

The Words of Our Salvation: Justification

Introduction:

I have been struggling over the best way to present this material for some time. This particular “doctrine” has been described as the “article by which the church stands or falls” by Martin Luther. In fact this doctrine was a key point in the conflict at the Reformation.

It still is a controversial issue today. Whether you realize it or not, this doctrine is probably the “hottest” topic on the theological table today. It is involved in the movement in some circles to bring dialogue (if not outright unification) with Protestants and Roman Catholics. And we are not referring to only those Protestants which might be considered “liberal” but many in what is considered the “evangelical” camp are working to think through these issues and have taken up sides with differing views than the historical. There has been a movement by some to unite with the Catholic faith because they have come to a position that minimizes the differences in this doctrine in particular. Some of you may know families where this has recently occurred.

This presentation cannot cover all of the issues involved. There is no time, and I am not sure I am the one to be able to answer all of the concerns in our short presentation. But I will provide the summary of the doctrine, provide a bit of the insight that has led to the controversy and then highlight the implications to this doctrine on the practical life as a Christian.

The Summary

This summary is very traditional in its approach to this doctrine. There are some helpful insights in the works of those who are at the forefront of the doctrinal controversy. They are examining ideas and texts that are used to refute the traditional view and indeed there are some issues that need to be emphasized or re-structured. But for now let's keep things simple.

Definitions

A few definitions will help us get started. Justification is:

“an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.” Grudem, W.

“an act of God whereby He declares unjust sinners to be just after He has imputed to them the righteousness of Christ.” Sproul, R.C.

“that legal act of God by which He declares the sinner righteous on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.” Berkhof, L.

“God’s wholly objective, wholly forensic judgment concerning the sinner’s standing before the law, by which forensic judgment God declares that the sinner is righteous in his sight because of the imputation of his sin to Christ on which ground his is pardoned, and the imputation of Christ’s perfect obedience to him, on which ground he is constituted righteous before God.” Reymond, R.

“an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us a righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone.” Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 33

The Problem

What do we find in common with all of these definitions? One is the presence of sinners. Grudem and the Catechism speak of our “sins”, Sproul refers to “unjust sinners,” Berkhof and Reymond talk of “sinners.” Justification first of all has to do with the problem of sin.

What else is present in these definitions? We find in each of these the idea of a judgment rendered. We see words like “declares” and “judgment.” We find concepts of pardon and see this word “forensic” or that which pertains to law. Indeed Reymond speaks of the “standing before the law” in his definition.

In putting these two ideas together we realize there is a problem before God where we do not meet his standards and are guilty in our current state.

The Answer

But each of these definitions also includes the answer for this problem. We find that each of these solutions include the righteousness or obedience of Christ as providing the answer for the malady. And even though only the Catechism speaks directly to this issue in its definition each of the others include later in their discussions that this declaration based on the righteousness of Christ is “received by faith alone.”

We cannot merit a return to any standing before God based on anything that we can do say or “feel.” It is only the work of Christ that puts us in this position. And faith is the visible connection of this act with our experience. Our faith is not the ground or the basis for this declaration.

The Biblical Data

Let us quickly look at some data from the Bible to support these assertions.

We are going to simply look at texts from Romans 3 – 5 at this point to defend the pain understanding give previously.

Romans 3:9-20

All are under sin and are accountable for judgment and cannot be justified in keeping the law.

Romans 3:21-26

God reveals a righteousness that is acceptable which is available through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a gift based on Christ's propitiation of God's wrath allowing God to be just in his forgiveness and still "justify" those he brings to him.

Romans 4 then shows that Abraham is a model for this in anticipation of the cross in that he was "declared" or reckoned righteous in relation to his faith. Let's refer to Rom. 4:1-3, 11-12, 16, 22-25.

A couple of non-Romans texts provide what is assumed in the Romans argument that is it is Christ's righteousness that has been revealed and is reckoned to us. We find this in I Corinthians 1:30 and in Philipians 3:9.

James tells us in his letter that this faith is evident by its activity. Faith is not mere assent to a concept; it is an embracing of God and his ways. It is the faithful obedience to God's expectations, knowing that we in and of ourselves cannot and indeed will not follow him we can only rely on Christ and his work for us. That is why we find this paradoxical statement in James 2:14-26. The distinction he is making is not faith versus works but an "empty faith" versus an "obeying faith."

The Benefits

Romans 5:1 speaks to us the main benefit of this idea, we have peace with God. This is a concept that should be wonderfully comforting but often is responded to with a "ho-hum" type of response. We in our culture have so minimized God to a manageable deity that the thought of being under his wrath is almost absurd. To spend time as we did a few weeks ago to present an idea like "propitiation" puts us in a pre-intellectual age. But peace in the face of the wrath of God should be overwhelmingly comforting.

But even beyond that, we have hope. Hope that it is not our own righteousness that finds us in God's presence. It is in Christ. It doesn't matter what sin I have fallen into, what weaknesses I have, the power of salvation is in Christ's righteousness.

It should also give us confidence to live in his light. Our failures will not keep us away from him. It is God who hears us for it is God who justifies. No one else

may lay any charge that will stick. God answers this through seeing us “in Christ.”

And all of this should provide the joy to see Christ as the glory of God and our sufficiency in all things.

The Scope

Thus far in looking at this doctrine, this “word of our salvation” we have examined it from a very narrow, almost “human-centered” perspective. Just as many of the theologians whose definitions we have used would critique a common short-hand for justification as being inadequate; this approach too is probably incomplete. Not incorrect mind you but just not satisfying to all of the Biblical data. The simplistic definition of justification you might have heard before is it is “just as if I never sinned.” This is incomplete because it says nothing about why you can say this, or how this can be true for you, or what does it matter anyway. So also is any understanding of justification that starts with man as sinner.

You can't have been listening to anything here at Clearcreek Chapel over the past 4 or 5 years if you have not taken away the emphasis of God's plan and our understanding of it in reading the Bible. The Chapel pulpit has over and over again put God's pursuit of his glory and praise, particularly in the person and work of the Son as the goal of creation and reason for the world's existence. When we read of the righteousness and justification language in the Bible it is intimately associated with this all-encompassing purpose of God.

Justification finds its problem, first of all in the representation of Adam. His failure has plunged us all into rebellion and face wrath. But even this is to show God's righteousness, that he is just. Adam's fall did not put the universe into plan B; somehow God has to find a justifiable way to bring worshippers back into his presence. Creating worshippers was not his main point. Glorifying the Son in worship is.

God's righteousness is his own character in relation to others. He will be just in the destruction of his rebels and in our sin all die as promised in the garden. But just as the promise in the garden foretold, the redeemer comes and stands where Adam fails. Romans 5:12-21 sums it up when it says justification stands as a gift but it is based upon Romans 5:1-11 where it describes the blood of Christ as interceding. God is just. Sin finds death. Death comes to the Son. His righteousness is accepted and acknowledged in his resurrection. The glory of the Son is in the humiliation of the cross. The pinnacle of history is found here. We are justified because God glorified the Son. We are not justified because God has done a work in us, but because he has worked to position Christ as the foremost one of all the universe. Let's close and read Philippians 2:5-11. We have not looked at the scope of God's righteousness as detailed as we could but

I hope we have planted some seed to cause you to look through the Bible seeing God at work to glorify the Son in the justifying work of redemption.