

The Importance of Justification

By R. C. Sproul

The Importance of Justification *Sola fide* (by faith alone) is important not merely because the church stands or falls on it. It is important because on it we stand or fall. The place where and the time when we will either stand or fall is at the judgment seat of God.

The doctrine of justification has to do with our status before the just judgment of God. That every person will ultimately be called into account before God is central to the teaching of Jesus. He warns that the secret things of our lives will be made manifest before the Father and that every idle word we have spoken will be brought into judgment. The whole world -- every man, woman, and child -- will come before the final divine tribunal. We will all come to that place, at that time, as either unjustified or justified sinners. Paul at Mars Hill warned: "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men every where to repent, `because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.'" (Acts 17:30-31 NKJV)

This judgment will be a righteous judgment by a righteous God. Those who will be judged are unrighteous people. The universality of sin is clearly affirmed by Paul:

"For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all (*italics mine*) under sin. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one...." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:9-10, 19-20 NKJV)

Herein is our dilemma. There will be a judgment. It will be a righteous judgment. As fallen, we are not righteous.

The ominous warning of the apostle is that "no flesh will be justified in His sight." Fortunately this is not the whole sentence. It is not an absolute denial of justification. If there will be no justification in his sight, then all disputes about the way of justification would be vain disputes, much ado about nothing. If there is no justification, then there is no gospel -- no good news, only bad news.

But this is not the entire statement. Paul does not say there will be no justification. What he does say is that no flesh will be justified in God's sight by the deeds of the law.

Paul does not exclude justification altogether. He does exclude it by virtue of our doing deeds of the law. Justification on the ground of our works is eliminated as an option. Christians were once debtors who could not pay their debts to God. The law of God requires perfection. It is a requirement sinners do not and cannot meet. Because of the universal reality of sin, Paul comes to his "therefore." Our sin leads to the necessary inference contained in the conclusion that by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in God's sight.

The verdict of the law on sinners was known in the Old Testament. Psalm 130 asks a question that is clearly rhetorical: "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (130:3 NKJV)

The answer to the psalmist's question is abundantly clear Who could stand? No one. Certainly not I. Certainly not you. If we are judged by the law in terms of our own righteousness, we will not stand; we are certainly fallen. If Luther rested on his own righteousness before the diet of heaven, he would have to declare: "Here I fall! I can do no other, God help me."

Not only would Luther fall. The whole church -- nay, the whole world -- would fall.

Paul does not leave us falling without hope before the righteous law of God. He continues his teaching of the doctrine of justification with a single word that screams relief to guilty sinners: "But..." There is, to our everlasting benefit, a "however" to his declaration. This little however introduces a high and mighty exception to the dreadful conclusion that by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in God's sight. Though justification is categorically denied by one means, it is now categorically affirmed by another means. That no flesh will be justified is not the final word. There is another word, which is the gospel itself:

"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that

were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:21-26 NKJV)

Here Paul declares a way of justification different from justification by deeds of the law. It is not a novelty, proclaimed for the first time in the New Testament. This way of justification is witnessed to by the Prophets and by the law itself. It is justification through faith in Jesus Christ. This justification is not given to everyone. It is provided to all and on all, who believe. It is based on the righteousness of God that is provided to and on the believer. It is given both freely and graciously by God through the redeeming work of Christ. This manner of justification demonstrates God himself to be both just and the justifier.

Again, the dilemma faced by the sinner summoned to the judgment seat of God is this: The sinner must appear before a divine Judge who is perfectly just. Yet the sinner is unjust. How can he possibly be unjust and justified? The answer to this question touches the eye of the Reformation tornado. For God to justify the impious (*iustificatio impii*) and himself remain just in the process, the sinner must somehow become actually just by a righteousness supplied him by another.

R.C. Sproul is now the distinguished visiting professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Knox Theological Seminary. R.C. Sproul is also chairman of the board at Ligonier Ministries.