

The Cross and Justification



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom.* 3:20, 28; 4:13; 5:14-18; 6:23; 8:33, 34; 9:31, 32; *2 Cor.* 9:15; *Gal.* 2:16; 3:8-11; *Eph.* 2:7-9.

Memory Text: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (*Romans* 3:28).

Paul wrote that Jesus “was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (*Rom.* 4:25). Few topics are more controversial among Christians than that of “justification.” From the time of Paul, who struggled with this issue in the early church, up through Martin Luther, whose battle with the papacy first arose over the question of justification, up through even today among Seventh-day Adventists (not to mention other Christians), the question of justification still foment discussion and debate.

It’s a crucial, powerful topic, one that we need to approach in humility, not just before the Lord but before one another. It’s a topic that we need to approach on our knees, our hearts and minds open to the Spirit, who alone can teach us from the Word.

This week we explore this rich and fruitful teaching, which stems directly from, and only because of, the Cross.

The Week at a Glance: Why must salvation be a gift from God to us? What is the meaning of *to justify*? Why weren’t Abraham’s works good enough to justify him? Why can the law not save us? What does it mean that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us?

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

The Gift

Last week we saw that, at the cross, God bore in Himself the punishment for sin. That is, to be true to Himself and to the grand principles that He Himself had established, sin had to be punished. This is God's justice. But in order to be merciful (for God is also merciful), He took that punishment on Himself, in the Person of His Son, thus satisfying the claims of justice while, at the same time, rendering mercy and forgiveness to those who deserve neither (*Rom. 3:26*). This amazing provision forms the basis of the Cross, the foundation upon which we are forgiven our sins, cleansed from our sins, and ultimately given a new body in a new world.

With this background in mind, can you see why salvation has to be free? Think about it: If salvation is based on anything that we can do, then God's Son taking on human flesh, living in that flesh a life of perfect obedience to the Father, and then going to the cross, where He faced divine wrath against sin, where all the sins of the world fell on Him, where He became sin for us, where He was judged and condemned in our place, where He died as a substitute for all the world—*all this still wasn't good enough?* Was it still lacking something that we, as sinners, can add in order to finish what Christ's life, death, and resurrection didn't complete? Please! The mere idea of earning our salvation automatically weakens in our minds just what God accomplished for us. What could anyone—that is, any *sinner*—do to add to what was done for him or her at the Cross?

LOOK up these few texts. Write out what they're saying about salvation: *Rom. 5:14-18, 6:23, 2 Cor. 9:15, Eph. 2:7-9.*

“Every soul may say: ‘By His perfect obedience He has satisfied the claims of the law, and my only hope is found in looking to Him as my substitute and surety, who obeyed the law perfectly for me. By faith in His merits I am free from the condemnation of the law. He clothes me with His righteousness, which answers all the demands of the law. I am complete in Him who brings in everlasting righteousness. He presents me to God in the spotless garment of which no thread was woven by any human agent. All is of Christ, and all the glory, honor, and majesty are to be given to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 396.

Rephrase in your own words what Ellen White wrote.

Justified

“By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (*Isa. 53:11*).

Read the above text. How does the righteous Servant justify many? How does that answer fit in with what we have studied so far?

Two words translated “justify” are *sadaq* (Hebrew) and *dikaioo* (Greek), and they have basically the same meaning. They are legal terms. Both are to be understood in the context of a pronouncement that a judge renders in a court case. If the judge rules in favor of the accused, the accused is “justified”; if the judge rules against the accused, the accused is condemned. “Justification” is, therefore, a legal declaration. A person is justified when he or she is declared acquitted by the judge.

Look up the following texts; notice the contrast expressed in them between being justified and being condemned. How does this contrast help us understand what justification means? *Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15; Matt. 12:37; Rom. 5:16; 8:33, 34.* (Read also **John 3:17**: What does the contrast between condemnation and being saved teach us about the meaning of justification?)

In all these examples, there are only two options. There’s no gray area, no middle ground, no compromise. People are either declared justified; that is, acquitted, or they are condemned. By its nature, the concept of justification (as well as condemnation) doesn’t allow for degrees. You can’t be partially justified or partially condemned. A decision can be changed, a person’s status can be reversed, but in the end a person is either justified or condemned.

Keeping in mind today’s study, what do these words mean to you: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (*Rom. 8:1*)? How would you explain this to a non-Christian?

The Reckoning of Righteousness

So far, in looking at the Cross, we've see that God Himself, in the person of Jesus, bore the penalty for our sins. Jesus paid the penalty; we, therefore, don't have to. We are spared what's due us, because Jesus took what's due us upon Himself.

Yet, there's more to our salvation. The good news is that we can stand justified before God—not on the basis of our good works (for however good they are, they aren't good enough) but because of the righteousness of Jesus. Jesus alone lived a sinless life, and His perfect life is credited to us as if it were our own. In other words, not only did Jesus take our sins, our filthy rags, upon Himself, but He offers us the opportunity to be dressed in His perfect robe of righteousness (*Matt. 22:1-14*).

Read prayerfully Romans 4:1-8 and then answer the following questions:

- What is Paul's reasoning in the first five verses? Why, if justification is by works, can it not be by grace? Why can it not be both?
- How was Abraham justified? What does it mean that "it was counted unto him for righteousness"?
- Read Paul's use of Psalms in verses 6-8. What elements are found there when God "imputeth righteousness without works"? How are sins forgiven and covered?

The great news of these verses is that if the works of someone as holy and righteous and faithful as Abraham aren't good enough to save, what about the rest of us? And that's Paul's point: Even Abraham, esteemed among the Jews as a great man of God, needed a righteousness to be "imputed" to him, a righteousness credited to him, in order for him to be justified before God.

All through the Bible Abraham is exalted in Scripture as a faithful man of God (see, for instance, Gen. 18:19, 26:5). And yet he didn't have the works to stand before God alone? What should that tell you about yourself and your only hope of being accepted by God?

Christ Our Righteousness

Abraham, no matter how pious and faithful, still wasn't pious and faithful enough to be justified before God. If he were to be saved, it would have to be because of something other than his own works or his own righteousness. And here again is where Jesus comes in. Not only did He die as our Substitute, paying the penalty for our sins, but the Lord offers to all who will claim it the perfect righteousness of Jesus in place of each person's sinful record. This is the wonderful provision of the plan of salvation: Not only are our sins forgiven, but the righteousness of Jesus is credited to us as if it were our own!

Read Romans 3:25,26. Whose righteousness allows for the remission of sins, and by whose righteousness are we justified?

In Romans 3:21-26, Paul makes it clear that the righteousness of Christ is the righteousness of God Himself, and this is the righteousness that allows sinners to be justified before God. No human being's attempt to keep the law can save him or her, for the righteousness that obedience produces is never the righteousness of God Himself.

Read Romans 10:1-3 and Galatians 2:21. In what way are both texts saying the same thing? Why can righteousness never come about by our obedience to the law?

“The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner's account. Christ's righteousness is accepted in place of man's failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son. This is how faith is accounted righteousness.”
—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 367.

Look at your own self, and your own attempts, however sincere, at obedience and righteousness. Can't you see how futile salvation by the law is? In what ways does your own experience show to you the great truth of Christ's merits, instead of your own, as the basis of salvation?

Justification by Faith

So far, what we have seen is that we are all sinners, incapable of ever achieving the righteousness needed to be justified. Jesus, however, has that righteousness, and through the wonderful provision of the gospel, that righteousness is available for all those who make it their own—by faith.

Read **Romans 3:20, 28; 4:13; 9:31,32; Galatians 2:16; 3:8-11.** Notice the contrast Paul places there between the law and faith. What point is he making? Why can the law never save us? Why must salvation be by faith?

These texts are so often misread as teaching that Christians are no longer obligated to keep the law (see next week's lesson); yet, that is not Paul's point. The immediate issue here isn't obedience (at least our obedience); it's salvation, something that the law can never produce in sinful human beings. Indeed, it's precisely because humans have violated the law that they face death, and it was to spare us from this death that Jesus came, obeyed the law perfectly, and offers us His record in place of our own. In the context of fallen humanity, the law isn't the solution—Jesus is.

Look at the above verses again. What evidence do we have there that salvation by faith was taught in the Old Testament, as well as in the New?

From Adam onward, all human beings (with the exception of Jesus) have been under the condemnation of the law, because all have violated the law. Hence, salvation always had to be by faith, because no one, even in the Old Testament times, could find salvation in the law; on the contrary, the law is the very thing that condemns sinners. Seeking salvation in the law is like trying to douse a fire with gasoline.

However, by centering salvation on Jesus and what He has done for us, God has shifted the center of attention off ourselves, who are the problem to begin with, and places it upon Jesus, the only solution. By realizing our total inability to do anything to save ourselves, we're forced to rely upon something outside of us, something greater, holier, and more powerful than we are, which is, of course, "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (*Jer. 23:6*).

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, pp. 19–30.

“Moreover, Christ became sin for us, in order that ‘in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ In other words, our sins were imputed to the sinless Christ, in order that we sinners, by being united to him, might receive as a free gift a standing of righteousness before God. Christian disciples down the centuries have meditated on this exchange between the sinless Christ and sinners, and have marvelled at it. The first example is probably in the second-century *Epistle to Diognetus*, chapter 9: ‘O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single Righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors.’ Then here is Luther writing to a monk in distress about his sins: ‘Learn to know Christ and him crucified. Learn to sing to him and say “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; yet you set on me what was yours. You became what you were not, that I might become what I was not.” ’—John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 200.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read the above section. What is it saying? How does this help us understand the concept of justification by faith? How do you understand the “sweet exchange”? What is that, and why is it “sweet”?
- 2 Imagine being in a school in which there are only two grades, pass and fail, and the only way to get the passing grade is to have a perfect score on every test, every quiz, every time. Even one question wrong on any test, and you get the same failing grade as someone who got every question wrong on every test. It makes no difference: If you get all the questions wrong or only one wrong, you still fail. How, in a sense, does this analogy help us understand why, as sinners, we need the righteousness of Jesus (who was the only Person ever to get every question right on every test) credited to us in order for us to be just before God?

Bury Me as a Christian

by J. H. Zachary

A young man in Thailand was killed in a terrible accident. The grieving father, a wealthy businessman, had lost not only his son, but his business partner.

Although the family was Buddhist, the son had recently begun learning about Jesus. One day just before his death, he had made a request of the father. "If I die before you do, Father, promise me that you will bury me in a Christian cemetery as a Christian."

The broken-hearted father was determined to honor his son's request, but his son had not yet joined a church, and Christian churches reserve their limited burial plots for members of their faith. The father contacted one church after another inquiring about burying his son in their cemetery, but denomination after denomination denied his request for a grave site. For one long month the boy's body lay in the Buddhist temple awaiting burial. Finally the father visited the pastor of the Chinese Adventist church in Bangkok, Thailand, Pastor Songrit Detwinya.

"We have very little space in our cemetery," the pastor said, "and normally we reserve it for our church members. But I will take your request to the church board. If they agree, then your son can be buried here."

The father's face lit up when he later learned that the church board had accepted the request and agreed to the Christian burial of this man's son. At last a grieving father would be able to keep his promise to his son. A funeral service was planned and the burial took place in the Adventist church's cemetery.

The businessman was touched by the kindness of the Adventist congregation. After the funeral he began to visit the church, curious to discover why his son had been so interested in the God of the Christians. He was impressed with the message of Jesus and the kindness of the believers. In time he asked the pastor to teach him more about the Christian faith. After four months of study, the grieving father accepted Jesus as his own Savior and was baptized. He finds hope in the promise that he and his son will be reunited when Jesus comes, and he prays that his wife and two remaining children will accept Jesus as their Savior as well.

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