



Ordo Salutis (Order of Salvation)

Lesson 4: Justification

Key Verse: Romans 8:30

“and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Introduction

So far, in the *ordo salutis*, we have looked at the doctrine of election, regeneration, and conversion. From before the foundation of the world, God elected those whom He would save (Eph. 1:4). The gospel call invited us to turn from sin and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. In regeneration, God, through the effectual call, performed a divine miracle in our soul taking dead sinners and giving us new spiritual life in Christ. Because of God’s regenerating work, it was possible for us to respond to that gospel call. In conversion, God granted to us the necessary gifts of repentance and faith by which we were united with Christ and lay hold of eternal salvation. Because of God’s work of conversion, we were able to respond to the gospel by repenting of our sin and trusting in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

As the application of redemption continues to unfold in the *ordo salutis* we come to justification. Martin Luther believed justification was the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.¹ The primary issue in the Protestant Reformation was a dispute with the Roman Catholic Church over justification. This dispute is still happening today. The dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation by faith alone and all false gospels of salvation based on good works comes down to an understanding of the doctrine of justification. As John Murray said in 1955, “Justification is still the article of the standing or falling of the church.”²

Understanding Man’s Condition

The main question we ask regarding justification is, “How can sinners be in a right relationship with the holy God of the universe?” Since God is holy, perfect, and righteous, He requires perfection to be in His presence (Matt. 5:48). However, man has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Luther understood this problem and the condemnation of all human beings because he had a profound theology of sin.³ He understood that because of sin people are condemned to eternal spiritual death because they lack the righteousness that is required to stand in God’s presence and be reconciled to Him. Where does a person get this righteousness that God requires to be reconciled to Him? Man has always tried to achieve this righteousness by their own good works. Paul says about Israel in Romans 10:3, “For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” Israel thought they could attain their own righteousness by the works of the law. Before the apostle Paul was saved, he thought he could attain his own righteousness

¹ “Because if this article [i.e., justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.” Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, Germany: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 40:3.352.3.

² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 128.

³ Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 102-20.

by the works of the law (Phil. 3:4–6). However, he came to understand that he could not attain salvation through a righteousness of his own (Phil. 3:9).

The Definition of Justification: A Legal Declaration

Justification is *a declaration that the believer has been restored to a state of righteousness through belief and trust in the work of Christ rather than on the basis of one's own accomplishment.*⁴ The verb *justify* in the New Testament (Gk. *dikaioō*) means “to be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous.”⁵ In a very common sense, it means “to declare righteous.” Justification is a legal, or forensic, declaration of righteousness, not an actual impartation or infusion of righteousness. It describes what God *declares* about the believer, not what He *does to change* the believer.⁶

There is disagreement about justification between biblical Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church today. Roman Catholic theology teaches that justification means “to *make* righteous.” However, the biblical view is that justification means “to *declare* righteous” not “to *make* righteous.” A believer who is declared righteous will become progressively righteous throughout their Christian life, but that happens in sanctification, not justification.

Key Verses:

1. Luke 7:29. What did the people and tax collectors do? _____

2. Romans 4:5. What does God do for the ungodly? _____

The Ground of Justification: Righteousness Imputed

How can God declare us to be not guilty but righteous when in fact we are unrighteous sinners? There is a twofold act of God that takes place. First, God imputes—counts, credits, or reckons—our sins to Christ and punishes Him in our place. This results in forgiveness of our sins. Second, God imputes Christ's righteousness to us and grants us eternal life in Him.

Forgiveness of Sins: God imputes our sin to Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “He [the Father] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” To be clear, Jesus did not become a sinner. In what sense did the Father make the Son “sin” on our behalf? The Father counted Jesus to have committed all the sins of all those who would ever repent and believe in Him. As the substitute, the Father judicially reckoned the Son as committing the sins of those for whom He died. As 1 Peter 2:23 says, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” and He was punished for our sin. In this act, divine justice has been satisfied and the believer's sin (past, present, and future) is not counted against him, but is forgiven and covered.

Provision of Righteousness: If the only benefit of justification was forgiveness of sins, we could not be saved. Forgiveness of sins would only leave us in a state of moral neutrality. Salvation is not merely a matter of sinlessness, innocence, or moral neutrality, but it is a matter of righteousness. Man has failed and does not live in perfect righteousness. Therefore, we need a righteousness that is not our own. We need the perfect righteousness of our Substitute. In this act of God, the justified sinner is counted as righteous. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, and therefore God thinks of it as belonging to us.⁷

⁴ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, gen. eds. *Biblical Doctrines: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 932.

⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Accordance, 249. (Hereafter BDAG)

⁶ *Biblical Doctrines*, 612.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 727.

With respect to justification, then, God not only satisfies the penal demands of the law by imputing our sin to Christ and punishing Him in our place but also satisfies the positive demands of the law by imputing Christ’s righteousness to us.⁸ When any sinner comes to God in repentant faith, acknowledging that he has no power to save himself from the deserved judgment of divine wrath, believing in Christ, and pleading for mercy, God’s promise of forgiveness is granted. God then declares him righteous because the sacrifice and obedience of Christ is credited to his account.⁹

Key Verses:

1. Romans 8:1. What does this verse say about those who are in Christ? _____
2. Romans 4:7–8. What do these verses say about those who have their sins forgiven and covered? _____

3. Romans 4:3. What does this verse say about Abraham? _____

The Gift of Justification: God’s Grace

God’s “grace” means His “unmerited favor.” The only way we can be declared righteous is if God freely provides salvation for us by His grace because we are completely unable to earn favor with God. God does not justify anyone because of any good work they have done, but purely by His grace.

Key Verses:

1. Romans 3:20. What does this verse tell us about being justified? _____
2. Romans 3:23–24. What does this verse say about justification? _____

The Means of Justification: Faith Alone

Since Christ’s work of redemption occurred two thousand years ago, how can the objective work of Christ be applied to me personally? By what means is my sin imputed to Christ and His righteousness imputed to me? The answer is through faith alone.

What is this faith and what role does repentance play in faith? R.C. Sproul says, “We may be tempted to think of repentance as an optional add-on to faith. Justification, after all, is by faith *alone*. But justification does not exclude repentance. Repentance is not a tangential concept in the Bible; rather, it is central in conversion and justification.”¹⁰ Thomas Schreiner says, “Genuine faith always includes repentance . . . Faith that doesn’t include repentance is false faith, for those who truly believe turn away from evil.”¹¹ When we talk about faith alone, we are not excluding repentance for true saving faith always includes repentance (Mark 1:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 20:21; Heb. 6:1).

This genuine faith unites us to Christ in His death and resurrection, so that His punishment counts for our punishment, and His righteousness counts for our righteousness.¹² On one occasion Jesus taught about a sinner who was justified. This is the tax collector in Luke 18:13–14. The Pharisee trusted in himself that he was righteous (v. 9), but the tax collector was declared righteous by faith alone.

⁸ *Biblical Doctrines*, 617.

⁹ *Biblical Doctrines*, 48-49.

¹⁰ R.C. Sproul, *What is Repentance?* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier, 2015), 20.

¹¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 119.

¹² *Biblical Doctrines*, 618.

It is important to note that faith in Christ is not the *ground* of the believer’s righteousness. Scripture never says that we are justified because of the inherent goodness of our faith, as if our faith has merit before God.¹³ Our faith in itself does not earn favor with God. Rather, faith is the *means*, or instrument, by which we receive righteousness. This is important to note because many people mistakenly suppose that faith is the basis of our righteousness. Their hope for heaven rests on the fact that they had the good sense to believe the gospel. But this understanding undermines the heart of the gospel of salvation by grace alone. Righteousness cannot be based on my faith without that righteousness becoming a “righteousness of my own” (Phil 3:9). If saving righteousness is grounded on the sinner doing anything—even believing—it is no longer an alien righteousness given as a gift and therefore cannot be the righteousness of God required for salvation. God declares sinners righteous not because their faith has earned them righteousness but because Christ has earned righteousness and because God has given sinners that gift by the means of faith.¹⁴ Because genuine saving faith is a free gift from God it must be the means by which a sinner is justified so that all of salvation is by grace alone (Rom. 4:16). As John MacArthur says, “faith is uniquely suited to grace because it is nothing more than the outstretched arm and the empty hand that says, “I have nothing! I am bankrupt of any spiritual resources or ability! Lord, I receive your gift of salvation in Christ.”¹⁵

Key Verses:

1. Romans 3:28. How is a man justified? _____
2. Romans 4:16. Why is faith the means of justification? _____
3. Romans 11:6. Why does faith not earn us justification? _____

The Result of Justification: Good Works

A common objection to the doctrine of *sola fide* (faith alone) is that the apostle James seems to contradict it. He says in James 2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.” How can James be reconciled with Paul and the doctrine of justification by faith alone? The answer is in how James uses the word “justified.” The word justified in the Greek (*dikaioō*) not only means “to declare righteous” but can also mean “to render a favorable verdict, to vindicate.”¹⁶ James uses it in the sense of demonstrating true righteousness. In Luke 10:29, the lawyer was seeking to “justify” himself to Jesus by asking who his neighbor was. He wasn’t seeking a legal declaration of righteousness but was attempting to demonstrate to others that he was already righteous. James uses “justified” in the same sense. He is not saying a person is “declared righteous” by works, but that his works “vindicate” or “demonstrate” his salvation. James is not speaking about good works being the grounds of salvation, but that good works are necessary evidence of our salvation. True faith is shown by its works, but those works are the evidence and result of our justification and initial sanctification, not the ground of our justification.¹⁷

Key Verses:

1. James 2:17. What does James say about faith without works? _____
2. James 2:19. What does James say about demons? _____
3. James 2:20. What does James say about faith without works? _____

¹³ *Systematic Theology*, 730.
¹⁴ *Biblical Doctrines*, 620-21.
¹⁵ *Ibid.*
¹⁶ BDAG, 249.
¹⁷ *Biblical Doctrines*, 622.