

Chapter XXI: Justification

1. The Nature and Elements of Justification

Justification may be defined as that legal act of God by which He declares the sinner righteous on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

It is not an act or process of renewal, such as regeneration, conversion, or sanctification, and does not affect the condition but the-state of the sinner. It differs from sanctification in several particulars. Justification takes place outside of the sinner in the tribunal of God, removes the guilt of sin, and is an act which is complete at once and for all time; while sanctification takes place in man, removes the pollution of sin, and is a continuous and lifelong process. We distinguish two elements in justification, namely: (a) The forgiveness of sins on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The pardon granted applies to all sins, past, present, and future, and therefore does not admit of repetition, Ps. 103: 12; Isa. 44:22; Rom. 5:21; 8:1, 32-34; Heb. 10:14. This does not mean that we need no more pray for forgiveness, for the consciousness of guilt remains, creates a feeling of separation, and makes it necessary to seek repeatedly the comforting assurance of forgiveness, Ps. 25:7; 32:5; 51:1; Matt. 6:12; Jas. 5:15; 1 John 1:9. (b) The adoption as children of God. In justification God adopts believers as His children, that is, places them in the position of children and gives them all the rights of children, including the right to an eternal inheritance, Rom. 8:17; 1 Pet. 1:4. This legal sonship of believers should be distinguished from their moral sonship through regeneration and sanctification. Both are indicated in the following passages: John 1:12, 13; Rom. 8:15, 16; Gal. 4:5, 6.

2. The Time of Justification

The word 'justification' is not always used in the same sense. Some even speak of a fourfold justification: a justification from eternity, a justification in the resurrection of Christ, a justification by faith, and a public justification in the final judgment. In explanation of this it may be said that in an ideal sense the righteousness of Christ is already accounted to believers in the counsel of redemption, and therefore from eternity, but this is not what the Bible means when it speaks of the justification of the sinner. We

must distinguish between what was decreed in the eternal counsel of God and what is realized in the course of history. Again, there is some reason for speaking of a justification in the resurrection of Christ. In a sense it may be said that the resurrection was the justification of Christ, and that in Him the whole body of believers was justified. But this was a general and purely objective transaction, which should not be confused with the personal justification of the sinner. When the Bible speaks of the justification of the sinner, it usually refers to the subjective and personal application and appropriation of the justifying grace of God. The usual representation is that we are justified by faith. This implies that it takes place at the time when we accept Christ by faith. Faith is called the instrument or the appropriating organ of justification. By faith man appropriates, that is, takes unto himself, the righteousness of Christ, on the basis of which he is justified before God. Faith justifies in so far as it takes possession of Christ. Rom. 4:5; Gal. 2:16. We should guard against the error of the Roman Catholics and the Arminians, that man is justified on the basis of his own inherent righteousness, or of his faith. Man's own righteousness or faith can never be the ground of his justification. This can be found only in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, Rom. 3:24; 10:4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9.

3. Objections to the Doctrine of Justification

Various objections are raised to this doctrine. It is said that, if man is justified on the basis of the merits of Christ, he is not saved by grace. But justification, with all that it includes, is a gracious work of God. The gift of Christ, God's reckoning of His righteousness to us, and His dealing with sinners as righteous,— it is all grace from start to finish. Again, it is said to be unworthy of God to declare sinners righteous. But God does not declare that they are righteous in themselves, but that they are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And, finally, it is said that this doctrine is apt to make people indifferent as to their moral life. If they are justified apart from any consideration of works, why should they care for personal piety? But justification lays the foundation for a living relationship with Christ, and this is the surest guarantee for a truly godly life. The man who is really in living union with Christ cannot be morally indifferent. Rom. 3:5-8.

To memorize. Passages speaking of:

a. Justification in general:

Rom. 3:24. "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

2 Cor. 5:21. "Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

b. Justification by faith, not by works:

Rom. 3:28. "We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law."

Rom. 4:5. "But to him that works not, but believes on Him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness."

Gal. 2:16. "Yet knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we believed on Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law: because by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

c. Justification and the forgiveness of sins:

Ps. 32:1, 2. "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom Jehovah imputes not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile."

Acts 13:38, 39. "Be it known unto you therefore, brethren, that through this man is proclaimed unto you remission of sins; and by Him every one that believes is justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses."

d. Adoption of children, heirs of eternal life:

John 1:12. "But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name."

Gal. 4:4, 5. "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."

Rom. 8:17. "And if children, their heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ, if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified with Him."

e. Justification based on the righteousness of Christ:

Rom. 3:21, 22. "But now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe."

Rom. 5:18. "So then as through one trespass the judgment came unto all men to condemnation; even so though one act of righteousness the free gift came unto all men to justification of life."

For Further Study:

- a. What fruits of justification are mentioned in Rom. 5:1-5?
- b. Does not James teach that man is justified by works? Jas. 2:21-25.
- c. With what objection to the doctrine of justification does Paul deal in Rom. 3:5-8?

Questions for Review:

1. What is justification?
2. How does it differ from sanctification?
3. What elements does it comprise?

4. In how far are sins forgiven in justification?
5. Why must believers still pray for forgiveness?
6. What is included in the adoption of children?
7. Can we speak of justification from eternity and in the resurrection of Christ?
8. How is faith related to justification?
9. What is the ground of justification? What is the Arminian view?
10. What objections are raised to this doctrine? Can you answer them?