

Of Justification (Part 1)

Phil 3:1-11; WCF 11.1

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 8 September 2019, 16:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

What is *justification*?

Well, the word *justification* comes from two Latin words, i.e....

- from *iustus* (which means *just/righteous*)
- and from *ficare*² (which means *to make*).

Thus, in a Biblical sense, justification refers to the state of someone who has been *made righteous/just* in the sight of God!

Why “in the sight of *God*”?

Well, because God is the ultimate/absolute standard of righteousness or justness! But not just *that*! No, God, our Creator, is also the supreme and sovereign Judge of heaven & earth! And the Bible clearly indicates that the One who is Judge of all is Himself perfectly just and righteous!³

Now, is that not absolutely wonderful!? I mean, let’s face it, if you & I had to live in a world governed by an unjust being, would that not have been a dreadful thing? You see, if that were the case, who could then have hope for the ultimate triumph of justice in such a world!?

So, it’s good news for you & me (and for all beings) that the Ruler and Judge of all things is Himself good and righteous! Yes, it’s good news!

But, on the other hand, it’s also bad news!

Why?

Well, because, by our very nature, you & I are not just/righteous! Yes, *God* is just, but *man* is unjust!

And what makes it even scarier is that the Bible tells us that this absolutely just & righteous God *has set a day on which He will judge the world*⁴ – including all of us who are not just! But you know what? The idea of a final judgement to which all people will be subjected has all but disappeared from our thinking, even from the preaching in many pulpits today

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life* (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² Which, in turn, comes from *facere* “to make.” (cf. <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/justify>)

³ Cf. e.g. Mt 5:48, ***You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect***. Also cf. Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:15.

Also cf. Gn 18:25, ***Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?***

And Deut. 32:4; Dan. 4:37; Rev. 15:3.

⁴ Cf. Acts 17:30-31 (especially v.31), ***“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead”*** (Emphasis mine).

– and this despite repeated warnings from our Lord Jesus that we will all stand before God, and be judged on every careless word which we have spoken!⁵

My brother & sister, here’s a great dilemma: If God judges people according to His perfect standard of righteousness, then will not those who are unjust be in serious trouble?

Ps 130:3 says, “*If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?*”⁶

Obviously, no one!!!

My brother & sister (and young people & children), see why it is vitally important to know what justification is – yes, to know how I can be made righteous in God’s eyes?

See, why the greatest clash in the history of the Christian church (that clash at the time of the Reformation) was all about justification?

So, here’s then a question: How am I justified? How am I made right with God?

Well, the answer to this question forms the two points of our sermon...

- What Justification Is *Not*
- What Justification Is

What Justification Is *Not*

My brother & sister, those 151 ministers of the Westminster Assembly, who met from 1643 for nearly six years, made a good study of what the Bible teaches about justification. Then they decided to first state what justification is *not*.

Why did they do that?

Well, because they knew very well what false teachings the Roman Catholic Church had spread re the sinner’s justification before God!

And so, what the Westminster Assembly first wanted to point out was what justification is *not* – it’s not what the Roman Catholic Church said it was.

And the Protestants’ dispute with the Roman Catholic Church came down to two words, i.e. *infusion* versus *imputation*. You see, the Roman Catholic Church said God *infuses* righteousness into the sinner, whereas the Protestants said God *imputes* righteousness to the sinner.

What does that all mean?

Well, the following...

You see, Catholicism used the word *infused* because they assumed that what happens when God justifies the sinner is that God *changes* an unjust person into a *just/righteous* person; yes, Catholicism says that God will never *declare* a person to be righteous until that person really *is* righteous.⁷

Well, is this not the worst news any sinner could ever receive? I mean, if God does not *declare* a person righteous before that person really *is* righteous, then it means that you & I must first be *sanctified* (made holy) before we can be *justified*! It also means that a person who still sins cannot enter into heaven! Surely, that would leave you and me (and everyone else) without any hope of heaven at all!!

My brother & sister, let’s not make a mistake! You see, Roman Catholicism does not say that people can work their way into heaven on their own, and by their own power! It’s not a black-white situation in which Roman Catholics believe in justification by *works*, while Protestants believe in justification *by grace through faith*! No, Catholicism does not say that a person is justified by works *without faith* or by merit *without grace*. No, they agree that we are fallen, that we are unjust, and that we do not have the power within ourselves

⁵ Cf. e.g. Mt 12:36-37, “*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, ³⁷ for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*”

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ps 130:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ My adaptation of the well-said words of Sproul (ibid:41).

to become good enough to pass the bar of God's final judgement.⁸ But they do believe that, for us to pass that bar of God's final judgement, God, in His grace, *infuses* us with righteousness.

And how does God infuse that righteousness into us? "Well," says Catholicism, "God infuses this righteousness into us when we participate in the seven sacraments⁹ of the Roman Catholic Church – seven sacraments of which the first one is *baptism*."

And so, do Roman Catholics believe that, when a person is baptised, the grace of the righteousness of Christ is poured into that person's soul. This is what they call *infusion* – infusion of righteousness! And they believe that, without this infusion of the righteousness of Christ, you cannot be saved.

Now, this *infusion thing* is already an unbiblical thing. But here is where things get even messier, for you see, for this infusion to take place, you must *cooperate* with it, *agree* to it, and *work* with it to such a degree that righteousness is truly in you.

How different to what the Bible teaches in Eph 2:8-9, "***For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.***"¹⁰

Well, if you have cooperated well with God, by using the Roman sacraments, then you are placed in a state of justification before God! And now you will remain in that state *as long as you don't commit mortal sin*, because mortal sin is so serious that it kills that infused grace in your soul and leaves you in an unjustified state!

What is mortal sin?

Well, it is a *grave* sin like murder, rape, incest, perjury, adultery, which you commit with *full knowledge* and *deliberately*!¹¹

What's more, if you then *die in the state of mortal sin*, then you perish eternally (you end up in hell)!

⁸ For these balanced views on the Roman Catholic view I rely on the words of Sproul (ibid:42).

⁹ Which are:

- Baptism.
- Eucharist.
- Confirmation.
- Reconciliation (Penance).
- Anointing of the sick.
- Marriage.
- Holy orders.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Eph 2:8–9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles (Emphasis mine).

¹¹ Three conditions are necessary for mortal sin to exist:

- **Grave Matter:** The act itself is intrinsically evil and immoral. For example, murder, rape, incest, perjury, adultery, and so on are grave matter.
- **Full Knowledge:** The person must know that what they're doing or planning to do is evil and immoral. For example, someone steals a postage stamp, thinking that it's only worth 50 cents. She knows that it's sinful, but if she's unaware that the stamp is rare and actually worth a \$1,000, she's not guilty of mortal sin but of venial sin.
- **Deliberate Consent:** The person must freely choose to commit the act or plan to do it. Someone forced against her will doesn't commit a mortal sin. For example, a woman told she's giving a minor shock to another person who in fact is administering tortuous electrical jolts is not guilty of a mortal sin (although she may feel guilty if she finds out the truth).

(<https://www.dummies.com/religion/christianity/catholicism/mortal-and-venial-sins-in-the-catholic-church/>).

What's the remedy? What plan does Catholicism now come up with to help the person who has lost his/her state of being justified; the person who has lost that *infused righteousness*!? Well, you would think that they will simply rebaptise that person! But no, what they rather suggest now is for the person to make use of another Roman Catholic sacrament – a sacrament called *penance*, which means, among other, that the sinner must *do something* to make *amends* for his sin: he must '*make satisfaction for*' or '*expiate*' his sins.¹²

And a priest must choose the exact act of penance, because it must be an act equal in weight to the mortal sin committed. So, acts of penance can vary from *easier ones* (like spending more time in prayer or in reading the Bible or reading other spiritual books), to *harder acts of penance* like fasting, continence, abstaining from alcohol or tobacco, or the wearing of a cilice (/ˈsɪlɪs/), which is a garment or undergarment made of coarse cloth or animal hair worn close to the skin. If that's not enough, then the sinner could still do self-flagellation (self-whipping with whatever whip is decided upon).

What if you did not commit a mortal sin, but you are guilty of a lesser (or *venial*) sin?

Well, according to Catholicism, you will then not go to hell, but neither will you go to heaven.

Instead, you will go to a place called *purgatory*, where you might spend ten minutes or ten million years, all depending upon how many imperfections there still remained in you at that moment when you died!

Of course, Rome believes that purgatory is a place of purging, where filth is burned away from gold until you become justified/righteous enough to enter heaven.

Yes, *heaven is available only when you have enough inherent righteousness* (justness) in yourself!¹³

And what will bring you to that level of having enough righteousness?

Well, the pope invented indulgences.

What is an indulgence?

Well, it's forgiveness (or a pardon from required punishment) which only the pope could give!

How did indulgences work?

Well, to some degree, it worked like a bank from which you can get money. You see, in simple terms, a bank houses the money of the rich – lots of money against which the bank could grant a loan to a poorer person. In a similar way did the pope believe that he controlled all the huge number of merits earned by Christ and all the thousands of merits of all the exceptionally good deeds which the saints had heaped up in abundance.

So, if you have committed a lesser sin which has reduced your righteousness before God, or if you have a loved one who is neither in heaven nor in hell, but sitting in limbo in purgatory because he/she is still not righteous enough in God's sight, then you could ask the pope to issue that indulgence/pardon for yourself or for your loved one in purgatory. The pope would then, in the fashion of a bank manager, transfer not *money*, but *merits* from Christ's earnings or from the earnings of a saint (like e.g. Francis of Assisi) to your "account" or to the "account" of your loved one who is held up in purgatory!

In this way, then, could you get back to having enough righteousness to enter heaven.

But there's a catch – i.e. that indulgences did not come for free! No, it asked some effort of you! You would either have to say (once, or many times) a specified prayer, or you could

¹² Cf.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacraments_of_the_Catholic_Church#Penance_and_Reconciliation_\(Confession\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacraments_of_the_Catholic_Church#Penance_and_Reconciliation_(Confession))

¹³ My adaptation of the well-said words of Sproul (ibid:43).

be asked to go visit a particular holy place, or you could be asked to perform specific good works.¹⁴

However, at the time of the Reformation, it was also possible to even *buy* indulgences from the pope!

Enough!

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that, although Catholicism might *say* that we do not have the power within ourselves to become good enough to pass the bar of God's final judgement, yet, that's not what Catholicism *is in practice!*

In practice, it's all about man making huge efforts to get himself justified with God.

Even just their assumption that God *infuses* righteousness into the sinner so that the sinner becomes then righteous in him/herself – even that belief is not supported by the Bible.

Well, this was point 1, a long point in which we saw what justification is *not!*

And we *had* to see/hear that *for ourselves* so that we could get a better idea of the background of the world in which the ministers of the Westminster Assembly had to draw up Article 11.1 of the WCF.

So, here is the last (and shorter) point of this sermon...

What Justification Is

My brother & sister, at the start of this sermon, we said that the Protestants' dispute with the Roman Catholic Church came down to two words, i.e. *infusion* versus *imputation*. Rome said God *infuses* righteousness into the sinner, whereas the Protestants said God *imputes* righteousness to the sinner.

What does *impute* mean?

Well it means *to account to*, or *to reckon to the account of*, or *to deem*, or *to transfer legally*. And that's what the meaning is of the word used in the Greek text of Rom 4:3, where it says, "**Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him** ([NIV & NASB], or **counted to him** [ESV])¹⁵ as righteousness."

In other words, the moment Abraham, by God's grace, believed, that very moment God counted Abraham as righteous! In & of himself, Abraham was still a sinner and still *unrighteous*, but God *counted* him as righteous!

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that it is not the righteousness of Christ working *in us* that justifies us. Rather, it is the righteousness of Christ which He worked *in His own life*, which God now counts toward us.

Said in another way: It is not the righteousness of Christ *in us*, but it's the righteousness of Christ *for us!*

So, God transfers righteousness from the account of Christ to the account of everyone who believes.

It's a transfer from one account to another!

¹⁴ The recipient of an indulgence must perform an action to receive it. This is most often the saying (once, or many times) of a specified prayer, but may also include the visiting of a particular place, or the performance of specific good works. (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indulgence>).

¹⁵ In Greek, *elogisthē* (ἐλογίσθη) – an Aorist Passive Indicative 3rd Person Singular of *logizomai* (λογίζομαι): to keep records of commercial accounts, involving both debits and credits—'to put into one's account, to charge one's account, to regard as an account.' τῷ δὲ ἐργαζομένῳ ὁ μισθὸς οὐ λογίζεται κατὰ χάριν ἀλλὰ κατὰ ὀφείλημα 'to a person who has worked, the wage is not regarded (or 'not credited to his account') as a gift but as a debt to be paid' (or 'a debt owed to him') Ro 4:4 (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 582). New York: United Bible Societies).

But do you know what?

It's actually a double transfer!

Why?

Well, because in justifying us, God does not only transfer *Christ's righteousness* to our account; no, He also transferred *our sin* to Christ on the cross!¹⁶

After all, why was Christ punished on the cross? For His own sin? No, *He had no sin!* He was the Lamb without blemish! He had no sin! And yet, the full wrath of God was poured out upon Christ because our sins were *imputed* to Him (transferred to His account)!

So, to sum up, here's a question: Is our righteousness *infused* into us or *imputed* to us? (Is it *infused* into us or *transferred to our account*?)

It's *transferred* to our account – not *infused* into us!!

Perhaps you ask, but does that then mean that the Holy Spirit does not dwell in us?

No! The Holy Spirit does dwell in us, but *righteousness* does not dwell in us as if it's an inherent part of us, for even the Christian still sins!

What was the big dispute then all about?

Well, that God does not look at some righteousness in us that we have cooperated with, but that God looks strictly at the righteousness of our Lord Jesus which He Himself produced in His own life for us!

Look, is that not why the Apostle Paul (having declared all his own past good deeds *rubbish*) says in our NT passage (Phil 3:9)...

“Being found in Christ, I do not have a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”¹⁷

Well, now that we have again a picture of what the Westminster Assembly had to fight against, allow me to conclude with the words they have written in WCF 11.1 (p.114 in the Creeds and Confessions booklet) ...

Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting them as righteous. It is not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone that they are justified. It is not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other act of Christian obedience to them, as their righteousness, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ to them who receive and rest on him and his righteousness by faith. Men do not have this faith of themselves; it is the gift of God.

What Good News! What grace given to the sinner!

No self-work needed!

No self-infliction of pain!

Just humble, child-like faith!

And enormous thankfulness!

AMEN (2,615 words excluding footnotes)

¹⁶ Cf. 2 Cor 5:21, ***“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”***

¹⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Php 3:9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.