

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

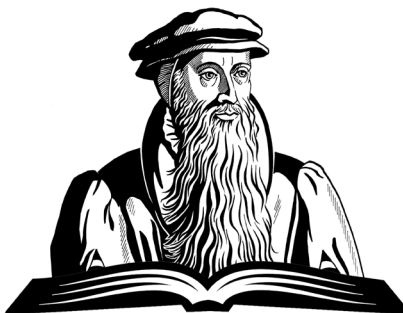
Module 5:

SOTERIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Lecture 6

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

© 2022 by John Knox Institute of Higher Education

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, John Knox Institute, P.O. Box 19398, Kalamazoo, MI 49019-19398, USA.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorized King James Version.

Visit our website: www.johnknoxinstitute.org

Rev. Robert D. McCurley is minister of the Gospel at Greenville Presbyterian Church, in Taylors, South Carolina, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), Presbytery of the United States of America.

greenvillepresbyterian.com

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 5 ~ The Doctrine of Salvation

1. Introduction
2. The Doctrine of Union with Christ
3. The Doctrines of Effectual Calling & Regeneration
4. The Doctrine of Saving Faith
5. The Doctrine of Repentance
- 6. The Doctrine of Justification**
7. The Doctrine of Adoption
8. The Doctrine of Sanctification
9. The Doctrine of Good Works
10. The Doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints
11. The Doctrine of Assurance of Grace and Salvation

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 5 ~ Lecture 6

The Doctrine of Justification

Zechariah 3, verses 1 to 5, provides us with a wonderful picture. You have an account of Joshua the high priest standing before the Lord, and Satan standing at Joshua's right hand to resist him. The devil's resistance is not a surprise really, because we know that Revelation 12, verse 10, says that he is the accuser of the brethren. Then we see it elsewhere. For example, we see Satan bringing accusations against Job; other examples could be cited. Joshua the high priest is described as clothed with filthy garments, depicting his many sins, which of course provides a cause for accusation. But notice, the Lord rebukes Satan, and defends Joshua as a brand plucked from the fire. And what does the Lord do? The Lord says, in verses 4 and 5, "Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD stood by." Here, Joshua's sins are removed before God's sight and presence. And instead, he's clothed with clean, beautiful garments that are supplied by God himself. So this is not Joshua changing his garments, or somehow trying to present himself beautifully, but it is God supplying something for him. And it provides a very vivid picture of the doctrine of Justification—the Lord coming to a sinner, and plucking them as a brand from the fire. That's God's initiative and sovereign grace, in drawing a sinner to himself, and then this natural pollution and defilement—the stains of sin that cover the believer, and that make him filthy in the Lord's sight—the Lord takes away. He removes those iniquities, and instead, he himself clothes his people with beautiful garments, so that they're able to stand acceptably in his sight.

Well, how important is Justification to the doctrine of Salvation? Martin Luther, the great German Reformer, said that Justification by faith alone is the article upon which the church stands or falls. It is the battleground of the gospel. It was in Luther's day, and it continues to be in our own day.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In this present lecture, we'll consider the doctrine of Justification. And we'll begin, as has been our pattern, by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Justification.

We read in Romans 3, verses 21 and 22, these words: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no

difference.” In the opening of Romans, in chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, Paul spoke of the gospel as the “power of God unto salvation.” He says, “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” Then, beginning in the next verse, chapter 1, verse 18, through chapter 3, verse 20, which is the verse right before our text, he describes the bad news for fallen, sinful men, both Jews and Gentiles, demonstrating their moral bankruptcy, and personal depravity. He insists on the inability of sinful men to achieve salvation by earning it through obedience to the law. He states that through the law, every mouth is stopped, and all become guilty before God. And then he concludes, in chapter 3, verse 20, “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” Well, the picture is bleak. How can God remain just, and anyone be saved, in light of their sin? God is just, and perfect righteousness is required of man for acceptance before him. Furthermore, the Lord must punish all of man’s sins. Well that sets before us the dilemma: holy God, sinful man—how can these two be brought together?

Well, Paul then turns to the good news, in our text, chapter 3, verses 20 and 21. And he expounds the doctrine of Justification by faith alone, from Romans 3, verse 21, all the way through Romans 5. He speaks, in the words that we cited at the beginning, he speaks of the righteousness of God without the law, that is, without man’s own record of perfect obedience to the law. He says further, in verse 28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified...without the deeds of the law.” So, what is needed, and what the Lord provides, is a righteousness that is found outside of man, not within man. Well, where exactly is that located then? It is a righteousness that is secured in Jesus Christ. Christ is, for the believer, the Lord our righteousness. Christ obeyed God’s law with perfect conformity at all points, without sin. And as a substitute, he bore the full penalty and punishment for the sins, the lawbreaking, of the elect.

Well, how is it that sinners receive and benefit from Christ’s righteousness? Paul says in our text that it is by faith. Faith appropriates Christ, and all that he did in his saving work. Because it is by faith, and not by works or human merit, it is all of grace. God giving unmerited favor. In verse 24, Paul says, “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Well this eliminates all proud boasting on man’s part, as you see in verse 27. So salvation in and through Christ answers our earlier question about how God can be just, and how man can still be saved. In verse 26, we read “that he”—that is, God—“might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” So the doctrine of Justification provides the answer. God’s justice is upheld in Christ’s perfect righteousness, and the believer is justified on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which the believer receives by faith alone, and thus by grace.

Well this introduces us, at least in a preliminary way to the importance of the doctrine of Justification. But we obviously need to further open up the details—what this means, and to clarify some important distinctions. And so in the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Scriptures teach about Justification, and its place within the doctrines of Salvation.

So that brings us, secondly, to considering a doctrinal exposition of Justification by faith alone. And we begin with a definition of the word “Justification.” Justification is not a word that people use in their ordinary speech at home and in the neighborhood, but it’s a theological term found in the Bible, and we need to define it. Well, we’ll come to the Westminster Confession of Faith later in this lecture, but we have a concise definition in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 33: “What is justification?” The answer is, “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.” So you can see, Justification answers the question:

“How can unjust sinners be made right in the sight of a just and holy God?” Unjust sinners need righteousness above all else, and God supplies this righteousness by Christ. So Justification is a legal term describing a legal transaction. It refers to a one-time, forensic act of God, declaring a person righteous before God and his tribunal of justice. So it’s one time—it’s a single act. It’s not something that’s ongoing. Justification is not a process. So it’s one time, but it’s also for all time. So once God brings justification, it’s permanent. It cannot be lost.

And you’ll notice, man is not made righteous. So it’s not referring to an inherent righteousness; it’s not referring to a change in his internal character, like we have, for example, in Sanctification, which we’ll consider in the next lecture. He is declared righteous. So he’s declared righteous; that means it’s describing his status—his legal status before God. Well how is it that he’s declared righteous? Because obviously, he’s unrighteous. It is through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer. So the word “imputation” means “to attribute to,” or “to credit to one’s account,” or “to reckon.” And this is essential for understanding the gospel. Christ’s righteousness is credited legally to the account of the believer, so that it is viewed legally as his own.

You’ll remember from an earlier lecture in a previous module, the Bible teaches three imputations. There is the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity. Then there is the imputation of the elect’s sin to Christ. Christ isn’t himself sinful, but he has it credited to his account, so he can bear the penalty for it. And then thirdly, there is Christ’s righteousness, which is imputed to the elect. The word “imputation” is used several times, for example, in Romans 4. And you see the concept in many places, like 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, where he who knew no sin became sin, “that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Here’s how the Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 1 puts it. It says, “he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone.”

So let’s flesh this out a little further. One important distinction is the difference between the ground of justification and the instrument of justification. When you conflate these, or confuse them, or if you replace them with one another, you end up in all sorts of serious error that undermines the gospel. So we need to understand the difference between the ground of justification, and the instrument. We’ll start with the ground—the ground of justification. And we’ll state what it’s not, and then state what it is.

So the ground of justification is not righteousness generated in us. So as we noted earlier, it’s not God making us or putting righteousness into our moral character. The ground is also not righteousness produced by us. So it’s not our attempts at obedience to the law, and our human merit, as if we are somehow paying for the ability to be justified before God. And especially important, it is not our faith in Christ either. The ground of justification is not our faith. If that were the case, then a person would be trusting in their faith, rather than trusting in Christ. And you can see the difference. It would be viewing faith as the one thing that does contribute to earning acceptance before God. So faith is not the ground. We’ll come to see more in a moment about what it is. Again, Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, paragraph 1 says, “Not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness by faith: which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.”

So we’ve talked about what the ground of justification is not. Well, what is it then? Well first

of all, it is an alien righteousness. What that means is, it is a righteousness that is outside of us. It comes from outside of us. And more specifically, it is the righteousness of Christ—so Christ’s perfect righteousness and the record of his perfect obedience to all the demands of the law. When Jesus obeyed the law, he did so as a substitute on behalf of his people, so that there would be, in humanity, a perfect record of righteousness that’s then credited to the account of his people. He also did so in satisfying the demands of a broken law, in bearing the sins in punishment for his people. So this ground of righteousness is the righteousness of Christ himself. Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 3 says, “Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father’s justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for any thing in them, their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.” So the question is, “What is the ground of justification?” It is the righteousness of Christ.

Then next, we can consider the instrument of justification, and the instrument is faith alone. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, paragraph 2, says “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification.” So the instrument for justification, first of all, it is not justification on account of faith, as it were, in payment for faith. As we noted, faith is not the ground. Faith is also not the consequence of justification. It’s not something that comes as a result of being justified. No, it comes first. It is by faith alone that we’re justified. So what is it? Faith is the vehicle, it is the instrument, the means, through which we receive the merits of Christ’s righteousness. God decreed in eternity that the elect would be justified. But it is applied—they actually become justified—in time, when they receive Christ by faith. And so faith is the way of appropriating the merits of Jesus Christ. It is believing, it is trusting, it is receiving and resting in what Christ alone has done. We saw that more fully in our lecture on faith.

But it is also faith alone—justified by faith alone. That means, faith alone, without the deeds of the law, or without human merit, or without our good works contributing anything. This is important because of the nature of faith. Faith doesn’t bring anything to the table. Faith doesn’t contribute anything to the Lord. Faith is a grace through which we are receiving something. We’re merely receiving Christ, and the merits of Christ, and all that he has accomplished. And so it’s perfectly suited to show the graciousness of the gospel. It’s not faith and repentance, faith and good works, faith and, as we just said, sanctification—it’s faith alone.

Next, we should consider then the relationship of justification to good works. Justification is by grace alone, received through faith alone, mediated through Christ alone. And so it is purely by free grace. Paul hammers this in his epistle to the Romans, in Galatians, and in many other places. It’s not by works. Romans 4, verse 4, says, “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” In other words, if we’re relying on works, then we’re paying for something that then we’re owed in return. Well we’re not owed anything. We don’t contribute anything. Works are the opposite of grace. And so, when you put these pieces together, you realize that it is not faith mixed with good works that then results in salvation, but rather, it is faith that results in justification, which in turn then bears the fruit of good works in sanctification. So the fruitfulness of sanctification must flow, by necessity, out of justification. But it is by faith alone, not by faith plus other things. So it’s faith alone, but not faith that remains alone. Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 2: “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the

alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.” We’ll talk more about this more in a moment, and then, in our lecture on Sanctification, more fully.

Next, we have the moral impetus of Justification. Here’s the problem: Roman Catholics and others will say, “This doctrine of Justification by faith, it will result in licentiousness. If people only receive justification by faith, without anything that they have to do, then they’ll feel as if good works don’t matter at all, and that therefore, they can live as they wish and do what they want. And it will result in moral degradation.” Well this is a false charge. What does the Bible say? The Bible says quite the contrary. It says, those who are justified have all sorts of things that flow from that. You look at Romans 5, verse 1 and following, it says, “Therefore being justified by faith”—and then it lists the things that come in the wake of it—we have peace with God, access into this grace wherein we stand, rejoice in hope, glory in tribulation, and so on.

What the Roman Catholics have missed, in their objection to Justification by faith, is understanding the impact that it has upon the believer subjectively. When the believer comes in to the gospel and receives Christ, and realizes that everything has been supplied by the Lord, that they are filthy, polluted sinners, who deserve hell, that God has mercifully provided a way of acceptance before him, through the work of Jesus Christ, which is given to them freely, and received by faith, the response that the believer has, the impact that produces is love—overwhelming gratitude! What a God! And what a Savior! What wonderful riches of grace that are to be found in him! And there’s gratitude that comes as a result, and there’s an intense love for him. And those are motivations—powerful motivations, that then fuel their desire to glorify him, and to worship him, and to please him, and to serve him, and to obey him, and to follow him, and so on. Well, these motivations of gratitude and love are far more powerful than the servile obedience that Roman Catholics would have us rely upon. “I have to do something, in order to somehow have enough good works to please God, and be accepted before him.” No, gratitude and love are far more powerful in the soul of the believer.

Well that brings us, thirdly, to considering this doctrine polemically, and we have to address some of the issues with Rome—Roman Catholicism, because at the Reformation, this doctrine of Justification by faith ended up being the context for serious conflict. You’ll notice, in what we’ve covered in this lecture, the difference between Rome and Biblical, gospel truth—Protestantism. Rome says that justification is an infused grace. So God comes and he infuses grace into the soul, and this is what lies behind their whole system of sacerdotalism. You have the seven sacraments, and so what happens, people come and they partake of the idolatrous Mass, and they believe that by taking the Mass, they’re actually physically eating the body and blood of Jesus, and that infuses grace into their soul, and so on. And the same is true of penance, and holy unction, and so on. Over against that, the Bible teaches, as we saw in Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 1, that it is imputed righteousness—imputed grace, not an infused grace. So that difference is the difference between whether we have the gospel or forsake the gospel. That’s why Luther said, upon this article the church stands or falls.

Furthermore, Roman Catholics believe that baptism is the instrument of justification, that God washes away original sin in baptism, and that is then followed by the sacrament of penance. So the ongoing sins have to be dealt with by ongoing penance in the soul. What does this do? Having baptism and penance and other things takes away the doctrine of Justification by faith alone, and it introduces works, so that we’re justified by the things we do—baptism, penance, taking the Mass, unction, so on and so forth. So it’s actually undermining the gospel. It’s the very thing that Paul

was confronting in his epistles with the Judaizers, who wanted to be able to rely on some merit in themselves.

Well, what do we do with the fact that there seems to be this apparent contradiction? Because on one side, in Galatians 2, verse 16, you have Paul writing, and he says this same thing in many places, but he says in Galatians 2:16, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” So we have that on one side, and you’ll see the same thing in Romans, and elsewhere. But then you turn to James, and in James, chapter 2, he’s talking about Abraham, and he says, in verse 24, “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” So how do we address this apparent contradiction? Well, it’s not a real contradiction. God can’t contradict himself, and there are no real contradictions in the Bible. And so, we need to make some distinctions here. What’s happening is, in Paul’s writings, he is confronting a certain type of error, James is confronting a different type of error. Paul is emphasizing the declarative aspect of Justification. God declares us righteous on account of Christ’s own righteousness. So it’s declarative Justification. James, in dealing with a different problem, is speaking about demonstrative Justification. Herman Bavinck, the Dutch theologian, said, “Paul battles against dead work, and James against dead faith.” So Paul is saying, for those who are depending upon their works for justification, they need to see that it’s by faith alone. But then there were those who said, “Well, we just have to believe, and it doesn’t matter if there’s any fruit of faith,” and so on, and James is confronting that dead faith. He’s saying, “This isn’t true saving faith, if it doesn’t result in fruitfulness.” And so he is confronting that error, which is different than Paul’s. The two of them come together. They’re dovetailed together. They’re consistent. It’s taking the doctrine of Justification, and confronting two opposite problems that arise within the church: demonstrative, versus declarative righteousness. James is showing how Justification by faith has to be demonstrated in the fruit of good works. Paul is saying that we need to recognize good works don’t contribute to our justification.

Well, lastly, fourthly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves. You know, one question that comes up pastorally by people in the pew is, “If we’re justified, what about ongoing forgiveness for justified sinners?” Sinners continue to sin after they’re justified. Westminster Confession, chapter 11, paragraph 5 says, “God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified: and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may by their sins fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.” So here again is a helpful distinction. Justification is a one-time act that’s permanent, it’s forever. And so, we can think of judicial forgiveness. That’s referring to justification. Justification provides acceptance before God—access to God—on the ground of Christ’s imputed righteousness. So there’s judicial forgiveness. All of the believer’s life, from conception to death, their sins are covered in justification.

But then there’s what we could call “paternal forgiveness,” so over against judicial forgiveness—paternal forgiveness, Father forgiveness. There needs to be the continual restored fellowship with the Father, through faith and repentance, regarding remaining sin. Our sins do grieve the Spirit, they dishonor the Lord, they displease him. And though our justification is never in jeopardy, our fellowship with the Lord can be broken. There can be distance; there can be coldness because of unrepentant sin. And so, as we continue to sin, we continue to repent, as we saw in a previous

lecture. We continue to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. We continue to look to the Spirit for the fruit of new obedience, and so on. And that is important—it's distinguished from our justification, but it is nevertheless relevant and important for our ongoing communion with God.

You'll notice as well, practically, that justification places Christ at the center of the gospel. Christ is the sin-bearer, the substitute on behalf of his people. Christ's righteousness is what clothes the believer—they're clothed in the perfect garments of his righteousness, and made acceptable before God; counted as righteous in God's sight on behalf of Christ. Christ then is at the center. We're to be esteeming him. We're to be looking to him. We're to be worshiping him. We're to be filled with love and adoration for him. We're to be depending upon him. And it works its way out, this ongoing dependence works its way out in the Christian life. You think of something as practical as prayer. You know, so often we go to prayer, and we conduct ourself on the basis of how we feel, for our frame of heart or mind. We think, Well, we've sinned in all these ways, so we can't draw near to the Lord, or we need to clean up our act before we can come before the Lord, or "I don't feel lively." "I feel cold and dead." And we're consulting our own internal frame. By putting Christ at the center, we're reminded that when we come in prayer, we're coming in dependence on Christ. That's what it means to pray in Jesus' name. We're depending upon his mediation, who intercedes on our behalf. His perfect righteousness, which gives us access into the Holy of Holies. The cleansing of his blood which washes us from our sins. We come pleading Christ in prayer. We come on the basis of all that Christ has accomplished for us. We're not to be looking to ourselves, but to him, as we exercise our souls in prayer. Well, that's one example of many ways in which dependence is ongoing in the Christian life.

Lastly, I'll just mention a warning. There is this warning against a fruitless profession. So if someone professes faith in Christ, but there's no fruit that comes from it. That's what James was speaking of when he spoke about a dead faith, and so in the lecture on Sanctification, we're going to talk about how Biblically are we to relate Justification and Sanctification. How do these two pieces fit together? And we'll have reinforced for us the importance of the ongoing fruit of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Well, in this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Justification by faith alone. We've noted that good works do not contribute to justification. But the question remains: "What role do good works have in the doctrine of Salvation?" In the next lecture, we're going to consider, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Adoption, and then in the following lecture, we'll come to the doctrine of Sanctification, where that question will be answered, with the Lord's help.