

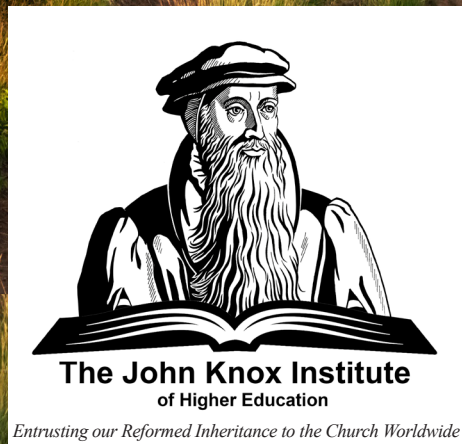
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

The Application of Redemption

by Rev. William Macleod

Lecture 7

Justification



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic Theology and Principal of the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary, in Inverness, Scotland. He is married and has three adult children and six grandchildren.

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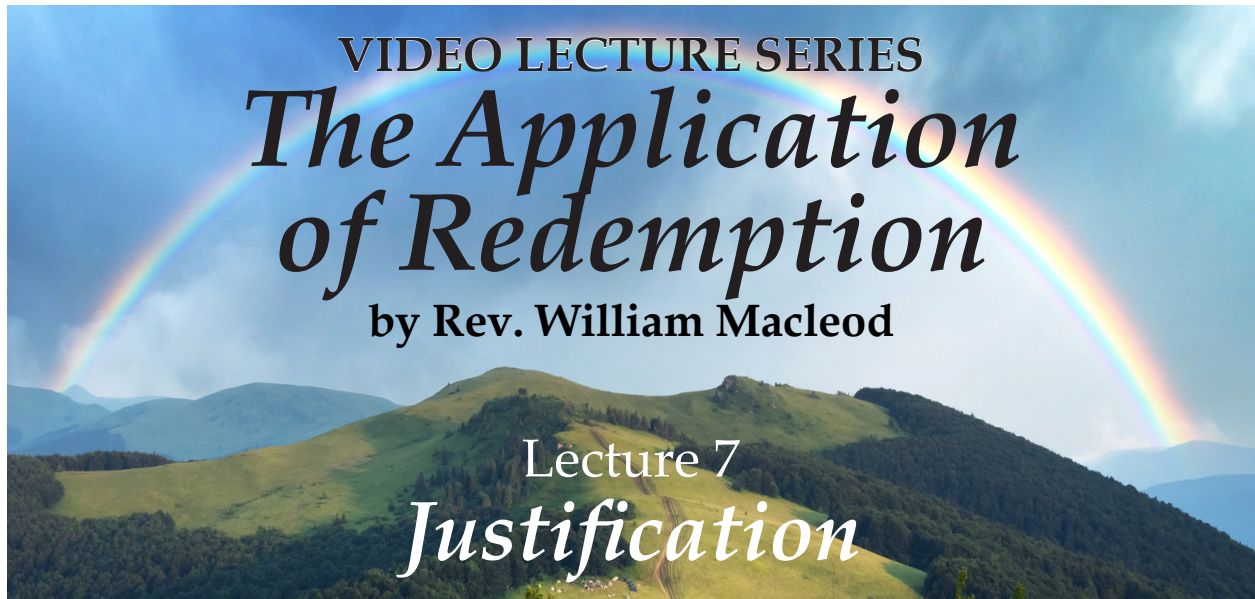
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The Application of Redemption

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12 Lectures

1. The Order of Salvation
2. Total Depravity
3. Effectual Calling
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Our lecture today is on *Justification*. Justification, by faith alone in Christ alone is one of the great fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. It is vital to be correct and accurate in our understanding of this truth, as it affects all other doctrines, and is essential for our standing before God. This doctrine is clearly taught in the Scripture. During the third and fourth centuries, the doctrine of God, the Trinity, and the person of Christ were worked out and stated by the church. It was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the doctrine of justification was clarified.

Martin Luther had a very important role to play. One day, Luther was thrown to the ground by a thunderstorm. Terrified, he promised God that if he was spared, he would become a monk. In the monastery, he tried to save himself by his works. The way of salvation that was commonly taught by the church of his day was by self-humiliation, penance, flagellation, fasting, prayers, and good works. After years of fruitless struggle, he discovered the glorious, liberating doctrine that “The just shall live by faith” (Romans 1, verse 17). This was the beginning of the Reformation, and Luther went on to assert that justification by faith alone in Christ alone is the article of a standing or a falling church. Calvin, the later Reformer, declared that justification is the main hinge on which religion turns.

There have been many heresies which are wrong on this point. The Roman Catholic teaching is that justification is by faith plus works. Justification and sanctification are mixed and confused by them. The Reformation delivered men and women from this darkness, and recovered this biblical truth. It’s sad to see some modern evangelicals attacking this foundational doctrine, in the interest of ecumenicity and union with Rome. For example, the *New Perspectives on Paul*, taught by N. T. Wright, argues that justification by faith was simply a marker of church membership amongst the Gentiles, but that the Jews were marked out as members of God’s covenant people by circumcision, dietary laws, sabbath days, etc.—people are saved by being part of God’s covenant people, and by faithfulness—that’s what the *New Perspectives on Paul* teaches. It’s just another way of presenting the old heresy of justification by faith plus works.

Looking then at *the Meaning of Justification*. Roman Catholicism believes that justification changes the person. They say it infuses with grace and sanctifies the individual. By asserting this, they confuse justification with regeneration and sanctification. Actually, justification does

not touch us. Rather, it is judicial, and deals with our standing before God. In justification, we are simply declared to be righteous. Justification is, thus, an act of the judge. It is the opposite of condemnation. A criminal is not made wicked when a judge condemns him. He was already wicked, and the judge simply declares him to be such. Indeed, a man may be innocent, and yet be unjustly condemned by a judge. Condemnation does not make a person wicked, neither does justification make a person righteous. Condemnation pronounces a man wicked, whether he be that or not. He is a criminal in the eyes of the law. Justification is the opposite, and pronounces the individual righteous in the eyes of the law. When the Scripture says that the people “justified God,” in Luke 7:29, that does not mean that they made God righteous, but rather, that they declared God to be righteous. It is a legal term. The Great Judge pronounces a person to be justified and righteous in his sight.

So then, looking at *the Problem*. There is a basic problem which the gospel has to answer. It is the question, *How can God be just and justify the ungodly?* In the Old Testament, we find the words, “He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD” (Proverbs 17, verse 15). We must not justify the wicked, but yet, God does. You and I are wicked, yet God justifies us. How can he do this? If a cruel, evil murderer was caught and his guilt clearly demonstrated for all to see, yet the judge pronounced him not guilty, there would be outrage, and rightly so. Popularly, though not completely accurate, justification is sometimes defined as “God treating me just as if I had never sinned.” How can he? We are all sinners. But people will sometimes argue that surely a sovereign, almighty God can do anything. But no, God cannot do anything; there are certain things which he cannot do. He cannot act contrary to his own nature. God cannot do anything against the law of God, which is actually an expression of his own nature. He cannot cast sinless angels into hell. He cannot look on iniquity (Habakkuk 1, verse 13); nor clear the guilty (Numbers 14, verse 18); God cannot tell a lie (Titus 1, verse 2). How, then, can God be just and justify the ungodly?

That leads us then to consider *the Basis of Our Justification*. The ground, or basis, of our justification is the work of Christ. God’s wisdom found a way by which he could be just and justify sinners. The Son of God was chosen to be the Savior. He took human nature and became a man. He became one of us, and took our place as our substitute. He kept the law perfectly for us. Our sins were imputed to him, and his righteousness was imputed to us. He suffered as our substitute for our sins, and he suffered all the penalty that the law of God demanded. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6, verse 23)—he died for us. The following illustration will help us to grasp this truth. An African president came to power, promising to root out all bribery and corruption. Anyone found guilty of bribery would be whipped. Shortly after his installation, his mother was caught in corruption and found guilty. He loved her, so what would he do? He could not bear to see her whipped. He could give her a presidential pardon, but then everyone would see him as partial and despise his government as being corrupt like his predecessors. The day came for the sentence of whipping to be carried out. His mother was taken, led to the whipping post, and tied to it. But then, the president stepped forward and asked that she be released. People thought he was just like the previous presidents. But he then took her place, and asked to be tied to the post and whipped in her stead. By this way, the law was upheld, his mother escaped the punishment, but justice was done, and the law was honored. So God, in human nature, suffered for our sins, and we received his righteousness. In this way, God is just, and the justifier of the sinner who believes in Jesus.

Considering now *the Place of Faith*. The Bible describes justification as being “by faith” (Romans 5, verse 1). Faith is the instrument which lays hold of Christ as our substitute and Savior.

Faith is the empty hand that receives God's gift, and the channel through which the blessing of eternal life flows to us. Faith is not, in itself, meritorious. It is not a work. "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9). We cannot even boast of our faith because it is actually a gift from God. Moses raised the brass serpent in the wilderness so that the bitter, poisoned Israelites who were dying would look to it and be healed. In the same way, faith is simply looking to Christ for healing (John 3, verse 14 and 15). Christ alone saves, and faith receives and embraces this Savior. Justification immediately follows faith. The Dutch American theologian, Herman Hoeksema (1886–1965) was wrong in arguing for eternal justification. Certainly, there is from before the foundation of the world, a decree to justify individual men and women. But until we believe, we are "the children of wrath, even as others" (Ephesians 2, verse 3). Karl Barth (1886 to 1968), a Swiss theologian, taught that justifying faith is the faith of Christ, not our faith, but this is nonsense. "What must I do to be saved?" the Scripture is clear; God commands us to believe and trust in the work of Christ, and then we will be saved (Acts 16, verses 30 and 31). Christ's work saves us, and we are to have faith in that finished work.

What then is *the Place of Works*? The Judaizers, in the early church, taught that faith alone was not enough for salvation. An individual also needed to perform certain rituals—for example, circumcision. Paul makes plain that this teaching, which required people to be circumcised, undermined the gospel: "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law....ye are fallen from grace" (Galatians 5, verses 2 to 4). Also, the Judaizers taught that a person needed to perform good works. However, Paul argued that "a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3, verse 28). But then, James wrote: "By works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2, verse 24). Paul, however, is talking about conversion, while James is describing the ongoing life of the Christian. James is against a cold, intellectual kind of mere faith. Saving faith always shows itself in works. It cannot remain alone. Paul, too, writes of justifying faith as that which works by love (Galatians 5, verse 6). Though justification is by faith alone, the faith that justifies never remains alone. On the judgment day, we will be judged according to our works (Revelation 20, verse 12). A distinction can rightly be drawn between actual justification, which is by faith alone, and takes place at the point when we first believe; and declarative justification, which is what is referred to by James, and follows on from our conversion until the judgment day. Declarative justification is the manifestation of our actual justification.

Looking now at *the Shorter Catechism*. The definitions given in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* are always very helpful. "What is justification?"—"Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone"—that's the answer to Question #33. God does it; it's an act, not an ongoing work. It is freely bestowed, not earned. All our sins, past, present, and future, are forgiven in a moment. We are justified because we are righteous. But our righteousness is that of Christ which has been imputed to us, and which we receive by faith alone.

And, a question Arises: *Does justification by faith alone encourage sinning?* Justification by faith alone definitely does not encourage sinning. Having been regenerated by the Holy Ghost, we are also being sanctified by the Spirit. If we carry on carelessly sinning, that proves that we were never born again, never converted, never justified in the first place. Paul deals with this objection as he addresses the Romans: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may

abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Romans 6, verses 1 and 2). Having died to sin, and been resurrected to a new life in Christ, we cannot happily go on in sin.

Another question: *But why should we go on praying for forgiveness if our sins are already forgiven the moment we believe?* Jesus taught us, in the Lord's Prayer, to pray for forgiveness. Although our sins are forgiven, we still displease our heavenly Father. If we do not repent, confess, and forsake our sins, his chastisement will come upon us, and that is painful (Hebrews 12, verses 5 to 11). Part of our growth in holiness is growing in our hatred for sin, and in this, becoming more like our Father. God does not spoil his children, but molds and forms them, shaping and preparing them for eternity with himself in heaven. Because we are justified by faith alone, and not by faith plus works, we can have assurance of our salvation. This is impossible, for example, in the Roman Catholic system, where your good works are weighed constantly, and may not be good enough. Let us rejoice in the glad tidings of justification by faith alone. Our salvation is not dependent upon weak and sinful us, but is all of God, all of grace, and all to the glory of God.

So, *in Conclusion*, justification by faith alone in Christ alone is a wonderful doctrine. All our days in this world, we are sinners. We have to keep coming to the Lord for forgiveness. To our dying day, our prayer will be, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18, verse 13). But rejoice in the Lord! Christ died for your sins. All is forgiven. Heaven is yours. Amen.