

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation

Lecture 13

Assessment of Competing Views of Justification

Today we have a very interesting and important topic to discuss. Last time we looked at the contrasting views of the Protestant Reformers and traditional Roman Catholic theologians concerning the nature of justification. We saw that Catholics traditionally understand justification to be the infusion of moral virtue into us, something that can increase over time, while the Protestant Reformers understood justification to be a change of legal status before God which is accomplished once and for all. Today we want to come to some assessment of these competing views.

By way of assessment, I think that the Protestant Reformers correctly understood Paul to be talking about a legal act whereby we are reckoned to be righteous. We are not somehow morally transformed into virtuous people; rather God declares us to be righteous. We are reckoned as righteous because we have placed our faith in Christ.

One way to appreciate this is to realize that the opposite of justification is condemnation. The opposite of justification is not moral turpitude. Rather, the opposite of justification is condemnation. When a criminal is condemned by the court, he acquires a legal status that is the opposite of acquittal by the court or pardon by an executive authority. The language of the New Testament reflects this opposition between justification and condemnation for those who are not in Christ Jesus. For example, Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In Romans 8:33-34, Paul says, "It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?" Do you see the polar opposites there? God is the one who justifies. Who is there to condemn? Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The peace with God spoken of here doesn't mean a kind of inner feeling of tranquility or serenity. Rather, it means that the enmity with God has been removed. We have been reconciled to God. Our sins are no longer counted against us. God's wrath and justice have been propitiated. God is no longer the one who condemns us, but now he is the one who justifies us.

So if you think of justification as the opposite of condemnation, I think you'll have a pretty firm handle on the Reformers' idea of justification as a legal act of God whereby you are pardoned, and declared to be righteous through Christ's righteousness.

Now sometimes New Testament scholars will say that according to the view that we are discussing here we are acquitted before the bar of God's justice. But technically speaking, that's a misunderstanding. We have been found guilty and condemned by God as the righteous Judge. His verdict is not overturned, as by some divine court of appeals. Our condemnation is just. Rather what God does is offer us a legal pardon which absolves us

of guilt. Just as the governor or the President can pardon a condemned criminal who has been sentenced to death, so that he becomes guiltless in the eyes of the law and is no longer liable to punishment, so God as the Ruler of the world can issue a divine pardon for our sins, so that we become guiltless and are set free.

Thus, there is a enormous difference between divine forgiveness and forgiveness in personal human relationships. For personal forgiveness does not absolve the wrongdoer of guilt. Even though the victim of a crime, and even the judge in a case, may personally forgive the criminal, that criminal can still be prosecuted for his crime and justly punished for it. But a pardon absolves the criminal of his guilt and removes his liability to punishment. Someone who has been pardoned for a crime cannot be justly punished for that crime. God's forgiveness, then, is like a legal pardon which takes away our guilt and sets us free. Thus, justification is legal in nature, just as the Protestant Reformers saw.

Now it might be thought that this legal view of justification amounts to nothing more than a legal fiction – you do not really become righteous; your righteousness is just a legal fiction. Legal fictions play an important role in our justice system. For example, in U.S. maritime law, ships have the legal status of persons. Now obviously, ships are not really persons. But the law has adopted the legal fiction of ship personification in order to make possible the prosecution of certain crimes on the high seas like violating embargo laws.

But clearly justification is not a legal fiction like that. Rather, we really are pardoned by God. Our guilt is absolved. A good illustration of this change of legal status is marriage. When a man and a woman are pronounced man and wife, there is an actual change of legal status that takes place. They are no longer single now in the eyes of the law; they are in this new legal state of marriage. That is not a legal fiction. There is no sort of pretense here that is going on. They really are now married. It is official before the law. The couple may feel exactly the same as they did before they got married, but their status has now changed in view of the declaration of marriage. Similarly, when we are justified by God, it is not as though God pretends that we are righteous. Rather, he really does pardon us and declare us to be righteous on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness. So the notion is that we move from a state of condemnation before God to a state of proper relationship with him in which we are no longer guilty but are pardoned of our sin and have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

The Reformed theologian Michael Horton reports that there is today a “considerable” and “settled” “scholarly consensus,” including Roman Catholic exegetes such as Joseph Fitzmeyer, Raymond Brown, and Karl Rahner, that “Justification is a declarative, judicial

verdict.”¹ This is a very heartening development and a significant step toward achieving unity of Christian doctrine.

Now I want to introduce yet another alternative to the Reformation view of justification, and this is a contemporary alternative – indeed a very recent alternative – that is known as the New Perspective on Paul. The claim of the adherents of the New Perspective is that the traditional Reformers have seriously misunderstood Paul and that when we correctly interpret Paul we see that in fact he’s not really all that different from what the Judaism of his day was saying.

One of the key figures in the so-called New Perspective on Paul is the biblical scholar E.P. Sanders. One of Sanders’ pivotal works is called *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, published in 1977. Now, you may ask, “What is the force of that word ‘Palestinian?’” Well, Palestine was the name of the Roman province that is occupied by Israel. So Palestinian Judaism was the Judaism of the people who lived in that region that we today call Israel. This was in contrast to the Jews who were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. There were Jews living in Egypt, Jews living in Rome, Jews living in Greece, Jews living in Syria. These Jews were part of the Diaspora, or the Dispersion, as it’s called. And what Sanders is writing about is Judaism as it existed in the Jewish homeland, not in the Dispersion. Often, *that* Judaism is called Hellenistic Judaism because it was in a Greek-speaking culture and as a result absorbed some of the Greek culture. But what Sanders is talking about is the Judaism that existed in Palestine – the Judaism in which the early church was birthed.

Sanders writes this with regard to Paul:

On the point at which many have found the decisive contrast between Paul and Judaism – grace and works – Paul is in agreement with Palestinian Judaism. . . . Salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining ‘in,’ but they do not earn, salvation.²

The view here is very subtle. The idea is that one gets into the covenant with God by God’s freely bestowed grace. You are not a member of the saving covenant of God in virtue of your works. It is by God’s grace. But one *remains in* the covenant by doing the works required by the law. Now these good works don’t earn salvation, but they are the instrumental means by which one stays in the covenant. So the claim is that these good works, while not earning salvation, are nevertheless necessary as the instrumental means

¹ Michael S. Horton, “Traditional Reformed View,” in *Justification: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhoads Eddy, assoc. ed. Steven E. Eenderlein, with contributions by Michael F. Bird, James D. G. Dunn, Michael S. Horton, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and Gerald O’Collins, S. J., and Oliver Rafferty, S. J. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), p. 93.

² E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 543.

by which a person remains in the covenant to which God has invited him by means of his grace.

So Sanders distinguishes between *getting in* and *staying in*. You get into the covenant by God's grace. But the way you stay in is by doing the good works that are required by the law to stay in that covenant. Those works don't earn your salvation but nevertheless they are the means by which you stay in this saving relationship with God.

Some have been persuaded that Paul's view is really no different than that of Palestinian Judaism. You are saved by grace but you stay in by means of doing good works.

Next time we'll offer some assessment of this New Perspective on Paul. Until then may God go with you and guide you throughout the coming week.³

³ □ Total Running Time: 14:44 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)