

Salvation by the way of the cross was so that God would be "just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus" ([Rom 3:26](#)). This will be in mind also in the reference to God as presenting Christ "as a sacrifice of atonement (better, "a propitiation") through faith in his blood" ([Rom 3:25](#)).

That we are "justified by his blood" ([Rom 5:9](#)) points to the same truth: It is the death of Jesus that makes us right with God. This is the meaning also when we read that we are "justified by his grace" ([Titus 3:7](#)). It was God's good gift that brought justification, his "one act of righteousness" in Christ that effected it ([Romans 5:16](#) [Romans 5:18](#)). Another way of putting it is that the saved are saved not because of their own righteousness (they are sinners), but because of the righteousness that is from God and which they receive by faith ([Php 3:9](#) ; cf. [2 Col 5:21](#)).

It is plain from the New Testament teaching throughout that justification comes to the sinner by the atoning work of Jesus and that this is applied to the individual sinner by faith. That God pardons and accepts believing sinners is the truth that is enshrined in the doctrine of justification by faith.