

JUSTIFICATION

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, Celia is shocked upon learning that her friend Shug thinks God loves her even if she does nothing for Him, like go to church, sing in the choir, or feed the preacher. Shug replies, "But if God love me, Celia, I don't have to do all that. Unless I want to" (176).

That's what the New Testament doctrine of justification is all about: We don't "have to" do anything to make God love us. But having accepted the fact that He loves us unconditionally, we will doubtless "want to" do what we can for Him, not to earn our acceptance but in gratitude for His mercy and grace.

The Christian life is grounded in the grace of God and is based in our union with Christ. Justification is the objective side of this relationship. Although the idea is expressed in a limited way in the Old Testament and also in the non-Pauline writings of the New Testament, it's the apostle Paul who develops the concept most thoroughly.

According to Paul, justification is received by faith and not by works (Rom. 3:23-24; 5:1). Accomplished by the sacrifice of Christ, it is our free, unconditional, and unmerited acceptance by God "who justifies the wicked" (Rom. 4:5). "Justification," a term from the judicial sphere, means "acquittal." That we are justified means that our guilt has been removed and our broken relationship with God has been restored by God's act of free grace and forgiveness.

Sometimes this doctrine is expressed in the abbreviated form "justification by faith." This would be a distortion if it were taken to mean that faith is a human act by which we earn our justification. A fuller and more accurate expression is Paul's statement in Eph. 2:8-9: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith." To nail down the point even further, the apostle then adds, "This is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." God's gift of justification is in no way dependent upon our works or our worthiness. Our reception of this gift depends only on our faith. But we cannot merit justification, even by

our faith. Faith is simply the proper response of trust and acceptance of God's unconditional acceptance of us. Justification is "the acceptance of acceptance." We are justified when, in simple faith, we accept the fact that we are accepted by God on the basis of the atonement made by His only Son.

*In my hand no price I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.*

Although Martin Luther called justification the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls, the entire Christian understanding of salvation cannot be reduced to this single truth. Nevertheless, this doctrine has enormous relevance for our day. Consider the many ways in which we try to justify ourselves, to make our lives meaningful and acceptable, if not by "good works," at least by hard work or by acts that we think will win the approval of others. The desire for success and the quest for acceptance in our competitive society often borders on idolatry. We become terrified by the prospect of failing to win the love and recognition that we crave. This attempt to gain the acceptance of others can easily transfer into our religious lives so that we try to become pleasing to God by our own efforts.

Justification is the word the New Testament uses to assure us that, with God, we are not "nobodies," but "somebodies." We are somebodies because the God who is our Creator and Redeemer says we are, because we are made in God's image and Jesus died for us.

In Rom. 4 Paul uses Abraham as the classic example of one who was justified by grace through faith. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 3). He was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (v. 21). Because of such faith, Abraham became the father of all of us "to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (v. 24).

Shug was correct. If God loves us, we don't have to do anything—unless we want to. But we want to. Don't we?



See also

Conversion
Regeneration
Adoption