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Justification: Moral or Forensic?

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How then can a man be just with God?¹ Job 25:4
I am not justified by works of my own,
But rather through faith in Christ alone,
Who died as a substitute for my personal sin,
That His righteousness might dwell within.

When I studied criminology in school, a widely accepted truism held that two kinds of criminals exist in the world, those who have been caught, and those who haven't. The reality is that everyone, at some time in his life has committed a crime and fractured the law, and whether the infraction is small or great, people are guilty. Someone might break a law and then say "I did not know it was a crime". However, the law presupposes that everyone knows the law, so that ignorance is no excuse. If a person was daydreaming while driving through a red light, he might try to explain to the officer who pulled him over that he "was not aware of the red light", but the officer will insist that he should have paid attention, and justly ticket him. Likewise, God justly judges all humanity by the standard of His own perfect righteousness (Matt. 5:48, Rom. 10:2-4) and either justifies or condemns accordingly. Ignorance of God and His standard does not remove the guilt of fallen humanity.

The question "how can a man be just with God?" is of major importance. Often humanity sees God as possessing only the attribute of love, and subsequently asks "how can a loving God send any to the lake of fire?" The Bible declares that God is love (Jer. 31:3; 1 Jo. 4:7-12, 16), but He is also righteousness (Ps. 11:7; 97:6; 111:3; 119:137; Rom. 10:3-4; 1 Jo. 2:29) and justice (Ps. 9:7-8; 19:9; 50:6; 58:11; Heb. 10:30-31); and based on the two attributes of righteousness and justice, God can have nothing whatsoever to do with sin, except to condemn it. The real question should be "how can a righteous and just God allow a rotten sinner into heaven?" How? Because God in love provided a way to satisfy His righteousness and justice without compromising His character and this act of love can be understood in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

I. What is Justification?

According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, justification is "an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight,

¹ All Scripture quotes are from the *New American Standard Bible* © 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.

only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”² The great theologian John Calvin sees justification “simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.”³ The great church historian Phillip Schaff states:

The subjective principle of Protestantism is the doctrine of justification and salvation by faith in Christ; as distinct from the doctrine of justification by faith and *works* or salvation by grace and *human merit*. Luther's formula is *sola fide*. Calvin goes further back to God's *eternal election*, as the ultimate ground of salvation and comfort in life and in death. But Luther and Calvin meant substantially the same thing, and agree in the more general proposition of *salvation by free grace through living faith in Christ* (Acts 4:12), in opposition to any Pelagian or semi-Pelagian compromise which divides the work and merit between God and man. And this is the very soul of evangelical Protestantism.⁴

Both *tsadaq*⁵ in the Old Testament (Gen. 15:6; Isa. 61:10) and *dikaioo*⁶ in the New Testament (Rom. 3:22, 25, 26, 28) refer to someone being declared righteous in a legal sense according to a legal standard. When a person is declared righteous *before God*, it is based on the fact that God has imputed His righteousness to that person, who by faith has trusted in the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ on his behalf. Being declared righteous *before God* has to do with justification, whereas being declared righteous *before men* has to do with vindication. The first is based on the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ, the latter with spiritual growth. Merrill F. Unger writes:

Justification is a divine act whereby an infinitely Holy God judicially declares a believing sinner to be righteous and acceptable before Him because Christ has borne the sinner’s sin on the cross and has become “to us...righteousness” (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 3:24). Justification springs from the fountain of God’s grace (Titus 3:4-5). It is operative as the result of the redemptive and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, who has settled all the claims of the law (Rom. 3:24-25; 5:9). Justification is on the basis of faith and not by human merit or works (3:28-30; 4:5; Gal. 2:16). In this marvelous operation of God the infinitely holy Judge judicially declares righteous the one who believes in Jesus (Rom. 8:31-34).⁷

Dr. Unger addresses the major issues related to justification and with great precision expresses the doctrine well. The evidence supporting this doctrine is overwhelmingly presented through scripture, so much so, that any person who believes or teaches otherwise will, of necessity, place a strain upon the biblical text and reject the evidence so clearly stated. In addition to Unger’s definition given above, J. I. Packer adds:

² Westminster Shorter Catechism; Question 33 (available from: http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC_frames.html)

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 3 (Albany: Ages Software, 1998), 200.

⁴ Phillip Schaff, *Justification by Faith*; The History of the Christian Church-Volume VII: (available from: <http://www.bible.org/docs/history/schaff/vol7/schaff77.htm#E12E7>)

⁵ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 842-843.

⁶ Fredrick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 249.

⁷ Merrill F. Unger, *Justification: The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 729

Justification is a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons, Rom. 4:5; 3:9-24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself. This justifying sentence is God's gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:15-17), his bestowal of a status of acceptance for Jesus' sake (2 Cor. 5:21).⁸

And Charles Spurgeon states:

The term justification is forensic, referring to the proceedings in a court of judicature, and signifies the declaring a person righteous according to law. It is not the making a person righteous by the infusion of holy habits, or by an inherent change from sin to holiness, this is sanctification; but the act of a judge pronouncing the party acquitted from all judicial charges. This is the sense in which the words just and justify are used in the Old and New Testament Scriptures.⁹

The common threads running through each definition are:

- God's standard of righteousness by which all humanity is either condemned or declared righteous (Ps. 11:7; Rom. 3:23).
- God's provision of Christ as a substitute on behalf of sinful humanity (2 Cor. 5:19-21).
- God's satisfaction with the believer who trusts in the finished work of Christ on his behalf (Rom. 8:1; 31-34).
- The imputation of God's righteousness to the believer (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).
- Justification as an act of God's grace (Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:4-5).
- Divine righteousness received by means of faith (Rom. 3:28-30; 4:5; Gal. 2:16).
- Human works rejected as acceptable to God (Isa. 64:6; Tit. 3:4-5).
- Distinction between immediate justification and progressive sanctification (2 Cor. 5:21; Jo. 17:17).

God's own righteousness is the norm or standard by which all humanity is compared and found either justified or condemned. Jesus is the only One to have ever lived a perfect life to such an extent that God looked down from heaven and said "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 17:5). "Clearly righteousness is understood as a matter of living up to the standards set for a relationship. Ultimately, God's own person and nature are the measure or standard of righteousness."¹⁰

II. Justification by Grace Alone

Grace is the unmerited, unearned favor which God demonstrates toward man based on His own character. Grace rules out any good works on the part of another to win the approval of God, for if grace is not free, then it is not grace, but rather what is due.

⁹And He also told this parable to some 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:

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Justification—Salvation is by grace through faith* (available from: <http://f27.parsimony.net/forum66635/messages/295.htm>, Aug 2003).

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon; *Justification* (available from: <http://www.soundofgrace.com/apr99/index.htm>) V5 N7.

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Co., 1998), 968.

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 18:9-14

There are those who trust “in themselves” that they are “righteous”, while others say “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” The former represent that camp who seeks to be accepted before God based on their own merit, rather than trusting in the righteousness that comes by faith alone in Jesus Christ; while the latter come to God and seek justification, not on any goodness found within, but rather on God’s mercy (Rom. 3:21-28; 4:1-11; 5:1, 6-9; 8:1, 31-34; 10:3-4; Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 21, 24-26; Phil. 3:9; Tit. 3:4-7; 2 Pet. 3:18). Those who come to God by faith alone will be justified. Notice the pseudo-righteous man operates on a relative righteousness where he compares himself with other sinners and then prays “to himself” and says “God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector”. By praying to himself as God, he makes himself the standard of universal righteousness whereby he condemns others. Such activity is biblically unwise (2 Cor. 10:12). Remember, a pseudo-righteous man never sees his own sinfulness, only the sinfulness of others.

Justification is based on grace alone, and not on any worthiness found in the sinner. The Scriptures declare loudly that “while we were yet sinners, Christ dies for us” (Rom. 5:8). While we were full of sin and completely unacceptable to God, He demonstrated His love toward us by graciously sending His Son to die as a substitute on our behalf. This act on the part of God was done not on the basis of who are, but on the basis of who He is. God did not send His Son to die for us because we were sweet and lovely, rather, He sent His Son to die for us because God is love! All humanity is deserving only of death, therefore, any act on the part of God to save anyone by declaring them righteous by faith alone in Christ alone must be considered gracious.

For those who argue that a man must do good works before he can be declared righteous before God, I say nonsense! To make a man righteous before God based on his own merit is an affront to the grace of God who has provided eternal life and righteousness based on faith alone in Christ alone. For if any man brings his own works to God and says “declare me righteous that I may enter your kingdom”, I tell you God is left with no other choice than to reject that man. For the Scripture clearly states “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” (Rom. 4:4-5). You see, it is not the man who works, but the man who trusts in the finished work of Jesus on his behalf who is declared righteous before God. It is clear, “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (Rom. 3:20).

²¹But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²²even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; ²⁵whom 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; ²⁶for 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.²⁷ Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Romans 3:21-28

Yes! God has declared it! A man is “justified by faith apart from works of the Law”. And the Scripture gives us no shortage of such statements declaring that we have “been justified by faith” (Rom. 5:1), with the result that there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), and who will dare to “bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies” (Rom. 8:33). You might ask, “Is there anything I can do by myself to be good enough?” No! The Bible describes human good as inadequate to measure up to the perfect standard of God’s righteousness. Human good is described as:

- Dead works (Heb. 6:1; 9:14).
- Not able to save mankind (Tit. 3:5; Eph. 2:8-9).
- Never acceptable to God (Isa. 64:6).
- Judged at the last judgment (for the unbeliever – Eccl. 12:14; Rev. 20:12-15= after the millennium / for the believer -1 Cor. 3:11-16; 2 Cor. 5:10 = after rapture).

This understanding does not seek to destroy what the Bible addresses regarding good works; rather it seeks to place good works as something subsequent to salvation. Phillip Schaff writes:

Protestantism does by no means despise or neglect good works or favor antinomian license; it only subordinates them to faith, and measures their value by quality rather than quantity. They are not the condition, but the necessary evidence of justification; they are not the root, but the fruits of the tree. The same faith which justifies does also sanctify.¹¹

Mike Stallard agrees with this understanding:

Good deeds in no way actualize any potential justification. Good deeds do not complete the declaration of righteousness before God. Faith and good works are not simply two things in the list of things, which taken together, cause one to be accepted before God.¹²

It is sad, but some men have confused positional justification (which comes by faith alone in Christ alone) with experiential sanctification (which is the result of spiritual growth subsequent to salvation), and concluded that man, by his own efforts can be declared righteous before God. Charles Finney has done much harm to the doctrine of justification by teaching a salvation by works rather than by faith alone. Finney states:

There can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law. This is of course denied by those who hold that gospel justification, or the justification of penitent sinners, is of the nature of a forensic or judicial justification. They hold to the legal maxim,

¹¹ Phillip Schaff, *Justification by Faith: The History of the Christian Church-Volume VII*: (available from: <http://www.bible.org/docs/history/schaff/vol7/schaff77.htm#E12E7>).

¹² Mike Stallard, *Justification by Faith of Justification by Faith Alone?* (available from: http://www.conservativeonline.org/journals/3_8_journal/justification_by_faith_or_faith_alone_frm.htm)

that what a man does by another he does by himself, and therefore the law regards Christ's obedience as ours, on the ground that He obeyed for us.¹³

And again he states:

It is self-evident, that entire obedience to God's law is possible on the ground of natural ability. To deny this, is to deny that a man is able to do as well as he can.....it is, of course, forever settled, that a state of entire sanctification is attainable in this life, on the ground of natural ability.¹⁴

Finney taught perfectionism, concluding that a man must cease from all sinfulness if he is to be acceptable before God. Finney's teaching of salvation by works contradicts the Word of God, which is the final authority on matters of faith. God's word declares "while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly," (Rom. 5:6) and "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). If man could save himself, why did Christ die? The answer is that Jesus provided for sinful man what he could not provide for himself; salvation. If man can save himself by his own efforts, then Christ dies needlessly (Gal. 2:21). Finney is guilty of rejecting the provision of God by faith alone. The apostle Paul writes of similar legalists in his own day when he states:

³For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. ⁴For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Romans 10:3-4

Man, by his own efforts, cannot win the approval of God. For Isaiah makes clear that "all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (Isa. 64:6). If a lost sinner were to be "good" his whole life and give to charities, feed the hungry, clothe the homeless, give to the poor, offer medicine to the sick, and perform every other deed declared righteous by men, and then gather all those deeds into one bag and bring it before God and ask "what is the trade-in value", it would be worth one "filthy rag." All of man's relative righteousness can never measure up to the standard of God's perfect righteousness. Man's relative righteousness is equal to one "filthy rag", which in the end will only be tossed into the fire to be burned like a soiled undergarment which cannot be cleaned.

In spite of such false teachers as Finney, the word of God rings clear that a sinner is justified before God based on the imputation of His righteousness to the one who comes with the empty hands of faith and believes the gospel.

³For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." ⁴Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. Romans 4:3-5

Paul makes the doctrine of forensic justification clear when he teaches the church at Rome to consider Abraham as the example of faith leading to righteousness. What

¹³ Charles G. Finney, Justification: Finney's Systematic Theology, Lecture 36 (Tustin, California: Gospel Truth Ministries (Electronic Edition), 1966).

¹⁴ Ibid., Sanctification, Lecture 37.

does Paul mean when he declares that Abraham believed God and that subsequently it was “credited to him” as righteousness? It means God imputed to Abraham’s account His righteousness; which imputation is possible because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on behalf of all humanity. Paul stated he would be found in Him not having a righteousness of his own, “but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9).

III. Justification through Faith Alone

The evidence for justification by faith alone in Christ alone is overwhelmingly taught in the Bible. Nearly 200 times salvation is conditioned on faith alone (Jo. 1:12; 3:16; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom. 1:17; 3:22-31; 10:3-4; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 1:1-2). Any claim to the contrary only expresses the lack of thorough study required of any serious student of the Word. Some have tried to add requirements such as baptism (Mark 16:16; 1 Cor. 1:17), lordship salvation (Rom. 10:9), or walking an aisle. One need only look back to Abraham who was never baptized, never declared God “Lord” (even though He is), and certainly never walked an aisle, and yet he is saved. Kenneth W. Allen writes:

Man is justified before God by faith alone; but what is faith? Faith is not merely intellectual assent to divine truth. “To have faith” means “to trust in,” “to rely on,” and in relation to justification faith refers to trust in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ... Faith is not the merit of justification but is the means. It is an instrument by which one lays hold of the basis of justification, which is the blood of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

The Bible declares that “by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). When Paul explained that it is “through faith” one is saved, he could not have been clearer. The Greek preposition *dia* followed by the noun *pistis* in the genitive can only mean that salvation comes THROUGH faith and never because of faith. That is, faith is the instrument by which a believer receives salvation, but faith is never the cause. J. I. Packer declares:

The necessary means, or instrumental cause, of justification is personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and risen Lord (Rom. 4:23-25; 10:8-13). This is because the meritorious ground of our justification is entirely in Christ. As we give ourselves in faith to Jesus, Jesus gives us his gift of righteousness, so that in the very act of “closing with Christ,” as older Reformed teachers put it, we receive divine pardon and acceptance which we could not otherwise have (Gal. 2:15-16; 3:24).¹⁶

Charles Spurgeon further elaborates:

How does a sinner obtain an interest in this righteousness in order to justification? The Scriptures are very clear on this. Simply by faith. (See Rom. 3:21–28; 4:4, 24, 25; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; Acts 13:38, 39.) Faith is the divinely-appointed medium of union to Christ, whose righteousness is imputed to the believer: "Even as David describeth the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord imputeth righteousness

¹⁵ Kenneth W. Allen, Justification by Faith (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary (Electronic edition by Galaxie Software, 1999)).

¹⁶ J. I. Packer, Justification (available from: <http://f27.parsimony.net/forum66635/messages/295.htm>).

without works." It is of the nature of faith to lead the sinner away from self, self-confidence and self-righteousness, to the finished work of Jesus. Hence we are said to be justified by faith, not by love or humility, or any other grace, but by faith only because faith is opposed to all works, and all graces too in the matter of our justification.¹⁷

IV. Grounds for Justification

So far we have learned that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone and that nothing else is required of the believer who would be declared righteous before God. This is possible for one reason only, and that is because Jesus Christ died as a substitute for sin. Only upon His death, burial, and resurrection does the believer find opportunity for salvation with God. Kenneth W. Allen writes:

The grounds of justification are the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was without sin in His person and conduct and during His earthly life He kept the law perfectly. Having therefore no sins of His own for which He need suffer the penalty of death, He had the right to die on the cross as a propitiation for the sins of the world.¹⁸

The grounds of justification are made possible only through the work of Jesus Christ on behalf of all humanity. The Greek prepositions *anti* (Matt. 20:28) and *huper* (Rom. 5:8 and 2 Cor. 5:21) clearly teach that Christ died "in place of" the sinner. The believer benefits from the fact that Jesus died as a substitute for him, and there is no longer a barrier between God and man (2 Cor. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:14-15). Millard J. Erickson states:

It is as if, with respect to one's spiritual status, a new entity has come into being. It is as if Christ and I have been married, or have merged to form a new corporation. Thus, the imputation of His righteousness is not so much a matter of transferring something from one person to another as it is a matter of bringing the two together so that they hold all things in common. In Christ I died on the cross, and in Him I was resurrected. Thus, his death is not only in my place, but with me.¹⁹

V. Imputation Leading to Condemnation and Justification

So, what is an imputation? The Greek *ellogeo* (2 occurrences: Rom. 5:13; Philemon 1:18), and *logizomai* (40 occurrences) denote a counting, crediting, considering, or charging something to someone's account. In a modern sense, it carries the idea crediting something to someone, much like depositing money into a checking account. Biblically, Imputation is the "action of the justice of God whereby either condemnation or blessing is assigned, credited, or attributed to a human being."²⁰ Biblically, there are two types of imputations the first is a real imputation, and the second is a judicial imputation. Dr. Robert Dean offers an excellent definition for both as follows:

¹⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, Justification (available from: <http://www.soundofgrace.com/apr99/index.htm>) V5 N7.

¹⁸ Kenneth W. Allen, Justification by Faith (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary (Electronic edition by Galaxie Software, 1999)).

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Co., 1998), 836.

²⁰ Robert L. Dean Jr., The Doctrine of Imputation and Justification (available from: <http://www.prestoncitybible.org/CD/imputjustif.htm>).

Real imputations credit something to a person which truly belongs to him; thus, an affinity exists between what is received and the one receiving it. Real imputations include: Adam's original sin to the sin nature at birth (Rom. 5:12-21), eternal life to the human spirit (1 John 5:11-12), blessings in time to the righteousness of God in us (Eph. 1:3; 1 Cor. 2:9), and blessings in eternity to the resurrected believer (2 Cor. 5:10).

Judicial imputations occur where the justice of God credits to a person what is not antecedently his own. There is no harmony, agreement, or affinity between the imputation and the object of the imputation, i.e., our personal sins to Christ on the cross (Rom. 8:31-32) and Christ's perfect righteousness to the believer at the point of salvation (Rom. 4:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:21).²¹

Regarding the six imputations listed above, only three are of immediate importance to our current study. The three are: “(a) imputation of the Adamic sin to the human race, (b) imputation of the sin of man to the substitute, Christ, and (c) an imputation of the righteousness of God to the believer.”²² Romans 5:12-21 addresses the imputation of Adam’s original sin to all humanity; however, due to the shortness of our study, I will only address verse 12.

¹²Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. Romans 5:12

Adam was the reason sin entered into the world, and as a result death spread to all mankind. When the text states “all sinned”, it is in the aorist tense in the Greek, meaning that when Adam sinned, all humanity sinned with him. That is, Adam served as the representative of all mankind, and so when Adam fell, we fell with him. You see, if Adam had not sinned, his children would not have been born with sin natures and Adam’s original sin would not be imputed by God to all his posterity. But since Adam did sin, all his children are born “in his own likeness, according to his image” (Gen. 5:3); that is, the fallen image of Adam. John Piper writes:

Paul is saying that the consequence of Adam's sin, death, was experienced by those who had not done what Adam did. In other words, Paul is stressing here that it is not our own individual sins that bring our first condemnation on us. People die who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam. The point is that Adam's sin is the most fundamental problem, not our sins – just as Christ's righteousness is the fundamental solution, not our righteousness.²³

John A. Witmer expounds on Romans 5:12 even further:

The Greek past (aorist) tense occurs in all three verbs in this verse. So the entire human race is viewed as having sinned in the one act of Adam’s sin (cf. “all have sinned,” also the Gr. past tense, in 3:23). Two ways of explaining this participation of the human race in the sin of Adam have been presented by theologians—the “federal headship” of Adam over the race and the “natural or seminal headship” of Adam... The federal headship view considers Adam, the first man, as the *representative* of the human race that generated from him. As the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Volume Two (Grand Rapid: Michigan, Kregel Publications, 1997), 296.

²³ John piper, *Adam, Christ, and Justification: part 5* (Desiring God Ministries, available from: <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/00/082700.html>, August 27, 2000).

representative of all humans, Adam's act of sin was considered by God to be the act of all people and his penalty of death was judicially made the penalty of everybody... The natural headship view, on the other hand, recognizes that the entire human race was seminally and physically in Adam, the first man. As a result God considered all people as participating in the act of sin which Adam committed and as receiving the penalty he received.²⁴

Romans 5:12, though dealing with death, describes the first of the imputations leading to justification. We should understand that without this first imputation, mankind would not be eligible to receive salvation. In fact, condemnation must necessarily precede salvation. I cannot state emphatically enough that all humanity is condemned "in Adam". You did nothing to condemn yourself before God; your condemnation is the result of the justice of God imputing Adam's original sin to your account. Millard J. Erickson explains:

All of us, apparently without exception, are sinners. By this we mean not merely that all of us sin, but that we all have a depraved or corrupted nature which so inclines us toward sin that it is virtually inevitable. How can this be? What is the basis of this amazing fact? Must not some common factor be at work in all of us? It is as if some antecedent or a priori factor in life leads to universal sinning and universal depravity. But what is this common factor that is often referred to as original sin? Whence is it derived, and how is it transmitted or communicated?²⁵

Let me set forth the doctrine logically as follows; imputation has: 1) a source of origin from which something is taken, 2) someone who performs the transaction (i.e. a transmitter), 3) a destination to which it is imputed, 4) a substance (i.e. Adam's original sin, the personal sins of every person, the righteousness of Jesus Christ), 5) a basis upon which the action takes place, 6) a time of deposit, and 7) a resultant change (real or judicial) between the two parties who participate in the exchange. Regarding the imputation of Adam's original sin to all humanity the following is noticed:

- Source of origin: Adam (Rom. 5:12).
- Transmitter: God (Rom. 5:12).
- Destination: All humanity (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22).
- Substance: Adam's original sin (Gen. 5:2; Rom. 5:12).
- Basis: Righteousness of God (Ps. 119:137; Rom. 10:3-4).
- Time of deposit: The origin of life (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12).
- Resultant change: death (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:14).

As the representative of all humanity, "Adam was on probation for all of us as it were; and because Adam sinned, all of us are treated as guilty and corrupted."²⁶ Every human is treated as though he were Adam himself, standing guilty before God with whom he broke covenant. Once again, Millard J. Erickson states:

Just as we are not actually righteous in ourselves, but are treated as if we have the same righteous standing that Jesus has, so though we are not personally sinful until we commit our first sinful act, we are, before that time, treated as if we have the same sinful standing that Adam had. If it is just to impute us a righteousness

²⁴ John A. Witmer, Romans: The Bible Knowledge Commentary (USA: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 458.

²⁵ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Co., 1998), 648.

²⁶ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Co., 1998), 652.

that is not ours but Christ's, it is also fair and just to impute to us Adam's sin and guilt. He is able to act on our behalf as is Christ.²⁷

VI. The Great Trade-off

Peter tells us “Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18). This is the greatest trade-off in history; the “just for *the* unjust”. Christ took our sins upon Himself, so we might be able to receive His righteousness. Paul makes this truth clear when writing to the church at Corinth:

²¹He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21

God the Father placed all our sin on Jesus Christ while He was on the cross and judged Him as if the sinner where there paying for the consequence of his own sin. Likewise, God the Father gives His righteousness to the sinner who comes by faith alone to Christ alone and declares him righteous, as though he were Christ Himself. Keep in mind that our sin was imputed to Jesus, and that just as such an imputation did not make Him a sinner, so the imputation of His righteousness to the believer does not make him righteous in conduct, it only declares him to be righteous. Charles Hodge declares:

There is probably no passage in the Scriptures in which the doctrine of justification is more concisely or clearly stated than [this]. Our sins were imputed to Christ, and his righteousness is imputed to us. He bore our sins; we are clothed in his righteousness... Christ bearing our sins did not make him morally a sinner... nor does Christ's righteousness become subjectively ours, it is not the moral quality of our souls... Our sins were the judicial ground of the sufferings of Christ, so that they were a satisfaction of justice; and his righteousness is the judicial ground of our acceptance with God.²⁸

God subtracts our sin and credits it to Jesus while He was on the cross (2 Cor. 5:19), and then imputes His righteousness to us at the moment of faith in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), hence we are then declared “justified”. Justification is the declaration of God that the Christian is made acceptable to Him forever, and that such acceptance is based solely on the fact that the believer is “in Christ”. Just as God cannot, and will not ever condemn Jesus Christ, neither can He, nor will He ever condemn the believer who is in union with the Savior (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:7-9). Indeed, Hebrews 10:14 declares the believer is “perfected forever” in Christ. Forensic justification does not make the believer righteous before God; rather, it declares him to be righteous because he is found to be “in Christ”. The imputation of all humanity's personal sin to Jesus Christ can be observed logically as follows:

- Source of origin: All personal sin belonging to humanity (2 Cor. 5:19-21).
- Transmitter: God (Isa. 53:5-6; Rom. 8:31-32).
- Destination: Humanity of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:12, 14; 1 Pet. 2:24).
- Substance: All personal sin produced by humanity (2 Cor. 5:19-21; 1 Jo. 2:2).
- Basis: Love of God (Rom. 5:6-8; Eph. 1:5).
- Time of deposit: While Jesus was on the cross (Heb. 10:10, 14; 1 Pet. 3:18).

²⁷ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Co., 1998), 652.

²⁸ Charles Hodge, Commentary on 2 Corinthians (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust Publication), 150-151.

- Resultant change: substitutionary death (2 Cor. 5:19-21).

On the flip side, the imputation of God's righteousness to the believer can be observed as follows:

- Source of origin: God (Rom. 3:26; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; Phil. 3:9).
- Transmitter: God (Rom. 3:26; 2 Cor. 5:21).
- Destination: Believer (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).
- Substance: God's perfect righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).
- Basis: Blood of Christ (Rom. 5:9).
- Time of deposit: Salvation (Rom. 4:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:21).
- Resultant change: Eternal life (1 Jo. 5:11-12).

The change from death in Adam to life in Christ is simple; for "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). The fact is "God sees but two men and each member of the race is either *in* one or the other. The unregenerate are *in Adam*; the regenerate is *in Christ*."²⁹ Merrill F. Unger adds:

The great theme of the book of Romans has to do with the doctrinal expression of imputation of the righteousness of God to the believer as it pertains to his salvation. It is quite obvious, therefore, that this truth is of great consequence to the Christian's salvation. The Pauline epistles in general clearly show that this phase of imputation is the groundwork of the Christian's acceptance and standing before an infinitely holy God. Only this righteousness can find acceptance for salvation, and through it alone one may enter heaven.³⁰

How righteous is God? He is perfectly righteous, in that he is altogether good and not even the slightest trace of corruption or fault can be found in Him. God's righteousness does not increase, nor does it decrease; God is perpetually righteous according to His own standard. God is just when He declares the believer to be righteous because he has trusted in the work of Jesus on the cross.

VII. What about the moralist?

In all this discussion I seem to have forgotten about the moralist. What does the moralist say about justification? He claims that the believer is justified before God through a mixture of faith and good works, or sometimes by good works alone. When talking to someone who believes that justification is based in whole or in part on human good, you will find that they usually run to a handful of verses to make their claim (Matt. 7:21-23; Jas. 2:18-26). Of course, they must, with a wave of the hand dismiss all the information in the Bible that teaches justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. They act with a pseudo-confidence as though they have objectively considered all the facts surrounding justification by faith alone and found them wanting. Self-righteous arrogance can be found in abundance among those who claim to be saved through some effort of their own. Let's consider a few verses and see if we can offer some analysis that keeps everything in order.

¹⁸But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." ¹⁹You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. ²⁰But

²⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Volume Two (Grand Rapid: Michigan, Kregel Publications, 1997), 303.

³⁰ Merrill F. Unger, Imputation: The New Unger's Bible Dictionary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 612.

are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? ²²You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,” and he was called the friend of God. ²⁴You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. James 2:18-26

“But someone may *well* say”; here James creates a character who challenges him, and gives him reason to state the truth. Justification in this context has to do with being justified before men and not God. You see, if you tell someone you have faith, and they never observe it, how can they validate your claims? In this context, justification is demonstrated to the man who says “show me your faith.” It is a man, and not God, who wants proof from the believer. Any demonstration of works is for men to see and to declare that you are righteous. “You see that a man is justified [before other men] by works [subsequent to salvation] and not by [the claim of] faith alone”. It should be remembered that justification is an immediate work on behalf of the sinner who believes in Jesus Christ and is then declared righteous. Sanctification, on the other hand, is not immediate, but is progressive. Any confusion between these two realities will result in a theology that either makes the believer’s justification a process to be lived out over time, or will make the believer righteous with the result that he never sins again. Any declaration on the part of the moralist to argue that a man is justified before God on the basis of works must reject the claims of many Scriptures, including the following:

¹⁸For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. 1 Peter 3:18

¹⁶nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the 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

For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. Galatians 3:21

⁴But when the kindness of God our Savior and *His* love for mankind appeared, ⁵He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to *the* hope of eternal life. Titus 3:4-7

⁹and 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

VIII. What do we Say?

The Scripture makes it clear that when the believer places his faith in Christ alone he is declared righteous before God based on the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ. Though this same believer may not always demonstrate his faith before others, and may even be counted among the lost according to the declarations of men, if he has indeed placed his faith in Jesus, he will forever be counted as righteous before God. It is nice when believers can demonstrate their faith so others may see, but we should never get caught in the trap of trying to live our lives as fruit inspectors trying to determine who is and is not counted among the saints. For the thief on the cross would certainly have failed any and all fruit inspections that day; yet he is certainly in heaven because of the declaration of our Lord. So, what do you say, will you trust in God who imputes His righteousness to those who come with the empty hands of faith, or will you be found praying to yourself and comparing yourself with others? Will you try to stand on your own good works to earn you a place in heaven, or will you trust in Christ alone to save you? The decision you make will determine your eternal future. I pray you will come with the empty hands of faith, trusting in the finished work of the savior.

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