

FREE JUSTIFICATION

A HILL TO DIE ON

Steve Fernandez

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PREFACE

Free Justification and Joy in Honduras

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them.

So there was much rejoicing in that city.

Acts 8:5, 8

As a Pastor for more than 20 years, justification by faith alone was not something that overly occupied my mind; although I preached it and held it dear. I assumed that free justification by faith, based on the blood and imputed righteousness of Christ alone, was an unchallenged, clearly understood truth in the broader Evangelical Church of which I identified myself. However, beginning in 1999, that all changed. I began to read and hear statements on justification by influential Evangelical teachers and leaders that troubled me. These statements were, at best, unclear, often confusing, and sometimes, in my mind, simply wrong. What complicated matters was that most said that what they were teaching was the biblical, historical view of justification as recovered at the Reformation. Moreover, the same phrases and terms commonly associated with the historic, biblical view were still used. Phrases such as, “Faith alone,” “Christ’s righteousness alone,” and others were used, but as I read them carefully, it seemed to me they were filled with a different meaning than they had commonly been understood to mean.

This led me to a study of justification that has

occupied much of my time over the last seven years. I think all would agree that if anything is worth the effort and work, if anything is worthy of a clear stand, it would be the doctrine of how God accepts and justifies sinners. The doctrine of justification is not a nonessential. It is not wrangling over theological impracticalities. I agree with the Reformers that it is “The hinge” upon which all else turns.

I was moved to write, however, by much more than theological matters. I was moved by a concern for the well-being of the Church; not only my own local church, but the Church at large. But more than that, I was moved by a concern for the glory of Christ.

I believe that the life and ministry of God’s people—whose consciences have been awakened to sin in conversion— are directly affected by how they understand, that as ill-deserving sinners, they are justified and accepted before an infinitely just and holy God. Our view of justification affects nearly everything from our concept of God’s grace and mercy to assurance, service, and to our worship of God Himself.

But even more importantly, it affects our understanding of the glory of Christ. Justification and the glory of Christ are tied together. The one is wrapped up in the other. A person’s understanding of how God, by Christ’s blood and obedience, justifies an ill-deserving sinner, determines the degree that Christ is glorified. If our works are entirely excluded from justification, then, Christ is entirely and rightly glorified. And, if He is rightly glorified, He will be rightly worshiped with a heart-affection and a soul-adoration that He alone deserves. The degree that man is abased in justification is the degree that Christ is exalted and glorified as the all-sufficient justifying Savior. Therefore, even if a particle of

justification is based on or caused by something we do—even the exercise of faith or works done by God’s strength, then Christ’s justifying work is diminished and His glory is not rightly exalted.

Recently, I had the privilege of preaching at a Pastor’s Conference in Honduras. Their response to free justification illustrates what I am trying to say. I decided to address these men on justification in the final session of the conference. With only one hour, and working through a translator, I knew I had to be very clear and concise. I wanted them to see the glory of Christ in the justification of sinners—like themselves. I knew that if they grasped this, God could use it to inflame their preaching and be a blessing in their churches, and perhaps, the church of Honduras.

I began by explaining, from Romans 3:9-11, 19, that we all sin, that we have no righteousness of our own, not even as believers. Our motives, our gratitude, and our love for God is never as it ought to be. We never love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul as we should. I further explained from Romans 1:21, 23; 3:23, that our sin involves a wicked refusal to honor and glorify God as He rightly deserves. We continually trample His name under our feet. Then, I explained that to be justified two things must be true. I told them that if God were to justify us without these two things He would, in fact, only be another corrupt, unjust judge. This seemed to come close to home to these men. First, to be justified we must have no guilt before God. The guilt of our sins must be wholly removed. Christ did this when He became a propitiation for our sins (which I explained as a satisfaction or a payment in full that satisfied God’s just anger against us). I illustrated it by comparing it to someone who went to a person to whom you owed a great debt which had greatly

offended that person, and on your behalf (because you had no means to) paid your debt in full. I also explained that to be justified more was required than just the removal of guilt. We must also ourselves honor and glorify God, by loving Him with our whole heart and worshiping Him with a glad-hearted obedience. Christ did this for us, as well. I explained from Romans 5:18, 19, that Christ, by His one act of righteousness in His death upon the cross, which is called His obedience in verse 19, honored and glorified the Father (I referred to John 12:26, 27). In other words, Christ, on our behalf, offered a glad, willing obedience that showed that the Father was infinitely worthy to be supremely glorified. Therefore, as a result of Christ’s death, our guilt is gone and the honoring and glorifying of God that is required has been gladly offered for us, all by Christ’s propitiatory death in our place. Then, finally, I explained that, by a repentant, Christ-embracing faith, God unites us to Christ. By this union, all Christ has done is regarded as if we had done it. So, His righteousness and obedience is imputed to us, and we are at once, at that very moment, forever justified. And, in it all, God remains entirely just when He justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

At that point, something happened while I was preaching that I had never seen before. The entire group of men, without any cue, spontaneously rose up and with much gladness and an unrestrained joy, began to clap and praise the Lord Jesus Christ. There was a simultaneous, joyous response of worship. They had seen that the guilt of all their sin was truly gone, and that the honor God deserves had been given to God for them, all done by another, the Savior Himself. I saw the soul-liberating, worship-producing, and joy-giving reality of justification by faith before my eyes.

In their response, I saw it all: Glad-hearted adoration and worship from a grateful heart, a renewed zeal to serve, an assurance that their soul was saved forever, and a glorifying of God as a result of a fuller understanding of His justifying grace, mercy, and love. It confirmed to me once again, that free justification is at the center of everything. The eternal and temporal good of man, and more importantly, the exalting of the glorious sufficiency of Christ, is at stake. It is worth our tireless effort to preach it and defend it as long as God gives us breath.

This book is an attempt to present the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone, based upon the blood and obedience of Christ alone, imputed to the sinner by faith alone. It, therefore, presents nothing new. It is the view that the Evangelical and Reformed church has held to since its recovery in the Reformation.

I quote a number of men unfavorably in the book. I regard them as godly men who love Christ. I don't question their integrity or character in the least. Some of their writings have been of much help to me and to many others. However, I find what they have written on justification to be troublesome. Their writings are published and in the public forum, so they are open to be judged and assessed by the Scriptures. As godly men, who recognize the final authority of the Scripture as the very Word of God, I believe that they would agree.

I would like to express gratitude and thank many who have been very helpful in the writing of this book. First, the council of Elders with whom I serve at Community Bible Church in Vallejo, California. It is a joy to serve with these men, they are my friends and co-laborers in the gospel. They encouraged me to write, and they granted me the time to finish the book.

I would also like to thank my two secretaries who

worked on the book. My dear wife, Karen, who often helped with the manuscript, and Patty Thompson, who did the bulk of the work and labored tirelessly without complaint.

To Brian Shealy, Dean of The Cornerstone Seminary, who often gave helpful critiques and suggestions. Finally to Phil Foley, Ray Palompo, and Jeff Knott, my fellow Pastors and Elders at Community Bible Church, who often encouraged me to continue on. To Christ alone, be the glory!

Free Justification: A Hill To Die On

Martin Luther's struggle over the state of his soul is well known. It is an epic story in the annals of the history of the church, and rightly so. He was tormented by a conscience stricken with a realization of his guilt before an infinitely holy God. Luther realized that God's holiness is infinite and His justice inflexible. Though an impeccable monk, he knew his sins justly condemned him. Neither extreme self-affliction, nor the meticulous confession of every sin he could think of—sometimes for six hours a day—could ease the anguish of his soul. He could find no relief. How could a man like himself—or any man for that matter—whom he knew to be vile and impure in God's sight, ever find acceptance with such a holy God? In his mind his case was hopeless. His despair led to bitterness and anger towards God. His words are gripping.

Is it not against all natural reason that God out of his mere whim deserts men, hardens them, damns them, as if he delighted in sins and in such torments of the wretched for eternity, he who is said to be of such mercy and goodness? This appears iniquitous, cruel, and intolerable in God, by which very many have been offended in all ages. And who would not be? I was myself more than once driven to the very abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him!¹

Finally, through a study of Paul, Luther came to the

realization that the righteousness demanded by God was freely given in Christ. He says,

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater² love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.

Luther came to see that the righteousness demanded by God, which he himself could never provide, is a freely given righteousness. He referred to it as, "that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us by faith." He grasped what Paul meant when he says,

But to him who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works (Romans 4:5-6).

¹ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, (Nashville, TN: New American Library for Abingdon, 1978), p. 44.

² Ibid, pp. 49-50.

For Luther, the ‘open doors into paradise’ was the realization that “God imputes righteousness apart from works” (Romans 4:6). His ‘gate to heaven’ was coming to see that justification is solely based on Christ’s blood and perfect righteousness imputed to his account as a gift by faith. On this ground alone, a person is freely and forever justified. This is the biblical gospel—the good news.

I believe we are in danger of seeing the doctrine of free justification by faith alone eclipsed and lost in our time. Because of a legitimate concern to stem the tide of “easy-believism” we are in danger of losing the gospel of grace. An emphasis on the biblical demand and inescapable requirement of repentance and perseverance in holiness has led some too far in the other direction. The biblical teaching of free justification based on Christ’s blood and imputed righteousness alone is often obscured and in some cases completely denied.

There is no truth more critical to the glory of Christ and the good of the church than the biblical doctrine of justification. It was the obscuring and ultimate rejection of the doctrine of justification by faith alone that was the primary reason the church descended into the long period of darkness of the medieval age. And it was the recovery of justification that was the great central truth, the hinge as it were, upon which the Great Reformation turned. The diligent and untiring labor of the Reformers centered around a clear biblical defense and fearless proclamation of this great truth. And God used it mightily to bring widespread renewal to Europe and beyond, ultimately ushering in the modern missionary movement.

Because this truth is so pivotal, both to the glory of Christ and the well-being of people, it has been subject to constant attack. It is a fact of history—even since the Reformation—that it has often been neglected, obscured

and outright rejected. Moreover, it has been from within the Evangelical and Reformed church that the greatest challenges to the doctrine of free justification have come. It began early on. For example, John Calvin, in his *Institutes*, wrote much of his treatment on justification in response to a challenge from Osiander. Osiander was an Evangelical Lutheran Reformed teacher who had a different nuance in his understanding of justification.³ Calvin knew better. It was actually a backward step that once again denied the biblical doctrine of justification by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness alone. Therefore, Calvin marshaled his great knowledge and skills to defend and proclaim that justification was based solely on the blood and obedience of Christ. One hundred years later, John Owen also wrote in response to attacks on the Reformed view of free justification. His primary opponent was the Puritan Richard Baxter. Owen’s great treatment of justification by faith alone (Volume V of his works) was

³ Osiander assaulted the essential gospel denying that the believing sinner was justified entirely by Christ’s blood and imputed righteousness. Calvin’s response to Osiander was lengthy. Here is an example, “Osiander laughs at those men who teach that ‘to be justified’ is a legal term; because we must actually be righteous. Also, he despises nothing more than that we are justified by free imputation. Well then, if God does not justify us by acquittal and pardon, what does Paul’s statement mean: ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not imputing men’s trespasses against them’ [II Cor. 5:19]? ‘For our sake he made him to be sin who had done no sin so that we might be the righteousness of God in him’ [v. 21p.]...Osiander objects that it would be insulting to God and contrary to his nature that he should justify those who actually remain wicked. Yet we must bear in mind what I have already said, that the grace of justification is not separated from regeneration, although they are things distinct.” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 738-739. It is evident that very early on, the doctrine of a free, completed justification by Christ’s blood and imputed righteousness was under attack even in the Reformed Church. Should we be surprised if men in the Evangelical and Reformed Church do so today?

a response to a ‘new’ view of justification, held by Baxter⁴ and others which, once again, denied that justification is based solely on Christ’s righteousness imputed to believers. A modern form of this view is gaining popularity today,⁵ and once again, the teaching of free

⁴ J. I. Packer comments on Baxter’s role in propagating a new view of justification that was in fact a denial of a free, once-for-all justification. “Now we turn to the sadder side of the picture and trace out those influences which distorted the doctrine of justification in England, and progressively robbed it of its proper influence, even among the Puritans themselves. This part of our story deals with two movements: Arminianism and Neonomianism (so called) of Richard Baxter...[It] was a denial of some basic reformed assertions...The...denial was that the covenant of grace is a relationship which God imposes unilaterally and unconditionally, by effectual calling...The...alternative was that the covenant of grace is a new law, offering present pardon on condition of present faith, and final salvation on condition of sustained faith...The...denial was that the ground of justification is Christ’s righteousness imputed. The...alternative was that faith itself is the ground of justification, being itself righteousness (obedience to the new law) and accepted by God as such...The meaning of faith as trust in Christ’s Person and work was forgotten;...and present justification ceased to be an issue of importance or interest...Baxter was convinced that those who held the ground and formal cause of our justification to be the imputing to us of Christ’s own righteousness (i.e. his fulfilment of the precept and penalty of the moral law) were logically committed to Antinomianism...” J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), pp. 156-157. Packer points out that three things marked the ‘new’ view of justification. First, it denied that justification was solely grounded on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Second, it denied a once-for-all completed justification. Instead, there was an initial and a final justification. There was present pardon [justification] on the condition of present faith, and final salvation [justification] on the condition of sustained faith. Thirdly, there was the belief that a completed, final justification by Christ’s imputed righteousness alone would lead to unholy living [antinomianism]. These same three things mark a movement in the Reformed and Evangelical Church today to redefine justification, in terms of a present and final justification, that deny the Reformed biblical teaching of a free and final justification.

⁵ Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday for example, among others, hold to a view that persevering faith is a means of accomplishing our final justification. In other words, they teach that faith and perseverance are not

justification is endangered and with it, the church. More on that later.

At this point, I would like to state why understanding and preaching justification by faith alone is so critical to the glory of Christ, the good of man, and the health of the church. The Reformers, with scripture and history to support them, said it is “the article by which the church stands or falls.”⁶ I believe they were right. It directly bears on nearly every major doctrine. Your view of justification determines your view on nearly every other key teaching and practice.

merely an evidence of justification as understood since the Reformation, but they are an actual means of accomplishing the ‘not yet’ aspect of justification which is completed on the last day. Schreiner remarks, “Since the Reformation, many Protestant Christians have tended to overstate Paul’s doctrine of justification...The consequence has been to exaggerate salvation’s already aspects with the effect that Paul’s orientation on salvation as not yet realized has virtually collapsed...For Paul, justification remains fundamentally the eschatological verdict of acquittal. Paul makes one thing clear: God’s promise of salvation is conditional. On the day of judgment God will award eternal life to those who persevere in good works (Romans 2:7, 10), because God does not justify hearers of the law, but doers of the law” (Romans 2:13). Thomas Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), pp. 160, 161, 166, 167. Their emphasis is clear: a full and complete justification awaits the verdict of the final day. It is conditioned on persevering. This is not the biblical Pauline gospel recovered by the Reformers.

⁶ Calvin’s words show the absolute centrality of a free justification, He says, “...the safety of the Church depends as much on this doctrine as human life does on the soul. If the purity of this doctrine is in any degree impaired, the Church has received a deadly wound; and, therefore, when I shall have shown that it was for the greater part extinguished, it will be the same as if I had shown that the Church had been brought to the very brink of destruction.” John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1994), p. 15.

It Exalts Christ and Abases Man

Why is free justification by faith alone so vitally important? First, it exalts the glory of Christ. Everything about the gospel is designed to glorify Christ and abase man. Therefore, anything that diminishes Christ's glory is either directly or indirectly inconsistent with the gospel. Justification by faith rightly abases man and duly exalts Christ. Paul, after declaring that "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God and righteousness" (1 Corinthians 1:30) follows it up by stating that the design and purpose of the gift of justifying righteousness is "that just as it is written, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (verse 31). In other words, justification by faith alone ensures that our boasting is entirely in the Lord. It ensures that He receives all the glory. There is not anything we have done or will do that we could boast of in our justification.

Therefore, any teaching on justification that in any degree involves man's doing for its accomplishment diminishes boasting in the Lord, and detracts from His glory.⁷ Paul explicitly says that all boasting is entirely excluded in justification for the simple reason that all human involvement is entirely excluded as its cause. He says, "Where then is the boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3:27-28). Paul makes no distinction between works done in our own strength

⁷ Calvin stated it this way, "Do you not see that the righteousness of God is not sufficiently set forth unless he alone be esteemed righteous, and communicate the free gift of righteousness to the undeserving? For so long a man has anything to say in his own defense, he detracts somewhat from God's glory." (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 763).

before we are saved, and evangelical works done as Christians through God's grace. Justification eliminates all human boasting, because it excludes all human involvement and gives all the glory to God.

It gives all the glory to God, for it is a justification grounded entirely on what Christ has done for us. It is based solely on His objective, saving work, a work done entirely outside and external to us. First, it is grounded on Christ's work of atonement. We are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). Paul explains further that Christ was "publicly displayed as a propitiation in His blood" (Romans 3:25). His death entirely propitiated, or satisfied God, and on that ground we are justified. Secondly, it is a justification grounded on the gift of Christ's imputed righteousness. Paul calls it "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:22). Paul himself defines this righteousness in the immediate context as a righteousness outside of us, a nonpersonal righteousness imputed to us by faith. He says, "Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works" (Romans 4:6; also vv. 3, 5, 9). Paul takes pains to assert that "God credits righteousness" to our account.

On these objective grounds, and on nothing else, are we justified. Therefore, all the glory goes to Christ. The design of the gospel is to magnify God's glory, and this is done to the greatest degree by a free, justifying grace. It is done when man's involvement is entirely excluded, when man is entirely debased. So then justification by faith alone exalts Christ's glory. It extols His grace and mercy to the highest degree. For this reason alone justification must be understood and heralded in the church.

It Promotes True Worship and the Praise of God

Next, free justification is vitally important to the worship and praise of God. The New Testament emphasizes that true worship is a response from the heart for a justification already accomplished. It is the response of the heart by one who knows what it is to be freely and forever accepted by God. In other words, it is because the believer enjoys a full and final justification that the heart brings forth worship and praise. Paul, in fact, directly connects worship to free justifying grace in Philippians 3:3.⁸ He says, “For we are the true circumcision who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ and put no confidence in the flesh.” Paul, in the context, is giving an account of his conversion. He is looking back on his former life in Judaism. He is giving an account of his abandonment of justification by his own works-righteousness. He describes what has already happened to him, a past reality. Paul says,

These things I have counted [a past fact with a continuing result in the present] as loss, for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count [I keep on counting] all things to be loss...and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ [at that initial point in the past] and may be found in Him [both at the point of his conversion and in the last day] not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law but that which

⁸ Warfield states the relation of a completed justification to a true spiritual worship as indicated by this passage. He says, “Paul exhorts his readers ‘to let their joy be in the Lord’ (verse 1) and he repudiates the concision on the express ground that their claims are antagonistic to a purely spiritual worship to boasting in Christ alone and the withdrawal of all confidence from the flesh.” Benjamin Warfield, *Faith and Life* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1916), pp. 320-321.

is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Philippians 3:7-9).

Paul says that as a true worshiper he glories in Christ and puts no confidence in the flesh (verse 3). He then explains why he worships in the Spirit and why he glories in Christ in verses 4-9. He worships in the Spirit and glories in Christ specifically because of His justifying grace. He has no righteousness of his own derived from works of the law (verse 9). He does not limit the statement in any way. He makes no distinction between ceremonial works of the law or moral works of the law. Could his language be clearer? Speaking of himself, he says, “as to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless” (verse 6)—clearly a reference to moral works of the law as distinct from ceremonial works such as “circumcised the eighth day” (verse 5). He then says, “I count all things to be loss...and count them as rubbish...that I may gain Christ...not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law” (verses 8, 9a). All is counted as rubbish and loss. He has no righteousness of his own—none in any form or degree.

Christ is Paul’s only justifying righteousness. He stands accepted before God solely because of Christ’s righteousness imputed to him, a righteousness entirely outside of him, as he clearly explains in verse 9⁹ and in

⁹ Warfield speaking on the emphasis of Philippians 3:1-9, culminating in verse 9 says, “...it seems perfectly clear that the language of Paul, taken as it stands, excludes even so much of a human element lying at the basis of salvation. What he says—whatever he means—is obviously that our own righteousness—in every item and degree of it—is wholly excluded from the ground of our salvation; and the righteousness provided by God in Christ is the sole ground of our acceptance in His sight. According to his express statements, at least, we are saved entirely on the ground of an alien righteousness and not at all on the ground of anything we are or have done,

Romans 4 and 5. So there is a vital relation between justification and true worship. In fact, it determines the nature of worship. Therefore, to the degree that a person grasps Christ's free, justifying grace will be the degree that a person worships and adores God. Worship is an issue of the heart (Matthew 15:9) and free justification has a great effect upon the heart. It produces a grateful heart that adores and extols God for His great mercy and grace (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).

This is not the only place where Paul indicates that the design of the gospel is the worship of God by a heart grateful for His free, justifying grace and mercy. He says elsewhere, "Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy" (Romans 15:8-9). Note that "Christ has become a servant...for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy." In Paul's thinking, justification is a fount that brings forth true worshipers. Therefore, when justification is confused, obscured or denied, worship loses its very heart and soul. History shows it degenerates into a mere lifeless form. One of its primary motives is lost. In other words, the joyful, heartfelt worship and adoration of God comes from people who revel in their once-and-for-all justification. It comes from a people sure of their acceptance with God, who see Him now as a kind generous Father. People beset with doubts, people who think their justification is conditioned on themselves in any way, will not be a people of joyful, grateful praise. So justification is vital to the worship and praise of God. For this reason, as well, it must be understood and preached in the church.

or can do,-be it even so small a matter as believing." Ibid. pp. 315-316.

It Cleanses the Conscience and Gives Peace of Mind

Another reason free justification is vitally important is that it alone relieves the conscience of a sinner weighed down by the guilt of sin. It alone brings real peace to a conscience awakened to the infinite guilt of sin before an infinitely holy God. In other words, those who have experienced the pangs of a stricken conscience are those who also revel in a free justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. Or to state it another way, to the degree that a person has a sense of their personal guilt before God, will also be the degree that they prize free justification. The opposite is also true. If someone does not feel their utter sinfulness before a holy God, why should they treasure as their only hope a free justification based on Christ's blood and imputed righteousness?

The problem facing a convicted sinner is this: On what account can I be assured that I am accepted with God? On what ground can I be sure that all my sins are pardoned and I stand justified before God? Or practically speaking, on what basis can my conscience be relieved and brought to enjoy peace? Paul says the only remedy is justification by Christ's blood and imputed righteousness. The classic text is Romans 5:1, "Therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Two things trouble the conscience of convicted sinners. The first thing is the realization that, as sinners, we must face a majestic, infinitely holy, and just God. Paul says, "God is the one Who justifies" (Romans 8:33). It is God Who determines our destiny and no one else. We will be justified on His terms. It is God with Whom we have to do and no one else. Theological controversy and

debate do not enter in here. We must picture ourselves standing alone before the court of an almighty, infinitely holy God. The second thing is as a sinner, what would we plead before God for justification? Would a person with a sense of their own sinfulness dare to offer their own righteousness, faith, or covenant faithfulness as a means of justification? John Owen states the necessity of a sense of the guilt of sin before someone will cast their hope entirely on Christ's blood and imputed righteousness for their once-for-all justification. He says,

And small hope is there to bring such men to value the righteousness of Christ, as *imputed* to them, who are so unacquainted with their own unrighteousness *inherent* in them. Until men know themselves better, they will care very little to know Christ at all...Whilst men have no sense in their own hearts and consciences of the spiritual disorder of their souls, of the secret continual actings of sin with deceit and violence, obstructing all that is good, promoting all that is evil, defiling all that is done by them...They will with assured confidence reject and condemn what is offered about justification through the obedience and righteousness of Christ imputed to us...Wherefore, if we would either teach or learn the doctrine of justification in a due manner, a clear apprehension of the greatness of our apostasy from God, a due sense of the guilt of sin, a deep experience of its power, all with respect unto the holiness and law of God, are necessary unto us...The whole need not the physician, but the sick.¹⁰

What right thinking person, aware of their sin, would ground their justification on anything but Christ's blood and imputed righteousness? Are not our best deeds, even deeds done by God's grace as Christians, tainted? Are our motives ever entirely pure?

¹⁰ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 5 (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), pp. 21-23.

The real question is this: how can we—despicable creatures that we are, still possessed of indwelling sin—dare to plead anything but Christ's blood and imputed righteousness for our justification and our acceptance with God? To appeal to anything we have done—whether it be our faith, our covenant faithfulness, or anything else as a means of our justification—is unthinkable. And, more than that, in the final analysis it is unwise and unsafe.

The Bible reveals the response of men who were brought before God's majestic greatness and infinite holiness. These were men far better than any of us. Their only plea was a free pardon by God's grace. I will mention two. The first is Isaiah the prophet. In response to a vision of the holiness of God he said, "Woe is me for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).

Isaiah, when before God, was gripped with a sense of his utter sinfulness. He made no appeal to his own faith or covenant faithfulness. He was stricken, as it were, by his vileness before a majestic holy God. His sole hope was God's free pardon. Isaiah goes on, "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven'" (Isaiah 6:7). Shaken in fear, Isaiah received free pardon entirely apart from his own doing. A burning coal touched his lips and free pardon was granted—a clear picture of justification in Christ entirely apart from our doing.

Job is another man who, when brought before God, realized his utter sinfulness and whose only plea was

God's grace and free pardon. Job did not hesitate to defend his righteousness and his works before his accusers. He insisted on his integrity and the sincerity of his obedience before men. But when called into the presence of God, it was a completely different matter. With self-abhorrence and a sense of his sin, he makes no appeal to his own righteousness before God. His only hope is a free and full pardon by God's mercy and grace. His first words are, "Behold I am insignificant; what can I reply to Thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; even twice and I will add no more" (Job 40:4-5). Clearly, a sense of sin gripped Job. Therefore, he realized that his only hope was God's free grace. His last words are an appeal to be justified by free grace alone. He says, "Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask Thee, and do Thou instruct me. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee, therefore I retract, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:4-6). So we see that a once-for-all, free and final justification based solely on Christ's blood and imputed righteousness is that which alone relieves the conscience of a convicted sinner.

It Safeguards the Nature of the Christian Life

Finally, free justification is vitally important, for it safeguards the true nature of sanctification and the Christian life. The Christian life is a life lived in gratitude for a full pardon already received. It is a response to justifying grace already enjoyed. The Christian life is a fight, a war, and an earnest, diligent pursuit of holiness. However, it is not a pursuit of holiness to attain eternal

life and justification in the last day.¹¹ It is a pursuit of holiness that is a joyful, grateful response that seeks to glorify the Savior for a complete justification already enjoyed in the present. In other words, sanctification must not be turned into justification. Or to put it another way, sanctification must not be turned into a means of our final justification in any sense. It is a necessary, non-negotiable evidence of justification, but it is not, in any form or degree, a means of accomplishing our justification or salvation.¹² This is the Roman Catholic doctrine that

¹¹ Schreiner and Caneday say that our final justification is conditioned on our earnest pursuit of holiness. Commenting on Paul's words in Philippians 3:8b-9a: "that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him" they state, "By faith he concentrates every nerve, every muscle, every desire on the singular goal that lies before him to win [gain] Christ (v.9). For to win Christ is the only hope of being declared righteous before God in the day of judgment...Paul extends his use of athletic imagery in Philippians 3:12-15, lest anyone presume to have won Christ already without the need for steadfast faith to the very end." Schreiner and Caneday, (2001) pp.111-112. They make two emphatic points. First, Christ is not fully ours in this life, for they say that none must "presume to have won Christ already." Second, we must wait until the final judgment to see whether we have won Christ and are declared righteous. In their words, we must like Paul "concentrate[s] on the singular goal to...win Christ" because it is "the only hope of being declared righteous before God on the day of judgment." I must confess that I am not able to see how this is not justification by works; nor how this differs from the Roman Catholic teaching of a final, second justification based on infused grace. It seems that in the final analysis, sanctification is turned into justification, and the gospel of grace, with an immediate free and full pardon by faith in Christ, is gone.

¹² Schreiner and Caneday insist that perseverance in holiness is a condition of attaining final salvation and justification. They write, "Perseverance is a means that God has appointed by which one will be saved...we will use the words *condition* and *means* interchangeably. When we use the word *means*, we use it in the sense that perseverance is a necessary means that God has appointed for attaining final salvation." Schreiner and Caneday, p. 151. My problem is the words "condition" and "attaining." Perseverance is not only a necessary evidence of salvation, it is a condition necessary to attain final salvation. What is even more of a concern is that by final salvation they

was opposed by the Reformers with all their might. The confusion of sanctification with justification opens the door to man's involvement in justification and the falling of the church.

It must be emphatically stated that free justification does not diminish the demand for holiness and sanctification as some suppose. We are to "pursue sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The Bible insists on the necessity of a holy life as much as it insists upon a free and final justification (Titus 2:14). But it does so without merging or mingling the two. Over and over, Scripture insists that those who profess faith in Christ but continue to live a sinful life have no warrant to think that their faith is genuine. To those professors who "practice lawlessness" Christ will say, "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). Those who "practice such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). So there must be holiness. But our zeal for holiness must not be at the expense of free justifying grace. In other words, we must not adopt a

mean justification, for they use the terms interchangeably. For example they state, "Conditional warnings and admonitions suspend God's judgment in the last day on perseverance in this age...since the Reformation, many Protestant Christians have tended to overstate Paul's doctrine of justification...with the effect that Paul's orientation on salvation as not yet fully realized has virtually collapsed...for Paul, justification remains fundamentally the eschatological verdict..." Ibid., p. 154, 160-161. This is clearly an interchangeable use of salvation and justification. In their system God's judgment on the last day [which is justification], is held in suspense. First, conditions must be met. The believer will then attain final salvation and the verdict of justification. For, in their words, "justification remains fundamentally the eschatological verdict." The problem they are correcting, is that "many overstate Paul's doctrine of justification." This "overstatement" it seems, is the historic teaching that justification is a complete and final declaration with no future element contingent on works.

future justification conditioned on works. To do so, in the final analysis, is to have no real justification at all.¹³

Justification is a once-for-all completed act. It is a declaration by God ("God is the one Who justifies," Romans 8:33) that believing sinners—those who at the moment of their justification are "ungodly"—are forever justified by virtue of Christ's blood and righteousness imputed to their account (Romans 4:5). It is the declaration that the trusting, self-emptying sinner is now and forever accepted before a holy and just God.¹⁴ Paul states it as a once-for-all accomplished fact. "Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God

¹³ John Owen rightly says that if there is no completed justification in this life by Christ's blood and obedience alone, then there really is no justification at all. The concept of a future justification, he writes, "has left us none at all." His exact words are, "From all which it appears that our justification is at *once complete*. And, it must be so, or no man can be justified in this world. For no time can be assigned, nor measure of obedience be limited, whereon it may be supposed that any one comes to be justified before God, who is not so on his first believing; for the Scripture doth nowhere assign any such time or measure. And to say that *no man is completely justified* in the sight of God in this life, is at once to overthrow all that is taught in the Scriptures concerning justification, and therewithal all peace with God and comfort of believers...so that this distinction, instead of coining us two justifications, according to the gospel, has left us none at all." Owen, pp. 141, 145.

¹⁴ Calvin's and Owen's words concerning the once-for-all completed nature of justification are worth noting. Calvin says, "But He does not justify in part but liberally so that they may appear in heaven as if empowered with the purity of Christ...this is a wonderful plan of justification that, covered by the righteousness of Christ, they should not tremble at the judgment they deserve, and that while they rightly condemn themselves, they should be accounted righteous outside themselves." Calvin, vol. 1, pp. 739-740. Owen says, "By our actual believing...on Christ or His name, we do receive Him. Hereby we have a right to an interest in, all the benefits of His mediation; which is to be at once completely justified for 'in Him we are complete.'" Owen, p. 144.

through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

Therefore, sanctification is an effect of justification. Justification is always accompanied by the new birth and a radical change of nature so that a new life always follows. Regeneration and the work of the Spirit ensure that sanctification follows. Antinomianism and an easy-believism that does not insist on a changed life are inconsistent with God’s great work of salvation. Nonetheless, though justification is never to be separated from sanctification, it must never be confused with it either. To turn sanctification into a means of justification is to diminish the atonement of Christ and His perfect righteousness imputed to us by grace. It is to have no justification at all.

This is a matter of great personal benefit to God’s people. It concerns their full enjoyment of assurance and growth in the Christian life. The assurance of God’s final acceptance is the only adequate foundation for growth in holiness and Christian living. Hebrews 9:14 says, “...how much more will the blood of Christ, Who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” Note the order. First, there is a cleansed conscience because of Christ’s blood which accomplished an eternal redemption (verse 12), and a completed justification with the full pardon of all sin (9:26; 10:12). Then there is the result that we now are able “to serve the living God.” Clearly, acceptable service is rooted in a full and free justification.

Speaking pastorally, this means that the care of souls involves grounding people in an understanding God’s free justifying grace. John Piper states what he calls the “pastoral preciousness” of a final completed justification that clearly distinguishes justification from sanctification.

He says,

It is hard to overstate the pastoral preciousness of the truth that by faith alone, apart from works (even works done by faith), we are united to Christ in whom we are counted as perfectly righteous because of his righteousness, not ours. The demand for obedience in the Christian life is undiminished and absolute. If obedience does not emerge by faith, we have no warrant to believe we are united to Christ or justified (Matthew 6:15; John 5:28, 29; Romans 8:13; Galatians 6:8, 9; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; James 2:17; 1 John 2:17; 3:14). But the only hope for making progress in this radical demand for holiness and love is the hope that our righteousness before God is on another solid footing besides our own imperfect obedience as Christians. We all sense intuitively—and we are encouraged in this intuition by the demands of God—that acceptance with God requires perfect righteousness—conformity to the law (Matthew 5:48; Galatians 3:10; James 2:10). We also know that our measures of obedience, even on our best days, fall short of this standard.¹⁵

What is defended in the pages that follow is a free and final justification. It is a complete justification based on Christ’s blood and imputed righteousness alone. It is the doctrine of justification recovered in the Reformation, and held dear by Evangelicals ever since, as the gospel of grace. Charles Spurgeon states the Reformed Evangelical view clearly. He says,

As soon as a repenting sinner is justified, remember, he is justified for all his sins. Here stands a man all guilty. The moment he believes in Christ, his pardon at once he receives, and his sins are no longer his; they are cast into the depths of the sea. They were laid upon the shoulders of Christ, and they are gone. The man stands a guiltless man in the sight of God,

¹⁵ John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 122.

accepted in the beloved. “What!” say you, “do you mean that literally?” Yes, I do, that is the doctrine of justification by faith. Man ceases to be regarded by divine justice as a guilty being, the moment he believes on Christ his guilt is all taken away. But I am going a step further. The moment the man believes in Christ, he ceases to be guilty in God’s esteem; but what is more, he becomes righteous, he becomes meritorious; for, in the moment when Christ takes his sins he takes Christ’s righteousness; so that, when God looks upon the sinner who but an hour ago was dead in sins, he looks upon him with as much love and affection as he ever looked upon his Son...If that young man over there really believed in Christ this morning, realizing by a spiritual experience what I have attempted to describe, he is as much justified in God’s sight now as he will be when he stands before the throne. Not the gloried spirits above are more acceptable to God than the poor man below who is once justified by grace. It is a perfect washing, it is perfect pardon, perfect imputation; we are¹⁶ fully, freely and wholly accepted, through Christ our Lord.

This is the gospel that alone is adequate to answer the need of sinners. This is the gospel that fully abases man and duly glorifies Christ. This is the gospel that sets God’s people free to serve Christ and to advance Christ’s Kingdom in the world. It is the gospel of free justification that I will attempt to set forth in the pages ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

Counted Righteous In Christ: Part One

*What Is “The Righteousness of God”
Imputed for Justification?*

Charles Spurgeon’s sermon, quoted at the end of the previous chapter, is a classic example of how the gospel of justifying grace has been commonly understood and preached by the Evangelical and Reformed church. Spurgeon declared that believers in Christ have “a perfect pardon, perfect imputation; they are fully, freely and wholly accepted through our Lord Jesus Christ.” He preached a free and final justification based solely upon what he called “a perfect imputation.” It is a perfect imputation because Christ’s perfect righteousness is imputed by faith to the sinner’s account. Because it is perfect, a sinner from the moment of faith is wholly accepted and forever justified. Spurgeon proclaimed, “the moment the man believes in Christ...he takes Christ’s righteousness...he is as much justified now as he will be when he stands before the throne.”

I believe Spurgeon had the gospel right. The gospel is the good news of a free and final justification centered and based solely upon the imputed righteousness of Christ. In fact, I believe it could rightly be said that the degree to which we understand Christ’s imputed righteousness, is the degree to which we understand justification by faith alone. We could even go further and say that if imputation is denied or diminished we no

¹⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *Justification By Grace*, in *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 3, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), p. 157.

longer have the biblical gospel of the grace of God.¹

By imputed righteousness I mean a credited or accounted righteousness. That is, the righteousness by which God justifies sinners is not their own personal righteousness. It is a forensic or legal righteousness that comes from God by grace, and is put or credited to their account by faith. The following is a sampling of verses that support the biblical teaching of imputed righteousness. I will bold the key elements that indicate, either directly or indirectly, that justifying righteousness is not a personal righteousness, but an external, legal, and credited righteousness.

But now **apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested**, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, **even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ** for all those who believe; for there is no distinction (Romans 3:21-22).

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to **the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness** (Romans 4:4-5).

Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom **God credits righteousness apart from works** (Romans 4:6).

So that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, **that righteousness might be credited to them** (Romans 4:11).

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**

¹ I am not saying a person has to understand imputed righteousness to be justified and saved. I am saying that it is the sole righteousness by which a person is justified—even if it is not believed or understood.

through the One, Christ Jesus (Romans 5:17).

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** (Romans 5:18).

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** (Romans 5:19).

Namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not counting their trespasses against them**, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation...**He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him** (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21).

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** (Philippians 3:9).

My task in the next two chapters is to show that these verses clearly affirm, some explicitly, others implicitly, that the sole righteousness by which a person is justified is a legal, non-personal, external righteousness that comes from God and is imputed or credited by faith to the sinner's account.

Much of my motivation for writing is in response to a movement abroad which denies that the imputed righteousness of Christ is the sole and entire righteousness by which a believer is justified. There are varying statements of this position, depending on the framework and approach taken.² However, common to

² Two of the most prominent are: "The New Perspective on Paul" and what could be called "The Covenantal Framework" or "Biblical Theological

them all is the teaching that the righteousness by which a sinner is justified before God consists of more than Christ's imputed righteousness—some go further and say that it does not include His imputed righteousness at all. Yet, they all insist that our own personal righteousness—whether it is our faith or the obedience of faith done by

Paradigm” (See John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 70, for a good analysis of the dangers and misuse of the “Biblical Theological” approach to justification). In my mind both impose a tentative, unproven theory on their understanding of the New Testament texts on justification. In other words, they filter their “exegesis” of Paul through the lens of their respective presuppositions which they bring to the text. Regarding the New Perspective, I believe it rests on an unproven theory about the rabbinical teaching that Paul was opposing in his letters. See D.A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). Paul was not opposing a moral works system of salvation, it claims, but the teaching that Jewish “identity markers” such as circumcision, festivals, and Sabbaths were still necessary to belong to God's covenant people. Therefore, the “works of the law” that Paul was opposing were not moral works but these “identity markers” (A brief look at Romans 2:17-24 and Luke 18:10-14 gives adequate proof that it was in fact the moral works of the law that Paul was opposing for justification). So Judaism at the time of Paul, in terms of the New Perspective, was a grace system because God graciously elects and puts a person in a covenant relationship with Himself. Yet, to stay in the covenant, a person must practice “covenant faithfulness.” In my mind, I do not see how the conclusion can be avoided that what they insist is not a works system of salvation turns out to be one after all! In addition, according to N.T. Wright and others, Paul's main point in Romans and Galatians is not to set forth how an individual is justified, but to show that God is justifying both Jew and Gentile, thereby forming one worldwide people of God. Therefore, justification has to do with the corporate issue of the inclusion of all nations in the one people of God. As I see it, the New Perspective has reversed Paul's emphasis. It has taken a real but secondary matter of Paul's teaching and made it primary—the matter of the universal reach of the gospel to all peoples (Wright, for example, says Romans 3:29-31 is primary and the key to interpreting 3:21-26 and not vice versa.) The end result of all this, in my mind, is that the unproven presuppositions of the New Perspective, in effect, empty the teaching of individual justification from what are perhaps the most explicit Scriptures on individual justification in the New Testament.

the enablement of God's inward work of grace—is an additional and necessary cause and means of our justification.

Moreover, it is often associated with a misinterpretation of Romans 2:6-13 and a faulty view of perseverance: perseverance in faith and good works is not viewed simply as the evidence of being justified, but it is the necessary condition that must be fulfilled in order to be justified on the last day. I believe this view of justification is entirely diverse from what is taught and expounded by Paul in Romans, Galatians, and elsewhere in Scripture. It is also not the position held by the Reformers or by most Evangelical and Reformed leaders since—although it is sometimes claimed that it is merely a nuance of the historic position.

The Issue at Stake

This is not quibbling over words. It is not merely a matter of nuance or how something is stated. Moreover, there are monumental far-reaching ramifications. The two basic views of justification and the issue at stake can be stated as follows:

Either...believing sinners are justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness alone—a righteousness entirely not their own; a righteousness that comes from outside of them—that is credited to their account by grace.

Or...believing sinners are justified by both, the imputation of Christ's righteousness (some would deny entirely the imputation of Christ's righteousness) *and* their own personal

righteousness (some call it covenant faithfulness or the obedience of faith) that is accomplished as a result of God's grace working in and through them.

These two positions represent two completely different approaches to justification. They are as far apart as the east is from the west. There is no middle ground. The first totally excludes us and our own righteousness from our justification. The second includes our own righteousness, notwithstanding the fact that it is accomplished by the help of God's grace. The first asserts the perfection of Christ's imputed righteousness so that no other righteousness is needed. The second diminishes it. The first affirms the sufficiency of Christ's obedience and once-for-all sacrifice to provide a perfect righteousness for a completed one-time justification. The second diminishes the sufficiency of His sacrifice. The first declares that justification is final and complete so that now we await only our inheritance and glorification, there being no future justification.³ The second, while acknowledging

³ I am not saying that there will not be a last day manifestation or vindication of those whom God has already justified. I do not believe, however, that Scripture anywhere, teaches that believers must wait for a future declaration of justification (in agreement with the Reformers, and others as John Owen [see notes 13, 14 in chapter one]). Their sole and final declaration of justification has already occurred (Romans 5:1; Titus 3:7, etc.). The teaching of a double justification is characteristically Roman Catholic and effectively undoes the first. Commenting on the Roman position Owen says, "Those of the Roman Church do ground their whole doctrine of justification upon a distinction of a double justification, which they call the first and the second. The first justification they say...is by faith: the obedience and satisfaction of Christ being the only meritorious cause thereof. The second justification the proper formal cause thereof is good works proceeding from the principal of grace and love." John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 5 (Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), pp. 138-139.

that there is a first justification, asserts that there is, in addition, a not-yet, final, last-day justification which is contingent on whether we continue in the obedience of faith. The first distinguishes justification from progressive sanctification.⁴ The second collapses and merges justification with sanctification.

Clearly, this is not a matter of semantics or merely different ways of stating the same thing. To think so indicates a misunderstanding of the vast difference in the two positions and a failure to see the magnitude of what is at stake. The whole matter is further complicated by the fact that the proponents of this divergent view usually employ the same terms as the historic position when discussing justification. Terms commonly understood to mean one thing are used but with a different meaning. Terms and phrases such as "grace alone," "justification by Christ's righteousness alone," "justification by union with Christ," and "faith alone" are primary examples.⁵

⁴ It is recognized that in Scripture there is, both a positional and a definitive sanctification. The issue here concerns progressive sanctification: the ongoing process of increasing holiness. It is this aspect of sanctification that must be kept distinct, though not separate, from justification.

⁵ John Armstrong, for example, uses the phrases "faith alone" (*sola fide*) and "union with Christ," but fills them with a meaning foreign to their historic understanding. To "faith alone" he gives a meaning beyond the initial one time act of faith by which a person is justified. Faith alone includes a life of obedience that comes from faith. It is a life lived out by God's help in covenant loyalty. This life of obedient faith becomes the basis (some call it means, but this makes no real difference) of a sinner's standing with God. He also uses "union with Christ," but it is not a legal or forensic union, but a vital union or union of life by which we are enabled to live a life of faith and obedience. In a subsection entitled "Our true basis of standing before God," he writes, "The more Pauline way of understanding this [*sola fide*] should add that in Christ we are brought into vital union wherein we share His covenantal loyalty which was previously God's alone. In this covenantal relationship, based solely on union with Christ, the righteousness of God communicated to Christians is nothing more or less

The use of familiar terminology is misleading. People can be left with the impression that what is taught is the historic view of justification when, in fact, it is not. It tends to convey the idea that the position is simply a fuller, more biblical restatement of the commonly accepted doctrine when the actual case could not be further from the truth.

Related to this is one other matter that is important, for it often clouds the issue. This is the tendency, on the part of some, to quickly assume a person is sound on justification by merely affirming that Christ's death is the ground of justification. This, however, is not an issue, for none can reject Christ's death as the ground of justification and still be considered Christian, even in name. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, affirms that Christ's death is the ground of justification. Its error is in teaching that the justifying benefits of Christ's death are mediated through infused grace and the church's sacramental system.

Consequently, it is important to see that the central issue concerns how and in what way the justifying benefits of Christ's death come to the believing sinner. Do they come to the believer immediately and completely by the imputation of Christ's righteousness so that there is no future final justification? Or do they come to the believer

than the ongoing righteousness of Christ, the continuing obedience of the one just man lived out now in Christians and forming the basis of their destiny to eternal life." Dr. John Armstrong et al., *Trust and Obey*, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), pp. 107-108. Using the language of justification, "our true basis of standing before God" and "the basis of their destiny to eternal life," Armstrong, states that our standing before God is by a "vital union" that brings about a "covenant loyalty," an "ongoing righteousness" and a "continuing obedience" "lived out now." This sounds much like the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification through infused righteousness.

in stages or increments: first, in part, by the initial act of faith and the imputation of Christ's righteousness and then later, in part, because of a continuous life of obedient faith? Or to state it another way: do the justifying benefits of Christ's death become ours conditionally at an initial first justification, and then, permanently at a final justification on the day of judgment? As said, the choice is between two completely different concepts of justification.

In all of this, it should be more than evident that the imputation of Christ's righteousness is the watershed issue of justification. It is truly an "either-or" matter where there is no middle ground. In the final analysis a person's view of the fact, nature, and sufficiency of imputation determines everything.

Therefore, with these considerations as a backdrop, in this chapter and the next, we will look at imputed righteousness—the heart of the gospel of free justification. My aim is to demonstrate from Scripture that Christ's imputed righteousness is the sole and entire righteousness by which the believer is justified before God so that there is no future justification. The fact is, a believer must be justified by Christ's imputed righteousness alone for he has no other by which he can be justified. Scripture and experience both demonstrate that man—even a Christian aided by the Spirit—has no righteousness in any manner, form, or degree acceptable to God. This is Paul's whole point in Romans 1:18-3:20. He proves that all forms and degrees of personal righteousness are entirely rejected even as partial causes or means of justification. He sums up man's state in Galatians 3:22 when he says, "we are all shut up under sin." I believe that the biblical evidence comes down to this: either we are justified by Christ's imputed righteousness alone, or we are not justified at all.

Justification by Christ's Imputed Righteousness is Revealed in the Gospel

My plan is to first show in this chapter what the righteousness is that God imputes to sinners' account for their justification. I will demonstrate that it is not a righteousness of their own, but the righteousness of God accomplished in Christ's obedience and atoning blood on the cross. Then in the following chapter, I will show how this righteousness comes to sinners by a direct, gracious imputation at the point of saving faith.

Now for the first: what is the righteousness that God imputes to believing sinners for their justification? The place to begin is where Paul begins: in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans. It is in the book of Romans that we find the most detailed and exhaustive treatment of justification by faith alone. This is to be expected, for Romans was specifically penned to show how God justifies and saves sinners.⁶ Paul, introducing the main body of the letter says,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17)

Two things stand out in Paul's introductory statement.

⁶ Although Paul does not use the term "justification" it is clearly included in the broader word "salvation" as the subsequent unfolding of his argument proves. The justification of a sinner (at least from 1:18-5:21) is his main theme as is seen from the constant reference to justification and the related phrase "the righteousness of God" (Romans 3:21-22, 24-26, 28-29; 4:2-3, 5-9, 11, 22, 25; 5:1, 9, 16-19).

First, it shows that the purpose of the letter is to unfold how "the righteousness of God is revealed" in the gospel. Paul's reference to "the righteousness of God" is central to all he says. Everything hinges on what this means. We will look at the specific meaning of this vital phrase later. For now, it is enough to say that it is a righteousness graciously provided by God by which He justifies a sinner. Therefore, Romans is a comprehensive and complete statement of how God provides a righteousness, whereby He justifies (declares righteous) the one who believes in Christ.

Second, Paul's introductory words assert that the content of the letter is a divine revelation. Speaking of the gospel he says, "for in it the righteousness of God is revealed" (Romans 1:17). Romans is a revelation of the mind and thoughts of God on the subject of justification. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:33, "God is the one who justifies." It is not the thoughts of man that we need on this infinitely important matter. It is God before whom we will stand. We need God's thoughts, not man's. Therefore, He must reveal how He justifies. And we must humbly receive His thoughts. We have this revelation in Romans.

It is implied, as well, that what is revealed in the gospel is not something that man would ever come to himself. Why else would it need to be revealed? Man's natural thoughts do not come to Paul's conclusion on justification by faith. This explains why the gospel of free justification has, and always will, come under attack. Man is incorrigibly bent to think in terms of his own personal righteousness when it comes to acceptance with God. It is inconceivable and offensive to insist that man is freely and fully justified by a righteousness entirely not his own. But, as I will attempt to show, that is the gospel revealed in

Romans or there is no gospel revealed there at all.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to understanding free justification, as revealed in the gospel, is the fear that it leads to unholy living. However, this need not be the case. The grace that justifies is inseparable from the grace that regenerates and sanctifies. A new life principle takes hold in all those who are justified. The law of God is written in their hearts so that a life of holiness and loving obedience necessarily follows. The promise of the New Covenant is clear, “I will give you a new heart...I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Paul himself responds to the charge that free justification leads to sin. He says, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2). He insists that free justification does not hinder holiness. It is only a limited view of God’s saving work that could lead one to think this. Free justification does not lead to sin. In fact, it is impossible since it is accompanied by a renewal in which true believers have died to sin and are now alive to God! This is the point Paul labors to bring home throughout chapter 6.

But we can say more. Not only does free justification not lead to sin, it is the greatest motivation to holiness there is. There is no greater incentive to obedience than the realization that, though we are totally ill-deserving, we are fully and forever accepted because of God’s free mercy and infinite love. In other words, there is no greater incentive to loving obedience than love itself. Christ Himself said, “her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). His point is obvious: The realization that we have been forgiven much causes us to

love Him much! There should be no fear of free justification.

It comes down to this: We are not to lean on our own understanding—we are not wiser than God! With Paul we must believe that “the grace of God has appeared...instructing us to deny ungodliness” (Titus 2:11-12). In short, we must not reshape justification and lose the gospel of grace because of a legitimate concern over rampant ungodliness among professing believers. The answer to that problem lies elsewhere. It is found in a biblical understanding of genuine faith, the nature of the new birth, and the perseverance of the true believer,⁷ not in a revamped doctrine of justification.

What is “The Righteousness of God” Imputed for Justification?

We will now delve into Paul’s positive treatment of justification by faith alone in Romans 3:21-26. The passage is crucial, for in it we have his most explicit statement of what he means by “the righteousness of God” which is revealed in the gospel for a sinner’s justification. In so doing, he answers the question of where man—proved before to be completely without any righteousness of his own—can find a righteousness so as to be accepted by God. But it is crucial for another reason.

⁷ Final perseverance in faith and loving obedience is the universal mandatory evidence of all those who have been justified (Hebrews 3:6, 14; 12:14). However, it is the evidence of justification, not a means or cause of attaining it, as some propose. The importance of perseverance cannot be overstated. Therefore, it must be emphasized together with free justification. Otherwise, justification is torn asunder from God’s overall saving work and can lead to false assurance and sin. In other words, the safeguard to holiness is not by undoing free justification, but by a rightly taught doctrine of perseverance.

It identifies for us what the righteousness is which God freely imputes to the believing sinners' account for their justification. In other words, it lays the ground work for Paul's teaching on imputed righteousness in chapter 4. The passage reads:

(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; (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, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This classic text declares that the righteousness by which a sinner is justified is found in the blood and obedience of Christ alone. We first see this in verse 24 which says, "being justified [declared righteous] as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Paul affirms here that it is through the redemption accomplished by Christ's death that God provides the righteousness by which He justifies sinners.

It must be observed, however, that Paul does not leave it open to interpretation or conjecture just how God provides a justifying righteousness "through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." He promptly gives us the answer in his carefully worded statement which follows in verses 25 and 26. He says,

(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, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In what amounts to Paul's grand climactic statement on the matter, he declares that justifying righteousness, or "the righteousness of God" (3:21-22), also "His righteousness" (3:25-26), is the righteous activity achieved by God Himself through Christ's obedience and sacrificial, propitiatory death. This is, in fact, Paul's focused purpose in these verses as even a cursory look at the text shows.

Two great realities are set forth. First, Christ's death accomplished redemption (or deliverance), because by it He made "propitiation in His blood" and thus, turned away and delivered us from God's wrath.⁸ Second, His death achieved or worked a righteousness by which God might justify sinners. For by it alone, Paul says, "He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

⁸ The context excludes the idea that redemption here is a deliverance from the power and dominion of sin, which some have proposed (as if it exactly parallels Israel's redemption at the Exodus from the power of Pharaoh). That idea has to be read into the text, for Paul states that Christ's death was a redemption or deliverance from God's wrath. In short, we are justified freely by grace because Christ's death accomplished a redemption by making a propitiation: a propitiatory sacrifice that (by definition) appeased and turned away God's wrath. Paul's previous references to wrath in Romans 1:18 and 2:5, 8 add weight to the case that redemption here is by a propitiation that turned away and thus delivered (redeemed) us from God's wrath and not from the dominion or power of sin. Paul does not deal with the dominion of sin until chapter 6. Redemption here is the same as Paul refers to in Ephesians 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace." Hodge's comments are helpful, "In this passage, the nature of this redemption is explained in the next verse: It is not by truth, nor by the exhibition of excellence, but through Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood." Charles Hodge, *Romans*, (Illinois: Crossway Books, 1993) p. 87.

In other words, all Paul has said up to this point (all the way back to 1:17) about “the righteousness of God” for justification is here defined and crystalized.⁹ In a climactic and concise statement, he declares that “the righteousness of God” by which He freely justifies a sinner is found solely in the obedience and blood of Christ.

Six Things Revealed About “The Righteousness of God” by Which God Justifies a Sinner

⁹ Paul takes the concept of “the righteousness of God” from the Old Testament. As in the Old Testament, he joins other ideas together with “the righteousness of God”—salvation and revelation (Romans 1:17; 3:21). Psalm 98:2 says, “the Lord has made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he revealed in the sight of the nations.” God’s righteousness is something “revealed” and is connected to His people’s salvation. The question then is: exactly how is it connected in Paul’s thinking to the justification of sinners? It cannot refer primarily to God’s attribute of righteousness for that would result in God’s wrath and condemnation (Romans 1:18, 2:5-6). Second, it cannot refer primarily to His attribute since it is a righteousness that comes to the sinner by faith—it is the “righteousness of faith” (Romans 4:11), and it is a righteousness which “comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9). In addition, it is not merely God’s faithfulness (as per many in the New Perspective) acting to fulfill His promise. For Paul it is specific. It is here, in Romans, a righteous activity of which God is the author and that God approves. This is evident, first, by the fact that it is contrasted with the righteousness of men which He rejects (Romans 3:10, 11, 20, 21). Second, it is the righteousness revealed for justification. Third, it is a righteousness which is seen in ‘demonstration’ (3:25-26): demonstration of righteousness in the cross. As a result of this demonstration, God’s attribute of righteousness is vindicated (He is just [righteous] when He justifies a sinner, verse 26b). In short, though God’s attribute of righteousness is never lost sight of (it is always assumed and in the immediate background), Paul indicates that “the righteousness of God” is the righteous activity of God worked out for a sinner’s justification by the obedience and blood of Christ on the cross. See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 73-75.

I will now attempt to state and summarize six things that we learn from Romans 3:21-26 about “the righteousness of God” revealed for the justification of a sinner.

- **First**, as said, *the righteousness of God* revealed in the gospel is God’s righteous activity accomplished in Christ’s propitiatory sacrificial death. Paul explicitly states that Christ was “displayed publically as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness...”(verse 25a). In other words, Christ’s death was a demonstration of God’s righteousness in that He acted righteously in relation to His own holiness and law—which had been violated by our sin—when He sent Christ to endure His wrath and make propitiation for our sin. Furthermore, Christ Himself also acted righteously when, by His willing obedience, He endured God’s wrath and made propitiation by His substitutionary sufferings. Buchanan’s words are to the point,

It is called pre-eminently and emphatically, ‘the righteousness of God’. By this name it is distinguished from the righteousness of man, and even contrasted with it as a ground of justification. It is brought in as a divine righteousness, only when all human righteousness has been shut out...if we would understand the reason why it is called ‘the righteousness of God,’ we must bear in mind that there was a twofold manifestation of righteousness in the cross of Christ; there was *first* a manifestation of the righteousness of God the Father, in requiring a satisfaction to His justice,—and inflicting the punishment that was due to sin; and to this the apostle refers when he says, that ‘God set forth Christ to be a propitiation—to declare His righteousness, that He might be just, and

Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus;’ there was *secondly*, a work of righteousness by God the Son—His vicarious righteousness as the Redeemer of His people, when He, ‘became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross’, and thus became ‘the end¹⁰ of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth.’

This mutual, cooperative working of righteousness by God and Christ was demonstrated on the cross and is the sole righteousness revealed for justification.¹¹

- **Second**, *the righteousness of God* that was worked out by God through Christ’s blood and obedience is the sole

¹⁰ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, (Pennsylvania, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997) pp. 318-319.

¹¹ Some argue that there is no specific reference or basis in Scripture for speaking of Christ’s righteousness being imputed to sinners. The fact, however, that Christ Himself, by His redemption and propitiatory work, accomplished “the righteousness of God” gives a biblical basis for referring to imputed righteousness as “the righteousness of Christ.” In other words, “the righteousness of God” was a mutual working of righteousness. It is “the righteousness of God,” yet the Father and the Son together acted to accomplish it. Paul, in fact, refers to it as Christ’s righteousness in 5:18 when of Christ he says, “so through the one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.” The fact that it is Christ’s righteousness is seen also in 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. Buchanan states the fact well; he comments, “while the righteousness which is revealed for our Justification may be called ‘the righteousness of God’ with some reference to both, it properly consists in the merit of Christ’s atoning sacrifice and perfect obedience, for these were offered by Him as our substitute and representative. The same righteousness which is called ‘the righteousness of God’ is also called ‘the righteousness of Christ.’ We obtain ‘precious faith through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ’ (2 Peter 1:1)...’This is the name whereby He shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness’ (Jeremiah 23:6). He is so called on account of the righteousness which He wrought out by His obedience unto death; for this righteousness is expressly connected with His Mediatorial work.” James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Pennsylvania, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), pp. 318-319.

righteousness by which God justifies a sinner.¹² Paul’s words in verse 26 allow for no other meaning. He declares that Christ’s atoning death was “a propitiation through His blood” and “the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Here, Paul affirms that Christ’s blood and obedience was “the demonstration of His righteousness,” and this demonstration of God’s righteousness was done with the specific design and intent that “He might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

- **Third**, *the righteousness of God* is an external righteousness—a righteousness achieved outside of, and apart from, anything done by us or in us. There is not a word said or implied that God’s justifying

¹² Paul describes Christ’s death as an “act of righteousness” in Romans 5:18, and as “the obedience of the one” in Romans 5:19. The “obedience” of verse 19 describes the “act of righteousness” of verse 18. In other words, His death had the character of a righteous act because it was an act of obedience to the Father. How could it please the Father otherwise? Piper says, “Paul’s aim here seems to be to show that the nature of the righteousness we are talking about in verse 18 is compliance with the will of God and corresponds to Adam’s disobedience. Adam did *not* comply with God’s will, and we were counted or appointed sinners in him. Christ *did* comply with his Father’s will, and we are counted righteous (obedient) in him.” Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, p. 109-110. In short, Paul indicates that Christ’s death involved more than the purchase of pardon and forgiveness. There was also the positive provision of righteousness through Christ’s obedience. Though Paul’s emphasis is on Christ’s death as the crowning act of His obedience, it cannot be disconnected from His overall life. If He had sinned at any point previously, He would not have been qualified to be our substitute. As Piper says, “any act of disobedience or unrighteousness in Jesus’ life would have disqualified Him from being our righteousness (or our substitutionary sacrifice), not just disobedience at the end of His life.” *Ibid.*, p. 113.

righteousness has anything to do with His work of grace in us. It is called “His righteousness” (verses 25 and 26), not only because it is His, but also because it is entirely not ours. God Himself worked this righteousness by Christ’s obedience and sufferings. There is no mention of the obedience of faith, covenant faithfulness, or of perseverance in good deeds as having anything to do with determining or influencing God’s verdict of justification. God’s justifying righteousness is something done for us as a gift which is then imputed to us freely by faith.¹³

- **Fourth**, because *the righteousness of God* consists entirely in Christ’s doing and dying for us, we are “declared righteous as a gift by His grace” (verse 24). The phrase “as a gift by His grace” is an emphatic way of attributing the cause of our justification entirely to the free grace of God. Paul repeats himself almost needlessly, for “a gift” and “grace” are somewhat redundant. However, he does so to accentuate the freeness of justification. The first term “a gift” means ‘without a price’ or ‘without consideration of a cause.’ ‘Freely’ gives good sense to the word. Jesus used it in John 15:25 when He said of the Pharisees, “they hated me without cause.” Obviously there was no ground or cause of the Pharisees’ hatred of Christ. In the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, it is translated ‘nothing’ in Genesis 29:15, when Laban said to Jacob, “because you are my relative should you therefore serve me for nothing?” It is translated ‘without

¹³ This is why Paul refers to it as, “the gift of righteousness,” (Romans 5:17).

payment’ in Exodus 21:2 when it says of a Hebrew slave, “he shall serve six years, but on the seventh he shall go out a free man without payment.” The phrase “By His grace” is added in order to stress that the free favor and kindness found in Christ, though completely undeserved, is yet freely given. As said, this combination of words is one of the strongest possible ways to state that justification is granted freely without any cause or determining influence in us. The whole thrust of this text is to demonstrate this point. This is why Paul labors to explain that “the righteousness of God” is achieved in Christ’s atoning death. It is designed to substantiate his declaration in verse 24 that justification is, in fact, “a gift by His grace.”

- **Fifth**, *the righteousness of God* becomes the sinner’s perfect, final, and sole justifying righteousness at the moment of faith in Christ. That is, it becomes the sinner’s when his faith rests and terminates for its justification solely on Christ’s death “as a propitiation by His blood.” This is made clear by the connection of the words “as a propitiation by His blood” with the words “through faith.” This linking is crucial. By it, Paul defines precisely what he means by justifying faith mentioned earlier in the phrase “through faith in Jesus Christ” (literally “faith of Jesus Christ”) in verse 22, and later in the phrase “the one who has faith in Jesus” in verse 26. It is also crucial, because the connection excludes any possibility that justifying faith refers to the ongoing obedience of faith or to covenant faithfulness as some propose. John Owen explains this clearly,

“By faith alone,” Nothing else is proposed, nothing else required unto this end...for faith respecting the blood of Christ as that whereby propitiation was made for sin,—in

which respect alone the apostle affirms that we are justified through faith,—admits of no association with any other graces or duties...And those who think otherwise may try how they can introduce them into this context without an evident corrupting of it, and perverting of its sense. Neither will the other evasion yield our adversaries the least relief,—namely, that by faith, not the single grace of faith is intended, but the whole obedience required in the new covenant, faith and works together. For as all works whatever, as our works, are excluded in the declaration of the causes of our justification on the part of God...so the determination of the *object of faith* in its act or duty, whereon we are justified,—namely, the blood of Christ,—is absolutely exclusive of all works from an interest in that duty; for whatever looks unto the blood for justification is faith, and nothing else.¹⁴

In short, when Paul connects the phrase “as a propitiation in His blood” with “through faith,” he limits justifying faith to the faith that looks away from self in order to lay hold and take possession of Christ—specifically and solely Christ “publicly set forth as a propitiation by His blood.”¹⁵ The long and short

¹⁴ Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, pp. 311-312.

¹⁵ It makes no difference whether “through faith” is directly connected to ‘propitiation’ or to ‘His blood.’ Either way it is a faith that is directed for its justification to Christ’s atoning sacrifice alone. It is clearly a propitiation accomplished by His blood to which faith is directed. Paul’s definition of faith excludes everything—even our own faith as a cause or means of our justification. Hodge, commenting on the exclusion of faith, remarks, “it teaches we are justified in a manner which is entirely of grace, without any merit of our own, through and by means of faith, and on the basis of the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As for participation in the meritorious basis of acceptance by God, it is clear from this statement that Paul intended to exclude not only those works performed in obedience to the law and with a legal spirit, but also those works flowing from faith and a renewed heart [what some call covenant faithfulness]. The part given to faith is that of an instrument...we are said to be justified by faith, of which Christ is the object, by faith in His blood, by faith in Him as a sacrifice.

of it is this: justifying faith is a self-emptying act that, casting itself on the grace and love of God, takes for its sole righteousness the righteousness demonstrated on the cross by the obedience and substitutionary death of Christ. Could God make Himself any clearer? In this short passage, four times Paul identifies justifying righteousness as God’s righteousness. Moreover, he takes pains to show that the demonstration of God’s justifying righteousness was in the obedience and propitiatory death of Jesus. Then, to seal the case with his crowning argument, Paul expressly says that this righteousness is the righteousness by which God “might be righteous [just] and the one who declares righteous [justifies] the one who had faith in Jesus.”

- **Sixth**, *the righteousness of God*, accomplished by the obedience and blood of Christ, becomes the sinner’s, by faith, through a free gracious imputation. Paul goes on to explain this in detail throughout chapter 4. It will be the focus of the next chapter. At this point one observation about Romans chapter 4 is in order: our understanding of the righteousness which is imputed to a believer’s account described in Romans 4 has already been determined in a large measure by Paul’s definition of “the righteousness of God” in chapter 3:21-26. In other words, Paul has prepared us for his discussion of imputed righteousness in chapter 4 by defining his terms in 3:21-26. Therefore, our understanding of imputed righteousness cannot

There is no more pointed way of denying that we are justified on account of the state of our own hearts [which of course includes our faith] or the character of our acts, than by saying that we are justified by a propitiatory sacrifice. This latter declaration of necessity puts the basis of acceptance outside of ourselves.” Hodge, *Romans*, pp. 90-91.)

ignore Paul's teaching in 3:21-26. In fact, it would not be saying too much to insist that it must be governed by it. To do otherwise would be to ignore the context, the flow of thought, and Paul's carefully structured argument.

CHAPTER THREE

Counted Righteous In Christ: Part Two

*How Is "The Righteousness of God"
Imputed for Justification?*

In the previous chapter we saw from Romans 3:21-26 that the only righteousness which is acceptable to God for a sinner's justification is the righteousness of God demonstrated and accomplished in the obedience and atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Paul's words it is "through the obedience of the one the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Now in this chapter we turn our attention to Romans 4:1-8 and show how this righteousness comes to the believing sinner. It comes by a direct and gracious imputation. The free imputation of Christ's righteousness is the central issue in any discussion of justification by faith. Few would disagree that this is where you draw your theological line in the sand.

However, this is nothing new. Justification by Christ's imputed righteousness was the core issue (the material principle) of the Great Reformation. It was the substance and center of the upheaval that brought about the recovery of the gospel to the world in the 16th century. It is well known that the Roman Catholic Church formally anathematized (condemned to hell) the Reformers because of their teaching on imputation. The following is an example from the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church's official response to the Reformation.

If anyone says that men are justified either by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone, or by the remission of

sins alone, to the exclusion of the grace and love that is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit and is inherent in them; or even that the grace by which we are justified is only the favor of God—let him be anathema.

The Roman Church directly attacked the teaching of the Reformers that the imputation of Christ's perfect righteousness to the believer's account is the only ground, cause, or means of acceptance or justification before God. The most significant thing to note is that the Roman Church did not necessarily deny imputed righteousness. Their anathema was leveled against the specific teaching that imputed righteousness "alone" justifies. It was "the exclusion" of any other righteousness, even that done by a Christian through God's grace, that brought forth such a severe denunciation.²

¹ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, sess. 6, canon 11.

² The following are examples from John Calvin's teaching on imputed righteousness and justification. He writes, "Moreover, in the fourth chapter of Romans he first calls justification "imputation of righteousness." And he does not hesitate to include it within forgiveness of sins. Paul says: "That man is declared blessed by David whom God renders acceptable or to whom he imputes righteousness apart from works, as it is written: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions have been forgiven'" [Rom. 4:6-7 p.; Ps. 32:1]. There he is obviously discussing not a part of justification but the whole of it...And surely, what he teaches elsewhere—that "we are made righteous by Christ's obedience" [Rom. 5:19 p.]—could not stand unless we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ and apart from ourselves...From this it is also evident that we are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ's righteousness. This is equivalent to saying that man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation—something worth carefully noting." John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1977), pp. 729, 753. Calvin's position is clear. First, imputed righteousness accomplishes a once-for-all, completed justification, for it is "not a part of justification but the whole." Second, it is the imputation of an external righteousness because "we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ apart from ourselves." Finally, it is a perfect

For the sake of clarity, I will state again what I mean by imputed righteousness. By imputed righteousness I mean a credited or accounted righteousness. That is, the righteousness by which God justifies sinners is not their own personal righteousness, but a forensic or legal righteousness that comes from God, by grace, and is put or credited to their account by faith. Moreover—and this is everything—it is the sole and entire righteousness by which God justifies a believing sinner. As a result justification is, at once, complete and final, so that there is no future justification. Christ's righteousness, being perfect, does not need to be supplemented by any other so-called righteousness.

Why was there—and, for that matter, why is there again today—so much controversy over imputed righteousness? Very simply: on it hinges everything! With it, you have a grace system that entirely eliminates man's participation and boast in justification. Without it, you bring in man's contributing righteousness, however it may be defined, and irrespective of whether it is enabled by

and sufficient righteous-ness, the only righteousness necessary for justification because "we are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ's righteousness" which Calvin tells us is equivalent to the fact "the righteousness of Christ is communicated by imputation." Calvin's teaching of justification by imputed righteousness echoed Luther's and brought forth Rome's fury. The application to our discussion of justification should be obvious. The issue is not imputed righteousness per se. As in Calvin's time, there are those who affirm imputed righteousness while still insisting that covenant faithfulness is a cause or means by which God will determine whether a person is to be justified in the last day. This necessarily involves the diminishing of Christ's perfect righteousness, since it is not sufficient in itself to justify, but must be supplemented by another. It comes down to this: is Christ's external imputed righteousness the believer's sole justifying righteousness? I believe, along with the Reformers, that it is, and that this is the gospel of grace set forth by Paul in Romans and Galatians.

God's inwrought grace.

In other words, as rightly understood, justification by imputed righteousness totally excludes man from his justification. There is nothing in man (even his faith), nor anything done by man, that contributes even a particle to his justification. Or to look at it another way, nothing done by a person, whether as a sinner out of Christ, or a believer in Christ enabled by the Spirit, has any influence upon, or is a cause or means of, his justification and acceptance with God. To state it negatively: If sinners are not justified entirely by the crediting or the imputation of a righteousness outside of themselves, then in some way or manner they contribute to their justification.

The point is this: In the final analysis there are only two methods of justification. One is justification by grace through faith alone based on Christ's imputed righteousness alone. The other is by faith and some form of works (some may craft their words so that works are hidden under the language of grace, but it is still works when man's participation is brought in). How important is imputation? John Owen says,

...a dislike of it, an opposition unto it, ever was, and ever will be a principle and cause of the apostasy of any professing church from Christ and the gospel.³

But, in general, the importance of the cause to be pleaded, the greatness of the opposition that is made to the truth, and the high concernment of the souls of believers to be rightly instructed in it, do call for a renewed declaration and vindication of it. And what I shall attempt unto this purpose I do it under this persuasion,—that the life and continuance of any church on the one hand, and its apostasy or ruin on the other, do depend in an eminent manner on the preservation

³ Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. V, 1990, p. 162.

or rejection of the truth in this article of religion.⁴

I believe Owen's assessment is right. Therefore, in this chapter, we will look at Romans chapter 4 and Paul's specific teaching of how Christ's righteousness is imputed to a believing sinner. I will start by noting Paul's constant references to a "credited" or "imputed" righteousness in Romans 4;

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was **credited** to him as righteousness." (v. 3)

Now to the one who works, his wage is not **credited** as a favor, but as what is due. (v. 4)

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is **credited** as righteousness. (v. 5)

Just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God **credits** righteousness apart from works. (v. 6)

"Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not **take into account**." (v. 8)

Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was **credited** to Abraham as righteousness." (v. 9)

How then was it **credited**? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. (v. 10)

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be **credited** to them. (v. 11)

⁴ Ibid., p. 165.

Therefore it was also **credited** to him as righteousness. (v. 22)

Now not for his sake only was it written that it was **credited** to him. (v. 23)

But for our sake also, to whom it will be **credited**, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. (v. 24)

Paul refers to imputing or crediting eleven times! It is clearly his intent to explain how the righteousness necessary for justification and acceptance with God comes to a sinner. It comes by direct imputation or crediting. The central passage is Romans 4:1-8 which reads,

(1) What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? (2) For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3) For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." (4) Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. (5) But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, (6) just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: (7) "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. (8) BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."

Notice that he opens the chapter by promptly asserting that justification consists in a credited righteousness. In verse 2 Paul declares, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." Then immediately in verse 3, Paul states how Abraham received the righteousness by which he was justified and accepted before God. It was not by anything Abraham did. It was by an imputed or credited

righteousness. He says in verse 3, "For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." The connection between justification and imputed righteousness is even more explicit in 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, Paul says that the justification of the ungodly is by the crediting of righteousness, through a faith which has as its object the God Who justifies (contrary to all expectations) the ungodly.

Clearly, Paul thinks of justification in terms of the imputing or crediting of righteousness. Moreover, Paul makes a point to emphasize that it justifies the ungodly! How can this be? God can justify the ungodly because justification consists in both a non-imputation of sin, "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account" (verse 8), and in a positive crediting of righteousness, "Just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works" (verse 6). Both, of course, are possible because of Christ's obedience and propitiatory death as set forth immediately before in 3:21-26.

My aim, in this chapter, is to set forth Paul's teaching of the character and nature of imputed righteousness; specifically, to demonstrate that it is the crediting of a righteousness that is gracious and undeserved. In the next chapter I will try to demonstrate that it is the crediting of a righteousness that is perfect and sufficient. As a result, the believer, at once, is completely and forever justified so that there will not be, nor need there be, any future justification.

It is a Gracious and Undeserved Crediting of Righteousness

We now begin with the first main point; which is the gracious, undeserved nature of imputed righteousness. The gift-nature of the righteousness by which God justifies a sinner has been Paul's theme since Romans 3:21. In Romans 4, Paul takes his argument a step further. Here, for the first time, he explains that the gift-righteousness provided by God in Christ comes to the sinner by a free and gracious imputation. By a gracious imputation, I mean the crediting of righteousness to a sinner's account which is not his own. That is, it is the gracious, unmerited bestowal of a perfect righteousness to those who have none at all. Or to state it another way, it is the crediting of righteousness that has nothing to do with anything in us or anything done by us.

My definition above is based upon Paul's statement of the nature of a gracious imputation in Romans 4:4. It says, "now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due." Two imputations or creditings are here distinguished. In one, something is credited because of unmerited favor or grace. In the other, something is credited because of "what is due" or deserved. Paul's point throughout Romans 4 is to demonstrate that the righteousness credited to our account for justification is all of grace. In his terms it is "credited as a favor."

To sum up, the essence and meaning of a gracious imputation can be stated as follows: It is the crediting of a righteousness that, at the moment of the crediting, we do not possess. It is, moreover, the crediting of a righteousness outside of and external to us—the righteousness of God through Christ—which is our sole

justifying righteousness. Finally, it is the crediting of a righteousness by which believers are at once completely and forever justified. My task is to prove all of this from Romans 4.

Abraham is an Example of a Gracious Crediting of Righteousness

The first indication that Paul teaches a gracious, unmerited imputation of righteousness is from his example of Abraham in Romans 4:1-3. The text says,

(1) What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? (2) For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (3) For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."

Paul in effect states here that Abraham was justified by grace through faith or, in terms of his teaching in chapter three, that Abraham was "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (3:24). In other words, Paul includes Abraham among the "all" when he says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23), so that Abraham is his prominent example of a sinner "justified as a gift by His grace" (3:24). Furthermore, in the immediately following context (verses 4 and 5), Abraham is put forth as an example of someone whose righteousness is "credited as a favor" not because of "what is due" (verse 4), and of someone that God "justifies" who is "ungodly" (verse 5).

It is important to note the significance of the fact that in Romans 4:3 Paul quotes Genesis 15:6. At the time of Paul it was a well known text with a commonly accepted Rabbinical interpretation. The Rabbis interpreted Genesis

15:6, “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” as a reference not to Abraham’s faith per se, but to his faithfulness. They did this by reading into Genesis 15:6 an understanding of faith brought over from Genesis 22 when Abraham, in obedience to God, offered up Isaac. Therefore, as a result of not interpreting Genesis 15:6 as it stands, they held that God regarded Abraham’s faith itself as his righteousness since his faith, in their thinking, was actually his own personal covenant faithfulness. This understanding of faith as faithfulness, or covenant faithfulness has surfaced often in the history of the Church and is gaining adherents today.⁵

⁵ It is the view of those who hold to the so-called New Perspective on Paul, and others as well, that do not subscribe to the New Perspective. N.T. Wright, a New Perspective adherent for example, says that “righteousness means covenant faithfulness and therefore that this righteousness is not a quality or substance that can be passed or transferred from the judge to the defendant.” David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Pauline Theology*, vol. 3, Romans (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 38-39. In my mind, Wright, using an unproven definition of “righteousness” and without any exegetical warrant, is in effect attempting to arbitrarily sweep away imputed righteousness and, with it, Paul’s doctrine of free justification. He writes elsewhere against imputation, “If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom.” N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 98. I believe Wright’s assault on imputation is not grounded on exegesis [as I am trying to prove in this book], but is a by-product of an unproven theory of Judaism, so that in the end it fails. All agree, in this camp whether New Perspective or not, that Paul is not speaking of the crediting of an external righteousness. It is faith itself that is regarded by God as Abraham’s righteousness, so He credits it to his account (and ours as well) for righteousness. D.A. Carson points out that this interpretation of faith as faithfulness which God regards as righteousness is the same one taught by the Rabbis. He gives a clear statement of the position when he notes that one adherent of this view, “cites some of the same Jewish sources to argue, rather, that what Paul

This interpretation, of faith as faithfulness, however, poses significant problems. To begin with, if Paul is agreeing with the Rabbis and uses the term “faith” as shorthand for faithfulness, he is in effect affirming justification by personal righteousness. This is the case because justification is, in part, determined by our own personal covenant faithfulness. Furthermore, this view of faith conflicts with the whole thrust of his argument of God’s gracious provision of an external gift-righteousness up to this point in Romans.

In addition, it ignores the fact that it is the Rabbinical interpretation of Genesis 15:6, which Paul is laboring to disprove in Romans 4. If this were not so, why would Paul make such an effort to prove a view already widely accepted? Why the bother? Therefore, it is Paul’s aim throughout chapter 4 to demonstrate, in contrast to the Rabbis, that Genesis 15:6 is to be understood as teaching a gracious, undeserved crediting of righteousness.⁶ In

means is precisely what they [the Rabbis] mean: that is, Abraham’s faith is imputed to him as righteousness precisely because his faith showed him to be faithful to the covenant, and thus endowed him with covenant righteousness.” Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 56. In the final analysis, what this position teaches is that God regards our own doing (covenant faithfulness) as our righteousness which He then credits to our account. As a result, this means that we are one step removed from Christ’s objective righteousness accomplished on the cross for our justification. In the end, we are cast back on ourselves and our own righteousness. When all is said and done, I do not see how it can be avoided that the New Perspective is a works system couched in the language of grace.

⁶ Carson writes, “In Jewish exegesis, Genesis 15:6 was not quoted to prove that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. Rather, the passage was commonly read in the light of Genesis 22...and was taken as explicit evidence of Abraham’s merit. In 1 Maccabees 2:52, Abraham was found to be...faithful (not simply “believing”...as in the LXX), faithful...[in trial] (which surely refers to Gen 22), and the previous verse explicitly sees this in the category of work...About 50 B.C., Rabbi Shemaiah has God saying,

Paul's own terms, it is "credited as a favor."

It is a Gracious Crediting of Righteousness Because It is the Crediting of an External Righteousness

The second indication that Paul teaches a gracious, undeserved crediting of righteousness is the fact that it is the crediting of an external righteousness. The key phrase in verse 3 is "it [Abraham's faith] was credited to him as righteousness." To understand Paul's meaning we must take into account the context. The verse comes immediately on the heels of his teaching in Romans 3:21-26 where he defines justifying righteousness as something which God has done outside of us, without regard to anything in us, (even faith), or done by us.

Consequently, the phrase "it [faith] was credited to him as righteousness" does not mean that Abraham's faith itself was credited as his righteousness. Or, to state it another way, God did not regard his faith to be his "righteousness," as if Abraham's righteousness consisted in his faith. The phrase, "faith was credited to him as righteousness" is Paul's way of saying that faith, which is one thing (faith), was credited to him as another thing (righteousness). Several things demonstrate that this is Paul's meaning.

First, this is a known use of the Greek term translated "credited." In the Greek Septuagint in Numbers 18:26-27,

"The faith with which your father Abraham believed in Me merits that I should divide the sea for you, as it is written: 'And he believed in the LORD, and He counted it to him for righteousness'..." What this means, for our purposes, is that Paul, who certainly knew of these traditions, was explicitly interpreting Genesis 15:6 in a way quite different from that found in his own tradition, and he was convinced that this new way was the correct way to understand the text." Husbands and Treier, p. 56.

for example, the word is used to speak of the Levites' tithe "credited" as grain of the threshing floor and as the produce from the wine vat. The passage reads, "Your offering [tithe, v. 26] shall be reckoned to you as the grain from the threshing floor or the full produce from the wine vat" (Numbers 18:27; see also verse 30). Here the tithe, which is one thing (tithe), is credited as other things (grain and wine). In the same way, Paul explains the crediting of righteousness: faith, which is one thing, is credited as another thing—righteousness.

Second, this relation of faith to the crediting of an external righteousness is supported by the Greek preposition translated "as." It is important to note that Paul, does not use the Greek particle "as" (*os*) in the text. "As" is an unfortunate translation. Rather, Paul uses a preposition which is broad in its meaning and here indicates that faith is merely that which "leads to" or "results in" the crediting of an external righteousness.⁷

⁷ The basic meaning of the preposition *eis* can be as wide as "with reference to" or "with the purpose or result of." A. T. Robertson gives many examples of the preposition with a noun in the accusative case, as here, where it means "with the purpose" or "with the result." Romans 3:25 is one. It says, "Whom God displayed publically as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to [eis] demonstrate His righteousness." In this verse, the preposition *eis* is translated "this was to" and clearly indicates result or purpose. In short, Christ was "displayed publically as a propitiation in His blood...this was to [or with the purpose, or result to] demonstrate His righteousness." Romans 8:15 is another. It says, "For we have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear." Here the preposition is translated "leading to" once again a clear example of purpose or result. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), pp. 594-595. Consequently, faith is not something God treats or regards as our righteousness. That would conflict with Paul's teaching in 3:21-26 of an externally provided righteousness, as well as his argument in the rest of chapter 4. Faith is credited with reference to, or in connection with, or with the result of righteousness. In short, it is the instrument that results in or leads to righteousness being credited. This is

Third, Paul speaks of faith elsewhere as having an instrumental relation to righteousness and justification. In other words, Paul always refers to faith as the instrument which leads to righteousness and justification, but never is faith said to be our righteousness. This is set forth explicitly by Paul in Romans 3:26-31. We are saved through faith, *dia pisteos* (3:22, 25-26), from faith, *ek pisteos* (3:26, 30), and by faith, *pistei* (3:28), but never on account of faith. In other words, it is never said that we are justified because of our faith, as if faith was our justifying righteousness. Everything Paul says indicates otherwise.

Fourth, Paul specifically states that it is righteousness itself which is credited. In verse 6 he says, “to whom God credits righteousness apart from works,” and in verse 11 he says, “that righteousness might be credited to them.” Here, when the role of faith is not in the forefront, Paul gets right to the point: It is righteousness itself that is credited. This is confirmed in verse 11 where Paul clearly distinguishes faith from the righteousness which results from it. There he says first that Abraham “might be the father of all who believe,” and then he states the result of believing, which is “that righteousness might be credited to them.”

Later in Romans 10:10 Paul adds further confirmation that this is what he means. Romans 10:10 reads, “for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” The

exactly what Paul says in verse 6. He says, “just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” Here, an external righteousness is credited to our account, not something in us, be it “our faith” or anything else. Moreover, if faith is our righteousness, then God regards something in us as our righteousness and credits it to us as our due. This would mean we are in ourselves righteous, and this would directly conflict with Paul’s definition of a gracious crediting in verse 4.

construction is the same in both phrases, “believes resulting in righteousness” and “confesses resulting in salvation.” Piper’s comments are to the point, “the confession does not consist in salvation, but leads to it; so also the faith does not consist in righteousness, but leads to it.”⁸

Philippians 3:9 could be added to the mix, since Paul clearly distinguishes faith from righteousness there as well. In that verse he speaks of “the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” This is his explanation of his earlier phrase “that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him not having a righteousness of my own.” His righteousness is not his own. He gladly disowned any personal righteousness for his justification. Why? Because in Christ, he has received an imputed righteousness which “comes from God on the basis of faith.” In other words, it is not a righteousness which consists of faith, it is an external righteousness that comes to him by God’s undeserved grace on the basis of faith.

All of the above clearly points to the fact that faith itself is not our righteousness, but merely the receiving instrument, the empty hand, that receives Christ and His imputed righteousness. With that said, and not wishing to be redundant, I will restate the evidence which demonstrates that Paul does not think of faith itself as our righteousness,⁹ but only as the receiving instrument that

⁸ Piper, p. 62.

⁹ There are many proponents of the view that God regards faith itself as our righteousness. Two prominent ones are Robert Gundry and Mark Seifrid. Both deny the positive imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Both also affirm, not only that faith itself is our righteousness, but also, that justification includes liberation from the mastery of sin. Speaking of imputation Gundry says, “the doctrine that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to believers needs to be abandoned. That doctrine of imputation

leads to, or results in, the crediting of an external righteousness.

First, the preceding and following contexts argue that Paul has in mind an external righteousness. Second, the

is not even biblical. Still less is it 'essential' to the gospel." (Gundry in John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002, p. 44). Of faith he writes, "Since faith as distinct from works is credited as righteousness, the righteousness of faith is a righteousness that by God's reckoning *consists of faith* even though faith is not itself a work." p.46. Regarding justification and liberation he says, "justification does not have to do with an exchange of our sin's for the righteousness of Christ; rather, it has to do with liberation from sin's mastery." p. 47. Seifrid is just as to the point. Speaking of imputation and faith he says, "Paul does not feel compelled to formulate justification along the way in terms of Christ (much less in terms of the imputation of Christ's righteousness) because he understands that faith itself is credited by that promise of God fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ." (Mark Seifrid, *Luther, Melancthon and Paul on the Question of Imputation*, in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, *Justification, What's at Stake in the Current Debate*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004, p. 148). He adds further, regarding faith itself as our righteousness, "we may begin by making the simple observation that Paul speaks of faith itself as being reckoned as righteousness. For the apostle, the "reckoning of faith as righteousness" does not signify an acceptance of faith for something it is not ("as if it were righteousness"), but a recognition of faith for what it is. Not only do linguistic parallels support this interpretation (here I agree with Robert Gundry's argument and extensive examples), but also Paul's dramatic depiction of Abraham's faith in Romans 4:18-22." p. 146. He then denies that faith is merely the instrument by which a sinner receives Christ's righteousness. He writes, "to insist that faith is only the means of receiving righteousness, and not the extrinsic righteousness of God itself presupposes that, along with Melancthon, one understands faith—a divine gift, to be sure!—as a human quality or virtue, and not the new creation effected by the Gospel." (I can't resist pointing out, that to teach that faith is only a receptive instrument, and not righteousness itself, does not presuppose that faith is merely a human quality—it did not with Calvin, Owen, and many others.) Lastly, regarding justification as liberation from the mastery of sin he writes, "to insist that justification is not 'liberation from sin's mastery' but a bare divine declaration is, again with Melancthon, to relegate justification solely to the role of quieting the conscience." (p.148-149).

instrumental role of faith in Romans 3:26-31 rules out faith itself being our righteousness. Third, the broad scope of the meaning of the preposition indicates that faith is that which leads to, or results in the crediting of righteousness. Fourth, if faith is seen by God to be our righteousness, Paul agrees with the Rabbis in affirming a personal righteousness for justification, and the controversial nature of his gospel of justification would not be an issue, which it clearly was. Lastly, Paul explicitly states here in Romans and elsewhere that it is an external righteousness which is credited for justification.

It is a Gracious Crediting of Righteousness Because It is not Something Due to Us

The third proof that it is a gracious, undeserved crediting of righteousness is found in verse 4. Repeating what was said above, verse 4 is foundational. In it, Paul states his fundamental concept of imputation. I will quote it again, "now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due." Once again, it is to be noted that something is credited either because it is due, and therefore given as a reward, or it is credited entirely by grace without regard to anything in us or done by us. Paul's whole point is to prove the second. Very simply, a gracious imputation is something made ours by the act of imputation itself. That is, something previously not ours (righteousness) is graciously and undeservedly credited to our account. According to Paul's definition, what is ours already—even our faith—cannot be credited to us by grace, but by debt or reward.

It is a Gracious Crediting of Righteousness Because It is Credited Apart From Works

The fourth argument for a gracious imputation is that righteousness is credited entirely without regard to works. First in verse 5, Paul says, “to the one who does not work,” then he adds in verse 6, “just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works.” Paul does not deny that works are necessary for those who profess faith in Christ. However, with respect to our justification, works are not a factor. God does not take them into consideration at all! Paul makes a point to exclude all works: moral works as well as ceremonial.

This is evident, to look at just one example, from Romans 2:21-22, where Paul referring to moral works says, “You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” Clearly, Paul is thinking in terms of moral works, not merely ceremonial works, as some would say.¹⁰ It is also evident from Romans 3:20, where, quoting David in Psalm 143:2—David is a regenerate believer for he calls himself, “thy servant” (Psalm 143:2a)—Paul says, “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.” It should be obvious that Paul makes no distinction, as some do, between meritorious and non-meritorious works, for there

¹⁰ New Perspective adherents, N.T. Wright, James Dunn and others, attempt to defend the view that Paul’s rejection of the works of law refers only to ceremonial works—things such as: Sabbath-keeping, circumcision, dietary laws, etc. Paul, they claim, is merely rejecting the Jewish demand for these ceremonial works (what they call Jewish identity “markers” or “badges”) for inclusion into God’s people. In short, moral works for justification are still necessary! Romans 2:21-24; 3:20, 23; Luke 18:9-14, indeed nearly the whole New Testament, indicate otherwise.

is no such distinction. All works, even evangelical works—which would include our faith and any works done by the Spirit in covenant faithfulness—are excluded. Finally, it is evident that he refers to moral works, for Abraham was justified prior to the Law and the institution of ceremonial works, such as circumcision, and the Sabbaths, etc. Therefore, the works that Abraham could not boast about before God for his justification were works of moral obedience.

This is forcefully brought home in Paul’s next phrase when he says, “but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly” (v. 5b). The person “who does not work” is the person who is “ungodly.” I will say more on this in the next section.

It is a Gracious Crediting of Righteousness Because It is Credited to the Ungodly

The fifth argument for a gracious, undeserved crediting of righteousness is perhaps the strongest. It is the fact that it is credited to the ungodly. Paul says in verse 5, “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Paul is not dealing here with the issue of whether a truly justified person can remain ungodly. His point here—and it would not be an understatement to call it his main point—is that at the moment God justifies a person he is ungodly. We can go further. According to Paul, God justifies none but the ungodly. John Owen says it well, “clearly before and up to the point of justification he was and is considered ungodly, and is one who works not and whose duties and obedience contribute

nothing.”¹¹

The fact God justifies the ungodly is Paul’s unanswerable affirmation of a gracious, undeserved crediting of righteousness. It is a crediting of righteousness which recognizes nothing in us, for it is credited to us when we are ungodly! The crediting of righteousness to the ungodly excludes anything and everything that could commend sinners: whether it is faith, covenant faithfulness, or anything else. All that we are and all we do is rejected and swept away! This is the heart of Paul’s gospel of a free justification. This is why all boasting is excluded. It banishes man’s contribution, even so much as a particle, from his justification. It gives all the glory to Christ. John Owen’s comments apply well today,

This is that expression which hath stirred up so much wrath amongst many, and on the account whereof some seem to be much displeas’d with the apostle himself. If any other person dare but say that God justifieth the ungodly, he is personally reflected on as one that by his doctrine would overthrow the necessity of godliness, holiness, obedience, or good works; “for what need can there be of any of them, if God justifieth the ungodly?” Howbeit this is a periphrasis of God, that he is... “he that justifieth the ungodly?” This is his prerogative and property; as such will he be believed in and worshipp’d, which adds weight and emphasis unto the expression; and we must not forego this testimony of the Holy Ghost, let men be as angry as they please... Wherefore, although in and with the justification of a sinner, he is made godly—for he is endowed with that faith which purifieth the heart and is a vital principle of all obedience, and the conscience is purged from dead works by the blood of Christ,—yet antecedently unto this justification he is ungodly and considered as ungodly, as one that worketh not, as one whose duties and obedience

¹¹ Owen, p. 316.

contribute nothing unto his justification.¹²

Owen’s words are well taken, especially “as such will he be believed in and worshiped.” This expresses the deepest affection of a Christian’s heart. In other words, we are compelled to gratefully worship our glorious God because He is the God who justifies the ungodly—even us!¹³ We worship Him because, by Christ’s atoning sacrifice, He has upheld the integrity of His righteousness and the glory of His name. He is now free to unleash His love upon sinners like us. In Paul’s glorious words, “He is just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹³ The contrast of Owen’s words with N.T. Wright’s are striking. Wright says such a God who imputes a forensic righteousness so that He justifies the ungodly is a God that we would not want to worship at all! He says, “If we leave the notion of ‘righteousness’ as a law court metaphor only, as so many have done in the past, this gives the impression of a legal transaction, a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct, but hardly one we would want to worship.” Wright, apparently seeing no love in the fact that God provided in Christ a legal righteousness to justify the ungodly, not only rejects imputed righteousness, but refuses to worship the God who would provide it. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Eerdmans, p.98).

At Once And Forever

Why Is “Justification Final and Complete, So That There Is No Future Justification?”

Perhaps the most striking example of free justification found in the New Testament is the account of a Pharisee and a tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. The account reads,

(9) And He also told this parable to some of the people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: (10) “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’(13) But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ (14) I tell you this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Luke tells us that the tax collector, “standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast” when he cried out, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” Christ at once says of the tax collector in verse 14, “I tell you, this man went to his house justified.” Christ could not have stunned His hearers more when He declared that the tax collector (and not the Pharisee), from the very moment of his cry of repentant faith, was at once and forever justified. Christ simply announced, “this man went to his house justified.”

The great and glorious truth of the gospel is that the tax collector’s justification was at once complete and final.

In other words—as we saw in the previous chapters—through the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness alone, based upon the atoning blood and obedience of Christ alone, there need not be, nor is there in fact, any other righteousness required for final justification.¹

Christ’s teaching is in complete harmony with Paul’s in Romans and Galatians. For in laying the groundwork for Paul, Christ makes no reference to any need for a supplemental righteousness to be done by the tax collector. In fact, if any personal righteousness—even a righteousness done by the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit—is a necessary means or condition of final salvation or justification, the perfect righteousness of Christ is undermined and diminished. To put it bluntly, Christ’s atoning righteousness is not sufficient to justify a sinner! More than this, man becomes a partial cause of his justification, boasting is not entirely excluded, and God does not receive all the glory!

The truth of a complete and final justification is under attack today. Instead of a complete over-and-done-with justification, a two-stage justification has been put in its place. The two-stage justification doctrine teaches that believers are justified now at the present time, but they also must wait for a final justification to be declared at the last day; a justification that is contingent and conditioned on their perseverance in faith and godliness to the end.²

¹ This does not mean that righteousness and works of obedience are not a non-negotiable requirement for the justified (1 John 2:4-11, 3:4-10). Righteousness and good works are a required accompaniment and evidence of a justified state. However, they are never a condition, means, or cause of justification. This order is being denied by some who insist that the believer’s works will be evaluated in order to be justified in the last day.

² N.T. Wright is very direct about a two-phase justification. He asserts, “Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification

I believe a future or second justification doctrine is in direct conflict with the gospel of grace. It, in effect, empties present justification of any significance so that in reality there is none at all.

This can be illustrated very simply: When a defendant in a criminal trial is acquitted, the acquittal is complete and final. The defendant is forever freed from the charges against him, so that there is no longer any liability to punishment. There is not a future evaluation of the person to determine if he will be finally and forever acquitted. It would be viewed as a travesty of justice. The acquittal would, in fact, be no acquittal at all—and any thinking person would know it! It is the same with justification. Justification, being a verdict and declaration, has either been declared once-for-all or it has not.

It needs to be pointed out that the two-phase justification doctrine is not new. It has long been at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on justification. In fact, it was at the center of the Reformation controversy with Rome. John Owen was well aware of the controversy over a double or second justification and spoke clearly of its danger. He writes,

I say, therefore, that the evangelical justification, which alone we plead about, is but one, and it is at once completed. About any other justification before God but one, we will not

will affirm publically...on the basis of the entire life." Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, p. 129. Elsewhere he writes, "The whole point about 'justification by faith' is that it is something which happens in the present time (Rom 3:26) as a proper anticipation of the eventual judgment which will be announced, on the basis of the whole life led, in the future (Rom 2:1-16)." N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 57. Wright does not hesitate to state that final justification is based upon the "the entire life" and "the whole life led," a clear affirmation of justification conditioned on works.

contend with any...Those of the Roman Church do ground their whole doctrine of justification upon a distinction of a double justification; which they call the first and the second...This distinction was coined unto no other end but to bring in confusion into the whole doctrine of the gospel. Justification through the free grace of God, by faith in the blood of Christ, is evacuated by it. Sanctification is turned into justification, and corrupted by making the fruits of it meritorious. The whole nature of evangelical justification, consisting in the gratuitous pardon of sin and the imputation of righteousness, as the apostle expressly affirms, and the declaration of a believing sinner to be righteous³ thereon, as the word alone signifies, is utterly defeated by it.

I believe Owen is right. The doctrine of a future or last-day justification, conditioned on the evaluation of the believer's works, undoes the gospel. The gospel of grace is utterly defeated by it. Therefore, in this chapter, my aim is to present the biblical case for a completed once-for-all justification: a justification which has no future aspect.⁴

³ Owen, pp. 137-138.

⁴ There are a few Scriptures that some understand to teach a future declaration of justification. Others understand them to teach only a manifestation, or perhaps a vindication of justification. In either case, they are unclear and tentative (those usually cited are Romans 2:13, 5:19; Galatians 5:5; 2 Timothy 4:8). Richard Gaffin, for example, acknowledges that "explicit references in Paul to a still-future justification for believers, if present at all, are minimal." Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *By Faith, Not By Sight* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), p. 80-81. He also states that there will be a future manifestation of justification, but not a declaration. He writes, "the final judgment will be the open manifestation of that present justification, their being 'openly acquitted' as we have seen. And in that future judgment their obedience, their works, are not the ground or basis. Nor are they (co-) instrumental, a coordinate instrument for appropriating divine approbation as they supplement faith. Rather, they are the essential and manifest criterion of that faith, the integral 'fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.'" p. 98. In response to this, it can be pointed out that a manifestation of justification is not, in a technical sense, actually justification. Justification is the declaration or verdict of a right

There are at least four biblical truths which demonstrate that this is the case.

First is the parallel made by Paul in Romans 5:12-19, between the final and complete condemnation of all men by the one act of Adam, and the final and complete justification of all who are in Christ by the one act of Christ. Paul's whole point is that as the condemnation of all in Adam is certain and complete, with no future aspect, so also the justification of all who are in Christ is certain and complete, with no future aspect.

Second is the exclusion of works—whether done by self-effort or done by the Spirit's enabling grace—from having anything to do with justification. This eliminates a last-day justification as well, since works are entirely excluded as a cause, means, or condition of our justification. This is Paul's constant emphasis in Romans, Galatians, and elsewhere.

Third is the distinction in Scripture between justification and salvation. Justification is narrow and specific in meaning. It is a verdict with a focus on once-for-allness. Salvation, however, is comprehensive and broad in meaning. It means deliverance, and has a not-yet-completed element. In short, salvation has both an already

standing, not a manifestation or even a vindication that someone is already justified. So, when all is said and done, there is in reality no actual future justification. Jesus Himself, declares that the believer no longer comes into judgment. He says, "Truly, truly I say unto you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). Why not drop the language of a last-day justification—it only confuses and muddles? In addition, there is much confusion and lack of clarity in the concept of "vindication." To some it seems to refer to a manifestation of those already justified. To others it is used to refer to a declaration of justification in the last day, as a reward for a life of obedience or covenant faithfulness, which is a justification conditioned on works. The lack of clarity in such a vital issue is inexcusable.

partially accomplished aspect, and a future not-yet-accomplished aspect. Justification, on the other hand, has only an already fully accomplished aspect.⁵

Fourth is the clear teaching of Scripture that holiness and perseverance are a necessary result and evidence of a truly justified state, but they are never a condition, means, or cause of final salvation or justification. In other words, perseverance is a necessary indication of what you already are (God's once-for-all justified child) but never a necessary means and condition of becoming what you are not yet (God's once-for-all justified child).

The Comparison between Adam and Christ Demonstrates a Completed Over-And-Done-With Justification with No Future Aspect

In this chapter we will look at just one of these biblical truths—Paul's comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-19. In this text, Paul has not yet left his great theme of justification which he began in 3:21.⁶ While the passage prepares for what follows in chapters 6-8, the connective "therefore" in verse 12 leaves no doubt that the passage is connected to what precedes. The entire passage reads,

⁵ The 'already not-yet' framework is a good biblical framework for understanding salvation, redemption, etc. in a comprehensive sense, but not for justification, as I intend to show a bit later.

⁶ John Murray says succinctly, "We must not forget that Paul is still with his grand theme, justification by faith...the apostle is now demonstrating that the divine method of justifying the ungodly proceeds from and is necessitated by the principles in terms of which God governs the human race." John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), pp. 179-180.

(12) Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all have sinned—(13) for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. (14) Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (15) But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. (16) The gift is not like *that which came* through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment *arose* from the 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. (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.

With the “therefore” in verse 12, Paul continues the theme of verses 1-11 on the finality and certainty of justification. One example, which demonstrates that this is his theme, is verse 9, it says, “having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” Notice, that since we already stand completely justified before God, it is certain that ‘we shall be saved from the wrath [future judgment] of God.’

Other examples (verses 2, 10, 11) could be given as well, which seem to make it evident that the “therefore,” points to yet another reason why we can have a full

confidence in a certain, over-and-done-with justification.⁷ Douglas Moo explains the connection this way,

The main connection is with the teaching of assurance of final salvation in the immediately preceding paragraph (vv. 2b, 9-10). The passage shows why those who have been justified and reconciled can be so certain that they will be saved from wrath and share in the glory of God: it is because Christ's act of obedience ensures eternal life for all who are “in Christ.”⁸

The following references in the passage give further support as well, that Paul is still dealing with justification:

The judgment arose from one transgression **resulting in condemnation** [the opposite sentence of justification, as in Romans 8:33-34], v. 16b

The free gift arose from many transgressions **resulting in justification**, v. 16c

The **gift of righteousness** will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ [righteousness is what is pleaded for as the ground of justification, it is a basic word in the justification word group], v. 17b

So then as through one transgression there resulted **condemnation** to all men [once again the opposite sentence or verdict to justification], v. 18a

Even so **through one act of righteousness there resulted justification** of life to all men, v. 18b

⁷ Owen says “therefore” begins a passage which is “a farther progress, as unto that whereon our glorying in God...does depend. And this is the imputation of the righteousness and obedience of Christ unto the justification of life, or the reign of grace through righteousness unto eternal life.” Owen, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 322.

⁸ Moo, p. 316.

Even so through the obedience of the One the many will be **made righteous** [more accurately; established or constituted righteous—once again justification language], v. 19b

The General Comparison between Condemnation in Adam and Justification in Christ

From the preceding context (verses 1-11) and the repeated references to justification in the passage itself, it seems conclusive that Paul's design in verses 12-19 is to give a final reason for the certainty and finality of a completed justification. But, how does he do it? He does it by a parallel and comparison between Adam and Christ. Verse 12 says,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—

Paul's use of 'just as' makes it clear he is entering into a comparison between Adam and Christ. He does not complete the comparison until verses 18 and 19. Verses 13 and 14 are a digression to clarify verse 12, and verses 15, 16 and 17 are a comparison built on a contrast. Verses 18 and 19 are where Paul finally sets forth the full and explicit comparison between Adam and Christ.

That Paul is setting forth a comparison is also evident by his constant use of comparative language. In verse 12 he says, "just as;" in verses 15 and 16, he says "not like;" in verses 18 and 19 he says, "as through...even so." However, it is in verse 14 that Paul expressly states that he is, in fact, making a comparison between Adam and Christ when he writes, "Adam who is a type of Him that was to come."

His reference to Adam being a type of Christ makes it clear that Paul's design in the passage is to show the parallel that exists between condemnation in Adam and justification in Christ. This parallel is Paul's grand climatic unanswerable proof of a free and final justification.

The Immediate, Once-For-All, Final Condemnation Of All In Adam, Parallels The Immediate, Once-For-All Final Justification Of All In Christ

But, exactly, what is this comparison? It is an explicit comparison between the certain, final, and over-and-done-with condemnation of all in Adam, and the certain, final, and over-and-done-with justification of all who are in Christ. Verses 18 and 19 are key. They read,

(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.

First, there is Adam's sin, of which Paul writes in verse 18a, "as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men." Then he brings in the comparison to Christ in verse 18b, "even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men." Paul's point is simple: The one act of Adam's transgression, or disobedience (verse 19a), and its resulting final condemnation of all men, is compared to the one act of Christ's righteousness, or obedience (verse 19b), and its resulting final justification of all who are His.

Paul's sustained emphasis all the way through the passage (verses 15-19) is this: as all men received a

complete and final condemnation in Adam, so also by parallel, all men who are in Christ, have already received a complete and final justification. Further-more, it is stressed that as there is not a future stage necessary to complete man's condemnation, so also by parallel, neither is there a future stage necessary to complete the justification of those in Christ.

A two-stage justification doctrine completely collapses Paul's comparison and undoes the thrust of the entire passage. It stands in direct conflict with Paul's grand final argument of free justification—by the comparison of Christ with Adam—that a believing sinner, by the one righteous act of Christ alone, is at once completely and forever justified.

The Particulars of the Comparison between Condemnation in Adam and Justification in Christ

The question remains. Specifically how is it with Adam and all men? That is, what are the particulars of the relationship that exist between Adam's one act of sin and condemnation, that parallels the particulars of the relationship that exist between Christ's one act of righteousness and justification? A closer look at the text indicates that at least three specific parallels exist in the comparison between Adam and Christ.

First, Condemnation By The Imputation Of Adam's One Act Of Sin Is Compared To Justification By The Imputation Of Christ's One Act Of Righteousness

The foundation of all Paul says is verse 12. We will quote it again,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

Paul says, "through one man sin entered the world...and so death spread to all men because all sinned." This is his opening assertion that by Adam's one act of sin alone, death and condemnation came to all men. Paul states this truth over and over through verse 19. It is:

- v. 14 the offense of Adam
- v. 15 by the transgression of the one the many died
- v. 16 judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation
- v. 17 by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one
- v. 18 through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men
- v. 19 through one man's disobedience the many were made sinners

Adam's one sin brought immediate condemnation to all men. But how? By the imputation of the guilt of his sin to all men. Verse 13 says, "Sin is not imputed when there is no law." By this statement Paul indicates clearly that he is still thinking in terms of imputation—as in chapter 4—when he speaks of Adam's sin and the condemnation of all men, and Christ's righteousness and the justification of all who are His.

Therefore, although he uses the word 'impute' only once,⁹ in verse 13, conceptionally it is his sustained

⁹ Paul's reiteration that Adam's one act of sin was directly imputed for condemnation to all men, and the parallel that Christ's one act of righteousness is directly imputed for justification to all who are His, is fatal to the view that God imputes faith itself, as our righteousness. A view held by many in their interpretation of Romans 4.

emphasis throughout the passage.¹⁰ This is to bring home one point: as Adam's one transgression was imputed to all men, and is the sole cause of their immediate and final condemnation, so also, by parallel, Christ's one act of righteousness is imputed to His people, and is the sole cause of their immediate and final justification. Piper summarizes Paul's words well,

The parallel here is this: The judicial consequences of Adam's sin are experienced by all his people not on the basis of their doing sins like he did, but on the basis of their being in him and his sin being imputed to them. As soon as that becomes clear in Paul's argument—just at this point—he brings in Christ as the parallel. The point is to make clear what the focus of the parallel is: The judicial consequences of Christ's righteousness are experienced by all his people not on the basis of their doing righteous deeds like he did, but on the basis of their being in him and his righteousness being imputed to them.¹¹

It should be evident that Paul's theology of justification has no place for the doctrine of a two-stage, or last-day justification. It flies in the face of all he labors to set forth about the grace of justification in this text.

¹⁰ Owen says, "The design of the apostle is to prove, that as the sin of Adam was imputed unto all men unto condemnation, so the righteousness or obedience of Christ is imputed unto all that believe unto the justification of life...As the sin of one that came on all unto condemnation, was the sin of the first Adam imputed unto them; so the righteousness of the one unto the justification of life that comes on all believers, is the righteousness of Christ imputed unto them. And what can be more clearly affirmed or more evidently confirmed than this is by the apostle, I know not." Owen, *Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 322, 333.

¹¹ Piper, pp. 101-102.

Second, Condemnation In Adam Entirely Apart From Man's Own Personal Acts Of Sin, Is Compared To Justification In Christ Entirely Apart From Man's Own Personal Acts Of Righteousness

All men are condemned in and by Adam's one sin alone, not by their own personal sins

The second particular to be observed in the text is a direct spin off of the first. It is the corollary fact that all men are condemned in Adam, and justified in Christ entirely apart from their own personal acts: either of sin, in the case of Adam, or of obedience, in the case of Christ.

Paul's initial proof that all men are condemned in Adam, apart from their own acts, is the phrase "death spread to all men because all sinned" in verse 12b. At first appearance it seems that the phrase "because all sinned" means that all men personally and actually sin, and this is the reason for their condemnation.

However, a closer look reveals that "because all sinned" is best taken to mean that all are counted by God to have sinned when Adam sinned. That is, when Adam sinned we—all of us—were counted as having sinned together with him in his one act of sin.

This is evident by the fact that verses 13 and 14 are a digression taken from Biblical history, designed by Paul to prove that this is so. In other words, they demonstrate that, "because all sinned" doesn't mean all men have personally sinned, but that all sinned in and by Adam's one sin, and as a result died and were condemned. With this clearly understood, he proceeds to build upon it in verses 15-19. Verses 13 and 14 read,

(13) For until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. (14) Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

There are at least six things in verses 13 and 14 which prove that the phrase “because all sinned” means that all men are counted by God as having sinned in and by Adam’s one act of sin.

First, is the explanatory “for” which connects verses 13 and 14 to verse 12. They are Paul’s explanation of what he means in verse 12 by the phrase “because all sinned.”

Second, he says “for until the law sin was in the world but sin is not imputed [or charged] when there is no law.” This is a general principle or maxim, which states a simple fact: sin and its guilt are not charged when there is not a specifically revealed law that is violated. As a result, there is not a liability to the penalty of sin which is death and condemnation.

Third, people, in fact, did sin in the period “from Adam until Moses,” for Paul says “until the law sin was in the world.” However, it was prior to the giving of the law of Moses for Paul says, “until the law” there was sin in the world. Consequently, when men sinned, “from Adam until Moses,” they did not commit a chargeable violation of God’s revealed will—since the law had not yet been given,¹² and as Paul points out “sin is not imputed where

¹² I am aware that some, if not many, people in this period did have God’s laws revealed to them (Noah, Abraham, etc.). However, the great majority were without any specific revelation of God’s commands. He “permitted all nations to go their own ways,” (Acts 14:16). It was the “times of ignorance,” (Acts 17:30). The ordinance of God that the Gentiles knew (Romans 1:32) is most likely a work of the conscience, as Paul says in Romans 2:14-15, or it is the generation after Noah that knew of God’s judgment upon evil at

there is no law.” Consequently, he states the nature of their sin this way, “those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam.” Clearly, Paul is pointing out a difference between the sin of men who lived “from Adam until Moses,” and the sin of Adam. The difference, which is significant, is this: unlike Adam’s sin, their sin was not against a revealed law so the guilt of their sin was not imputed to their account. More important than this, the punishment for their sin, which is death and condemnation, was not inflicted upon them.

Fourth, although men were not formally charged with their own sin and its guilt during this period, they nevertheless received the penalty of sin—they died and were condemned. Paul says, “nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses.”

Fifth, there is the clear inference (Paul says “nevertheless death reigned”) that there had to be some actual sin and its guilt charged against men for the simple reason that the penalty of sin—which is death and condemnation—was inflicted upon them.

Sixth, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the sin which must have been charged against them—and with it the guilt and punishment of death which it brings—is Adam’s sin. Therefore, Adam’s one sin alone, and not the personal, individual sins of men, was the sole cause of their death and condemnation.

So we can rightly conclude that verses 13 and 14 demonstrate that the phrase “because all sinned” in verse 12 is Paul’s shorthand way of saying that, by and in Adam’s one act of sin, all were counted as having sinned as well. This in turn resulted in all being placed under the

the flood.

sentence of death and condemnation. But beyond all this—and this is Paul’s main point—it proves that the personal sins of men are entirely excluded as having anything to do with their condemnation.

Just as all were condemned apart from their own personal acts of sin, so also, parallel to this, all are justified in Christ apart from their own personal acts of righteousness

But this is only the beginning, because verses 12-14 are foundational. They merely lay the groundwork for Paul’s real concern: the comparison and parallel between condemnation in Adam and justification in Christ in verses 15-19. It is in this carefully worded parallel that Paul proves conclusively that justification, like condemnation in Adam, is accomplished by Christ’s one act alone, entirely apart from the personal acts of men. A good example is verse 16, it reads,

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.

Notice that Paul, without ambiguity states, “the judgement arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation.” This is a direct assertion that by Adam’s one sin alone, and not by their own personal sins, all men were condemned.

The terms “judgment” (*krima*), and “condemnation” (*katakrima*), are significant. Speaking of *krima*, Moo says, “this word...differentiated from *katakrima* (condemnation) probably means “judicial verdict;” the sentence of

judgment.”¹³ Commenting on *katakrima*, Cranfield writes, “Where the condemnation referred to is condemnation by God, *katakrima* often signifies not only the pronouncement of the sentence but also its execution.”¹⁴

So, what we see here is that, used together, the terms indicate that not only a legal sentence, but also its execution and penalty were immediately carried out on all men on account of Adam’s one act of sin.

Paul’s precise language rules out a future sentence of condemnation. All men are already judged; they are already fully and finally condemned by Adam’s one sin!¹⁵

¹³ Moo, p. 538.

¹⁴ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary, Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, Great Britain: T & T Clark, 1979), p. 287.

¹⁵ *Krima* (judgment) according to Cranfield “denotes simply a judgment pronounced.” Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 287. Cremer comments that it is “the result of *krien* [the verb to judge] or the decision arrived at...in particular the decision of a judge.” Hermann Cremer, *Biblical Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed., (Edinburgh, Great Britain: T & T Clark, 1962), pp. 372-373. Kittel says, “it is the decision of the judge.” Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 942. *Katakrima* (condemnation), on the other hand, according to Cranfield, “signifies not only the pronouncement of the sentence, but also its execution” (p. 287). Cremer says the verb *katakrein* means “not simply to pronounce condemnation, but...to accomplish the condemnatory judgment,” and he points out this use in Romans 8:3 where God actually executed the judgment for sin upon Christ on the cross. It says, “God, sending His own Son...as an offering for sin, He condemned sin [executed judgment] in the flesh.” Kittel remarks that it refers to “the divine condemnation including its execution,” (vol. 3, p. 952). From the above, it seems Paul’s intent is clear: God acted as a judge upon all men as a consequence of Adam’s one sin. The immediate result of His action as a judge (*krien*) was a sentence (*krima*) and the judgment was immediately executed (*katakrima*) in the direct and immediate condemnation of all men. Paul’s precise language rules out a future condemnation of men when they individually sin. This, of course, does not mean that the personal sins of men do not increase the amount or degree

This leads to Paul's parallel of justification in Christ. In parallel assertions (here in verse 16 and repeatedly until verse 19), those in Christ are already declared to be fully and finally justified by Christ's one act of righteousness! All of which eliminates a future declaratory justification.

Verses 18 and 19 are where Paul most clearly and conclusively asserts his argument. He expressly declares that by Adam's one act of disobedience alone, apart from their own personal acts of disobedience, all men were condemned.¹⁶ In verse 18 he declares, "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men," and then in verse 19, "through the one man's disobedience the many were made [constituted] sinners."

Paul then brings in the parallel to Christ, which begins with "even so." In verse 18b he asserts "even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," and then in 19b, "even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made [constituted] righteous."

Paul's intent is unmistakable: as all, apart from their

of their final punishment. But the fact of their present already condemned state is a reality affirmed repeatedly in Scripture. John, for example, says, "he who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). Paul says as well, that men are born into the world "by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3).

¹⁶ Murray points out that there are "explicit and repeated affirmations of the context to the effect that condemnation and death reign over all because of the *one sin* of the *one man* Adam. On at least five occasions in verses 15-19 this is asserted... This reiteration establishes beyond doubt that the apostle regarded condemnation and death as having passed to all men by the one trespass of the one man Adam. This sustained appeal to the one sin of the one man rules out the possibility of construing it as equivalent to the actual personal transgressions of countless individuals." Murray, pp. 183-184.

own personal sins, were condemned by Adam's one act of disobedience, so also all in Christ, apart from their own personal acts of righteousness, are justified by Christ's one act of righteousness.

The term 'made' in verse 19 is best translated "appointed" or "constituted." It vividly portrays the reality that by a single act, either of Adam or of Christ, all men assume a specific relationship to God's law. In Adam's case they were made or constituted sinners, and received a sentence of judgment and condemnation (as verse 16). The parallel in Christ's case is that all are made or constituted righteous, and are recipients of a sentence of justification.

The translation of the Greek term *kathistemi* by the English word "made" is unfortunate. It can be easily misunderstood to mean that what Paul is teaching here is that men were personally made sinful by Adam's sin or are personally made righteous by Christ—which Paul does elsewhere, but not here.

The meaning of the term, however, which reflects Paul's focus throughout, is legal and forensic, not practical and personal.¹⁷ In short, Paul asserts that, just as all men

¹⁷ Moo writes, "Some argue that it means nothing more than 'make.' But this translation misses the forensic flavor of the word. It often means 'appoint' [see Luke 12:14, where—using the verb form—Jesus said 'Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?'], and probably refers here to the fact that people are 'inaugurated into' the state of sin/righteousness. Paul is insisting that people were really 'made' sinners through Adam's act of disobedience just as they are really 'made righteous' through Christ's obedience. This 'making righteous,' however, must be interpreted in the light of Paul's typical forensic categories. To be 'righteous' does not mean to be morally upright, but to be judged acquitted, cleared of all charges, in the heavenly judgment. Through Christ's obedient act, people become really righteous; but 'righteous' itself is a legal, not a moral, term in this context... People can be 'made' sinners in the sense that God considers them to be such by regarding Adam's act as,

were constituted sinners because the sin of Adam, was imputed to them (in the words of verse 13), even so, all in Christ are constituted righteous because the righteousness of Christ¹⁸ is imputed to them.

Third, The Abundance Of The Grace Of God Is "Much More" Certain To Result In A Once-For-All Final Justification Than The Sin Of Adam Was Certain To Result In A Once-For-All Final Condemnation

But Paul goes even further. In verses 15-17 he takes great pains to demonstrate the freeness and finality of justification, by piling up descriptive terms of God's grace (which I will bold) in an ever-ascending manner.

(15) But **the free gift** is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did **the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound** to the many. (16) **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.

Notice, he speaks (with two different Greek words—*charisma* and *dorea*) of the gift of grace five times.

at the same time, their act." cf. esp. Murray. Moo, p. 345.

¹⁸ This, of course, is no more nor less than a restatement by Paul, in different words, of his great declaration in Romans 3:24-26. The declaration that by faith in the blood and obedience of Christ alone, based solely upon the propitiation of His atoning death alone, a sinner receives a justification that is at once complete and final.

He speaks of the abundance (or abound, v. 15) of grace twice. But he does not stop there. In verse 17 he specifically asserts that grace is preeminently displayed in the "gift¹⁹ of righteousness" that is given to sinners for their justification.

But what is Paul's point in his constant references in verses 15-17 to grace: "the free gift," "the grace of God," "the grace of the one man," "the gift by grace," "the abundance of grace" and finally "the gift of righteousness"? His point is to make a comparison by way of contrast between Adam and Christ.

This is evident by his "not like" statements. First he says that grace is "not like the transgression" (v. 15), and second, it is "not like that which came through the one who sinned" (v.16). The contrast is accentuated by the twice repeated phrase "much more." It first occurs in verse 15, "much more did the grace of God...abound to the many," then it occurs in verse 17, "much more...the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life."

It must be asked, what is Paul contrasting by the "much more" phrase? He is contrasting the fact that it is "much more" certain and "much more" just that God justifies sinners by "the grace of God" and the one act of Christ's obedience alone, than it was certain and just that He condemned all men by the one act of Adam's sin

¹⁹ The Greek word (*dorea*) in verses 15 and 17, translated "gift" [a free donation] is the same word translated "gift" in Romans 3:24 (it is also the word translated "without a cause" in John 15:25), where Paul says, "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." In context, it seems evident that Paul's "gift" here in 5:17, which could be translated "the abundance of grace, even the free gift of righteousness," is the same free gift of righteousness as in Romans 3:24-26, provided and accomplished entirely outside of us, for our justification, by Christ's final obedience and propitiatory death on the cross.

alone.

In other words, it is indeed certain and just, as a result of Adam's one act of sin, that condemnation, at once complete and final, came upon all men. But it is surely even "much more" certain²⁰ and just, as a result of Christ's one act of obedience (through "the gift of righteousness") that justification, at once complete and final, comes to all who are His.

In short, what Paul is declaring is this: although Christ's one act of obedience parallels Adam's one act of disobedience, it actually goes far beyond it in one respect. It goes far beyond it in degree—in the degree of the certainty and equity of its final result.²¹

But, how can God justify sinners, at once and forever, by Christ's one act of righteousness? God can do so because the grace of God abounds far beyond the sin of

²⁰ Moo writes, "For them, Paul claims, the enjoyment of the gift and grace of God will be even more certain than the death that came to all in Adam. Condemnation through Adam is inescapable, and Paul says nothing that would diminish the horrible reality of this judgment under which all people stand. But alongside condemnation there is the grace of God...In keeping with its use in 5:10-11 (see the note there), it is more likely to have simple logical significance—'how much more [certainly] will the grace of God...abound to the many (Meyer).'" Moo, p. 337.

²¹ Owen comments, "The opposition is between *paraptoma* [transgression] on the one hand, and *charisma* [grace] on the other,—between which a dissimilitude is asserted, not as unto their opposite effects of death and life, but only as unto the degrees of their efficacy, with respect unto those effects...Besides the thing itself asserted, which is plain and evident, the apostle seems to me to argue the equity of our justification by grace, through the obedience of Christ, by comparing it with the condemnation that befell us by the sin and disobedience of Adam. For if it were just, meet, and equal, that all men should be made subject unto condemnation for the sin of Adam; it is much more so, that those who believe should be justified by the obedience of Christ, through the grace and free donation of God." Owen, p. 327.

man. In fact, this is how Paul finalizes his whole argument in the climatic statement of verse 20b where he says, "but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

But, how can this be? How can grace abound beyond sin in the free and final justification of sinners? Paul directs us to Christ Himself. Christ is an infinitely glorious person, who has infinite value as God's own Son. Therefore, His righteous-obedience and propitiatory suffering, satisfied and pleased the Father "much more" than Adam's sinful disobedience (and our many additional transgressions, v. 16) had ever displeased Him!

Notice that Paul makes a point to say, that it is not only "the grace of God" (v. 15b), but "the gift by the grace of the one man" (v. 15c). It is "the grace of the one man"—the grace of the infinite Son of God. It is also, His "gift of righteousness" (v. 17b) provided through His atoning propitiatory obedience on the cross (3:25-26). In other words, because of the infinite glory of Christ, His obedience was of infinite atoning and justifying value. Consequently, His atoning obedience is more than enough to clothe a sinner in a perfect righteousness which justifies a sinner at once and forever.

The Exaltation of The Glorious Sufficiency Of Christ In His Atoning Justifying Work

In the end, the whole matter comes down to the supreme value and glory of the person of Christ. Therefore, to supplement Christ's justifying righteousness—even with a Spirit-enabled righteousness—does far more than undo Paul's parallel between Adam and Christ. It also—and this is the core issue, the hill to die on—robs Christ of His full glory in the justification of sinners.

So Paul's point is this: Christ's atoning grace abounds. It abounds because sinners, at the point of saving faith, receive a "much more" certain and final justification. They receive justifying grace that super-abounds beyond Adam's sin—justifying sinners at once and forever, not only from their sin in Adam but also from the "many transgressions" (verse 16b) that they themselves personally commit.

This is the gospel of grace which duly exalts the glorious sufficiency of the person of Christ and His saving work. It is the heart and center of Paul's theology of grace. To posit a second or last-day justification based on an evaluation of works of obedience or covenant faithfulness²² undoes it all! May God forbid!

²² Some do this by merging justification and sanctification. This is, I believe, what Douglas Wilson has done with his view of justification. Wilson, in an interview, was asked if he viewed justification and sanctification as distinct steps or "all of one piece." He answered, "Justification to them [not to Wilson, but to those who he disagrees with] is something that happens and has to be tied up with a bow, and then we can move on to sanctification. But when God gives faith, that faith does not immediately croak. It is a saving faith and that same faith is the alone instrument for sanctification also. One can't be apprehended without the other. They are distinct but not separable. You can't make an ontological distinction. It is an organic whole for us" (From CRE Presbytery Exam of Wilson, p. 7). In response, it is agreed that true faith is an active faith (it doesn't croak) and it is also agreed that it is the alone instrument of sanctification. That however, does not relate to the question. The question is whether sanctification follows a completed justification. This Wilson denies. Three observations can be made about Wilson's doctrine of justification: 1) Justification must not be considered as "something that happens and has to be tied up with a bow, and then we can move on to sanctification." Here, Wilson clearly distances himself from the teaching that justification is at once complete and final. 2) Justification is a process, since it can't be completed without sanctification. His words are, "one can't be apprehended without the other." Here he asserts that justification is apprehended [grasped or arrived at] with sanctification. He does not say that justification is evidenced with sanctification. The difference is everything. In my mind, it would be hard to find a more direct statement

Paul's design, in this great text, at every point, is to exclude man's own working from having anything to do, either with condemnation in Adam, or justification in Christ. Paul's language is so clear, his emphasis so constant, that if it does not mean this, it means nothing at all.

As said, all of this is absolutely fatal to the doctrine of a two-stage, or last-day, justification. It cannot be made to harmonize with Paul's teaching at any point. This is so because a last-day justification is completely unnecessary.²³

that justification is a process that involves our own doing. 3) Justification ultimately is not to be distinguished from sanctification. Although he says there is a distinction between justification and sanctification for "they are distinct but not separable," apparently it is not a real distinction. For he also says, in contradiction to this, "there is no ontological [essential] distinction." So to Wilson there is a distinction, that is in fact not a distinction at all! The bottom line seems to be clear: sanctification in his system is part of the process that leads to a final justification. Wilson has committed the fatal error of turning sanctification into justification. His affirmations in his writings about imputation, grace, and sola fide are qualified, since he sweeps away the doctrine of a complete and final justification. This also puts Wilson in the two-phase justification camp. CRE's Presbytery Exam of Wilson, Question 23. Both quotes are in John M. Otis, *Danger in the Camp* (Corpus Christi, TX: Triumphant Publications, 2005), pp. 336, 343.

²³ Some argue that a last-day justification is a theological tension that we must humbly accept. It is true there are theological tensions in Scripture (such as sovereignty and responsibility), but a tension is not a contradiction. A two-stage justification, however, is a contradiction. It contradicts a once-for-all completed justification. In the end, we must accept the fact that Romans 3:21-5:21 is God's final word on how He justifies a sinner, and we search in vain there for a single word of a conditional last-day justification by means of covenant faithfulness, or Spirit-enabled works of obedience. Romans 2:10-13 is no exception. It is part of Paul's overall argument (1:18-3:20) proving the condemnation of all men. In fact, he expressly states that no one will be justified by works at the final judgment for "by works of the law no flesh will be [future tense] justified" (Romans 3:20). By this concluding statement, Paul leaves no doubt that 2:10-13 does not set forth God's method of final justification—a justification by works enabled by

Justification, Works, And The Final Judgment

*Where Do Works Fit,
In Relation to Free Justification?*

Christ's perfect righteousness, as the sole and final cause, means, or basis of justification, has already been imputed to the believer's account. But it is not only unnecessary. It also diminishes the finality and perfection of Christ's justifying righteousness—a righteousness accomplished by His culminating act of righteous-obedience and His wrath-absorbing propitiatory death on the cross.

But beyond all this—and this is everything so it cannot be overstated—a last-day justification doctrine robs Christ of His glory. The glory which is His because He; by His grace alone, by His blood and obedience alone, justifies, at once-and-forever, repentant and believing sinners. This, is the gospel of the grace of God. To Christ alone be the glory!

Free justification has always caused controversy. Paul faced this problem right from the beginning. In fact, the question in Romans 6:1, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin, so that grace might increase?” is Paul's statement of the objection of those who oppose his teaching on justification in Romans, chapters 3-5. The objectors—real or rhetorical—cannot see how Paul's teaching will not lead people into sin.¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones' comments on this charge are insightful,

This is a very good test of gospel preaching. If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding, then it is not the gospel! Let me show you what I mean. If a man preaches justification by works, no one would ever raise this question...nobody would say to such a man, 'shall we continue in sin, that grace may

grace. On the contrary, Paul's point in 2:10-13 is to give a warning not to seek justification by works, even by those done by the enabling grace of the Spirit, since in that day “by the works of the Law **no flesh will be justified.**” It seems to me, to argue for a last-day justification, conditioned on works, in the midst of an overall argument designed to show that justification by works is impossible, is to disregard a cardinal rule of exegesis: the use of context and flow of thought. Therefore, other texts must be understood in the light of the clear statement of free justification set forth in Romans 3:21-5:21. The clear always interprets the unclear.

¹ This appears to also be the concern of some modern NT scholars. For example, Mark Seifrid in his work, *Christ, Our Righteousness* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), writes, “In reducing ‘justification’ to a present possession of ‘Christ's imputed righteousness’, Protestant divines inadvertently bruised the nerve which runs between justification and obedience” (p. 175). In this statement Seifrid indicates that there is a deficiency in seeing justification as merely “a present possession of ‘Christ's imputed righteousness.’” In his thinking it diminishes the demand, or any real incentive for obedience, for he also writes that this teaching, “bruised the nerve which runs between justification and obedience.” In short, in his mind, free justification leads to unholy living. This is the objection Paul answers in Romans 6.

abound?’²

Jones’ point can’t be missed. Why would anyone ask, “are we to continue in sin so that grace might increase,” if works are necessary to be justified at the final judgment? In other words, the accusation against Paul’s doctrine of free justification is, in itself, another proof that works have no part in justification, either now or in the future. Furthermore, if we are clear like Paul is clear, that justification is not in any part conditioned on works, we too should be faced with the same charge.

All of this has to do with a central issue in any discussion about justification: How do works fit in? Are not works, and perseverance in holiness necessary for a believer? Paul immediately turns to this question in Romans 6. And what does Paul say there about works? Can professing believers live any way they want—as Paul was misunderstood to teach—and still be assured they are justified, pardoned people? The apostle says, absolutely not! However, his answer, unlike what some are saying today, is not that works are necessary to be justified in the last day. Seifrid, for example writes,

We may now return to Paul’s understanding of final judgment and its relation to the message of justification. We recall that in Romans 2:1-16, in a strikingly straightforward manner, Paul declares that justification is contingent upon obedience, and specifically upon ‘doing the law’ (verse 13). Mere knowledge of God’s will is insufficient to save, since only the ‘doers of the law will be justified.’³

This however, is not Paul’s conclusion on justification.

² D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 6* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 8.

³ Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness*, p. 147.

Although hard pressed, by an accusation of antinomianism, he does not qualify free justification in the least. Romans 6 was his opportunity to clear up any confusion about his teaching. It was the place to state—as it is often done today—that although believers possess a present justification the verdict of final justification, is conditioned on their works, and awaits the final judgment. Yet, Paul asserts none of these things.

On the other hand, he does not say that works and perseverance in holiness are not necessary. In fact, he states the exact opposite. But not for a moment does Paul say they are necessary for justification. What he says is this: Works are the universal and mandatory evidence of the great change that takes place in all true believers, and which always accompanies their justification. Without this change and growth in holiness, there is no valid evidence that a person has been saved.

Paul states his position on works and the necessity of a holy life beginning in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 6. He says,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Notice, Paul says believers are people, “who died to sin,” so how can they, in his words, “still live in it.” Then, later in chapter 6 he asserts that there is a radical break from the indwelling power of sin that always accompanies justification and true conversion. Therefore, Paul can say to believers, “having been freed from sin you became slaves of righteousness” (verse 18). They are also those to whom he says, “for sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (verse 14).

So what is Paul’s answer to the accusation that free

justification leads to loose, lawless living? It is the fact that God's great inward renewing work occurs in all those He justifies, so that they are changed forever. This is Paul's safeguard to holiness.⁴ This, and the fact that the Father disciplines all His children so that they may share in His holiness (Hebrews 12:10).

Beyond this he did not go, and neither must we. He does not state that works are necessary to be justified at the final judgment. In a word, perseverance in holiness and an obedient life is the evidence of justification in all true believers. But it is never its condition, cause or means.

Having said that, in this chapter we will look, in some detail, at the relationship between works and justification. We will do this in two parts. First, we will attempt to show that works have no part or influence in justification, now or in the future. Second, we will look at the perseverance of the saints and its relationship to justification and final salvation. I will attempt to show that the Scriptures do not teach that perseverance in obedience, while absolutely necessary, is a condition or means of attaining final salvation or justification. This will come later.

⁴ This is the emphasis of the entire New Testament. For example, the Apostle John says, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:9-10) John could not be more direct. He says, "anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God." A lifestyle of sin casts great doubt on whether a person has ever been saved.

Works Are Excluded From Having Any Part Or Influence In Justification

First, Works In General Are Excluded From Justification

Now for the first main point. To begin with, the Scriptures teach that works in general, of all kinds and by all means, are entirely excluded from justification.⁵ They contribute absolutely nothing to justification now or in the future.

Furthermore, when Paul excludes works from justification, he makes no distinctions, nor does he give any indications, that he does not exclude all works, even works done by the empowering-grace of God.⁶

⁵ It must be pointed out that when Paul excludes works from justification, he does not exclude only ceremonial works; things such as Sabbath keeping, circumcision, festivals, etc.—as the proponents of the so-called New Perspective on Paul contend. In other words, his aim is to exclude from justification all works, not simply works such as Sabbaths and circumcision that signify outward Jewishness. A quick glance at a few verses demonstrate that this is the case (for example see Romans 2:17-23, 3:19-20, 7:7).

⁶ Some attempt to make a distinction between works which are the result of faith and the presence of the indwelling Christ, and works done by self-effort. The first category of works is what they call "the law of faith", the second, "the law of works." It is claimed that "the law of faith" in Romans 3:27, refers to works which come from faith (which is a gift of God) and Christ's presence working in the believer. Therefore, it is further said, that these works are not actually "human works." Consequently, they are not "the works of the law" excluded by Paul from justification. Seifrid attempts to defend this distinction. Regarding works of obedience that come from faith, he asserts that they are not, "a 'work of law' which proceeds from the human being, but the work of God." Therefore, they are not, he claims, "human works." Mark A. Seifrid, *Christ Our Righteousness*, p 133. Furthermore, these works are necessary for justification. He writes, "The inadequacy of human works to justify in the presence of God (and at the final judgment) does not at all mean that God's work in the human being

Paul's assertions are clear: All works, of all kinds, are excluded from having any part or influence in justification. The following verses should be conclusive, Paul says,

Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20)

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. (Romans 3:28)⁷

is inadequate; just the opposite." Seifrid, p 133. His point is clear: works are not "inadequate" to justify. Moreover, the works that justify are the works done by God in and through the believer. There are three problems with this interpretation. For one thing, the "law of faith" doesn't refer to works of obedience produced by faith. In the context, this phrase refers to the principle of faith—in contrast to works—which is the single act of saving faith that justifies a sinner. This is seen two verses earlier, in 3:25, when Paul refers to "a propitiation in His blood through faith." Here, faith is the act of faith that rests on Christ's propitiatory death alone for its justification. Therefore, in context, "the law of faith" is the faith that rests on Christ, not the works of obedience that come from faith. Second, Paul doesn't say "works of faith," he says "law of faith." To interpret the "law of faith" as the works of obedience that come from faith, ignores the context and reads a meaning into the words that is not there. Third, and this is most significant, it empties Paul's statement in the very next verse of its obvious intended meaning, that "a man is justified apart from works" (v. 28). In my mind, this distinction of so-called works that are not "human works" undoes Paul's teaching by bringing in works under another name, and making them a requirement for justification. In the end what we have is a restatement, in different words, of the old theology of infused grace.

⁷ The Greek term translated, "apart from", is *choris*. Thayer defines it as; "making no use of, having no association with, apart from, aloof from." Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), p. 675. It is translated "without" in Hebrews 4:15, where it says that Christ is, "One who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin." Christ is totally "without sin." There is no aspect or element of sin associated with Christ. It is translated, "apart from" in John 1:3 where it says of Christ's work as creator, "apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." The term

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. (Romans 4:5)

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. (Romans 11:6)

Nevertheless knowing that man is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified (Galatians 2:16).

These verses seem clear enough (others could be added: such as, Ephesians 2:8-9 and Titus 3:5). Read at face value, the verses are clear: Works in general, of all kinds, and by all means, contribute nothing to justification.

Second, Works Done By God's Grace Are Excluded From Justification

Not only are works, in general, excluded from justification, but more specifically, works done by God's strength are excluded as well. I mentioned this, to some degree, in the previous section, but because many today are advocating this, it needs more focused attention.

Some have attempted to qualify Paul's teaching, that all works are excluded from justification, by making a distinction between autonomous works, and Spirit-enabled works. It is said that autonomous works, done by self-effort, are excluded by Paul from justification, but the others, done in God's strength, are not. For example

indicates a total exclusion of all others from the work of creation. There is not a particle of creation that Christ did not create. Therefore, the term indicates a total exclusion of works from justification.

Schreiner writes,

On the other hand, we should understand the good works that do lead to an eschatological reward in different terms. They are the result of the Spirit's work in one's life, as the connection forged between verses 26-27 and 28-29 demonstrates. The Spirit's work on the heart logically precedes the observance of the law by the Gentiles. Autonomous works are rejected, but works that are the fruit of the Spirit's work are necessary to be saved.

This, however, is another case where works, redefined as non-works, are brought in under another name and made a condition for final salvation and justification. But, once again, Paul makes no such distinction.

A key verse is Romans 3:20. It is Paul's summary conclusive statement on the rejection of works and the universal need for free justification. The significance of this verse, for our present purpose, is this: It is a quote from David—a godly, grace-enabled, God-strengthened believer—taken from Psalm 143:2. Romans 3:20 reads “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.” Psalm 143:2, from which it is taken, says, “And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.”

⁸ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p.145. Schreiner's point can't be missed, he says “good works...lead to an eschatological reward.” He also makes it clear elsewhere that by “eschatological reward” he means eternal life itself, and that “eternal life itself is the reward” for “the person who observes the law.” For he further writes, “The reward should not be construed as something given above and beyond eternal life. Romans 2:26 suggests that eternal life itself is the reward since there the uncircumcised person who observes that law “will be reckoned” as circumcised, as a member of God's covenant people.” Ibid, p. 144. All of this seems to indicate that he uses “saved” here to mean justify. For examples of his use of ‘salvation’ and justification interchangeably, see chapter one, footnote #12, p. 19.

There are two things to note about Paul's choice of Psalm 143:2 as quoted in Romans 3:20. Both point decisively to the fact that his design is to exclude the works of a godly believer, done by God's grace, from having anything to do with justification. First, as mentioned, is the fact that the writer is David, a godly man. He was a man of whom God testified, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22). In the Psalm, David makes a point to describe himself as God's servant. He says, “do not enter into judgment with Your servant.” As God's servant, he was, by definition, a godly man characterized by obedience to God.

So David was a surrendered believer, who had the Spirit, and who depended upon God's grace to live a faithful and obedient life (see Psalm 51:8-12). It is true that David was a righteous man before men. He was a man of integrity in his dealings with men, and he often appealed, in the Psalms, to God to consider his righteousness in this way. But, he never appealed to God to consider his righteousness or integrity for his justification.

As is clear from Psalm 143, he did the exact opposite. When it came to his justification, David renounced all his works of obedience. David pleaded with God, “and do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.” He did not want God to condition his acceptance or justification on his perseverance in holiness. In fact, the very thought terrified him! Why? Because he knew that his own works, even the works done as God's servant by God's strength would, in

the end, be of no avail.⁹

In other words, David was another example of Paul's to prove what he had declared earlier in Romans 3:10, "there is none righteous, not even one." So, we must ask ourselves this question: If one of God's most renowned servants renounced grace-enabled works for his justification and acceptance with God, would we dare to do otherwise? Who are we? David says, "no man living is righteous." Paul says, "no flesh will be justified." Do we exalt ourselves and make ourselves an exception? So the Scripture is clear: The works of a godly grace-empowered believer contribute nothing to justification.

Third, No One Will Be Justified On Account Of Works At The Final Judgment: Romans 2:13; Galatians 5:5

Another significant thing about Paul's words in Romans 3:20, as quoted from Psalm 143:2, is that he phrases it specifically to deal with justification at the final judgment. He uses the future tense. He says, "no flesh will be justified." Paul changes the present tense of Psalm 143:2 to a future tense to emphasize its full intent. And what does he say about the final judgment? He declares, that no one will be found who will be justified by their works—not even those whose works were done by God's grace. Paul's quote from David should put an end to the whole matter.

This verse is critically important for another reason: It

⁹ If God accepted our grace-enabled works for justification, then He would accept works tainted in part by sin, for all we do is stained by remaining indwelling sin (Romans 7:18-24). Moreover, God would, in effect, be accepting an imperfect righteousness as a cause of justification. But God cannot declare us righteous, even in part, by an imperfect righteousness. He would violate His justice in doing so. His very nature would be compromised.

gives us a proper understanding of Romans 2:6-7 and 2:13. For these verses, like 3:20, have to do with justification and the final judgment. Romans 2:13 says, "For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." Romans 2:6-7 reads, "[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life."

Romans 2:6-7 and 2:13 are often used to teach that works are necessary to be justified on the last day. For example, commenting on Romans 2:13-14, Schreiner says,

Gentiles have heard 'the law' just as the Jews have heard the law, but no Gentile is saved merely by knowing what the law requires. What is needed for righteousness is obedience to the law. Paul's aim is to say that the same is true of the Jews. Only keeping the law will result in justification on the day of judgment.

¹⁰ Schreiner, p. 117. He advocates a two-phase justification doctrine, based in part on Romans 2:13: A doctrine where final justification and final salvation are conditioned on whether persons, in his words, "do the required works." Commenting in more detail on verse 13 he asserts, "Hearing the law is of no salvific advantage; only those who do the law will be declared righteous before God (v. 13). Verse 13 in essence reiterates the principle of verse 6: those who perform the required works will be rewarded. Wilckens (1978: 132) states rightly that Paul accepts in principle the idea that those who do good works will receive justification. It will become clear only in verses 26-29 [chapter 2] whether and in what sense he thinks any can truly obtain justification by keeping the law. I should also point out that both (*dikaioi*, righteous) and (*dikaiothesonai*, shall be declared righteous) are forensic in this verse. Those who do the required works will be declared to be righteous by God, the eschatological judge, on the day of the Lord." p. 119. Regarding Schreiner's understanding of 2:26-29—which he says is key to 'whether and in what sense' a believer can obtain justification by keeping the law, he writes, "On the other hand, we should understand the good works that do lead to an eschatological reward in different terms. They are the *result* of the Spirit's work in one's life, as the connection forged between verses 26-27 and 28-29 demonstrates. The

In contrast to this, Romans 3:20 gives us Paul's understanding of Romans 2:7 and 13. And his position on these verses is this: At the final judgment none will be found who persevere in doing good, nor will any be found who are doers of the Law, for He says, "no flesh will be justified."

In other words, the requirements laid down for justification in Romans 2:6-13, are not hypothetical, they are actual and real—for any who seek justification apart from Christ. But Paul reveals that these conditions will not in fact be realized; not even by a single person. This is Paul's whole point in the overall section from 1:18-3:20. Moo's comments state this well,

It is a continual seeking after eternal rewards, accompanied by a persistent doing of what is good, that is the condition for a positive verdict at the judgment. Paul never denies the validity of this principle, but he goes on to show that no one meets the conditions necessary for this principle to become a reality. This is the conclusion to which Paul is driving throughout this part of Romans (cf. 3:9, 19-20).¹¹

To suggest that Romans 2:6-13 is an alternate means

Spirit's work on the heart logically precedes the observation of the law by the Gentiles. Autonomous works are rejected, but works that are the fruit of the Spirit's work are necessary to be saved." p. 145. The components of Schreiner's justification doctrine seem clear. First, it involves a process leading to a last-day justification for "only keeping the law will result in justification on the day of judgment." Second, it is a reward for works for "those who do the required works will be declared to be righteous." Third, justification is conditioned on doing works enabled by the Spirit, for works which "lead to an eschatological reward," of justification "are the result of the Spirit's work in one's life." This is infused grace under another name. I can't see how all of this does not undo a completed and final justification based solely on the imputation of Christ's blood and obedience.

¹¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle To The Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 142.

of justification, is to ignore Paul's flow of thought, and make Paul utterly inconsistent. Why would Paul state that men are justified by works in the midst of an argument designed to prove that no one will be justified by their works?

It is in Romans 3:20, that Paul makes everything clear: Not a single person will hear the verdict "declared righteous" on account of their God-enabled works, on that day. The verse is consistent, in other words, with what he has already said in verse 10, "There is none righteous, not even one." So, in the end we are, in Paul's words, "all under sin" (verse 9). Therefore, we must receive Christ's gift-righteousness imputed by faith—as Paul immediately goes on to say in chapter 4 and 5—or we have none at all.

Another verse, which some interpret to teach a future justification conditioned on works, is Galatians 5:5. Others believe that it refers only to a future, public manifestation of justification, not an actual declaration of justification. Our focus will be on verse 5, but I will quote it in context with verse 4.

(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.

It is the phrase, "waiting for the hope of righteousness" that some understand to teach a future declaration of righteousness, or in a word, a future justification. For example, Schreiner and Caneday state, "For although we have already received God's justifying verdict by faith, by faith we yet await through the Spirit the hope of receiving this same verdict in that day (Gal

5:5).”¹² I will attempt to show that verse 5 does not have to do with a last-day justification at all.

The evidence points instead, to the view that the phrase “waiting for the hope of righteousness” has to do with the believer’s hope of future glory, which is a result of already having righteousness [a righteous standing] as one of God’s justified people. At least three things point to this conclusion.

First of all, the phrase, “the hope of righteousness” can grammatically be understood to mean “the hope which is the result of righteousness,” rather than “the hope which consists of righteousness,” or “looks forward to being declared righteous.” Either understanding of the phrase is grammatically possible.

But, the first view, “the hope which is the result of already having righteousness” best expresses Paul’s thought and intent. For one thing, in other passages he connects future hope with a present and complete justification. For example, in Romans 5:1-2 he says, “having been justified by faith...we exult in the hope of the glory of God.” Paul says the believer’s future hope of glory is a direct result of “having been justified” and possessing a righteous standing before God.

In addition, the phrase “the hope of righteousness” is similar to the phrase “the hope of the gospel.” It is not the hope which consists of the gospel, or looks forward to the gospel. It is the hope that comes from, and is the result of the gospel. That is, it is because of the gospel that we have a certain hope and expectation of glory (see Colossians 1:5, 23). This is parallel to Paul’s statement in Romans 8:24 where he says, “for in hope we have been

¹² Thomas Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), p. 162.

saved.”

Furthermore, earlier in Galatians 2:16; 3:8-13, Paul had forcefully stated that believers are already justified and therefore, already possess righteousness before God. Therefore, as “the hope of the gospel” is the hope which is the result of the gospel, so also, “the hope of righteousness” is the hope that is the result of righteousness.

The second reason that I believe this view is correct is the immediately preceding context. In verse 4 Paul addressed people who had chosen to seek justification by the works of the law. He says in verse 4, “you have been severed from Christ you who are seeking to be justified by law, you have fallen from grace.”

The phrase “seeking to be justified” is a present tense. It indicates a decision to earnestly and continuously pursue justification by works. Paul warns that this, in effect, cuts them off from Christ and any possibility of being saved. He says, “you have been severed from Christ.” In other words, seeking justification by works severs a person from Christ and the justification He offers (see Romans 10:3-4).

In a word, by choosing to pursue a works-justification, they “had fallen from grace.” So Paul warns that they are in great danger. To approach God for justification by works will only result in rejection and condemnation.

This is the immediate context of verse 5. Therefore, it is unlikely Paul would respond to the works-justification of verse 4, with a future justification conditioned on works in verse 5. Rather, it would be expected, that he would respond to verse 4 by affirming a righteousness already possessed, because of a justification already enjoyed. This, I believe, is what Paul does when he speaks of “the hope of righteousness.” So, from the immediate

context as well, it seems evident that verse 5 does not concern future justification.

This brings us to the third reason to understand “the hope of righteousness” to mean the hope of glory that comes from righteousness. This is the specific contrast that Paul makes in verse 5 with verse 4. Paul says, “for we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.” The personal pronoun “we” is placed first for emphasis. It is an emphatic contrast to those in verse 4.

His contrast is this: “We,” in contrast to you in verse 4, are not in a process of justification. Instead, we are people who “through the Spirit by faith,” are already justified (as clearly stated in 2:16 and 3:8-13). That is, we are people waiting for “the hoped for things” that come from already being righteous by justification in Christ! Or as one commentator says, We are waiting for, “the realization of the hoped for things pertaining to the state of righteousness conferred in justification.”¹³

So, we can sum up this way: The grammatical meaning of the phrase itself, the immediate context in which it is written, and the contrast with verse 4, all point to the fact that verse 5 does not speak of a future justification. Rather, it has to do with the believer’s future hope of glory, because of a righteousness, already conferred by justification.

Fourth, Christ Rejects Works Done By God’s Grace As Having Any Part Or Influence In Justification

¹³ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 226

But there is more. Christ, Himself, in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector in Luke 18:9-14 rejects works done in God’s strength from having any part in justification. The significance of the account cannot be overstated. In it Christ directly addresses the issue of how a person is justified and accepted before God. In fact, it is not going too far to say that Christ tells this story with the specific purpose of teaching how a person is justified. This is evident from verse 14, when he says, “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other.”

What also makes the account so significant, is that the Pharisee and the tax collector are representative of all men. They represent the two ways by which men approach God for their justification. One way is accepted, the other is not. Christ flat out says, “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other.” So the account is utterly critical.

But why was one man justified and the other was not? Christ tells us. First, there is the tax collector. Notice what Christ says of him,

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went to his house justified (Luke 18:13-14a).

Why was the tax collector justified? He was justified because he placed his hope for acceptance with God entirely outside of himself. He renounced his works and righteousness, for he was totally aware that he had none. This is vividly pictured by the fact that Jesus says he, “standing some distance away was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, the sinner.’”

“Be merciful to me, the sinner” literally means, “be

propitious with me, the sinner.”¹⁴ In other words, the man is pleading with God to find a way to be satisfied [propitious] with him, solely based upon God’s mercy. He was pierced with the realization that he was, as it were, “the sinner” who had absolutely no righteousness before God—he knew his case was hopeless, apart from the mercy of God.

The tax collector’s response is representative of all who are justified. All must see themselves as this man saw himself if they are to be justified. Ryle states this fact well,

The Publican confessed plainly that he was a sinner. This is the very A B C of saving Christianity...Let these things sink down into our hearts. He that has learned to feel his sins has great reason to be thankful. We are never in the way of salvation until we know that we are lost, ruined, guilty, and helpless. Happy indeed is he who is not ashamed to sit by the side of the publican! When our experience tallies with his, we may hope that we have found a place in the school of God.¹⁵

Those who see themselves as the tax collector, and put their trust in Christ are justified; all others are not. In other words, all of us are in the same category as the tax collector; whether we acknowledge it or not. Or does God justify a tax collector one way and others another way?

Christ, in this story, anticipates His propitiatory death, and lays the groundwork for Paul’s teaching in Romans 3:21-26. Christ knew that His death would propitiate, or satisfy, God’s justice for our sins, and turn away His wrath. Therefore, Christ’s blood and obedience is the only

¹⁴ The Greek term is *hilasmos* the same root word as propitiation in Romans 3:25.

¹⁵ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), p. 262

place sinners can find mercy, full pardon, and a justifying righteousness. There simply is no place for a future justification conditioned on works—of any kind or any degree.

Then there is the Pharisee, of whom Christ said, in a startling contrast to the tax collector, “rather than the other,” did not go to his house justified. But why was the Pharisee not justified? Two things stand out.

First, he rested on his works, at least as a partial cause of his acceptance with God. He was an example, Luke says in verse 9, of those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” Christ describes the man’s thinking in verses 10-13, “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself, ‘God I thank you that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of all that I get.’”

The startling thing about the man is that he did not claim that he was righteous in and of himself. He made a point of thanking God for his righteousness. He said, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people.” In other words, he acknowledged that his righteousness was a product of God’s grace and strength working in and through Him. It was a God-produced, grace-enabled righteousness. And Christ rejected this righteousness for justification! Why? Because it was still his righteousness—for he trusted in himself that he was righteous (v.9).

Second, he was a man with an unhumiliated, self-exalting heart. In verse 14 Christ says, “I tell you this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.” Here is the sobering reality: To think that works, even God-enabled works, have any part in our justification reflects a proud heart which God detests. Calvin states it this way.

Though a man may ascribe to God the praise of works, yet if he imagines the righteousness of those works to be the cause of his salvation, or rests upon it, he is condemned for wicked arrogance.¹⁶

The fact is, grace-enabled works are still our works as verse 9 tells us. We are the ones who do them. We are the ones who act them out. Piper says,

Verse 9: “[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” Now make sure you see what this is saying. It is not saying that he is trusting in himself to make himself righteous. No. He says explicitly he is thanking God for that...He is trusting in himself that he is righteous with the righteousness that God has worked in him. That is what he is trusting...When it came to justification—for that is the issue, as verse 14 shows—this man was trusting in the wrong thing...He was looking to his own righteousness—and it was his, not because he created it, but because he acted it. It was in his will and in his heart¹⁷ and in his actions. It was his, and it was put there by God.

The long and short of all of this is: All works of all kinds—even grace-enabled works—are rejected for justification. The only righteousness God has provided for condemned sinners is the perfect, unblemished righteousness of the sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing, sinner-loving Savior imputed to their account by faith.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Harmony of the Evangelists Vol. XVI* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), p.203.

¹⁷ John Piper, “This Man Went Down To His House Justified,” *Justification*, August 06, 2006, <<http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/06/080606.html>> (August 18, 2006).

Perseverance In Faith And Obedience Is Not A Condition Or Cause Of Attaining Final Justification

The second main point that demonstrates that works contribute nothing to justification is the fact that perseverance in holiness is not a condition, cause, or means of attaining final salvation or justification. This is not to say it is not an absolute necessity. As emphasized earlier, without holiness, and an obedient faith, there is no true evidence that a person has been saved.¹⁸

Perseverance Is A Means Of Assurance, Not A Means Or Condition Of Attaining Final Salvation.

The book of Hebrews puts great emphasis on the need for perseverance. In fact, the book was written as an exhortation to persevere. The author writes in Hebrews 13:22, “Bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you in brief.” The following are examples of exhortations to persevere,

For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. (10:34-36)
But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the persevering of the soul. (10:38-39)

¹⁸ This does not mean that a genuine Christian cannot fall into sin, even grievous sin, nor have prolonged struggles with overcoming a particular sin. (Romans 7:15-25).

The teaching of these verses is unmistakable: Perseverance in obedience is absolutely necessary. On the other hand, they do not teach that perseverance is a condition of attaining final salvation or justification. We will take a closer look at these verses, and others, to show that this is the case.

Verse 35 says, “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.” The author has just stated, in verse 34, what the “great reward” is. It is “a better possession and a lasting one.” In other words, it is the believer’s inheritance (see I Peter 1:3-4) and the glories of heaven, which are the additional blessings, over and above justification, that come with our “adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:5). John Owen says, “Wherefore the ‘recompense of the reward’ here intended is the glory of heaven proposed as a crown unto them that overcome in the sufferings for the gospel.”¹⁹

Paul referred to the believer’s inheritance when he said, “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). Christ referred to it when He said, “For behold, your reward is great in heaven (Luke 6:23). So the promised reward is not justification. It is the glory of our inheritance which God promises as a reward to His people, for their faithfulness in suffering for His name.

Paul speaks of rewards beyond justification in 1 Corinthians 3:8, 14-15, and Christ mentions them in Matthew 19:28-29. In context, it makes perfect sense. The Hebrew believers had experienced “seizure of your property.”(vs. 34) Therefore, the author reminds them

¹⁹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen, vol. XXII, An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), p. 577

that they have a “better possession and a lasting one” in glory.

Verse 36 then says, “you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.” There is no issue that there is a connection between endurance and receiving, “what was promised.” But what is the connection? The connection is not that endurance is a condition of attaining final justification or salvation. The verse simply states a reality: Endurance necessarily precedes (or is connected to) receiving the full enjoyment of what God has promised in final salvation and glory. It is an unavoidable fact.

In other words, what is being taught is consistent with what is emphasized throughout the New Testament, that sufferings precede glory. For example it says in Acts 14:22, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Enduring tribulations is not a condition or cause of entering the kingdom. It is simply how all believers enter in. It is the same with Hebrews 10:36-39. It states no more than this. There is not a word that endurance is a condition, cause, or means of attaining final salvation or justification. It is simply a reality that before we inherit, we must endure.

Verse 39 states it another way. It says, that true believers are “those who have faith to the persevering of the soul.” This verse states that genuine believers are those who continue to have faith (the present tense is used), and the result of this continuance in faith is “the persevering of the soul.”²⁰

²⁰ This does not discount the reality of the sin to death (I John 5:16) or the discipline of God where He causes someone to “sleep” in death (I Corinthians 11:30). The sin to death is the sovereign act of God whereby He accomplishes His greater purposes, by the death of a sinning believer (Acts 5:1-11). This is in contrast to the view which holds that the sin to

Note carefully, it does not say that the result is , “the justifying or saving of the soul.” All it says is that faith results in the persevering, or sustaining, of the soul. In context, this is in direct contrast with verse 38 which speaks of the ones who “shrink back.” In other words, genuine faith, is a living faith, which sustains the soul so that true believers do not “shrink back.” In fact, he expressly says in verse 39, “we are not of those who shrink back.” In a word, faith enables believers to continue on. Once again, the verse says nothing about persevering as a condition of attaining final salvation.

With that as a backdrop, we will look at two verses which are key to understanding the warning and perseverance passages that occur throughout the book of Hebrews. The verses are Hebrews 3:6 and 3:14, they say,

But Christ was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. (v. 6)

For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end. (v. 14)

The significance of these verses cannot be overstated. They are a summary statement, of the author’s theology of perseverance, as it relates to final salvation in the book of Hebrews.

First, notice that verse 6 says, “we are” Christ’s house. His point is that we are already a member of His house. He does not say “we will become” His house. Then he adds, “if we hold fast...until the end.” In other words, perseverance in faith, in the author’s thinking, is not a condition, cause or means of becoming Christ’s house [or

death is what God does in the case of those who cannot be sanctified.

being saved]. On the contrary, it is the proof and evidence that “we are” already His house. In short, that we are already saved people who belong to Christ’s family.

More to the point is verse 14. It says, “For we have become partakers of Christ.” The verb “become” is in the perfect tense. It emphasizes that genuine believers have been savingly joined to Christ in the past, with the result it remains an unchanging reality in the present. And what is the proof we are partakers, savingly joined to Christ? We persevere in faith and obedience to the end. The author writes “If we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” Once again he stresses that perseverance gives evidence that we are, in fact, already partakers of Christ.

So, we can conclude that, perseverance is proof that we are saved people who belong to Christ. There is not a word that perseverance is the cause or means of attaining final salvation or justification. What it comes down to is this: Perseverance in faith and obedience is designed by God to be a means of assurance of salvation, in order to encourage His people to continue on in their battle with sin. Grudem states this well,

For our purposes 3:14 is especially relevant: *For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm to the end* (NASB). This verse provides an excellent perspective on the doctrine of perseverance. How do we know if “we *have become* partakers of Christ”? How do we know if this being joined to Christ *has happened to us at some time in the past?* One way in which we know that we have come to genuine faith in Christ is if we continue in faith until the end of our lives...continuing in faith is the one means of assurance that is named here by the author of Hebrews. He mentions this to warn his readers that they should not fall away from Christ, because he is writing to a situation where

such a warning is needed (see 3:12).²¹

It goes without saying that Hebrews 3:6 and 3:14 are critical. They give us a framework for understanding the theology of perseverance in the book of Hebrews. And what they teach is this: Perseverance passages are a means of assuring believers that they are truly saved people. This in turn, encourages believers to continue on in faith (which is the purpose of the letter 13:22) and not fall away. In no case are they a means of attaining final salvation or justification.

Enduring to the End is not a Condition of Attaining Final Salvation or Justification

Besides passages in Hebrews, another verse which is interpreted to teach that justification and final salvation are conditioned on perseverance in obedience is Matthew 10:22 (parallel passages are Matthew 24:13, Mark 13:13). In it Christ says,

You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.

Christ's words, "but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" are interpreted to say, 'it is the one who has endured to the end, *because he has endured*, who will be saved.' In other words, endurance, or perseverance is seen as a condition, or means, of attaining final salvation and justification. Schreiner and Caneday, for example, commenting on Matthew 10:22 write,

²¹ Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews," in Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware (ed.), *Still Sovereign*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, p. 175

The text says, the one who perseveres to the end will be saved. Jesus' words indicate that perseverance to the end is the necessary condition. Perseverance is a₂₂ means that God has appointed by which one will be saved.

They do not leave any doubt as to what they have in mind when they say, "perseverance is a means by which one will be saved." For they write in a footnote,

At times we will use the words *condition* and *means* interchangeably. When we use the word *means*, we use it in the sense that perseverance is a necessary₂₃ means that God has appointed for attaining final salvation.

The authors are to the point: Perseverance is a "condition and means...by which" one actually attains final salvation. Their emphasis must not be missed: Perseverance is not merely an evidence of salvation, or that through which we enter into final salvation. It is actually a condition and means of "attaining final salvation." To attain salvation, by perseverance, is to work for it. A primary dictionary definition of attain is; "to achieve, or accomplish; to arrive at, esp. after some labor or tedium."²⁴ Therefore, to speak of "attaining salvation," is the language of works, whether it is said to be so or not.

This however, is not what Christ teaches. The evidence indicates that we should understand the verse to mean something else. Rather, it teaches that perseverance is the inescapable experience that all believers undergo before they come into the glory of final salvation. There

²² Schreiner and Caneday, p. 151

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 151

²⁴ *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1996), p. 133

are at least three reasons for understanding the verse in this way.

First, it is consistent with Paul's teaching on the finality of justification in the book of Romans. In short, because the believer is already justified, there is nothing left to attain, nor is there any condition left to be met. The clear teaching of Paul in Romans is not open to any qualification. Any necessary conditions, causes, or means of attaining final salvation and justification, contradict Paul.

Another way to state it is this: Romans was written to give a full understanding of the gospel of free justification. On the other hand, the book of Hebrews and the gospels were not. The book of Hebrews was written as a "word of exhortation" to continue in the faith (Hebrews 13:22). The gospels were written to prove Christ was the Son of God, and the Messiah. Therefore, since Scripture interprets Scripture, The Gospels and Hebrews must be understood in light of the clear teaching of Romans.

Second, Christ's words in Matthew 10:22 are conspicuous by the absence of the language of condition and instrumentality. Christ does not say "if one has **endured** to the end he will be saved:" There is no conditional "if" clause. It must be read into the text.

In addition, there are no prepositions that indicate instrumentality either. That is, He does not say that endurance is that, "**by** which," or "**through** which," we will be saved. There is a glaring omission of prepositions such as, "by" or "on account of" or "through;" prepositions which express cause and instrumentality. In short, Christ does not say "it is the one who **by enduring** to the end who will be saved."

On the other hand, Paul regularly uses prepositions when he speaks of the relationship of faith to justification.

He says, we are saved "by" (*en*) or "through" (*dia*) faith. For example, he says, "having been justified **by** faith" (Romans 5:1), and "God will justify the circumcised **by** faith and the uncircumcised **through** faith" (Romans 3:30). Paul is careful to use prepositions to indicate that grace and faith are the means and instruments of justification. Christ, in contrast, does not say we are saved "by" or "through," let alone, "on account of" endurance. He simply asserts, "it is the one who has endured...who will be saved."

Third, and this is most significant, Christ does not say, "it is the one who has endured...who will be justified." Christ says "will be saved." There is a great difference! It is one thing to say, "it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved." It is another thing to say "it is the one who has endured to the end who will be justified." While they often overlap, the terms are not synonymous or equivalent. Therefore, the terms must be carefully distinguished. Why?

Justification is narrow and specific in meaning. It means to declare righteous in relationship to the law. It is a verdict in relationship to law and justice. As a verdict, by definition, it is once-for-all. There are no phases or steps to a justifying verdict. Salvation, on the other hand, is comprehensive and all-encompassing. In general it means "to rescue or deliver" (Acts 27:31). It is the basic term for deliverance. It can include justification, sanctification, the future redemption of the body, as well as glorification and our final inheritance.

Therefore, because it is broad in meaning, salvation has both an 'already' aspect, and a future 'not-yet' aspect. Justification, on the other hand, being narrow and specific, has only an 'already' accomplished aspect.

Since the terms do overlap, sometimes "saved" may

refer to the 'one-time,' finished reality of justification. Ephesians 2:5, 8 is an example, Paul using the perfect tense says, "you have been saved." The tense of the verb stresses a past completed act, with a present unchanging, ongoing result. At other times salvation refers to a future, yet-to-be completed aspect, things such as; the redemption of our bodies and deliverance from judgment, etc. (Romans 13:11). However, the future aspect of salvation, although often prominent in Scripture, is never said to include justification.

The point I am making, that some fail to see, is this: Christ does not say, "justified," He says "saved." And salvation is not justification. It is deliverance which is the result of justification. This is evident in Romans 5:9, where Paul uses both terms. He says, "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him."

As he has done since verse one, Paul is pointing out the great blessings of a completed justification. One further blessing of this "now" justification is that it guarantees our future salvation, and deliverance, from wrath. There is no mention of a future justification, for the simple reason that the verdict of justification has already been declared.

In verse 1 Paul accentuates the fact that the verdict of justification has already been declared. He uses the aorist, or past tense, in the verb "having been justified" and contrasts it with the present, or continuous tense of the verb "we have peace with God." His point is to stress that because the verdict of justification has been declared, we now continuously enjoy "peace with God" that is an ongoing and permanent reality. When he gets to verse 9, Paul points out another benefit and result of "having now been justified." It is that our future salvation (deliverance)

from the wrath of God is guaranteed.

All of this supports the conclusion that what Christ is saying in Matthew 10:22, (reiterated by Paul in Romans 5:9) is that believers can look forward to a future final salvation. But, of a future justification, Christ (like Paul) says nothing. Therefore, we must not read justification into Christ's words and teach what He is, in fact, not teaching. Like Paul, we must clearly distinguish the two terms. To confuse the two is to add works to justification, and undo the gospel of the grace of God.

We can conclude that the Scriptures do not teach that final salvation or justification is conditioned or attained by perseverance. There is no need. Christ has attained all, He has done all. We now stand complete and justified in Him; clothed in His perfect righteousness alone, imputed to us by faith. To Christ alone be all the glory!

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