

The Elements of Justification

In the beginning of the Puritan era, Christians were seeking to continue to define and purify their doctrine and drew up several *catechisms* and various *confessions* of faith in order to define the parameters of their faith. In 1646 the Church of England, by the minds and hands of the Westminster Assembly, drew up their own confession which was called the **Westminster Confession of Faith**. From this confession, both Baptist and Congregation Churches also drew up confessions which were actually just modified arrangements of the Westminster. Later the Westminster was officially adopted by the Presbyterians and the Church of Scotland and so most Protestant branches of Christianity had roots which sprung from this comprehensive confession of faith. At this time, Christians were also busy writing catechisms to have standards for teaching the faith to future generations. From these efforts many great catechisms were developed including one that the Westminster Assembly drew up which is called the Westminster Larger and Shorter catechisms. These documents were very helpful in defining many of the different aspects of biblical doctrine. Now concerning the doctrine of Justification, the Westminster catechism asks in question number 32....

Q. What is Justification.

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, (Rom 3:24, Eph 1:7) and accepts us as righteous in His sight (2 Cor 5:21) only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, (Rom 5:19) and received by faith alone. (Gal 2:16, Phil 3:9)

Now this statement gets right to the heart of what Justification in the biblical sense really is. It is broken down into four parts as follows....

- **Justification is an act of God's free grace** - God's work, given freely(at no cost to the beneficiary, flowing from the gracious character of God)
- **wherein he pardons all our sins** – It is a legal(forensic) term dealing with Law and includes pardon from sin, God is pictured as Judge
- **and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us** – Righteousness is also a legal(forensic) matter which comes by imputation
- **and received by faith alone** – Faith is seen as the means of reception or appropriation

This description of Justification speaks to us clearly about the basic *elements* of Justification. They tell us of the nature of Justification, of what it is like and how it functions in God's plan of Redemption. With these elements in mind, let us look a little closer and understand how these are described in the Bible.

Justification is an act of God's free grace – The Scripture clearly ascribes justification as being an act of God.

Romans 8:33 - 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? **God is the one who justifies**; NASB

Galatians 3:8 - 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that **God would justify the Gentiles by faith**, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." NASB

As the Scripture describes this act, it also clearly describes it as flowing from God's gracious character and identifies it as a free gift (at no cost) given to the beneficiary. Justification in the Bible is always free and always associated with God's grace.

Romans 3:24-26 - 24 **being justified as a gift by His grace** through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 **whom God displayed** publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that **He might be just and the justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus. NASB

Romans 5:16-17 - 16 And **the gift** is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand **the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification**. 17 For if by the transgression of the one,

death reigned through the one, much more those who receive **the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness** will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. NASB

Titus 3:5-7 - 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, **but according to His mercy**, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 **that being justified by His grace** we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. NASB

wherein he pardons all our sins – Justification consists first in God pardoning our sins. It is a legal (forensic) term dealing with Law and God is pictured as the Judge. One of God's attributes is Justice as He is seen as holy and just, ruling over the world with justice! Throughout the Scripture God is seen as the only Lawgiver and Judge.

Genesis 18:25 - 25 "Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! **Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"** NASB

Isaiah 33:20 - 2 For **the Lord is our judge, The Lord is our lawgiver**, The Lord is our king; He will save us NASB

James 4:12 - 12 **There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One** who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor? NASB

In this sense, our sins are brought ultimately and finally to the authority of the Judge of all the earth to be dealt with in finality. Justification concerning our sins before God then is a legal or forensic proceeding in God's tribunal. It is here where we receive a **pardon from God** which means a release from the *penalty* of our offenses, a free remission of the penalty or consequences of sin. We are therefore set free from the bondage or power of sin, because the consequences of the Law have been foregone by the Lawgiver and Judge.

1 Corinthians 15:56-57 - 56 The sting of death is sin, and **the power of sin is the law**; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. NASB

Romans 8:1-2 - 1 There is therefore now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For **the law of the Spirit of life** in Christ Jesus has set you free from **the law of sin and of death**. NASB

This does not mean we are not guilty, but that the consequences of our guilt have been foregone or remitted, paid in full by our Redeemer. This is called **expiation**. Our guilt then can remain no longer, it is removed by way of its penalties and consequences being pardoned by the Judge. This pardon of justification is a *declarative act* on the part of God. It is a *final* pronouncement of the commuting of the sentence of death.

John 8:36 - 36 "If therefore the Son shall make you free, **you shall be free indeed**. NASB

and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us – Apart from the removal of the consequences and subsequently our guilt, we are also credited with a positive righteousness in this Justification. We are said to now possess the righteousness of God. This righteousness means, **right-standing** with God or acceptable in His sight. Because the penalties of sin have been satisfied by Christ's payment at Calvary, we are free from any accusation or blemish of any kind.

Colossians 1:21-22 - 22 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-**

Now this righteousness is the righteousness that God both *requires* and *provides* in Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:30-31 - 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, **who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption**, 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." NASB

Romans 5:19 - 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so **through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous**. NASB

2 Corinthians 5:21 - 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, **that we might become the righteousness of God in Him**. NASB

Because of Christ's obedience and fulfillment of the Law, we are now *reckoned* or counted as righteous in God's sight. Our righteousness is "*in Him*" (2 Cor 5:21) and "*through Him*" (Rom 5:19). Christ is counted as our Righteousness (1 Cor 1:30). This righteousness that we possess before God then, is not our own inherent righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ Himself.

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Philippians 3:9-10 - 9 and may be found **in Him, not having a righteousness of my own** derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in **Christ, the righteousness which comes from God** on the basis of faith, NASB

and received by faith alone – This righteousness then becomes ours by simply trusting in or looking to Christ for it. This believing or trusting is what the Bible calls faith. It is through this faith that this righteousness is imputed or reckoned to us.

Romans 4:5 - 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, **his faith is reckoned as righteousness**, NASB

Romans 3:21-24 - 21 But now apart from the Law **the righteousness of God** has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe**; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a **gift by His grace** through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; NASB

This very simple concept is portrayed very clearly in Scripture and provides for us, through the merits of Christ, both righteousness (right-standing with God) and justification (declared righteous in His sight).

Romans 10:4 - 4 For Christ is the end of the law **for righteousness to everyone who believes**. NASB

Romans 3:28 - 28 For we maintain that **a man is justified by faith** apart from works of the Law. NASB

Justification in the Confessions

For a bit more insight, consider the profound wording of some statements of Justification from both the **Westminster** and the **1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith**. Both the Westminster and 1689 Baptist Confession read identically. These confessions provide a rich learning experience and are excellent fodder for family Bible study and discussion;

CHAP. XI. Of Justification.

1. Those whom God Effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing Righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting, and accepting their Persons as Righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone, not by imputing faith it self, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their Righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole Law, and passive obedience in his death, for their whole and sole Righteousness, they receiving, and resting on him, and his Righteousness, by Faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

2. Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ, and his Righteousness, is the alone instrument of Justification: yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving Graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

3. Christ by his obedience, and death, did fully discharge the debt of all; and did by the sacrifice of himself, in the blood of his cross, undergoing in their stead, the penalty due unto them: make a proper, real and full satisfaction to Gods justice in their behalf: yet inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his Obedience and Satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for any thing in them; their Justification is only of Free Grace, that both the exact justice and rich Grace of God, might be glorified in the Justification of sinners.

The Basis of Justification

But how and on what basis can God pardon freely? How is the justice of God actually met if we do not pay the penalty for our own sins? This is an important question to which the Scripture says much and gives clear answers. As we have discussed, justification is a legal term describing the act whereby God *declares* us righteous based on the merits of Christ. This justification is a complete work of God whereby He fully meets all the requirements of divine justice and then on that basis declares the sinner righteous. In this work God.....

- satisfies and appeases the divine requirements of justice - **Propitiation**
- completely removes the guilt of our sins, - **Expiation**
- credits the righteousness and merit of Christ to the believer – **Imputation**
- restores relationship and rightstanding with God - **Reconciliation**

It is clear from scripture that in the death of Christ upon the cross, that God's wrath because of sin has been satisfied by Christ's payment of death. This is called "**propitiation.**" Because Jesus was without sin, His was qualified to pay **the debt for all sin** by His death. He died as a substitute or in place of sinners, and bore the wrath of God Himself, not dying for His own sins but for the sins of all who would trust him. This sacrifice of atonement, that is, the death of Christ, affected a real and fundamental change in our relationship to God by taking our place and bearing the guilt of our sins as an offering to appease the holy wrath of God.

Hebrews 2:17 - 17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, **to make propitiation for the sins of the people.** NASB

It is in this "**propitiation**" that God, in His requirement of divine justice is actually propitiated. Because God has instituted the sacrificial system as a means of atonement, he has therefore been pleased to have a sacrifice appease or satisfy His wrath. Propitiation is an "**appeasement**" or "**satisfaction.**" The holy anger and wrath of God toward sin demands a satisfaction of justice, and His vengeance is enraged toward sin and must have a subject to inflict the good and righteous penalty of death.

Romans 6:23 - 23 **For the wages of sin is death,** but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. NASB

Therefore we must have a substitute to satisfy God's wrath or be consumed ourselves. This is what sets Christianity apart from every other world religion. Jesus Christ is the only sufficient substitute who can meet the just requirements of God's law (divine justice) in order to die vicariously (for us) as a substitute (in our place). Jesus becomes then this propitiation *Himself* to appease the wrath of God.

1 John 4:10 - 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and **sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.** NASB

Notice here, that this propitiation is not only what Christ did (the work of Christ), but that Jesus Christ Himself (the person of Christ) is the propitiation for our sins. The New Testament words normally translated as "**propitiation**" are the Greek [hilasterion 2435] and [hilasmos 2434], and carry with them the idea of "**expiation**" (to remove offense or guilt) or to "**cover over.**" In fact, these Greek terms actually hold a more personal meaning to the means of expiation, namely that of "**an atoning victim**" or the actual sacrifice of atonement, an expiator. This idea, that Jesus is the "**atoning victim,**" the propitiatory sacrifice, means that Jesus paid a very real price. He literally bore the penalty for our sins! Our chastisement became His! He carried our griefs....and our sorrows! This was beautifully expressed by Isaiah's prophecy, in chapter 53.

Isaiah 53:4-6, 11-12 - 4 Surely **our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried;** Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He **was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.** 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his

own way; But the **LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him**. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, **My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities**. 12 Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet **He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors**. NASB

Therefore, the atonement does in fact *satisfy* God's holy wrath toward sin because it is God's own work, graciously creating the means for us to be justified and His holy wrath to be appeased. All of this was designed in eternity by God and implemented by Him in the course of History because of the great love that He wished to express to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 Peter 1:18-20 – 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 20 For **He was foreknown before the foundation of the world**, but has appeared in these last times **for the sake of you** NASB

But propitiation is not the only thing that justification is. Not only has God's wrath been appeased but, the actual guilt of sinners has been removed by Christ's payment, because He paid the full price of that guilt. This is called **"expiation."** Jesus removed our guilt having paid the full price of redemption for our sins. Christ made a fundamental change in our relationship with God by *expiating* our guilt. In expiation, our guilt has been removed by meeting the demands of holy justice for sin on our behalf. The offense of our sins has been absorbed by the *sacrifice* of the body of Jesus for us, and the requirements of God's justice for sin have been **"cancelled out."**

Colossians 2:13-14 - 13 And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 **having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us** and which was hostile to us; and **He has taken it out of the way**, having nailed it to the cross. NASB

The penalty deserved in our guilt, has been paid in full by the sacrifice of Christ. This is to say then that the atonement is *redemptive*, that it pays the price required by justice. Jesus death on the cross is seen as a ransom price paid to redeem us from the penalties of the law, **"the certificate of debt consisting in decrees against us"** that we owed to God because of sin.

1 Timothy 2:5-7 - 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 **who gave Himself as a ransom for all**, the testimony borne at the proper time. NASB

This is why the scripture can say, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Having our guilt cancelled, the corresponding condemnation for our sins has been removed.

Romans 8:1-2 - 8:1 There is **therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. NASB

Jesus death is the full payment price demanded by the law because of our violations of it. He redeemed us from the *curse* of the law.

Galatians 3:13 - 13 **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law**, having become a curse for us — for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE" NASB

All of this was done by God, who justifies, and this has removed our guilt and condemnation.

Romans 8:33-34 - 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? **It is God who justifies**. 34 **Who is he that condemns?** Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

However there is still yet more to the **basis of justification** than propitiation and expiation. Having our guilt removed and God's wrath because of our sins satisfied, we still lack the positive righteousness required of us by God's Law. You may recall that there are two kinds of sin. There is the transgression of the negative aspects of the Law we call *penal sanctions*. These transgressions or violations have been fully paid for by Christ's sacrifice. But the Law also has *preceptive requirements* whereby God expects us to fulfill certain precepts such as **"love your neighbor as yourself."** We have sinned by failing to do this again and again. Therefore it is necessary for God to provide for us a righteousness of fulfilled *preceptive requirements* because we have failed to fulfill them in order to have this positive righteousness before God. We have

need of a foreign righteousness that is not our own, but is rather being afforded to us by other means because we do not possess it in and of ourselves. In justification, God provides this righteousness to us by **"imputation."** In this imputation God credits the righteousness of Christ to us. Jesus' perfect righteousness has become ours through faith in Him. It is the merits of Christ perfectly fulfilling the preceptive requirements of the Law that becomes ours in justification through imputation. This gives us positive righteousness in the sight of God. We can stand in God's presence therefore, with the imputed righteousness and holiness of Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:30-31 - 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, **who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,** 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." NASB

Romans 5:18-19 - 18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so **through one act of righteousness there resulted justification** of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so **through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.** NASB

2 Corinthians 5:21 - 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, **that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.** NASB

Therefore when we say that the sinner is **"declared righteous"** by God it is because the sinner is not actually righteous in himself but in Christ has received a foreign righteousness which is not his own, but is from God in Christ. Since Jesus' life was one of sinless perfection, this righteousness which is received is also therefore perfect.

Philippians 3:9-10 - 9 and may be found in Him, **not having a righteousness of my own** derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, **the righteousness which comes from God** on the basis of faith, NASB

Romans 3:21-24 - 21 But now apart from the Law **the righteousness of God** has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe;** for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a **gift by His grace** through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; NASB

Christ's righteousness is now ours and this has then fully met all the requirements of God's Law for us so that before His seat as our righteous Judge, we can be declared righteous on **this basis of propitiation, expiation and imputation.** And all of this has brought about Justification before God.

Romans 5:9 - 9 Much more then, **having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.** NASB

Now because the requirements of divine justice have been fully met and we are now declared righteous in the sight of God, this has restored the relationship with God that was damaged because of sin. In the Bible, this is called **"reconciliation."** We have been reconciled to God through Christ! God took the initiative, and sent His Son Jesus to reconcile us to Himself.

2 Corinthians 5:18 - 18 Now **all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ,** and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, NASB

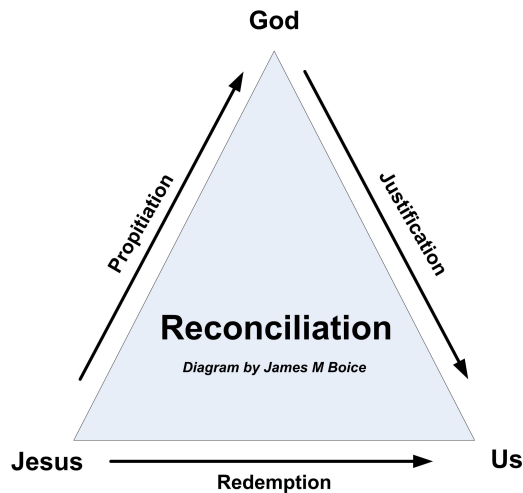
In this reconciliation we now exult in God. This means we are overwhelmed with joy because the most fundamental problem that mankind faces (estrangement from God because of sin), has been corrected and we can now rejoice that we have been brought back into right-standing with Him through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:10-11 - 10 For if while we were enemies, **we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son,** much more, **having been reconciled,** we shall be saved by His life. 11 And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **through whom we have now received the reconciliation.** NASB

On this basis then we can now fellowship with God once again. We are free to love Him because He has freely loved us, even when we were at enmity with Him.

1 Peter 1:8-9 - and though you have not seen Him, **you love Him,** and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, **you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,** 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. NASB

The below diagram by James Boice is helpful in understanding reconciliation.



Justification is applied or received by Faith

This is to say that the benefits of Christ's sacrifice become benefits realized for us through Faith or trust in Jesus work. We must believe in and rely upon the justifying work of Christ in order for it to be applied to us. This justification by faith is a gift (not earned) by God's free grace.

Romans 3:21-24 - 21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe**; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being **justified as a gift by His grace** through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; NASB

Romans 3:28 – 28 For we maintain that **a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law**. NASB
So then, we receive these benefits by faith in what Christ has done and NOT on the basis of any merit in us or by some thing that we could possibly do. **Justification comes to us by grace**(God's unmerited favor), **through faith**(by trusting and believing), **in Christ alone**(Christ is the only object of faith), and NOT on the basis of any good works that we have done.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - 8 For **by grace you have been saved through faith**; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, that no one should boast. NASB

Romans 5:1-2 – 1 Therefore **having been justified by faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our **introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand**; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. NASB

In Galatians chapter 5, Paul clearly summarizes that seeking to be justified by the good works of the law, forfeits the value of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. He clearly states that trying to be justified by the law alienates one from Christ, who alone is the way of salvation.

Galatians 5:1-5 – 1 **It was for freedom that Christ set us free**; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. 2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that **if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you**. 3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. 4 You have been severed from Christ, **you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace**. 5 **For we through the Spirit, by faith**, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. NASB

Summary

By the merit of Jesus Christ only, can we be justified (**declared righteous**) before God, NOT on the *basis* of our own good works. It is on the *basis* of His perfect life and sacrificial death that we are justified. He fully met the requirements of the law and made a full payment (**propitiation**) for the penalties of sin, removed our guilt (**expiation**) and by His perfect life merited the righteousness of God for us which is credited (**imputation**) to us **by faith**.

Philippians 3:9-10 - 9 and may be found in Him, **not having a righteousness of my own** derived from the Law, but that which is **through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith**, NASB