

Justified Before God

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Yeshua:

Justification and regeneration are closely related doctrines. Regeneration occurs in believers' hearts when they receive Christ and become "born again." It refers to an impartation of life and is God's answer to the problem of sin and spiritual death. In comparison, justification by faith is the foundational truth of God's provision of salvation. Justification is often misunderstood but is one of the profound truths of God's salvific plan restored to the church from the Protestant Reformation.ⁱ

Justification is a legal term and concerns our standing or position before God. It means to be declared righteous, but more significantly, it puts the believer in a position of innocence in God's eyes, meaning "not guilty." To be justified before does not merely suggest that our debt of sin has been paid but leaves us without the scars of those sins that would otherwise be carried forever.ⁱⁱ Indeed, criminals serve their time and are released from prison, with their history of evil deeds perpetually clouding their character. They are never described as a good or righteous man.

No, once God forgives and justifies us, the ungodly, He no longer remembers our sins, and our guilt and punishment are permanently removed.ⁱⁱⁱ We are *justified* before God without stains or wrinkles.^{iv} God now sees us as though we have never sinned and the crime was never committed. Thus, we read, "As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us" (*Psalm 103:12, NKJV*).^v But how can a righteous God forget our evil deeds?

As a God of justice, He cannot merely overlook our sins out of kindness, for doing so would defile His holy character. He must preserve His holiness and uphold His justice, and His pardon must be based on His strict terms of justice. God demands payment, and someone, namely the sinner, must pay the penalty for their sins. Therefore, for God to extend His mercy and grace, a scapegoat, as in a substitutionary sacrifice, is required, someone upon whom God could place our sins, and that person is nonother than Jesus Christ.^{vi} However, Jesus did not just pay for our iniquities; He took them upon Himself. Peter affirms this, saying, "Christ also suffered for us... who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed" (*2 Peter 2:21 & 24*). Jesus became the sinner, and we became the innocent as if we had never sinned.

Another way to look at it is that our sins were imputed to Christ, who had no sin, and Christ's righteousness, in turn, was imputed to us, who were full of sin. In other words, we switched places. Hence, we read, *"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin... [and] by His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many; For He shall bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:10-11); "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

To impute means to lay the responsibility or credit for something on another. We inherit or are given something not of ourselves. If God can impute us with Adam's sin, He can also positively impute us with Christ's righteousness.^{vii} James Buchanan said, "Justification consists partly in the 'non-imputation' of sin, which did belong personally to the sinner, and partly in the 'imputation' of righteousness, of which he was utterly destitute before. Both are necessary to express the full meaning of justification."^{viii}

Christ's righteousness is imputed to all who believe, who have faith and trust in God's Son through the Gospel. And God declares all who believe as justified.^{ix} Like Abraham, our faith is counted to us as righteousness. It is not that we are righteous, but we are declared righteous based on exercising our faith and are imputed the righteousness of Christ.^x We are delivered from God's wrath and the punishment we deserve because God's Law has been preserved and perfectly fulfilled. As Jesus said, *"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).*

Jesus' perfect obedience to the Law provided the righteousness through which God could extend His mercy and grace. We have been granted unimaginable salvation where Christ has taken our sin upon Himself, and His righteousness is bestowed upon us—an unbelievable exchange! Our criminal records are permanently expunged (erased), and all evidence of our sin and guilt is completely erased.^{xi} *"For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).* God now only sees us through the righteousness of His Son. He sees us as He sees Jesus, perfect and righteous.

In Christ, we are not only forgiven our sins. We also receive God's favor to restore us positionally before Him. We read, *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2).*^{xii} P.B. Fitzwater said, "Justification is much more than a discharged criminal. He is restored to the position of one who is righteous. God treats him as though he had never sinned."^{xiii}

Being restored positionally also means we now have fellowship with God, and this fellowship with a holy God can only be based on righteousness, notably, the righteousness of Christ. Hence, Jesus's righteousness is essential for our salvation, and there is nothing we can bring to God to make ourselves righteous. No person can be justified based on their righteousness or good deeds, as none are righteous, and certainly not by endeavoring to keep the Law of Moses.^{xiv} This Christian understanding is a clear departure from Rabbinic opinion.^{xv} Rabbi Jeffrey

Salkin says, "Judaism is a profoundly this-world-oriented religious tradition."^{xvi} Most Orthodox Jews believe in our justification through observance of the Mosaic Law.

However, to be clear, there is nothing wrong with God's Law.^{xvii} We read in scripture that *"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" (Psalm 19:7)*. Still, the writer of Hebrews says, *"For the law made nothing perfect" (Hebrews 7:19)*.^{xviii} The problem again is not with God's Law, it is with sinful man who, even if capable of keeping the Law, is already conceived in iniquity and born with an evil disposition that cannot do anything but sin against God.^{xix} Paul affirmed that salvation is found only by faith in Christ and not by any works of the flesh learned through the Law of Moses, saying, *"By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20)*. And he gave a clear discourse on justification, saying:

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20).

"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Paul even refers to the righteousness imputed to Abraham for his faithfulness towards God, saying, *"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Romans 4:2-5)*.

Paul argues that the Law of Moses given to Israel hundreds of years after the Abrahamic covenant could not annul this earlier, unconditional covenant of faith that God made in response to Abraham's faithfulness and obedience. We read, *"Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ. And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise" (Galatians 3:16-18)*.

Paul has given us an inarguably robust application of scripture regarding our salvation and justification, which is by faith alone, and through no works of the flesh or the Law of Moses;

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).^{xx} However, the Roman Catholic Church and now a small but growing number of Messianic and Christian churches are endeavoring to keep works as an inseparable aspect of our justification. Some congregations even attempt to keep the Law of Moses, arguing that God had promised to write His law on our hearts and minds and that Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.^{xxi}

This group splits into those who believe in salvation by grace plus works and those who are grace-centered but feel obligated to obey God's written commandments. James is also referenced as a defense for grace plus works when he said, *"A man is justified by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24)*. So how could two godly men, Paul and James, both filled with the Holy Spirit seemingly contradict each other over such an important theological issue?

For those who desire to keep the Law of Moses, Paul makes a clear argument against it, saying, *"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4)*. We should recognize that God's moral law serves as a solid foundation for the discipleship of any Christian believer. However, when we stumble, God's mercy and grace prevail because the blood of Jesus already covers us.

The word grace (*Charis* in Greek) initially meant "loveliness" or "charm." It was later used to indicate "any favor granted to another, especially when the recipient had not merited such a favor." *Charis* is where we get the word Charismatic. In the New Testament, grace indicates the forgiveness of sin granted entirely out of the Goodness of God, completely apart from any merit on the part of the person forgiven. In other words, grace is favor shown where there is a positive demerit.

Grace is more than the expression of God's goodness; it expresses and, more importantly, reveals who God is. As Jesus said, *"No one is good but One, that is, God" (Matthew 19:17)*. "Grace is the attitude on God's part that proceeds entirely from within Himself and is conditioned in no way by anything in the objects of His favor."^{xxii} A.W. Pink wrote: "Grace is a provision for men who are so fallen that they cannot help themselves, so corrupt that they cannot change their natures, so averse to God that they cannot turn to Him, so blind they cannot see Him, so deaf they cannot hear Him, so dead that He Himself must open their graves and lift them into resurrection."^{xxiii} Oh, how great a debt Jesus has paid for our salvation.^{xxiv} The perfect Son of God willingly took our sins upon Himself and received the punishment for them.

Paul affirms salvation is by faith alone, while James expounds on our salvation experience, saying that genuine faith also produces good works. Jesus Himself said, *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16)*. In other words, faith cannot be seen unless it manifests through us in a way that others can see it. This manifestation is to draw others to glorify God in Heaven.

If we return for a moment to our study on faith, we are reminded that our faith is demonstrated as "trust" in God and obedience (faithfulness) towards Him. We read again, with emphasis

added, *"But without faith [without trust in God and faithfulness towards Him] it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him"* (Hebrews 11:6). Therefore, it is impossible to please God unless we trust Him and are obedient and faithful towards Him. Jesus said, *"If you love Me, keep [obey] My commandments"* (John 14:15). So if we trust God, who is faithful to us, then our response should be one of faithfulness and obedience to Him.

James said, *"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?"* (James 2:21-22). Notice that Abraham trusted God with his only son. And in obedience, was willing to offer the child as a sacrifice to God. Therefore, it was not Abraham's works that were accounted to him as righteousness. His belief, as in trust, but more importantly, his obedience to God, was counted as righteousness. James affirms this by saying, *"And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. And he was called the friend of God"* (James 2:23). Did not Jesus do the same, as it says, *"Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered"* (Hebrews 5:8).

The clear implication here, in the words of James, emphasis added, is that "works" equate to obedient actions: *"Show me your faith without your [obedient] works, and I will show you my faith by my [obedient] works"* (James 2:18). James is not saying that faith plus works are required for our salvation. If so, what are the works? Is it the Law of Moses or the works of the Spirit? If it is the Law, Paul says, *"By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin"* (Romans 3:20).

And if it is by the Spirit, as in the fruit of the Spirit or good works preordained by the Lord, we are reminded that the unregenerate man is dead in his sin until he is born again. We read, *"The body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness"* (Romans 8:10). Our good works are as filthy rags before the Lord. Isaiah said, *"We are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away"* (Isaiah 64:6).

But if we are regenerated, we have already been saved by God's grace through faith. And how can we add anything to our salvation once we are saved? No, James is not advocating that we try to fulfill the Law of Moses or any works of the flesh. Nor is he suggesting that we can add anything to our salvation experience. It is a sovereign work of the Spirit. James understands salvation has always been through faith alone, as in trusting God. But he also knows that the response of our salvation and justification before God is a surrendered heart that lives in obedience to Him. Obedience is merely an indicator of our salvation, not a prerequisite for it.

Our salvation, and therefore, our justification before God, cannot be worked for or merited. We are saved by God's grace alone and justified when we surrender to Christ and accept Him as our Lord and Savior. As we read, *"Having been justified by His grace we should become heirs*

according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7).^{xxv} From that moment, we are filled with the Holy Spirit and have become a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Unlike the Catholic Church, which holds to an unbiblical view of purgatory where one works out their salvation after they die, our salvation is assured and secured from the moment we receive Christ. Every work we do for the Lord in obedience to Him after we are saved can neither add nor subtract from our secure and justified position before Him. However, our works do measure our obedience toward God, and He has promised to reward each according to their works.^{xxvi} Therefore, obedient works are not without their merit. God has entrusted us with a certain number of talents, and how we invest those for His Kingdom will yield an eternal reward that is a hundred times greater.^{xxvii}

Acknowledging that God justifies us through faith that He provides, we accept that even our faith is not something we can meritoriously offer to God for our salvation. Faith is only the means that God has provided us so that we would know the value of the incredible gift God has placed before us and the granted opportunity that we might choose to receive Christ as our Lord and Savior. Thiessen says, "We are not saved *for* our faith but *through* our faith," and even our faith is a gift from God.^{xxviii} Everything is through His gracious provision. We have nothing to bring Him except our surrendered hearts, an altar of sacrifice that we pledge to obediently follow Jesus and always remain faithful towards Him. This is our response of love, not that we have loved God, but He first loved us and has extended His arm of salvation to rescue and save us from inevitable destruction.

The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead is a testimony that He was satisfied with the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for our sins. Paul said, "*It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses and was raised because of our justification*" (Romans 4:24-25). The resurrection is the Father's seal of approval upon Christ's atoning sacrifice that our justification is complete. Our justification, like our salvation, is not incremental or progressive. It is finished.

Amen!

ⁱ Duffield, Guy P. and Van Cleave, Nathaniel M. *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*. Foursquare Media. 1910.

ⁱⁱ Acts 13:38-39. Ephesians 1:7. Colossians 2:13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 8:35.

^{iv} Romans 8:33. Ephesians 5:27.

^v All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

^{vi} Leviticus 16:8-10.

^{vii} Romans 4:6-8.

^{viii} Buchanan, James. *The Doctrine of Justification*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House 1955. 323.

^{ix} Galatians 2:16.

^x Romans 4:3. 1 Corinthians 1:30. 2 Corinthians 5:21.

^{xi} Jeremiah 50:20. Hebrew 10:16-17. Colossians 2:13.

^{xii} John 3:36. Romans 1:18, 5:9. Titus 3:4-7. Luke 15:22-24.

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- xiii P.B. Fitzwater, 47.
- xiv Galatians 2:16. Romans 8:3, 11:5-6.
- xv Romans 11:5-6. Galatians 2:16, 3:10.
- xvi Salkin, Jeffrey. *'Rabbi, what happens after I die?'* RNS, Religion News Service.
- xvii Romans 7:12. Romans 3:20.
- xviii Romans 7:12. Galatians 3:10.
- xix Psalm 51:5. Romans 3:23, 5:12.
- xx Romans 3:24, 26, 4:5, 5:1, 10:10. Galatians 2:16.
- xxi Jeremiah 31:33. Matthew 5:17.
- xxii International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943. II, 1291.
- xxiii Pink, Arthur W. Source unknown.
- xxiv Hebrews 2:3.
- xxv Romans 3:24.
- xxvi Matthew 16:27.
- xxvii Matthew 25:14-30.
- xxviii Thiessen, 382.