



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

The Theology of the Reformers

TRANSCRIPT

“Justification: Its Forensic or Legal Character”

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee again for another opportunity to study the Scriptures and to reflect upon the doctrinal teaching of Thy word. We pray Thou wilt give us understanding, enable us to comprehend the Lord, and especially with regard to this doctrine of justification by grace, enable us to grasp the importance of it and the principles that are revealed in the teaching.

We also ask Lord that Thou wilt be with us throughout this hour and the hour that follows. May in all of the instruction tonight our Savior be honored and glorified and Thy name exalted. We pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] This is the second in our series of studies on justification by grace, and our topic, as you can tell from the overhead projector is “Justification: Its Forensic or Legal Character.” The term forensic is used quite frequently in discussions of the doctrine of justification by faith, and that is why I have dared to use it in the title, even though I have discovered that it's not quite as familiar to us as probably it would have been fifty to seventy-five years ago. It is a synonym for legal, and so when we say its forensic character, we mean, essentially, its legal character.

This is the second in the series, and so for just a few moments I want to review what we tried to go over last week in our study. First of all, I tried to make the point that

justification is central the Christian faith and cited some authorities, both contemporary and more ancient in support of that claim.

For example, G.C. Berkouwer, some think the most important contemporary theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, former Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free University in Amsterdam, now retired, has said that justification by faith “defines the preaching of the church.” In other words, you can tell what a church preaches by its concept of justification. If it preaches the true doctrine of justification by grace, then you can say that it does preach the gospel of the Bible.

Luther said that it was the article of a standing and falling church, by which he meant that our concept of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith determines whether the church stands or falls, so that if we do not preach the doctrine of justification by grace in the biblical sense, it was Luther’s contention, I think rightly, that the church would fall. Now that is, fall before God, that does not necessarily mean that it would not succeed according to human standards. Now if she does preach that gospel, she shall stand, and though she may not seem to be succeeding according to human standards, she is according to divine standards.

The second point I sought to make is that justification overthrows the legalism of Pelagianism, of Romanism, and of Arminianism. The reason for this is that justification, according to the Bible, is justification by grace. And in the case of Pelagianism, with its stress upon the ability of man to do the will of God, or semi-Pelagianism, with its stress upon man out of his free will, being able to make the first step toward God; or in Romanism in which we have a system of justification by ordinances, the observance of ordinances; or Arminianism, which is semi-Pelagian in its doctrine of the will in which man may make the first step toward God. In all of these different types of viewpoints, there is fundamentally the same objection; they are all legalistic.

If it is possible for all of us to take the first step toward God, then of course we have fallen into a doctrine of justification by works. So that is why the Reformers, that is

why evangelicals who have been, in my opinion, clear in their understanding of grace, have always, strongly spoken out against the doctrine of the human free will. Free willism is contrary to the grace of God. That is why we try to stress it here in Believers Chapel.

Justification by grace alone overthrows all forms of legalism, even those sophisticated ones which escape the minds of the theologically illiterate. I’m not referring to you; you are the theologically literate, now, of course. [Laughter]

Another point that I tried to make, “the gospel of the five onyls.” In case you don’t remember, *sola fide*, by faith alone; *sola gratia*, by grace alone; *solo Christo*, for Christ’s sake alone; *sola scriptura*, by Scripture alone, and *solli deo gloria*, to God alone by the glory. That of course, is the result of the preaching of the doctrine of justification by grace. This gospel of the five onyls, as it has been called, is found in the ancient confessions.

Now when I spoke about the ancient confessions, I did not mean the confessions of the earliest centuries of the Christian faith, but we looked at the statements in the Heidelberg catechism, the Belgic catechism, the Augsburg statement or standard of the Lutheran church, and we also looked at the Westminster Confession of Faith, and I think we looked at one other of the standards.

These standards which were expressions of certain parts of the Reformed church united in the confession that justification was by grace. You’ll find that taught in the Heidelberg catechism, you’ll find it taught in the Belgic Confession, you’ll find taught in Augsburg and you’ll find it taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith. So, that we are not speaking about something that is only characteristic of a slender part of the whole of the evangelical church. We are talking about that which is mainline Protestant Reformed teaching when we talk about justification by grace.

And then I didn’t have sufficient time at the end to do anything more than refer to a few passages of Scripture, simply to point out that the Bible is full of the idea of

justification. It is not a doctrine which is taught only in a few passages. It is a doctrine that is taught throughout the whole of the Bible. Well, that’s a brief review of what we went over last time.

What is salvation? Well, for the Apostle Paul, it’s being justified. I’d like for you to turn with me to Romans chapter 1 verse 14 through verse 17 and let me read these very familiar verses which form, some think, the theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Some go so far to say it’s the theme of all of Paul’s epistles. Romans chapter 1 and verse 14. The apostle writes,

“I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. (Why was Paul eager to preach the gospel to those who were in Rome? Well, he explains in verse 16. He says,) For I am not ashamed of the gospel (why is he not ashamed of the gospel?) for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Well, why is the gospel the power of God unto salvation?) 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.’”

So you can see that for Paul to preach the gospel was to preach a righteousness of God. Or, for Paul to speak about the salvation of men’s souls was to speak about justification. For the Apostle Paul to be saved is to be justified. To be justified is to possess salvation.

Not that has often become a difficulty for earnest souls. If we say that it is possible for man to be justified. Or if we say that a believer in Christ is justified; that is, that we stand right at this moment, if we are believers in Christ, just in the sight of God, well, earnest souls have had difficulty with that because they look within themselves and they still see a whole lot of sin.

And when they read the Bible, they note that the Bible says a great deal about their sin. For example, in Romans chapter 7, they discover that the principle of sin dwells in their members. So, how is it possible for them to be justified or just before God, but carrying around with them in their members the principle of sin?

Now James also speaks about men as being sinners in his epistle, so, this is not something that is caught just in one place. It is true that we are sinners. We are conscious of sin within ourselves. Then, how it can be said that we are justified?

Now we must be clear on two points if we are to put all of these facts together and understand them. First of all, after we are saved, we are still sinners. Now Romans 7 says that. James chapter 4 and verse 8 says it very definitely, and I’ll read it for you, because I can find it more quickly than you since you don’t know which chapter I’m looking at. James chapter 4 and verse 8 says this,

“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners (now he’s addressing his epistle to believers). Cleans your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded (in verse 11, if there should be any question about it, he says,) do not speak against one another, brethren.”

So James calls us sinners.

That’s the first point we need to be plain, clear about. After we are saved, we are still sinners. Luther liked to say that we were at the same time just and a sinner. And in fact, the Latin expression that he used, *simul justus et peccator*, came to be a kind of common expression of the fact that we were both just and a sinner at the same time.

The first point is that after we are saved, we are still sinners. The second point is that after we are saved, we are justified. So, we are still sinners, and we are justified. Acts chapter 13 and verse 38 and 39 is a text in which the Apostle Paul states our

justification. He states there in words that anticipate some of the doctrine that he will preach in Romans and Galatians,

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, (in Antioch and Pisidia) that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed (the Greek word is justified) is justified from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.”

And then in this passage, in Romans 1, 16 and 17, he states,

“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 to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘BUT THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’”

So then, here we have men are just on the one hand, and they are sinners on the other. How shall we handle this problem?

Does justified mean “to be just.” Does it mean “made just.” Or, is there some other understanding of this term that will help us to comprehend the fact that in the sight of God, we may be both just and also sinners at the same time? Well, that what we want to look at, and we want to try first of all to take a look at the confessional answer to the question. I think it is important for us to get acquainted with what some of the great confessions of the Christian church have said on these important doctrines.

You know, we have a tendency in evangelicalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to think that the truth has really come to us for the first time down through the centuries, that all of the creeds of the church of the past are just so much tradition, and therefore we are to pay to attention to them whatsoever. We are really sufficient if all we have is the Bible and our own enlightened 20<sup>th</sup> Century mentality. And with the two in hand, we can discover all

that the Bible has been teaching all along, and we don’t need the help of any other living person, even Dr. Johnson.

Now, that’s alright, as far as I’m concerned, but I would feel really bad if you were to neglect some of the great teachers God has given the Christian church. Now think how arrogant it is for a person in 1977 to say, I don’t need, and then, the great line of men through whom God has taught the Christian church down through the years.

Suppose you were to say, I don’t need Luther, I don’t need Calvin, I don’t need Whitefield, I don’t need Hodge, I don’t need Warfield. What are you saying? Well, you’re saying in effect that I don’t need men that God gifted to teach the word of God. I don’t really need his program for spiritual gifts for the Christian church. What an arrogant position to take.

Now, we must also hold those men under the word of God. We should never for one moment think that we should listen to Luther or Calvin above the Scriptures. We listen to the Scriptures first, but they have been men gifted by God to teach us, and it is foolishness as well as arrogance to pay not attention to what they’ve said.

And then when we have historic occasions when the whole Christian church or a whole section of the Christian church came together and debated great doctrines of the faith in serious consultation one with another – sometimes these councils and meetings lasted well over a year – to disregard the things they wrote finally as a mature judgment of the Scriptures is again foolishness and arrogance and pride. So, we want to listen to what the Heidelberg catechism has to say and what the Apology of the Augsburg Confession written by Melancthon has to say, and what Westminster has to say about justification by grace.

The Romanists were misled by Augustine. Again, we don’t listen to any one man, even a good man. Augustine understood grace in a very remarkable way, but he didn’t understand justification by grace. He apparently was misled by the Latin term, *justifico*, or *justificare*, the infinitive. That’s as you can probably tell, the word for justify. But in

Latin, it ordinary meant “to be made just.” That’s its natural meaning. So since Augustine read the Bible out of a Latin translation, he tended to give the words the meaning that the words had in Latin, just as you, reading an English Bible, would give the words the meaning that they have in English ordinarily, unless someone who knew Greek would say to you, that word really means this and not what the English text seems to suggest.

So Augustine thought that to be justified was to be made righteous. They thought of justification as resulting from the infused grace of God through the exercise of faith, fear, hope, love, penitence, together with an intention to receive the sacrament.

And even these things, the Romanists said, only prepared a person for justification, because as long as we’re in the flesh, we could never know that we were justified. So, the Romanists were misled by Augustine and came generally to the idea that justification generally meant “to be made just” and that it was never accomplished in this life.

But when the Reformation took place, others came to more scriptural views. Capital A in our outline is the Heidelberg catechism, and just a word about that catechism. In question 60, in the Heidelberg catechism, it is stated that the righteousness that we possess is imputed, and furthermore, it’s stated as “imputed out of pure grace.” Now when righteousness is imputed to us, it’s obvious that it’s reckoned to us. It’s not something that we have of ourselves. In other words, that kind of righteousness, imputed righteousness, is harmonious with the idea of being declared just before God, but not harmonious with the idea of to be made just.

Because if we’re made just, then our righteousness is not reckoned to us. It’s what we have, of ourselves, inherently. So the Heidelberg catechism confessed, then, in its statements that justification meant not to be made righteous, but to be declared righteous before God. Now, there’s a difference, as well shall see.

Capital B. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession. This apology, incidentally, was written by Melancthon to explain what he and his helpers had drawn up in the Augsburg Confession, because after it was drawn up, the Romanists attempted to refute it.

And so Melancthon wrote an apology, and this has really become the official understanding of the Augsburg Confession.

Melancthon explained justification this way in the Apology. He said that justification is “according to forensic (notice the term) usage, legal usage, to acquit the guilty one and declare him righteous.” So according to the Lutheran Reformation, to justify meant “to declare” righteous, to treat as righteous. And he goes on to say, “But on account of a righteousness of another (that is, not on account of our own righteousness are we counted righteous, but on the count of a righteousness of another).” In other words, *solo Christo*, for Christ’s sake alone we were declared righteous, Melancthon would have said.

The Westminster Confession, capital C, is probably better known to us since more of us come from the Presbyterian tradition rather than the Lutheran, but we have a number of Lutherans in our congregation these days. We are delighted to have you, incidentally. In the Westminster Confession, we have the same things that the Lutherans set forth. “God freely justifieth,” the Confession says, “Not by infusing righteousness into them (that was a statement directed toward the Roman Catholics), not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous.” In other words, to justify means to account as righteous, to declare as righteous.

It goes on to say, “Not for anything wrought in them (again directed toward the Romanists, infused grace) or done by them (directed toward the Pelagians and the semi-Pelagians) but for Christ’s sake alone (*solo Christo*), but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them.” So that justification meant to them to be in a position where God had declared us righteous.

John Calvin defined justification as, “Acceptance whereby God receives us into his favor and regards us as righteous.” And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Now, Mr. Calvin was not altogether clear

on some aspects of the doctrine of imputation, but here he states it plainly that it consists in the remission of sins and in the imputation of righteousness of Christ.

What’s the key thought of all of these statements? Well, the key thought is that justification means to declare righteous a person for Christ’s sake only, on account of what he has done. It does not mean to be made righteous, it does not mean to be inherently righteous. It means to be declared righteous. That is, to have a legal standing of righteousness before God.

I guess if we were to go into this further, we would say that what is involved in this is kind of a participation through exchange. Our representative has come from heaven and he has taken our sins to himself, upon himself. He has borne those sins, and we in our Substitute have borne the judicial penalty of sin. And because we have borne the judicial penalty for sin in our Substitute, we don’t have to bear it again. We don’t have to bear it anymore. It is forever gone.

But in this exchange, our righteousness is given to us so that in a sense, our Lord has taken our sins, and he has taken our righteousness. There has been an exchange. Luther says, “This is that mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners, wherein by a wonderful exchange, our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s, and the righteousness of Christ is not Christ’s but ours. He has emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us with it and fill us with it, and he has taken our evils on himself that he might deliver us from them.”

What do contemporary theologians say about justification? Now, we cannot deal with all of these men of course. I want to deal with two men who are important. John Macquarrie of the University of Oxford. John Macquarrie is the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford. That, incidentally, is a very important position, and some outstanding men, including evangelicals, have been Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford.

He speaks of justification as “an archaic term.” In other words, you shouldn’t use the term. It’s archaic. It’s old. This is usually the first step in discounting biblical doctrine: speak against the terms. As if they’re very difficult. We’re living in a scientific age when the most difficult terms are spoken by our elementary school pupils, but when the term justification is mentioned or sanctification or glorification or imputation or something like that, the average man in the pews throws up his hands and says, Why do these theologians have to use such difficult terms?

They’re not difficult. They’re not nearly so difficult as the scientific terminology of the day, believe me. They’re not nearly as difficult as the terms the economists are using today. These are simple terms in comparison with them. What you do have to have though, to understand them, is a slight interest in coming to know them, because they are in God’s word.

So, first thing Mr. Macquarrie says is, “This is an archaic term.” Really, he says – I want you to notice, he says justification is an archaic term – but this is what it really is. I wish I could quiz each one of you and ask, do you understand just what it is that he really means? He says, “Really, it is the experience of being accepted by Being.”

[Laughter]

Now the second “Being” is capitalized. Justification is an archaic term, but what it really is is being accepted by Being. Now what in the world does that mean? If justification is an archaic term, then that is an arcane term. Translated, *breckundeit* – hidden, darkened, obscured, difficult, incomprehensible. He says, further, “*Sola fide* is often exaggerated, by faith alone. There’s a danger in separating justification from (he says another archaic term!) sanctification,” [Johnson laughs] So the professor says that sanctification is also archaic, and if you talk about justification like the evangelicals do, you are inclined to separate justification and sanctification.

He goes on, “You must include the idea of making just in justification.” Now you can see that he is moving to define justification as “to be made just by God.” But he says,

“It must have the idea of making just and it must have in it the element of free human cooperation.” Notice that: “Free human cooperation.”

Now he goes on to add, “Which while indeed subordinate to the divine action, it is nevertheless indispensable.” You must have free human cooperation, and while it is subordinate to the divine action of saving a soul, that free human cooperation is nevertheless indispensable. What is he, theologically? He is a semi-Pelagian. Right. Exactly. You’re learning theology. For you see if there is anything there that we must do by way of cooperating with God, then we have fallen semi-Pelagianism. We have fallen away from the doctrine of justification by grace. The professor has done it.

And the proof of it is that when he has concluded his discussion of two pages of theology on this point – that tells us a great deal, too; that he devotes that much time to it – he concludes by saying that Hans Kung’s, probably one of the most outstanding of the Roman Catholic theologians, interpretation of justification is satisfactory for him, a Protestant. He agrees with Kung that there are just imaginary differences between the Reformed and the Roman teaching on justification by grace. When I read that statement this afternoon, Luther turned slightly in his grave. [Laughter] Because he speaks of the papistic doctrine of justification as the venom of Satan, and the most pestilential pest – *pestilentissima pestus*, the most pestilential pest.

And here is a modern day theologian sitting in a seat in Cambridge which has had evangelicals in it in the past saying there’s no difference between justification by faith and justification by works in effect.

Now what about our next professor, C.K. Barrett. Professor Barrett is one of the outstanding New Testament scholars of our day. His title is Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham in England, and he is a highly regarded scholar, a man who has written a number of very important books on biblical interpretation, and in whose works there is a great deal of good material. Professor Barrett is a man whose position is on the

border of being an evangelical. At times he speaks like an evangelical, and at other times, you have to wonder a little bit.

He does acknowledge that it has been the general opinion that the word “to justify” means “to declare righteous.” But he objects. He says really, no, the word to justify does not mean to declare righteous because it’s a translation of a Hebrew word in the Old Testament which meant in a particular stem, for those of you who know Hebrew now, you’ve had a lesson or two under Frank, so you know Hebrew, in the Hiffield stem, he says that stem, that word, the Hebrew word, *tsdiyq*, means “to make righteous.” And since the New Testament writers use the concepts of the Old Testament, we could expect for them, then, to give the Greek word, *dikaioo*, “to justify” the sense of the Old Testament word which was “to make righteous.”

Furthermore, he says, that if you do claim a justification by grace through faith, that kind of doctrine leads to Pelagianism – imagine it – in which faith becomes a righteous work. Now it’s true that if you think that faith is the real reason that you are justified, that is, that God considers your faith to be meritorious, then you have fallen into Pelagianism. So, it’s clear, the professor does not quite understand what the evangelicals have taught through the years.

Now we don’t have time to talk about the details of Professor Barrett’s viewpoint. We will, in the Advanced Study Center, deal with the exegesis of the Epistle to the Romans. Suffice to say this, that the good professor is wrong about the meaning of the Hebrew word in the Old Testament in the Hiffield stem, *tsdiyq*. If you consult any lexicon of reputable size, you’ll see that there are many passages – and I’m going to show you one tonight – where this word, *tsadaq* in the Old Testament, means not to make righteous, not to be righteous, but to declare righteous, or to treat as righteous in the legal sense.

And furthermore, to say that this is Pelagianism is, I say, to confuse the doctrine of the Reformers with the doctrine of some of the modern day preachers of the word who

do think that because we believe, our faith is regarded as a meritorious work. The facts are that our faith is a gift of God. It is, in itself, something that God provides. Professor Barrett says that for God to call an unrighteous man righteous is a legal fiction. That is, he’s really unrighteous, but God is saying he’s righteous, and that’s a legal fiction. How can God himself pretend that black is white?

Well he overlooks entirely the fact that the reason God declares the believer just is that there has been a costly achievement by Jesus Christ, on the basis of which our Lord’s saving work, we who are unrighteous in ourselves are declared by him to be righteous. It’s not a legal fiction at all. We do possess a righteous standing before God because God has given it to us in grace because of what our representative has done for us. It is a costly achievement by Christ. It is not legal fiction. Now, we’ll deal with some of these things further as we get on into the doctrine of justification by faith.

But I want to turn now for the remainder of our time to the scriptural answer, and I want to look at three simple passages in order to show tonight that justification is a forensic or legal act and that the word “to justify” means “to declare righteous.” The first passage we want to look at is Deuteronomy chapter 25 verse 1. Deuteronomy 25 verse 1. The text reads, “If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, then it shall be if the wicked man, etc.”

Now notice the expression. They justify the righteous and condemn the wicked. Now don’t for one moment think that if a man stands before a judge and he is righteous, and the judge justifies him, does he make him righteous? No. He declares him righteous and he’s justified, it can only mean declared righteous. If he’s wicked, and he’s condemned, he doesn’t make him wicked by his judgment. He merely recognizes that which is already there. Clearly, the word justify here means “to pronounce just,” because, by definition, he is a righteous man. So, the judge justifies the just, means simply he declares the righteous righteous, just. He issues a pronouncement. And incidentally, the

Hebrew lexicon, such as Koehler-Baumgartner, at this point say the word means “to treat as guiltless or to treat as just.”

Now let’s turn over to the New Testament. Now, incidentally, there are half-a-dozen passages we could turn to in the Old Testament. We don’t have time. I’m not singling out one isolated passage. Turn to Romans chapter 2 and verse 13. Romans chapter 2 and verse 13. Incidentally, the Reformers used to say that for the meaning of justification, one must go to Paul, for it’s in Paul that we learn the meaning of justification. Well, we’ll look at Paul, then.

In Romans chapter 2 and verse 13. This, incidentally, is the first occurrence of the verb, to justify, in Romans. And listen, “For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law shall be justified.” Now look at that text carefully. You can see that justified cannot mean “to be pardoned,” since if he’s justified as a doer of the law, he’s nothing to be pardoned for. If he’s a doer of the law and he’s justified, it’s obvious he’s not pardoned. He’s not made just. He’s what? Declared just. It cannot mean here “to be made just.” He’s already that by the supposition. He’s a doer of the law. So, it must mean “to declare just.”

About twenty-five years ago when I was doing some study on the doctrine of justification, I asked my wife – I’m telling this tonight not because she’s not here tonight – she was afraid she was going to catch a cold and she wanted to go a little trip next week, just anxious not to really catch a cold, so she did not come. Therefore, I’m a little freer in telling this story, but it’s not purely for that reason.

Over twenty-five years ago when I was first studying justification, I always like to ask her questions. She never beats around the bush. She always just tells me – [she’ll say] that’s terrible, or I don’t understand that, or that’s unclear or something. Anyway, I asked her, does justification mean to be just? She said, yes. I said, no it does not. I enjoyed that. I can still remember it.

Does it mean “to be made just?” Well, she was not so confident this time. She said, I guess so. So I triumphantly replied, No, it means to be declared just. So then about five years ago I ran over these notes, and I made a little note of that, and ran over the notes and was studying justification again, and I came up to her and I said, “Does justify mean to be made just, to be just, or to be declared just?” She said, it means to be declared just. What in the world made you think I didn’t know that? [Laughter]

Now one last passage. Romans chapter 3 and verse 5. I think this ought to be convincing that the term, “to justify” is forensic or legal. The apostle writes in Romans 3:4 in another of the occurrences of the word justify, citing an Old Testament passage, “May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, THAT THOU (notice the capital T if you have the New American Standard Version; wait all the words are capitalized, aren’t they? This is a reference to God,) THAT THOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN THY WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED.”

Now then, what’s the reference to here? If the reference is to God, can it mean that he is made just? It can only be since he is just, declared just. So, to justify, then, means to declare just. It is a forensic term as the Westminster Confession has put it. And the exclusive phrases with the term further confirm it.

Turn over to chapter 3 verse 23 through verse 28, and notice, as the term justify occurs how often the apostle adds an exclusive little phrase like, “it’s not by works.” Verse 23,

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace (notice, by His grace) through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 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; 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.

Where then is 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 (now notice this exclusive phrase again) apart from works of the Law.”

He’s trying to stress the fact that justification is by grace.

Quickly, chapter 4 and verse 5 through verse 8, and we’ll have to stop with this,

“But to the one 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 upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,  
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.

BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO  
ACCOUNT.”

Well, to be justified then means to be declared righteous by God. And I do think that this is extremely important, and I do believe that the Augsburg Confession is right when it says, “This whole doctrine must be related to the conflict of an alarmed conscience, and without that conflict it cannot be grasped. So persons lacking this experience and profane men are bad judges of the matter.”

In other words, in the final analysis, if we are to understand justification by faith, that we have had the experience of coming to the knowledge of our sin, of our guilt, of our condemnation, of realizing our inability to do any of the works of the law – why any person can think he is good enough to yield himself to God I don’t understand, because God has revealed the depths of our sin to us. And if we do not understand the depths of our sin, then it’s true, we cannot understand justification by grace. May God help us to do it.

I’ve intended for two times to conclude with an account of Luther’s conversion, and I still have not been able to get to it. [Laughter] Our time is up. We’ll have to close. Let’s close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for this great doctrine, and that by the grace of our great God apart from works, believers are declared just, righteous before Thee. What a relief to the guilty, the sinful, the condemned. And what joy to know of our acceptance and the imputation of the righteousness of our God. Be with us in the hour that follows.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.