

What's the Message – Lesson 143

We begin our study of the doctrine of Justification, the central doctrine of the Christian church.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, because we have been justified in Your sight and You have forgiven our sins, we now have the privilege to come before You and thank You for Your mercy, and the gift of Your Son. We ask that You guide our lives, that we may forgive others even as You have forgiven us. Amen.

Last time we told you that with this lesson we would be studying the doctrine of Justification. Now, Teacher, that brings up a whole list of questions in my mind – like, what is meant by the word “justification,” and what does it include or imply? And how is it obtained? What is the process? Who does it, mankind or God?

Whoa! There is enough in just those questions to take us more than a few minutes to cover. But let's start at the beginning with one more question: who needs it? Or, why do we even need to be talking about justification in the first place? For our answer let's turn to the Bible.

First, let's see what Jesus had to say about man's condition. Dale, please read Luke, chapter 5, verses 30 – 32.

And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

And let's see what the Old Testament has for us. Please read Psalm 53, verses 1-3.

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good. God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

So what's the message there for us? It is something we don't like to hear, and especially not to admit. But we are sinners. Every one of us. Every person who has ever lived on this planet since Adam. And, as Jesus said, sinners need to repent and be forgiven of their sins.

I have often said that we need to put a great big sign above the main entrance to our church that says, "For sinners only, all others stay out!" So the first point in our study of Justification is simply this: we need it. We need to have our sins forgiven and brought back into the family of God. Now, the next question. How does this happen? Paul's epistle to the Romans is a great source of information on this doctrine, so let's take a look at what Paul says in chapter 3, verses 20 – 25.

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.

That is one paragraph full of solid food for our soul! But let's focus on just one phrase for the moment. Paul says that we are justified by God's grace, as a gift.

So the point here is that God is the one doing the doing, not man. Man contributes nothing to the act of justification. It is strictly God's declaration that we are now forgiven because of our faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. Let's check a few more passages, starting with 2nd Corinthians, 5:19, then the 1st epistle of John, 2:2, the familiar John 3:16, and lastly Romans 4:25.

In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . . (Christ) is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only,

but also for the sins of the whole world. . . . For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him. . . . (Jesus our Lord) was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

And that leads us to the first part of our definition of the meaning of the word “justification.” Justification is a judicial act of God. He is the judge of all mankind, and He has declared – through faith in Jesus – that the sins of the whole world are forgiven. As theologian Dr. Edward Koehler has written: God in His mercy, for the sake of Jesus Christ, has pronounced the sinner righteous, even though he has no righteousness of his own. “God justifies the sinner by imputing to him the righteousness of Christ.” There are two separate theological terms involved here. The first is that in addition to being a judicial act of God, it is *objective* in scope. That is, it applies to the entire world. Second, it also becomes *subjective* when we – by faith – put ourselves in personal possession of that general justification.

Again quoting Dr. Koehler: “Thus it appears that universal justification does not benefit anyone unless it is followed by personal justification, and that personal justification is possible only because of the preceding universal justification. In other words, the fact that God has forgiven all sins to all men does not help anyone unless he accepts it by faith; on the other hand, he cannot appropriate forgiveness to himself if the sins are not yet forgiven. Illustration: Bread will not nourish us, unless we eat it; but we cannot eat it unless it is there.”

In our next lesson St. Paul will tell us more about the benefits of being justified and how it effects our lives.