

Justification

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

Justification in Christ through faith is a necessity for spiritual health, bringing peace, liberty, and power to the soul.

Scripture: Genesis 15:6, Acts 13:39, Romans 3:25, Romans 5:1, 2 Corinthians 5:21

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Salvation Through Christ"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the significance of Justification in the spiritual life, emphasizing its role in restoring our true relation to God by removing condemnation, guilt, and separation caused by sin. Justification is not merely pardon but the act of God accepting and accounting us as righteous through faith in Christ, leading to a perfect standing before God. The doctrine of Justification by faith alone is crucial for spiritual health, peace, and liberty, cutting at the root of sacerdotal mediation and serving as the foundation of holiness, spiritual power, and true spiritual service.

Transcript

The spiritual life can be considered from the Divine or the human standpoint, from the point of view of God's provision or from that of our appropriation. As a rule differences do not show themselves in connection with the great objective concerning God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Sin and Redemption. It is only in the application of them to individual and corporate life that differences emerge. We see this in the great Reformation Movement of the sixteenth century. There was no essential difference on fundamental doctrine; the vital differences were in regard to the precise methods of applying Christ's Redemption to individual life. This is especially seen in connection with what is known as the doctrine of Justification, for it was the theological and spiritual foundation of the Reformation Movement. People sometimes wonder why Luther called that doctrine "the article of a standing or falling Church," but his spiritual insight was perhaps never more evident than when he did so.

The question of Justification was not only the foundation of the Reformation; it lies at the root of all Christian life and service; for only when it is settled are real peace, power and progress possible. The prominence given to it at the Reformation is a striking testimony to its importance as, in some respects, the supreme question of the ages. Justification is concerned with the great inquiry: "How should man be just with God?" This inquiry is found as far back as the Book of Job, and then no less than four times (4:17, 9:2, 15:14, 25:4). It is seen throughout the history of the Jews, it is expressed in heathen sacrifices, and is implied, in one way or another, in all oriental religions. The Bible alone gives the true answer, and it

was this beyond all else that led to the emphasis on the Bible as the Rule of Faith at the time of the Reformation. It may be said that the whole movement of the sixteenth century was bound up with the two principles of the Sufficiency and the Supremacy of the Bible, and Justification by Faith.

The first hint of the latter subject comes in Genesis 15:6, and then gradually through the Old Testament more and more light is given in such passages as Psalm 143:2, Micah 6:6, Habakkuk 2:4, until at length in the New Testament we have God's full revelation in answer to man's inquiry. It will help us to understand this subject if we proceed to ask some questions.

I. What Is the Meaning of Justification? Justification can be understood either as the Divine act and gift to man, or else as the human reception and result of the Divine gift. Justification is thus connected with our true relation to God. A good definition of it is found in the Church of England Article, "We are accounted righteous before God." Justification is not concerned with our spiritual condition, but with our spiritual relation; not with our actual state, but with our judicial position.

This should be continually borne in mind in order to avoid spiritual confusion and difficulty. This true relation to God was originally lost by sin. Sin is always disobedience of the Divine Law, rebellion against God's Will; and in regard to our true relation to God, there are three results of sin: guilt, condemnation, separation. We see these three in the Garden of Eden as the direct and immediate result of sin. Justification is the restoration of this true relation to God, and as such includes (a) the removal of condemnation by the gift of forgiveness; (b) the removal of guilt by the reckoning (or imputation) of righteousness; (c) the removal of separation by the restoration to fellowship.

Justification therefore means: to treat as just or righteous, to account righteous, to regard as righteous, to declare righteous, to pronounce righteous in the eyes of the law (Psa. 51:4, Prov. 17:15, Ezek. 16:51-52; Matt. 11:19, 12:37; Luke 7:35). As we have seen, it is at least a coincidence that St. Paul's three questions at the close of his eighth chapter in Romans deal with these three results of sin as seen in the history of the Fall: (a) "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" (verse 33).

That is, No guilt. (b) "Who is he that condemneth?" (verse 34). No condemnation. (c) "Who shall separate us?" (verse 35). No separation. Justification is therefore much more than pardon, and the two are clearly distinguished by St. Paul (Acts 13:38-39). A criminal is pardoned, though he cannot be regarded as righteous. But Justification is that act of God whereby He accepts and accounts us righteous, while in ourselves we are unrighteous. The Christian is not merely a pardoned criminal, but a righteous man.

Man can forgive his fellow man, but he cannot justify him. God can do both. Forgiveness is an act issuing in an attitude. Forgiveness is repeated throughout life; justification is complete and never repeated. It relates to our spiritual position in the sight of God and covers the whole of our life, past, present and future. Forgiveness is only negative, the removal of condemnation; justification is also positive, the removal of guilt and the bestowal of a perfect standing before God.

In a word, justification means reinstatement. Forgiveness is being stripped; justification is being clothed. Day by day we approach God for forgiveness and grace, on the footing of a relation of justification that lasts throughout our lives. In regard to the justified man, the believer, God is "Faithful and righteous to forgive". Thus justification is the ground of our assurance. The reason why "we know" is because of what Christ has done for us and is to us. Justification is also different from "making righteous," which is the usual interpretation of Sanctification.

The two are inseparable in fact, but they are distinguishable in thought, and must certainly be kept quite clear of each other if we desire peace and blessing. Justification concerns our standing; Sanctification our state. The former affects our position; the latter our condition. The first deals with relationship; the second, with fellowship. And even though they are bestowed together, we must never confuse them. The one is the foundation of peace - "Christ for us"; the other is the foundation of purity, "Christ in us".

The one deals with acceptance; the other with attainment. Sanctification admits of degrees, we may be more or less sanctified; Justification has no degrees, but is complete, perfect and eternal. "Justified from all things." Our Lord indicated this distinction between Justification and Sanctification when He said, "He that hath been bathed (justification) needeth not save to wash the feet (sanctification)." At this point it is necessary and important to consider the Roman Catholic doctrine of Justification.

While there are other prominent differences between the New Testament and the Church of Rome, it is apt to be overlooked that there is a fundamental difference between them on Justification as well. A brief reference to what happened at the Council of Trent will enable us to understand this difference. Dr. Lindsay describes the statement put forth at that Council as "a masterpiece of theological dexterity". This was doubtless due to the fact that there was not a little evangelical doctrine of the Roman Church which had to be considered, and so much was this the case, that at one time it had been thought possible to win over the Protestants.

But that time, if it ever existed, had gone by, and the discussion in the Council revealed fundamental lines of difference. A small minority was ready to accept the Lutheran view of Justification by faith alone, but the majority easily won the day on behalf of a view which was almost the exact opposite of the Lutheran doctrine. The result was that Justification was no longer regarded as a change of state, but as the actual conversion of a sinner into a righteous man. The fact is that Rome teaches forgiveness through Sanctification, while Scripture teaches the opposite.

Rome confuses Justification and Sanctification, and says that the former comes by the infusion of Grace, and includes remission and renovation. But this is really to rob the soul of the objective ground of righteousness, and to confuse spiritual acceptance with spiritual attainment. Justification in Scripture is independent of, and anterior to the spiritual state or condition, which, however, necessarily follows. It has often been pointed out that Justification, according to the Scripture, is complete from the first.

As a modern writer has remarked the father in the parable does not leave his prodigal son outside the house until he has shown his repentance by his works. He goes forth to meet him and heartily welcomes him. And in the same way the sinner is not taken back into the Divine favour by degrees, but is restored at once to all his privileges as a child of God. This, as it has been well urged, is the only way to make the work of sanctification complete. It is a work which can go forward only after the relation of fatherhood and sonship has been fully reestablished.

It is only by such love that the sinner's love can be made perfect (1 John 4:19). It is of vital importance, therefore, to keep clear the distinction between the doctrine of the New Testament and that of Rome, because there is so much confusion today in regard to the essential meaning of our acceptance with God.

II. What Is the Basis of Justification?

We are accounted righteous before God, "only on account of the merit of our Lord Jesus Christ". This is the language of the Anglican Article, and it can be paralleled by identical teaching in the Westminster

Confession and other similar documents. It is an echo of the Pauline language, "In Him ... justified" (Acts 13:39). The "merit" of our Lord Jesus Christ, of course, refers to His atoning work, by which He removed the alienation between God and the sinner and brought about our reconciliation. It must never be forgotten that the New Testament doctrine of Reconciliation implies a change of relationship, and not a mere alteration of feeling on our part. This doctrine of Justification because of the work of Christ is seen all through the New Testament. Our Lord's perfect obedience, even unto death, His payment of the penalty due to our transgressions, His spotless righteousness, the entire merit of His Divine Person and work, form the ground or basis of our justification. This merit is reckoned to us, put to our account; God looks at us in Him, not only as pardoned, but as righteous. He who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might become God's righteousness in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). This is the great and satisfying doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ, which is clearly taught in the New Testament as meritorious on our behalf. It is sometimes stated that this theory is not found in Scripture, because of its association with what is sometimes called "legal fiction," but in the light of the teaching of the New Testament on our Lord's atoning death, by which we are accounted righteous before God, the doctrine of Imputation is quite clear, and is taught plainly, in Scripture and therefore in the truest theology.

This reference to the "merit" of our Lord brings into greater contrast the negative aspect emphasized by St. Paul that our justification is due to Christ through faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Our obedience to law could not merit or work out our Justification. It is absolutely impossible for anything human to form the foundation of acceptance with God, for our obedience to law could not bring this about. God requires perfect obedience (Gal. 3:10), and man cannot render this. Human nature has ever been attempting to establish its own righteousness, but failure has been the invariable result. The Jews of old (Rom. 10:3), and mankind today, alike fail because of the twofold inability; inability to blot out the past, and inability to guarantee the present and future. Justifying righteousness must be by a perfect obedience, and the Lord Jesus is the only One who ever rendered it. Nothing could be clearer in the New Testament than the absolute impossibility of human merit in connection with Justification.

III. What Is the Method of Justification?

The merit of our Lord becomes ours "by faith". "Through Him all that believe are justified" (Acts 13:39). Faith is never the ground of Justification, but only its means or channel. All the New Testament references to faith indicate this in the clearest possible way. Trust implies dependence upon another and the consequent cessation of dependence upon ourselves. Faith is therefore the acknowledgment of our own inability and the admission of our need of another's ability. Faith links us to Christ and is the means of our appropriation of His merit. The full meaning of Faith in the New Testament is trust. (1) The primary idea is belief in a fact (1 John 5:1). (2) The next is belief in a person's word (John 4:21). (3) But the fullest is trust in a person (John 3:16). Thus, faith in its complete sense includes the assent of the mind and the consent of the will, the credence of the intellect and the confidence of the heart. As such, it is best understood as trust, the attitude of one person to another.

The reason why faith is emphasized is that it is the only possible answer to God's revelation. From the earliest days this has been so. The word of the Lord came to Abraham and he at once responded by simple trust (Gen. 15:1-6). To the same effect are the various illustrations of faith in Hebrews 11, all implying response to a previous revelation. Between man and man the absence of faith is a barrier to communion, and it is just the same in things spiritual. Faith in man answers to grace in God. Faith is the correlative of promise. Trust answers to truth; faith renounces self and emphasizes God's free gift. There is no merit in faith. It is self-assertion with a view to self-surrender. As Hooker once said, "God doth justify

the believing man, yet not for the worthiness of his belief, but for His worthiness who is believed." We are not justified by belief in Christ, but by Christ in whom we believe. Faith is nothing apart from its object, and is only valuable as it leads us to Him who has wrought a perfect righteousness, and as it enables us to appropriate Him as the Lord our righteousness.

IV. What Is the Value of Justification? The Anglican Article speaks of the doctrine as "most wholesome," and "very full of comfort," and this is not surprising because every revival of spiritual life has been associated with it as the true explanation of the way in which the Atonement is appropriated by sinful men. Justification in Christ through faith is a necessity for spiritual health. The Council of Trent clearly taught the meritoriousness of Good Works. But as long as this is emphasized there cannot possibly be that spiritual life which is found in the New Testament.

Justification by faith is the foundation of peace. The soul looks backward, outward, upward, onward, and even inward, and is able to say with the Apostle, "justified from all things," and as a result of "being justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Rom. 5:1). When this is realized, all questions of human merit disappear, and the fabric of Roman Catholicism falls to the ground. This Justification is immediate, certain, complete and abiding. Justification by faith is really the only answer to the moral perplexities of the doctrine of original sin.

It vindicates God's righteousness while manifesting His mercy (Acts 17:30, R.V.; Rom. 3:25, R.V.). Our deepest need is a right idea of the character of the God with whom we have to do. How He can be just and yet justify the ungodly is an insoluble problem apart from Jesus Christ. Christ is the proof of God's capacity to forgive while remaining just. A sin convicted soul demands at least as much righteous indignation of sin in God as it feels itself. This is seen in the Cross.

It is characteristic of St. Paul's teaching in Romans that the Cross is the manifestation of God's righteousness rather than of His mercy (Rom. 3:21-26). In all this it will never be forgotten that faith is not the ground but only the means of our justification, and the strength or weakness of our trust will not affect the fact but only the enjoyment of our justification. This doctrine is also the secret of spiritual liberty. All the Reformers felt and declared this, and we repeat that it was with true spiritual insight that Luther spoke of it as "the article of a standing or falling Church"; indeed, we may go further and say with a modern writer that it is "the article of a standing or falling soul".

It removes the bondage of the soul, sets the prisoner free, introduces him directly to God, and gives continual access into the Holiest. It therefore cuts at the root of all sacerdotal mediation as both unnecessary and dangerous. On this account it is easy to understand the intense opposition shown to this doctrine on the part of the theologians of the Church of Rome. This doctrine is also the necessity for spiritual power. It is the foundation of holiness. The soul is introduced into the presence of God, receives the Holy Spirit, realizes the indwelling presence of Christ, and in these finds the secret and guarantee of purity of heart and life.

It brings the soul into relation with God, so that from imputed righteousness comes imparted righteousness, and this keeps the doctrine from the charge of mere intellectual orthodoxy without spiritual vitality. So far from the doctrine putting a premium upon carelessness, it is in reality one of the springs of holiness. When St. Paul was charged with what is now called Antinomianism, he did not tone down his doctrine in the least, but declared it all the more fully as the very heart of the Gospel.

It is also the secret of true spiritual service. The soul released from anxiety about itself is free to show concern about others. The heart is at leisure from itself to set forward the salvation of those around. When Christian workers obtain a clear insight into this doctrine and yield the life to its power and influence, it becomes the means of liberty to spiritual captives, and the secret of peace and blessing to hearts in spiritual darkness and fear. From all this it is easy to see what the New Testament teaches, the intense and immense spiritual blessing of the doctrine, and there are signs that the truth is being realized afresh by many who have been "tied and bound by the chain" of a purely legal view of Christianity.

Certainly, if we are to get back not merely to the joy, peace, liberty, and power of Reformation days, but still more to the primitive truth of the Christian life recorded in the New Testament, we must give the most definite prominence to this truth of Justification in Christ through faith.

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