

CHRISTIAN BASICS

by Grant Thorpe

available at
www.corobaptist.org.au

The following study notes may be copied and distributed freely if they are acknowledged and not used for profit.

Study Ten

CALLED AND JUSTIFIED

Paul said that those whom God called he also justified (Rom. 8:30) and in so saying, showed that the well-being of believers was on a sure footing, so sure in fact, that no power or circumstance could ever separate the justified from God's love (Rom. 8:31–39). He showed that forgiveness of sins was not an indiscriminate forgetting of the past, but an action consistent with the nature of God and all things.

The theme of justification is expounded in 'Romans' and strongly argued in 'Galatians', and is shown to have its roots in the OT. It was the major truth that awakened many at the time of the Reformation. In every age and place, the truth of justification needs to be re-asserted and understood because it is the revelation whereby God brings man to a healthy relationship with himself (Rom. 5:1–2).

'Justified' is the verb (*dikioo*) associated with the noun 'righteousness' (*dikaisune*), and means 'to declare (a person) righteous'. What this means for God, the world, and ourselves, must be traced clearly.

THE RIGHTEOUS GOD

Firstly, it needs to be asserted that God himself is righteous. A very fundamental question was asked by Abraham concerning the proposed destruction of Sodom: 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Gen. 18:25). Clearly, for Abraham, the fact that God could be relied on to do what was right was the thing that held the world together. The same confidence was expressed by Moses in the face of Israel's perversity (Deut. 32:4). In the NT, Paul asks concerning the judgement of Pharaoh: 'Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!' (Rom. 9:14).

Some modern thinkers have argued that there is no purpose or order or moral absolute in the universe, and many others who do not think assume this to be so, giving themselves up to any practise they like. But a Christian sees through what appears as chaos to an eternal God who does right, and knows that there can be no reality that is not related to morality. (See P.T. Forsyth, 'The Justification of God' p 167). He must also know that his salvation can have no validity unless founded on justice.

THE MEANING OF 'JUSTIFY'

The Greek word for justify (*dikaioo*) and its Hebrew equivalent (*tsadak*) have distinctly legal connotations and mean 'to declare righteous' rather than 'to make righteous'. Even the noun 'righteousness' (*dikaiosune*) while often used with a seemingly ethical significance (as for example when speaking of God's righteousness) follows the Hebrew meaning of righteousness (**tsedek**) which means a 'declared righteousness'. So the Biblical meanings of righteousness and justification are different from the common English words which follow more the classical Greek meanings and have a more ethical connotation. So 'to justify' means to pronounce, accept, and treat as just. It means that the recipient is not penally liable but entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law (Rom. 8:33f.). So God protects and blesses those whom he holds to be in the right. (Isa. 45:25; 50:8). (See J.I. Packer article in *Bakers Dictionary of Theology*. p 304).

JUSTIFYING THE UNGODLY

It is truly incredible that a sinful man should be declared righteous. The Jews knew that 'He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord' (Prov. 17:15; cf. Exod. 23:7, and Isa. 5:23). The law required that the guilty be condemned and the righteous acquitted. (Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32). So Paul says that it is not the hearers of the law but the doers of it that will be justified (Rom. 2:13). However, he also says in the same letter that a man may trust in God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5 The same Greek phrase as LXX of Exod. 23:7 and Isa. 5:23). Surely this is an incredible thing and requires close scrutiny and clear understanding.

RIGHTEOUSNESS FROM GOD

This gift of righteousness, or justification is called 'righteousness of God' (Rom. 1:17), which could either mean God's own righteousness or the gift of righteousness given to believers. It may make for simpler understanding to choose the second (as in Phil. 3:9), but the first meaning is not untrue in any case, and both may be meant. God is just, and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus. (Rom. 3:26; 1 John 1:9). What God has done in saving man reveals God's righteousness as well as reveals to man the gift of righteousness. In Romans 3:22, the 'righteousness of God' is for all who believe.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

Righteousness from God comes through Christ (Rom. 3:24). It had been prophesied that the righteous servant would make many to be accounted righteous (Isa. 53:11), which prophesy Jesus fulfilled. Jesus showed his determination to fulfil all righteousness at the time of his baptism (Matt. 3:15), in his teaching (Matt. 5:17–20), and particularly in his death (Rom. 5:18; Phil. 2:8), and it is by this act of righteousness that he provides 'acquittal and life for all men.' He died 'the just, for the unjust', to bring men to God (1 Peter 3:18)

THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

Jesus came to fulfil the law (Rom. 5:17) and did so by his own righteous life. But it was not his own justification he had in view, but ours. As such, he bore our sins (I Peter 2:24), he was made sin (II Corin. 5:21); the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6). As such he bore the condemnation and curse of God's righteous law against all sin (Gal. 3:13). Christ fulfilled the law positively, by doing all that it required, and negatively, by bearing all that it legislated when broken. He said before his death that he had finished the works he had been given to do (John 17:4) and on the cross said: 'It is finished' (John 19:30). The same word (finished) is used in Rom. 10:4 when it says that Christ is the end (finish) of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes. This does not simply mean that law has been discarded as a means of righteousness, but that as a means of righteousness it has been fulfilled, on our behalf, by Christ. In Rom. 8:4, Paul says that through Christ, the just requirement of the law is fulfilled in those who walk by the Spirit (i.e. in Christ). This does not mean that Christians fulfil the law by their actions, because Paul always makes it clear that no relationship with God is maintained by works of law, and besides, the law would always then be only part fulfilled in that our works are always imperfect. The law does not allow for partial fulfilment in regard to justification (James 2:10). [As in Romans 5:16, where condemnation (katakrima) is contrasted with justification (dikaioma), it seems best here, where the same two Greek words are used, to liken the 'no condemnation' of Romans 8:1, with the 'just requirement' of vs 4. That is, the just requirement of the law is fulfilled in us because it has been fulfilled for us by Christ and we appropriate this by walking in the Spirit. (cf. Gal. 5:18)]

RESURRECTION PROCLAIMS JUSTIFICATION

The truth of Jesus' claim 'It is finished' was declared by God raising him from the dead. Peter says it was not possible for Jesus to be held by death. Quoting David, he shows that that would infer that the soul of Jesus would have been abandoned in Hades. No victory could have been offered to man.

But Jesus himself was justified. Having borne our sin, and its consequence, he now shows himself to be free of it and its consequence. And in him, we also are free. Paul says Christ was 'raised for our justification' (Rom. 4:25), so when man believes in his heart that Christ was raised from the dead, he is justified (Rom. 10:9f.).

BY FAITH

Abraham believed that God would justify the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Abraham was not thereby attributing perversity to God, but was stating (in context of Gen. 15) that he could see God accepted him (reckoned him to be righteous) and would vindicate him by making him a blessing in the earth. It is clear that Abraham had no acceptance with God in his own right, but only in virtue of his belief that God would bless him as though he were. This is stated to be the manner in which believers are accepted—by receiving the status of righteousness as a gift (Rom. 1:17; 3:21f.; 5:17).

Habakkuk too, in the midst of trying to understand God's judgement of Judah by a pagan power, was told that 'he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the

righteous shall live by his faith'. (Hab. 2:4). This link between righteousness and faith, although spoken in the context of a temporal deliverance is used in Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38 to support the idea that approval as righteous has never been gained other than by faith.

So justification is a gift and is received by faith. (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 5:1). Faith as such however, is not the ground on which justification is granted as though faith were taken as adequate in place of righteousness. In the NT the phrases used are 'through faith' (dia pisteos), 'to faith' or 'for faith' (pistei) indicating the instrumental means whereby Christ and his righteousness are appropriated, and 'of faith' (ek pisteos), indicating that faith occasions and logically precedes personal justification. But 'on account of faith' (dia pistin) is never used. (J.I. Packer, in Bakers Dictionary of Theology p 306).

That Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness does not signify that the faith was righteousness, but the occasion and means for righteousness to be imputed to him. In Romans 4, Paul was not discussing the ground for justification, but the means of receiving it.

UNION WITH CHRIST

Righteousness is reckoned to the believer not because he has been accounted to have kept the law (which would be false judgement) but because he is united to the one who has kept it representatively.

In this sense, righteousness is imputed to the believer (Rom. 4:2–8). It should not be a problem to us that righteousness worked out on our behalf is credited to us, if we understand the indissolubility of our union with Christ. He is in us and we are in him (John 14:20). We are said to be one spirit with him (I Corin. 6:17).

Paul can say, one man's act of obedience has made many righteous (Rom. 5:19), not referring to ethical purity, but right standing with God.

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND ACCEPTANCE

From the beginning it has been clear that right action would bring God's acceptance. Cain was asked: 'If you do well, will you not be accepted?' (Gen. 4:6f.). Job and the Psalmists frequently protested their innocence or righteousness and asked God to answer their prayers accordingly (Job 27:5f.; Psalm 97:6–12; 101:1–4). Proverbs and the prophets make profuse reference to blessings that come to the righteous. (e.g. Isa. 26:7–10)

One needs to enquire however as to the nature of this righteousness, and it is clear from the context of these references that the righteousness that makes one acceptable to God is not the faultless behaviour of the person concerned.

In each of the books or persons concerned, there is also reference to the need for mercy or forgiveness. But in receiving that mercy, there is a trust in God and a

direction of life that God accepts and because of which he reckons them to be righteous.

REPENTANCE

If one not only thinks about the concepts involved in justification but the personal interactions involved, it will be clear that faith in a God who justifies could not be present unless mingled with repentance. Those who look to God for justification are those who feel keenly the rightful condemnation of God's good law. In longing for righteousness they would be filled not only with the completed righteousness of Christ but with a wholesome change of direction. Some may see this as the justification of justification, as though the end of a redirected man justified the means. While it must be true that God is satisfied with his new creation, the end has not justified the means. The rationale of justification lies in God's own nature and purpose.

THE REVELATION OF GOD

That man is justified is not the end of the matter. By his justifying man he has demonstrated in the world of lawlessness that righteousness has prevailed without ever varying from righteousness. God has justified himself and his mercy in the eyes of his creation (Isa. 45:21–25; Rom. 3:21–26).

Faithful men have always believed in God's goodness and that his goodness would prevail despite the waywardness of man. Somehow they could see that mercy would triumph over judgement, yet without ever becoming less than just. This paradox is illustrated by Abraham, himself justified by faith, calling to God to have mercy on two whole cities, far from deserving mercy, on the basis that there may be ten righteous people in the city. He must have known the dubious worth of the less than ten people he was related to in those cities, yet he cried out with incredible understanding of God's righteousness: 'Shall not the God of all the earth do right?' (Gen. 18:25)

He could see that judgement is mingled with mercy (cf. Hab. 3:2) that righteousness and peace had kissed each other (Ps 85:10—so mercy and justice are likewise linked together as a requirement on man—Micah 6:8). Mercy may be extended, without a blemish being left on the moral order.

JUSTIFICATION FLOWS FROM JUSTICE

None of this should suggest to us, that God's righteousness, in order to be just, was under some compulsion to save us, as though his creation would be seen to have failed if he did not. It is made clear that God has mercy on who ever he wills to have mercy (Rom. 9:15) and he can as readily reveal his righteousness in judgement (Rom. 1:18 and II Thess. 1:5–10).

Yet we must understand that God saves us, not in spite of his righteousness, but by his righteousness. Deliverance is not only consistent with justice, but arises from it. (See especially Isa. 45:8; 21–23; 53:11; 59:17). We must see that all grace

anticipates, or arises from a covenant of grace within which an offering is made for sin that fully satisfies, and expresses, the righteousness of God.

Attempts by us to analyse or categorise justice and mercy when in Christ (and before that, in the nature of God) they have come together, are futile.

PROPITIATION

The NT is not interested in asking if God has to forgive to be righteous, but rather, how God could forgive if he were not righteous. There would be no reliable grounds on which he could pronounce anything. Yet the problem is not simple because forgiveness involves the passing over of an offence (Micah 7:18–20)—so what of the offended party? Is there no justice?

It is at this point that propitiation is introduced in Paul's letter to the Romans. God himself, the offended party in all wrong doing ultimately, in the person of his Son, bears the wrong, and all the offence, and all the indignation he most justly has against that wrong. Righteous wrath falls on the Son and God is fully satisfied that justice has been done. Righteous mercy is extended to all who repent. So now mercy has been remembered in wrath (Hab. 3:2). Mercy has rejoiced over judgement (James 2:13) but judgement is happy for it to be so.

CONSCIENCE SATISFIED

This raises the point that it is not only the justice and law of God that require propitiation, but, because we are creatures, made in the image of the creator, our own consciences require it. The psalms speak of the ravages of conscience subsequent to wrong doing (Psalm 32:3–5) as does the NT (Heb. 2:15; 10:22). Man, given up to his sins, is in anguish and in fear of death, even though most would not admit this. But it is expressed in a sense of inferiority, failure, fear, and purposelessness.

But united with Christ, the conscience can understand that wrong has received all its lashes—so that 'by his stripes we are healed.'

So the believer is not under the judgement of God, nor the curse and condemnation of law, not the threat of wrath, but is guiltless, acquitted, and clean. Servile fear gives place to serving love.

He has freedom (because redeemed) and fellowship with God (because reconciled) and all of this may not be threatened or overthrown because God, the Judge of all the earth, acting according to the strictest requirements of justice, has cleared us of guilt (Rom. 8:31–39). With God, might is not right. He has not passed over certain sins on the basis of caprice or favouritism nor declared a convenient amnesty. His justification is total, permanent, and above all, reveals beyond all shadow of doubt, that the God of all the earth has done right.

Final judgement was brought into the present at the cross and is pronounced over those who believe. Jesus said: 'He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already . . .' (John 3:18).

LAW FULFILLED BY US?

To make the fulfilment of the law by us a requirement subsequent to justification, is to go back on the decision of the Jerusalem council in AD 50, which recognised that the law had never been kept by Jews, was not the means whereby any had come to salvation, and would not be required of the Gentiles (Acts 15). Where Paul says that he is under the law of Christ he does so simply to show that he is not without guide or principle in his living (I Corin. 9:21); but where the attaining of righteousness (or fulfilling of law) is concerned, it must be by faith (Rom. 9:30–32; Gal. 3:2–5; Phil. 3:6–9). He was free in a way that the law could never have provided (Acts 13:38f.).

Clearly, the law is a delight to the inward man (Rom. 7:22) and is written on the heart of believers. Heb. 8:10; 10:16. It is a constant guide to his actions, not to be overlooked (James 1:25; 2:8–13; 4:11), and is to be fulfilled by love (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; cf. 6:2).

However, to make any such fulfilment the basis of righteousness is something the Bible never does. Rather, our attempts to please Christ arise out of a certain attainment of righteousness through faith, i.e., justification. Paul said that God made Christ to be our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Corin. 1:30).

The works by which James says Abraham was justified are clearly the works of faith (James 2:21–26). That is, because man is body and mind, his faith will be expressed in action as much as in thought and word. In similar vein John says, 'He who does right is righteous' (1 John 3:7). Those who are justified cause righteousness to spring up in the earth (Isa. 45:8), their good works glorify their Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16), yet no saving merit is attached to them other than as evidences of faith (and this is just as well in view of their mixed value and irregular occurrence!). The righteous people in the parable of Jesus (Matt. 25:31–46) are rewarded for their works, but their righteous deeds were quite unselfconscious and they attributed no saving value to them. Clearly what they did for Christ's brethren they did for love of him and so were an evidence of faith, and not a means of merit.

CONCLUSION

Paul says that 'since we are justified by faith . . . we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God' (Rom. 5:1–3). As judgement has already been declared and we are acquitted, there is only time between now and sharing in that glory. This is the hope of righteousness (Gal. 5:5) for which we wait. We have come 'to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect . . .' (Heb. 12:23). This is the kingdom that cannot be shaken, and for which men long. A world in which righteousness reigns. And we participate in that kingdom, now and then, not as importers, but as qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Col. 1:12).

Such a prospect would have been unthinkable apart from revelation (Titus 3:3–7), and unjust apart from the cross (Rom. 3:21–26), and quite unreal apart from our union with Christ in whom we are justified.

But justification is dynamic in its effects because, being freed from the necessity to fulfil the law of ourselves, we offer to God a love which is free—and in-as-much as we love, we fulfil the law.