

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 6: JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE

The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls

Lesson 16

Justification Defined

The Great Exchange

Declared Righteous in the Courtroom of God

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”

Key Texts: Romans 3:21–28; 4:1–8; 5:1; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9; Romans 8:1, 33–34

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB 1995

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Introduction

With Lesson 16, this Soteriology series enters its sixth unit, Justification by Grace Alone through Faith Alone, and arrives at what Luther rightly called “the article by which the church stands or falls.” The preceding units have traced the eternal foundations of salvation (the covenant of redemption, election), the union with Christ that is salvation’s organizing center, the Spirit’s sovereign work of calling and regeneration, and the first conscious response of the converted sinner in repentance and faith. All of those elements have been leading, with the inevitability of a well-structured argument, to this: the moment when the divine Judge pronounces the verdict over the believing sinner, not guilty, righteous in My sight, on the basis of the righteousness of the Son in whom she has placed her trust.

Justification is the doctrine that stands at the exact intersection of the sinner’s greatest problem and God’s most magnificent provision. The problem is this: the sinner stands before the holy God of infinite righteousness with a record of transgression that is both real and irreversible. The righteousness the law demands is perfect; the righteousness the sinner has produced is deficient; and the gap between them cannot be closed by any improvement in the sinner’s future performance, however sincere, however sustained. The provision is this: the Son of God assumed our humanity, lived the perfectly obedient life we failed to live, bore the penalty we deserved to bear, and offers the full credit of His righteousness to every sinner who comes to Him in faith. The justification of the sinner is the divine declaration that the exchange has been made: her sin has been charged to His account; His righteousness has been credited to hers.

The definition of justification that the Reformed tradition has consistently maintained is: the legal act of God by which He declares the believing sinner to be righteous in His sight, on the basis of Christ’s imputed righteousness, received through faith alone. Every element of this definition is theologically significant and will be developed in this lesson. “Legal act”: justification is forensic, a legal declaration rather than a moral transformation. “Declares”: it is a pronouncement, a verdict, not a process. “Righteous in His sight”: the declaration is the divine assessment, carrying the full weight of the infinite God’s judicial pronouncement. “Imputed righteousness”: the righteousness on the basis of which the verdict is pronounced is Christ’s, credited to the sinner’s account. “Through faith alone”: the instrument by which the imputed righteousness is received is faith, and faith alone.

This lesson will proceed through seven major sections: the forensic character of justification (what it means that justification is a legal declaration, not a transformation); the courtroom setting and the sinner’s hopeless case before the divine tribunal; the double imputation at the heart of the great exchange (our sin to Christ, His righteousness to us); the single most comprehensive statement of the gospel in all of Scripture (2 Corinthians 5:21); the three-fold basis, instrument, and ground of justification (Christ’s righteousness, faith alone, grace alone); the completeness and the permanence of the justification verdict; and the fruits and consequences of justification for the believing soul. Throughout, the governing conviction is the Westminster Confession’s own: 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” (WCF XI.1).

A note on the stakes of this doctrine before we begin. Justification is not one biblical theme among many, to be developed and then set aside as the curriculum moves on to other equally important matters. It is the load-bearing wall of the entire structure of Christian theology. Remove it or distort it, and everything else, sanctification, perseverance, assurance, the Christian life, the mission of the church, becomes unstable. Maintain it in its proper

biblical and Reformation form, and the entire Christian life is set on the foundation that can never be moved: not the believer's performance, not the church's sacraments, not the sinner's cooperation with grace, but the righteousness of Christ alone, declared to be the sinner's own by the sovereign, gracious, irrevocable verdict of the God who justifies the ungodly.

I. The Forensic Character of Justification

A Verdict, Not a Process

A. *Justification Is Declarative, Not Transformative*

The single most important structural distinction in the whole doctrine of justification is the distinction between a legal declaration and a moral transformation. Justification is a legal declaration: God pronounces the believing sinner to be righteous in His sight, in the same way that a judge pronounces a verdict over a defendant. It is not a moral transformation: God does not make the sinner actually, subjectively righteous in her own person by the act of justification. That transformation, the actual moral renovation of the inner person, is the work of sanctification, which is the necessary companion of justification but is not the same thing as it. The Reformation's battle with Rome on this point was the battle over whether justification is a declaring or a making, a pronouncing or a producing, a verdict or a process.

The distinction between declarative and transformative justification is built into the semantics of the Greek verb *dikaioō*. As noted in Lesson 15, the verb carries the forensic/declarative sense, to pronounce the verdict of righteousness over a person, as its primary meaning in the Pauline corpus. The courtroom context of Romans 1:18–3:28 establishes this beyond reasonable exegetical doubt: the entire argument from 1:18 through 3:20 has been about the universal guilty verdict before the divine Judge, and the justification of 3:21–28 is the resolution of that legal situation through the pronouncement of a counter-verdict. It is not a description of moral renovation; it is a description of judicial vindication. And the distinction matters infinitely, because if justification were a moral transformation, then the completeness of one's justification would depend on the degree of one's moral transformation, which can never, in this life, be described as complete.

The Westminster Confession's definition captures the declarative character with precision: "Those whom God effectually calleth, 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" (WCF XI.1). The phrase "not by infusing righteousness into them" is the direct rejection of the Roman Catholic doctrine that justification involves the infusion of sanctifying grace into the soul, making the sinner morally better. The Reformation's alternative is "accounting and accepting their persons as righteous", a legal accounting, a judicial declaration, an accounting of the person's status before God, not of the person's moral condition in themselves.

The practical pastoral significance of this distinction is enormous. If justification were a moral transformation, then the degree of my justification would be proportional to the degree of my moral renovation, and the anxious question "Am I justified?" would be equivalent to the anxious question "Am I good enough?" to which the honest answer is always: not yet, not fully, not compared to the standard the holy God requires. But if justification is a legal declaration, then the question "Am I justified?" is equivalent to the question "Has the verdict been pronounced?", and the answer, for the believing sinner, is: yes, fully, completely, irrevocably, on the basis of a righteousness that is perfect and permanent, independent of the fluctuations of her own moral performance. The declaration has been made. The verdict stands. And the quality of today's moral performance does not change the verdict that was pronounced the moment faith received the righteousness of Christ.

B. The Roman Catholic Error and the Reformation's Response

The Council of Trent's formal definition of justification, promulgated in 1547, defines it as "not the remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unrighteous man becomes a righteous man." This definition explicitly includes the transformation of the inner person as part of justification itself, conflating what the Reformation distinguished as justification (the forensic declaration of righteousness) and sanctification (the progressive transformation of the inner person). For Rome, justification is a process that continues throughout the Christian life, dependent in part on the cooperation of the human will with the infused grace of the sacraments and advancing or retreating according to the quality of the recipient's cooperation.

The Reformation's response, at every point, was that this conflation does irreparable damage to both doctrines. If justification includes sanctification, then the certainty of the justified person's standing before God is contingent on the quality of her ongoing moral transformation, which means it can never be fully certain in this life, because the transformation is never complete. And if sanctification is part of justification, then the works of sanctification inevitably become partial causes of the justified standing, which is precisely the confusion of faith and works that the Reformation's *sola fide* was designed to exclude. By keeping justification and sanctification clearly distinct, both real, both necessary, both the work of the same Spirit, but distinct in their nature and their effect, the Reformation preserved both the certainty of the justified person's standing (grounded in the complete, once-for-all, irrevocable pronouncement of the divine verdict) and the genuine demand for sanctification (grounded in the new nature that the Spirit produces in all who are genuinely justified).

II. The Courtroom Setting

The Sinner's Case Before the Divine Tribunal

A. The Universal Guilty Verdict, Romans 1:18–3:20

The doctrine of justification cannot be understood without first understanding the legal situation it resolves. Paul's letter to the Romans is structured as a legal argument, and the justification of 3:21–28 is comprehensible only in light of the universal condemnation that 1:18–3:20 has established. Paul's argument in those two and a half chapters is among the most relentless and most comprehensive in the entire New Testament: the Gentiles are under condemnation because they have suppressed the truth about God that creation has made plain (1:18–32); the morally self-righteous are under condemnation because they hold others to a standard by which they themselves are condemned (2:1–16); the Jewish people are under condemnation despite their covenant privileges because circumcision and the law do not provide the righteousness the law requires (2:17–3:8); and the Scripture itself confirms that "there is none righteous, not even one" (3:10, NASB 1995).

The culminating verdict of this section is 3:19–20: "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (NASB 1995). "Every mouth", silenced, unable to offer any defense. "All the world", the universal scope of the condemnation. "Accountable to God", answerable, liable, under legal obligation and legal jeopardy before the

divine tribunal. “No flesh will be justified” by the works of the law, the works-righteousness that every human religious system has attempted is formally declared insufficient before the court of divine judgment.

The courtroom analogy, which the lesson’s outline specifically invokes, helps to make the concrete legal reality of the sinner’s situation vivid and precise. The sinner stands before the divine Judge, the Judge whose knowledge of the case is omniscient (He knows every thought, word, and action), whose standard of righteousness is infinite (the law requires perfect, continuous, whole-souled obedience), and whose justice is absolutely incorruptible (He will not declare the guilty innocent on a technicality or a bribe). The evidence against the sinner is not disputed; it is the sinner’s own record, which no amount of subsequent goodness can erase. And the verdict of the law, the verdict that perfect justice demands, is “guilty.” The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23); the soul that sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:20); cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law to do them (Galatians 3:10). The sinner in the divine courtroom is in a situation from which she cannot extricate herself by any act of her own.

B. The Counter-Verdict: Romans 3:21–22

Romans 3:21–22 is the great turning point of the entire letter, the “But now” that changes everything: “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe” (NASB 1995). The “But now” (Greek: *nuni de*) is the hinge on which the entire argument turns, from the revelation of God’s wrath against universal sin (1:18–3:20) to the revelation of God’s righteousness for all who believe (3:21–4:25). And what has now been manifested is described with the phrase that carries the full weight of the Reformation’s gospel: “the righteousness of God.”

The “righteousness of God” in Romans 3:21–22 is not God’s attribute of righteousness (by which He judges sin) but the righteousness that God provides, the righteousness that comes from God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe. It is the divine answer to the legal problem that human unrighteousness has created: where the sinner’s own righteousness is insufficient for the divine demand, God Himself provides the righteousness that satisfies that demand, in the person and work of His Son, and offers it to every sinner who will receive it through faith. This is the counter-verdict of justification: not merely that the guilty verdict is set aside (which would be injustice), but that a positive righteousness has been provided and credited, so that the justified sinner stands before the divine tribunal not merely as “not guilty” but as “righteous”, positively and completely righteous in God’s sight, on the basis of a righteousness that fully satisfies the divine demand.

Romans 3:24 packs three of the most important soteriological terms in Paul’s vocabulary into a single verse: “being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). Justified: the legal declaration of righteousness. As a gift (Greek: *dōrean*, freely, without charge, as a pure gift): the non-meritorious character of the justification, which is received rather than earned. By His grace: the divine source of the whole transaction, grounded entirely in God’s own free, undeserved favor toward the sinner. Through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus: the historical, accomplished, objective basis of the justification in the atoning work of Christ. The three terms together, justified, as a gift, by grace, establish the complete structure of the justification verdict: it is a legal pronouncement, given freely, grounded in the divine mercy, on the basis of what Christ has done.

III. The Double Imputation

Our Sin to Christ, His Righteousness to Us

A. *The Logic of the Great Exchange*

At the heart of justification is the divine transaction that the Reformation called “the great exchange”, the double imputation by which the sinner’s sin is charged to Christ and Christ’s righteousness is credited to the sinner. This is not a divine fiction or a legal technicality; it is the most real and most costly transaction in the history of the universe, accomplished at the greatest price that infinite love can pay. The exchange is the substance of what Paul describes when he says that God made Christ “to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB 1995), the verse that the lesson’s outline identifies as “the single most comprehensive statement of the gospel in all of Scripture.”

The double imputation works in two directions simultaneously. In the first direction, our sin is imputed to Christ: the guilt of the sinner’s transgression, the full weight of the divine condemnation that her sin has earned, is charged to the account of the sinless Son of God, who bears it in His body on the cross. This is the passive dimension of the great exchange, and it is described throughout the New Testament with the language of substitution: Christ died “for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3), “for us” (Romans 5:8), “in our place” (Galatians 3:13), bearing the curse that the law pronounced over the lawbreaker. In the second direction, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer: the full, perfect, permanent record of the Son of God’s lifelong obedience to His Father, every act of perfect love, every moment of complete submission, every exercise of holy, selfless devotion, is credited to the account of the believing sinner.

The result of the double imputation is the legal standing of the justified sinner before God: she stands in the divine courtroom not with her own deficient record (which has been charged to Christ and borne at the cross) but with Christ’s perfect record (which has been credited to her by faith). The divine Judge looks at the account and finds it perfect, not because the sinner has produced the perfection it records, but because the One whose perfection it is has offered it as the gift of His love, and she has received it through the instrument of faith. The verdict is pronounced: “Righteous.” And the basis of the verdict is not the quality of the sinner’s own life, past, present, or future, but the absolute and permanent perfection of the One whose righteousness has been credited to her account.

B. *The Active and Passive Obedience of Christ*

The double imputation requires a careful account of what exactly constitutes the righteousness of Christ that is credited to the believer, and the Reformed tradition has consistently maintained that this righteousness has two dimensions, corresponding to the two aspects of what the law requires: the active obedience of Christ (His lifelong, perfect fulfillment of the law’s positive demands) and the passive obedience of Christ (His suffering and death as the law’s penal sanction against sin).

The active obedience of Christ is the dimension that is most often overlooked in popular accounts of the atonement but is indispensable for the full account of justification. The law does not merely demand that its penalties be paid (which the passive obedience accomplishes); it demands positive, perfect, lifelong obedience. The sinner’s problem is not merely that she has incurred a debt (the guilt of transgression, which the passive

obedience removes) but that she lacks the positive righteousness that the law requires (the record of perfect obedience, which the active obedience provides). Christ's lifelong obedience, His perfect fulfillment of the law's positive demands across thirty-three years of human life in all its temptation, suffering, and moral complexity, is the positive righteousness that the sinner receives in justification. Without the active obedience, the justified sinner is relieved of the guilt of transgression but possesses no positive righteousness, she is not guilty but not righteous either, which is not the biblical account of justification.

Romans 5:17–19 provides the most explicit Pauline account of the active obedience and its role in the imputation: “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (NASB 1995). The “one act of righteousness” of verse 18 and the “obedience of the One” of verse 19 are not limited to the cross event (the passive obedience) but encompass the whole of Christ's obedient life, the obedience that is the basis of the justified sinner's being “made righteous.” The passive obedience removes the condemnation; the active obedience provides the positive righteousness that justification requires.

IV. The Most Comprehensive Statement of the Gospel

2 Corinthians 5:21 Examined

A. The Structure of the Verse

Second Corinthians 5:21 stands alone in the New Testament as the single most compressed, most balanced, and most comprehensive statement of the double imputation at the heart of the gospel: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (NASB 1995). The verse's structure is a perfect chiasm of exchange: the sinless One made to be sin, so that sinners might become righteousness. The exchange is total, the reversal is complete, and the means and the ground are both named in the verse itself.

The first half, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf”, is the most explicit statement in the New Testament of the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ. Three elements of the first half demand careful attention. First, “He made”: God the Father is the active agent of the imputation. The sinlessness of the Son is not abrogated by the imputation; the Son does not become a sinner in His own nature. But the Father charges to His Son's account the guilt and the condemnation that the believer's sin deserves, so that the Son bears it in His body on the cross. Second, “who knew no sin”: the sinlessness of the One who becomes sin is not incidental but essential. Only the sinless One can bear another's sin without the bearing being His own just desert; only the One who has no sin of His own can be the pure substitute, the spotless Lamb whose sacrifice is accepted because it is the sacrifice of the innocent bearing the guilt of the guilty. Third, “on our behalf” (Greek: *hyper hēmōn*): the preposition of substitution and representation, indicating that Christ's bearing of sin was in the place of, on behalf of, as the substitute for those for whom He bore it.

The second half, “so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”, is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer, stated in terms of the most astonishing transformation of status that the New Testament records. The believers do not merely receive forgiveness (the removal of the guilty verdict); they “become the righteousness of God.” The righteousness they become is not their own righteousness (produced by their own moral performance) but the righteousness of God, the divine righteousness, Christ’s own perfect obedience, credited to their account and constituting their standing before the divine tribunal. And the means of this becoming is “in Him”, in Christ, by union with Christ, through the faith that unites the sinner to the One whose righteousness is now hers. The verse captures the full exchange: He bore what is mine; I receive what is His. The sin is His (by imputation, to be borne and atoned); the righteousness is mine (by imputation, to be worn and enjoyed forever).

B. The Context of 2 Corinthians 5:18–21

The verse does not stand in isolation; it is the climax of Paul’s account of the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:18–20. “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (vv. 18–20, NASB 1995). The reconciliation of verse 19, “not counting their trespasses against them”, is the non-imputation of sin: God does not charge the believer’s trespasses against her because they have been charged against Christ. And the ministry of reconciliation is the proclamation of this exchange, the “word of reconciliation” that the ambassador preaches, calling the world to “be reconciled to God.”

The flow from verses 18–20 to verse 21 establishes the ground of the reconciliation call: the reason the sinner can be reconciled to God is that God has made the great exchange possible, making the sinless Son to be sin so that sinners might become righteousness in Him. The preacher who proclaims “be reconciled to God” is proclaiming on the basis of what God has done in 5:21: the exchange has been accomplished; the sinless One has been made sin; the righteousness is available; and all that remains is for the hearing sinner to receive it through the faith that makes the exchange personally hers. The urgency of Paul’s ambassadorial appeal (“we beg you on behalf of Christ”) is the urgency of a person who knows that the most extraordinary exchange in the history of the universe has been accomplished and is being freely offered to those who have no other ground of hope before the divine Judge.

V. The Basis, Instrument, and Ground of Justification

Christ’s Righteousness, Faith Alone, Grace Alone

A. The Basis: Christ’s Righteousness Alone

The basis of justification, the thing on which the divine verdict rests, the foundation of the justified sinner’s standing before God, is the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. This is the Reformation’s *solus Christus* in its most precise soteriological form: not merely that Christ is necessary for salvation, but that Christ’s righteousness is the exclusive and exhaustive basis of the justified person’s standing before God. Nothing the sinner does, has done,

or will do contributes to or supplements this basis; it is complete, perfect, and permanently sufficient in Christ's own person and work.

Philippians 3:9 provides Paul's most personal statement of this exclusive basis: "and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (NASB 1995). The contrast is absolute: "not having a righteousness of my own" versus "the righteousness which comes from God." Paul, who had, by his own account, been "blameless" under the standards of Pharisaic righteousness (Philippians 3:6), counts all of that self-achieved righteousness as loss and as rubbish in comparison to the righteousness that comes from God in Christ. The comparison is not between two kinds of righteousness, one better than the other; it is between the creature's self-generated religious performance and the Creator's own righteousness, and in that comparison, every form of the former is infinitely inadequate.

The active and passive obedience of Christ together constitute the double basis of the justified sinner's standing. The passive obedience (the atoning death) removes the guilt of transgression, satisfying the law's penalty. The active obedience (the lifelong righteous life) provides the positive righteousness, satisfying the law's positive demand. Both are necessary for the full account of what justification provides: the removal of what stood against the sinner (the record of transgression charged to Christ at the cross) and the supply of what she lacks (the record of perfect obedience credited to her account by faith). The justified sinner stands before God as if she had never sinned (because Christ has borne the penalty) and as if she had always perfectly obeyed (because Christ has provided the obedience). This is the glory of the great exchange.

B. The Instrument: Faith Alone

The instrument of justification, the means by which the righteousness of Christ is received and the verdict of righteousness is pronounced over the sinner, is faith alone. This was the subject of Lesson 14 and was developed at length there; it requires only a brief restatement here in the specific context of justification. Faith is the instrument, not the basis: it is the empty hand that receives the gift, not the gift itself. The righteousness that justifies is Christ's; faith is the means by which that righteousness is personally received and credited to the believer's account. Faith saves not because of any virtue in faith but because of the virtue of the One in whom faith is placed.

Romans 5:1 states the result of justification by faith with a simplicity that carries enormous pastoral weight: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (NASB 1995). The peace with God that follows from justification is not a subjective feeling of religious calm but the objective status of reconciliation, the end of the hostility between the sinner and God that sin has created, replaced by the genuine, permanent peace of those who have been declared righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness and stand before God as friends, not enemies. The instrument of this peace, faith, is named explicitly, and it is named as the instrument that receives the justification that produces the peace. The faith does not produce the peace directly; it receives the justification that produces the peace.

C. The Ground: Grace Alone

The ground of justification, the source from which the whole transaction flows, the reason why God justifies the ungodly at all, is grace alone. This is the *sola gratia* of the Reformation's five-fold affirmation: the justification of

the sinner is entirely unmerited, undeserved, and unearned. It proceeds from no quality in the sinner that might commend her to the divine favor; it rests on no prior religious performance that might constitute a claim on the divine generosity; it depends on no future promise of moral improvement that might justify the risk of the divine pardon. It flows purely and entirely from the free, sovereign, self-motivated love of God for sinners who have done nothing to deserve it and everything to forfeit it.

Romans 3:24's "justified as a gift by His grace" (dōrean, "freely," "without charge") makes the gift character of justification explicit: it is received without payment, without qualification, without any contribution from the recipient. The grace from which it flows is God's own uncoerced love, the love that moved the Father to give the Son (John 3:16), the love that moved the Son to offer Himself (Galatians 2:20), and the love that moves the Spirit to apply the accomplished redemption to the hearts of the elect through the effectual call. Justification is the product of this Trinitarian grace from beginning to end; there is not a single element in the whole transaction to which the sinner can point as her own contribution. The glory belongs entirely to the God of grace.

VI. The Completeness and Permanence of Justification

A Once-for-All Verdict That Stands Forever

A. Justification Is Complete

One of the most practically significant truths about justification is its completeness: when God declares the believing sinner to be righteous, the declaration is not partial, provisional, or subject to revision on the basis of subsequent performance. The verdict is complete, as complete as Christ's righteousness that grounds it (which is perfect), as complete as the divine law's demands (which are fully satisfied), and as complete as the authority of the divine Judge who pronounces it (whose verdict admits no appeal or revision). The justified sinner is not partially justified, progressively justified, or conditionally justified; she is completely and fully justified at the moment of faith.

This completeness stands in sharp contrast to the Roman Catholic account of justification, which treats it as a process that advances through the cooperation of the human will with infused grace and that can be lost through mortal sin, requiring re-justification through the sacrament of penance. The Reformation's account grounds the completeness of justification in the completeness of Christ's righteousness: because the basis of justification is not the sinner's own progressive moral performance but the finished righteousness of the crucified and risen Christ, the justification grounded on that basis is as complete as the righteousness itself. Christ said "It is finished" (John 19:30, NASB 1995), *tetelestai*, the perfect tense of completion, and the justification grounded on the finished work is equally finished.

Romans 8:1 states the completeness with the most unqualified language available: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (NASB 1995). Not partial condemnation, not conditional condemnation, not provisional freedom from condemnation that depends on future performance, "no condemnation." The forensic declaration is absolute. The justified believer in Christ stands before the divine tribunal without a single charge outstanding against her, not because her record has been expunged (as if the sin never happened) but because the sin has been charged to Christ and the penalty has been paid in full, leaving no basis for any remaining condemnation of those who are in Him.

B. Justification Is Permanent

The permanence of justification follows directly from its completeness: a verdict that is complete admits no reversal, and the God who pronounces it is the God who does not change. Romans 8:33–34 poses the question of the justified sinner’s permanent standing with a series of rhetorical challenges: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (NASB 1995). The rhetorical question “Who will bring a charge?” is followed by the answer that silences every potential accuser: God is the one who justifies. The divine Justifier cannot simultaneously be the divine Condemner; the Judge who has pronounced the verdict of righteousness cannot turn and pronounce the verdict of condemnation over the same person on the same charge. The verdict, once given, stands.

The permanence of justification is further grounded in the golden chain of Romans 8:30: “whom He justified, He also glorified.” The past tense of “glorified”, expressing the eschatological certainty of what is yet to occur in the experience of the justified believer, establishes that the chain from justification to glorification is unbroken. Every justified person will be glorified; no justified person will fail to reach the terminus of the chain on which the divine purpose has placed her. The permanence of justification is the permanence of the divine purpose that decreed it, executed it through the great exchange, and will consummate it in the glorification of every believing soul.

The practical pastoral import of justification’s permanence is the specific, stable, warfare-tested assurance that the Reformation fought to restore to the church and that Rome’s system had systematically withheld. The believing sinner who understands that the verdict of justification is permanent does not live under the anxiety of potential re-condemnation; she lives under the settled, joy-producing, endurance-enabling confidence that the God who has declared her righteous has declared it forever, on the basis of a righteousness that is as permanent as the eternal Son who provided it. The good days of her Christian life do not increase her justification; the bad days do not diminish it. The verdict was pronounced on the basis of Christ’s righteousness; and Christ’s righteousness is as permanent as He is.

VII. The Fruits and Consequences of Justification

Peace, Access, Hope, and the Life That Flows from the Verdict

A. Peace with God and Access to Grace

Romans 5:1–2 provides the most comprehensive statement of the immediate fruits of justification in the entire New Testament: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God” (NASB 1995). Three fruits are named in rapid succession: peace with God, access to grace, and the exultant hope of glory.

The peace with God that justification produces is not primarily a subjective experience of tranquility, though it often expresses itself in genuine emotional peace. It is first and primarily the objective status of reconciliation, the end of the hostility that sin created between the creature and the Creator, replaced by the genuine peace of the declared righteous standing. The believer who has been justified is no longer God’s enemy (Romans 5:10 describes

the pre-justified as “enemies”); she is God’s friend, God’s child, and the object of God’s ongoing saving love. The peace is real, permanent, and objective before it is felt; and it is the basis from which the felt experience of peace, as the Spirit bears witness with the believer’s spirit that she is a child of God, flows.

The access to grace describes the ongoing relational reality of the justified person’s standing before God: she stands in the grace in which she was placed at the moment of justification, and she approaches the throne with the confidence of one who has been declared righteous rather than the dread of one who remains condemned. Hebrews 4:16, “Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (NASB 1995), is the practical expression of the access that justification provides. The approach is confident not because the approaching sinner is worthy but because her standing before the throne has been established by the imputed righteousness of the One whose sacrifice opened the way.

B. The Hope of Glory and the Life of the Justified

The exultant hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:2) is the eschatological dimension of justification’s fruit: the justified believer is not merely reconciled to God in the present (peace) and given ongoing access to His grace (standing), but she is oriented toward the consummation of the salvation that justification has begun. The hope of glory is not wishful thinking; it is the confident expectation of one who knows the basis on which she stands before God and knows that the God who has justified her is the God who will glorify her (Romans 8:30). The hope fuels the endurance of present suffering (Romans 5:3–5), because the suffering of the present is not the final word; it is the precursor to a glory that will make every present pain look small.

The justified life is not a life of anxious self-examination aimed at determining whether the verdict has been maintained; it is a life of joyful, Spirit-empowered obedience that flows from the security of the verdict already pronounced. The believer who knows herself to be justified by grace through faith is free to pursue holiness not as the prerequisite of acceptance but as the grateful expression of the acceptance already received. The justification does not diminish the demand for holiness; it relocates the motivation from fear to gratitude, from the slave’s dread of punishment to the child’s love of the Father who has declared her His own. This is the life that justification makes possible: a life lived from the security of the verdict rather than in the anxiety of its uncertain maintenance.

Romans 8:33–34 closes the lesson’s biblical account with the most triumphant declaration of the justified sinner’s permanent security available in the entire Pauline corpus: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” Every potential accuser is silenced: the devil cannot condemn whom God has justified; the law cannot condemn whom Christ has fulfilled; sin cannot condemn whom the cross has atoned; and death cannot condemn whom the resurrection has overcome. The justified sinner stands in the security of the one verdict that matters, the verdict of the divine Judge who has declared her righteous in His sight, and no voice in heaven, earth, or hell can reverse what the eternal God has pronounced.

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.”

Romans 5:1–2, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Justification	The legal act of God by which He declares the believing sinner to be righteous in His sight, on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness, received through faith alone. Justification is forensic (a declaration, not a transformation), instantaneous (not progressive), complete (not partial), and permanent (not reversible). It is the divine counter-verdict over the sinner whose own record of transgression earned condemnation: God declares her righteous on the basis of an alien righteousness (Christ's) credited to her account through faith. Luther called it "the article by which the church stands or falls." Grounded in Romans 3:21–28; 5:1; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9.
Forensic	From the Latin <i>forensis</i> , relating to the forum or law court. The forensic character of justification means that it is a legal declaration, a judicial pronouncement of a verdict, rather than a moral transformation of the inner person. God does not make the sinner righteous in justification (that is sanctification); He declares her righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. The forensic distinction preserves both the completeness of justification (the verdict is pronounced fully and completely at the moment of faith) and the genuine demand for sanctification (which is the separate, progressive, Spirit-empowered transformation of the inner person that necessarily accompanies but is distinct from the forensic declaration).
Double Imputation	The twin transfer at the heart of the great exchange: (1) the believer's sin is imputed (legally charged) to Christ, who bears the penalty at the cross; and (2) Christ's righteousness is imputed (legally credited) to the believer, who receives the verdict of righteousness by faith. The double imputation is the basis of the justified sinner's standing: she stands before God as if she had never sinned (the sin having been charged to Christ) and as if she had always perfectly obeyed (the perfect obedience having been credited to her account). The fullest single statement of the double imputation is 2 Corinthians 5:21: He was made sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
Active Obedience	The dimension of Christ's atoning work consisting of His lifelong, perfect fulfillment of the law's positive demands across the whole of His human life, every act of perfect love, complete submission, and holy obedience to the Father's will. The active obedience provides the positive righteousness that the believer receives in justification: not merely freedom from condemnation (which the passive obedience secures) but the positive record of perfect compliance with the law's demands (which the active obedience provides). Without the active obedience, the justified sinner would be declared "not guilty" but would possess no positive righteousness. Grounded in Romans 5:18–19: "through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous."
Passive Obedience	The dimension of Christ's atoning work consisting of His suffering and death as the law's penal sanction against sin, the bearing of the curse that the law pronounced over the lawbreaker (Galatians 3:13) in the place of and on behalf of those for whom He died. The passive obedience removes the guilty verdict from the believer's account by satisfying the law's demand for the penalty of sin. Without the passive obedience, the believer's transgression would remain charged to her account; with it, every sin is atoned, every debt is paid, and no condemnation remains (Romans 8:1). Together with the active obedience, the passive obedience constitutes the complete basis of the justified sinner's standing.
Imputation	The legal crediting or charging of something to a person's account that did not originate with that person. In justification: (1) the believer's sin is imputed to Christ, charged to His account, borne by Him at the cross; and (2) Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer, credited to her account, received by her through faith. Imputation is a legal reckoning, not a moral transfer: Christ does not become a sinner in His own nature when our sin is imputed to Him,

	nor does the believer become intrinsically righteous in her own person when His righteousness is imputed to her. The imputation is a change of legal standing, not a change of moral character. The believer's intrinsic character is changed by sanctification; her legal standing is changed by the imputation of justification.
Sola Gratia	Latin: "by grace alone." One of the Reformation's five solas, affirming that justification is entirely unmerited, undeserved, and unearned by the sinner, it flows from no quality in the sinner that commends her to the divine favor, from no prior religious performance that constitutes a claim on divine generosity, and from no future moral promise that might justify the divine pardon. Grounded in Romans 3:24 ("justified as a gift by His grace"), Ephesians 2:8–9, and Titus 3:4–7. Sola gratia establishes that the ultimate cause of justification is the sovereign, free, self-motivated love of the Triune God for sinners who have forfeited every claim to His favor. The glory of justification belongs entirely to God.
Propitiation	The satisfaction of God's just wrath against sin through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Translates the Greek <i>hilastērion</i> (Romans 3:25) and <i>hilasmos</i> (1 John 2:2; 4:10), the mercy seat in the Old Testament Tabernacle, the place where blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement to satisfy the divine demand for the penalty of sin. Christ is the true and final propitiation: His death on the cross satisfied the full demand of divine justice against every sin of every believer, so that God can be simultaneously just (having punished sin in full at the cross) and the justifier (declaring righteous those for whom the punishment was borne). The propitiation is the basis of Romans 3:26's resolution of the divine dilemma.
No Condemnation	The complete absence of any basis for divine condemnation of those who are in Christ Jesus, declared in Romans 8:1: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The "now" is temporal (the present age of the new covenant) and the "no" is absolute (not "less condemnation" or "conditional freedom from condemnation"). The basis of the no-condemnation verdict is the double imputation: the sin that would have been the basis of condemnation has been charged to Christ and atoned; the righteousness that is the basis of the positive verdict of righteousness has been credited to the believer's account. No charge that Satan, the law, or the conscience can bring against the justified believer can reverse what the divine Judge has declared.
Peace with God	The objective status of reconciliation between the justified sinner and God, produced by the declaration of justification and described in Romans 5:1: "having been justified by faith, we have peace with God." Distinct from the subjective experience of emotional peace, though often expressed in it: peace with God is first and primarily the legal status of the person who has been declared righteous, the end of the hostility that sin created between the creature and Creator (Romans 5:10 describes the pre-justified as "enemies"), replaced by the genuine reconciliation of the declared righteous standing. The peace is as permanent as the justification that produced it, grounded not in the believer's fluctuating spiritual experience but in the immovable verdict of the divine Judge.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that justification is a legal declaration, not a moral transformation, and we must believe this with sufficient precision to distinguish it from the Roman Catholic confusion of justification and sanctification. This means believing that the complete, permanent acceptance of the believer before God does not rest on the quality of her moral progress (sanctification) but on the forensic declaration of the divine Judge based on Christ's imputed righteousness (justification). The sanctification is real, necessary, and the Spirit's work in every genuinely justified person; but it is not the ground of the justification. The person who is progressing well in sanctification today is no more justified than she was on the day of her conversion; the person who is struggling in sanctification today is no less justified than she was on that same day. The verdict was pronounced once, on the basis of a righteousness that does not fluctuate, and it stands forever.

We must believe that 2 Corinthians 5:21 is the most personal possible truth, not merely the most theologically comprehensive statement. "He was made sin for me, so that I might become the righteousness of God in Him." The sin He was made is my sin, specifically, personally, exhaustively, with nothing held back and nothing left on my account. The righteousness I become is His righteousness, specifically, personally, completely, with nothing lacking and nothing dependent on my supplementation. The exchange is total; the terms are complete; and the recipient is me, by faith, as the gift of the God whose grace is as great as His love for sinners who deserved nothing from Him but condemnation. We must believe this not merely as a theological proposition but as the specific, personal, identity-defining truth of who we are before God.

We must also believe that Romans 8:1's "no condemnation" and Romans 5:1's "peace with God" are not aspirational goals to be pursued but descriptions of the present reality of every person who is in Christ by faith. The condemnation is absent now. The peace exists now. The access to the throne is available now. The hope of glory is a present possession now. These are not experiences to be worked up or achievements to be attained; they are the legal, relational, and eschatological realities that the divine verdict of justification has established for every believing sinner in Christ. We believe them not because they correspond to how we feel but because the God who cannot lie has declared them to be true, on the basis of a righteousness that is as unchangeable as the eternal Son who provided it.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that the doctrine of justification should produce, when it is received with the full personal weight it bears, is the specific, deep, relief-flooded gratitude that Luther described when the gates of paradise opened to him in the study of Romans 1:17. The problem that justification solves is not a minor inconvenience; it is the most catastrophic situation any human being can find herself in: standing guilty before the infinite, holy God whose standard of righteousness she has violated and whose justice demands the full penalty. The solution that justification provides is not a partial remedy; it is the most complete, most costly, most comprehensive act of love and justice in the history of the universe. The gratitude that is the appropriate emotional response to this truth should therefore be the most specific, most personal, most deeply moved gratitude the human heart is capable of feeling.

Desire the settled, specific, warfare-tested assurance that the permanence of justification is designed to produce. Not the complacency of the antinomian who has reduced assurance to the dismissal of all moral concern, but the specific, gospel-grounded confidence of the person who knows that her standing before God rests on a foundation that her worst day cannot shake. When the accuser's voice is loudest, when the conscience is most active, when the failures of the past seem most disqualifying, this is exactly the moment for the specific, articulate, theological declaration: I am justified. Not because I have done well, but because the divine Judge has declared me righteous on the basis of the righteousness of the eternal Son. No charge you bring stands, because God is the one who justifies, and He does not reverse His verdicts.

Desire, for those in your pastoral care, the liberating joy that the correct understanding of justification produces in those who have been living under the oppression of the performance anxiety that a works-based understanding generates. The person who has been trying to maintain her acceptance before God through the quality of her daily performance needs to hear the specific, precise, pastorally targeted declaration: the acceptance is already complete, in Christ, on the basis of His righteousness, and your performance today does not change it. That truth, received and believed, does not produce moral complacency; it produces the specific kind of free, grateful, Spirit-empowered obedience that flows from the accepted child rather than the anxious slave.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Romans 3:21–28 in its full context by reading 1:18–3:28 as a single continuous argument, or at minimum reading 3:9–28. Note the “But now” of verse 21 as the hinge that turns the argument from universal condemnation to the manifestation of the divine saving righteousness. What is the specific rhetorical effect of Paul’s extended demonstration of universal guilt (1:18–3:20) on the impact of the justification declaration in 3:21–28? How does understanding the darkness of the condemnation heighten the light of the counter-verdict? And what specific elements of 3:21–28, the righteousness of God, the gift by grace, the redemption in Christ, the propitiation, the demonstration of God’s righteousness, correspond to the elements of the doctrine of justification developed in this lesson?
- Meditate on 2 Corinthians 5:21 as a personal statement rather than a doctrinal proposition. Take each clause and make it first-person and specific: (a) “He made Him who knew no sin”, what does the sinlessness of the One who bore my sin establish about the character and the cost of the exchange? (b) “to be sin on our behalf”, what was specifically charged to His account? (c) “so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”, what is specifically credited to my account? Write out the exchange in the most personal and specific terms you can: what exactly did He take from me, and what exactly did I receive from Him? Then bring the result of that meditation to God as a prayer of thanksgiving.
- Read Romans 8:1, 31–34 as a declaration of the permanent security of the justified sinner, and identify every potential accuser that Paul’s rhetorical questions are addressing. Who might bring a charge? What charges might they bring? And what is Paul’s answer to each? Then identify the specific accusations that most frequently trouble your own conscience, the charges that the accuser most consistently brings, the failures that most persistently generate the sense that the verdict might be in jeopardy. Bring each specific accusation to the specific answer of Romans 8:33–34: God is the one who justifies. Write down the accusation on one side and the gospel answer on the other, and commit the gospel answer to memory.
- Distinguish justification from sanctification in your own practical understanding by answering the following questions as clearly as possible: (1) Does my justification before God increase when I have a spiritually productive week and decrease when I have a spiritually unproductive one? (2) If the answer to (1) is no, what determines the quality of my standing before God if not my current moral performance? (3) What is

the relationship between the security of my justification and my motivation for pursuing holiness in sanctification? How does the security of the verdict (justification) strengthen rather than weaken the pursuit of holiness (sanctification)? Bring your answers to your study group and compare them with the lesson's account.

- Memorize Romans 5:1 and use it each morning for one month as the declaration of the specific legal and relational reality of your standing before God at the beginning of each day: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, I have peace with God through my Lord Jesus Christ." Note: not "I hope for peace with God" or "I am working toward peace with God" or "I will have peace with God when I have performed better." But: "I have peace with God", present tense, objective reality, grounded in the past declaration of the divine Judge and maintained by the permanence of the righteousness on which that declaration rests. Report to your study group at the month's end: what effect did the daily declaration have on your experience of the day, your approach to prayer, and your motivation for the works of love and obedience?

Key Texts: *Romans 3:21–28; 4:1–8; 5:1–2; 8:1, 30, 33–34; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Galatians 2:16; 3:13; Philippians 3:9; Isaiah 53:4–6; Hebrews 4:16*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how would you have described your standing before God, your acceptance, your rightness, your status in His sight? Would you have described it primarily in legal terms (a verdict that has been pronounced), in relational terms (a relationship that has been established), in experiential terms (a condition that you feel or perceive), or in moral terms (a status that reflects your current level of obedience)? How does the lesson's definition of justification as a forensic declaration, rather than a moral transformation, either confirm or challenge the way you have previously understood and described your standing before God?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 3:9–28. What is the scope of the condemnation that verses 9–20 describe (note the phrases “none righteous,” “every mouth,” “all the world,” “no flesh”)? What is the specific turning point in verse 21 (“But now apart from the Law...”), and what is now manifested? In verse 22, who is the provision for (note the twice-repeated “for all”)? In verse 24, what three soteriological terms appear together, and what does each contribute to the description of justification? In verse 25, what does “propitiation” describe, and what does the propitiation accomplish for the relationship between God’s justice and His role as justifier (v. 26)? In verse 28, what is the specific conclusion Paul draws?
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–21. What is the structure of the passage, what has God done (vv. 18–19), what has He given the apostles (v. 18b), and what are they therefore called to proclaim (vv. 19b–20)? In verse 19, what does “not counting their trespasses against them” describe, is this the imputation of sin to Christ, the non-imputation of sin to the believer, or both? In verse 21, what two exchanges are described, and what is the specific character of each participant in the exchange (“who knew no sin” describes whom, and “we” describes whom)? What does “become the righteousness of God in Him” mean, is it a moral transformation, a legal imputation, or something else?
- Read Romans 5:1–11. What three fruits of justification are described in verses 1–2 (peace..., access..., hope of...)? What is the relationship between the peace of verse 1 and the reconciliation of verse 10 (“reconciled to God through the death of His Son”), are they describing the same reality or different aspects of it? In verse 10, what is the description of the pre-justified person (“when we were...”) and what has changed through justification? What is the flow of the argument from tribulation (v. 3) through perseverance and proven character to hope (v. 4) to the love of God poured out through the Spirit (v. 5), how does the justified person’s hope sustain her through suffering?
- Read Romans 8:28–34. What is the basis for Paul’s confidence in verse 28 that “all things work together for good” for those who love God? In verse 30, what is the golden chain, and what does the past tense of “glorified” establish about the certainty of the chain’s final link? In verses 33–34, Paul asks “Who will bring a charge?” and “Who is the one who condemns?”, what is the specific answer Paul gives to each question, and how do the answers silence every potential accuser? What four things does Paul note about Christ in verse 34 (died, raised, right hand, intercedes) and how does each contribute to the security of the justified believer?
- Read Philippians 3:7–9. What is Paul describing when he lists his religious credentials in verses 5–6? Why does he call them “loss” and “rubbish” (v. 8) in comparison to knowing Christ? In verse 9, what is the specific

contrast Paul draws between two kinds of righteousness (“not having a righteousness of my own derived from... but that which is through faith in Christ...”) What is the specific character of each kind of righteousness, and what does the contrast establish about the exclusive basis of justification?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the crucial distinction in justification is between a forensic declaration (pronouncing righteous) and a moral transformation (making righteous), and that the Reformation’s insistence on the forensic character of justification was its most important contribution to the church’s understanding of salvation. Evaluate this claim. Is the distinction between forensic and transformative justification genuinely present in Paul’s usage of *dikaioō*? What specific exegetical evidence from Romans 3–5 supports the forensic interpretation? And why does the practical pastoral consequence of the distinction, the basis and the certainty of the justified person’s standing before God, matter so much?
- The lesson presents the double imputation (our sin to Christ, His righteousness to us) as the structural heart of the great exchange, and cites 2 Corinthians 5:21 as the single most comprehensive statement of the gospel in all of Scripture. Evaluate this claim about 5:21. Does the verse, in its context, actually support both directions of the imputation, the imputation of the believer’s sin to Christ and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer? What specific language in the verse supports each direction? And how does the context of verses 18–20 (the ministry of reconciliation and the non-counting of trespasses) clarify the meaning of the exchange in verse 21?
- The lesson argues that the active obedience of Christ, His lifelong fulfillment of the law’s positive demands, is a necessary component of the righteousness imputed to the believer in justification. Evaluate this argument. What is the specific problem that the active obedience is designed to address (what would the believer lack if only the passive obedience were credited to her account)? How does Romans 5:18–19’s language (“one act of righteousness” and “obedience of the One”) support the active obedience dimension? And how does the active/passive obedience distinction make the account of what the believer receives in justification more complete than if only the atonement (passive obedience) were credited?
- The lesson argues that justification is both complete (pronounced fully at the moment of faith) and permanent (incapable of reversal). What specific challenges might be raised against the permanence claim, texts that appear to suggest the possibility of losing one’s justified standing (Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–29; Galatians 5:4)? How does the lesson’s account of justification as a forensic declaration based on Christ’s imputed righteousness (rather than the believer’s own moral performance) address these apparent challenges? And how does Romans 8:33–34’s rhetorical structure (“Who will bring a charge...? God is the one who justifies”) establish the permanence of the verdict against every potential counter-argument?
- The lesson identifies three distinct aspects of justification: its basis (Christ’s righteousness), its instrument (faith alone), and its ground (grace alone). How do these three aspects relate to each other in the full structure of the doctrine? What would be lost if any one of the three were absent, distorted, or supplemented? Specifically: what happens to the doctrine if (a) another basis is added to Christ’s righteousness (e.g., the believer’s works); (b) another instrument is added to faith (e.g., baptism, love, cooperation with grace); or (c) the ground is shifted from grace alone to grace plus merit?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the forensic character of justification (a verdict, not a process) has enormous practical pastoral significance because it grounds the certainty of the justified person’s standing in the unchanging character of the verdict rather than in the fluctuating quality of her moral performance. Does

this actually describe your experience of your standing before God? Do you live with the settled assurance of a person who has received an irrevocable verdict, or do you experience your standing before God as a condition that rises and falls with your daily spiritual performance? What specific thought patterns, emotional habits, or theological misunderstandings contribute to the latter experience, and what specific aspects of the lesson's account of justification address them?

- The lesson presents the fruits of justification, peace with God, access to grace, and the hope of glory (Romans 5:1–2), as present, objective realities, not aspirational goals. Evaluate your own experience of each: Do you experience the peace with God that justification produces as a present reality, or primarily as a hoped-for future condition? Do you approach the throne of grace with the confidence of one who has been declared righteous (Hebrews 4:16), or with the dread of one who is not sure whether the approach is welcome? And does the hope of glory function in your life as a present possession that shapes your endurance of present difficulties, or as a distant prospect that has little practical bearing on today?
- The lesson distinguishes the justified life (lived from the security of the verdict) from both antinomian complacency (treating the verdict as a license for moral indolence) and legalist anxiety (treating the verdict as conditional on moral performance). Which of these two distortions most characterizes your own functional approach to the Christian life? If complacency: what specific aspect of the doctrine of justification, the holiness of God whose law Christ fulfilled on your behalf, the costliness of the exchange that secured your verdict, the purpose of your new creation (Ephesians 2:10), is most needed to address the complacency? If anxiety: what specific aspect, the forensic completeness of the verdict, its permanence, the sufficiency of Christ's righteousness as its basis, is most needed to address the anxiety?
- The lesson moves the series into its sixth unit, treating justification as "the article by which the church stands or falls." Survey the theological environment in which you minister or bear witness. What are the most common distortions of justification that you encounter, the most common ways in which the basis (Christ's righteousness) is supplemented, the instrument (faith alone) is compromised, or the ground (grace alone) is corrupted? Name them specifically, explain what they get wrong, and articulate how the biblical and Reformation account of justification corrects each distortion. This exercise is not merely academic; it is the preparation for the pastoral and apologetic engagement with the distortions that are actually present in your context.

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading Romans 3:9–28 slowly, attending to both the accumulating weight of the condemnation (vv. 9–20) and the specific relief of the counter-verdict (vv. 21–28). Read the condemnation section as the honest account of your own condition before God apart from Christ, every mouth closed, every human defense silenced, all the world accountable before the divine tribunal. Let the weight of that account press upon you not to produce despair but to prepare the ground for the full reception of the counter-verdict that follows. Then read verses 21–28 as the specific, precise, legally authoritative declaration of the God who has provided what the law demanded: the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe, given as a gift, by grace, through redemption.

Pray 2 Corinthians 5:21 in the first person, as the personal declaration of your own standing before God. Not “God made Christ to be sin for sinners” but “You made Him who knew no sin to be sin for me, for my specific sins, named and known and charged to His account at the cross, so that I might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Let the exchange be as specific and as personal as it actually is: the sin He bore is my sin, every item of it; the righteousness I now wear before the divine tribunal is His righteousness, every dimension of it. Receive the exchange as the completed, irrevocable, sufficient transaction that it is, not as a theological formula to be recited but as the specific, personal, identity-defining truth of who you are before God right now.

Pray Romans 8:33–34 as a declaration of permanent security in the face of whatever accusations your conscience, the accuser of the brethren, or your own memory of past failures is most likely to bring against you. Name the specific accusations: bring them into the open before God, one by one, with the specific honesty that genuine confession requires (Lesson 13). And then answer each specific accusation with the specific answer: God is the one who justifies. The specific sin you are naming has been charged to Christ. The specific condemnation it would have earned has been borne at the cross. The specific righteousness that replaces it has been credited to your account. “No condemnation”, not for that specific sin, not for any of them.

Pray for those in your congregation who are living under the oppression of performance-based Christianity, who are trying to maintain their acceptance before God through the quality of their daily spiritual life, whose assurance rises and falls with the consistency of their devotions, whose approach to God is colored by the dread of the judge rather than the confidence of the child. Ask the Spirit to do in them the work that only the Spirit can do: to bring the specific, precise, pastorally targeted truth of Romans 5:1 to bear on their specific, personal, named anxiety, that they have peace with God, that the peace is present and objective and permanent, and that the verdict of the divine Judge cannot be reversed by the quality of their daily performance.

Close with a declaration of Romans 5:1–2 as the corporate statement of the justified community's present standing and future hope: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.” Speak it as those who mean it, who have received the verdict, who stand in the grace, who exult in the hope. Let the doxological exultation that the justified life makes possible be the tone of the prayer's close: not the anxious petition of those who are unsure of their standing, but the confident, grateful, hope-filled worship of those who have been declared righteous in the sight of the eternal God, on the basis of the righteousness of the eternal Son, by the gift of the eternal Spirit.

“Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”

Romans 8:33–34, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 3:21–28; 4:1–8; 5:1–2; 8:1, 30, 33–34; 2 Corinthians 5:18–21; Galatians 2:16; 3:13; Philippians 3:7–9; Isaiah 53:4–6; Hebrews 4:16; John 19:30

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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