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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
Salvation (4)

Salvation: God's Pursuit of Us
Part Four

Justification

Justification in the Life and Theology of Martin Luther

Most Protestant Christians immediately think of the reformer Martin Luther when the subject of justification is raised. Early on Luther believed that, if the sinner would take the initiative by humbly calling on God and “doing what lies within”, God would respond with the grace of justification. This doctrine, however, brought Luther little comfort, for he found himself despairing of the ability to fulfill the condition of the covenant.

He conceived of the “righteousness of God” as an impartial divine attribute according to which God either forgave or condemned the individual based on the latter’s response to the terms of the covenant. God’s righteousness, therefore, was not gospel (i.e., good news) for Luther but an ever-present threat. The transformation in Luther’s theology came with the recognition that the “righteousness” of God was, in fact, that according to which God graciously provided the very righteousness he required.

Fundamental Characteristics of Justification by Faith Alone

(1) Justification means we are *declared* righteous, not made righteous. It is a change in our status, not our nature. That doesn’t mean justification has no relationship to progressive sanctification in which we are gradually, by grace, transformed inwardly into the very image of Jesus himself. They are distinct spiritual realities, but by no means separable. Those who are truly justified will be sanctified. This radical and fundamental distinction between justification as a status obtained by initial faith and the subsequent sanctification or transformation of one’s nature through grace was a profound insight of the Protestant Reformers and a return to the biblical doctrine itself.

(2) Justification is *objective*, not subjective. That is to say, it is something done *for* us, not in us. Or to say much the same thing, justification is *forensic*, not experiential. That is to say, it is a *legal act*, not an emotional feeling. Whereas we do not feel justification when it occurs, once we comprehend what God has done there may be great exhilaration of soul and spirit.

Thus, the differences between the Protestant and Roman Catholic views on justification are unmistakable. In Protestantism, justification is extrinsic (not intrinsic), alien to us (not inherent within us), objective or for us (not subjective or in us), punctiliar (it occurs at a point in time, when we believe, and is not progressive), forensic (not experiential), declarative (not transformative), entails the imputation of righteousness to us (not the impartation of righteousness in us), issues in (but is not the same as) sanctification, and pertains to our status (not our being) as we are reckoned righteous (not made righteous).

(3) Justification is both *acquittal* and *acceptance*. That is to say, it involves both the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the righteousness of Christ. God not only declares us "Not guilty!" he also declares us "Righteous!" Mere pardon would leave us spiritually naked with no righteousness. Pardon might save us from hell but it wouldn't get us into heaven.

(4) Justification is both *exclusive* and *extensive*. By exclusive I mean there is no middle ground: you either are or are not justified. It is not something you attain by degrees but is a standing that is yours by divine decree. By extensive I mean that *all* sins are dealt with, whether past, present, or future.

(5) Justification is both *instantaneous* and *irreversible*. It is a position or status to which we are elevated. It is not a process. Furthermore, it is irreversible. It cannot be lost. God’s verdict will never be appealed to a higher court (cf. Rom. 8:31-34).

(6) Justification is received by *faith*, being *freely* bestowed by God (cf. Rom. 3:24; 2 Thess. 3:8; John 15:25). Thus the sinner is justified *per fidem propter Christum*, “through faith on account of Christ” (rather than *propter fidem per Christum*, “on account of faith through Christ,” as later Arminianism contended). We are not justified because we believe. Faith is not a human work that somehow merits justification. We are justified on account of or because of Christ, whose righteousness we receive passively, through faith.

(7) Justification is by faith *alone*, but the faith that justifies is never alone. In other words, the person who is justified *will be* sanctified. *Sola fides iustificat, sed non fides quae est sola*, or “faith alone justifies, but not the faith which is alone.” Thus whereas we are not justified by works, neither are we justified without works, for in the faith that justifies lies the seed of that sanctification of life apart from which no one shall see God.

(8) Justification by faith alone is grounded in our union with Christ. What we receive from God by grace is the indwelling of Christ himself into whose risen life we are incorporated. As Alister McGrath says, “justification is still treated as the external pronouncement of God that we are right in his sight – but the pronouncement is made on the basis of the presence within us of the living Christ” (*Justification by Faith*, 58).

Roman Catholicism

Intrinsic
Inherent
Subjective (to/in us)
Progressive
Experiential
Transformative
Impartation
Justification *is* Sanctification
Being
Becoming Righteous

Protestantism

Extrinsic
Alien
Objective (for us)
Punctiliar
Forensic
Declarative
Imputation
Justification *issues* in Sanctification
Status
Reckoned as Righteous

Glorification

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says that we “are being transformed into the same image [that is, the image of Christ himself] from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). The implication is obvious: progressive sanctification will not continue without end. ***There is a conclusion to our consecration.*** This progressive transformation from one degree of glory to another ***will one day reach its consummation.*** On that day we will be fully glorified and altogether shaped and fashioned forever in the likeness of Jesus.

This is surely what is in view in Paul’s anguished but hopeful cry in Romans 7:24 – “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). The question clearly suggests that a day is coming when “deliverance” from one’s sinful flesh would actually occur, and Paul evidently knew the answer to his own question, for just a few verses later, in chapter eight, he declares that “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be ***glorified*** with him” (Rom. 8:16-17).

In the verse that follows, Romans 8:18, he says this: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the ***glory*** that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). He then explains that the natural creation itself will one day “be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the ***glory*** of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). And yet again, in v. 30, we read that “those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also ***glorified***” (Rom. 8:30).

This is surely what Paul had in mind in 1 Corinthians 13:12 when he said that “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Think about what Paul is saying. When Christ comes and the ***perfect*** arrives, which I understand to be the final state of moral and metaphysical perfection in the New Heavens and New Earth, we will “know fully”. This doesn’t mean we

will become omniscient. But at the core of glorification will be ***the absence of any false views of God***. No heresy will exist in heaven. No misconceptions or distorted images of who God is will linger in our hearts. There will be no misinterpretations of Scripture.

Still in 1 Corinthians, Paul exuberantly declares “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and ***we shall be changed***” (1 Cor. 15:51-52). But the change is not merely physical. It is moral as well. Our bodies are to be transformed from perishable and corruptible into imperishable and incorruptible, but this extends as well to our ***minds***: how we think; it extends to our ***wills***: what we choose; it extends to our ***affections***: what we desire; it extends to our ***tongues***: what we say; and to our ***hands***: what we do.

Paul speaks again to this idea of glorification in Philippians 3. “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his ***glorious*** body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).

Many of you live in constant frustration because you hate your body. You are dissatisfied with your appearance, your size, your color, your hair. You think you’re either too tall or too short, too thin or too fat, too weak or too strong. Worse still, you hate what your body does and how it feels. You despise disease and weakness and fatigue and pain and lust and greed and discomfort and death.

Does this rob you of life and joy and service? Or does it cause you to fix your eyes on the heavens and the return of Christ who will finally, fully, and forever change your body into one that is fit for the glories of heaven and the kingdom of God?

Never forget that ***we will live for eternity in a body, a glorified and redeemed body, but no less a body***. Our existence will not merely be spiritual but gloriously physical forever! Our hope, as Paul states it in Philippians 3:21, is that Christ “will transform our lowly ***body*** to be like his glorious ***body***, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

It’s often hard to be happy when you hurt. Some of you are feeling that right now. But in heaven, with new and glorified bodies, you will never be out of breath; there will be no fatigue, pain, discomfort, chronic aches or itches. There will be only pure physical pleasure with no bodily obstacles to diminish our ability to see and feel and hear and touch and taste and smell the glories of paradise. Now, on earth, physical pleasure often competes with spiritual happiness, but in heaven they are one! The physical and emotional and intellectual pleasures of heaven will infinitely exceed the most ecstatic of physical and sensual pleasures on earth.

In the age to come, once sin is eradicated from our souls and bodies, there will be ***new faculties of mind*** to think and to comprehend the majesty of God. There will be ***new senses*** that enable us to see and feel and hear and taste the limitless beauty and sweetness of all that Jesus Christ is.

There will be no bodily lusts to defile your heart, no physical fatigue to cloud your mind, no wicked impulses against which you must fight, no dullness of spirit to hold you back, no lethargy of soul to slow you down, no weakness of will to keep you in bondage, no lack of energy to love someone else, no absence of passion to pursue what is holy.

Insofar as our bodies will be glorified in heaven and thus delivered of weakness and frailty and obscurity and our senses all heightened and magnified and their capacity to see, touch, feel, hear, and smell greatly increased and no longer hindered by disease or distraction, our experience will be indescribably joyful.

And what precisely is the ***practical benefit*** of thinking on these things and fixing the eyes of our hearts on the heavens from which Christ will return? As John said – “***Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure***” (1 John 3:3).

In Colossians 3 Paul assures us that “when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him ***in glory***” (Col. 3:4).

According to this text, Christ, who is our life, will one day “appear”. That is typically taken for granted among Christians. We refer to it as the Second Coming. But we fail to consider that “when” he appears “then” (note the explicit temporal connection in Paul’s language) we “also will appear with him in glory.”

Let’s put this passage together with two others. According to Romans 8:18 we will “see” that glory. Paul says it will be “revealed” to us. But in another sense we will “*be*” that glory. But in what sense? And in “being” that glory how do we keep the focus on Christ and not ourselves? Look again at Colossians 3:4.

When Paul says we will appear with him “in glory” *he’s not referring to a place but an experience*. This is the promise of sharing in the glorified life of Christ. It is the promise of the eradication of evil and every fleshly impulse. It is the promise of everlasting deliverance from greed and pride and lust and envy and bitterness. It is the promise that our whole being: body, soul, mind, spirit, and affections will experience and forever live in the power and purity of God himself.

It’s somewhat akin to what Paul had in mind in 2 Thessalonians 1:10 where he declares that Christ is coming to be glorified “*in*” his saints. John Stott explains it this way:

“So how will the coming Lord Jesus be glorified in relation to his people? Not ‘among’ them, as if they will be the theatre or stadium in which he appears; nor ‘by’ them, as if they will be the spectators, the audience who watch and worship; nor ‘through’ or ‘by means of’ them, as if they will be mirrors which reflect his image and glory [although, in a sense all those are true]; but rather ‘in’ them, as if they will be a filament, which itself glows with light and heat when the electric current passes through it” (*The Gospel and the End of Time*, 149).

Stott’s point is that we will not only witness Christ’s glory, we will be *enveloped within it, engulfed by its surging splendor, and made experiential participants of it*. One day our lives will no longer be “hidden” with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), but fully and finally and forever seen as we glow with the brightness of his glory, for his glory. This is surely what Jesus had in mind in Matthew 13:43 when he said of his Second Coming: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43a).

Although the word “glory” or “glorification” does not appear in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, that is undoubtedly what Paul has in mind when he prays, “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23). One day our sanctification will be “complete” or consummated.

The author of Hebrews says that when Christ returns to this earth a second time it will not be to deal with sin but “to *save* those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:28b).

Perhaps the most instructive of all biblical declarations of our “glorification” is provided by John in 1 John 3. “*Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3:2).

Just as our spiritual perception of Christ in the present sanctifies us incrementally and progressively, our literal vision of Christ in the future will sanctify us wholly. It is our experience of Christ that sanctifies. *If progressive assimilation to the likeness of Christ results from our present beholding of him through a glass darkly, to behold him face to face, i.e., "to see him as he is," will result in instantaneous perfection or glorification.*

What is the precise *causal relationship* between the vision of Christ and final glorification? Two views are possible:

On the one hand, some insist that we shall see Christ because we are like him; likeness, then, is the condition of seeing him (cf. Mt. 5:8; Heb. 12:14). Thus, this view says that holiness is a prerequisite to the vision of Christ and thus must precede it (the holiness, of course, is God given, not earned by man).

But I think it more likely John is saying that Christ shall appear, we will see him, and as a result of seeing him we shall be made like him. In other words, in his presence sin will be eradicated altogether from us. *When the glory of*

Christ finally appears, sin flees. It cannot abide his presence. In that moment and forevermore we will reflect his glory and through the majesty of that encounter we will be made like him.

There is also a sense in which this ***glorification, of which the apostle speaks, never ends.***

I don't mean that it will never be reversed, although that's true. There will never be the slightest diminishing or regression or reversal or loss of the purity and holiness and likeness unto Jesus that we gain at the resurrection of our bodies. What I mean is that ***although glorification will happen in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, it will also eternally grow and expand.*** The condition of our body, soul, and spirit, although entirely free from sin as a result of the ***event*** of glorification, is not the final expression of what we will experience throughout eternity. Let me say that again: ***glorification is a singular event that happens in a moment in time.*** But I want to suggest that there is a very real sense in which it is also ***an eternal process, a never-ending, ever-expansive, incremental increase in our knowledge and experience of God and thus also in our joy or delight in him.*** How do we know?

It is true that when we are "glorified" we will forever cease from sin and disease and death. But that does not mean that all we could possibly know about God and his redemptive purposes in Christ will be ours at a single point in time, as if to suggest that we won't "learn" in the New Heavens and New Earth. ***At the moment of glorification all false ideas about God and his ways will be eradicated from our brains. But that doesn't mean that all possible true ideas about him are instantly imparted to us.*** In fact, I would argue that to suggest otherwise borders on blasphemy. To contend that we will, at the moment of glorification, instantaneously and forever know everything about God that can be known is to reduce God to the level of the Devil. It is to suggest that there is a limit to what is true about God and thus a limit to what we his creatures can know of him.

Is God infinite? If so, what does that mean? It means that there is no limit to God, in the sense that what can be known of him and his character and his ways can never be exhausted. ***Everything else in this universe is quantifiable.*** Everything that is created can be counted. That is to say, there is a finite number of quarks in material reality. There is a finite number of grains of sand on the seashores of the earth and on every planet in the cosmos. There is a quantifiable number of stars in the galaxies above. ***Everything that has been created is finite.***

But the Creator is not. ***God cannot be quantified. The truths about him cannot be counted. God cannot be exhaustively known.*** To argue that the doctrine of glorification means we attain to an exhaustive and altogether comprehensive knowledge of God is to reduce God to the status of a creature. It would mean that God is finite, that there is a quantifiable amount of truth to and about him that can be reduced to a specific number. The great medieval philosopher/theologian, St. Anselm (1033-1109), is well-known for his definition of God. God, he said, is ***"That than which none greater can be conceived."*** But if there is a finite, definitive, limited quantity of truths about God, could we not conceive of something greater, a being of whom even ***more*** truths might be discovered? Yes.

Not only do we reduce God to the level of a creature, in a sense we elevate ourselves to the level of the Creator. If we ever attained comprehensive knowledge of this being who purports to be infinite, ***would we not ourselves then be omniscient?*** Is not the definition of omniscience the capacity to know all that can be known? If it is, to suggest that we might ever reach a point at which we know everything about a God who is infinite would require that we ourselves be infinite at least in terms of our knowledge. And that, I suggest, is blasphemous.

Now consider a profound and necessary implication of this truth. With each new revelation about God that we learn, we rejoice. Genuine joy is always the fruit of knowledge. ***As our knowledge grows and increases so too does our joy or delight in what we have learned.*** And if that discovery of infinite truths about God never ends, then neither does the depth and intensity and expanse of our joy. It simply must increase forever as our knowledge of God increases forever. If we ever arrive at a point in eternity future where there is nothing more to know or learn or discover about God, ***he's not God!*** It would mean that the object of our knowledge, the one who we thought was God, is finite, limited, quantifiable, bounded, and exhaustible. Such a being is not the God of the Bible who is in every respect infinite, unlimited, unquantifiable, unbounded, and inexhaustible!

That is why I can say that, in a very real sense, glorification never ends. Our transformation never ceases in the sense that ***we will continue to learn and expand in our knowledge of God and thus too in our delight and joy in God, all of which will lead to ever-increasing dimensions of change and growth and understanding.***

Discussion Questions

- (1) Define justification. What do we mean when we say it is punctiliar, not progressive, and that it is forensic, not experiential?
- (2) What does it mean when we say that we are declared righteous through faith in an “alien” righteousness? Whose righteousness is this? Where did it come from? Are we justified because of a righteousness inherent within us? If not, would this contribute to a lax and even licentious approach to Christian living? If not, why not?
- (3) Are the differences between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism on justification substantial, or minor? Can a person who embraces the RC view of justification be saved? Defend your answer.
- (4) What is glorification? Define it. What biblical texts give us reason to believe it?
- (5) In what sense will glorification never end? What is meant by this? What is your response to this? Do you find joy in it?