

Justification: Declared Righteous or Not at All

The doctrine of justification is not one doctrine among many. It is the doctrine. It is the article upon which the church stands or falls, as the Reformers rightly insisted—not because it is merely central, but because it is foundational. And the foundation is this: **Justification is a forensic declaration, not a process of transformation.**

The Verdict, Not the Process

In Romans 3:26, Paul says God is both *just and the justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus. That statement only makes sense if justification is legal. In fact, the very word *justification* (δικαίωσις) is drawn from the courtroom. It refers not to the making of someone righteous, but to the **declaration** that someone is righteous.

This is the first point that must be made, and made forcefully: **Justification is a verdict. Not a change of nature. Not a progress report. A verdict.** It is the heavenly Judge declaring the sinner righteous **based solely on the imputed righteousness of Another.**

To confuse justification with sanctification—or to make it dependent on sanctification—is to collapse grace into law. It is to smuggle works in through the back door by calling them "evidence." It is to declare the gavel still hanging in midair, awaiting performance, rather than already dropped with thunderous finality at the cross.

Imputation: Declared—and Treated—as Righteous

When we speak of justification as forensic, we mean it is a **declaration**—a legal verdict rendered in the courtroom of heaven. But that declaration is not fictional. It is not legal theater. It is not a divine wink.

It is a declaration with real consequence: not only are we declared righteous—we are treated as righteous.

This is the often-overlooked implication of imputation that cannot be missed. Christ didn't become sin ontologically on the cross. He wasn't transformed into a sinner. He was reckoned as one. Counted as one. Treated as one.

"God made him who knew no sin to *be sin* for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor 5:21)

He was not made sinful. He was **made sin** by reckoning. And then the Father poured out wrath. Why? Because though Christ was not a sinner in Himself, **He was treated as one—because our sin had been truly imputed to Him.**

So too, justification is not God pretending we are righteous. It is God reckoning us righteous in Christ—and then **treating us accordingly**.

This is not semantics. This is everything.

Justification is not only the declaration of a new status—it is the beginning of a new standing.

We are not only “as if we had never sinned,” but more than that—**as if we had always obeyed**. In Christ, we are treated as those who have perfectly fulfilled the law. And this is not postponed until glorification. This is the current standing of every believer.

This is why Paul can say:

“There is therefore *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 8:1)

“Since we have been justified by faith, *we have peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 5:1)

The word “peace” is not a feeling—it’s a status. Hostility has ended. Fellowship has begun. Because the One who sees the end from the beginning already treats you in the present according to the righteousness of the Son.

You are not treated as you are. You are treated as Christ is.

This is the **starting point** of Christianity—not the goal.

It is not the reward for transformation. It is the reality that fuels it.

If you reverse that order—if you try to become what you are not to receive a verdict that is not yet—you’ve rejected the gospel. You are not justified by transformation. You are transformed *because* you have been justified.

You cannot even begin to live the Christian life—to *pray, to worship, to endure, to repent, to rejoice*—unless you believe that God already counts and treats you as righteous in Christ. That’s what walking by faith means.

You walk knowing that though you are not yet glorified, **God is treating you now as if you already are**.

That’s justification. And that’s the freedom the enemy wants to rob from you by blending categories, confusing covenants, and shifting the burden from Christ’s shoulders back onto your own.

Faith Alone—Not as Work but as Trust in the Work

Faith is not a contribution. It is not a virtue that earns. It is not a condition that satisfies. Faith is the hand that receives. It looks away from self entirely. It is not the reason God justifies—it is the means by which we are united to the reason: **Christ alone.**

This is why Paul says:

“We hold that one is justified by faith *apart from works* of the law.” (Rom 3:28)

“If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” (Rom 11:6)

To try and make faith include works is to destroy both. Grace becomes wage. Justification becomes sanctification. And the gospel becomes just another form of law.

Romans 6 and the Christian Life: The Reckoning That Frees

This is not just theology for a seminary. This is oxygen for the Christian life.

Romans 6 doesn't begin with behavior. It begins with *reckoning*:

“So you also must *consider* yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 6:11)

That word *consider* (λογίζεσθε) is the same word Paul uses for *impute*—it is a call to live in light of what has already been declared.

Paul doesn't tell the Christian to become dead to sin. He tells them to *reckon* it so. **To walk by faith in what has already been counted true.**

How can you live as one who is dead to sin if you do not believe that God already sees and treats you that way? How can you obey the imperatives of Scripture if you have not grasped the indicatives that anchor them?

Justification is not a footnote to sanctification. It is its fuel.

Polemics: Blurred Lines Are Damned Lines

Justification is not the whole story of salvation. Sanctification is real. Glorification is coming. The Spirit truly indwells and transforms. The Christian life is not static. But we must be clear: **justification is not transformation**, and it must never be confused with it.

There is an unbreakable union between justification and sanctification—but **not an indistinguishable one**. They are united in the order of salvation, not merged in their definitions. To blend them is to lose both.

The enemy of justification by faith alone is not only legalism but **confusion**. When people say “you’re justified, but if you don’t do X, you’ll lose it,” they have denied justification.

When people say “you’re declared righteous, but the real righteousness is your growth in holiness,” they have denied justification.

When people say “faith and works together justify,” they are preaching another gospel. Let them be accursed (Gal 1:8–9).

The most dangerous heresies today are not overt. They are the ones that **blur lines**. That redefine justification as transformation. That recast the gospel as a process. That subtly reintroduce sight into what must be walked by faith.

We must be clear: **Justification is not progressive. It is perfect.** You are not *becoming* justified. You are not *staying* justified. You are either justified or you are not. And that verdict hinges on whether you are in Christ—through faith alone.

So What?

You will not make it to heaven because you tried. You will not make it because you changed. You will make it because Christ was tried in your place. Because Christ was righteous in your place. Because Christ was condemned in your place.

The Christian life does not begin with transformation. It begins with declaration.

And if you miss this—you miss everything.

So hold fast. Reckon it so. Rest your full weight on the finished work of Christ. And live not to become righteous—but because you already are.