

# The Doctrine of Justification

by John Piper

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*This sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding and defending the heart of the gospel, specifically focusing on the doctrine of justification by faith alone and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. It addresses the need to preach the robust biblical gospel, highlighting the significance of God's righteousness being imputed to believers through faith in Jesus Christ. The sermon encourages preachers to teach and help their congregation grasp the assurance of salvation found in Christ's righteousness.*

**Duration:** 38:12

**Scripture:** Romans 1:16, Romans 4:5, Romans 5:19, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 3:9, John 3:16, Galatians 3:6, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Isaiah 53:5

**Topics:** "Justification by Faith", "Assurance of Salvation"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Father in heaven, I ask that you would make the truth of the gospel now plain and that you would use my words to defend it from corruption so that the pure gospel would go forth with the power that Paul said it had in Romans 1:16. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe and so come now and refine the understanding of the gospel biblically in every person's mind, I ask, so that the gospel we preach would be robustly biblical. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Since the titles of these messages weren't published, I felt a little bit of liberty at 11 o'clock last night to change my mind, because as I listened to everybody talk, I thought I was going to talk about lessons from the life of Athanasius about defending the faith, and as I looked at what I had, I said this has been said well enough. I don't need to go here, but I think something has not been said in this conference that needs to be said. Nobody yet, this is a time of evangelism and defending the faith as a sub-order, and nobody has articulated the heart of the gospel yet.

We've all talked around it, assumed it, and so it just landed on me that okay, put these two together. What is the gospel, and what aspects of it need defending today? I'm going home in a few hours, and on

Wednesday I meet with a whole bunch of students, and they're going to hammer me with questions about the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works of the law, and why we should believe in the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. So I'm going to talk about that, because it helped me get ready for my encounter tomorrow, but mainly because the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ has fallen on hard times in these days, and those of you who are reading have heard of the New Perspective on Paul and people like E.P. Sanders and James Dunn and N.T. Wright, and to my dismay, so many evangelicals are embracing not just the wholesome, helpful dimensions of the New Perspective, but aspects of it that are undermining to Reformation truth, which is biblical truth.

Let me explain what I mean, and then I'm going to take you to Romans, and we're going to work on this for a few minutes. The doctrine of justification by faith is the heart of the gospel, and it goes like this. The righteousness required for our justification, for our right standing in our righteousness before God, the righteousness required of us is not a righteousness we perform even by the grace of God.

So many people today are saying, oh, but we're different from the Catholics because we believe in the sovereign grace of God, enabling us to do the things that God requires, which constitutes our righteousness. I say, you've given away the store if you go that way. So that's the negative.

The righteousness that God requires for our justification is not a righteousness that we perform even by sovereign grace, but is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us by God. It's called an alien righteousness. Yes, I believe in sanctification.

Yes, I believe that sanctification, that is, my performed righteousness, is a necessary evidence of the authenticity of my faith, which unites me to Christ who is my righteousness. Yes, I believe there should be holiness of life, and you can go to hell for not being a holy person, because the holiness that you lack shows you're not trusting God, and thus you're not united to Jesus, and thus not sharing in his righteousness, which is perfect. God requires a perfect righteousness.

We cannot perform it. You will not even perform it sufficiently in heaven, because in heaven there'll be a continuity with your life here, therefore you'll always be a forgiven sinner. Always, forever, even when you are perfect in heaven, you'll be you here.

You take you, you take you to heaven. You are you. From cradle to grave and from grave to eternity, that's you.

It's all you, and you're a sinner, and you'll always be a forgiven sinner, and a sinner who stands righteous before God on the ground of the righteousness of Christ, which you have by faith alone. And oh, how we need to get this right. If we don't preach this, we don't preach the robust biblical gospel, and I say that because of Romans 116.

I'm not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed. So he's defining the powerful gospel, the robust gospel, as the gospel in which righteousness is being revealed.

What does that mean? Now we're at 320, where he picks that theme up again, 321, but now he's just talked about the awful condition we're in for three chapters, but now the righteousness of God has been manifested. That's picking up 117. You see the connection between 117, righteousness being revealed, 321, but now in Jesus Christ, now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, though

the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God, who is God's, through faith in Jesus Christ.

So we need to figure this out, and the way I want to do it, here's the question I'm asking. I'm asking very specifically, does the Bible teach that God imputes the righteousness of Christ and His fulfillment of the law to ungodly sinners who merely trust Him for it? Does God do that? Is that a biblical teaching? Because two articles showed up a few years ago in Books and Culture by Robert Gundry saying that is not a biblical teaching. It's a leftover of systematic theology.

It's not part of biblical theology, and we should be honest and just drop that whole concept of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to sinners. And I wrote a whole book in response to those two articles. I was so bent out of shape that these evangelicals would even publish those articles without some kind of balance, and then they tried to follow it up with Thomas Oden's article defending, and bless God for what Thomas Oden is doing in these days in his turn from liberalism to evangelicalism, but all he did was defend the fact that it's a historical argument.

I mean, it's a historical doctrine from the Reformation. Well, that won't cut it with biblical scholars. Biblical scholars are arguing it's not in the Bible.

You got to show it's in the Bible. And so I wrote my little book on Counted Righteous in Christ, and so here's where I want us to go in the few minutes we have. I want to give you a credible argument that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the ungodly by faith alone.

So let's start in chapter four of Romans. We're going to do some careful thinking here, so put on your caps. Chapter four, let's jump in.

We have to go fast to verse two. For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God, which I think means he can't be justified by works before God. He isn't justified by works before God.

And then he quotes verse three, Genesis 15, 6, what does Scripture say? Abraham believed. That's the opposite of works. He believed.

He believed God, and it was counted. Now, that word is the key word. The Greek word *logizomai* can be translated counted, credited, reckoned, imputed.

They all mean the same thing. I got no problem with using any of those words. I just want you to know that's the word on which we base the doctrine of imputation.

Righteousness is imputed. However, there's a question here. When you read verse three, Abraham believed God and it, that is his believing, was counted to him as righteousness, does that mean faith is the righteousness? That's what it looks like.

A lot of people are taking it that way. Faith or faithfulness is your righteousness. You do it.

You do it. He looks on it and he counts it as what is required. So, this is now not the imputation of an alien righteousness.

That understanding would mean he is looking at your intrinsic performance, even of faith or faithfulness, and he said, that's what I require. That's your righteousness. That's the ground on which you stand, and I

accept you because you have performed that.

And that's what it looks like it means, which is why it's gaining in ascendancy. It says God reckons it as righteousness. Or here's the alternative historic Reformation interpretation, namely, it's not that the faith is the righteousness and is counted as such, but rather faith unites you to God or Christ who becomes your righteousness, and faith is the instrument of attachment to Christ who then has a righteousness counted to you.

Now, which of those is biblical? That's the issue. And I want to try to show you by following Paul's train of thought and then looking at a word in Philippians that an alien external righteousness is being imputed to you, counted to you, credited to you because you had faith alone. And it's not your faith that's the righteousness.

So let's follow him. Verse 4, now, to the one who works, his wages are not counted. Now, he's picking up the word counted from verse 3, and he's showing how he understands it, and he's understanding it in a bookkeeping employment ledger context.

This is what the new perspective blows away. They don't like it. They don't see it.

They want to talk simply in terms of covenantal belonging to the people of God. And if at best they say, this is a subordinate concept in Paul, this idea of a working, a wage, a ledger, and are you paid by what you earned, are you paid by faith, and how you get something credited to your account, that's the imagery of these two verses, 4 and 5. And I think it's really important. I don't think it's peripheral.

I don't think it's subordinate. I think it's foundational. We belong to the covenant community because underneath it, this happened.

So the covenant participation in the people of God isn't the main thing. It's the result of this main thing, that God counts me righteous. But let's let Paul speak.

Now, to the one who works, if you wanted to get it by works, this is the way you'd do it. You'd be paid a wage. Now, what would you be paid? Righteousness.

That's the wage here. You want righteousness by working, you'll get it by a wage, not as a gift or not by grace, not according to grace, but as due, as debt. So there's a way you can relate to God.

You can take the law. You can perform it and hope that in the performing of it, you have now done your work and you will now get your wage. And of course, when you get chapter 6, you realize what the wages are really going to be if you go that way.

The wages of sin are death. If you want to go the wage route, you get death. Now, verse 5 gives the alternative.

And to the one who does not work, we're not going that way. We're not going to get righteousness by working, but trust. Okay, here's the second way you can have the wage.

Now, the reason this is so crucial is because Paul has brought an imagery to bear on our minds which has an external reality called a wage that is to come to me. And it gives me two ways to get it. I can work for it or trust for it.

But if I trust for it, the trust is not it. That's my first argument. He has brought in an imagery to make righteousness an external thing like a wage.

He said you've got two ways of getting it. You can work for it or you can believe for it. And if you believe for it, it's not the belief.

However, he does quote the same word from Genesis at the end of verse 5. He says, but alternative to working, trust him who justifies the ungodly. Oh, that's good news. That preaches.

Oh, brothers, learn this glorious doctrine of justification of the ungodly. Somebody just asked me on a radio interview, what's the relationship with this thing you're going to talk about this morning to a changing of the world? The world will be changed by Christians when they have learned that the only sin they can make any headway in defeating in their lives is a justified or forgiven sin. If you turn it around and say, I'm going to get justified by changing my life, changing the world, get God to like me, get him to accept me, get him to reckon me as righteous someday, you will fail.

The key to a transformed world is to realize that we are, that the ungodly are counted righteous. You go to the brothels, you go to the inner city gangbangers and you say, guess what? God justifies the ungodly. You go to the absolutely hopeless people who cry their eyes out, feeling like 40 years of sin makes it impossible for them to be saved.

And you say, God justifies the ungodly by faith alone. Can you fall on this floor? If you can fall on this floor, you can fall on Jesus. Doesn't take any muscles to fall.

No, I guess stop preaching because I want to do this exegesis here and get this argument before you and I'm going to lose it. So, Lord, help me. To the one who does not work, I'm at verse 5, but trusts him who justifies the ungodly.

And then he says it again. But the question is, what does it mean? His faith is counted as righteousness. So again, it sounds, just the phrase by itself sounds like he's looking at your faith and he's saying, that's the righteous.

I'm counting that as righteous. And I've just argued, my first argument is, no, no, no. He has brought in an imagery of wage, a wage obtained by working or a wage obtained by trusting.

And if it's by trusting, the righteousness is not the trusting. That's argument number one. Number two is to go into verse 6. Just as David also speaks of a blessing.

You can explain a little further what this imputation was like for David. Just as David also speaks about the blessing of the one to whom God counts or imputes. Keep remembering that the doctrine of imputation is in that word counting, crediting.

God imputes righteousness apart from works. Now, this is interesting and very crucial. Notice in verse 3 and 5, it says that God is counting faith as something.

In verse 6, it says God is counting righteousness. Righteousness is now the direct object of the imputation word. That's hugely important.

He shifted gears from looking at faith and saying, that's credited to your account for righteousness. And now He's looking at righteousness and saying, I credit that to your account. And it's external.

I credit that to your account. So, I think His shifting of grammar and language in what's the direct object of the counting in verse 6 is very illuminating as to the meaning of what Genesis 15:6 meant. Let's confirm this, if we're on the right track, with Philippians 3:9. Would you go there with me? Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians 3:9, and we'll just read that one verse.

Paul is longing, praying that he would be found in Him, that is, in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, that is, I don't want a righteousness that is my performance of the law, but that which comes, now, key word, key prepositions, through faith. Faith is not it. It's coming through faith, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

So, you got through faith, you got on faith, and I'm going to argue, and I'm going to end this argument right here, it's not faith. The righteousness, the wage, is not the faith. Let me give you an illustration from my son's bedroom to prove it, or at least not prove it, illustrate it, because we need conceptual framework, because the average reader, if he just takes out of context, Genesis 15:6, quoted twice there in Romans 4, Abraham believed God, and God counted it to him as righteousness.

They're going to easily say, it is the righteousness. And I'm arguing right now, it is not the righteousness. It's the instrument by which we get attached to God, Christ, who gives us external alien righteousness that is not our own.

So, how can that language work like that? Okay, I say to Barnabas, my son, he's out of the house now. When I made this analogy up, he was at home and a teenager. Barnabas, clean your room this morning before you go to school.

I'm your father, this is a command. Clean your room, make your bed, get that stuff off the floor before you go to school. If you have a clean room this afternoon, you can go to the ballgame tonight.

I make your going to the ballgame tonight contingent on your having a clean room. And he forgets and leaves the house without cleaning the room. Now, I'm really sad.

I love my son. I want him to go to the ballgame. I don't like this kind of discipline.

So, God-like, I clean his room. I make his bed. He comes home, and it occurs to him as he walks in the front door, I forgot to clean my room.

And instead of being feisty and argumentative, he says, Daddy, I forgot to clean my room. I heard what you said. Okay, I'll be home tonight.

And I look at him and I say, Barnabas, I count your apology as a clean room. That's counted as a clean room. Because I said this morning that if your room is clean, you go to the ballgame, guess what? Your room is clean.

He looks at me, really? I said, right. I count your apology. I'm just, I choose.

I'm sovereign here. I'm God. I can do this.

I count your apology as a clean room. Does that mean his apology is a clean room? An apology is an apology. The clean room is a clean room.

It is not a clean room. So, let's get this clear. I credit your apology as a clean room is like Genesis 15, 6 quoted in verse 3 and verse 5. God credits Abraham's faith as righteousness.

And I'm arguing against the view that the faith is the righteousness. So, when I say to Barnabas, I credit, I count, I impute your apology as a clean room. I do not mean your apology is a clean room.

It's upstairs. You're down here. Second, your clean room does not consist in an apology.

It's a clean room. Your apology is that. This is this.

And thirdly, you didn't clean that room. I did, and you are at this game by grace alone and by apology alone. Now, it's only an analogy.

Don't push the details here. That really helps me handle Genesis 15, 6 in a fully biblical way rather than becoming Roman Catholic. Or new perspective and saying, really, the righteousness that will get you right with God is your own performance of faith and faithfulness.

That is sadly spreading in evangelicalism, and I don't think it's true. Now, here's the remaining two questions. Whose righteousness is credited? We haven't seen that answer in chapter 4. Whose righteousness is credited to our account when we believe in Jesus? And there are two answers.

The first one is God's righteousness, and the second one is Christ's righteousness. They're not at odds. We are Trinitarians, but let's look at both of them to be biblically faithful.

Chapter 3, verse 20, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight. Through the law comes the knowledge of sin." So, works ruled out. You can never, ever be reckoned righteous, counted righteous by works of the law.

Verse 21, "But now'..." Here's an alternative way to be counted righteous. "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law." So, flowing from verse 20, unpacking justification and how we are declared righteous, verse 21 says, "The righteousness of God has shown up." Now, what's the connection with me, the sinner? Verse 22 makes it plain. "The righteousness of God,' namely, "through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." The righteousness spoken of is God's righteousness, and it comes through faith, through faith in Jesus Christ for me as I believe, and so I argue that the righteousness that's imputed, the wage that doesn't come through works but is freely given by faith is God's righteousness.

Now, we get into it more specifically. Is it Christ's? Let's go to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. We'll come back to Romans for our final argument, but 2 Corinthians 5, 21 is as big as it gets in the doctrine of justification, absolutely crucial word here. Let me set you up with verse 19.

That is, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting." Now, there is introduced the doctrine of the imputation, not imputing, not counting, not crediting their trespasses against them. How can that be? How can that be? How can God move through the world and save the ungodly by faith alone? I mean, that's unjust. You just can't do that.

Good judges don't sweep sin under the rug and count the ungodly righteous. They count the righteous righteous and the ungodly ungodly and send those to jail and give those liberty. That's the way judges work, and here God is not counting the sins of the world against them and imputing righteousness to

ungodly people.

This is so impossible, except for verse 21, "For our sake God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Now, the parallelism between what happened to Christ in regard to my sin and what happens to me in regard to God's righteousness is absolutely crucial to see. Ask yourself this question. When God looked upon His sinless Son and made Him to be sin for me, did Jesus at that moment become a morally corrupt person sinning against His Father as He hung on the cross? Nobody believes that or shouldn't.

Everybody believes that's imputation, not performance. Jesus didn't start performing sin at that moment. He simply had my sin and your sin imputed to Him.

God looked upon Him as though He were sinner and punished Him with our sin because of our sin. Now, you bring that imputation idea over onto me as I go into Christ by faith, and it says, in Christ I become the righteousness of God, and I think we better keep the same imputing idea on this side of the analogy and say, I don't become righteous in order to get justified. God justifies the ungodly.

Rather, I am credited with the righteousness of God, and the connection with Christ is so plain. It is in Christ, in Christ, in Christ, so that I am now enveloped in my Christ, and thereby Him I have righteousness with God, and that brings His righteousness and God's righteousness so close together, I regard them as inseparable. Now, I'm going to skip over some texts.

Let's just look at two more to underline whether I'm right here, to try to decide whether I'm right here, that this is a teaching in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, that my righteousness is only in Christ and is thus the righteousness of Christ. Even though it is called here the righteousness of God, I'm saying they're one. Look at...let's just do one.

Let's just go back to Romans 5 and end on verse 19. Romans 5, verse 19, For as by one man's disobedience, that's Adam, the many, everybody, were made sinners, the word is constituted sinners, so by the one man's obedience, that's Christ, Christ, many will be constituted or made righteous. Now, there it's explicit.

The obedience I need is Christ's. Adam's disobedience is imputed to me before I did anything. That's the teaching of verses 12 through 19.

Jesus' righteousness is imputed to me before I perform any works of the law. I just lean on it, fall on it, cherish it, treasure it, embrace it. It's my only hope.

So, I'm just going to close with a couple of exhortations. One, preach the gospel. Preach the gospel.

Don't assume your people know the gospel. They don't. They don't understand this doctrine.

I promise you, your people cannot articulate, most of them, the doctrine of the imputation of the righteousness of Christ or the free work of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, all taught in the Bible without any help from the papal authority alone. Your people don't, they can't articulate that. Everybody once upon a time 300 years ago lived on that.

They preached it. They loved it. It was John Bunyan's only hope.

You remember him walking among the trees as a 25-year-old, utterly torn to shreds inside with lack of assurance, wondering how he could ever measure up and how God could accept a sinner like him. And he said, it landed on him, and he couldn't quote the verse at the time, it was 1 Corinthians 1.30, that Christ is our righteousness. And he said, suddenly the Holy Spirit illumined my mind, and I saw that my righteousness is not in here.

It's in heaven, standing at the right hand of God. It cannot be more. It cannot be less.

It is perfect, there, secure, forever. And he never doubted his salvation again. Oh, feed the assurance of your people's salvation.

They don't come to you very often with this news, but they have late-night horrible feelings that they're not really Christians. They need to be taught what justification by faith alone is, and how it relates to sanctification. So, that's my first exhortation.

Preach the gospel. The second thing I would say is, it is universally applicable. It does not—it dare not be abandoned when you go to Guinea, or China, or Sri Lanka, as though, well, they don't have the same legal system that we have there, and they don't have judges, and they don't have—so we better just use regeneration language there.

Or they don't have that either. So, let's just use sacrifice language, or just—now, I know the atonement has many metaphors. I'm saying this one is universal because of chapter 5. Adam is the father of every tribe on planet earth, and Adam is the reason Christ has to come in as the second Adam, and his righteousness has to fix Adam's disobedience.

That's universal. There's no tribe where that's not crucial. And the third thing I would say is, give Christ all of His glory.

Don't do like the New Perspective. They're glorifying Jesus as the One who shed His blood to pay for our sins, but they rob Him of the glory as the One who was perfectly obedient in His meticulous law-keeping so that His obedience could be imputed to me. There's none of that there, and therefore—at least for some in the New Perspective—and therefore, half of the glory of Christ in the performance of my salvation is robbed from Him.

I want Him to be the pardon and the perfection of my life. I have sins that need to be forgiven, and I have a shortcoming and cannot perform the perfection that the law demands. He is that, and He is that, and I'm going to sing His praises as my righteousness and my pardon.

Don't strip out of hundreds of hymns the glorious truth. He is our righteousness. And the last thing I would say is, help your people with their assurance.

And I've said that already, but let me just underline it. Most of your people struggle with the doctrine that is with the experience of assurance. I speak from personal experience.

Some of us are wired to doubt our own motives and to doubt ourselves. If I am left, if I am left with having to perform even a fraction of the righteousness that some of you are capable of, I am undone. I am undone.

I won't have any standing before the throne, and I won't be able to sleep tonight. I have to, as I lay my head down, and I do this so often, I set my alarm. I put my head down and ponder.

I might, at three o'clock this morning, wake up in heaven without waking up here. How would it be? I've sinned today. My motivations have been corrupt today.

How would it be? I tell you, you want to be able to say to your people, your righteousness that gives you a standing with the Father is not your own. It's not your own. It's God's.

It's Christ's. Let's pray. So Lord, now I least feel like I have discharged my duty that I felt last night at 11 o'clock to say the gospel.

So put all the other beautiful pieces of this conference around this diamond of the gospel that isn't in John Piper. It's in Romans and Philippians 3 and Galatians 3. Oh God, grant, I pray, that we as a people would love the gospel, understand the gospel, preach the gospel, live the gospel, and give all the glory to Christ our righteousness. In his name we pray, amen.

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