

Justification by Faith

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Scripture tells us that “the just shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17 NKJV).

But who are the just? And how does one become just?

The just are those who have been justified—but what does it mean to be justified?

What law lens do you read this word through: human law—imposed rules that require external oversight and inflicted punishment, or design law—the protocols upon which our Creator built reality to operate (such as the laws of health and physics)?

Seeing God as Creator, we understand that His laws are the laws upon which reality is built and that violations of God’s law injure and destroy, ultimately resulting in death *unless* the Creator intervenes to heal and restore—that is, to **set right**, which is what justification actually means: setting right that which is not right.

But if one operates under the human definition of law—imposed rules, made-up mandates—then one thinks that justice requires the sovereign to use power to police and enforce the law through inflicted punishment. In this view, justification is not about healing, restoration, or setting hearts and minds right; it is about a legal adjustment.

Bad Assumption, Wrong Conclusion

Many theologians suggest that the word *justification* in Christianity refers to a legal process because the word itself is part of a set of legal words—it is legal language, they say.

Some problems with this view are:

- The word *justification* does not exist in the original Bible text.
- The Bible was not written in English or Latin.

Instead, *justification* was a word used by sincere but biased translators who, when they translated, did so from a Roman legal worldview. In other words, the translators, having come from a Roman background, had accepted the lie that God's law functions no differently than human law.

In short, they artificially introduced legal language and ideas.

But even using the word *justify*, the idea that it has only a legal connotation is false. *Justify* also has non-legal meanings:

- To *justify* the margins in your document is not a legal act; instead, it is a moving or setting what is not in-line to being in-line.
- And *justify* can also mean to show, demonstrate, or prove an action, position, person, or claim to be right.

If one views the Bible through a human-law lens, then one assigns a legal definition to the word *justification* and, therefore, teaches that spiritual justification is being legally declared to be righteous *even though* one is not righteous. It creates a legal fiction in which God is portrayed as declaring something true that is, in fact, not true.

But when we reject the false human-law construct and embrace design law and return to worshiping God as Creator, we understand that justification in the Bible is both setting right that which is wrong (making sinners into saints) and demonstrating the righteousness of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Bible Demonstrates Justification

In Romans 3:25, 26, the apostle Paul describes both the demonstration aspect of justification and the putting right what is wrong aspect of justification:

God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people's sins are forgiven through their faith in him. God did this **in order to demonstrate that he is righteous**. In the past he was patient and overlooked people's sins; but in the present time he deals with their sins, in order to **demonstrate his righteousness**. In this way **God shows that he himself is righteous** and that he **puts right everyone** who believes in Jesus (GNT, emphasis mine).

Justification is part of the process of saving sinners from sin. Therefore, in order to accurately understand what justification is, we must accurately understand what the problem is. In other words,

we must first diagnose what is actually wrong before trying to describe God's treatment plan.

If we accept the lie that God's law is like human law, then we believe that the problem created by Adam and Eve when they sinned was legal trouble—that they now stood under legal condemnation for breaking the law of God. And that God, being both perfectly holy and sovereign, was required by His law and holiness to inflict appropriate punishment for their sin. If God were to remit this punishment, it is claimed, then God is not just and His law is void. Thus, in the legal view, justice requires God to inflict the death penalty for sin. But, it is argued, there is good news: God sent His sinless Son and executed Him in our place (even though He was innocent) and we can now claim the blood of this sinless human sacrifice to be applied to our legal registry in heaven. In so doing, God is required by law to declare us to be legally righteous, even though we are still unrighteous in heart, mind, and character.

Not only does such a view misrepresent God's law, but it also perverts the divine character as it would make God a liar—declaring humans to be righteous who are not—and would make God out to be the source of death. In such a warped view, God needs something done to Him (appeasement by sacrifice) so that He won't use His power to kill us.

When we reject the lie that God's law functions like human law and return to worshipping the Creator whose laws are the design protocols for life, we realize that when Adam and Eve sinned, they did not somehow remain loyal, faithful, trustworthy beings who were suddenly in legal trouble. Instead, we understand reality, that their sin changed them. Love and trust were displaced in their hearts by fear and selfishness, which became their new motives. They were damaged in their inmost beings and were now "dead in trespass and sin" (Ephesians 2:1). In other words, they had a terminal condition. As the Bible says, "sin when full grown brings forth death" (James 1:15). Without God intervening to cure this condition, all humans would die because all humans are "born in sin conceived in iniquity" (Psalm 51:5).

Understanding that sin changes the sinner—corrupts the mind, incites fear and selfishness, warps character, takes us out of harmony with God and the holiness of heaven—then what do sinners actually need in order to be right with God?

- A new legal record?
- A judicial ruling?
- A blood payment to a punishing deity?
- A legal declaration?
- Or do they need a new heart and a right spirit?

Scripture is clear on what is needed:

- "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10 NIV84).
- "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19 NIV84).
- "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts" (Hebrews 8:10 NIV84).
- "A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Romans 2:29 NIV84).

All the descriptions of Scripture are the same: The plan of salvation is God's work *in* sinners to transform their hearts and minds to set them right by restoring God's law of love into them and eradicating fear and selfishness from their characters. As we find in Romans 2:29, it is a heart work not

a legal (written code) work.

The Bible describes our sinful heart and mind as being hostile to God:

“The sinful mind is hostile to God” (Romans 8:7 NIV84).

Another version puts it this way: “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (NKJV).

We, in our unconverted, sinful state, distrust God and are hostile to Him. Our hearts are not in harmony with His. We don’t love what God loves. We don’t think how He designed us to think. We don’t function as God intends us to function. We are fearful and selfish. We need to be put right, set right, justified in heart, mind, attitude to trust God. This is what justification is—changing the heart of a being who distrusts into one who trusts, setting right the heart with God.

Justification Illustrated

Abraham, as the rest of us, was “born in sin and conceived in iniquity.” He was a sinner tempted by fear and selfishness and acted, on multiple occasions, to deceive others in such a manner as to put his wife in harm’s way, all in order to save himself. But Abraham experienced a change—not a legal change, but an actual change. He went from a person who didn’t trust God and did things his own way to a person who did trust God and followed God’s directions. In other words, Abraham experienced an actual change of heart motive; his heart was set right with God. ***This is justification.***

And once Abraham trusted Him, God—who is the Creator God of reality and not fantasy—recognized the new state of being in Abraham, that he was justified, actually right in heart with God (Romans 4:1-3).

God did not declare Abraham righteous when Abraham still distrusted God, but He did recognize the reality that Abraham’s heart had changed from distrust to trust. And once a sinner genuinely trusts God, opening their hearts to Him, God heals and restores them, writing His law upon their heart and mind.

This is the justification of the individual sinner with God. But this justification—the setting of an individual heart and mind right with God—is possible only because Jesus first became our substitute, the second Adam, and overcame sin in our stead, setting the human *species* right with God.

When Adam sinned, not only was he as an individual out of harmony with God (at enmity with God), but the entire species was also out of harmony—because every human is descended from Adam and born infected with fear and selfishness. After Adam and before Jesus, there were no sinless human beings—none. Jesus became human to remedy that situation, to become the connecting link to heaven, the one human being in which God’s design law of life was perfectly lived out, thereby restoring harmony with God’s design law into the human family.

In so doing, Jesus became the new head of a renewed and cleansed humanity—our second Adam.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the species human was justified—set right, put right—with God. He became human and was tempted in all points just like we are, yet He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). In the human life experience of Jesus, He accomplished something real, something no other human could,

something objective: He developed with the use of *only* His human abilities a perfect, sinless *human character*, thereby restoring God's design law of love back into the species human. In the person of Jesus, the human race was put right with God—we were justified.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, **once made perfect**, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8, 9 NIV84).

Wait ... wasn't Jesus always perfect?

He was always sinless, yes, but Bible perfection means maturity of character and character cannot be created, it must be developed by the choices of the sentient being. Jesus developed, as a human, a perfect, mature sinless character, restoring God's law of love into the species human. In so doing, He as our substitute set the species human right with God; i.e., He justified the species and became our remedy to sin, the source of salvation for all who follow Him.

When we are won to trust, we open the heart and receive the indwelling Spirit, who takes the character of Christ and reproduces it in us, such that "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20 NIV84). This is true biblical justification.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might **become the righteousness of God**" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV84).

Genuine justification is not a matter of legal forgiveness; it is the actual work of God through Christ to set us right in heart, mind, attitude, and character—to be united, at-one with God.