

JUSTIFICATION

Before we start talking about “justification by faith” (one of our most familiar phrases) or its many alternatives (justification by excuses; justification by being perfect; justification by the blood of Jesus; justification by being successful in this world; justification by pedigree; and there are many more), we should probably make some attempt to remember what this word meant before it was drafted into the service of religious doctrine.

Some of you have word processors on your computer. If you type a document, select all the text, and then hit the prompt to “justify,” the margins on the right-hand side are brought into line. The text is just as straight on the right-hand side as they are on the left.

“Justification” means you live “in line” with accepted rules of behavior; your beliefs and thoughts are in line with accepted truth; you veer neither to the right nor to the left. But suppose it has been claimed that you are not living like you should and it is said that you wobble out of line – that you behave in ways not in accordance with “the straight and narrow.” Then shame and disapproval await you or worse, depending on how far out of line you really are.

But maybe the accusations are not accurate or do not consider the full picture. On closer investigation, you are justified – that is, you are exonerated, vindicated. In my experience, rarely are we vindicated in this life. Some people hold one opinion; some another. In most cases, many people just don’t really care; they have problems enough of their own. But suppose everybody was paying attention and really cared and it turned out that you had done nothing wrong – that in fact you were living an exemplary and honorable life. Then you are justified, exonerated, vindicated.

Most of the time in this imperfect world, unless you have done something strikingly out of line, the world does not pay very close attention. But most religious people believe that *God* pays attention. “Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.” Do you remember that phrase from *Silas Marner*? (A sophomore English assignment, if I remember.) Hindus call it “karma.” Sometimes we fool ourselves; sometimes we fool each other. But God cannot be fooled. God looks on the heart. And sooner or later, perhaps

even for our own benefit, things will come to light. It is one of Jesus' promises. We will know the truth, and the truth will set us free (from confusion and error, among other things). Sweeping our Sin or our sins under the rug does not really free us in the long run. But that introduces another level of reality – one our age does not like to think about very much.

So what happens if we are *not* justified? That is, when it all comes to light, what if there is no justification for us? Well, we get punished. Or sent to prison. Or our goods are confiscated. Or we are beaten, or killed. And oh yes, almost forgot: we get thrown into Hell. Not the symbolic one with flames and fire. But we end up depressed; isolated; lonely; trapped in a meaningless realm with no way out that we can see. I have known more than a few people who spend a lot of time in Hell. I have been there myself. I know that the Christian Path leads us out of Hell. I know Twelve Steps that, if a person really takes them, leads us out of Hell. But I also know that people who are in Hell do not at first want to have anything to do with either the Christian Path or the Twelve Steps. They are certain that it is all childish and stupid and mere illusion. So they go on walking the ways of isolation and loneliness and purposelessness. Affair after affair; pretend friendship after pretend friendship; paycheck after paycheck; job after job; pretense after pretense; church after church. How nice that none of that is childish or stupid or mere illusion.

In any case, in a former language: If you are not exonerated, you are condemned. If you are not justified, you are thrown away. That was the assumption before all the fancy theological concepts and theories got brought into the picture.

But life is always more complicated than our diagrams make it seem. What if the borders have been violated and you do not live on the straight and narrow, but you have friends or parents or somebody who thinks you are valuable anyway? Sometimes that's just playful; we like people who are bold and interesting – up to a point. The Music Man sings: "I hope, I pray for Hester to win just one more A." Not really, but it's a great lyric.

Sometimes people break past the borders for higher reasons. Some of them even become our heroes. A Robin Hood who will not cooperate with Prince John because Robin is loyal to Richard the Lionheart – the true King. That is a Palm Sunday story retold, of course, with the names changed to protect the innocent.

In reality, most outlaws are bad. They hurt us and they hurt the whole community. But on occasion we run into an outlaw who is good – better than the vast majority of us, who are going along with a corrupt and decadent establishment.

Martin Luther was an outlaw most of his adult life. No euphemism here. Luther was wanted by both church and state, and but for the surprising protection of Frederick the Wise (a German Prince-Elector of Saxony), he would have been executed long before any of us could have heard of him or understood why. Eerie and ironic. Frederick the Wise is still a mystery to those who study the story. He and Luther never met, as far as we know. Luther insulted him scathingly and publicly regarding his collection of relics. Yet Frederick protected Luther dramatically and continually for as long as Frederick lived. Had it not been for Frederick, the Protestant Reformation is difficult if not impossible to imagine. Some think it would have been better if Luther had died unknown. But many others of us think it was the influence of the Holy Spirit that carried Luther through so many perils. In any case, he was an outlaw, and most of us think he was an incredibly wonderful outlaw.

Has Luther been justified? It depends on who you are talking to and on what level you are asking the question. Around here, of course, there are people who would never agree that Luther was justified because he used too much bad language. Luther himself had come to trust that God would justify him because of the grace revealed in Christ Jesus. And Luther became one of the top champions of grace, and has remained so ever since.

On the other hand, even allowing for the realities of a different time and context, it is hard to swallow or justify Luther's fierce anti-Jewish statements. How could a man so compassionate and so determined to free people from their fears of God and their fears of being thrown into Hell have such a huge and damaging blindside? He adored the Apostle Paul and read Paul's writings all the time, even writing commentaries on all of Paul's letters. How could Luther have missed Paul's passion and love for his own relatives and friends – his own people?

Hard not to wonder if Luther's greatest theological error helped to pave the way for the holocaust almost five hundred years later. Hard not to wonder, and sad that we have to wonder. It is a harsh and broken world, and there are no perfect heroes in it – except, perhaps, for one.

But that brings us to it, does it not? What if we start talking about our own lives, our own records, our own blind spots instead of Luther's? Is justification possible for us? On what basis? In what kind of light? On whose authority?

If we are not just doing "twinkle, twinkle little star" games – if we are not just doing "feel good and don't worry about it" games – is there any such thing as hard-core, all-the-way, clear-to-the-hilt justification for any of us?

Of course, if there is no God, then there is no problem. That is more and more frequently the modern solution. There is no God, or at least no personal God who really cares. Same thing in reality. Therefore there is no right or wrong. One opinion is as good as another. Justification is irrelevant. If we have no real, living relationship with God, what difference does it make? My father again: "If you cannot tell the difference, what difference does it make?" If you cannot tell the difference between a Christian who is sworn to pray and obey the Holy Spirit, and a secular person who is only concerned about taking care of their own needs and desires – if you cannot tell the difference, what difference does it make?

In any case, it does not really matter because God will overlook it. I know you cannot believe I just said that, but that is a major theological position for many thousands of people in our time. God will overlook it. "Forgive and forget." God will choose not to remember our sins. They will be washed white as snow. They will be erased from the record books. We no longer have to right any wrongs or make amends or confess our errors or our shortcomings. We no longer have to convert or change or walk into a New WAY of Life. We will wave the blood of Jesus over it all, and it will cause a great memory loss that reaches clear up to God in Heaven.

God will overlook it? We can kill six million Jews, eight million Muslims, ten million poor people – and God will overlook it? The One who sees and remembers every sparrow that falls (Matthew 10:29) will overlook it? I would not count on it. I *do not* count on it. I would never be able to love a God who was that crass and uncaring. I doubt very much that you could either.

But are we really as confused here as we sometimes pretend? Is that the kind of God that Jesus came to reveal to us, reconcile us to, restore us to? Turning a blind eye has no respect or regard for us.

Turning a blind eye means we are hopeless. It means that it makes no sense to expect anything more from us. You might as well settle for the way things are because it cannot get any better.

God never overlooks anything. Nor do we *want* God to overlook anything – not really. We want to be healed, restored, changed; in some way we can barely imagine, we want to be brought into New Life; we want to be made fit for the Kingdom; we are eager for authentic Life and Love and Peace and Joy – if we ever believe in it enough. To be sure, there are days when we cannot imagine that God will ever be able to work such a transformation in us. At the same time, all the substitutes hold no appeal for us. If we cannot be justified in some true and authentic way, then please: Just get us out of here. *Ex nihilo*. In Star Trek language: Let us cease to continue.

Seeing our need for justification – our *hunger* for justification – is when much of Christendom goes into its theories of the necessary transactions that must take place to justify us. What sorts of transactions must take place between God and Satan or between God and Jesus to make up for our shortfalls, our failures, our inadequacies – our Sin? Jesus becomes the true “lamb without blemish.” Jesus is the perfect sacrifice – even though none of us have been sacrificing any animals on any altars for nearly two thousand years now. Jesus balances the scales for us. Jesus dies in our place. Jesus on the Cross outweighs the sins of the world. The mistakes and blunders and incredible evil and cruelty of billions of us, over centuries of ongoing greed and pride and murder and adultery, are all bought and paid for by one event – one crucifixion among hundreds of crucifixions that took place two thousand years ago, with only a handful of people paying any attention.

I do not mean to be irreverent, but is that really what we are counting on? Is that the hope, the message, the truth that Christianity is holding out to our ever-more divided and broken world? I cannot look on other people’s hearts any better than they can look on mine, but I do not know many people with more regard or love or amazed respect for Jesus than I have. It’s just that what I hear being claimed is not what I see or experience or watch being the transforming power of Jesus. Our lives do not change because of some sacrificial act that we hear happened so many generations before us. That may indeed show us how much Jesus cared and how faithful He was to God. But what still changes us today is what that *opened up for us* then and now: awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit – the forming

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of an actual love-bond between us and God that calls us into more gratitude and devotion and hope than we ever knew before or ever thought possible before.

I do not repent because Jesus suffered. Everybody who comes here suffers. I repent because I want my life to mean more than it does, and Jesus makes it very clear that my life is far more valuable than I ever thought it was. And so is yours! I repent because Jesus calls me into a very new and different LIFE, and that means I have to choose. That is what *repentance* means. I can turn and go in a new direction, or stay the way I already am. I can choose to follow Jesus, or go on living by my own best light. And that's a tough decision.

If we really are a church, we are a community – a fellowship – of people who have decided that win, lose, or draw, we would rather follow Jesus than go on doing our own thing in our own way. That is a really tough call for some of us. Nevertheless, it is the choice that is set before us.

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Are you still thinking about justification? I hope so, because that is still the issue. Are you more likely to find justification by following your own light, or by following Jesus? Here is the real wrinkle, at least for me: We try to understand justification by taking all the old concepts and definitions and opinions about what justification means and then trying to imagine how Jesus can make us straight – how Jesus can justify us by all the rules and definitions and understandings of what justification has always meant. It's the same old concepts, only with Jesus superimposed or overlaid on top of it. Did we forget about the new wine and the new wineskins?

We cannot fit our old concepts of justification into the new dynamism of Jesus' coming to us and calling us into the New Life of His Kingdom. We are justified because He says so. Not because we can figure out some mathematical formula that makes it come out right. We are justified because the God He claims and reveals says so. There is no transaction. There is nobody we have to prove it to. There is nobody who can take it away from us either. It is not based on any rules or definitions we have ever heard of before. Jesus is too NEW.

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The relationship between us and God is established or restored. We have died to this world and thrown away all our trust in its ways and promises and rewards, or we go on living by our own light. All of our trust and all of our hopes have been turned over to God because Jesus has told us and shown us that we can trust God to love us. If that love does not transform us, nothing ever will. Suddenly nothing else matters as much as this God who Jesus lived and died for. Nothing else matters as much as what this God wants, how much this God loves us, and what this God is calling us into. And that's not some old religion warmed over. That's brand new.