

Justification: A Royal Pardon

by Charles Finney

Justification by faith is a pardon and acceptance by God, treating us as if we were righteous on account of our faith, and it is not the same as imputed righteousness.

Scripture: Job 9:20, John 3:16, Romans 5:1, Romans 8:31, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 10:14, James 2:21-24, 1 John 2:1

Topics: "Faith and Works", "Justification"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that justification is a royal pardon granted by God, not based on our works but through faith in Jesus Christ. He explains that legal justification declares one 'not guilty,' while gospel justification offers pardon and acceptance, treating the sinner as righteous despite their past transgressions. Finney argues that excuses such as sinful nature or inability to obey are insufficient for justification, as true justification requires repentance and faith that produces holiness. He highlights that justification restores the believer to a relationship with God, akin to a child being welcomed back into a royal family. Ultimately, Finney reassures that through faith, believers are supported by God's attributes and grace, ensuring their salvation.

Transcript

"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified"--Galatians 2:16

In its general sense, legal justification means "not guilty." To justify an individual in this sense is to declare that he is not guilty of any breach of the law. It affirms that he has committed no crime and pronounces him innocent.

More technically, it is a form of pleading to a charge of crime. The individual who is charged admits the fact but brings forward an excuse, on which he claims that he had a right to do as he did. Thus, if a person is charged with murder, the plea of justification admits that he killed the man but alleges either that it was done in self-defense or that it was by unavoidable accident. In either case, the plea of justification admits the fact but denies the guilt.

By the deeds of the law "there shall no flesh be justified." This is true under either form of justification.

Under the first, or general form of justification, the burden of proof is on the accuser. In this case, he only needs to prove that a crime has been committed once. If it is proved once, the individual is guilty. He cannot be justified, in this way, by the law. He is found guilty. To argue that he has done more good than harm or that he has kept God's law longer than he has broken it is not valid. To be justified in this way he must prove that he has fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law. Who can be justified by the law in this way? No one.

In the second, or technical form of justification, the burden of proof lies on him who makes the plea. He admits the fact alleged and must either make good his excuse or fail. Two points are to be regarded. The pleaded excuse must be true, and it must be a good and sufficient excuse, not a frivolous apology that does not meet the case. If it is not true or is insufficient, and especially if it reflects on the court or government, it will only harm him further.

THE NATURE OF SIN

Sinners often plead their sinful nature as a justification. This excuse is a good one, if it is true. If it is true, as they maintain, that God has given them a nature that is itself sinful, then it is a good excuse for sin. In the face of heaven and earth, and at the day of judgment, this will be a good plea in justification. God must annihilate the reason of all rational beings in the universe before they will ever blame you for sin if God made you sin or if He gave you a nature that is itself sinful.

How can your nature be sinful? What is sin? Sin is a transgression of the law. Does the law say you must not have the nature that you have? This is absurd.

This doctrine overlooks the distinction between sin and the occasion of sin. The bodily appetites and tendencies of body and mind, when strongly excited, become the occasions of sin.

So it was with Adam. No one will say that Adam had a sinful nature. But he had, by his constitution, an appetite for food and a desire for knowledge. These were not sinful but were as God made them. They were necessary to fit him to live in this world as a subject of God's moral government. But being strongly excited led to indulgence, and thus became the occasions of his sinning against God. These tendencies were innocent in themselves, but he yielded to them in a sinful manner, and that was his sin.

When the sinner talks about his sinful nature as a justification, he confounds these innocent appetites and susceptibilities with sin itself. By so doing, he in fact charges God and accuses Him of giving him a sinful nature. In fact, his nature is essential to moral agency. God has made it as well as it could be made, perfectly adapted to the circumstances in which man lives. Man's nature is as well fitted to love and obey God as to hate and disobey Him. The day is not distant when it will be known whether this is a good excuse or not. Then you will see whether you can face your Maker in this way--when He charges you with sin, will you turn around and throw the blame back upon Him?

Do you wonder what influence Adam's sin has had in producing the sin of his posterity? It has subjected them to aggravated temptation but has by no means rendered their nature in itself sinful.

UNABLE TO OBEY?

Another excuse in inability. This also is a good excuse if it is true. If sinners are really unable to obey God, this is a good plea in justification. When you are charged with not obeying the laws of God, you have only to show that God has required what you were not able to perform, and the whole intelligent universe will

resound with the verdict of "not guilty." If you don't have natural power to obey God, they must give this verdict or cease to be reasonable beings. A law of reason states that no being is obliged to do what he has no power to do.

Suppose God required you to undo something that you have done. This is a natural impossibility. Are you to blame for not doing so? God requires repentance of past sins--not that you should undo them.

Suppose it was your duty to warn a certain individual about his sin, but now he is dead. Are you still under obligation to warn that individual? No. That is an impossibility. All that God can now require is that you repent. God may hold you responsible for not doing it when it was in your power, but it would be absurd to make it your duty to do what is impossible.

If God requires you to do what you have no power to do, it is tyranny. What God requires is on penalty of eternal death. He threatens an infinite penalty for not doing what you cannot do, and so He is an infinite tyrant. This plea, then, charges God with infinite tyranny and is not only insufficient for the sinner's justification but is a horrible aggravation of his offense.

Let's vary the case a little. Suppose God requires you to repent for failing to do what you never had natural ability to do. You must either repent, then, of not doing what you were powerless to do, or you must go to hell. You can neither repent of this, nor can He make you repent of it.

What is repentance? It is to blame yourself and justify God. But without power, you can do neither. It is a natural impossibility that a rational being should ever blame himself for not doing what he knows he couldn't do. And you cannot justify God.

Suppose God required you to repent for not flying. By what process can He make you blame yourself for not flying when you are conscious that you have no wings or power to fly? If He could cheat you into the belief that you had the power and make you believe a lie, then you might repent. But what sort of way is that for God to act with His creatures?

What do you mean by bringing up such an excuse? Do you mean that you have never sinned? It is a strange contradiction when you admit that you ought to repent but say you have no power to repent. You ought to stand your ground one way or the other. If you mean to rely on this excuse, come out with it in full, take your ground before God, and say, "Lord, I am not going to repent at all--I am not under any obligation to repent, for I don't have the power to obey the law. Therefore, I plead not guilty, for I have never sinned!"

Another excuse sinners offer for their conduct is their wicked heart. This excuse is true, but it is not sufficient. The first two that I mentioned would have been good if they had been true, but they were false. This is true but is no excuse.

What is a wicked heart? It is not the bodily organ we call the heart but the affection of the soul, the wicked disposition, the wicked feelings, and the actings of the mind. If these will justify you, they will justify the devil himself. Has he not as wicked a heart as you have?

Suppose you had committed murder and were put on trial and offered this plea: "It is true," you would say, "I killed the man. But then I have such a thirst for blood and such a hatred of mankind that I cannot help committing murder whenever I have an opportunity."

"Horrible!" the judge would exclaim. "Put him in jail and throw away the key!" Such is the sinner's plea of a wicked heart in justification of sin. God will condemn you out of your own mouth. (See Job 9:20.)

SHIFTING THE BLAME

People often excuse themselves by pointing to the conduct of Christians. Ask a man why he doesn't believe, and he will point to the conduct of Christians as his excuse. "These Christians," he will say, "are no better than anybody else. When I see them practice what they preach, then I will think about it." He is hiding behind the sins of Christians. He shows that he knows how Christians ought to live and cannot plead his sin through ignorance.

But does it amount to grounds for justification? I admit that Christians behave very badly and do much that is contrary to their faith. But is that a good excuse for you? Far from it. This is itself one of the strongest reasons why you should be saved. You know how Christians ought to live and should be an example. If you had followed them ignorantly, or didn't know any better, it would be a different case. But your plea shows that you know they are wrong and is the very reason you ought to exert a better influence than they do. Instead of following them and doing wrong because they do, you ought to rebuke them, pray for them, and try to lead them in a better way.

This excuse, then, is true but not good for justification. You only make it an excuse for charging God foolishly. Instead of clearing yourself, you only add dreadful, damning guilt.

Who can be justified by the law? Who has kept it? Who has a good excuse for breaking it? Who will dare go to God and face his Maker with such apologies?

DID JESUS OBEY FOR US?

Gospel justification is not the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. Under the gospel, sinners are not justified by having the obedience of Jesus Christ set down to their account as if He had obeyed the law for them or in their stead. People often suppose that they are accounted righteous in the eye of the law by having the obedience or righteousness of Christ imputed to them.

This idea is absurd and impossible for this reason: Jesus Christ was bound to obey the law for Himself. It was His duty to love the Lord His God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love His neighbor as Himself. If He had not done so, it would have been sin.

The only work He could perform for us was to submit to sufferings He did not deserve. This is called His "obedience unto death," and this is placed on our account. But if His obedience of the law is placed on our account, why are we called to repent and obey the law ourselves?

Does God exact triple service--first to have the law obeyed for us, then that Jesus must suffer the penalty for us, and then that we must repent and obey ourselves? No such thing is demanded! It is not required that the obedience of another should be imputed to us. All we owe is perpetual obedience to the law of benevolence. For this there can be no substitute. If we fail, we must endure the penalty or receive a free pardon.

Justification by faith does not mean that faith is accepted as a substitute for personal holiness or that faith is imputed to us instead of personal obedience to the law.

Some people think justification implies that personal holiness is set aside and God arbitrarily gets rid of the law and imputes faith as a substitute. But this is not the way. Abraham's faith was imputed to him for righteousness, worked by love, and produced holiness. Justifying faith is holiness and produces holiness of heart and life. It is imputed to the believer as holiness not instead of holiness.

FAITH WORKS BY LOVE

Some suppose that justification by faith is without regard to good works or holiness. They have understood this from what Paul said when he insisted so vehemently on justification by faith. But it must be remembered that Paul was combating the error of the Jews, who expected to be justified by obeying the law. In opposition to this error, Paul insists that justification is by faith, without works of law. He does not mean that good works are unnecessary to justification. Works of law are not good works because they spring from legal considerations, hope, and fear and not from faith that works by love.

Since a false theory had crept into the Church on the other side, James took up the matter and showed them that they had misunderstood Paul. To show this, he took the case of Abraham: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he had offered Isaac his son upon the alter? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. You see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2:21-24).

This epistle was thought to contradict Paul, and some of the ancient churches rejected it on that account. But they overlooked the fact that Paul was speaking of one kind of works and James of another. Paul was speaking of works performed from legal motives. But everywhere he insists that good works springing from the righteousness of faith are indispensable to salvation. All that he denies is that works of law grounded on legal motives have anything to do with the matter of justification.

James taught the same thing when he said that men are justified not by works or by faith alone but by faith together with the works of faith. Or, as Paul expressed it, faith works by love. Please remember that I am speaking of gospel justification, which is very different from legal justification.

Gospel justification, or justification by faith, consists in pardon and acceptance by God. When we say that men are justified by faith and holiness, we do not mean that they are accepted on the ground of law. But they are treated as if they were righteous on account of their faith. This is the method that God takes in justifying a sinner. Not that faith is the foundation of justification, because the foundation is in Christ. But this is the manner in which sinners are pardoned, accepted, and justified. If they repent, believe, and become holy, their past sins will be forgiven for Jesus' sake.

Justification under the gospel differs from justification under the law. Legal justification is a declaration of actual innocence and freedom from blame. Gospel justification is pardon and acceptance, as if he were righteous, but on grounds other than his own obedience. When the apostle says, "By works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16), he uses justification in a strictly legal sense. But when he speaks of justification by faith, he speaks not of legal justification but of a person being treated as if he were righteous.

RESTORED TO SONSHIP

When an individual is pardoned, the penalty of the law is released. The first effect of a pardon is to set aside the execution of the penalty. It admits that the penalty was deserved but sets it aside. Then, as far as punishment is concerned, the individual has no more to fear from the law than if he had never transgressed. He is entirely released. People justified by true faith, as soon as they are pardoned, need no more be influenced by fear of punishment. The penalty is set aside as if it had never been incurred.

The next effect of pardon is to remove all the debts acquired as a consequence of transgression. A real pardon removes all these and restores the individual back to where he was before he transgressed. Under the government of God, the pardoned sinner is restored to the favor of God. He is brought back into a new relationship and stands before God and is treated by Him, as far as the law is concerned, as if he were innocent. It does not suppose or declare him to be really innocent, but the pardon restores him to the same state as if he were.

Another operation of pardon under God's government is that the individual is restored to sonship. In other words, it brings him into such a relationship to God that he is received and treated as a child of God.

Suppose the son of a king had committed murder and was condemned to die. A pardon would not only deliver him from death but would restore him to his place in the family. God's children have all gone astray and entered in to the service of the devil. But the moment they are pardoned, they receive a spirit of adoption, are sealed heirs of God, and are restored to all the privileges of children of God.

Justification secures all needed grace to rescue themselves fully out of the snare of the devil and the innumerable sinful entanglements. If God were merely to pardon you and then leave you to get out of sin by yourselves, of what use would your pardon be to you? Imagine a child who runs away from his father's house, wanders into a forest, and falls into a deep pit. When the father finds him, he cannot merely pardon the child for running away. He must lift him from the pit and lead him out of the forest.

In the scheme of redemption, whatever help you need is guaranteed, if you believe. If God undertakes to save you, He pledges all the light, grace, and help that are necessary to break the chains of Satan and the entanglements of sin; and He leads you back to your Father's house.

SALVATION THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

When individuals are first broken under a sense of sin and their hearts gush out with tenderness, they look over their past lives and feel condemned. They see that it is all wrong, break down at God's feet, and give themselves to Jesus Christ. They rejoice greatly in the idea that they are through with sin.

But soon they begin to feel the pressure of old habits and former influences. Often they become discouraged when they see what must be overcome. If God has saved you, you only have to keep near to Him, and He will carry you through. You don't have to fear your enemies. Though the heavens thunder, the earth rocks, and the elements melt, you need not tremble or fear. God is for you, and who can be against you? (See Romans 8:31.) "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us" (Romans 8:34).

Justification enlists the divine attributes in your favor as much as if you had never sinned. Imagine a holy angel, sent on an errand of love to some distant part of the universe. God's eye follows him. If He sees that angel likely to be injured in any way, all the divine attributes will at once protect and sustain him. Just as absolutely, they are all pledged for your protection, support, and salvation. Although you are not free

from remaining sin and are totally unworthy of God's love, yet if you are truly justified, the only wise and eternal God is pledged for your salvation. Will you tremble and be faint-hearted with such support?

If a human government pardons a criminal, it is then pledged to protect him as a subject--as much as if he had never committed a crime. So it is when God justifies a sinner. The apostle Paul says, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Romans 5:1). God is on his side, pledged as his faithful and eternal friend.

Gospel justification differs from legal justification in this respect: If the law justifies an individual, it holds only as long as he remains innocent. If he transgresses again, his former justification won't help. But when the gospel justifies a sinner, it is not so: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

A new relationship is now in effect. The sinner is brought out from under the covenant of works and placed under the covenant of grace. He no longer retains God's favor by absolute and sinless obedience. If he sins, he is not thrust back again under the law but receives the benefit of the new covenant. If he is justified by faith--and so made a child of God--he receives the treatment of a child and is corrected, chastised, humbled, and brought back again.

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