

THEOLOGY CLASSES · SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY V: SOTERIOLOGY

Lecture 8: The Doctrine of Justification

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BEFORE YOU WATCH

Job asked the question at the far edge of the Bible's oldest book: how can a man be just before God? This session is the course's summit. It walks three whole systems of an answer, the Eastern climb toward godlikeness, the Roman process of infused righteousness administered through seven sacraments, and the Protestant declaration that clothes a still-sinning person in the righteousness of Christ. Listen for why forgiveness alone is not enough, and for the Latin phrase Luther gave the church that the teachers make the class say out loud.

THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

1. The question and the stakes

In the order of salvation, justification follows conversion logically while occurring with calling, regeneration, and conversion in the same instant. The question it answers is Job's: how can a man stand just before his Maker? God's righteousness is immutable; he cannot decide to waive its demands and let people in the back door, for a righteousness that can be set aside is a policy, not an attribute. Luther called justification the article by which the church stands or falls, and the Reformation itself divided over it. The teachers coin a companion term for the session: as there is an *ordo salutis*, each tradition has an order of justification, a path by which a sinner is supposed to arrive at righteousness before God.

2. More than forgiveness

A distinction controls everything that follows. To justify is, if the Greek verb could be carried straight into English, to righteous someone. And being forgiven is not the same as being righteous. Forgiveness cancels sins and returns you to zero; justification requires standing before God as one who has done everything right, as if a perfect life had been lived. The whole dispute of this session is over how a sinner gets from below zero, past zero, to that positive standing.

3. The Eastern Orthodox answer: theosis

The Eastern answer is a process called theosis or deification: justification as becoming godlike through participation in the divine nature, a phrase drawn from Peter's second letter. The East is deliberately mystical; an Orthodox theologian would say there is no point defining justification, for God is not defined but approached, which is why Orthodox teaching runs to prayer and the spiritual life rather than classes like this one. Practically, saving grace is conferred at baptism, and the believer then climbs the ladder of theosis through the sacraments and the worship of the church, fully deified, made godlike though never God, only in glory. The teachers' pastoral observation from ministry in a largely Orthodox country: ask people whether they will go to heaven and they answer no, and name their own spiritual lethargy, for when salvation is a climb, every missed week is a step back down and assurance is structurally out of reach. Yet, they add carefully, nothing in the Orthodox confessions, which are essentially the early ecumenical councils, necessarily condemns the gospel; the tradition is not so much against the righteousness of Christ alone as silent about it, and there are true believers within it.

4. The Roman Catholic answer: an appropriated process

The Roman answer is a defined process: justification is the process through which the limitless merits of Christ are appropriated, through the church, by people responding to God in faith and good works. Two words carry it: process and appropriation. It runs on Anselm's satisfaction framework taken whole: Christ's death satisfied God and earned a boundless treasury of merits, and the church, holding the keys, distributes them. Justification and sanctification are one thing here, a single lifelong becoming-just; before the Reformation the distinction most Protestants take for granted did not exist, for what else could being justified mean but actually becoming just?

5. The Roman order, step by step

The path: baptism removes original sin and confers saving grace; confirmation seals a person's own faith with an infusion of actual grace by the laying on of hands; the believer then continues in justification-sanctification by works, receiving what Rome calls infused righteousness, righteousness poured in as an ability to become righteous, so that grace enables works which draw more grace. A mortal sin, grave, committed knowingly and voluntarily, destroys saving grace; since baptism cannot be repeated, confession and penance restore. At death, extreme unction addresses last sins; purgatory purges remaining venial sins, since God's holiness admits no imperfection; and only in heaven is a person finally justified. So no Roman Catholic would claim to be justified now, any more than a Protestant would claim to be fully sanctified now: the term names the destination of a process. And the whole is by grace alone in Rome's vocabulary, for every ability is Christ's merit graciously infused; what Rome will never say is faith alone.

6. The seven sacraments and the power of the church

The machinery deserves its own station. Five sacraments trace the stages of a life, baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, and two, holy orders and matrimony, need not occur in every life. At Trent the sacraments were declared to confer grace *ex opere operato*, by the work performed, effective by the power of the church administering them rather than the faith of the recipient. Behind this stands the old maxim that outside the church there is no salvation, affirmed from the fourth century and softened only in the 1960s, and an ecclesiology the teachers explain rather than mock: if the institutional church simply is the body of Christ, and the fullness of the Spirit dwells in the body, then who else could dispense the Spirit's grace? They trace how naturally the structure grew, from disputes over who may baptize, through the church's reading of Christ and the twelve, and note the modern proof of its seriousness: a politician barred from the mass is, on the older understanding, being handed over to damnation. The invisible church, known to God alone, is a Reformation idea the Anabaptists paid for in blood; Rome's church has always been visible.

7. Luther, Tetzl, and Trent

The Reformation broke out where the machinery met the market: Tetzl selling indulgences, springing souls from purgatory for money, a practice, the teachers note fairly, that even Rome's stated theology did not support and that the Counter-Reformation cleaned up. Luther's protest began as a call to line practice up with confession, and pressed deeper into the doctrine itself. Trent then made official what had been developing: justification is not only the remission of sins but the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, whereby an unjust man becomes just. The teachers read Trent's words closely because Trent is the authoritative Roman answer on exactly this question, and its definition, becoming just, is precisely what the Reformers denied justification means.

8. The Protestant answer: a forensic declaration

The Protestant doctrine: justification is a forensic declaration in which a sinner is declared righteous while still in a sinning state, a change of standing, not of nature, occurring as an instantaneous event. Forensic is courtroom language: the judge's verdict does not transform the defendant; it settles his legal standing. The Greek verb helps: it means to declare righteous, as a judge does, never to make righteous. The enemies of the doctrine named it from the first: a legal fiction, God calling just what is not just. The five solas frame the difference: by Christ alone, not Christ and man's works; by grace alone, and not grace appropriated through works; and the one Rome can never say, by faith alone, faith the only instrument. The teachers add a warning from the modern rapprochement movements: both sides can now sign grace alone while meaning different things by every word of it.

9. Imputation and the three great transfers

The engine of the Protestant doctrine is imputation, the accounting word: to credit to an account. God justifies sinners by reckoning Christ's righteousness to their account through legal declaration, imputed, not infused: not an ability poured in to become righteous, but a righteousness credited as done. The charge of legal fiction is answered from Romans 5 by the symmetry of the great imputations. Adam's sin was imputed to us: nobody first became an actual sinner to be condemned in Adam; condemnation came through one man. Our sin was imputed to Christ: he never became an actual sinner, yet bore our sins. So Christ's righteousness is imputed to us on exactly the same terms: we are declared righteous before we are actually righteous, and whatever you do with Adam you must do with Christ. If imputation is fiction, the fall itself is fiction. Luther's own words are quoted: Christ's righteousness made mine, my sin made his; if he has taken my sin, I do not have it, and I am free.

10. Abraham's ledger

Romans 4 supplies the text the Reformation stood on. If Abraham was justified by works he has something to boast about, but what does Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, the bookkeeping word, deposited to his account. To the one who works, wages are owed; to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, faith is credited as righteousness. And the timing matters, as the teachers noted in passing: Abraham was counted righteous before the law existed, so faith has always been the instrument, in both Testaments, with the atonement as the standing ground, applied, before the cross, like a debt carried until the payment cleared. Justified by faith, Romans 5:1 concludes, having been, past tense, we have peace with God. Galatians 2:16 says it three times in one verse: not by works of the law.

11. Simul iustus et peccator

Luther compressed the doctrine into four Latin words the teachers make the class repeat: simul iustus et peccator, at the same time just and sinner. The believer stands before God perfectly righteous, clothed in Christ's imputed righteousness, and remains, in daily fact, a sinner who will sin again. Rome resolves that tension by making you actually just first, and thereby loses justification by faith; the Bible leaves the tension standing. This is the dangerous gospel again: hearing that we need not become righteous first sounds like license, but the imputation is what makes the process of becoming possible, not the reverse. The order of the whole is then drawn in one diagram: the reason on our side is our sin, on God's side his righteousness; the motive is his love, the avenue his grace; the ground is the cross, always and for everyone who has ever been saved; the instrument is faith, always faith, in both Testaments; the result is justification, forgiveness plus imputed righteousness; and the benefits flow on, adoption, sanctification, eternal life, glorification. The arithmetic the session closes on: faith plus works does not equal salvation; faith equals salvation plus works. It is faith alone that saves, but the faith that saves is never alone.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

2 Peter 1 · Galatians 2 · Job 9 · Romans 3 · Romans 4 · Romans 5

KEY TERMS

Justification

To righteous someone: not merely to forgive, which returns a person to zero, but to establish them before God as one who has done everything right. The traditions divide over whether that standing is become or declared.

Theosis

The Eastern Orthodox answer, also called deification: justification as a lifelong mystical climb into godlikeness through participation in the divine nature, by the sacraments and worship of the church, completed only in glory.

Infused righteousness

Rome's term: righteousness poured into a person as a grace-given ability to become righteous, so that works drawn from grace draw further grace. Set against the Reformation's imputed righteousness, credited rather than poured.

Ex opere operato

By the work performed: Trent's teaching that the sacraments confer grace by the power of the church administering them, not by the faith of the recipient. The engine of the Roman system of appropriation.

Mortal and venial sin

The Roman distinction that drives the process: grave sin, committed knowingly and voluntarily, destroys saving grace and requires penance; venial sins remain for purgatory's final purging.

Forensic declaration

The Protestant doctrine's courtroom heart: God declares the sinner righteous, a verdict settling legal standing rather than transforming nature, instantaneous rather than processive.

Imputation

The accounting word: to credit to an account. Adam's sin imputed to us, our sin to Christ, Christ's righteousness to us; three transfers on identical terms, so that calling the third a fiction unravels the first.

The five solas

The Reformation's summary: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, God's glory alone. Rome can pronounce several of them in its own sense; the one it can never say is faith alone.

Simul iustus et peccator

Luther's four words: at the same time just and sinner. Perfectly righteous in standing, clothed in Christ's righteousness, while remaining in daily fact a sinner; the tension the biblical doctrine refuses to resolve.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Seventeen questions from the lecture. Circle your answers, then check them against the key at the bottom.

1. Why can God not simply waive the demands of his righteousness?

- A. Because the angels would object
- B. Because his righteousness is an immutable attribute, not a policy; a righteousness that can be set aside is not essential to his character
- C. Because the law of Moses forbids it
- D. Because no one has ever asked him to

2. Why is forgiveness alone not justification?
 - A. Because forgiveness is impossible before the cross
 - B. Because forgiveness applies only to venial sins
 - C. Forgiveness cancels sins and returns you to zero; justification requires a positive standing, as if a perfect life had been lived
 - D. Because forgiveness must be repeated daily
3. Why would an Orthodox theologian decline to define justification?
 - A. Because the East is deliberately mystical: God is approached, not defined, so its teaching runs to prayer and the spiritual life rather than doctrine classes
 - B. Because the term does not appear in the Greek Bible
 - C. Because the councils forbade definitions
 - D. Because the West had already defined it
4. What pastoral effect of theosis did the teachers meet on the mission field?
 - A. Widespread overconfidence about heaven
 - B. Indifference to the sacraments
 - C. Hostility to the church
 - D. People answering that they will not reach heaven, naming their own lethargy, for when salvation is a climb every missed week is a step down and assurance is structurally out of reach
5. Which two words carry the Roman definition of justification?
 - A. Faith and assurance
 - B. Process and appropriation: the limitless merits of Christ appropriated, through the church, by faith and works over a lifetime
 - C. Verdict and standing
 - D. Election and calling
6. What is infused righteousness?
 - A. Righteousness credited to an account as done
 - B. The righteousness of the saints shared at death
 - C. Righteousness poured in as a grace-given ability to become righteous, so that grace enables works which draw more grace
 - D. A synonym for imputed righteousness
7. In what sense does Rome affirm grace alone, and what will it never say?
 - A. It denies grace alone in every sense and affirms works alone
 - B. It affirms both grace alone and faith alone as the Reformers meant them
 - C. It affirms faith alone but denies grace alone
 - D. Every ability is Christ's merit graciously infused, so Rome says grace alone in its own sense; what it will never say is faith alone
8. What does ex opere operato mean for the sacraments?
 - A. They confer grace by the work performed, by the power of the administering church rather than the faith of the recipient
 - B. They are effective only when faith is present
 - C. They are symbols with no effect
 - D. They may be administered by anyone

9. How do the teachers explain, without mocking it, the church's claim to dispense grace?
- A. As a medieval power grab with no reasoning behind it
 - B. If the institutional church simply is the body of Christ, and the Spirit's fullness dwells in the body, then who else could dispense the Spirit's grace? The theology built the structure
 - C. As a borrowing from Roman civil law only
 - D. As a doctrine no Catholic has ever defended
10. Why do the teachers read the Council of Trent so closely?
- A. Because Trent endorsed the Reformers
 - B. Because Trent predates Anselm
 - C. Because Trent is Rome's authoritative answer on precisely this question, and its definition, an unjust man becoming just, is exactly what the Reformers denied justification means
 - D. Because Trent was never ratified
11. What does forensic mean in the Protestant definition?
- A. Progressive and lifelong
 - B. Mystical and undefinable
 - C. Sacramental and repeatable
 - D. Courtroom language: the judge's verdict settles legal standing without transforming the defendant; the sinner is declared righteous while still sinning
12. How does Romans 5 answer the charge of legal fiction?
- A. By conceding the fiction but defending its usefulness
 - B. By the symmetry of the imputations: nobody became an actual sinner to be condemned in Adam, and Christ never became an actual sinner to bear our sin, so being declared righteous before becoming righteous is no fiction, or the fall itself is one
 - C. By removing Adam from the argument
 - D. By appealing to church tradition alone
13. What does the crediting language of Romans 4 establish about Abraham?
- A. That Abraham was justified by circumcision
 - B. That Abraham earned wages by his works
 - C. He believed God and it was credited, the bookkeeping word, to his account as righteousness, and before the law existed, so faith has always been the instrument in both Testaments
 - D. That Abraham's faith was itself his righteousness
14. How was salvation grounded for those who lived before the cross?
- A. On the atonement still to come, applied like a debt carried until the payment cleared; nobody has ever been saved on any other ground
 - B. On the sacrificial system as a final payment
 - C. On works of the law until faith arrived
 - D. On a separate covenant of merit

15. What does simul iustus et peccator confess?
 - A. That the believer sins in body but not in spirit
 - B. That justification alternates with sin day by day
 - C. That sinners become just gradually and then stay just
 - D. That the believer is at the same time just, perfectly righteous in standing through Christ's imputed righteousness, and a sinner in daily fact; the tension the biblical doctrine leaves standing
16. What is the closing arithmetic of the session?
 - A. Faith plus works equals salvation
 - B. Faith plus works does not equal salvation; faith equals salvation plus works: faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is never alone
 - C. Works equal salvation plus faith
 - D. Salvation minus works equals faith
17. Which sola frames the unbridgeable difference with Rome?
 - A. Scripture alone, which Rome denies entirely
 - B. Glory alone, which Rome refuses to pronounce
 - C. Faith alone: Rome can pronounce several solas in its own sense, but never that faith is the only instrument of justification
 - D. Christ alone, which Rome has formally condemned

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 A · 4 D · 5 B · 6 C · 7 D · 8 A · 9 B · 10 C · 11 D · 12 B · 13 C · 14 A · 15 D · 16 B · 17 C

TALK IT OVER

1. The teachers observed that where justification is a climb, assurance is structurally impossible, and they met the fruit of that in ordinary believers who expect to miss heaven. Where in your own instincts does the climb still live, and what does the courtroom verdict say to that instinct?
2. If imputation is a legal fiction, so is the fall. Work through the three great transfers with your own name in them: condemned in Adam without sinning his sin, your sin borne by Christ without his sinning it, his righteousness credited to you without your earning it. Which of the three is hardest for you to say aloud, and why?
3. Simul iustus et peccator: at the same time just and sinner. Which half of the phrase do you forget more often, and what does forgetting it cost you? What would this week look like lived with both halves held?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul draws the conclusion in Romans 5: therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

GO FURTHER

Patton mentions his own long study of the righteousness word group through Romans, where it appears more than in any other New Testament book; read Romans 3 through 5 in one sitting with this session's chart beside you, and R. C. Sproul's Faith Alone from the course bibliography stands ready for those who want the Reformation's case at book length. The imputation of Christ's righteousness, the teachers note, is what makes the next two sessions possible: a security that does not rest on you, and a sanctification that flows from salvation rather than earning it.