

The Free Gift of Justification: (Romans 5)

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Why does justification matter? It mattered in the sixteenth century because the recovery of justification by faith alone in Christ alone struck at the bondage imposed by the works religion of Roman Catholicism. Rome has and still teaches that justification happens in different stages. Cornelis Venema summarizes the Roman Catholic teaching that “justification commences at baptism (“first” justification), and it is subsequently increased through the believer’s cooperation with God’s grace imparted through the [seven] sacraments (“second” justification). However, justification is only completed at the final judgment after a period of purification in purgatory (“final” justification).”¹

Justification matters in our day, not just because Rome still teaches this error, but within Protestantism, it has been recycled, repackaged, and sold under what is called the “New Perspective on Paul.” This new (but actually old) error teaches that believers “get into the covenant community by grace but ‘stay in’ and are ultimately vindicated by their works...our ‘future justification’ will be on the basis of a lifetime of faithfulness...justification pronounced in the final judgment will be granted only to those who have maintained their justification by persevering in obedience.”²

These errors strike at the heart of the gospel, claiming that the work of Christ is insufficient to count as a believer’s righteousness

1. Cornelis P. Venema, “Justification and Judgment,” *Tabletalk* 45, no. 10 (October 2021), 19.

2. Venema, “Justification and Judgment,” 19.

before God once and for all. These errors deny the free grace and mercy of God in declaring sinners to be righteous before God. They attribute far too much to man's ability to maintain his own justification. They fall back on works, as either contributing something (if not everything) to salvation. They deprive believers of the certainty and comfort of being justified fully and finally by faith in Christ. They minimize Adam's sin and its consequences as the representative of the human race. They minimize the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice as the representative of all believers. They leave a person with uncertainty as to how God receives sinners by leaving it up to man to maintain his justification. And so we would do well to maintain and recover the biblical doctrine of justification as the free gift of a sovereign and gracious God in Christ. Our theme is "the Free Gift of Justification." We will consider 1) its benefits; 2) its basis; and 3) its Benefactor.

The Benefits of Justification

As we turn to Romans 5, we find that Paul is keen to highlight the certainty of justification. In Romans 4, Paul argues that Abraham was justified by faith when he was yet uncircumcised, proving that his religious pedigree was not the ground for justification, but only his faith in the promise, power, and performance of God. Paul then shows that justification was not only for Abraham, but it is "for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:24–25). Paul demonstrates here that justification is available to sinners, both Jew and Gentile, both religious and non-religious, through the sheer mercy and grace of God.

In chapter 5, Paul continues his reasoning, demonstrating the "so what?" of justification: "Therefore being justified by faith" (v. 1). Now what? What happens when a believer is justified? What happens when you believe upon Christ? What do you receive? There are a number of benefits that Paul brings forward to highlight the certainty of justification. These benefits highlight the

security of justification that hinge not on our performance, but on Christ's sacrifice.

If Christ's sacrifice will not fail before the Father to atone for sin, then your justification, dear believer, will not fail. It is eternally secure because in the first place we have *Christ-centered peace with God*. Notice what Paul says in verse 1: "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." What a comfort and certainty that is! You no longer need to wonder whether God is favorably disposed to you or not. Through Christ, you have peace with God. The hostility that existed between a sinner and God is removed through God's justifying grace. The wrath of God is removed against sin. Jesus is our peace. When we are justified, we not only receive the benefits of Christ; we receive Christ Himself, who is our peace (Eph. 2:14).

And because we have peace with God through Jesus Christ, we also have *Christ-centered access before God*. In verse 2 Paul writes, "By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand." The justified sinner not only has hostility removed through Christ, but he now has access to God. This brings us back to the Garden of Eden, where the angel stood with a sword of flaming fire, barring access to the place of communion with God (Gen. 3:24). But now the sword of flaming fire is gone. The wrath of God is removed, and the sinner is given access to God. The way is opened up in Christ. There is no need for other intermediaries because Christ is the only Mediator. Dear believer, you have access to God by faith into this grace (or unmerited favor) wherein we stand (v. 2). Peace is one thing, access is another. Access refers to restored fellowship and communion through the unmerited favor of God.

And the third benefit of justification is *Christ-centered rejoicing in God*. Paul moves from access to God to rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God. It is as if he extends his thoughts into eternity and the hope that propels a believer forward to what is coming. Hope conveys certainty. A present faith in Christ is also anchored in the future in the fact that a believer will one day stand before

God without sin, fully remade into the glorious image of Christ. Paul is rejoicing in Christ alone. The glory of God will be reflected in every believer, in every justified sinner, where they will no longer be sinners, but saints in every respect who reflect the glory of God. Justification provides this rock-solid hope for every justified sinner. What a believer has now in justification will be realized to the fullest extent in glory. Let us rejoice in that prospect.

The fourth benefit of justification is *Christ-centered boasting in God*. Then too, a justified sinner is able to boast in God through Christ in the midst of tribulation. Paul writes in verses 3–4, “And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope.” At times, when we are called to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, it can seem so distant, so far off, so remote from our lived experience. But justification takes the believer into his present experience of tribulation and Paul shows here how that tribulation gives way to hope. When we suffer and experience trials, it works endurance. Our faith is tested, and when it is tested it endures—we persevere by grace.

When a justified sinner endures, then that endurance works experience. The word “experience” here does not just mean a special spiritual experience, but it means that the result of being tested or proven. A person who begins a new trade is not experienced, but a person who has persevered and been tested in learning that trade has gained the experience necessary to become a master. Likewise, a justified sinner in the midst of trials learns the experiences necessary through testing and being proven. They are experienced—battle-hardened. And as they come out with this experience and maturity, trials give way to hope—the hope that Paul speaks about in the previous verses about rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. So don’t lose heart! Justification benefits in the midst of trial and tribulation and brings Christ close so that we come to the one who is our hope beyond the veil (Heb. 6:19).

And this hope brings a justified sinner, finally, to the enjoyment of the *Spirit-shed love of God*. As Paul writes in verse 5,

“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” Time would fail me to explain all the glorious realities of this one verse, but this hope is certain because the love of God has found entrance into the hearts of sinners. The love of God as revealed in Christ and poured into the hearts of those who are justified. And we need to get what Paul is saying here—we not only receive the love of God in our hearts, but we also receive the Holy Spirit who is given unto us. The hope of a believer thus rests on the work of the Triune God in the work of justification. The free gift of justification has an unshakable foundation because of these Christ-centered benefits.

The Basis of Justification

The free gift justification also has an unshakable foundation because of its basis. The Word of God continues to point out how justification is not tied to any work or effort of man. It rests solely on the finished work of Christ alone. It rests first of all *on the timing of the death of Christ*. In Romans 5:6–8, we have a beautiful statement of the death of Christ in relation to our justification. If we go back to Romans 4 and consider when it was that Abraham was justified, it was while he was uncircumcised, while he was still in Ur of the Chaldees. That is where God found him and justified him. That is where Abraham believed the promises, power, and performance of God as he looked forward to the coming Christ who had justified him. And Paul picks up that same line of reasoning again and looks back at the death of Christ through the lens of the New Testament believer. He says, “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure [perhaps] for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (vv. 6–8).

The free gift of justification rests alone on the death of Christ. You and I cannot contribute anything to our justification. The Scriptures do not say, “only when you work sufficiently does the

death of Christ apply to you.” No, the death of Christ is for sinners who cannot find any life in themselves. The point of Paul’s argument is to get us to see that the situation is only hopeful because of the death of Christ. That alone is the basis for a declaration, both now and in eternity, that you are righteous before God—because of the death of Christ. Your justification, dear believer, rests alone in the death of Christ. In the words of the answer to Question 61 in the Heidelberg Catechism, “Because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, is my righteousness before God.”³

Second, justification rests on *the purpose of the death of Christ*. Paul goes on to show how the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood not only justifies a sinner, but when a sinner is justified, he is also saved from the wrath of God. This is what Paul drives home in verse 9: “Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” There is peace with God through Jesus Christ. There is no more wrath. “There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). There is no more wrath in the present and there is no more wrath in the future. A justified sinner is eternally secure because of his once-for-all justification in the blood of Christ. You no longer need to wonder whether God will accept sinners based on what you do. How tenuous that is! How fear-inducing it is to live in this constant state of worry, wondering, “Will God really accept me? Does God really love me? How can He love me?” Here is the answer, dear child of God—the death and blood of Christ that saves sinners from wrath.

There is reconciliation through the death of Christ in the present. And because there is reconciliation, there is not just a state of neutrality, a blank no-man’s land of emptiness. No,

3. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 61), in *The Three Forms of Unity* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2010), 87.

justification brings us into fellowship with God, and we shall be saved through the life of Christ. This again speaks to the present realities and future hope of justification. It speaks to the security and certainty of a justified sinner in Christ. There is no undoing of justification because Christ's death has secured it. In the final judgment, there will be no undoing of justification for us as believers because our right standing is secured in the life of Christ and will be fully realized.

Our response to this should be joy in God. Paul writes in verse 11, "And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement." We joy in the God who gave His own Son so that we might be justified in His sight: "So that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me, inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart."⁴

The Benefactor of Justification

In all of this, Paul is keen to show us that justification does not come from humanity's side. It comes from Christ alone. In the closing section of this chapter, Paul draws a stark contrast between Adam and Christ as representatives—one of the human race, the other of believers.

The contrast is stark and cuts off man's contributions and exalts Christ's work and the free gift of justification, thereby underlining the certainty of a believer's spiritual state in Christ alone. Let's follow the contrast and then apply the comfort to be gleaned from it.

4. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 60), in *Three Forms*, 87.

In verse 12–14, Paul points out Adam’s contribution to the problem of the human race. In verse 12 he writes, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” Adam sinned and as a result, every human being born after him inherited his sin nature and the guilt of that sin nature—what we call the imputation of Adam’s sin. In verses 13–14, Paul shows that the law, both the verbal law to Adam and the written law to Moses, served to point out the guilt and penalty of sin: “For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.” There is not much hope in these verses. Indeed, the human race as comprehended in Adam is in dire straits under the guilt and condemnation and the penalty of sin. But the hope breaks through at the end of verse 14: “Who is the figure of him that was to come.”

It is here that Adam is contrasted with Christ. Let’s highlight that from the following verses. In verse 15, Paul contrasts the offense (sin) and the free gift (grace). Just as Adam sinned and many are dead as a result, just so the grace of God and justification through Christ abounds to many. The contrast is that Adam brought death, but Christ brings life. The contrast in verse 16 is that Adam’s sin and consequent judgment brought condemnation, but the free gift means that Christ’s righteousness removes the offences in justification. In verses 17–18, the contrast is between the death that Adam introduced as a result of his sin, and the life that Christ brings in through His own person and work and justification. In verse 19, the contrast is between Adam’s disobedience which constituted us sinners, but through Christ many shall be declared righteous by faith. In verses 20–21, the contrast is between the function of the law in aggravating and convicting of sin, but grace prevails to overcome sin and bring eternal life through Jesus Christ.

So what is the comfort of this contrast and the comfort of the certainty of justification by faith alone in Christ alone? There is the comfort of knowing that justification by faith alone in Christ alone proclaims the gospel of done. There is nothing you or I can add to our salvation. In fact, we would only detract from the beautiful work of Christ.

There is the comfort of knowing that Christ alone holds eternal life. There is none better to run to than Christ. He is the second Adam, the perfect Adam, the obedient Adam, the righteous Adam. He is the one in whom we as the sons of the first Adam can find life for death, reconciliation instead of condemnation, perfect obedience for our disobedience, and perfect righteousness for our unrighteousness. There is also the comfort of knowing that our justification is secure, when we have believed in Christ. That security is found in Christ alone. What rest that gives as He gives the free gift of justification.

Do you believe this, dear friend? That is what is pressed home this morning from our text: “Therefore being justified by faith.” Faith is the instrument by which we receive Christ in justification. The catechism picks up this Pauline emphasis as well. We enjoy this double imputation “inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.... I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only.”⁵ Faith brings us not only into the heart of what justification means, but it brings us into the very heart of Christ. Justification matters. It is not merely an abstract doctrine to be studied and dissected, but to be believed and embraced, because it brings us into the very heart of the Savior who accepts sinners solely on the basis of His finished work. Amen.

5. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 60–61), in *Three Forms*, 87.