

Defining Words of Faith 2: *Justification*

by
The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

September 18, 2022

Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his

blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Luke 18:9-14

⁹Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

You could say that this week and next comprise a mini-series within the longer fall contemplation of the Defining Words of Faith. Today we consider our biblical, theological understanding of *Justification* – the declaration of who we are in the presence of God. Next week we will probe the significance of *Sanctification* – the process of growing in faithfulness and holiness in response to God’s saving grace. These two words go hand in hand: One the affirmation of what God has done for us and the other how we respond by the way we live into our Christian calling. However, even as partner theological concepts in the divine-human relationship, these words – *Justification* and *Sanctification* are big enough, important enough to our faith, that each merits the consideration of a full sermon.

We began this Defining Words of Faith series last Sunday with *Incarnation* – how God entered human existence in the person of Jesus, and calls us into incarnate community. And we will move through even more familiar words like: *Hope*, *Grace* and *Love* – word that sometimes lose their theological import precisely because of their common usage. But before we get to that more familiar religious language, probing the matters of *Justification* and *Sanctification* poses a challenge because these words are not used very often. We don’t toss them out in everyday conversation; we don’t get out of bed in the morning, stretch and say, “Thank God I am justified!” or put Sanctification on the To-Do list of the day. Yet these words undergird the very foundation of what it means to be a Child of God, to claim Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God, and to respond to God’s claim upon our lives for the living of our days.

So let’s begin with *Justification* which is the focus of both of our scripture readings today. While *Justification* does not pop up very often in our conversations or in our pondering faith, it was the obsession of the Apostle Paul. And Paul’s emphasis on it became the cause of the Reformation five hundred years ago which divided the Roman Catholic Church into Catholics and Protestants. As such, the biblical understanding of *Justification* had political consequences because the

debate about justification was used, to justify the Thirty Years War which tore Europe apart and realigned all manner of political power structures.

The Western church splitting up because of the Reformation, and the nation-state political realignment came to pass because Martin Luther thought the Roman Catholic Church was preaching justification by good works. That is, the Medieval priests were telling the people that if they were good enough God would accept them. Being good meant doing good things, including giving generously to the church. You could put it this way: whether or not you were forgiven of your sins and were heaven-bound had become a financial transaction! It's not a bad stewardship theme, when you think about it! Money poured into the church to save peoples' souls and do good thing: it built St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican, hospitals, universities and cathedrals all over Europe, but selling forgiveness and putting a price on a right relationship with God was found by the Reformers to be theologically bankrupt! A concerned Catholic monk, Martin Luther went to the Bible, and studied the texts like the one we just heard from Romans 5.

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand... God proves God's love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Luther understood this to say that Christ had already done what the priests during the Middle Ages were claiming they were doing. Luther found that the original Greek word for *Justification* can variously be translated to mean slightly different things. It can mean "justice" or "righteousness" or "uprightness," but when you probe the Apostle Paul's language in Romans 5, and in many other Biblical texts, you come away understanding that *Justification* is the Biblical word the church uses to talk about being right with God. Rightness with God, being in right relationship with God – that is *Justification*. Martin Luther, and his Reformer wife Katherine, John Calvin and the French Princess

Marguerite de Navarre, and John Knox and Margaret Willoughby and so many other Reformers came to understand from a deep study of scripture that being right with God does not and cannot come from our good works.

Getting right with God is not something we can do – no matter how good we are, or how much we give away, how often we confess, or take communion as the Medieval Catholic church was saying. Our good standing with God is what God has done for us. When we accept that God acts to make us right with God, we have faith. Therefore, according to Paul, by the grace of God we are justified by faith.

The great theologian of the twentieth century Paul Tillich explained *justification by faith* for a more contemporary Christian saying simply: Being in right relationship with God is to know that you are accepted. Faith means: accept that we are accepted. We hear and take to heart this good news: in Jesus Christ we are accepted, our sins are forgiven, and we are brought into right relationship with the living God.

Jesus told his followers a parable to help them understand how we are accepted. *Two men went up to the temple to pray, One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector...* While taking the form of a prayer of thanksgiving, the Pharisee is overheard disclosing his contentment that he's not like other people. In fact, his regular fasting and tithing put him Over and above what the law required.

But it's the "I...I...I...I..." of his prayer that gives him away; his arrogance about his own goodness comes to the fore while he compares himself to another. His negative casting of "even this tax collector" overtly pits them against the other. By comparison, the tax collector bowed down in humility, turns toward God in guilt and regret, and stands at a distance, pounding his chest. It's worth noting that neither the tax collector nor the Pharisee should be considered stand-ins for all

who shared their professions. The negative picture of this one Pharisee would have been shocking, as would a tax collector entering the Temple at all. For both, the behaviors portrayed in the parable are out of character and intended to surprise.

Today we might assess both characters as problematic – the puffed up one needs to drop the arrogance *and* the one who basks in low self-esteem needs to let go of his shame. But here for both, prayer is meant to convey faith based upon a relationship with God. Robert Capon said it with brutal force, “What Jesus is saying in this parable is that no human goodness is good enough... God will not take our cluttered life, as we hold it, into eternity. God will take only the clean emptiness of our death in the power of Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus condemns the Pharisee because he takes his stand on a life God cannot use; he commends the tax collector because he rests his case on an emptiness that God alone can fill.” That is Justification – God alone gives us life in right relationship with the living God.

So if that is the case for us, that is also the case for others – which brings me at last to the contemporary application of what *Justification by Faith* means for us in this moment in time. As New Testament scholar and preaching professor Fred Craddock noted, “The interpreter of this parable does not want to depict the characters in such a way that the congregation leaves the sanctuary saying, *God, I thank thee that I am not like the Pharisee.*” The real sin of the Pharisee is the sin of the sideway glance, and that is a sin for which all of us are guilty. We live in a time when we are completely immersed in the sin of the sideway glance, and we are complicit and guilty in the judgment of others.

Jia Tolentino is a millennial blogger and author of a book entitled *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self Delusion*. She describes how, as a ten-year-old, she became fascinated by the internet, chatting with friends about their Beanie Baby collections. It was sweet how folks explained appropriate computer behavior like “don’t use ALL CAPS – it is shouting.” With time, of course, this wholesome connectional power is

no longer always put to good use. We find like-minded people online *and* many venture into the deep abyss of contempt and judgment of others. So much of social media is organized around the notion, as Zuckerberg himself has said of Facebook, “a thing is important insofar as it is important to you.” Tolentino argues, “Facebook’s goal of showing people mostly what they were interested in seeing resulted, within a decade, in the effective end of shared civic reality.”

Of course, we cannot lay all of that burden on Facebook alone, but when we combine various forms of social media networks with news outlets available on television, and our sorting ourselves into mostly like-minded associations, you could argue that the Sin of the Sideway Glance, the posture that I am more righteous than you are has become a primary way of being in today’s culture. We have industrialized regarding others with contempt; we have widely organized systems of declaring ourselves righteous by many avenues and associations; and we have perfected dividing ourselves from one another by our own declarations of righteousness.

However, according to Jesus Christ, according to the Apostle Paul, and according to the theological tenets of the church: *Justification* belongs to God alone. This does not mean that we condone all the behavior of all others, or that we are called to turn away from evil and its human and systemic manifestations. But it does mean that the ultimate declaration of Justification belongs to God. And we are called to repent of our propensity to hold others in contempt, scorn, disdain, and disrespect. In a word, the parable pushes us toward humility.

Friends, we are powerless to get it right with God. It does us no good to puff up our own self-righteousness by putting others down. What God asks of us is to trust that by faith we are accepted. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have peace with God and are reconciled to one another.

That is *Justification* – the theological lens through which we can see ourselves and treat one another. AMEN.