

JUSTIFICATION MADE PLAIN

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”—Romans 3:24

Now, what is the meaning of justification? Divines will puzzle you, if you ask them. I must try the best I can to make justification plain and simple, even to the comprehension of a child. There is not such a thing as justification to be had on earth for mortal men, except in one way. Justification, you know, is a forensic^[1] term: it is employed always in a legal sense. A prisoner is brought to the bar of justice to be tried. There is only one way whereby that prisoner can be justified, that is, he must be found not guilty. And if he is found not guilty, then he is justified, that is, he is proved to be a just man. If you find that man guilty, you cannot justify him. The Queen may *pardon* him, but she cannot *justify* him. The deed is not a justifiable one, if he were guilty concerning it, and he cannot be justified on account of it. He may be pardoned, but not royalty itself can ever wash that man’s character. He is as much a real criminal when he is pardoned as before. There is no means among men of justifying a man of an accusation which is laid against him, except by his being proved not guilty. Now, the wonder of wonders is, that we are proved guilty, and yet we are justified: the verdict has been brought in against us—guilty—and yet notwithstanding, we are justified. Can any earthly tribunal^[2] do that? No, it remained for the ransom of Christ to effect that which is an impossibility to any tribunal upon earth. We are all guilty. Read the 23rd verse, immediately preceding the text: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” There the verdict of guilty is brought in, and yet we are immediately afterwards said to be justified freely by his grace.

Now, allow me to explain the way whereby God justifies a sinner. I am about to suppose an impossible case. A prisoner has been tried and condemned to death. He is a guilty man; he cannot be justified because he is guilty. But now, suppose for a moment that such a thing as this could happen—that some second party could be introduced, who could take all that man’s guilt upon himself, who could change places with that man, and by some mysterious process, which of course is impossible with men, become that man or take that man’s character upon himself. He, the righteous man, putting the rebel in his place and making the rebel a righteous man—we cannot do that in our courts! If I were to go before a judge, and he should agree that I should be committed for a year’s imprisonment, instead of some wretch who was condemned yesterday to a year’s imprisonment, I could not take his guilt. I might take his punishment, but not his guilt. Now, what flesh and blood cannot do, that Jesus Christ by his redemption did. Here I stand, the sinner. I mention myself as the representative of you all I am condemned to die God says, “I will condemn that man, I must, I will — I will punish him.” Christ comes in, puts me aside, and stands himself in my stead. When the plea is demanded, Christ says, “Guilty;” takes my guilt to be his own guilt. When the punishment is to be executed, forth comes Christ. “Punish me,” he says; “I have put my righteousness on that man, and I have taken that man’s

sins on me. Father, punish me, and consider that man to have been me. Let him reign in heaven; let me suffer misery. Let me endure his curse, and let him receive my blessing." This marvelous doctrine of the changing of places of Christ with poor sinners is a doctrine of revelation, for it never could have been conceived by nature. Let me, lest I should have made a mistake, explain myself again. The way whereby God saves a sinner is not, as some say, by passing over the penalty. No; the penalty has been all paid. It is the putting of another person in the rebel's place. The rebel must die. God says he must. Christ says, "I will be substitute for the rebel. The rebel shall take my place; I will take his." God consents to it. No earthly monarch could have power to consent to such a change. But the God of heaven had a right to do as he pleased. In his infinite mercy he consented to the arrangement. "Son of my love," said he, "you must stand in the sinner's place; you must suffer what he ought to have suffered, you must be accounted guilty, just as he was accounted guilty, and then I will look upon the sinner in another light. I will look at him as if he were Christ; I will accept him as if he were my only-begotten Son, full of grace and truth. I will give him a crown in heaven, and I will take him to my heart for ever and ever." This is the way we are saved. "Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."

And now, let me further go on to explain some of the characteristics of this justification. As soon as a repenting sinner is justified, remember, he is justified for all his sins. Here stands a man all guilty. The moment he believes in Christ, his pardon at once he receives; and his sins are no longer his. They are cast into the depths of the sea. They were laid upon the shoulders of Christ, and they are gone. The man stands a guiltless man in the sight of God, accepted in the beloved. "What!" say you, "do you mean that literally?" Yes, I do. That is the doctrine of justification by faith. Man ceases to be regarded by divine justice as a guilty being; the moment he believes on Christ, his guilt is all taken away. But I am going a step further. The moment the man believes in Christ, he ceases to be guilty in God's esteem; but what is more, he becomes righteous, he becomes meritorious, for in the moment when Christ takes his sins, he takes Christ's righteousness; so that when God looks upon the sinner who but an hour ago was dead in sins, he looks upon him with as much love and affection as he ever looked upon his Son. He himself has said it: "As the Father loved me, so have I loved you." He loves us as much as his Father loved him. Can you believe such a doctrine as that? Does it not pass all thought? Well, it is a doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine whereby we must hope to be saved. Can I to any unenlightened person illustrate this thought better? I will give him the parable we have given to us in the prophets—the parable of Joshua the high-priest. Joshua comes in, clothed in filthy garments; those filthy garments representing his sins. Take away the filthy garments; that is *pardon*. Put a miter on his head; clothe him in royal raiment; make him rich and fair; that is *justification*. But where do these garments come from? And where do those rags go to? Why the rags that Joshua had on go to Christ, and the garments put on Joshua are the garments that Christ wore. The sinner and Christ do just what Jonathan and David did.

Jonathan put his robes on David, David gave Jonathan his garments. So Christ takes our sins, we take Christ's righteousness, and it is by a glorious substitution and interchange of places that sinners go free and are justified by his grace.

“But,” says one, “No one is justified like that till he dies.” Believe me, he is.

“The moment a sinner believes and trusts in his crucified God,
His pardon at once he receives; Salvation in full, through his blood.”

If that young man over there has really believed in Christ this morning, realizing by a spiritual experience what I have attempted to describe, he is as much justified in God’s sight now as he will be when he stands before the throne. Not the glorified spirits above are more acceptable to God than the poor man below who is once justified by grace. It is a perfect washing, it is perfect pardon, perfect imputation. We are fully, freely, and wholly accepted through Christ our Lord.

Just one more word here, and then I will leave this matter of justification. Those who are once justified are justified *irreversibly*. As soon as a sinner takes Christ’s place, and Christ takes the sinner’s place, there is no fear of a second change. If Christ has once paid the debt, the debt is paid; and it will never be asked for again. If you are pardoned, you are pardoned once for ever. God does not give man a free pardon under his own sign-manual,^[3] and then afterwards retract it and punish man: that be far from God so to do. He says, “I have punished Christ; you may go free.” And after that, we may “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” that “being justified by faith we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And now I hear one cry, “That is an extraordinary doctrine.” Well, so some may think; but let me say to you, it is a doctrine professed by *all* Protestant churches, *though they may not preach it*. It is the doctrine of the Church of England, it is the doctrine of Luther, it is the doctrine of the Presbyterian Church: it is professedly the doctrine of all Christian churches. And if it seems strange in your ears, it is because your ears are estranged, and not because the doctrine is a strange one. It is the doctrine of holy writ that none can condemn whom God justifies and that none can accuse those for whom Christ hath died; for they are totally free from sin. So that, as one of the prophets has it, God sees no sin in Jacob or iniquity in Israel. In the moment they believe their sins being imputed to Christ, they cease to be theirs, and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to them and accounted theirs, so that they are accepted.

Excerpted from *Justification by Grace*, a Sermon Delivered on Sabbath Morning,
April 5, 1857, at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens

¹ **forensic** – relating to courts of law.

² **tribunal** – the bench on which a judge sits to administer justice.

³ **sign-manual** – signature, especially of a monarch, at the top of a royal decree.