

# WORLD RELIGIONS

## Roman Catholicism and Justification

### Lesson 11

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Justification is one of the more important doctrines in the Bible, for it is the doctrine that explains how a sinner is made right before a holy God. In reality, to be justified is to be saved, for there is no salvation for those who are not justified. However, Roman Catholics have a very different and unbiblical view of justification. In fact, their view of justification is similar to the Protestant view of sanctification and like their view of salvation incorporates human works. In this lesson we will contrast the biblical view of justification with the Roman Catholic position. We will see why justification became a critical doctrine among the reformers and why a wrong view of justification is a damning heresy that has sent many to hell.

#### I. BIBLICAL DEFINITIONS OF JUSTIFICATION

- A. John Walvoord: "In theology, justification is the judicial act of God declaring one to be righteous by imputation of righteousness to him. It is judicial not experiential, and all believers in Christ are equally justified."<sup>1</sup>
  
- B. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*: "When God justifies, He charges the sin of man to Christ and credits the righteousness of Christ to the believer (2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, "through one Man's righteous act, the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life" (Rom. 5:18). Because this righteousness is "the righteousness of God" which is "apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21), it is thorough; a believer is "justified from all things" (Acts 13:39). God is "just" because His holy standard of perfect righteousness has been fulfilled in Christ, and He is the "justifier," because this righteousness is freely given to the believer (Rom. 3:26; 5:16)."<sup>2</sup>
  
- C. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*: A forensic (legal) term related to the idea of acquittal, justification refers to the divine act whereby God makes humans, who are sinful and therefore worthy of condemnation, acceptable before a God who is holy and righteous. More appropriately described as "justification by grace through faith," this key doctrine of the Reformation asserts that a sinner is justified (pardoned from the

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<sup>1</sup> John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, pg. 155.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, R. K. Harrison and Thomas Nelson Publishers, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Rev. Ed. of: *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1995).

punishment and condemnation of sin) and brought into relationship with God by faith in God's grace alone.<sup>3</sup>

- D. In very simple terms, justification is not when God *makes a sinner holy*, but when He *declares them to be holy*. Those who are justified remain sinners until they die or are glorified. This is why justification is said to be a legal term (forensic). God, the judge, declares a sinner to be just, not because of anything the sinner has done or earned, but because of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross. The sinner's faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation is what fetches a declaration from God that the sinner is now just before Him. "Abraham believed God [had faith] and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6). God is able to justify the sinner because of what Christ accomplished on the cross. The believer, by placing his faith in Jesus, is forgiven in Christ, has His sins atoned for by Christ, and is justified. At the time of justification, Jesus' perfect righteousness is then reckoned or credited to the account of the sinner. The end result is that the sinner is forgiven, atoned for, justified, and has the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to them so that they can have a relationship with God.

## II. ROMAN CATHOLIC DEFINITIONS OF JUSTIFICATION

In an earlier lesson we talked about the habit of some Roman Catholic theologians and most of the official documents of Roman Catholicism to use "obfuscation," the art of hiding the truth in unintelligible jargon. This is very pronounced when it comes to explaining the doctrine of justification. Latin phrases and specialized Roman Catholic terms leave the reader in a fog rather than understanding things better. In the Roman Catholic encyclopedia, under justification, they begin with a very confusing paragraph talking about original sin. Original sin is the sin we inherit from Adam as Paul explains in Rom. 5:12. We are all guilty in Adam. His sin being passed down to all men from generation to generation. The Bible teaches that original sin corrupts the totality of our being so that every part of us is tainted and corrupted by sin. People, apart from the grace of God, don't seek God (Rom. 3:10-18), can't understand the Word of God (I Cor. 2:14), can't please God (Rom. 8:5-8), and do not come to God for they love darkness rather than light (Jn. 3:19-21). Those who do come, only come in response to the grace of God drawing them to Christ (Jn. 6:44, 65). Thus God must be the initiator and men the responder because apart from God's saving grace no one would choose God.

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<sup>3</sup>Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 69.

Below are selections from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

- A. *Catholic Encyclopedia*: "While in Baptism infants are forthwith cleansed of the stain of original sin without any preparation on their part, the adult must pass through a moral preparation, which consists essentially in turning from sin and towards God. This entire process receives its first impulse from the supernatural grace of vocation (absolutely independent of man's merits), and requires an intrinsic union of the Divine and human action, of grace and moral freedom of election, in such a manner, however, that the will can resist, and with full liberty reject the influence of grace (Trent, l.c., can.iv: "If any one should say that free will, moved and set in action by God, cannot cooperate by assenting to God's call, nor dissent if it wish. . . let him be anathema").<sup>4</sup>
- B. Having said the above, and other painfully obscure things, I leave the *Catholic Encyclopedia* to speak for itself, proving the point of obfuscation in their attempt to define justification: "We now come to the different states in the process of justification. The Council of Trent assigns the first and most important place to faith, which is styled "the beginning, foundation and root of all justification" (Trent, l.c., cap.viii). Cardinal Pallavicini (Hist. Conc. Trid., VIII, iv, 18) tells us that all the bishops present at the council fully realized how important it was to explain St. Paul's saying that man is justified through faith. Comparing Bible and Tradition they could not experience any serious difficulty in showing that fiduciary faith was an absolutely new invention and that the faith of justification was identical with a firm belief in the truths and promises of Divine revelation (l. c.: "illumque [Deum] tanquam omnis justitiae fontem diligere incipiunt"). The next step is a genuine sorrow for all sin with the resolution to begin a new life by receiving holy baptism and by observing the commandments of God. The process of justification is then brought to a close by the baptism of water, inasmuch as by the grace of this sacrament the catechumen is freed from sin (original and personal) and its punishments, and is made a child of God. The same process of justification is repeated in those who by mortal sin have lost their baptismal innocence; with this modification, however, that the Sacrament of Penance replaces baptism. Considering merely the psychological analysis of the conversion of sinners, as given by the council, it is at once evident that faith alone, whether fiduciary or dogmatic, cannot justify man (Trent, l. c., can. xii: "Si quis dixerit, fidem justificantem nihil aliud esse quam fiduciam divinae misericordiae, peccata remittentis propter Christum, vel eam fiduciam solam esse, qua justificamur, a.s."). Since our Divine adoption and friendship with God is based on perfect love of God or charity (cf. Galatians 5:6; 1 Corinthians 13; James 2:17 sqq.), dead

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08573a.htm>

faith devoid of charity (*fides informis*) cannot possess any justifying power. Only such faith as is active in charity and good works (*fides caritate formata*) can justify man, and this even before the actual reception of baptism or penance, although not without a desire of the sacrament (cf. Trent, Sess. VI, cap. iv, xiv). But, not to close the gates of heaven against pagans and those non-Catholics, who without their fault do not know or do not recognize the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance, Catholic theologians unanimously hold that the desire to receive these sacraments is implicitly contained in the serious resolve to do all that God has commanded, even if His holy will should not become known in every detail.

- C. Many other Roman Catholic sources might be cited but the above paragraphs include most of what needs to be understood about the Roman Catholic view of justification. We discover several things concerning the Roman Catholic view of justification, namely:
1. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism cleanses a person from original sin and prepares them for repentance (turning from sin). The Bible does not teach this any where, it is a fiction made up by men. However, it helps us understand why being baptized in Roman Catholicism is so important.
  2. Second, Roman Catholicism teaches that justification is not a once for all forensic declaration that one is declared to be right before God on the basis of faith alone, by grace alone, in the person and work of Christ alone. No, it is *“an intrinsic union of the Divine and human action, of grace and moral freedom of election, in such a manner, however, that the will can resist, and with full liberty reject the influence of grace.”* Which means that the will of man is free to choose God apart from grace and not only that but able to reject God’s saving grace. In fact, to deny that men can reject saving grace is to be accursed.
  3. Third, we see that Roman Catholicism teaches justification is a process achieved by several steps, not necessarily in this order.
    - a. First, one has faith.
    - b. Second, one has sorrow over sin.
    - c. Third, one is baptized, saved, and freed from original sin. If one commits a mortal sin, they lapse back into a state of original sin and need to practice penance in place of baptism.

4. Fourth, we see that faith alone cannot justify a person. A person must have love and good works to accompany their faith before they are justified. Therefore, justification is by faith and works.
5. Fifth, Roman Catholicism teaches that if anyone has a sincere desire to please God, contained in that desire is the necessary means of justification. A person could be a pagan, an idol worshiper, trust and practice any brand of religion, and as long as they are sincere in their desire to please God, they will be justified apart from the Word of God.

### III. CONTRASTING BIBLICAL VERSUS ROMAN CATHOLIC JUSTIFICATION

- A. Roman Catholicism teaches that justification is an *ongoing process*. However, sanctification is an ongoing process. The chart below was constructed from Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* showing how justification differs from sanctification.

Biblical Justification	Biblical Sanctification
Justification removes the guilt of sin and restores the sinner bringing them to adoption as God's son with all the privileges of a true son.	Sanctification removes the pollution of sin and renews the sinner ever increasingly in conformity with the image of God.
Justification takes place outside of the sinner with God, and does not change his inner life.	Sanctification takes place in the inner life of man and gradually affects his whole being.
Justification takes place once for all. It is not repeated, neither is it a process; it is complete at once and for all time. There is no more or less in justification; man is either fully justified, or he is not justified at all.	Sanctification is a continued process which is never completed in this life.
God the Father declares the sinner righteous because of the work of Christ.	The Holy Spirit sanctifies the believer because of the work of Christ.

- B. It is often thought that Paul's teaching concerning justification contradicts James' teaching. Paul says, "*Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,*" but James says, "*Was not Abraham justified by works.*" How can both be true? Are we justified by faith, works, or both?
1. **Rom. 3:19-4:25** Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; 20

because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. 21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. 31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. 8 "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." 9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." 10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; 11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. 13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of

the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. 16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, “A father of many nations have I made you”) in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. 18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” 19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; 20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. 22 Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness. 23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

2. **Gal. 3:1-14** You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? 2 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? 5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? 6 Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. 7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. 10 For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” 11 Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” 12 However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who

practices them shall live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”— 14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

3. **Gal. 5:4** You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.
4. **James 2:14-26** What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” 19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.
5. *The New Bible Dictionary* discussing the paradox between Paul’s teaching on justification in Romans and Galatians and James’ teaching says:

“Of the other writers in the NT we must notice James, for he has often been held to be in opposition to Paul in this matter. Where Paul insists that a man is justified by faith and not by works James maintains ‘that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone’ (Jas. 2:24). There is no more than a verbal contradiction, however. The kind of ‘faith’ that James is opposing is not that warm personal trust in a living Savior of which Paul speaks. It is a faith which James himself describes: ‘You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder’ (Jas. 2:19). He has in mind an intellectual assent to certain truths, an assent which is not backed up by a life lived in accordance with those truths (Jas.



2:15f.). So far is James from opposing faith in the full sense that he everywhere presupposes it. Right at the beginning of his Epistle he speaks naturally of ‘the testing of your faith’ (Jas. 1:3), and he exhorts his readers, ‘show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory’ (Jas. 2:1). He criticizes a wrong faith but assumes that everyone will recognize the need for a right faith. Moreover, by ‘works’ James does not mean what Paul means by that term. Paul thinks of obedience to the commands of the law regarded as a system whereby a man may merit salvation. For James the law is ‘the law of liberty’ (Jas. 2:12). His ‘works’ look uncommonly like ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ of which Paul speaks. They are warm deeds of love springing from a right attitude to God. They are the fruits of faith. What James objects to is the claim that faith is there when there is no fruit to attest it.”<sup>5</sup>

We have learned from this lesson that the Roman Catholic view of justification is in keeping with their views of works salvation. They take texts, like the one from James above, and twist their meaning claiming that works are necessary to gain justification, not that once justified, someone will do good works as the fruit born from a transformed life. Thus, they nullify the many clear statements in Scripture that justification is apart from works, in order to promote their sacramental view of salvation by works.

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<sup>5</sup> *The New Bible Dictionary*, Logos Bible Software under “faith.”