

'Justification' in the New Testament

By Gordon C. Olson

The term "justify" means to administer justice, or to execute justice upon. It is the opposite of leniency and compromise and has nothing to do with mercy. It means to adjust or arrange exactly, to pronounce free from guilt or blame; or to absolve. It is to prove or to show to be just, to vindicate, to maintain or defend as conformable to law, right, justice, or duty. Justification would then be the administration or execution of justice, the act of justifying or state of being justified.

There is certainly a basic difference between being saved by strict judicial justice and by the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness we have seen to be God's relaxation of His claims against us out of His benevolent kindness. The idea of a salvation by strict judicial justice, of course, could not involve any justice in the individual being saved, for he is guilty. It must involve an arrangement by which the merits of a substitute are so literally imputed or set down to the account of the individual as to be come in some mysterious way his very own. Then for the negative side, the disposition of guilt, there must be a literal transfer of every iota to a substitute who must suffer the exact equivalent of a given amount of suffering multiplied by an endless duration of time. With total guilt literally discharged, and in its place a positive moral character credited to the individual, a perfect standing before God would evolve which would be independent of moral state or condition. God would not see the individual as he is and has been, but rather the merits and accomplishments of his substitute.

A salvation based upon a literal interpretation of the word "justification" would be strictly judicial, a forensic proceeding, which would appear to be in conflict with the many words which speak of the Godhead as relaxing Their claims against man in the forgiveness of sins. Justification is an insistence upon the fulfillment of every claim; forgiveness is the waiving of all claims. The essential ideas of justification and forgiveness, therefore, are plainly antagonistic to each other. One or the other must be modified. The bible must be its own interpreter. There must be a sense in which the New Testament uses the words "justify" and "justification" that is in harmony with the beautiful and uniform message of the Bible, that "God is love" in very essence of moral character and is overwhelmingly willing to forgive repentant sinners if the problems involved therein can be solved. The problems are not within the essential nature of God, as we have seen and shall further see. There we have a complete conquest of love. The problems of forgiveness arise because of God's relationship to man as a Moral Governor, responsible for the administration of justice to all moral beings.

The words in question are part of a whole family of words derived from the same basic word for "right" or "justice" (dikee, 1349), which in its New Testament meaning relates

to a judicial hearing or judicial sentence, especially a sentence of condemnation: Acts 25:15; 28:4; 2 The. 1:9; Jude 7.

Derived from this word is the word "righteous" (dikaios, 1342), frequently used to describe one who is such as he ought to be, with no implication that this is not an actual description of an inner state or condition (Mt. 5:45; 9:13; 13:49; 25:46; Acts 24:15; Rom. 3:10; 3:26; 1 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 3:12; 4:18; 1 John 1:9; 3:7; Rev. 22:11). Akin to this word is the word "righteously" or "justly" (dikaios, 1346), which properly means, "agreeable to what is right or rightly" (Luke 23:41; 1 Cor 15:34; 1 The. 2:10; Titus 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:23).

Then we have the common word "righteousness" (dikaiosune, 1343), which describes the virtue or quality or state of one who is righteous. In the broad sense it refers to the state of one who is such as he ought to be, the condition acceptable to God. This involves a dealing with the guilt of past sin as well as with a present state. Where is the proof of the idea that man can be in a present state of acceptance with God in the commission of more or less sin, because of some mysterious arrangement of grace whereby God does not deal with actualities that are occurring? The following passages certainly imply that there is not only forgiveness of sin but a cessation from sin: Mat. 5:6, 20; 6:33; Acts 17:31; 24:25; Rom 1:7; 3:25-26; 4:5 (this must clear up past sin), Eph. 4:24; Phil. 3:9; 1 Tim. 6:11; Heb. 11:7; James 2:23; 1 Peter 2:24; 2 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10.

We have also the verb "to make righteous (dikaioo, 1344), which conveys the idea of rendering one righteous or such as he ought to be, but has also come to mean to declare or pronounce one to be just, righteous, or such as he ought to be, thus to acquit of a charge or reproach and be acceptable to God. We have key usages as follows: Mt. 12:37; Luke 18:14; Acts 13:39; Ro. 3:20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1, 9; 6:7 ("freed" is "justified"); 8:30, 33; 1 Cor 6:11 (follows "sanctified"); Gal. 2:16-17; 3:24; Titus 3:7; James 2:24-25; Rev. 22:11.

Finally, we have "justification" (dikaiosis), properly a making right or just, a declaration of right or justice, thus of the act of God's declaring men free from guilt and acceptable to Him, adjudging them to be righteous. We have two instances of this word: Rom 4:25 ("raised again for our justification") and 5:18 ("unto justification of life"). We also have in this series the word of "a judge" (dikastees, 1348), occurring in Luke 12:14; Acts 7:27, 35.

With this summary of all the words relating to the idea of "justification" before us, it is at once evident that they are not used of a Divine procedure of salvation that deals with some sort of an imputed standing before God that does not relate to the state or condition of the one being saved. The idea of standing and state are intermixed on every hand. Man's acceptance before God is an inseparable combination of the two. Man is acceptable to God when he presents himself before God to be transformed completely by the grace of God, applied by the Holy spirit through the atonement of Christ, and be forgiven freely and graciously for all past sins. there are no present sins that do not affect acceptance with God. Present sin is a double audacity against the condescending grace of God in this climaxing era of God's manifested love. If sin was bad before, it is far more so now in

this "dispensation of the grace of God." The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to show that the New Covenant far surpasses the Old, both in grandeur and in guilt for its rejection and disrespect (10:26-31).

The idea of justification, then, is both a making righteous and a declaring righteous, whereupon it is the provision of God's loving grace that the resurrected Christ should dwell supreme in the transformed life. It is now "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). It appears that the words "justify" and "justification" were peculiarly given through the Apostle Paul to add a profound emphasis to heretofore undeveloped concepts of the forgiveness of sin. It appears to relate particularly to the explanation as to how God has met the problem of forgiveness. It appears to stress the idea that the glorious atonement of Christ justifies God in the manner in which sin was forgiveness in the Old Testament times, and now in the New Testament era.

The key passage on justification seems to be Rom. 3:21-26. In verse 25, the word "remission" is really "the passing over of sins that are past." This is the only instance of this word. The "sins that are past" doubtless refer to the sins that were forgiven before the accomplished atonement of Christ, indication that there was before that time an incomplete solution to the problem of forgiveness. God's conduct therein was subject to question as to proper regard for His governmental responsibilities in so freely pardoning sinners. The institution of animal sacrifices was not a satisfactory guarantee that great governmental ills should not be incurred by God's condescending love. But now all was different. The accomplishment of the Atonement, in spite of man's rebellion and utter stupidity, was a climatic achievement of Divine wisdom. Now God would not only be justified before the universe as to His perfect righteous rulership, but was safeguarded against possible ill effects of unheard-of condescensions of intimacy in the bestowal of the Holy Spirit to make the resurrected life of Christ a reality within us.

We should notice in 1 John 1:9 that God's justice is distinguished from His forgiveness. The atonement of Christ enabled God to do justice to all His righteous obligations and at the same time forgive man freely out of His great heart of love, which He previously already wanted to do. Thus "justification" is an explanation of the Divine mode of forgiveness. We should notice that "justification" is not a mode of salvation that in any sense modifies the idea of simply gratuitous forgiveness, for the Apostle Paul uses "forgiveness of sins" in tow of his later epistles as embracing the sum total of salvation as far as man is concerned, namely Eph. 1:7 and Col. 1:14. Certainly, the full revelation of the Gospel instituted no changes in the Divine procedures, so "justification" must be interpreted in the light of that heart-rendering term "forgiveness," and we see that all fits together in the view presented.

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