

# Justification of the Ungodly

📖 Romans 4:5-8

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We are studying and Paul is giving the Church its first lessons in systematic theology. He begins logically with the division known as Hamartiology which comes from two words, *hamartios* meaning "sin" and -ology, "the study of." So hamartiology is the study of sin. It is our sin that condemns us and so we have called the first division in Romans 1:18-3:20 Condemnation. We are condemned by a righteous and holy God because of our sin. The second division is known as Soteriology from two words, *soteria* meaning "salvation" and -ology, "the study of." So soteriology is the study of salvation. It is salvation in three tenses. First, the past tense of salvation is Justification covered in Romans 3:21-5:21. This is the legal declaration of Christ's righteousness to the sinners account at the moment of faith alone in Christ alone that establishes a legal standing for the sinner with God. Second, the present tense of salvation is Sanctification and is covered in Romans 6:1-8:17. This is the impartation of Christ's righteousness through the sinner as he lives by faith so that there is a positive fruit production before God. Third, the future tense of salvation is Glorification as covered in Romans 8:17-39. This is the resurrection of the believer such that he is actually righteous in himself and can dwell in God's presence forever. So the solution to our sin problem occurs in three tenses and we are studying the first tense, Justification.

I have tried to relate the picture of justification the imagery often attributed to Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, who restored the doctrine of justification to the Church. To clarify the difference between Protestant Justification and Catholic Justification he said that we, as sinners in Adam, are like a pile of dung and that when we have faith in Jesus Christ His righteousness comes to cover us like a blanket of snow, so that justification is an imputation and when God looks upon us He sees us as whiter than snow and can treat us as if we are righteous even though underneath we are still dung. The Catholic Church disagreed and said that justification is not an imputation that simply covers over the fact that we are still dung underneath but rather it is the sanctification and the transformation of the dung such that it is in the process of becoming white as snow. That is, justification is an infusion of righteousness as we cooperate by acts of our free will with Christ's grace. What the Catholic Church then is doing is confusing justification with sanctification so that justification, rather than being a once

for all declaration, becomes a life-long process of inner transformation of the individual. We disagree with that and we think that there are a number of unhappy ramifications if you hold to that.

What is the most unfortunate ramification? What differences does it make? You have to think this through. If Catholicism is correct and justification is the process of me being transformed into a righteous person as I cooperate with Christ's grace then can I know that I am saved? By definition if something is in process then it's not complete so I may be in the process of being saved but I cannot know that if I were to die today I would die in a state of grace and be acceptable to Him. So Catholicism denies that I can know I am saved and says that if I say I know I am saved then I am committing the sin of presumption. Protestants said no; justification is a legal declaration that I am righteous before God in heaven at the moment of faith alone in Christ alone and therefore I can know that I am saved. I'm not presuming upon God because my confidence is in Christ and what He has done and He promises that whosoever believes in Him has eternal life. So I can know I am saved.

What difference does it make; whether I can know if I am saved or not? It makes every difference in the world. On one hand I know I'm accepted with God; on the other hand I don't know if I'm accepted with God. That changes your entire motive for living. If I know that I am accepted by God then my whole base of motivation is one of gratitude to Him; but if I don't know that I am accepted by God then my whole base of motivation is one of fear of Him. And that is precisely where Martin Luther found himself in the Catholic system prior to his discovery that there was a righteousness available to us that was apart from works, by faith alone. When he discovered that in Romans he says he was like a bird set free from a cage. And that is what the gospel does; it frees us.

I'm suggesting that what Martin Luther found is what Paul taught in Romans 3-4. In 4 we find two OT men; Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation and David, the greatest king of the Jewish nation; Abraham living before the Law; David living after the Law and yet both men were justified how? In the same way, by faith. So then a Jew could not argue that justification was by keeping the Law. Abraham lived before the Law and so could not possibly have been justified by the Law. David, living after the Law was given was not justified by the Law either. Justification is always by faith and never by works.

Now this idea of justification by faith alone apart from any works, understanding justification to be a legal declaration and faith to be simply receiving a gift that gave such a wonderful assurance of salvation, was restored by Martin Luther and it was maintained by the 1st generation Reformers like Savanarola and Melancthon and even Calvin until his later years. But then Calvin shifted his position and that's what has caused all the confusion in our own day. What we have today in Catholicism is the same as it was then, justification is a transformative process. But what we have in Protestantism has divided into confusion.

What happened with the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of Reformers like Calvin in his later years and Beza who succeeded Calvin that led them to change their view of justification by faith? Well, you didn't think the Catholics just stood around and let hundreds of thousands of people leave their church without trying to get them back, do you? No, they countered the arguments of the original Reformers. What was the Catholic counter-argument? The Catholics, and particularly the Jesuits, the intellectual powerhouse of the Catholic Church, argued against the 1<sup>st</sup> generation Reformers saying, "If you tell someone that they are justified, simply through faith alone in Christ alone and they have that assurance, then they will just go out the door and use it as a license to sin." Unfortunately, the power of this argument was felt by some of the Reformers, and in particular Calvin, who in 1563, the year before he died, in his Institutes, modified his stance saying that *we are saved by faith alone but the faith that saves is never alone*. In other words, he invented the idea that there are different kinds of faith. There is a faith that works and there is faith that does not work and only the faith that works is true saving faith. This false idea has now spawned many different kinds of faith in the literature. You can read about spurious faith and temporal faith and intellectual faith and saving faith and all kinds of faith. So then we end up asking ourselves, how do I know if I had saving faith? And the answer we hear is that we only had saving faith if we persevere in good works until the end of our life. Otherwise, if you have only good works for a little while then it shows that you only had temporal faith and temporal faith can't save.

Now I think it was a grave error for Calvin to open the door up to the idea that there is more than one kind of faith. Especially when faith is faith. Faith just means trust or confidence in another. There is no other definition of faith. There are no different kinds of faith. But once you start the game of different kinds of faith then what you have done is removed people's focus from the object of their faith, Jesus Christ, and moved it over to the kind of faith they have. So now I'm looking at my faith and asking whether my faith has the right kind of works. And once I've done that I'm no longer looking at Jesus Christ. So it turns faith into the right kind of faith that produces works. Friend, that is a merry go round you will never get off of. That is a track that goes on and on forever trying to find true assurance because how can you know. You may commit some atrocity some day and then you will think you only had a spurious faith and all this time you were never saved.

Now when you think about this view of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Reformers and that of the Roman Catholics, what really is the difference? As far as my assurance that I am saved there is no difference. Neither view can give you certainty of salvation. Both keep you guessing until the end of your life! And I think that is a tragedy. I don't think Paul went around unsure whether he was saved or not. I know they have verses that they use to say Paul was unsure but they're all in rewards contexts. Paul wanted to run the race all the way to the end to win the prize. That's rewards. It has nothing to do with whether Paul was sure he was saved. You can't even be in the race if you're not saved! So that's just silly.

But today we have these views that keep millions of people confused but fortunately there are some who are trying desperately to recover the true doctrine of justification by grace through faith which was originally taught by Luther and that view simply says *I am justified by faith alone in Christ alone apart from any works*. That is very different than saying *I am justified by faith alone in Christ alone but the faith that justifies is never alone but must be accompanied by works*. That latter view keeps me guessing all my life; keeps me wondering all my life whether I will persevere in good works till the end and show that I really am justified. Is that really how Abraham and David were thinking? When they failed to live by faith were they wondering, hmm, am I really saved to begin with? I think that is ludicrous. I think that is a false gospel. I think it is not really a gospel at all because the gospel is good news and the good news is not that I *may* be saved but it is that I *am* saved.

The true gospel and the only gospel is that when I trust in Jesus Christ alone for my eternal salvation then I am saved at that moment in the sense of justification; I have been declared by God to be righteous in His sight; not because of who I am, not because of any works I do, but because of who Jesus Christ is and what He has done! That means my focus is on the object of my faith, Jesus Christ and I am at that time and forevermore covered by His righteousness! Only in that view can I know that I am saved. That does not mean that I have arrived and live a sinlessly perfect life. It simply means that Christ has provided a perfect righteousness for me and has credited it to my account.

See, you, I, all of us, have an account in heaven with God. This is another way to look at it. You have an account in heaven and before faith in Christ your account is bankrupt. In fact, you're not only bankrupt but you are in debt and owe Him. Jesus Christ came along and paid the debt and when you receive His payment on your behalf, which is faith, then He fills your account with His riches. That's justification! At that point nothing is ever going to change the balance in your account. He's not going to make a withdrawal out of your account because you committed a sin. He already paid for that sin. So you have eternal security. You know you are saved and He said you can know you are saved. 1 John 5:13, "These things are written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." If you can't know then the Bible is a false witness!

Abraham was justified. How was he justified? Romans 4:2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." In other words, if he was justified by works he has something to boast about before men, there is a justification before men that is by works and that's James 2, but justification before God is not by works, no man will be justified before God by works, God looks at the heart. Well then how are we justified? Verse 3, by faith. "For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." As far as I can tell from that verse and many others, it's faith alone. Abraham was just believing God's seed promise; God's guarantee that a seed would come through a woman who would defeat Satan and save him from sin.

Verse 4 begins a contrast with verse 5. Verse 4 says, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due." Works is the Greek word *εργαζομαι* and it means "to expend energy or effort." If you expend energy or effort at a job then you earn a wage. That is very simple to understand. Your boss could never argue at the end of the day that the wage you earned was credited to you as a favor. That would be nonsense. The wage would be what was due. Paul could not speak in simpler terms but people have made this so complex as to render the entire gospel gobbledygook. Why can't people understand when it comes to justification that it's just like getting money put in your bank account that you didn't earn? That's all it is. It's a favor! Now to make crystal clear that is what it means Paul gives us verse 5, **But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...** here you do nothing, you exert no effort, you're just a pile of dung lying there amongst the rest of the dung of humanity and you believe in Him. If that is the case then you are not working. Do you see again that believing is not working? Believing is the opposite of working. It isn't exerting effort. It isn't doing anything. It is receiving something. Many people like to say that if you are believing then you are doing something and cooperating with God in salvation. Scripture rejects that idea entirely. Scripture says plainly, **to the one who does not work, but believes.** Faith is the opposite of works!

Alright, believes in what? **Believes in Him. Him** in this context is God from verse 3. He's talking about Abraham and Abraham believed in God. What did God do? God is the one who justifies through the seed. And note who it is exactly that God justifies? Is it the godly or the ungodly? He **justifies the ungodly!** God doesn't justify the godly; He justifies the ungodly. Now these things are so important. Two things here are just absolutely critical. First, when are we justified? When we become godly or while we are still ungodly? While **ungodly!** God **justifies the ungodly.** So then you see that justification could not have anything to do with our godliness. The word translated **ungodly** is from the same root in 1:18. What did Paul say there? That "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness." The word "ungodly" refers to one who is immoral in behavior. It is in that condition of a man that God justifies the man. That ought to make you praise God! Second, when do we believe? When we are godly or ungodly? While still **ungodly!** Of course, from other passages, we realize that we would not believe apart from God drawing us and calling us to Himself. Yet nonetheless, when we are in a state of immoral behavior is when we believe. How then could anyone ever argue that we must become godly in order to believe? That we must be regenerated before we believe? That is not the proper order. We do not get regenerated before we believe, we believe when we are still ungodly and God justifies us when we are still ungodly, showing that it is not a change within us, it is a declaratory statement in God's court in heaven about us. The justification does not make us godly! That is Roman Catholicism. The justification declares you righteous while ungodly! That is Protestantism and that is Paul and that is the Bible from beginning to end.

For me to ponder the fact that Evangelicals are trying to get back together with Catholics on the doctrine of justification since the early 1990's is very difficult for me to swallow. Perhaps you've heard of ECT, Evangelicals and Catholics Together. From the documents they have produced together it is the Evangelicals that have compromised on the doctrine of justification. The Catholics haven't changed a thing. The documents state that the doctrine of justification includes the gift of the Holy Spirit through whom the love of God is poured forth into our hearts.<sup>1</sup> If that is the case then it is a denial of justification as a legal declaration since it relates directly to a change made in my human heart. The documents also state that true faith issues in a changed life, thus re-defining the concept of faith alone to mean a faith that is not alone, but always accompanied by or producing works. This is a distortion of Holy Scripture! It destroys entirely the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works as taught in Holy Scripture.

It is so much simpler and so much more beautiful than this. There is faith in Christ, the sole object, security and righteousness! My everything. And if you have faith in Jesus Christ you are justified. What about my life afterward? If God justifies me when I am ungodly how could my ungodliness unjustify me? You see, it will not work. Paul locks down all attempts to erase our justification because of anything we do. Let's say that someone comes along and believes in Christ and then later they deny Him. Does that change anything? No. That is irrelevant; He will not then deny that man because that would be to deny Himself. Or let's say that a man believes in Christ and then blasphemes Christ. Will that change anything? No, that is irrelevant; the sin of blasphemy relates to the Holy Spirit and to the nation Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and has no application today. Or let's say that a man believes in Christ and then murders someone. Will that change anything? No, Jesus Christ paid for that. It is irrelevant to the question of justification. Those issues relate to sanctification but they have no bearing at all on justification. And it is the blurring of these two that keep people confused! Justification is simply by faith alone in Christ alone.

Verse 6, **just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:** Now there is a man I believe who after he believed committed adultery and murder. Are you going to tell me that David lost his justification when he did those things? Now 1 John 3:15 says that David was not abiding when he did those things but abiding is a very different thing. David was justified the entire time. In fact, this Psalm that David quotes here is most likely a Psalm written in the wake of his adultery and murder. And what does he say in this famous Psalm 32? **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.** It's something of a mystery to many why David wrote these words after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah. But I think I can tell you why. David knew that were he not justified by God apart from his works he would have no legal basis with God for restoration to fellowship. You see, you must have a legal basis with God before you can ever talk about fellowship with God. It doesn't matter how many so called "good deeds" that you do before you

have justification they don't amount to anything before God. There must be a legal base. David is reflecting on the fact that he had a legal base and this is a tremendous blessing. **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN.** Now you'll note the words **lawless deeds.** The Greek word *ανομια* refers to "the product of a lawless disposition." In other words, the deed is coming out of a disposition that is opposed to God. We still have the flesh and out of our flesh comes lawlessness. But blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven. The Greek word forgiven means "to send away." It is a beautiful word picture. You will recall that in the OT on the Day of Atonement the high priest would take two male goats for a sin offering and he would cast lots for the two goats and the one lot was for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. The one for the Lord would be sacrificed as a sin offering for the people and it's blood taken inside the veil and sprinkled on the mercy seat and the other he would place his hands on to signify atonement and send it into the wilderness. The scapegoat signified the "sending away" of sins since the goat was sent away into the wilderness such that the sins were as far away from the Lord as the east is from the west. Forgiveness is the picture of that "sending away" of our sins. Forgiveness is negative only; it gets rid of our sins judicially and brings us back. On a scale of -1, 0 and +1, in Adam we are dead in our transgressions and sins, -1, with forgiveness we are brought back to 0. Justification includes forgiveness but takes it one step further and gives us + 1 righteousness with God. David didn't reveal that yet but he does next when he say **And whose sins have been covered.** That's justification and it's the illustration I have used from Martin Luther of dung being covered with a blanket of white snow. That's the picture here. We are dung and that means that we remain sinners but we are covered judicially by Christ's righteousness and therefore we are *simil iustus et peccator*, at the same time just and a sinner, so that God looks at us judicially as if we are white as snow. And finally verse 8, **Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.** Again we're dealing with an account, a reckoning, a crediting and the man who is justified will not be taken to task for his sin! This is the good news because you could die at any moment and the issue is not how pure am I in myself? And do I need to do more to clean up my life. The issue is do I have Christ's righteousness credited to my account. And if you have believed in Jesus Christ then you are counted righteous and the Lord will not take your **sin...into account.** This is good news, it is freeing news and I want you to be free. I want you to believe in Jesus Christ because He will set you free. You can be free right now. You can be wholly accepted by God right now. You don't have to wait; you don't have to perform; you don't have to work. You only have to receive the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and His free gift of righteousness. Just believe in Him! That's all there is. Jesus did it all. He satisfied the Father. You are accepted in the Beloved. You don't have to promise Him anything. You don't have to change your life. You just have to believe in Him and at that moment your eternal destiny is secure. It is a great gift of God and it is totally free.

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<sup>1</sup> Colson, C. & Neuhaus, R. J. (1997). *The Gift of Salvation*. Retrieved from LeaderU website  
<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9801/articles/gift.html>