

The Doctrine of Justification 3. Its Problem

by A.W. Pink

A.W. Pink explores the profound problem of how God can justify sinners while upholding His justice and holiness.

Scripture: Exodus 34:7, Job 25:4, Psalm 89:14, Psalm 139:1-5, Isaiah 64:6, Romans 1:18, Romans 3:10, Romans 3:19, Galatians 3:10, Ephesians 4:18

Topics: "Justification", "Divine Grace"

Description

A.W. Pink addresses the profound problem of justification, emphasizing that no sinner can achieve acceptance with God through their own efforts. He explains that the dilemma of saving a sinner is one that only God's omniscience can resolve, allowing Him to declare a guilty transgressor righteous without compromising His holiness or justice. Pink highlights the necessity for individuals to recognize their sinful state and the impossibility of meeting God's perfect standards on their own. He urges believers to understand the depth of divine grace and the importance of acknowledging their need for salvation through Christ. Ultimately, he sets the stage for exploring how God can justify the ungodly in the next chapter.

Transcript

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

3. ITS PROBLEM

In this and the following chapter our aim will be fourfold. First, to demonstrate the impossibility of any sinner obtaining acceptance and favour with God on the ground of his own performances. Second, to show that the saving of a sinner presented a problem which nought but omniscience could solve, but that the consummate wisdom of God has devised a way whereby He can pronounce righteous a guilty transgressor of His Law without impeaching His veracity, sullyng His holiness, or ignoring the claims of justice; yea, in such a way that all His perfections have been displayed and magnified, and the Son of His love glorified.

Third, point out the sole ground on which an awakened conscience can find solid and stable peace. Fourth, seek to give God's children a clearer understanding of the exceeding riches of Divine grace, that their hearts may be drawn out in fervent praise unto the Author of "so great salvation." But let it be pointed out at the onset that, any reader who has never seen himself under the white light of God's holiness, and

who has never felt His Word cutting him to the very quick, will be unable to fully enter into the force of what we are about to write.

Yea, in all probability, he who is unregenerate is likely to take decided exception unto much of what will be said, denying that any such difficulty exists in the matter of a merciful God pardoning one of His offending creatures. Or, if he does not dissent to that extent, yet he will most likely consider that we have grossly exaggerated the various elements in the case we are about to present, that we have pictured the sinner's condition in far darker hues than was warranted.

This must be so, for he has no experimental acquaintance with God, nor is he conscious of the fearful plague of his own heart. The natural man cannot endure the thought of being thoroughly searched by God. The last thing he desires is to pass beneath the all-seeing eye of his Maker and Judge, so that his every thought and desire, his most secret imagination and motive, stands exposed before Him. It is indeed a most solemn experience when we are made to feel with the Psalmist, "O LORD, Thou hast searched me, and known me.

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, Thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, Thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thine hand upon me" (Ps. 139:1-5). Yes, dear reader, the very last thing which the natural man desires is to be searched, through and through by God, and have his real character exposed to view.

But when God undertakes to do this very thing--which He either will do in grace in this life, or in judgment in the Day to come--there is no escape for us. Then it is we may well exclaim, "Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into Heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in Hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me" (Ps. 139:7-11). Then it is we shall be assured, "Yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee" (v. 12). Then it is that the soul is awakened to a realization of who it is with whom it has to do. Then it is that he now perceives something of the high claims of God upon him, the just requirements of His Law, the demands of His holiness.

Then it is that he realizes how completely he has failed to consider those claims, how fearfully he has disregarded that law, how miserably he falls short of meeting those demands. Now it is that he perceives he has been "a transgressor from the womb" (Isa. 48:8), that so far from having lived to glorify His Maker, he has done nought but follow the course of this world and fulfill the lust of the flesh. Now it is he realizes that there is "no soundness" in him but, from the sole of the foot even unto the head, "wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores" (Isa. 1:6).

Now it is he is made to see that all his righteousness are as "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). "It is easy for any one in the cloisters of the schools to indulge himself in idle speculations of the merit of works to justify men; but when he comes into the presence of God, he must bid farewell to these amusements, for there the business is transacted with seriousness, and no ludicrous logomachy (dispute about words) practiced. To this point, then, must our attention be directed, if we wish to make any useful inquiry concerning true righteousness; how we can answer the celestial Judge, when He shall call us to an account.

Let us place that Judge before our eyes, not according to the spontaneous imaginations of our minds, but according to the descriptions given of Him in the Scripture; which represents Him as one whose refulgence eclipses the stars, whose power melts the mountains, whose anger shakes the earth, whose wisdom takes the subtle in their own craftiness, whose purity makes all things appear polluted, whose righteousness even the angels are unable to bear, who acquits not the guilty, whose vengeance, when it is once kindled, penetrates even to the abyss of Hell" (John Calvin).

Ah, my reader, tremendous indeed are the effects produced in the soul when one is really brought into the presence of God, and is granted a sight of His awesome majesty. While we measure ourselves by our fellow men, it is easy to reach the conclusion that there is not much wrong with us; but when we approach the dread tribunal of ineffable holiness, we form an entirely different estimate of our character and conduct. While we are occupied with earthly objects we may pride ourselves in the strength of our faculty, but fix the gaze steadily on the midday sun and under its dazzling brilliance the weakness of the eye will at once become apparent.

In like manner, while I compare myself with other sinners I can but form a wrong estimate of myself, but if I gauge my life by the plummet of God's Law, and do so in the light of His holiness, I must "Abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). But not only has sin corrupted man's being, it has changed his relation to God: it has "alienated" him (Eph. 4:18), and brought him under His righteous condemnation. Man has broken God's Law in thought and word and deed, not once, but times without number.

By the Divine tribunal he is pronounced an incorrigible transgressor, a guilty rebel. He is under the curse of his Maker. The law demands that its punishment shall be inflicted upon him; justice clamours for satisfaction. The sinner's case is deplorable, then, to the last degree. When this is painfully felt by the convicted conscience, its agonized possessor cries out, "How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?" (Job 25:4). How indeed!

Let us now consider the various elements which enter into this problem. The requirements of God's Law. "Every question therefore, respecting justification necessarily brings before us the judicial courts of God. The principles of those courts must be determined by God alone. Even to earthly governors we concede the right of establishing their own laws, and appointing the mode of their enforcement. Shall we then accord this title to man, and withhold it from the all-wise and almighty God?

Surely no presumption can be greater than for the creature to sit in judgment on the Creator, and pretend to determine what should, or should not be, the methods of His government. It must be our place reverently to listen to His own exposition of the principles of His own courts, and humbly to thank Him for His goodness in condescending to explain to us what those principles are. As sinners, we can have no claim on God. We do have claim to a revelation that should acquaint us with His ways.

"The judicial principles of the government of God, are, as might be expected, based upon the absolute perfectness of His own holiness. This was fully shown both in the prohibitory and in the mandatory commandments of the law as given at Sinai. That law prohibited not only wrong deeds and wrong counsels of heart, but it went deeper still. It prohibited even wrong desires and wrong tendencies, saying, 'thou shalt not be concupiscent'--that is, thou shalt not have, even momentarily, one desire or tendency that is contrary to the perfectness of God.

And then as to its positive requirements, it demanded the perfect, unreserved, perpetual surrender of soul and body, with all its powers, to God and to His service. Not only was it required, that love to Him--love

perfect and unremitted--should dwell as a living principle in the heart, but also that it should be developed in action, and that unvaryingly. The mode also of the development throughout, was required to be as perfect as the principle from which the development sprang.

"If any among the children of men be able to substantiate a claim to perfectness such as this, the Courts of God are ready to recognize it. The God of Truth will recognize a truthful claim wherever it is found. But if we are unable to present any such claim--if corruption be found in us and in our ways--if in any thing we have fallen short of God's glory, then it is obvious that however willing the Courts of God may be to recognize perfectness wherever it exists, such willingness can afford no ground of hope to those, who, instead of having perfectness, have sins and short-comings unnumbered" (B.

W. Newton). The indictment preferred against us. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward" (Isa. 1:2-4).

The eternal God justly charges us with having broken all His commandments--some in act, some in word, all of them in thought and imagination. The enormity of this charge is heightened by the fact that against light and knowledge we chose the evil and forsook the good: that again and again we deliberately turned aside from God's righteous Law, and went astray like lost sheep, following the evil desires and devices of our own hearts. Above, we find God complaining that inasmuch as we are his creatures, we ought to have obeyed Him, that inasmuch as we owe our very lives to His daily care we ought to have rendered Him fealty instead of disobedience, and have been His loyal subjects instead of turning traitors to His throne.

No exaggeration of sin is brought against us, but a statement of fact is declared which it is impossible for us to gainsay. We are ungrateful, unruly, ungodly creatures. Who would keep a horse that refused to work? Who would retain a dog which barked and flew at us? Yet we have broken God's sabbaths, despised His reproofs, abused His mercies. The sentence of the law. This is clearly announced in the Divine oracles, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10).

Whoever violates a single precept of the Divine Law exposes himself to the displeasure of God, and to punishment as the expression of that displeasure. No allowance is made for ignorance, no distinction is made between persons, no relaxation of its strictness is permissible: "The soul that sinneth it shall die" is its inexorable pronouncement. No exception is made whether the transgressor be young or old, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile: "the wages of sin is death"; for "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18).

The Judge Himself is inflexibly just. In the high court of Divine justice God takes the law in its strictest and sternest aspect, and judges rigidly according to the letter. "But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. . .Who will render to every man according to his deeds" (Rom. 2:2, 6). God is inexorably righteous, and will not show any partiality either to the law or to its transgressor. The Most High has determined that His Holy Law shall be faithfully upheld and its sanctions strictly enforced.

What would this country be like if all its judges ceased to uphold and enforce the laws of the land? What conditions would prevail were sentimental mercy to reign at the expense of righteousness? Now God is the Judge of all the earth and the moral Ruler of the universe. Holy Writ declares that "justice and judgment," and not pity and clemency, are the "habitation" of His "throne" (Ps. 89:14). God's attributes do not conflict with each other. His mercy does not override His justice, nor is His grace ever shown at the expense of righteousness.

Each of His perfections is given free course. For God to give a sinner entrance into Heaven simply because He loved him, would be like a judge sheltering an escaped convict in his own home merely because he pitied him. Scripture emphatically declares that God, "will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex. 34:7). The sinner is unquestionably guilty. It is not merely that he has infirmities or that he is not as good as he ought to be: he has set at nought God's authority, violated His commandments, trodden His Laws under foot.

And this is true not only of a certain class of offenders, but "all the world" is "guilty before God" (Rom. 3:19). "There is none righteous, no, not one: They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10, 12). It is impossible for any man to clear himself from this fearful charge. He can neither show that the crimes of which he is accused have not been committed, nor that having been committed, he had a right to do them.

He can neither disprove the charges which the law preferred against him, nor justify himself in the perpetration of them. Here then is how the case stands. The law demands personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity to its precepts, in heart and act, in motive and performance. God charges each one of us with having failed to meet those just demands, and declares we have violated His commandments in thought and word and deed. The law therefore pronounces upon us a sentence of condemnation, curses us, and demands the infliction of its penalty, which is death.

The One before whose tribunal we stand is omniscient, and cannot be deceived or imposed upon; He is inflexibly just, and swayed by no sentimental considerations. We, the accused, are guilty, unable to refute the accusations of the law, unable to vindicate our sinful conduct, unable to offer any satisfaction or atonement for our crimes. Truly, our case is desperate to the last degree. Here, then, is the problem. How can God justify the willful transgressor of His Law without justifying his sins?

How can God deliver him from the penalty of His broken Law without compromising His holiness and going back upon His word that He will "by no means clear the guilty"? How can life be granted the guilty culprit without repealing the sentence "the soul that sinneth it shall die"? How can mercy be shown to the sinner without justice being flouted? It is a problem which must forever have baffled every finite intelligence. Yet, blessed be His name, God has, in His consummate wisdom, devised a way whereby the "chief of sinners" may be dealt with by Him as though he were perfectly innocent; nay more, He pronounces him righteous, up to the required standard of the law, and entitled to the reward of eternal life. How this can be will be taken up in the next chapter.

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