

Romans 8:28-30

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Date: 24 September 2017

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[0 : 0 0] Something I always do just as we're about to start the sermon is just have a glance at the time, so I can, you know, have an idea of roughly how much time I've got. Sometimes the first part of this service takes a little bit longer than on other occasions. The reason I'm mentioning this is that I did that just a moment ago and realized I don't have a watch, and there used to be a clock up there, but there isn't anymore, so you're warned. I have no idea what the time is, and I will have no idea what time it is as I go through the sermon, so that could mean that I'll kind of rush things, I hope not, or who knows, it might go in the other direction, so if it gets ridiculous, stamp your feet, I don't know. We'll see how we get on. Are you right with God? What is your standing before God?

Does God consider you a friend or an enemy? Does He claim you as a son or daughter, or does He view you as a stranger? Now, these are big questions of eternal significance. They're important in the here and now, but they're also important in the light of eternity.

The fourth of the five solas of the Reformation is sola fide, by faith alone, and it helps us to continue focusing on the matter of how a sinner can be made right with God, how you and me as sinners can be made right with God. At the very heart of Reformation theology stands this bedrock of biblical truth, justification by faith alone. A sinner, any sinner, is justified is made right with God by faith alone. You can be justified by faith alone. Martin Luther, perhaps the most famous of the Reformers, spoke of justification by faith, and I quote, as the article by which the church stands or falls. While John Calvin, more in our tradition as a church, identified the doctrine of justification by faith as the principal hinge on which religion turns. Calvin further insisted that justification by faith, if denied, leads to this outcome. The glory of Christ is extinguished, religion is abolished, the church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown. I don't know what you make of each one of these claims, but I think we can safely say that he felt quite strongly on the subject.

But what is justification? We speak of justification by faith. What is justification? What does it mean to be justified? The text that we are using as our starting point really in Romans chapter 8 simply declares what God has done for His people. Let's just read again. And of course, in these three verses, what is described about what God has done goes beyond the matter that concerns us this morning, justification, though it speaks of that also. For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called. Those He called, He also justified, which is our concern this morning.

Those He justified, He also glorified. The description there in Romans is all in the past tense, because for God, it's all a done deal. But we can set what is said there on a timeline to observe the work of God on our behalf. In eternity past, He predestined us. In our present, He calls and justifies, and in our future He will glorify us. But our interest today, this morning, is in God's work of justification on behalf of His people. As Paul says, He justified them. Now, the declaration in our text that God justifies serves, as I said a moment ago, as our starting point, our springboard for exploring some of what the Bible teaches about justification. So, this morning, we're going to do things a little bit differently than how I would normally preach a sermon, which is to take a text and really limit ourselves fairly strictly to that text. We're taking our text really as a springboard to then see what the Bible says, not only in this text, but in other parts of the Bible on this subject of justification. And we'll order what we have to say by means of three questions. First of all, we're going to ask the question, what does justification involve? And we're going to identify that as the work of the Father, of God the Father. But then we're going to ask the question, how is justification secured? And there we're going to focus on how this is the work of the Son, of Jesus. And then the third question is, how is our justification appropriated? How do we make it our own? And there we're going to notice how in particular that is the work of the Spirit. And so, we'll see this beautiful harmony of the Godhead in securing for us our justification that we would be right with God. The first question then, what does justification involve? Now, the shorter catechism, which some of us had to learn or forced to learn as children, provides a concise and biblical answer to the question. So, this isn't a verse from the Bible, but it is, I would contend, truth that is grounded in the Bible. And it helpfully summarizes for us the answer to the question, what is justification?

[6 : 44] And the answer given is as follows. Justification is an act of God's free grace. Remember what we were thinking about last Sunday morning, sola gratia. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He, that is God the Father, pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight only for, or on account of, or on account of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.

And from that answer that we find in the catechism, let's draw out the two aspects of justification that are identified, that go hand in hand, but are distinct. First of all, we have identified as the word of God's free grace, as integral to justification, pardon of sins. Justification involves God the Father pardoning or forgiving all our sins, every last one of them.

Sins committed in the past, sins committed in the present, and indeed sins that we will commit in the future, every last one of them, pardoned, forgiven. Justification involves this forgiveness of sins.

In Romans chapters 4 and 5 where Paul deals with this matter of justification by faith, notice how chapter 4 is entitled, Abraham justified by faith. And as I say in the following couple of chapters, this is the theme that Paul develops. And as he does so, he quotes or speaks of the psalm that we sung a few moments ago, Psalm 32, and especially the first two verses. There in verses 7 and 8 of Romans chapter 4 where Paul is speaking about justification, he identifies this as one aspect of it.

Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him. Pardon of sins. Now, pardon of sins is amazing. We don't appreciate how amazing it is because we don't appreciate how sinful we are. But it is amazing that each and every one of our sins is forgiven. But amazing though it is, pardon of sins, what it does is provide for the sinner what we might call a clean slate. We were guilty, but once forgiven, we're no longer guilty because our sins have been forgiven. They've been dealt with. The wonderful thing that the catechism identifies as involved in or as part of justification is that God does even more than just pardon the sinner. If we can speak about pardon as being just pardon, it doesn't seem right to use that language. But God does even more. He pardons our sin, but also he accepts us as righteous. To put it another way, we are counted as righteous by

[10:08] God. Now again, in Romans chapters 4 and 5 where Paul develops this theme, he speaks in those terms or he uses that language. Let me just draw your attention to verses 18 and 19 of chapter 5 of Romans and we'll read these two verses. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass, that is the sin of Adam our first father, was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous. Made righteous. Counted as righteous by God. Not only not guilty, not only sins forgiven, but positively righteous in the sight of God, but positively righteous in the sight of God.

Now this aspect of justification involves a declaration on the part of God. He declares the sinner as just or righteous. It's not about being made righteous in our conduct, because evidently we're not. Nobody here this morning, and many of us believers, none of us are righteous in our conduct, but we're righteous in the sight of God. We are declared righteous by God. To capture the seeming enigma, Luther spoke of how the believer is simul justus et peccator, at the same time just and a sinner. I googled the phrase, it's a Latin expression, and I googled it just to make sure I got the spelling right, and I was intrigued to find that you can get t-shirts with that emblazoned on it at missionalwear.com if you're interested in a simul justus et peccator t-shirt. But the truth is an amazing one, at the same time just and a sinner.

And this is what Paul is explaining. This is what is involved in justification. These two elements, the pardon of sin, but also declared righteous. We are declared or counted righteous on account of Christ and our connection with Christ. The catechism speaks of Christ's righteousness being imputed to us, reckoned to our account. To try and illustrate that aspect of justification, imagine if when John, this is John's son, not John's father, so that's my oldest son for those of you who don't know the family connections. Imagine if when John was very small, we had gone as a family to the fair.

So me and Martha and John, maybe, I don't know, two years old. And imagine if Martha had had a go at the, what do they call these, the coconut sty, you know, that where you throw balls at coconuts and knock them over. I don't know if you still can do that at the fair, but anyway, imagine that Martha was doing that, and she was amazingly successful. She knocked all the coconuts over and she won this big, almost life-size teddy bear because she'd done so well. Now, all John was doing was looking on in amazement. In this very unlikely scenario, her husband would also have been looking on in amazement at her success, but that's by the by. John is looking on in amazement, this two-year-old, he's looking on in amazement at his mother's dexterity at being able to knock down all these coconuts and won this amazing teddy bear. And at the end of it, Martha's won the teddy bear, and I go and I take the teddy bear from Martha with her approval, and I give it to John. And I say, this is yours. Now, John's done nothing. He's done nothing, but it's his. And that, in a small way, captures what is going on here. God the Father, he sees what his Son has done, this perfect life that he has lived, this life of sinless obedience, and he takes that and he gives it to the sinner, and he says, this is yours. You've done nothing for it, but it's yours. It's a gift that I give you.

I'm not just forgiving your sins. I'm giving you the righteousness of my Son, Jesus. What is justification? What does justification involve? Well, it involves these two elements, pardon of sins and being accepted as righteous or declared as righteous. But the second thing we want to look at, and we've kind of touched on it just a moment ago, is how is justification secured?

[15 : 15] To kind of enter into the question, or to kind of introduce the answer to the question, we could pose another question, and it would be this, how can God forgive just like that? How can He just say to a sinner and say, well, you know, you're forgiven? Yes, you've committed all these sins, but you know, let's just forget about it. I'm just going to forgive you. How can He do that and remain true to His character as a just and holy God? Imagine if judges did that in our courts. Imagine what chaos would ensue if judges took to themselves that prerogative that somebody came to court, was guilty of a crime, and the judge said, you know what? Forget about it. I'll forgive you. Off you go home.

Chaos would ensue. We would protest rightly so. We say, you can't do that. You may be a judge. You may be very important. You may be very educated, but you can't just forgive people like that.

Or even more remarkably, how can God declare righteous somebody like me who quite evidently is not righteous? You say, well, how can He do that? How can even God do that? You know, again, if I could illustrate it, you know, imagine if, you know, if somebody were to come up to me and to say, you know, David, I think you are the very best football player in the world. I declare you to be the best football player in the world. Now, I might say, well, that's very kind of you, but, but you know, it's not true. You know, you can declare it all you want, but it's simply not true.

It is a nonsense statement. It's not true. Well, how can God go to a sinner who evidently is not righteous? Indeed, a sinner who continues to sin and say, you're righteous. How could even God do that? Well, to answer these questions, we turn to the work of God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

And the first thing we need to stress about Jesus is that He was sent into the world by the Father to act as our representative, our representative head. Paul speaks of Jesus as the second Adam, Adam. The first Adam, Adam and Eve, represented us, represented humanity. And so when they fell, we fell. Well, the second Adam, Jesus also represents us. He represents us in His life, death, and resurrection that were for us and on our behalf. Let's just think about what Jesus did, His life. Jesus became one of us and lived the life that we could not live, a perfectly righteous life.

[18 : 08] His death, Jesus died, an atoning death for us in our place, bearing the punishment due for our sin. His resurrection, here it's more really the focus on the Father. The Father, by raising Jesus, the Father set His seal of approval on His Son's life and death. Sometimes spoken of as the Son's active obedience, His perfect, sinless life, and His passive obedience, handing Himself over to death.

There's nothing really very passive about it, but that's the language that is sometimes used. Note the language that Paul uses concerning the resurrection of Jesus. In Romans chapter 4 and verse 25, we read there about Jesus, He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. And just bear in mind that language with what Timothy says, or rather Paul says, in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 16. So, the two verses really we need to think about together.

In 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 16, we read, and again it's speaking about Jesus, He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, but there the word that is translated vindicated is that same word that we have in Romans, justified. He was justified by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. And what these verses are saying is that by the resurrection, the Father vindicated or justified Jesus. Now, the Father didn't make Him righteous. He was righteous already, but He declared Him righteous. And as Paul says in Romans 4 25, by the resurrection of Jesus, we too are justified, we are declared righteous on account of the righteous life and atoning death of Jesus for us. But in this matter of what Jesus does for us to secure our justification, are we mere observers of what Jesus has done on our behalf? In a spiritual and very real sense, we are united to Jesus in His life, death and resurrection. So we are united to Jesus in His life of perfect obedience. In a sense, we participate with Him in our union with Him. We are united to Him in His death as our substitute representative. We are united to Him in His resurrection and justification as He is declared by the Father. We are united to Him in His righteousness. We are united to Him in His and His righteousness. We are united to Him in His righteousness. We are united to Christ, in union with

Christ. The Father looks on you and sees Jesus. Now, just let that sink in, the glory of it, the wonder of it, the practical comfort that it brings to us as sinners. J. Gresham Machen was a New Testament scholar at Princeton and laterally at Westminster Theological Seminary across in the United States in the first half of the 19th century. And the story is told that as he lay on his deathbed, he sent a telegram, in the days of telegrams, he sent a telegram to his friend and colleague, Professor John Murray, who as it happened, hailed from Sutherland, born in Boner Bridge. And in that telegram, as he is lying on his deathbed, he wrote these words, directed to his friend, directed to his friend, I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.

Now, I don't know if you know anything about telegrams, but you know, when you're doing a telegram or in the days when there were telegrams, you had to use your words carefully because you paid for each word. So, here is a man who's about to die and this is what he says, I am so grateful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it. Now, perhaps only a scholar would express his hope in such theological terms, but the truth to capture is this is indeed the ground of our hope as we prepare to meet our maker. We have been credited with the active obedience or perfect righteousness of Christ. And so, when we die and we stand before God on the day of judgment, we will do so in the words of the prophet in Isaiah 61, clothed in a robe of righteousness, the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And so, the Father will embrace us. He will welcome us. He can do no other to those so clothed, to those wearing such a garment, to those united to His Son. How is our justification secured by Jesus, our representative head, by His life, by His death, and by His resurrection as that serves to vindicate all that He had done for us? Now, the third question that I said that we needed to pose and answer is, how is our justification appropriated? How does it become our own in our life experience? We've seen what justification involves, pardon and acceptance as righteous. We've seen how it was secured for us by Jesus, our representative head.

[24 : 10] By His perfect life, He secured our righteousness. By His death, He secured our pardon. By His resurrection, the Father declared that Jesus had fulfilled the mission on our behalf. But how in my life, in your life, is this justification, pardon and acceptance, how is it appropriated or made our own? And in a sense, we've finally reached our destination because it is received. Your justification is received by faith, by faith by faith alone. What is this faith that enables us to trust in Jesus and receive our justification.

The Reformers, as they thought about this matter of faith, they distinguished three elements that together constitute saving or justifying faith. Knowledge, assent, and trust. Knowledge is knowledge concerning who Jesus is, concerning our condition. Knowledge arises out of the grace of revelation that God lets us know these truths.

But then there's assent when we say, yes, I believe that to be true. I believe what the Bible says about my condition to be true. The diagnosis is true. I am a sinner. I am without hope. I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. And so we assent to the truths that are revealed. But another element, an integral element of justifying or saving faith is trust. Trust is secured as we are persuaded of and discover the trustworthiness of Jesus. And we place our trust in Jesus. And it's very important to stress that we receive our justification by faith, not on account of faith. Faith is the instrumental cause, not the material cause.

What I mean by that is that it's not faith that saves us. It is the means, the instrument that God has given for us to lay hold of what Jesus has done. To put that in another way, strictly speaking, we're not saved by faith or even by faith in Jesus. We are saved by Jesus through our faith. Faith is the instrument that God gives to the sinner in order that he might embrace Jesus. And I wonder when we talk about being justified by faith and in the light of all that we said about Christ alone and grace alone, I wonder if we could consider the faith that we exercise as our wee bit in our justification. And so we readily acknowledge, well, God has done everything in and through Jesus, but that's my wee bit. That's what I bring to the table, my faith, I believe. I'm the one who does that.

Can at least that be seen as my part, my wee bit? Can we view it in those terms? Well, no, we can't. Not even the faith that we exercise. We were thinking about Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 1 to 10 last Sunday morning. Notice what is said there in verses 8 and 9. For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.

[27 : 32] We contribute nothing. We don't contribute any good works or righteousness, for we have none. And we don't even contribute our faith because it is a gift of God. God, by the Spirit's work in our heart and mind, enables us to see our need and to see the sufficiency of Jesus and by faith to lay hold of Jesus for our salvation, for our justification.

What about you? You know, let this not be just some lecture on doctrine. What about you? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus as your representative who lived for you and who died for you? Faith in Jesus is the only way of appropriating or receiving what Jesus has done for you.

Faith is embracing Jesus as your Savior. Faith is abandoning yourself to Jesus as your Savior. Savior. The one who has secured your pardon and righteousness. Faith is an open hand, ready to receive what God has provided in and through his Son, Jesus. What God has done defies description. His saving work in Jesus and on your behalf is a thing of wonder and beauty.

But it's not enough to admire God's saving work. You need to embrace the Savior. And if you have not yet done so, I would urge you to embrace the Savior today. Embrace Jesus. Trust in Jesus as your Savior.

Acknowledge your need of a Savior and see in Jesus the one who is a sufficient Savior. And trust in Him. Abandon yourself to Him. Believe in Jesus.

[29 : 30] Believe in Jesus. Be saved as you by faith receive Jesus. There's one final matter we need to touch on in connection with this great truth of justification by faith alone. And it's a question that is sometimes posed in the context of this doctrine and I think it would be strange not to at least touch on it. If we are justified or made right with God by faith alone, does that mean that we can live as we please? I think even to pose the question is almost offensive. How could anybody who grasps even something of the sacrificial love of God poured out for sinners do anything other than with God's help and in gratitude seek to live a holy life laden with the fruit of good works? The Westminster Confession of Faith, our subordinate standard of faith captures the matter succinctly when it describes these elements in this way. Faith is the alone instrument of justification, yet it is not alone in the person justified. You see what's being said there?

It's an acknowledgement that we are saved by faith alone, but faith is never alone. If it is true saving faith it will always be accompanied by, it will bring in its train a life of good works, of service to God, and of service to others. That of course is what Paul himself goes on to say in the passage in Ephesians that we referenced just a moment ago. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. As we draw things to a close, let me invite you to stand in grateful wonder at the beautiful harmony of the work of the three persons of the Godhead on our behalf to secure our right standing, to secure our right standing before God. God the Father justifies, pardons your sins, declares you righteous. God the Son secures our justification by his life on our behalf, by his death in our place. And God the Spirit enables us to receive our justification by faith alone, that is a gift of God. And so with the psalmist we join and invite others to join in the praise of God.

Come see what God has done, his mighty works of old, his deeds towards the human race. How awesome to behold. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we do thank you for your Word, the Bible. We thank you for your work of salvation on our behalf. We thank you for your Son, Jesus. We thank you that he is indeed our representative head, the one who lived a perfect life for us, the life that we could not live, who died an atoning death in our place, bearing the punishment of our sins, and whose saving work was vindicated as he was raised again from the grave, triumphant over death. Heavenly Father, we do pray that your Spirit would be the one who would be at work in us, helping us to wonder at and to glory in all that you have done, and helping us above all to put our trust in Jesus and to keep our trust in Jesus day by day. And these things we pray in His name. Amen.