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**How the Doctrine of Justification by Faith  
Impacts Christian Counseling**

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**Introduction**

Christian counseling is affected, both theologically and practically, by the doctrine of justification by faith. Counseling seeks to help a person realize and understand areas in their life that need to be conformed to the image of Christ. Justification by faith raises some practical questions in regard to that change. Since a person is justified by faith, will not their change take place over time without the aid of counseling? Is it possible for a person to “never get it” in light of their justification by faith?

Many biblical counselors will attest to what seems to be non-change in the heart of true believers. How does one reconcile what was already done through Christ with what still needs to be done here

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and now in their lives? What part does a person play in their change? What did they actually gain through their justification by faith? In this article we want to look at these and other issues surrounding the impact of justification by faith on Christian counseling.

### **I. Understanding Justification**

In the second chapter of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul describes man's spiritual condition in light of his sin. He states:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Every human being enters this world in a drastic predicament. Alienation from God is man's greatest problem. This condition or state did not happen in a vacuum but rather was the direct result of the choice to rebel against God. This rebellion not only affects a person's present life, but without the grace of God intervening he would be heading into eternity forever separated from God. In this sinful state, man lives to please *the prince of the power of the air*. Even the greatest seemingly moral choices man makes are rooted ultimately in walking in obedience to Satan without justification taking place.

Paul lays out this terrible condition to the believers at Ephesus in order to remind them of how destitute they were and now how blessed they are in light of God's justification of them through the blood of Christ. The Christian who understands their depravity will have a greater appreciation for what follows in the next verses of Ephesians chapter 2 and will realize that the justification at the hands of God is their ultimate security.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:4-9)

God is the one who initiates the process of change in the life of a sinner. God's actions are based on His *mercy* and *love*. These two attributes uphold the very foundation on which our justification stands. We are excluded from having anything to do with the act of justification. His mercy and love result in His showing of grace which ultimately saves us. Grace presupposes guilt on our part.<sup>2</sup> This process of justification not only takes care of a penalty we could not have paid but results in placing us in a new spiritual position through the work of Christ.

This truth further extends the depths of God's grace. He not only made us alive with Christ but also placed us in a position with Christ. Our sanctification through the work of Christ brings us into an inheritance we did not work to receive and therefore can never lose. This standing in Christ's righteousness is never affected to any degree by our good-day or bad-day performance.<sup>3</sup>

The enormity of our justification is often overlooked or lightly passed by. The grace of God that has saved or justified us not only removed the wall that separated us from God but also satisfied the demands of God's holiness. There was justice that needed to be accomplished in light of our offense against a holy God. In God's plan of justification, however, justice is not violated by a gratuitous pardon of the convicted sinner, rather justice has been satisfied: The penalty has been fully paid by the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

We can take no credit in what God has freely chosen to do on our behalf. No justice demanded God to act on our behalf but rather He moved in response to His love for us. Understanding that our justification solely resulted from God's sovereign plan, what part do we now play beyond our justification? How does Christian counseling affect this great truth of being freely justified by God through the work of Christ?

## II. How Change Occurs

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006): 55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Berg, *Changed into His Image* (Greenville: BJU Press, 1999): 146.

Justification gives us the ability to live a life that corresponds to God's ultimate purpose for us. There will be an outworking through our lives as God's grace changes our hearts, constantly aligning them with His. However, this change does not happen without great struggle. We are admonished in scripture in the book of Galatians:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (Galatians 5:16)

This verse gives us a command to walk in the Spirit, which assumes we have the ability to choose to walk in the Spirit. The precious indwelling of the Holy Spirit now becomes the means or the power through which we can live life in conjunction with what pleases God. There is a twofold involvement in this verse regarding our walk. We do the walking, however the Holy Spirit empowers us to walk. Jim Berg captures this idea well when he states in his book *Changed into His Image*:

Change into Christlikeness, likewise is not something we do to ourselves. It is something that happens supernaturally through the agency of the Holy Spirit when we expose ourselves to God's Word and He reveals to us His glory.<sup>4</sup>

The instruction we receive from the Holy Spirit's illumination of our hearts is the catalyst for change. However, there must be a willful yielding of our hearts to submit to this obedience. In other words, the Holy Spirit does not do the yielding but rather we yield to the Holy Spirit's control. It is vital in the counseling setting for people to grasp this concept. The knowledge of what to do is totally different from the willful yielding of one's heart to walk in what is right. There is a misconception that we need to "wait" on God to do the change. In one sense we are depending on God, His grace, His wisdom, and direction through the Holy Spirit, however we need to move in the direction in which He has empowered us to walk. In Galatians we read:

For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. (Galatians 6:8)

In this verse we again see the action taken by man determines the results that are reaped in his life. His desire to follow his flesh, versus following the Holy Spirit, will reap corresponding consequences. The counselee must be honest as to his actions that have contributed to the fruit he is reaping in his life.

The indwelling of the Spirit, the birthright of every believer, should not be confused with this control of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> The Holy Spirit's indwelling happened upon the moment we trusted through faith in the redemption of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Our justification is guaranteed because of God's promise to save us by His grace. We know through the Holy Spirit's indwelling that we are presently His children. The book of Romans declares:

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba Father. (Rom 8:15)

Our justification resulted in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. However, each believer must consciously and willfully commit themselves to yielding to the transforming work the Holy Spirit is doing in their life. The Holy Spirit is not neutral or inactive. Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would be the Person to guide, convict, and bring back to our memory the things He taught. The Holy Spirit is active in our hearts and yet we can still resist Him and come out from under His control. Scripture warns us not to do this in Romans when it says:

Neither yield ye your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness unto God. (Romans 6:13)

The act of our will is seen in this verse. There is the dichotomy in our lives between being spiritually alive through our justification but yet having the potential to walk in disobedience and totally contrary to the Holy Spirit's working in our lives. This truth has vital importance in the counseling context.

The fact is that although one may experience powerful emotions and desires, there exists the ability to say "no" and to go in another direction because of the resources that belong to the believer in Christ.<sup>6</sup> The resources of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God coupled with prayer enable the believer to truly present His body as a living sacrifice!

Why do we not do this consistently at times? We must admit that we simply choose to sin and fulfill what our selfish desires are in spite

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Berg, *Changed into His Image*. (Greenville, SC : BJU Press, 1999): 187.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002): 92.

of the justification God has given to us! In writing believers, James states:

From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *Come they* not hence, *even* of your lusts that war in your members? <sup>2</sup> Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. <sup>3</sup> Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts. (James 4:1-3)

The recipients of these words have been fully justified through faith by God's grace and they have the Holy Spirit indwelling in them. Yet, their lives are displaying selfish ambition and characteristics that match one who has not experienced transformation. Somewhere along the way they stopped yielding to the Holy Spirit's control and willfully chose to yield to their sinful flesh. All the power resides in them and yet they chose to yield to the flesh which would ultimately make them powerless. This is a strange predicament of the believer's life. We can walk a death sentence while at the same time have the Holy Spirit, which raised Jesus from the dead, living within us! And yet, our justification stands sure and unmoved by our unyielding to the Holy Spirit. The fact that our justification remains intact is further evidence of how great is the grace of God. It is further evidence that our human efforts did nothing to acquire this justification. It is further evidence to show why all the glory goes to God.

### III. Christian Counseling

Taking the Word of God and explaining its meaning and application to people is the essence of Christian counseling. The goal in biblical counseling is for the person to have their actions and responses in life reflect God's glory. In order for this to happen there will be times where the admonition needs to be firm. There will be times where compassion needs to be shown. Finally, at times the truth needs to be spoken in love.

Christian counseling seeks to see the heart of the person change through the work of the Holy Spirit. By definition, the biblical counselor is one who is persuaded of and allegiant to a Christian worldview.<sup>7</sup> This worldview is determined from the Holy Bible. As Christian counseling takes place the counselee should walk away with

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<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur and Wayne Mac, *Introduction to Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group 1994): 145.

very little opinion of the counselor as a means for direction but rather the authoritative word of God. Christian counseling can also be seen through the lens of discipleship.

The justification that is the believers cannot be hindered by the actions in their lives. As stated earlier it is freely given because of God's mercy and love and grace. However, the life for the believer will be one of constant struggle with his flesh as he attempts to *walk worthy of the gospel*. In the book of Ephesians Paul states:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

There is the plea for the believer to demonstrate a life that corresponds to the reality of being justified. Walking in a manner worthy of the calling demonstrates a life that reflects the gospel. Christian counseling will seek to find those areas in which Christlikeness is not being displayed and help instruct counselees in walking accordingly. We need to ensure that Christian counseling always circles back to the reality of our justification and therefore the reality of the power we have to walk according to God's word.

Unless we take the time to think biblically about what others share with us, we are the blind leading the blind.<sup>8</sup> Christian counseling will seek to disciple the believer in understanding and growing in his knowledge of who he is presently in Christ, as well as how he needs to walk presently in light of the flesh and its struggles. Paul makes us very aware that in spite of our justification in Christ and in Christ alone, we are going to have a battle with our flesh and its sinful desires. Paul states his own personal struggle in Romans when he says:

<sup>5</sup> For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. <sup>16</sup> If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that *it is* good. <sup>17</sup> Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. <sup>19</sup> For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. <sup>21</sup> I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. <sup>22</sup> For I

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002): 187.



delight in the law of God after the inward man: <sup>23</sup> But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. <sup>24</sup> O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? <sup>25</sup> I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:15-25)

Believers will struggle in this life with sin. Our flesh has not been redeemed. The sinful desires, while not the norm in a believer's life, will often creep up and we act upon them. The counselee can respond two ways to this spiritual reality. He can either throw his hands up and give up trying to live a life of righteousness, or he can repent, ask forgiveness, and continue to renew his thinking in conjunction with God's word. To throw his hands up is to forget that he is forever a child of God. His failure in sin does not remove his justification in Christ. The condemnation that often arises in the believer's life comes from falling into sin and falling repeatedly. He begins to feel that because of the struggle with sin he must not truly be justified in God's eyes or that he has lost his position of being justified with God. The reality is that his justification was sealed in what Christ accomplished on the cross. He can neither add to or detract from it. However, he can change his actions when they do not align with the word of God. He can, in light of his justification, live in a manner in which he resists sin and seeks to please God.

Justification then becomes a huge motivation to the counselee because although he may fail, his position in Christ is never hindered. Paul recognizes in this passage that this struggle will continue until the day God calls us home. Our ultimate deliverance from the struggle will come when we drop off this corruptible flesh and are clothed with new bodies as he states in Corinthians:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. <sup>51</sup> Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. (1 Corinthians 15:50-54)

Christian counseling seeks to encourage the believer to understand he can and must walk in a way that pleases God. Christian counseling



must reflect on what has already happened for the believer (justification) and the things that need to happen on a daily basis (sanctification) in his life. The impact of justification is such that it is the motivation to keep moving in the direction of change.

Justification assures that God is going to change him despite his failures. Paul declares in Philippians 2:13, “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure.” Justification assures him that spiritually he is already a joint heir with Christ even though his life often may not reflect it. Justification assures him to not grow apathetic to change because of the tremendous grace poured out on him. He should not take an attitude on presuming upon God’s grace but rather of having a heart felt desire to live for him! Paul declares in Romans 6:1-2, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” As the Christian counselor constantly reminds the counselee of God’s grace which resulted in his justification, the counselee’s attitude should be a desire to live for His glory.

#### **IV. Being “In Christ”**

Part of the difficulty in discipling people through the counseling process is getting them to understand the “already” verses “not yet” principle. Because of our justification, we already have in us the righteousness of Christ. Paul declares:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is *hidden with Christ in God*. <sup>4</sup> When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

My life is hidden with Christ which indicates that presently, because of my justification by God’s grace, I have a high standing in God’s eyes. The righteousness I possess is not mine but yet it is mine because of Christ. I hide behind His righteousness. I am covered by His righteousness. God in His grace imputes His righteousness to my account! What a glorious truth.

Even now with all of my struggles I have this standing and one day will fully experience all the benefits of this standing with Christ. This position the believer has should invoke in him a desire to *seek those things which are above*. What are these things? It is the placing

of our passion on Christ and on what would please Christ now in this world and even amidst our struggles. It is having a desire to live our lives in obedience to God's word. It is not being consumed with the here and now but rather living in light of eternity which is our final home.

Our justification in Christ should invoke in us a desire to be like Christ. We are His, and we are heading to be with Him throughout eternity. Simply put, Christ should be the focus of our lives. When I embrace Christ by faith my sins are completely forgiven, and I stand before God as righteous.<sup>9</sup> There is also the "then" of the future, the promise of eternity with the Lord, free of sin and struggle.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

The impact of justification on Christian counseling is such that it serves as the back drop for all that is said. Christian counseling seeks to direct a person in their understanding of Christ and admonish them to live a life worthy of the gospel; this is possible because of our justification in Christ.

The reality of our justification has given us also the ability to walk according to the Holy Spirit's desire. It is because of our justification that when we miserably fail in our struggle with sin, we can continue to go on because our standing has not been hindered in Christ. We still have all the riches that are in Christ and they have no bearing on our performance.

The motivation to live a life for Christ is fueled by the fact of our justification. All our sin was poured on Christ and paid for and then His payment put to our account for all eternity. What love should this invoke in the counselee towards God? A love demonstrated through a life of willful obedience. A love demonstrated by totally presenting my life as a *living sacrifice* for His glory! Christian Counseling seeks to bring about change here and now, and justification has already brought about the greatest and most important change that needed to occur in order for our eternity with God to be secure.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

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