



## Wesley on Romans: Justification by Faith

### Romans 4:1-17

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June 25, 2017

\*All words printed in *italics* come from Wesley's original publication.

Over the next month, we're going to be looking deeper into six of John Wesley's sermons, all based on scriptural text from the Epistle of Romans. Wesley wrote in an 18<sup>th</sup> Century vernacular that to even the most dedicated scholar is difficult to read and comprehend. Wesley also preached in a revival type fashion, with many of his sermons being twice as long as you would normally hear on a Sunday morning in worship. It is my hope to rewrite and deliver Wesley's sermons in such a way that we can understand them and glean a call to discipleship from the founder of our denomination. I will do my best not to change Wesley's intent, or to skew the text in any way to reconcile discrepancies I personally may have with his teachings. If you disagree or find challenging any of the sermons this summer, I invite you to join with me in conversation as together we consider the modern application of these sermons.

If you want to pick up a printed copy, or if you check the sermons out online at [wsumc.com](http://wsumc.com) as they are posted each week, I will have indicated what phrases I pulled directly from Wesley's sermons. We begin this week with Wesley's sermon titled, "Justification by Faith," which was first published around 1746.

How a sinful person becomes justified to God is a question we all should wonder. Becoming justified to God is the foundation of our hope, for truly no person can be at peace or have joy, in this life or in eternity, if they are not reconciled to God. We can have no peace or joy, in this life or the next, if in our hearts we condemn ourselves and believe we are condemned by God.

Justification is a most difficult theological concept to understand. Not only are many confused by the idea of justification, there are many others whose teachings around justification are *utterly false, contrary to the truth as light to darkness.*

But this is a really important topic, because understanding justification is vital for any who seek truth. Because it's such an important topic, and because there is so much confusion around this topic, *I shall endeavor to show, First, what is the general ground of this whole doctrine of justification; secondly, what justification is; thirdly, who are they that are justified; and, fourthly, on what terms they are justified.*

First, let us consider, what is the foundation for the doctrine of justification?

In the beginning, humanity was made in the image of God. Because we were created in the image of God, we were holy, merciful, and perfect - just as God in heaven is holy, merciful, and

perfect. We were like God, pure from sin, with not the slightest bit of evil in our lives. We were *inwardly and outwardly sinless and undefiled*.

Once created, God gave us, humanity, a perfect law, to which our obedience was expected. On to the law of love, written on our hearts, God added one additional rule in that idyllic Garden of Eden, saying, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that grows in the garden.' To this law, God added a penalty, saying, 'If you eat the fruit, you shall surely die.'

*Such then was the state of [humanity] in paradise.* In the free and unmerited love of God, humanity was holy and happy. If we had but kept the law and obeyed God in all things, we forever would have lived in the perfect life of love. But, as we know, humanity did disobey God; we, the created, *'ate of the tree of which God commanded [us], saying, You shall not eat of it.'* As a result, humanity was separated from God. Our bodies became corruptible and mortal, so that death took hold of our being.

Through the one, sin entered the world, and by sin came death. Sin and death became common among all of humanity. *'Through the offence of one' all are dead, dead to God, dead in sin, dwelling in a corruptible, mortal body, shortly to be dissolved, and under the sentence of death eternal.* By the sin of the one, all were made sinners and judgment came upon all of humanity.

Into this world, in a world in which all of humanity was condemned because of sin, "God sends his Son as a once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world."<sup>i</sup> God sent the Son that we might not suffer from sin and death, but that we may have everlasting life. If Adam, the first of humanity, was the representative through which we were all condemned, Christ becomes a new representative through which we are all reconciled to God. Christ offered himself for the sin of all humankind. By his one offering of self, by his giving of his life, Christ has redeemed all humankind, *having thereby made a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.*

Through that which Christ has done, God has removed the punishment due for our sins, has restored us to the favor of God's love, and has restored our dead souls into new life, truly to life eternal.

In summary, here is the foundation of the doctrine of justification: *By the sin of the first Adam ... the representative of us all, we all 'fell short of the favour of God.'* ... *Even so by the sacrifice for sin made by the second Adam [that is, Christ], as the representative of us all, God is so far reconciled to all the world that he has given [us] a new covenant.* In our new condition, there is no longer condemnation for us, for we are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.

Now that we've considered the foundation of justification, we should consider, what exactly does that mean? Well, that's the second thing which I said I would show, let's get to it. From what we have already considered, it's clear that being justified does **not** mean we are now made without sin. Being made perfect without sin is a process we call sanctification, which

perhaps is that which follows justification, but is a distinct gift of God, and is really totally different. Justification is what God does *for us* through the Son; sanctification is what God works *in us* by the Spirit. There are perhaps some instances in which justification and sanctification are joined, but generally speaking, the two are really quite distinguishable and should not be considered the same.

Justification doesn't mean we have reached a state of perfection. Being justified doesn't mean we have never done wrong, nor does it mean we will never screw up again. Justification doesn't automatically bring about a behavioral change such that we become instantaneously perfect in all of our thoughts and deeds. What justification does mean (though, a true definition is perhaps not appropriate) is that though we all deserve the punishment due for the times we've broken God's law, God chooses not to inflict such punishment on those who are justified.

Don't be mistaken, I'm not saying God is deceived by those who are justified. God doesn't believe any of us are any better than we actually are. God doesn't think that just because you're justified, you no longer will sin. God is *all-wise*, and knows the truth. You should take note of this, for just as God doesn't think you less innocent than you really are, you also should not consider yourself to be more innocent than you really are. Don't give in to some false notion that because you have been justified and reconciled to God, that you no longer have the capability to sin in your life. Such an idea is preposterous, whether looking through the lens of the scriptures or through basic human reasoning.

So, what is justification? At its core, the basic scriptural teaching is that justification is God's pardon, *the forgiveness of sins*. Justification is the act by which God shows mercy by forgiving all the sins of your past. The apostle Paul explains this in Romans 5, saying, '*Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.*' God will not condemn the justified for the sins they commit, either past or future. All sins, those thought, spoken, and acted out, are forgiven; *[they] shall not be remembered or mentioned against [any person], any more than if they had not been.* Though rightly, we should suffer for breaking God's law, God will not allow for our suffering, because through God's love, the Son has already suffered for those very sins.

If the justified are those who shall have their sins forgiven through the mercy of God, the third thing which we must consider is, who are the justified? How do I get into that club? The Apostle tells us in verse 5 of our scriptural passage today in Romans 4 that God justifies the ungodly. There are no defining criteria regarding this term: God justifies *the ungodly of every kind and degree and none but the ungodly*. Those who are righteous don't need to be justified, for they are already righteous. It is only sinners who need to be pardoned; *it is sin alone which [is in need] of being forgiven*. Forgiveness, as understood as coming from God, is most pointedly, if not exclusively, in reference to the forgiveness of sin.

There are some who would say a person must first be holy in God's sight before they can be justified. There are many who believe one must be obedient to God before they can have their sins forgiven. But this is *not only flatly impossible, but also grossly, intrinsically absurd, contradictory to itself*. We don't say that saints need forgiveness, but that forgiveness is for

those in sin. The scripture doesn't tell us that God justifies the godly, but the ungodly. To say one must be perfect or holy first would be to say that upon justification, God would be offering forgiveness for sins which were already taken away and have forgiven before. That doesn't even make sense.

Think about it in terms of scriptural identity. *Does the good Shepherd seek and save only those that are [already found]? No! [Christ] seeks and saves that which is lost.* God offers forgiveness to those who need such pardoning mercy. God forgives those who are ungodly, *in whom the love of the Father was not.*

So, justification is God's forgiveness offered as a gift to the ungodly in need of forgiveness.

What does it take to be justified? There is but one requirement: faith. One need but believe in the God who justifies the ungodly to be '*passed from death unto life.*' One who believes in God, one who has faith in Christ Jesus, is considered justified even if their life shows no past obedience to the God's law. This is common sense: how could anyone be expected to be obedient to God's law of love if they did not yet know the love of God in their hearts?

If faith is the requirement, how do we define faith? We know that faith in general is defined as a belief or conviction of things not seen. *Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,' but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me.* Justifying faith is not about a mere belief in the concept that God was in Christ, but is built upon the trust that Christ died for me, or for you, the individual. And it doesn't matter at what time someone comes to have this faith. They could be a child, early in years, or when they are *old and hoary-haired.* God promises to justify each and every person, no matter when in life they come to faith.

By claiming that faith is the only necessary condition of justification, that is also to say that there is no justification without faith. Faith is the one and only necessary condition of justification. The very moment a person receives faith, they are counted to God as righteous. Again, as we've noted before, that's not say that from the moment we have faith we are flawless, or perfect, or no longer capable of sin. But, in the love of God sent in the form of Christ who took on the sin of the world, we are counted as righteous from the moment we put our faith in the Lord.

Hear this, and understand the joyful freedom that comes in believing in God. A person can be reprehensible in every sense; a person can be sinful in every aspect of their lives; a person can be *a sinner of any kind or degree, in a full sense of their total ungodliness, of their utter inability to think, speak, or do good ...* but the moment they find faith in the mercy of God in Christ, *who can doubt but [that they] are forgiven in that moment?*

There are some who will question why it is faith is the only prerequisite. In fact, there are probably some, who, had they been in charge of the writing of scripture, would have set a

stronger requirement. But, it is not for us to call in to question the conditions necessary for justification. The terms of forgiveness, the terms of God's pardon, do not depend on our preferences; the terms for forgiveness fall in God's hands. It is not our mercy being offered, and therefore, we do not get to set the terms for who receives mercy or when they receive it. The mercy is God's, and God has set that all that is needed to receive such grace through forgiveness is faith in the love of God.

Perhaps it's worth looking quickly at why faith is the only necessity for justification. The most obvious answer is to *'hide pride from [humanity].'* *Pride had already destroyed the very angels of God.* It was pride that caused humanity, represented by Adam, to break God's law in the first place causing the need for justification. This is why faith is the only necessary condition. Faith reduces pride and brings one to acknowledge that there is something far better than I in the world, namely, the love of God. One *must come as a mere sinner inwardly and outwardly, self-destroyed and self-condemned, bringing nothing to God but ungodliness only, pleading nothing of his [or her] own but sin and misery.* When we can acknowledge our brokenness and when we can own that we are guilty of being less than perfect as God is perfect, then we can stand before the cross and acknowledge that our ability to be forgiven, the chance to be reconciled, the opportunity to once more be in the favor of God, is only possible by the love of God as witnessed in the gift of the Son.

So, to all you who have sinned, to all those who are helpless in this broken world, listen up and hear the good news: there is a place you can go to find healing! Go to God. Don't try to plead your righteousness; don't try to convince God you are worth forgiving. Go to God and acknowledge your appreciation for such amazing love; acknowledge that you are among the broken and hurting, the lost and sinful, the grieving and struggling. *And know that [God] justifies the ungodly.* You don't need to plead your case before the Lord of all that you have done right in the past. In fact, you do not have to have ever done anything right in your life before this moment right now. God yearns for you. Any who says, I'm not worthy, God says, you are worthy because I, your Lord, have made you worthy. So come, *believe in the Lord Jesus; and you, even you, are reconciled to God.*

Praise be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas C. Oden. *John Wesley's Teachings: Volume 2, Christ and Salvation.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.