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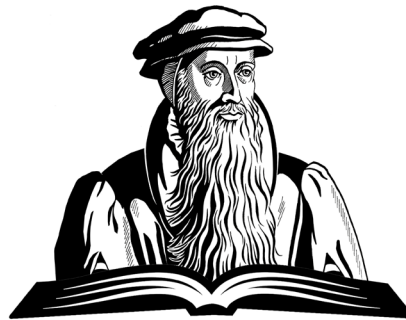
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #24

Justification

Catechism Question 33



The John Knox Institute
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VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

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Lecture #24

Justification

Question 33: *What is justification?*

Answer: *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.*

Today we get to look at one of the great blessings of salvation. We looked last lesson at how it is when we're united to Christ by grace through faith, that all of these benefits of salvation come to us. Today we look particularly at justification. This is one of those blessings that come to us in Christ Jesus. As we learn more about God and his Word, as well as more about ourselves, there's an important question that starts to develop. We learn that God is holy, he's righteous, he's good, he's perfect, and all that he does is good. And though we've learned that we were made in God's image, we also learned that we've turned from God. And the more we think about this, the more we see ourselves as guilty and corrupt. We realize we deserve punishment. We realize that God is holy, but we are not. And this starts to cause a question to come up, "How shall I, a sinner, ever be accepted with God? How can I, as one who has sinned, ever have peace with God?" Well, of all questions we can ask, this is among the most important in our life. To make a mistake about this is to ensure that our souls are lost forever. However, to enjoy the truth of justification by grace through faith, is to enjoy one of the greatest privileges ever given to men.

So let's look at our Question today, which is Question #33 of the *Shorter Catechism*. It asks, "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." Now, two words are very important to emphasize.

The first word is "justification." This is a Biblical word, it's a Biblical doctrine. The word itself means something that is determined righteous. It is related to the word "justify," which means "to declare righteous." "Righteous" of course, meaning "right," or in accordance to what is right. So the word "justify" does not mean "make righteous," or change something into being, as it were, righteous within themselves. To justify is simply to declare or affirm what something is. Think of it this way—in a criminal trial, the judge and jury do not make a defendant innocent or guilty. They look at the evidence presented, and the evidence shows that the defendant is either innocent or guilty. If the evidence shows that the defendant committed a crime, the judge and jury find the defendant guilty. If the evidence shows that the defendant did not commit a crime, they find and declare the defendant innocent. This is what justification refers to. It is the declaration of God

regard a sinner who trusts in Christ.

The second word is “imputed.” This word means “credited,” or “accounted,” or “reckoned.” If I reckon or credit something to you, I give you something that is not your own. But once it is given, credited to you, you are now treated as if it is yours. Well, in our Question, it is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. It’s not our personal righteousness. It’s not the righteousness that God produces within us. Rather, it’s that righteousness belonging to Christ that is considered reckoned or imputed to us. It’s credited to us, so his righteousness is now ours.

Well, for the rest of the lesson, let’s look at three main points. First, the Parts of Justification; second, the Basis of Justification; and third, the Act of Justification.

So first, the Parts of Justification. If you think of a bicycle, you think of something that one rides. It has two wheels, handlebars, peddles that your feet move. There are different parts that make up the one bicycle, and they’re all necessary for that bicycle to function as it should. Well, we could think, in some sense, of justification as having different parts to it. They’re both related, they’re intimately related to one another, but there is a distinction between them. It’s a single act, justification is, as we’ll see. However, that one act has two main parts to it. When one is justified, two related things happen. The first of these is that the sinner is fully pardoned of all sin. The second of these is that the sinner is accepted as perfectly righteous. So let’s look at each of these a bit.

The first part, the sinner is fully pardoned. The Catechism teaches that in justification, God “pardoneth all our sins.” Well, this word “pardon” means “to forgive.” The guilt is removed. Remember, sin demands God’s judgment. It demands punishment. If ever we are to have peace with God, we must have our sins forgiven, because sins demand God’s justice to be executed against us. Well, we cannot earn our forgiveness. We can’t work off our sin. We can’t erase it ourselves. It’s God, the righteous Judge, who must forgive. Praise God that his Word tells us that this is what he does for the one who trusts in Christ. Even God himself says, in Isaiah 43, and verse 25, “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” To blot out something is to mark it off, and to say “no more.” Even God says, “I will not remember your sins.” This is what David rejoices in, in Psalm 32, verse 1, when he wrote, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” This is one part of justification.

But there’s another part that is equally good. The sinner is accepted as perfectly righteous. So in other words, the sinner isn’t just brought to a neutral state before God, as it were, innocent of crime. But in addition, when a sinner is justified, God actually credits that one, and accepts that one as perfectly righteous. Not only has he been forgiven for what he’s done against God’s law, he’s now received and accepted as one who has kept God’s law. What this means, of course, is, as the Catechism says, “God accepteth us as righteous in his sight.” He looks upon us as righteous. When one is justified, they are declared righteous in God’s sight. In our second main point, we’ll look at how god does this. But for now, simply note that this is what God does when he justifies a sinner.

Paul gives us some insight when he writes in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21: “For he”—speaking of God—“hath made him”—speaking of Christ—“to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” God made Christ to bear our sins, though he was innocent. He made us to receive Christ’s righteousness, though we were guilty. Well, the point for us right now is to see that when a sinner is justified, he is accepted as righteous in God’s sight.

Now let’s look at the second main point, the Basis for Justification. We just learned that justification is that act of God whereby he both pardons and declares righteous a sinner. But what is the basis for that? On what grounds is God able to say that one is now declared righteous? When

we use the word “basis,” we’re talking about the foundation of something. When we talk about the basis of justification, we’re talking about what God looks at, the basis of how it is God is able to declare a sinner righteous.

So what is it that he looks at? Does he look at the sinner’s tears? Does he look at the sinner’s love? Does he look at the sinner’s church attendance? or Bible reading? Does he look at the sinner’s earnestness? Does he look at the sinner’s obedience? The answer to each of these is “No.” Instead, the Bible teaches that God looks at the righteousness of Christ that is given or credited to that sinner. That’s the basis. That’s the foundation. That’s what God points at and says, “Because of this, I declare you righteous.” You’ll remember 2 Corinthians 5:21—“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” This verse refers to a double exchange. Our sins were given to Christ. And Christ’s righteousness is given to the believer.

Well, understand this. Christ did not personally sin. That’s not why he was condemned. That’s not why he died on the cross. He wasn’t one who personally engaged in sin. Instead, he had our sins imputed to him. And because of that, he was condemned. Well, so it is with the believer. The believer is not declared righteous because of something good in himself, or something good that he has done or will do. Instead, the believer is justified, declared righteous because of the perfect righteousness of Christ that is transferred to our account. In other words, all of Christ’s obedience to the law of God, its perfection, is credited to the believer. It is this, the righteousness of Christ, that God looks at, the basis, the ground for his declaring us to be righteous. God takes the righteousness of Christ and places it upon us, and says, “Because of this, I declare you righteous.” “How so?” someone asks. “Is it because of a change in me? Is it because of goodness, however small, in me?” No, it is simply and solely because of Christ’s righteousness credited, or imputed, to the believer.

Notice how the Bible teaches this in Romans 5. In verses 11 to 21, Paul is comparing and contrasting the effect of Adam’s work upon all men, and Christ’s work upon all who trust in him. Well, notice Romans 5, verses 18 and 19—“Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” Do you see? The righteousness of one, namely, Jesus Christ—it’s that righteousness which brings justification of life. It’s by the obedience of one, Jesus Christ, that many will be made righteous. The sinner is declared righteous. He is justified by the righteousness and obedience of one—Jesus Christ. God does not look at the believer’s good works. He looks at Christ’s good works which are credited to the believer. It’s Christ’s perfect righteousness that is given to the believer’s account that God looks at, and is then able, in righteousness, to say that you are declared righteous.

Well, third then, the Act of Justification. You’ll notice that the Catechism teaches “justification is an act of God’s free grace.” This is an insightful statement, however simple it is. An act is something that is finished once it is done. It does not continue and go on, and on, and on. It does not continue its occurrence. It doesn’t keep happening. Once it is done, it is finished, though its effect remains. Justification is an act. When the sinner trusts in Jesus Christ by God’s grace, he is justified. Think of it this way—Christ’s death was an act. Once he died, it was finished. The blessed effects of his death continue to us, but he’s not still dying, nor does he have to continue to die, or repeat his death over, and over again. His death is accomplished. It’s finished. It’s completed, because it was an act. Once it’s done, it’s over.

So is justification. The Bible does not speak about our growing in our justification. It doesn’t

speak of our beginning to be justified, our continuing to be justified, and then our finally being justified. The believer, once believing upon Christ, is justified, is always justified, and shall ever be justified, because he trusted in Christ, and Christ's righteousness is given to him. He doesn't grow in his justification. He doesn't mature in his justification. Justification is an act.

Additionally, you'll notice that this act is of God's free grace. This tells us that the reason behind God justifying a sinner has nothing to do with what the sinner did or would do. It is entirely because God chose to be gracious. God did not see the works of the sinner, and say, "Now, because he did those things, I will justify him." Nor did he look down the future and see what the sinner would do, and say, "Well, because of what he's going to do, I will justify him." Instead, God justified the sinner graciously, by applying the work of Christ to his account. Notice what the Bible says, in Romans 3, verse 24: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." A sinner is justified freely by God's grace. He does not prepare himself, or qualify himself by his obedience. Certainly there will be tears that are shed when a sinner is convinced of sin. There may even be outward changes that occur in the life of a convicted sinner. However, God doesn't look at those things and measure them up, and say, "Now I'll justify you." It's not by the sinner's activity. God justifies the sinner because he freely chose to do so in his grace, and gave that sinner Christ's righteousness.

One way that God's grace is displayed in justification is that it is by faith alone. Faith, of course, is trust in Jesus Christ. As we saw, faith receives Christ. By faith, we embrace Christ. We are united to Christ. Notice, faith does not give something to God. Faith is like the empty hand of a beggar. It's empty. It contains nothing. God gives to that empty hand Christ and his righteousness. You can see how justification is by faith alone throughout the Bible. You can read Romans chapter 4, and you'll see that Paul makes an argument, as he looks to David's example, and Abraham's example, and the teaching of Scripture throughout that chapter, as well as in Romans chapters 3, 4, and 5, and the book of Galatians, and so on. Paul is regularly making this point. But in Romans 4, Paul is clearly showing that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. And this excludes our works, our contributions. In Romans 4:16, Paul summarizes his argument about justification by saying, "Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace." God doesn't look at our faith and works. Faith, rather, is that which receives Christ, and in receiving Christ, we are justified. Faith is not a work that earns justification. It's not as if God looks at the act of faith, and says, "Well, since you've done that, and you've done what's right in believing, I'm going to declare you righteous." That would be making faith a work. Instead, the Bible teaches, as the Catechism expresses, that faith alone receives Christ and his righteousness. Faith does not contribute to our justification. Faith receives Christ, whose imputed righteousness justifies us.

Well, as we come to a close, I'd like to give you a way of expressing this Biblical truth in a way that summarizes this wonderful doctrine of justification. Some of you will be familiar with it, as it expresses what are known as "the solas" of the Reformation. If you're not familiar with it, I encourage you to think much upon it, and even memorize it, as it simply presents to us the way that a sinner is justified. The expression is this—*Sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, as taught by the Scriptures alone.* Well, pay special attention to that word "alone."

Sinners are justified by grace alone. They're not declared righteous because they make themselves worthy by their works. They are justified by grace alone.

Notice, they are justified by grace alone, through faith alone. They do not receive their justification based on their faith and love, their faith and works, their faith and their obedience.

Faith alone receives and rests upon Christ for their acceptance with God.

Sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Their faith does not look to Christ and Mary, to Christ and the saints, to Christ and a pastor, to Christ and a priest. Faith looks exclusively to Jesus Christ, trusting him alone.

Sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. Since they are declared righteous by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, they receive no praise to themselves, and there's no praise to be given to anyone else. It's God's gracious work. Therefore, he alone is to be praised.

Sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, as taught by the Scriptures alone. While we are grateful for faithful parents, and pastors, and other Christians who help us understand the way of salvation, it's only the Bible that gives us the infallible and authoritative teaching as to the way of salvation. Pastor's can err. Parents can make mistakes. Good Christians can be wrong. But the Bible does not and cannot err. If ever someone adds to or takes away from the Bible in anything, that's a wicked sin. But to add to or to take away from the Bible's teaching on the way of justification, that's wicked, and dangerous, and most damnable sin. Let us ever hold fast to the teaching of the Bible on this important doctrine of justification.

Well, can you say this summary once more? Sinners are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, as taught by the Scriptures alone.

There are many things that flow out of this lesson, but I want to press two points upon you. First, if you do not have Jesus Christ, you are left with your sin and guilt on your account. Your every breath is one closer to your death and judgment. And at that judgment, God will bring up your account of sin and wickedness, and you'll have no hope of escaping his condemnation. You will have to answer for your wickedness. But in God's mercy, you have not yet breathed your last breath. Right now, you have known and heard the way of Christ. He alone is the Savior. As we saw in a previous lesson, he is the one offered to us in the gospel freely. And in him is a perfect righteousness, faultless before God. Oh, see the wondrous gift that is extended to us in Christ, and take Christ as your hope.

And second, if you have received Christ by faith, you are justified. You're pardoned, and accepted as righteous in God's sight. And if this is the case for you, see how good your case is with God. Satan is our adversary. He attacks us, and he accuses us. He stands opposed to us. And he often does so by pointing out our sins. But remember, as John writes, in 1 John 2, and verse 1: "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Your standing, believer, before God is not based on your works, it is based on the work of Jesus Christ the righteous. Ever let your faith trust in him. When you are convicted of your sin, go to him again. For he is your hope, he is your pardon, he is your righteousness. In him, and in him alone, we have peace with God. And oh, believer, what a blessed truth. Such peace is yours now and forever.