

The Doctrine of Justification 4. Its Basis

by A.W. Pink

A.W. Pink's sermon explores the complex interplay of justice and mercy in the doctrine of justification through Christ's atonement and righteousness.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:6, Jeremiah 23:6, Luke 15:22-24, John 8:7-11, Romans 3:22, Romans 4:6-8, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13-14, Galatians 4:4, Revelation 21:27

Topics: "Justification", "Christ's Atonement"

Description

A.W. Pink addresses the profound issue of justification, emphasizing that a holy God cannot simply overlook sin. He explains that salvation cannot be achieved through personal works or mere mercy, as both justice and mercy must be satisfied. Pink highlights that Christ's atonement is the basis for justification, where our sins are imputed to Him, and His righteousness is imputed to us. This divine exchange allows believers to stand justified before God, not through their own merit but through Christ's perfect obedience. Ultimately, Pink asserts that understanding this doctrine is crucial for peace and assurance in the believer's relationship with God.

Transcript

THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

4. ITS BASIS

In our last chapter we contemplated the problem which is presented in the justifying or pronouncing righteous one who is a flagrant violator of the Law of God. Some may have been surprised at the introduction of such a term as "problem": as there are many in the ranks of the ungodly who feel that the world owes them a living, so there are not a few Pharisees in Christendom who suppose it is due them that at death their Creator should take them to Heaven. But different far is it with one who has been enlightened and convicted by the Holy Spirit, so that he sees himself to be a filthy wretch, a vile rebel against God.

Such an one will ask, seeing that the word of God so plainly declares "there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination" (Rev. 21:27), how is it possible that I can ever gain admission into the heavenly Jerusalem? How can it be that one so completely devoid of righteousness as I am, and so filled with unrighteousness, should ever be pronounced just by a holy God? Various attempts have been made by unbelieving minds to solve this problem.

Some have reasoned that if they now turn over a new leaf, thoroughly reform their lives and henceforth walk in obedience to God's Law, they shall be approved before the Divine Tribunal. This scheme, reduced to simple terms, is salvation by our own works. But such a scheme is utterly untenable, and salvation by such means is absolutely impossible. The works of a reformed sinner cannot be the meritorious or efficacious cause of his salvation, and that for the following reasons.

First, no provision is made for his previous failures. Suppose that henceforth I never again transgress God's Law, what is to atone for my past sins? Second, a fallen and sinful creature cannot produce that which is perfect, and nothing short of perfection is acceptable to God. Third, were it possible for us to be saved by our own works, then the sufferings and death of Christ were needless. Fourth, salvation by our own merits would entirely eclipse the glory of Divine grace.

Others suppose this problem may be solved by an appeal to the bare mercy of God. But mercy is not an attribute that overshadows all the other Divine perfections: justice, truth, and holiness are also operative in the salvation of God's elect. The law is not set aside, but honored and magnified. The truth of God in His solemn threats is not sullied, but faithfully carried out. The Divine righteousness is not flouted, but vindicated. One of God's perfections is not exercised to the injury of any of the others, but all of them shine forth with equal clearness in the plan which Divine wisdom devised.

Mercy at the expense of justice over-ridden would not suit the Divine government, and justice enforced to the exclusion of mercy would not befit the Divine character. The problem which no finite intelligence could solve was how both might be exercised in the sinner's salvation. A striking example of mercy helpless before the claims of the law occurs in Daniel 6. There we find that Darius, the king of Babylon, was induced by his nobles to sign a decree that any subject within his kingdom who should pray, or "ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days" save the king himself, should be cast into the den of lions.

Daniel knowing this, nevertheless, continued to pray before God as hitherto. Whereupon the nobles acquainted Darius with his violation of the royal edict, which "according to the law of the Medes and Persians altereth not," and demanded his punishment. Now Daniel stood high in the king's favour, and he greatly desired to show clemency unto him, so he "set his heart on Daniel to deliver him, and he labored till the going down of the sun to deliver him." But he found no way out of the difficulty: the law must be honored, so Daniel was cast into the lion's den.

An equally striking example of law helpless in the presence of mercy is found in John 8. There we read of a woman taken in the act of adultery. The scribes and Pharisees apprehended her and set her before Christ, charging her with the crime, and reminding the Saviour that "Moses in the law commanded us that such should be stoned." She was unquestionably guilty, and her accusers were determined that the penalty of the law should be inflicted upon her. The Lord turned to them and said, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her"; and they, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, leaving the adulteress alone with Christ.

Turning to her, He asked, "Woman, where are thine accusers, hath no man condemned thee?" She replied, "No man, Lord," and He answered, "Neither do I condemn thee, go, and sin no more." The two adverse principles are seen operating in conjunction in Luke 15. The "Father" could not have the (prodigal) son at His table clad in the rags of the far country, but He could go out and meet him in those rags: He could fall on his neck and kiss him in those rags--it was blessedly characteristic of His grace so to do; but to seat him at His table in garments suited to the swine-troughs would not be fitting.

But the grace which brought the Father out to the prodigal "reigned" through that righteousness which brought the prodigal in to the Father's house. It had not been "grace" had the Father waited till the prodigal decked himself out in suitable garments of his own providing; nor would it have been "righteousness" to bring him to His table in his rags. Both grace and righteousness shone forth in their respective beauty when the Father said "bring forth the best robe, and put it on him."

It is through Christ and His atonement that the justice and mercy of God, His righteousness and grace, meet in the justifying of a believing sinner. In Christ is found the solution to every problem which sin has raised. In the Cross of Christ every attribute of God shines forth in its meridian splendor. In the satisfaction which the Redeemer offered unto God every claim of the law, whether preceptive or penal, has been fully met. God has been infinitely more honored by the obedience of the last Adam than He was dishonored by the disobedience of the first Adam.

The justice of God was infinitely more magnified when its awful sword smote the beloved Son, than had every member of the human race burned for ever and ever in the lake of fire. There is infinitely more efficacy in the blood of Christ to cleanse, than there is in sin to befoul. There is infinitely more merit in Christ's one perfect righteousness than there is demerit in the combined unrighteousness of all the ungodly. Well may we exclaim, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

But while many are agreed that the atoning death of Christ is the meritorious cause of His peoples' salvation, there are now few indeed who can give any clear Scriptural explanation of the way and manner by which the work of Christ secures the justification of all who believe. Hence the need for a clear and full statement thereon. Hazy ideas at this point are both dishonoring to God and unsettling to our peace. It is of first importance that the Christian should obtain a clear understanding of the ground on which God pardons his sins and grants him a title to the heavenly inheritance.

Perhaps this may best be set forth under three words: substitution, identification, imputation. As their Surety and Sponsor, Christ entered the place occupied by His people under the law, so identifying Himself with them as to be their Head and Representative, and as such He assumed and discharged all their legal obligations: their liabilities being transferred to Him, His merits being transferred to them. The Lord Jesus has wrought out for His people a perfect righteousness by obeying the law in thought and word and deed, and this righteousness is imputed to them, reckoned to their account.

The Lord Jesus has suffered the penalty of the law in their stead, and through His atoning death they are cleansed from all guilt. As creatures they were under obligations to obey Gods' Law; as criminals (transgressors) they were under the death-sentence of the law. Therefore, to fully meet our liabilities and discharge our debts it was necessary that our Substitute should both obey and die. The shedding of Christ's blood blotted out our sins, but it did not, of itself, provide the "best robe" for us.

To silence the accusations of the law against us so that there is now "no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" is simply a negative blessing: something more was required, namely, a positive righteousness, the keeping of the law, so that we might be entitled to its blessing and reward. In Old Testament times the name under which the Messiah and Mediator was foretold is, "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. 23:6). It was plainly predicted by Daniel that He should come here to "finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness" (9:24).

Isaiah announced "Surely, shall one say, in the LORD have I righteousness and strength: even to Him shall men come; and all that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed. In the LORD shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory" (45:24, 25). And again, he represents each of the redeemed exclaiming, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness" (61:10).

In Romans 4:6-8 we read, "David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin." Here we are shown the inseparability of the two things: God imputing "righteousness" and God not imputing "sins." The two are never divided: unto whom God imputes not sin He imputes righteousness; and unto whom He imputes righteousness, He imputes not sin.

But the particular point which we are most anxious for the reader to grasp is, Whose "righteousness" is it that God imputes or reckons to the account of the one who believes? The answer is, that righteousness which was wrought out by our Surety, that obedience to the law which was vicariously rendered by our Sponsor, even "the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:1). This righteousness is not only "unto all" but also "upon all them that believe" (Rom. 3:22).

It is called "the righteousness of God" because it was the righteousness of the God-man Mediator, just as in Acts 20:28 His blood is call the blood of God. The "righteousness of God" which is mentioned so frequently in the Roman epistle refers not to the essential righteousness of the Divine character, for that cannot possibly be imputed or legally transferred to any creature. When we are told in 10:3 that the Jews were "ignorant of God's righteousness" it most certainly does not mean they were in the dark concerning the Divine rectitude or that they knew nothing about God's justice; but it signifies that they were unenlightened as to the righteousness which the God-man Mediator had vicariously wrought out for His people.

This is abundantly clear from the remainder of that verse: "and going about to establish their own righteousness"--not their own rectitude or justice, but performing works by which they hoped to merit acceptance with God. So tightly did they cling to this delusion, they, "submitted not themselves unto the righteousness of God": that is, they refused to turn from their self-righteousness and put their trust in the obedience and sufferings of the incarnate Son of God. "I would explain what we mean by the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Sometimes the expression is taken by our divines in a larger sense, for the imputation of all that Christ did and suffered for our redemption whereby we are free from guilt, and stand righteous in the sight of God; and so implies the imputation both of Christ's satisfaction and obedience. But here I intend it in a stricter sense, for the imputation of that righteousness or moral goodness that consists in the obedience of Christ. And by that obedience being imputed to us, is meant no other than this, that that righteousness of Christ is accepted for us, and admitted instead of that perfect inherent righteousness that ought to be in ourselves: Christ's perfect obedience shall be reckoned to our account, so that we shall have the benefit of it, as though we had performed it ourselves: and so we suppose, that a title to eternal life is given us as the reward of this righteousness" (Jonathan Edwards).

The one passage which casts the clearest light upon that aspect of justification which we are now considering is 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might

be made the righteousness of God in Him." Here we have the counter imputations: of our sins to Christ, of His righteousness to us. As the teaching of this verse is of such vital moment let us endeavor to consider its terms the more closely. How was Christ "made sin for us"? By God imputing to Him our disobedience, or our transgressions of the law; in like manner, we are made "the righteousness of God in Him" (in Christ, not in ourselves) by God imputing to us Christ's obedience, His fulfilling the precepts of the law for us.

As Christ "knew no sin" by inward defilement or personal commission, so we "knew" or had no righteousness of our own by inward conformity to the law, or by personal obedience to it. As Christ was "made sin" by having our sins placed to His account or charged upon Him in a judicial way, and as it was not by any criminal conduct of His own that He was "made sin," so it is not by any pious activities of our own that we become "righteous": Christ was not "made sin" by the infusion of depravity, nor are we "made righteous" by the infusion of holiness.

Though personally holy, our Sponsor did, by entering our law-place, render Himself officially liable to the wrath of God; and so though personally unholy, we are, by virtue of our legal identification with Christ, entitled to the favor of God. As the consequence of Christ's being "made sin for us" was, that "the LORD laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6), so the consequence of Christ's obedience being reckoned to our account is that God lays righteousness "upon all them that believe" (Rom. 3:22).

As our sins were the judicial ground of the sufferings of Christ, by which sufferings He satisfied Justice; so Christ's righteousness is the judicial ground of our acceptance with God, by which our pardon is an act of Justice. Notice carefully that in 2 Corinthians 5:21 it is God who "made" or legally constituted Christ to be "sin for us," though as Hebrews 10:7 shows, the Son gladly acquiesced therein. "He was made sin by imputation: the sins of all His people were transferred unto Him, laid upon Him, and placed to His account and having them upon Him He was treated by the justice of God as if He had been not only a sinner, but a mass of sin: for to be made sin is a stronger expression than to be made a sinner" (John Gill).

"That we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" signifies to be legally constituted righteous before God--justified. "It is a righteousness 'in Him,' in Christ, and not in ourselves, and therefore must mean the righteousness of Christ: so called, because it is wrought by Christ, who is God over all, the true God, and eternal life" (Ibid.). The same counter-exchange which has been before us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is found again in Galatians 3:13, 14, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ."

As the Surety of His people, Christ was "made under the law" (Gal. 4:4), stood in their law-place and stead, and having all their sins imputed to Him, and the law finding them all upon Him, condemned Him for them; and so the justice of God delivered Him up to the accursed death of the cross. The purpose, as well as the consequence, of this was "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles": the "blessing of Abraham" (as Rom. 4 shows) was justification by faith through the righteousness of Christ. "Upon a Life I did not live, Upon a Death I did not die; Another's death, Another's life I'd rest my soul eternally."

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