

The People's Bible Teachings

JUSTIFICATION

How God Forgives

Wayne D. Mueller

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Third printing, 2016
Second printing, 2014

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations in reviews, without prior permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2001135253
Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
© 2002 by Northwestern Publishing House
www.nph.net
Published 2002
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-0-8100-1369-8

Table of Contents

Editor's Preface	5
Introduction	7
1. What Do We Mean by Justification?	10
2. Why Do We Need to Be Justified by God?	22
3. What Moves God to Justify Us?	34
4. Whom Does God Justify?	48
5. Who Benefits from Justification?	56
6. How Long Does It Take to Be Justified?	68
7. What Also Happens When We Are Justified?	76
8. What Do Our Good Works Have to Do with Justification?	92
9. What Is the Current Status of the Justified?	100
10. What Is the Final Status of the Justified?	116
Endnotes	125
For Further Reading	127
Scripture Index	129
Subject Index	135

Editor's Preface

The People's Bible Teachings is a series of books on all of the main doctrinal teachings of the Bible.

Following the pattern set by The People's Bible series, these books are written especially for laypeople. Theological terms, when used, are explained in everyday language so that people can understand them. The authors show how Christian doctrine is drawn directly from clear passages of Scripture and then how those doctrines apply to people's faith and life. Most importantly, these books show how every teaching of Scripture points to Christ, our only Savior.

The authors of The People's Bible Teachings are parish pastors and professors who have had years of experience teaching the Bible. They are men of scholarship and practical insight.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Professor Leroy Dobberstein of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, and Professor Thomas Nass of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, for serving as consultants for this series. Their insights and assistance have been invaluable.

We pray that the Lord will use these volumes to help his people grow in their faith, knowledge, and understanding of his saving teachings, which he has revealed to us in the Bible. To God alone be the glory.

Curtis A. Jahn
Series Editor

Introduction

“If the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost.”¹ This is how Martin Luther expressed the central importance of the Bible’s teaching of justification. The faithful men who later committed Luther’s Bible teachings to formal confessions made a similar assertion. They taught that the church stands or falls on the teaching of justification.

Justification is the Bible’s technical word for how God forgives. The Bible uses many different word pictures to assure us of God’s forgiveness. Remission, redemption, reconciliation, atonement, cleansing (washing, purging), taking away, and forgetting are some of the most common ones. But the word *justification* literally explains how it was possible for a just and holy God to embrace condemned sinners to himself in Jesus Christ.

Justification is a legal word that embodies the whole heart and action of God in reconciling sinners to himself. It resolves the Scripture’s tension between law and gospel, between the holiness and the grace of God. In doing so, justification draws the Bible’s entire message into a divinely coherent unity.

Justification is the core of the gospel’s message. That we might be justified by faith is the reason God sent Jesus. Justification is the gospel blossom the Holy Spirit brought to full bloom in Saint Paul’s New Testament letters. For 14 centuries after that, however, the fragrance of God’s message was increasingly masked with human error. By the Middle Ages, justification’s meaning and thus its comfort were barely discernable to clergy or laity. Then, through

his servant, Martin Luther, God once again uncovered his precious flower. The Lutheran Reformation unfolded justification in shining new clarity for the church.

Satan knows that the message of how God forgives the sinner is the heart of the gospel. So he attacks justification with greater vehemence than he does any other teaching, save that of the person of Jesus Christ himself. Since the Reformation, Satan has pushed forward Arminianism, dead orthodoxy, Pietism, rationalism, liberalism, Fundamentalism, sectarianism, humanism, modernism, and Eastern mysticism in his attempt to push the church back into the spiritual darkness of the Middle Ages.

In post-Christian America, many congregations are struggling to maintain or regain their vitality. Clergy libraries are full of books about how churches can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But the real answer to the inner and outer vigor of the church lies here, in the clear proclamation of justification by grace alone, by Christ alone, through faith alone. The church's high calling in every age is to defend and disseminate the teaching of justification against every effort of Satan. That is how God reinvigorated the church through Paul and through Luther. This is the message by which God will restore vitality to his church today.

We remember, however, that God's church is the gathering of many individual believers into Christ's body. For each of us individual believers, justification holds the highest importance. When God justified you and me, God reestablished the relationship between himself and us sinners. So justification by Christ alone is the centerpiece of personal faith. From justification every blessing of God flows to you and me. Paul wrote: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1,2).

Thus this book. As long as justification is preached by Christ’s church and trusted by the individual believer, Satan is stymied. And he knows it. This book aims to help the individual believer and the gathered church in their struggle against the onslaughts of the gates of hell. This book intends neither to embellish nor to expand on justification but merely to let it shine in the simple splendor the Holy Spirit has already given it. It is written with the prayer that God will renew our faith in his declaration of righteousness for us and will give us courage to continue to proclaim justification to the world.

What do we mean by justification?

It is God's declaration
of forgiveness.



1

What Do We Mean by Justification?

The meaning of the word

Justification is just one of many terms the Bible uses to tell us that God has forgiven our sins. Although it is found elsewhere, it is used mostly by Paul in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. The word *justification* is special because it not only announces God's forgiveness, it also explains in a technical way how God forgives us. Justification encompasses the meaning of the various scriptural words and phrases for forgiveness. It draws into itself God's whole plan of salvation as fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

For this reason, in the Lutheran church, the word *justification* is synonymous with forgiveness. From a positive

point of view, justification is pregnant with comforting assurance of God's grace to the sinner. It is the heart and core of the gospel. From a negative standpoint, justification argues against all the wrong ideas about salvation and forgiveness that Satan has raised against it, inside and outside of the visible church.

To justify means literally to declare righteous. Scripture teaches that in his mercy God declares the sinner to be righteous for Christ's sake, through faith. By grace alone, God pronounces us holy, innocent, and morally perfect. From this truth is derived the hallmark teaching of the Lutheran Reformation: justification by Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone. "We . . . know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:15,16).

Justification is a forensic term. This means that Paul borrowed it from the language used in public debate and law courts. When a court justifies a defendant, it declares him to be "not guilty," innocent of the crime or crimes with which he is charged. In Paul's day, just as in legal proceedings today, this justification was a verdict or pronouncement of the court.

Understanding the forensic nature of justification is key to understanding its meaning in the Bible. A court's pronouncement is legal, not medicinal. That means that the court's decree of innocence changes neither the past actions nor the present moral quality of the defendant. A pronouncement of "not guilty" does not alter the accused person's actual guilt or innocence. The only thing that forensic justification changes is the status of the accused in the eyes of the court. The innocent verdict declares how the court will act toward the defendant. When the accused is judged to be innocent, he is treated from that

point on as such, regardless of past or present conduct. He is set free. He is not punished for his crimes. And he cannot be held accountable for them again at a future time.

This understanding of justification has become a part of the official teachings of the Lutheran church. The Lutheran Confessions say, “We believe, teach, and confess that according to the usage of Scripture the word ‘justify’ means in this article ‘absolve,’ that is, pronounce free from sin.”²

Justification is the heart of the gospel

Justification is the word the Bible uses to tell us what God has done for us in Christ. For the sake of Jesus’ perfect life and sacrificial death, God has declared us innocent of all the sins we commit. This means that regardless of past actions or present moral character, we are now free of the guilt of our sin. We are released from any punishment for our sin. This declaration by God is the gospel, the good news of our forgiveness.

Believers of all time were and are saved only by this pronouncement of God that they are innocent for Christ’s sake. To the Jews at Rome, Paul argued that the patriarchs Abraham and David were saved by the same gospel that he was now preaching to them in the name of Christ. Quoting from Genesis chapter 15, Paul wrote: “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness’” (Romans 4:3). Referring to Psalm 32, Paul pointed out that King David was saved by the same proclamation: “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works” (Romans 4:6).

An Easter proclamation

When did God pronounce this “not guilty” verdict? On Easter morning God declared all the world justified by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ resurrection was God’s final proof to the world that God had accepted the life and death of his Son for our salvation.

When he preached in Pisidian Antioch, Paul tied the resurrection of Jesus to our justification: “But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:37-39). Again, in his letter to Corinth, Paul said that our forgiveness hinges on Jesus’ resurrection: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Finally, in his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul once more connected Christ’s resurrection to our justification: “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:23-25).

Of course, forgiveness through Jesus Christ was an accomplished fact in the heart of God from eternity. This is why Paul could write that God for Christ’s sake justified Old Testament believers like Abraham and David before Jesus appeared in history. Yet we may think of Easter morning as the time in history when God made his formal declaration of righteousness for sinners.

An alien righteousness

Lutherans refer to the righteousness God declared for sinners as an alien righteousness. That means that the righteousness that we now possess by faith through justification is a righteousness that has a source outside of ourselves. Nothing that we are or do contributes to it. The decree of innocence that God issues for Christ's sake is not contingent on anything good that is inherent in us or anything good that we have merited through our actions.

The concept that the righteousness we receive from God in justification comes from outside of us and not from within us was the heart of Luther's faith in salvation. In his commentary on Galatians, he wrote, "By the one solid rock which we call the doctrine of justification we mean that we are redeemed from sin, death, and the devil and are made partakers of life eternal, not by ourselves . . . but by help from without, by the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ."³

Human beings did at one time have an inherent righteousness. At the beginning, when God created us, he made us in his own holy image. We were personally righteous, without sin. But Adam and Eve lost their personal righteousness when they fell into sin. So Holy Scripture makes it clear that the righteousness God now credits to us in justification is alien to us. It is not inherent in us. It is not our own personally earned righteousness. When Paul spoke to the Philippians about his personal faith, he said he wanted to "gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Philippians 3:8,9).

So the righteous decree God made on Easter morning had nothing to do with something good in us or something good we had done in obedience to the law. This is a constant theme in Paul's epistles. To the Romans he wrote, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21,22). Even the thought that we may earn or supplement God's righteousness puts us at risk of losing his grace: "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

The Bible's message regarding this alien righteousness that God credits to us produced a great awakening in Martin Luther. Recall that for years Luther struggled with a false concept of righteousness. Raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, he connected the Bible's every mention of justice and righteousness to God's demand for his personal obedience to the law. Try as he would, he could not find peace of conscience in his rigorous attempts to keep God's commandments. Bible passages such as, "The righteous will live by . . . faith" (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17), frightened him. He reasoned that if he was not personally just, or righteous, he was not living by faith.

Through his study of the Bible, especially the books of Romans and Galatians, Luther came to a right understanding of the gospel. God led him to understand that saving righteousness was not from himself; it was "a righteousness from God" (Romans 1:17; 3:21). "In the Scriptures," Luther wrote, "the righteousness of God is almost always taken in the sense of faith and grace, very rarely in the sense of the sternness with which He condemns the wicked and lets the righteous go free."⁴ "But he is dis-

cussing righteousness in the sight of God, by which we are freed from the Law, sin, death, and every evil, become partakers of grace, righteousness, and life, and eventually are established as the lords of heaven and earth and of all creatures. This righteousness neither human nor divine Law is able to produce.”⁵

So Luther could join with Paul’s confession: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21). When commenting on this passage, Luther wrote, “This means that you will not be a Christian unless you cast away your own righteousness entirely and rely on faith alone.”⁶

How Scripture uses the word

The Bible uses *justification* in the simple sense of being declared righteous. Justification means the same as being forgiven. Jesus said in regard to the humble tax collector who prayed for forgiveness in the temple: “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified” (Luke 18:14). Paul used the word with this plain meaning in Romans 5:1: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Justification also means forgiveness when the Bible says that God credits righteousness through faith. Paul used this phrase several times in Romans chapter 4. First he quoted Genesis 15:6 in regard to Abraham: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (verse 3). Then he applied the principle to all who believe: “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (verse 5). Going back to Abraham’s faith, he wrote:

“This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’ The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness” (4:22-24). This crediting is accounting terminology. On our personal record, where our sin had created a huge deficit, God credits the righteousness of Jesus. What we did not earn is credited to our account as though we ourselves had earned it.

The change that justification brings

One more thing about justification needs to be stressed. We have said that God’s justifying the sinner is like a judicial decree that does not change the actual moral fiber of the defendant. On the other hand, we must note that justification does not produce a change in God either. God does not change. God still hates and punishes sin. God still desires our personal righteousness.

So, if justification does not change us or God, then what does change when we are justified? Justification changes our status before God’s court of justice. It changes our relationship to him. When God declares us not guilty, he sets us free. He promises never to punish us. When he says he will not remember our sins (Jeremiah 31:34), he is promising that he will not return later and charge us with that which he has forgiven.

Commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:18, Professor John Meyer wrote:

There are some who assume that [reconciliation] points to a change in God, that during the process He changed from an irate into a placated God, that some sort of appeasement took place.—But no, not the least change took place in the heart of God. It was His love which was active dur-

ing the entire process of [reconciliation]. The change was effected in our status before our Judge.⁷

Reconciliation is one of the words the Bible uses to indicate our change in status before God. Paul wrote: “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:9,10). God “reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:18,19).

When sinful people are reconciled with a holy God, a radical change in status has taken place. “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:21,22).

Thus justification is not a medicine God prescribes to fix something inside us. His decree does not change our inner moral character or improve our disposition toward him. Instead, justification restores a relationship that our sinful actions and our natural evil disposition had ruined.

The cornerstone of the church’s teaching

Until the end of time, the teaching of justification will remain the cornerstone doctrine of Christ’s church. Luther insisted, “The doctrine of justification must, as I frequently urge, be diligently learned; for in it all the other articles of our faith are comprehended. And when

that is safe, the others are safe too.”⁸ We can trace the modern decline of the visible Christian church to the way it waters down or outrightly denies justification by Christ. Luther would have agreed:

In short, if this article concerning Christ—the doctrine that we are justified and saved through Him alone and consider all apart from Him damned—is not professed, all resistance and restraint are at an end. Then there is, in fact, neither measure nor limit to any heresy and error.⁹

What God led Luther to treasure in his heart became the great treasure of the Lutheran church through the reformer’s teachings and writings. The Lutheran Confessions say, “This article of justification by faith is ‘the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine,’ ‘without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ.’”¹⁰

Those who bemoan the sad state of affairs in much of the visible church today must take notice. When faith flourishes in the hearts of individual believers, the outward church will again see God’s blessing.

