

What We Believe:

Solid Doctrine for Everyday Life:

The Doctrine of Justification.

Definition

(From the Westminster Larger Catechism, WLC) **WLC 70: What is justification?**

Answer: Justification is an act of God's free

grace unto sinners¹, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight²; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them³, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them⁴, and received by faith alone.⁵

1. [Romans 3:22, 3:24-25](#)
2. [2 Corinthians 5:19, 5:21; Romans 3:22, 3:24-25, 3:27-28;](#)
2. [Titus 3:5, 3:7; Ephesians 1:7](#)
4. [Romans 5:17-19, 4:6-8;](#)
5. [Acts 10:43; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9](#)

WLC 71: How is justification an act of God's free grace?

Answer: Although Christ, by his obedience and death, did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in the behalf of them that are justified¹; yet inasmuch as God accepts the satisfaction from a surety, which he might have demanded of them, and did provide this surety, his own only Son², imputing his righteousness to them³, and requiring nothing of them for their **justification** but faith⁴, which also is his gift⁵, their **justification** is to them of free grace.⁶

1. [Romans 5:8-10, 5:19](#)
2. [1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 10:10; Matthew 20:28; Daniel 9:24, 9:26; Isaiah 53:4-6, 53:10-12; Romans 8:32; 1 Peter 1:18-19](#)
3. [2 Corinthians 5:21](#)
4. [Romans 3:24-25](#)
5. [Ephesians 2:8](#)
6. [Ephesians 1:7](#)

Note: Justification, as understood by Christians, is another doctrine we cannot "figure out on our own". The doctrine of justification by faith through the grace of God in Christ Jesus is unique among the world's religions. In a sense, it is God "showing us His accounts management and how He balanced the books". Justification matters most to God – to us, it is wonderful news that our sins are no longer counted against us and we have peace with God. In a sense, the fact that the Bible goes to such lengths to explain justification is evidence that we matter greatly to God, and that scripture is demonstrating how much God sees us as bearing his image. He explains how he is able to deal with sin to us, at least as much as we are able to comprehend, by means of words that can make sense to us, for we are so much more than sinners – we bear his image & He loves us!

Throughout the Bible, God offers many descriptions for the need for and process of justification (including the entire Old Testament sacrificial system). From these many descriptions emerge four broad categories of word-pictures:

1. **An economic word-picture.** (A key passage that exemplifies this is Colossians 2:13-14)
 - a. **Summary of our economic crisis:** We are bankrupt before God due to a great debt we owe Him. Sin is the great debt that we have both inherited & knowingly increased, & unless it is paid, we cannot have further interaction or exchange with our God.
 - b. **A common (but offensive) objection:** Why can't God just forgive the debt by "fudging the books" or "writing off the debt as pure loss? (*This is offensive to anyone who is involved with wealth management, for it devalues everything & will have lasting consequences through economic deprivation accompanied by increase in inequalities between the "haves & have-nots".*)
 - c. **Christ as the One who balances the books:** Justification pays the debt & moves the riches of Christ into our account.



2. **A judicial word-picture.** (A key passage that exemplifies this is Romans 5:6-9)
 - a. **Summary of the legal charges we face:** We are guilty & under penalty before God. Sin is a heinous breaking of a good & righteous law, & we have incurred a grave penalty & justice requires restitution. Unless the penalty is dealt with & restitution made, we cannot be restored to God.
 - b. **A common (but offensive) objection:** Why can't God just pardon the guilty & let us walk free? (*This is deeply offensive to justice and a just God, for it demonstrates Him as unjust & increases unrighteousness. The innocent are left vulnerable while the guilty are rewarded.*)
 - c. **Christ as the One who satisfies the demands of justice:** Justification is Christ taking on the penalty & making restoration through His life, death, & resurrection.

3. **A relational word-picture.** (A key passage that exemplifies this is Romans 3:4-30.)
 - a. **Summary of the broken relationship:** We are dishonorable reprobates – not evidencing ourselves as children of God. Sin is shameful – a great dishonor to the Only True God. Unless honor is restored to our Father, we cannot stand before Him or even be in His presence.
 - b. **A common (but offensive) objection:** Why can't a loving and faithful God just be accepting & welcoming to those who have behaved so shamefully & offensively? (*This is deeply offensive to anyone who has been a faithful & true partner in a relationship – making a mockery of what is honorable, & lowering the one who has been faithful & true to the capriciousness of the faithless.*)
 - c. **Christ as the One who mediates and reconciles the estranged family:** Justification is Christ taking on our shame while remaining the faithful & obedient Son of the Father, & then being raised to life, again, as evidence of the full restoration of honor to all who are in Him by faith in His finished work.

4. **A military/warfare word-picture** (Key passages exemplifying this are Ephesians 2: & Colossians 2:15)
 - a. **Summary of our situation as prisoners of war, complicit with the enemy:** We are not only helpless captives, powerless to reach God, we collaborated with God's enemy and are traitors, and we have been taken captive by sin & death. Unless a conquering Lord is victorious over the enemy, those who have been captured by sin and death cannot be with God.
 - b. **A common (but offensive) objection:** Why the warfare? Why doesn't the one betrayed by the traitors just stop fighting and settle for peace with the enemy so that the captives can go free? (*This is deeply offensive to anyone who has been true, who understands the betrayal and what is at stake. Treason would be rewarded & what is beloved would be betrayed while scoundrels go free.*)
 - c. **Christ as Victor & Lord:** Jesus, sent by God to free us from captivity & our enmity with Him, as our Victorious Captain & King, conquering sin, death, & the devil is how justification is accomplished.

Discussion/Application:

1. Have you ever tried to explain to a client or customer (or to a young child) something vital to your profession or their interaction with you in your area of responsibility that is quite distressing or confusing to them? How did you "build a bridge of understanding" to their perspective to help them?
2. Which of the Bible's word-pictures for sin and the need for justification more easily makes sense to you? Which one is harder for you to understand? What do you see more clearly through the four word-pictures side-by-side?
3. Gratitude & desire to grow closer to the Lord are the most appropriate responses of believers for the reality of being justified by faith in Christ. How do the Bible's word-pictures help you see who Christ is & what He has done for you? Which word-picture for sin most causes you to see the offensiveness of sin more clearly? Which word-picture helps you see most clearly what a glorious Savior Jesus is?