

# 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 foments 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.**

**Key Text:** *Romans 5:16-18.*

### Teachers Aims:

1. To emphasize that Jesus delivers us and heals us from sin by His imparted and imputed righteousness.
2. To describe justification as our opportunity to be acquitted of the penalty of sin through the gift of Jesus' blood.
3. To invite class members to accept and to rejoice in the wonderful provisions of the gospel.

### Lesson Outline:

#### **I. Delivered From Our Offenses** (*Rom. 8:33, 34*).

- A. God's justice demanded that sin be punished; thus, He took the punishment on Himself through His Son.
- B. Salvation must be free; the idea of earning salvation weakens what God did for us.
- C. God's righteousness answers all the demands of the law; I am complete in Him.

#### **II. Justification—a Legal Pronouncement** (*Rom. 4:1-8*).

- A. To be justified, or acquitted from our sins, means that Jesus has ruled in our favor and has overturned the verdict of condemnation.
- B. Only two options exist for humanity in the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, leaving no middle ground.
- C. Jesus' perfect life is credited to us as though it were our own.

#### **III. The Wonderful Provision** (*2 Cor. 9:15*).

- A. The sinner is incapable of rendering the righteousness the law demands.
- B. Not only does Jesus forgive our past sins, but He imparts the power of His righteousness to us to overcome temptation.
- C. In the plan of salvation, the center of our attention is removed from human weakness and is placed on Jesus, the only Solution to sin.

**Summary:** Second Corinthians 9:15, NIV, describes Jesus' grace as an "incredible gift!" Jesus, God's Son, who knew no sin, took sin and its penalty on Himself. This amazing provision is the basis of the Cross. It allows us to be declared *acquitted*, or *justified*, when we deserve condemnation.

## COMMENTARY

### The Cross and Justification.

**Introduction.** "The gulf that was made by sin has been spanned by the cross of Calvary. A full, complete ransom has been paid by Jesus, by virtue of which the sinner is pardoned, and the justice of

## 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?

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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?)

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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 law is maintained.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 363.

### I. The Gift.

The vastness of our need as sinners and the impossibility of meeting that need cry out for a divine solution. God’s answer to humanity’s moral plight is the Cross, the emblem of the whole plan of atonement. It is folly and confusion to try to supplement God’s complete and perfect plan with “meritorious” deeds of our own, as though they could liquidate any portion of our moral debt as transgressors. We have no righteousness of our own by which to generate acceptable works, much less to compensate or atone for our evil natures and deeds (*see Isa. 64:6*).

To attempt, however indirectly, to accrue righteousness through creature merit is to profane and depreciate the atoning sacrifice of Christ; it is to underestimate the high cost of our salvation and the humanly incurable nature of sin. It also reveals ignorance of the infinite holiness of God and His moral standard for all beings (*read Titus 3:5-7*).

### II. Justified.

Jesus did not often use the word *justification* in the theologically analytic way He taught His future apostle Paul to use the term. Even so, one of the most penetrating and comprehensive references to gospel justification comes in the setting of Christ’s parable about the two worshippers (*Luke 18:9-14*). Jesus declared that the repentant publican, who acknowledged himself a sinner and cried out to God for mercy, went down to his house justified rather than the conceited Pharisee, who regarded himself as a paragon of virtue and piety (*see Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 157–161).

“The moment true faith in the merits of the costly atoning sacrifice is exercised, claiming Christ as a personal Saviour, that moment the sinner is justified before God, because he is pardoned.”—Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 52.

### III. The Reckoning of Righteousness.

The essential condition for being righteous is to believe God on His own terms and accept the gift of salvation for just what it is—a divine bestowal of mercy, infinitely valuable, indispensably needed, and readily available to all who believe. Paul speaks of this as “the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference” (*Rom. 3:22*).

It is just this open and nondiscriminatory access to righteousness that offends the pride of all who want to be credited with some of the merit for their own redemption (*see Rom. 9:30-33*). We are justified solely through the merits of Christ’s righteousness. Yet, those

## 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?**

who do accept God's righteousness as a gift live in harmony with its standards, not through self-generated effort but through the

## Inductive Bible Study

**Texts for Discovery:** *Romans 4:1-8, 5:14-18, 2 Corinthians 9:15, Ephesians 2:7-9.*

① We work to earn wages. We never would expect our bosses to *give* us a paycheck when we had not worked the hours necessary to receive it. On the cross, Jesus died to deliver us from sin. He imputed His righteousness to us when we did not deserve it. We could not even work hard enough to earn it. How would you explain God's mercy to a neighbor who has heard only about God's justice (as in how He punishes sin)?

② Think back to the best birthday gift you ever received. How would you describe your feelings when you received it? How did you express your gratitude? Paul calls God's grace an "in-describable gift" (*2 Cor. 9:15, NIV*). Write a Thank-You note to God telling Him how you feel about this most precious of all gifts.

③ Abraham is considered the father of the faithful (*see Heb. 11:11*). When we review his story, we can see that even he struggled with sin. He did not have the works to stand before God alone. If we cannot ever live up to the demands of the law, why did God give it? How does seeing our sinfulness through the "mirror of the law" help us recognize our need of Jesus? How can we join Paul in saying, " 'Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him' " (*Rom. 4:8*)?

④ We inherited our sinfulness from our father, Adam, much the same way our children inherit their traits from us. We inherited and deserve death because of our trespasses. How does Jesus' grace "overflow" (*Rom. 5:15, NIV*) to you? In what ways has it changed your inherited traits? How would you describe this blessing to someone who is struggling with personality flaws?

⑤ If you were asked to define the word *wonderful*, what words would you use? When we consider salvation as "God's wonderful provision," how does it expand the words necessary to describe *wonderful*? Why is it necessary to include the concept of justification by faith as part of the definition? What adjectives would you include as you share what God has done to save you from sin? For example, John Stott, in *The Cross of Christ*, has called it the "sweet exchange."—(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 200.

## 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?

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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?**

power of the new birth, which invests believers with grace to live “soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (*Titus 2:12*).

#### IV. Christ Our Righteousness.

Righteousness does not come to us as an abstract quality. It is the fruit of accepting Christ as our Substitute and Surety and the accompaniment of having Christ in our lives. Christ and His right-

## Witnessing

What promises can be found in Romans 5:1! Let your heart absorb the message as you read the words: “Now that we have been put right with God through Jesus Christ, don’t we have something that others don’t have? Of course, we do! We are justified by faith in God and are at peace with Him because we know how much He loves us” (*The Clear Word*). Our text tells us four things: (1) Christ’s sacrifice on the cross has bridged our full reconciliation with our heavenly Father; (2) God has now acquitted us from our sins; (3) we are now at peace with our heavenly Father; and, last, (4) we are assured of His great love for us.

What if you were to tell as many new people you meet as possible you have the inside scoop on how to achieve total peace in their lives? Are you prepared for their reactions? Some will immediately tune you out. Others won’t hesitate to express their skepticism. A few might ask you to explain; those few are in for a true blessing!

You can begin by sharing the plan of salvation, by outlining Christ’s willing sacrifice on the cross. Let them know Christ substituted His life for theirs—that His death sets them free from sin and guarantees everlasting life to all humanity. Explain that because Christ lived a perfect life, we benefit and, in fact, are accepted by God as if we also have lived a perfect life. Caution them to be sure to accept this gift of eternal life as it is offered. Make sure they clearly understand this gift comes with boundless love from the Father. Be sure to emphasize this is a *gift*; it can’t be bought, bargained for, or earned. No actions or good works will guarantee everlasting life—God asks only for our total and complete surrender and dependence on Him. Help those to whom you witness to understand that by fully committing their hearts to God, they will *naturally* want to follow His law.

Assure them that though they may stumble and fall as they journey on the road to heaven, they have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ. Assure them that if they seek forgiveness and strength from Him, no matter what obstacles they encounter, heaven will be theirs.

As you help them with their journey, they’ll be helping you with yours. Be prepared to visit with them again—in heaven!

## 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?**

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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*).

eousness are inseparable (*see Jer. 23:6, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:21*).

“Then come, and seek, and find. The reservoir of power is open, is full and free. Come with humble hearts, not thinking that you must do some good work to merit the favor of God, or that you must make yourself better before you can come to Christ. You are powerless to do good, and cannot better your condition. Apart from Christ we have no merit, no righteousness.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 333, 334.

### V. Justification by Faith.

“It is important that we understand clearly the nature of faith. There are many who believe that Christ is the Saviour of the world, that the gospel is true and reveals the plan of salvation, yet they do not possess saving faith. They are intellectually convinced of the truth, but this is not enough; in order to be justified, the sinner must have that faith that appropriates the merits of Christ to his own soul.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 191. James speaks forthrightly of this appropriative, living faith in James 2:19-26. His position does not contradict that of Paul but simply clarifies it and guards against turning faith into a fantasy.

## Life-Application Approach

**Icebreaker:** What is your favorite story of forgiveness?

**Verses for Group Focus:** *Romans 8:1-5*.

### Thought Questions:

- ① What did God accomplish by sending Jesus as a sin offering?
- ② What do Romans 8:1 and 3 tell us about condemnation?
- ③ In verse 3, Paul states that the law is unable to produce righteousness in us because our flesh is weak. Does this mean he is against the law? Explain your answer.

### Application Questions:

- ① Does the action in this passage occur within us or outside of us? Does it happen in the past or in the present? Explain your answer.
- ② What has God accomplished in you that the law was powerless to do?
- ③ People are always condemning us, sometimes for things we are guilty of. How can we meet condemnation? Accept it? Reject it? Or some other way?

**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?