

Biblical Keyword - Justification

Justification is the core of conversion. What is it? How is one getting to know that he is justified?

Keyword	Timeline	Description
conviction	Process	Knowing his sinful heart and lifestyle
calling	Moment	Words of Scripture or the sermon speak
regeneration	Moment	Receiving of new spiritual life
faith	Moment/Process	Trusting in Jesus as the only Savior of sin
justification	Moment	Acquitted from sin before God and right to eternal life
conversion	Process	Turn from sin and turn to God
sanctification	Process	Process of renewing of a man
glorification	Process	Man is made sinless and perfectly glorifying God

The term

What is justification? It is an image that comes from court. A judge acquits or convicts a suspect. He places his deeds next the law. Has he transgressed it or is he innocent? In the first case, he is convicted and receives punishment. However, if a suspect is innocent, he is *declared just*.¹ He is set free.

Spiritual Justification

How does spiritual justification work? Simply said, a sinner is acquitted of guilt and punishment. He returns to a right relationship with God. He receives the right to eternal life. He may enter heaven. In justification, we see elements of an earthly court. How is that related to each other?

Persons in Justification

Who is the judge of every sinner? That is God. The letter to the Romans says, "It is God that justifieth" (Rom. 8:33). Which of the three Persons is it speaking of? When we read all of Romans 8, it refers to the Father. Also, in the epistle of Peter, we see that the Father judges, "And if ye call on the *Father*, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work..." (1 Pet. 1:17). Thus, it is the Father who convicts or acquits a sinner.

Who then is the lawyer for sinners? That is the Lord Jesus. The Son of God. How do we know this? John writes, "And if any man sin, we have an *advocate* with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). An advocate is modern English a lawyer. How in this case is Jesus be able to be honest? Because the sinner has sinned and deserves punishment. The reason? This punishment has been paid. Jesus underwent death to pay for the sins of His children. Based on this foundation, a sinner can be justified (Rom. 4:25). Therefore, Jesus is able to plead the Father to set a sinner free. Not because he would be innocent, but because this payment is accounted to this human being.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit? Before justification, He convicts of sin (John 16:8). Further, He reveals to one that he is a child of God (Rom. 8:16). In other words, He gives the assurance of faith. This is based on what Scripture says about a righteous person.

Who is the suspect? We all are! Actually, God places us each Sunday before His tribunal when we hear the law read. When we read the Bible, it says that we are guilty, "The soul that sinneth, it shall

¹ Sometimes, in Dutch is spoken of "rechtvaardigmaking", which literally translates "made righteous." This term is an unfitting, because the person will never *become just* in himself. He is not made righteous. He is only *declared* righteous. I will use in this article the term justification or declared just.

die” (Ezek. 18:4). In another place, it says, “He that believeth not *is condemned already*” (John 3:18). The way we are born, we are all condemned. What is, however, the biggest issue? That we do not feel it. We live as if nothing will happen. Gladly, God does work in the heart of sinners. Then one will feel himself guilty. The sinner will ask this question: how do I become right with God?

Obtain Justification

How does one obtain this justification? Is that because he does something for it? No. One only receives it by faith. This is the instrument to justify a person. In justification there is no growth. That is only the case with sanctification. With the latter, one is more and more renewed, but never made perfect.² When it comes to justification, you are either justified or not. There is no possibility in between. Either you are acquitted from eternal damnation, or you are still under the wrath of God. Either you are safe behind the blood of the Lord Jesus, or you will not be able to stand before God. How will we feel after our death when we stand before God? Without the blood of Jesus, God must eternally damn us! That is an utterly serious matter! We should make haste if that is the case. We should understand, however, that the things written above are only a *theological representation* of justification. You do not need such experience to be saved or to be sure of your justification before God. That is one of the wrong perspectives of justification that we will consider now.

Wrong Perspectives

Sadly, there are a number of incorrect perspectives on justification. This is certainly the case with the Roman Catholic Church. The sinner himself has to supplement to his justification. He needs to do good works to enter heaven. That is not what we as reformed people believe. However, in our circles we do have views on justification that are incorrect either. What then? The more known fourfold justification. Those that advocate this make a difference between justification *before* faith and justification *by* faith. To be honest, this perspective is quite confusing and complex. It misses the simplicity of the Biblical justification and keeps doubting believers unsure about their state. What does this perspective stand for? That is the following:

Justification	<i>Part</i>	<i>Proof text</i>
Before faith	From eternity in God’s decree	2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8
	In the resurrection of Jesus Christ	Rom. 4:25
By faith	Actual justification	Rom. 5:1; Rom. 4:6-8
	In the court of conscience	Gal. 4:1-2; Isa. 54:9; Rom. 8:1

The first is *the justification from eternity*. In the counsel of peace, God the Father has already declared the sinner just. Christ gave Himself as Surety for the elect. The Father accepted this promise to forgive the elect. By this, God’s justice has been satisfied, and the acquittal is settled. Is this view correct? Sadly, no. It is quite problematic when a sinner is both acquitted *and* still under God’s wrath (Eph. 2:3). It is either the one or the other. Both cannot be true. The Westminster Divines argue against this, “God did, from all eternity, *decree* to justify all the elect ... nevertheless, they *are not justified, until* the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them”³ They say that God decreed to justify them. Still the elect are not justified until they believe in the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, none of the ‘proof’ texts are about justification from eternity. They do speak about election in Christ (Eph. 1:4), the suretyship of Christ (Rev. 13:8), and the continual application of this reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19). When we analyze the last text, some would say that God has reconciled the world with Himself before creation. Why? Because it says, “To wit, that God *was* in Christ, *reconciling* the world *unto himself*, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Cor. 5:19). I have two comments on this argument. In the first place, the text does not add “before the foundation of the

² Westminster Larger Catechism, question 75, “Sanctification is a work of God’s grace ... as they more and more die unto sin and rise unto newness of life.” See also question 77 that shows the difference between justification and sanctification.

³ Westminster Confession of Faith, XI.4

world,” as in other places. Secondly, the part “was ... reconciling” is not a completed case. It does, however, emphasize the continuation of this action. See my footnote below for a more thorough explanation.⁴

The second type of justification is *in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*. The proof given is, “[Jesus] ... was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). “Do you see,” they say, “that the elect are justified in the resurrection?” However, this is just not the case. It says, namely, “... *for* our justification.” You could translate this as “resurrected *as foundation for* our justification.”⁵ What then is its meaning? The foundation or payment of justification lies in the resurrection, but this is not justification itself. One is still not righteous before God.

The third part is the *actual justification by faith*. Paul writes, “Therefore *being justified by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). This is indeed a Biblical perspective. True faith is necessary to be justified. Sadly, we see that wrong ideas have risen from conventicles, with all its good intentions. At this very moment on the path of faith, one has a covered guilt, but not a forgiven guilt. By faith in the promise, the sinner does no longer *see* his guilt, but that guilt *still exists*. It is sad to say that this is not Biblical. How do we know? It can be simply refuted with Psalm 32, “Blessed is he whose transgression *is forgiven*, whose sin *is covered*” (Ps. 32:1). In this verse, forgiveness and covering of sin are equated. When someone comes by faith to Christ, at the same time he is righteous before God. This might differ from feeling sure about one’s justification. This is what we sometimes call assurance.

The last phase, it is the *conscious justification in the court of conscience*. The sinner is fully aware that he is justified in the court of conscience. God places him spiritually before His judgment seat. The Holy Spirit convicts him of sin, righteousness and judgment. As an utterly lost sinner, he agrees with the righteousness of God. God has to damn him eternally. That is just and right. He feels that his life is cut off. Then, however, the Lord Jesus comes in between as a lawyer and pleads for this man. The Father forgives the sinner on the basis of His sacrifice. The Holy Spirit seals that acquittal to his heart. In this way the sinner is set free.⁶ Where does this perspective come from? Is it from Scripture? The only passage that looks like it is the vision of high priest Joshua (Zech. 3). He stands before the LORD in filthy clothes. Satan accuses him. God gives him new clothes. The Lord Jesus stands by as the Angel of the LORD. Is this then the basis for this view? No, because this is not a ‘court of conscience experience.’ The annotations on the Dutch Statenvertaling argue that it is about Joshua’s role in the temple service. Does this perspective then come from our confessions? No, we find it nowhere. Still, some argue that there is a difference between Lord’s Day 7 and 23 in the Heidelberg Catechism. However, Lord’s Day 7 speaks of faith, and Lord’s Day 23 of its profit. Where does this view ultimately come from? From Jean de Labadie. He argued that one has to experience this kind of justification by faith. A sinner must be willing to go lost forever. Without it, he cannot be saved.⁷ In opposition to this, Wilhelmus à Brakel turned from De Labadie and his followers. It still takes its root in church life. Because in the nineteenth century this ‘court of conscience experience’ is introduced again in the conventicles. From there it enters gradually the churches and preaching. What should we think of it? It can indeed be true that some will experience justification in this manner. Still, it can and may never become a rule that each true Christian must experience it in order to be justified. Such a doctrinal theory can even be proven Biblically wrong. Why? A sinner is already justified by faith

⁴ The phrase “was...reconciling” is a periphrastic construction. An indirect manner of speaking. The verb “was” is in the imperfect tense and participle “reconciling” is the present tense. The combination of the two makes an imperfect, which is not always a completed action. For instance, in John is written, “In the beginning *was* the Word” (John 1:1). That was true for the past, but is still true for the moment of writing. If reconciliation was a completed matter, it had to be a construction of a perfect or aorist (one time event in the past). Then was written: God “has reconciled the world” or “reconciled the world.” Now, the phrase “was reconciling” shows the continual aspect of reconciliation, till the end of the world.

⁵ In the original *διὰ* with an accusative is used. Then *διὰ* shows the foundation or cause of what is said in the word following. It does not say “resurrected with the result of justification.” Then justification would a direct consequence of the resurrection. It is only a found, basis or foundation for the justification that happens by faith.

⁶ Kersten, G.H., *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume II, 423-424.

⁷ <http://www.afwachtenofverwachten.nl/lw-havanrijn.htm>

(Rom. 5:1). This ‘believer’ is according to this theory justified again, even though he would find himself a sinner in his experience. The question is: How can one be a sinner before God if he is already justified by faith? That is illogical and confusing. Only some who is an actual sinner can be justified before God.⁸ Besides this, it keeps the weak in faith in doubt and makes them passive. They will ask themselves: Is what they have experienced truly from God? Are they actually saved? Do they not have to wait for a special experience and revelation? However, the Biblical view on this doctrine sheds a different light. It gives spiritual freedom: I do not need a ‘court of conscience experience’ in order to be saved. What is needed to have this realization? Besides one’s justification by faith, he can have the *knowledge* that he is saved. We call this the assurance of faith or feeling. Then, one knows that he is justified before God. How does one experience this matter?

Experience of Justification

How does one realize that he is justified? This begins by faith. It is to flee and come to the Lord Jesus with all his sins. This is necessary. Nevertheless, God does not use a vision or particular revelation to justify, or assure a person. Our fathers of Dort reject this, and call it an introduction of the doubts of the Roman Catholic Church.⁹ The question then is: how does a believer know he is justified? Let us mention a number of marks that the Bible gives concerning this theme.

In the first place, a sinner gets *hope*. That is the opposite of despair. What kind of hope is this? Hope of eternal life. That I am able to receive salvation and eternal life. It is like an inheritance. At the same time I do no longer find eternal life in and of myself. That is a hopeless route. It is only found in God. How do I know this? God has promised it (Tit. 3:7). This fixed foundation in the Bible gives me hope. I *can* be saved. How do we know that hope is a fruit of justification? We find this in the letter to Titus, “That being justified ... we should be made heirs according to the *hope of eternal life*” (Tit. 3:7). The annotations of the Dutch Statenvertaling give this explanation, “That is, of eternal life, on which the believers hope, as in Titus 1:2.” Do you know this hope? Is this hope founded in God? If that is not the case, you are not justified. Seek then the hope for your salvation in God. If you know this, it is one of the marks that you have received salvation.

The second mark is that I realize that *I am able to obtain redemption*. I am only able find it in the Lord Jesus. Paul writes about this, “*Being justified* freely by his grace through the *redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 3:24). Then I need the blood of Christ (Rom. 5:9). He has shed this on the cross for the atonement of sins. In sermons, I hear of this redemption (Rom. 3:25). By the preaching of the law and gospel, I will seek my salvation in the Savior alone (Gal. 3:24). The result is a deep joy that the world cannot give (Gal. 5:22, Ps. 32). Do you and I realize that there is salvation available? No, not in yourself, but in Christ? This is essential for salvation and a sure mark of justification. Not your tears, prayers, or listening to sermons can save you. Only the blood of the Lord Jesus is able to do this. Has this ever given you joy in your heart? Then you will never forget it.

A third experience as a result of justification is *peace*. From that moment and onward there is peace with God. He is no longer angry with me. How do we know? We find the answer in Romans, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have *peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). Nonetheless, there might be a difference between having peace with God and its experience. The latter is the assurance. What does then happen? Then I *feel* that the burden of my sin in my conscience is silenced. I am no longer accused, because the enmity between God and my soul has been taken away. The annotations of the Dutch Statenvertaling write that this peace is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, “Namely by the Holy Spirit, Rom. 14:17; coming from the assurance that we have peace with God.”¹⁰ Has the burden of sin already been taken away from your conscience? Are you able to say, in all honesty, that you experience peace and rest in your heart? Is that only because of the sacrifice of the

⁸ God justified the sinner, but not a righteous person or believer, “But to him that ... believeth on him [God] that *justifieth the ungodly*, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Read also what Theodore VanderGroe writes about justification.

⁹ Canons of Dort, Head 5, paragraph 10 and rejection 5.

¹⁰ Gal. 5:22. Annotations on the word “joy.”

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Lord Jesus? Then indeed Gods wrath is appeased.

We could mention many more marks that one experiences when he is justified, but that goes too far. Let us lay our lives next to the marks mentioned above. When you are truly justified, it is noticeable in your heart and life. Then you are journeying to the country of eternal rest and peace. One day you will see and embrace your Savior to never let Him go. Is that your desire? You will receive it.