

The Cross and Justification¹



SABBATH—MARCH 5

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Romans 3:20, 28; Romans 4:13; Romans 5:14-18; Romans 6:23; Romans 8:33, 34; Romans 9:31, 32; 2 Corinthians 9:15; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 3:8-11; Ephesians 2:7-9.

MEMORY VERSE: “We firmly believe that people are made right with God because of their faith. They are not saved by obeying the law” (Romans 3:28, NIV).

PAUL WROTE THAT “JESUS WAS HANDED OVER TO DIE FOR OUR SINS. He was raised to life in order to make us right with God” (Romans 4:25, NIV).

The subject of justification is one of the most talked-about subjects among Christians. Paul struggled with this subject in the early church. Martin Luther² struggled with the subject of justification. Even today, Seventh-day Adventists and other Christians still talk about the question of what justification is.

As believers, we need to discuss justification humbly before God and one another. Justification is a subject we need to pray about. Only the Holy Spirit can teach us from the Bible about justification.

A year of adult Bible study guides could not cover justification well, but this week we will study justification, which comes directly from the Cross.

A LOOK AT THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Why must salvation be a gift from God? What is the meaning of “to justify”? Why were Abraham's works not good enough to justify him? Why can the law not save us? What does it mean that Jesus' righteousness is imputed (credited) to us?

Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 12.

¹justification—the process of being forgiven and made righteous (holy) when we accept Jesus as our Savior.

²Martin Luther—1483–1546. Leader of the Reformation in Germany. This Reformation began when Bible students did not agree with the Roman Catholic Church's belief on how we are saved.

SUNDAY—MARCH 6

THE GIFT (Romans 5:14-18).

Last week, we studied how at the Cross God put on Himself the punishment for sin. To be true to His own justice, God had to punish sin. But to be true to His mercy,³ God took that punishment upon Himself, in the person of His Son Jesus. In this way, He could satisfy the claims of justice and mercy at the same time. God's Son dying on the cross is the most wonderful gift of all.

Now can you see why salvation has to be free? If salvation is based on anything we do, then Jesus would not have had to come to this earth as a human, live a sinless life, then die on the cross for the sins of the world. Being able to earn our salvation weakens what God tried to do for us through Jesus. We can do nothing to add to what Jesus has done for us at the Cross.

What do the following verses say about salvation? Romans 5:14-18; Romans 6:23; 2 Corinthians 9:15; Ephesians 2:7-9.

“Every person may say: ‘By His [Jesus]’ perfect obedience He has satisfied the claims of the law. My only hope is found in looking to Him as my

Substitute.⁴ He is the One who obeyed the law perfectly for me. By faith in His righteousness (holiness), I am free from the condemnation⁵ of the law. Jesus clothes me with His righteousness. His righteousness answers all the demands of the law. I am complete in Him who brings in everlasting⁶ righteousness. Jesus presents me to God in His spotless robe of righteousness, which no person has made. All glory and honor are to be given to the Lamb of God (Jesus), who takes away the sins of the world.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 396.



**The law cannot save.
Only Jesus can save us.**

Rewrite in your own words what Ellen White wrote in the quote above.

³mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

⁴substitute—a person who takes the place of another person. Jesus took our place on the cross.

⁵condemnation—judgment of guilt.

⁶everlasting—lasting forever; without beginning or end.

MONDAY—MARCH 7

JUSTIFIED⁷ (Isaiah 53:11).

How does the righteous (holy) Servant (Jesus) justify⁸ many? Isaiah 53:11. How does the answer fit in with what we have studied so far?

Two words translated “justify” are *sadaq* (Hebrew) and *dikaioo* (Greek). These words have the same meaning. They are legal words. Both words are words a judge uses to give a sentence in a court case. If the judge rules in favor of a guilty person, that person is “justified.” If a judge rules against a guilty person, the guilty person faces punishment. So justification is a legal announcement. A person is justified when he or she is acquitted⁹ by the judge.

Notice the difference in the following verses between being justified and being condemned.¹⁰ How does this difference help us understand what justification means? Deuteronomy 25:1; Proverbs 17:15; Matthew 12:37; Romans 5:16; Romans 8:33, 34. Read also John 3:17. What does the difference between condemnation and being saved teach us about the meaning of justification?

⁷justified—to have forgiven and made a person righteous; to have cleansed from sin.

⁸justify—to forgive and make a person righteous (holy); to cleanse from sin.

⁹acquitted—to have been set free; to have been found not guilty.

¹⁰condemned—found guilty.

In all these verses, there are only two choices. There is no gray area, no middle ground, no compromise (give-or-take)! People are either declared justified or they are condemned. If a person is not justified, she or he can become justified. Or a person who has been justified can choose to leave God. But in the end, a person is either justified or condemned.

Keeping in mind today’s study, what do the following words mean to you: “Those [people] who belong to Christ Jesus are no longer under God’s sentence” (Romans 8:1, NIV)? How would you explain this to a non-Christian?

TUESDAY—MARCH 8

MORE ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS (HOLINESS) (Romans 4:1-8).

On the cross, God Himself, in the person of Jesus, accepted the penalty for our sins. Jesus paid the penalty so we do not have to. We are spared punishment, because Jesus was punished for us.

But there is more to our salvation. The good news is that we can stand justified in God’s eyes, but not because of our good works. (No matter

how good our works are, they are not good enough.) We are justified because of Jesus' righteousness. Jesus alone lived a sinless life. His sinless life is credited to us as if it were our own. Jesus took our sins upon Himself. Now He offers us the opportunity to be dressed in His perfect robe of righteousness (Matthew 22:1-14).

Use Romans 4:1-8 to answer the following questions:

1. What is Paul saying in Romans 4:1-5? Why can we not be justified both by grace and our good works?
2. How was Abraham justified?
3. Notice Paul's use of Psalm 32:1, 2 in Romans 4:6-8. How are our sins forgiven and covered?

The works of a person as holy and faithful as Abraham are not good enough to save that person. Even Abraham needed a righteousness to be "imputed" (credited) to him, so he could be justified before God.

Abraham is praised throughout the Bible as a faithful man of God (for example, read Genesis 18:19; Genesis 26:5). But he did not have enough good works to stand before God. What should that tell

you about yourself and your only hope of being accepted by God?

WEDNESDAY—MARCH 9

JESUS, OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (HOLINESS) (Romans 3:25, 26).

No matter how spiritual and faithful Abraham was, he still was not spiritual and faithful enough to be justified before God. Here again is where Jesus comes in. Jesus died as our Substitute and paid the penalty for our sins. And God offers to anyone who will claim it the perfect righteousness of Jesus in place of her or his sinful record. This is the wonderful gift of the plan of salvation. Our sins are forgiven, and Jesus' righteousness is credited to us as if it were our own righteousness! Read Romans 3:25, 26.

In Romans 3:21-26, Paul makes it clear that Jesus' righteousness is the righteousness that justifies¹¹ sinners before God. People's hard work to keep the law cannot save them.

How are Romans 10:1-3 and Galatians 2:21 saying the same thing? Why can righteousness never be a result of our obedience to the law?

"The law demands righteousness. Sinners owe righteousness to the

¹¹justifies—forgives and makes righteous (holy); cleanses from sin.

law. But they cannot give righteousness to the law. The only way to receive righteousness is through faith. By faith, sinners can bring to God the righteousness of Jesus. Then God credits the obedience of His Son to sinners. Jesus' righteousness is accepted in the place of people's failure. God receives, pardons, and justifies repentant,¹² believing people. He treats them as if they were righteous (holy). God loves them as He loves His Son, Jesus. This is how faith is credited to sinners for their righteousness." —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 367.

Think about your own obedience and righteousness. How useless is it for you to try to be saved by your obedience and righteousness? How does your own life show to you that only Jesus' righteousness is the basis of salvation?

THURSDAY—MARCH 10

**JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH
(Galatians 3:8-11).**

We are all sinners. We cannot ever earn the righteousness (holiness) we need to be justified. But Jesus does have the righteousness we need. His righteousness can be given to people who make His righteousness their own by faith.



We must walk by faith in Jesus.

What difference does Paul show between the law and faith? Why must salvation be by faith? Romans 3:20, 28; Romans 4:13; Romans 9:31, 32; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 3:8-11.

People often misunderstand these verses as teaching that Christians are no longer required to keep the law. But that is not Paul's point. The question is not about obedience. The question is about salvation. The law can never save sinful people. People face death because they have broken the law. Jesus came to save us from this death. He saved us by obeying the law perfectly and offering us His obedience in place of our own. For sinners, then, the law is not the answer. Jesus is the answer.

Read the verses in the last question again. What proof do they give that salvation by faith was taught in the Old Testament and in the New Testament?

¹²repentant—to be sorry for your sins and to want to stop sinning.

All humans, except Jesus, have been under the curse of the law. This is because all humans have broken God's law. Salvation has always come through faith. This is because no one, even in Old Testament times, could find salvation in the law. The law is what makes sinners guilty. Looking for salvation in the law is the same as trying to put out a fire with gasoline.

By focusing salvation on what Jesus has done for us, God has moved the focus of attention off ourselves. Jesus is the only answer to sin. We know that we cannot save ourselves. For this reason, we are forced to depend upon something holier and more powerful than ourselves. That something is "THE LORD [JESUS] OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jeremiah 23:6).



Focus on Jesus.

FRIDAY—MARCH 11

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, pp. 19–30.

"Jesus became sin for us so that 'in him we might become the righteousness [holiness] of God.' Our sins were placed in the sinless

Jesus so that we sinners might receive righteousness before God as a gift. Throughout history, Christians have studied the relationship between the sinless Jesus and sinners. They have been very impressed with this relationship. One Christian in the second-century *Epistle [Letter] to the Diognetus*, chapter 9, wrote: 'O sweet exchange (trade)! O unequalled way! O benefits beyond all hope! The wickedness of many people are hid in a single Righteous (Holy) One (Jesus). The righteousness of One should justify many sinners.'

"Martin Luther wrote to someone who was depressed about his sins: 'Learn to know Jesus and Him crucified. Learn to sing to Jesus and say "Jesus, You are my righteousness. I am Your sin. You took on Yourself what was supposed to be mine (punishment). Then You set on me what was Yours (righteousness). You became what You were not (sinful), so that I might become what I was not." ' '—Adapted from John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 200.



"O sweet exchange!"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do the quotes you just read help you understand justification by faith? What does the “sweet exchange” in the second quote mean? Why is that exchange “sweet”?
2. Imagine being in a school in

which there are only two grades, pass and fail. The only way to get the passing grade is to have a perfect score on every test, every time. Even one wrong answer is as bad as getting every answer wrong. How does such a school help you to understand why sinners need Jesus’ righteousness?