

My intent in this brief series of booklets is to show the immense practicality of Christian doctrine. On the one hand, much of Christian literature today turns to Christian and biblical psychology as the basis from which Christian practice is drawn. Theology and doctrine seem to be outmoded ways of addressing problems in our culture. On the other hand, there are those who seem to be well versed in theology who go about their lives in ways that practically denies the theology they profess to believe.

I believe that good theology is eminently practical. It is my hope that, after reading these brief treatises, Christians might recapture a love for biblical doctrine as they see doctrine's practical implication for life. It is God who has made us. It is God who knows us. It is God who knows how best to deal with us in a loving fashion. Doctrine is a vehicle through which we see how God works toward us, in us, and through us. As we look at biblical doctrine, we see the gracious and loving way in which he deals with us for our greatest benefit. May his name be praised!

## **JUSTIFICATION AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**

One of the key doctrines of the Protestant Reformation was the doctrine that man is justified by grace through faith. It is not my purpose to get into a detailed theological discussion of this doctrinal position. Suffice it to say that the reformers rediscovered the truth that God does not accept his people because of the things they do (their works), but rather by the perfect work of Jesus Christ imputed (applied) to them through the vehicle of faith. Justification is an act of God whereby he forgives sins based on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and credits the righteousness of Christ to His people. This action is not based upon anything good in people, but rather upon his sovereign mercy and grace. This work is applied to man through faith in the work of Jesus Christ. And even the faith by which the righteousness of Christ is applied (imputed) to us is a gift of God, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:8-9).

What is important to see is that God accepts us before we do anything to deserve his acceptance. It is an act based solely on who He is as a loving and gracious God, not based on who we are or what we do. It is only after this acceptance that God expects anything from his people and works to mold them into increasingly holy people (the work of sanctification).

The practical significance of this doctrine is incomprehensible to many people because of their experiences in most of the rest of life. In almost all other areas of life people must do something before they are accepted or promoted. As the

old Smith-Barney commercial used to say, “We make money the old-fashioned way – we EARN it!” We live in a world in which everything must be earned. Do you want to move onto the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade? Make sure you successfully perform the work required in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Do you want to become President of the company? Make sure you perform well as the Vice-President. Do you want Santa Claus to bring you a nice present? Be good – after all, “He sees you when you’re sleeping, he knows when you’re awake, he knows when you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness’ sake.” All of life says, “If you want something, you must work for it – you must earn it.” Thus, when it comes to practical living, the prevailing atmosphere tends to be, “If you want me to love you, you must earn it.”

The doctrine of justification turns this mindset upside down. It says, “You’ve been accepted already – now work it out.” You don’t have to earn anything, it has already been given to you by the gracious work of God.

## **Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Justification in Family Life**

### **Problems in the Christian family**

In most of the counseling I have undertaken a common theme has been repeated. Over and over again I see problems in the Christian family which stem from one key factor – a sense of parental rejection. Many Christian people today live not knowing for sure whether or not their parents have loved them. Why is this? Usually it is because their parents have communicated the fact that they have never performed well enough to merit that love. No matter what they did or how hard they tried their efforts were always met with disgust, disappointment, or at best indifference. Too many people have grown up thinking that they haven’t been good enough to be loved and they bear a great burden as a result.

One sad result of this is that they relate poorly to God. Even though they know intellectually the truth that they are justified by faith, not works, they have a great deal of difficulty appropriating God’s love to themselves. Their Christian life consists of constantly trying to prove themselves to God – and they invariably know that they fall short. They never can get to the point of believing wholeheartedly and experientially that God loves them not for who they are or what they have done, but because of what God has done for them in Christ. His love is based on who He is and what He has done, not on what we have done.

The sad outworking of not appropriating the love of God to themselves is that these Christians also have difficulty loving their children as God loves them. Even though they recognize the shortcomings of their own upbringing, they tend to deal with their own children in the same way in which their earthly parents dealt with them. Why is dad so mean to the kids? Probably because his parents were mean to him and he never believed that he was loved for who he was. He may have hated the way his parents treated him, but because he has not experienced parental love, he is not sure how to show it to his children. Thus,

the very things that he hated when his parents did them to him, he now does to his children. Why is mom so critical? Well, her parents were critical of her. She never thought that they accepted her and so now, she finds it nearly impossible to build up her children.

What tends to happen, then, even in the Christian family, is that the children are put on an endless treadmill of trying to prove themselves to their parents. They don't ever get the impression that they have been accepted (justified) by mom and dad and they are often right. The old adage of the world keeps coming to bear, "If you want my approval, you must EARN it!" Even though parents would never want to voice those words to their children, in practice, that is the message that they send.

This message is not sent intentionally. It is often sent through the harsh tone of voice that is used when dealing with the children – a tone of voice which communicates the message, "I don't like you very much", or "You bother me". Even though such a tone may only be used when instructing how to fold the laundry, the message of rejection is clearly sent. The message may be sent by constantly rejecting the plans that the children devise for dealing with a family problem, or rejecting their friends. The message may be sent by the lack of time that parents spend with their children. If a parent is always "too busy" to play with the children, the true message gets across, "You are just not important enough for me to prioritize spending time with." The methods of communicating rejection may vary, but the message the child receives is the same, "Mom and Dad just don't like me – I must be an unlovable person."

The degree to which that message is sent will vary from household to household, but when it is sent in its more severe forms, the results can be disastrous. If you have lived in such an environment you know the effects of it. You may recognize that you consider your children more of a frustration than a blessing. You may see yourself become an angrier and angrier with your children. If you are a child you get angrier and angrier at your parents. You may get to the point of thinking that you're never going to please your parents, so you just quit trying. Maybe you even consider suicide because life just isn't worth living. *Generally, you get tired of playing a game that you just can't win.*

When a child gets to this point, they have become exasperated. And despite the fact that Christian parents are familiar with Ephesians 6:4, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath (sometimes translated 'exasperate your children'), but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord", when it comes down to life in the family, exasperation is exactly what takes place.

#### **Enter the doctrine of justification**

It is at this point that the doctrine of justification must come to bear. The way God deals with us is important because, as Christians, we are members of the family of God. God has given us a model of family relationships because he uses familial terms when he describes his relationships to us. He is our heavenly

Father. We are his children. Thus, as we look at how our heavenly Father deals with us, we receive a good picture of how we ought to deal with our children.

The first thing that we encounter in our search of God's familial dealings is the fact that our heavenly Father has not received us because of our performance. "If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us", (1 John 1:8). "For the wages of sin is death...", (Romans 6:23a). Based upon our performance we deserve to die. Thus, our acceptance by God must be based upon something else. The doctrine of justification reminds us that God provides the impetus and God provides the means of our acceptance by him. It is because he purposes to love us that we are loved by Him, not because we are so lovely.

The truth that God provides the impetus is seen in the fact that we are accepted by God purely because he has determined to do so. It is the action of election by which God himself that says we are his – it is not anything that we do. God chooses (elects) those who he will count as his family members, and then enters into a familial, or covenantal, relationship with them through the gifts that he provides. In this we see the wondrous grace of God.

The first means that God uses to enter into this relationship with us is the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Remember, we deserve death. The gospel (good news) is that God has exacted that death penalty upon his Son instead of on us. He also applies (imputes) the righteousness of his Son to us. Thus instead of being miserable sinners, deserving of death, we become beloved children of God – members of his holy family.

The second means which God uses to cement this wonderful family relationship is the gift of faith. He gives us the ability to believe and He gives us reason to trust in him by his steadfastness and mercy. He provides the ability to trust in him by the operation of the Holy Spirit. He gives us reason to trust Him because He never changes, because He has sent His Son to die for us. Through the work of Christ, and our faith in that work, we are God's very family.

*We see then that God acts in three key ways with His children. 1) He graciously chooses them, 2) He provides the means for the forgiveness of their sin, and 3) He provides faith in Himself as a free gift. And all these things happen before we have done anything to deserve them. These are the key elements which Christian parents ought to follow as they work out the truths of justification practically.*

### **The Act of Choosing**

As finite creatures we cannot operate in exactly the same manner as God because we are not God. He is sovereign; we are not. He can create life; we cannot. There will, then, be differences in the way we accomplish what God has done for us because we are only his creatures, whereas he is the creator. We can, however, act upon the same principles that God has revealed to us.

“How can I choose my child(ren)?”, you may ask. Well, of course, you can’t select them from a catalogue. God gives children to us – we don’t select them. *What we can do, however, is determine to love the children that God has given us.* We may not have planned for them. We may find it difficult to understand them. But we can say, “This is my child. I will love him.” What is important is that you determine to love them solely because they are the children God has given to you. You can’t say, “I will love them if, or when, they do thus and so”. You must say, “I will love them because they are my children.” After all, that is what God has done for you. To do this is not at all an easy task. Often the Lord gives us children with personalities and temperaments with which we would rather not deal. We cannot fall into the trap, however, of requiring them to change before we love them – that only leads to exasperation.

G.K. Chesterton, in his work “Orthodoxy” asked whether men loved Rome because it was a lovely city, or whether Rome was a lovely city because men loved it? In other words, “What came first, the love of the object or the loveliness of the object?” His contention was that the love came first. I think the Christian view of justification would agree with this truth. *In justification, God shows us that love precedes loveliness. Our task, therefore, is to love our children in order that they become lovely, not because they have already achieved loveliness.* That is how God has dealt with us and that is how we are to deal with our children. That means that we determine to love them so that they will become godly children, not because they have already attained godliness. Such a determination requires that we lovingly bear with their shortcomings while we wait for our love and instruction to manifest itself in their lives – not demand that it be manifested before love is given.

Determine to love the children God gives you and you will be working out the doctrine of justification in the lives of your children.

### **Providing Forgiveness**

Of course, it is not the case that just because you have determined to love your children that you won’t sin against them or that they won’t sin against you. Though God’s people are redeemed from sin, they are not immune to it. Sin will occur in every household. The question is, “How do we deal with it?” The answer is to provide a readiness to forgive.

At a recent leadership retreat the speaker made a very insightful comment. He said, “God doesn’t expect perfect sinlessness from us, he desires us to come to him when we sin, confessing them and receiving forgiveness.” “If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). If God demanded perfect sinlessness from us, the only thing we would do when we sinned would be to run away from Him because the only thing that would be before us would be punishment and condemnation. In the act of justification God provides the means for forgiveness

of sins in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. We must also provide vehicles of forgiveness in our homes.

Sadly, that is not what we see in many homes. The sinful child does not consider confessing his sin because he knows that he will not find a forgiving parent but a harsh judge. It is a shame when our children try to hide their sin. On the one hand, it shows the amazing ability of the human flesh to compound sin, but it may also reveal that the child does not expect forgiveness, or at least has not learned that it is available.

The regular training and practice of confession and forgiveness is a necessity if we are to live the justified life in our homes. Too often what occurs in anger, resentment, and separation. The sinning party is yelled-at, spanked, and sent to his room to “pay his penalty”. If the child is not taught to confess and receive forgiveness, in addition to receiving appropriate, loving discipline, then the wrong message is being sent. The child receives the message, “You are not pleasing to me”, rather than the message, “You are my beloved child, and though I must lovingly discipline you, I am always ready to receive your apology and forgive your offense.” Our children must be encouraged to come to us confessing their sins before God and us and knowing that they are forgiven. The simple act of a loving hug and profession of forgiveness after such an episode goes a long way in communicating this to them – just as anger and sending them away goes a long way toward driving them away from us. In giving them the cold shoulder of anger and sending them away, we have become more harsh than God and we are treating our children as condemned heathen rather than beloved children. *If we are to practice justification, we must be ready to forgive.*

#### **Providing the means of faith**

God gives us faith by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Though we can't perform the same internal operation that he can, we can create an environment of trust for our children. The way to accomplish this is to tell our children of our love for them and to put that into practice. God is faithful to his word. We must be as well.

From their earliest days, Christian parents ought to verbalize their love for their children. Even though your children may not be old enough to understand language, tell them that you love them. The tone of voice and look on our face as we say those words will likely communicate even to an infant that he/she is in loving hands. Creating an atmosphere of trust must begin with the verbalization of your love.

Secondly, pray for your children in their presence. Jesus prayed for his disciples in their presence when he was with them. Let your children know that you not only pray for them, but that you want them to hear your prayers for them. This sends a powerful message that cannot be duplicated. To know that his/her parents are going to the King of kings and Lord of lords for them enforces in the child's mind and heart that they are indeed cared for and loved. One caution in

this is not to use this only as an opportunity to use prayer as an indirect disciplinary device. “O Lord, please forgive Johnny for his sinful attitude” will only be an encouragement if it is balanced by prayers like, “Lord, give Johnny the ability to study effectively and to do well on his test tomorrow.”

Thirdly, as your children grow older teach them to seek forgiveness. When they are too young to speak, if they must be spanked, give them a hug afterward to let them know that they are forgiven. As they learn to talk, teach them to ask for forgiveness. The words, “I’m sorry, please forgive me” ought to be heard frequently in the Christian home. These words ought to be immediately followed by the words, “I forgive you”. Let your children know that you can be trusted to forgive them – do not withhold it from them when they seek it. This will create an environment of trust and peace.

Finally, remember to be good to your word. Do what you say you are going to do. Unfulfilled promises are more harmful than no promises at all because they teach a child that faith/trust in you is not well grounded. Never break a promise. And never make idle threats. If you do not intend on disciplining sin in a certain way, don’t say that you are going to and then not follow through. Again, the child will learn that you don’t mean what you say – and that will have dire consequences when you utter the words, “I’m sorry”, or, “I forgive you”. Follow the old adage, “Say what you mean and mean what you say”, and you will have gone a long way toward creating a trusting environment.

Though we cannot create faith in our children, by God’s grace we can create an environment of trust that will facilitate our child(ren)’s faith in us as parents. This, too will go a long way toward living out the doctrine of justification in the Christian family.

### **Living the Justified Life in the Church**

What has been said about the practice of the doctrine of justification in the family also applies to the life of the church. Churches can easily slip into a practice of viewing their members with suspicion. Members are made to feel that they are never “good enough” for the church or for God. A man recently told me of his experience in a previous church. Whenever he was providentially hindered from attending church by work-related travel or vacation he would get grilled by another parishioner when he returned. “We missed you on Sunday”, were the words this parishioner spoke. The tone of voice used, however, communicated the message, “I hope you have a good excuse for missing church last week.” What was taking place in this church, was that members constantly had to prove their sincerity and Christian commitment. Their salvation was constantly in question which led to frustration and a sense of works-righteousness.

What has always amazed me is how St. Paul dealt with the early churches. There were problems of sin galore and yet Paul consistently believed that the people in the churches would respond favorably to his exhortation and rebuke. Why did he assume this? He assumed it because he believed that he was writing to the elect people of God in whom the Holy Spirit dwelt. It was because of that belief that he had confidence they would desire to follow his instruction.

In essence, Paul was assuming that the people to whom he was writing were justified by God and because of that they would also be sanctified. Contrast this to the church example I gave earlier where there was an assumption that no one was justified - they constantly proved it by their works. Paul's exhortations grew out of trust and love – the church of which I spoke exhorted out of doubt and suspicion. In the latter setting justification was never assumed and the result was a stifling, oppressive atmosphere of justification by works – and in the heart-of-hearts, every person knows he can't win under that type of system.

Did Paul think that every church member was the elect? Experience had shown him otherwise. Many former co-laborers had fallen away and shown themselves to be enemies of the church (Romans 16:17-18, 2 Timothy 4:10,14-15). Paul was not concerned to spend his time trying to determine who was saved and who was not. Rather, he assumed all were saved and knew that those who were not would rebel in the course of time. [NOTE: In a later pamphlet the doctrines of grace as they relate to the sacraments and the church will be further discussed.] Unfortunately, many evangelical churches today have adopted the unattainable and unwarranted ideal of a producing a pure, believing church – the outcome of which is to view everyone with suspicion.

### **Living as a Justified Church**

To live the justified life in the church requires the same steps that we have talked about with the family 1) choose to love church members assuming they are the elect, 2) provide for forgiveness when offenses occur, 3) be trustworthy in your dealings with other church members.

The church is not merely a human organization – it is the body of Christ, arranged by Christ himself exactly the way he wills (1 Corinthians 12:18). It does us no good, therefore to spend time trying to determine whether or not God wants this or that person in the body – rather we must look at each person as the elect of God, justified by grace and placed in the body by His sovereign will. *We must, then, choose to love all members of the body because Jesus himself has placed them there.* Instead of judging the actions and motives of the members of the body of Christ, let us love them and serve them as Christ has done for us.

Within the body of Christ there will be sin because the body is comprised of sinners. Though God clothes His people with the righteousness of Christ, his people still are prone by their own sinful nature to sin against God and man. Sin is not an indication that someone is not a believer – it is simply an indication that even believers wrestle with their flesh (sinful nature). We ought not to assume

the worst when sin is manifested in the church, we ought to come along our brethren and strive to see them reconciled with God and man.

This requires that repentance and forgiveness be part of church life just as it is in family life. Yes, sin must be dealt with. When the sin is private, church members must follow the pattern laid out in Matthew 18; when it is public, the church leadership must take disciplinary action. However, the goal is always repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Church leaders and membership alike must always be ready to apologize and to forgive because they are members of the body of Christ for whom Christ died. As such loving discipline and forgiveness takes place, the members of the body are molded by God increasingly into the image of Christ.

Finally, the church ought to be the place where Christians feel safest because they know and can trust the fact that the other members of the body are committed to them and to their growth in Christ. As the church treats all its members as the redeemed of God and deals with them graciously, the message gets across that here is a people in whom you can place your trust. Why do you think that someone who sows discord amongst the brethren is hated by God (Proverbs 6:19)? It is, in part, because brothers are treating one another worse than they ought to treat their enemies and the trust which ought to reign within the church is severely damaged or destroyed. "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). This is what transpires when trust reigns within the body of Christ.

## **SUMMARY**

*The key point that needs to be understood with regard to the doctrine of justification is that God loves in order that we might become lovely. He does not love because loveliness has already been attained. To do that would be to place sanctification before justification – the end result before the process begins. He elects, he provides atonement, and he is faithful to us.*

These attributes must also be worked out in the life of each Christian if the grace and love of God is to be made manifest through us. *We, too, must love in order that the objects of our love might become lovely – not because they already are lovely.* This principle goes against the grain of our culture, but it is in perfect accord with how God deals with us. May God grant us the grace to live the justified and justifying life in His presence that His name might be all the more praised!