



Soteriology

Justification and Adoption

Introduction:

Justification and adoption are two of the most glorious doctrines in the believer's salvation. Justification speaks of our new legal standing before God, while adoption reveals our new relational standing as His children. Together, they display the fullness of God's grace—declaring us righteous through Christ and welcoming us into His family forever.

I. Justification

A. Definition

1. What does it mean to justify? Is it to make just or to declare just? How does the Bible use this word? All of these things are vital to a Biblical understanding of justification.
 - **Romans 4:5** — *But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.*
2. "We may define justification as that instantaneous act of God whereby, as a gift of his grace, he imputes to a believing sinner the full and perfect righteousness of Christ through faith alone and legally declares him perfectly righteous in his sight, forgiving the sinner of all unrighteousness and thus delivering him from all condemnation."¹
3. At its most basic level, to justify means "to declare righteous."
4. Justification is a legal term. It is a declaration of righteousness, not an infusion of righteousness. Justification describes what God declares about the believer, not what He does to change the believer.
5. "In fact, justification itself effects no actual change whatsoever in the sinner's nature or character. It is an instantaneous change of one's status before God, not a gradual transformation that takes place within the one who is justified."²
6. How common are these legal declarations? What does this look like?
7. "When a minister declares, 'By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife,' there is an instant change in the legal status of the couple standing before him. Seconds before, the law regarded them as two distinct individuals. Yet on the basis of this pronouncement, their legal status before God and in society changes entirely. And while that declaration has profound and life-transforming implications, nothing about the couple's character or nature changes as a result of the minister's words. It is a legal declaration only."³

B. Some confusion throughout Church History

1. Justification is a very vital part of salvation. There has been some debate/confusion about the biblical doctrine of justification throughout time. Why is that the case?
2. The Greek word for "to justify" occurs 39 times in the NT.⁴ *Dikaioō* means "to justify" or "to pronounce righteous."

¹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 612.

² Ibid., 612.

³ Ibid., 612.

⁴ Douglas Mangum and Derek R. Brown, *Galatians*, Lexham Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Ga 2:1–21.

3. When the NT was translated into Latin, there was a subtle, most likely innocent, shift in the connotation of the word. In the Latin Vulgate, the Greek word *dikaioō* is translated as “justificare,” meaning “to make worthy.”⁵
4. “This subtly shifts justification from being God’s acquittal of the believing sinner to the sinner’s transformation into a person worthy of God’s esteem. Early Latin writers such as Tertullian began to teach that man can earn merit so as to make God his debtor and can satisfy his obligations to God through deeds of penance.”⁶
5. “Roman Catholic theology teaches that justification is not merely forensic but transformative. In other words, according to Roman Catholic teaching, “to justify” does not mean “to *declare* righteous” but “to *make* righteous.” Now, it is true that the saving grace of God is transformative; those who are declared righteous in conversion will be progressively made righteous throughout the course of their Christian lives. However, this progressive transformation defines the reality not of biblical justification but of sanctification. By failing to distinguish these two intimately related yet nevertheless distinct applications of redemption, Roman Catholicism collapses sanctification into justification. The inevitable consequence is that the believer’s own imperfect righteousness replaces the perfect righteousness of Christ as the sole ground of justification. The result is “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,” which, as Paul says in Philippians 3:9, is not the saving righteousness of God. Because of this, failing to understand the nature of justification as a legal declaration and instead mischaracterizing it as a transformative process destroys the very foundation of the gospel.”⁷
6. “The result of this Roman Catholic view of justification is that people cannot be sure if they are in a “state of grace” where they experience God’s complete acceptance and favor. The Catholic Church teaches that people cannot be certain that they are in this “state of grace” unless they receive a special revelation from God to this effect.”⁸

C. How is it just of God to declare a sinner to be righteous?

1. How can a just and holy God declare a wicked sinner to be righteous?
 - **Proverbs 17:15** — *He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, Even they both are abomination to the LORD.*
2. All of mankind has fallen short of the glory of God and is worthy of total condemnation and eternal damnation. How could we be declared righteous? Romans 4:5 says that God justifies the ungodly. Romans 3:26 says that God is the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. But what grounds does God have to make this possible?
3. The answer to these questions is found in the rich doctrine of imputation. “[Imputation] is a twofold act; God imputes—that is, counts, credits, or reckons—our sin to Christ and punishes him in our place, and he imputes Christ’s righteousness to believers and grants them eternal life in him.”⁹

⁵ Chris Woodall, *Covenant: The Basis of God’s Self-Disclosure* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

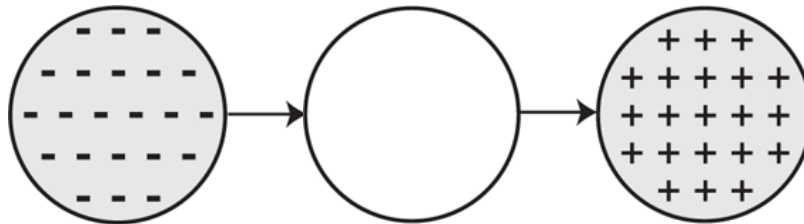
⁶ Kenneth Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation,” in *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 551.

⁷ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 613.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 891.

⁹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 614–615.

4. Why is it essential that imputation be a twofold act? What if God just forgave our sin without ever imparting Christ's righteousness to our account?
- If God only forgave our sin, it would only make us morally neutral before God. We would be in the state that Adam was in before he had done anything right or wrong in God's sight—he was not guilty before God, but neither had he earned a record of righteousness before God.¹⁰
 - The first aspect of imputation is our sin being imputed to Christ. He took our sin onto His account and paid for it in full.
 - **2 Corinthians 5:21a** — *For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin;*
 - **Isaiah 53:6b** — *And the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*
 - **1 Peter 2:24** — *Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.*
 - The second aspect of imputation is the truth that Christ's righteousness is now imputed to our account. "When we say that God *imputes* Christ's righteousness to us it means that God *thinks of* Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, or regards it *as belonging to us*."¹¹
 - **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.*
 - **Romans 4:5–6** — *5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. 6 Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works,*
 - "[There are three times we see imputation in Scripture.] First, when Adam sinned, his guilt was imputed to us; God the Father viewed it as belonging to us, and therefore it did. Second, when Christ suffered and died for our sins, our sin was *imputed* to Christ; God thought of it as belonging to him, and he paid the penalty for it. Now in the doctrine of justification we see imputation for the third time. Christ's righteousness is *imputed* to us, and therefore God *thinks of it* as belonging to us."¹²
 - "It is essential to the heart of the gospel to insist that God declares us to be just or righteous *not* on the basis of our actual condition of righteousness or holiness, but rather on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness, which he thinks of as belonging to us."¹³



¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 887.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 888.

¹² *Ibid.*, 889.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 889.

D. How can I be justified?

1. Christ's redemptive work was finished two thousand years ago on Calvary. Christ paid the debt and provided righteousness for those who would believe. But how can this redemptive work be applied to me? How can Christ's righteousness be applied to my account?
2. "The answer Scripture consistently gives is that we are justified through faith alone apart from works."¹⁴
3. *Sola Fide*, or faith alone, is the position that the Bible teaches for salvation. Where do we see this?
 - **Romans 3:21–31** — *21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; 22 Even the righteousness of God **which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe**: for there is no difference: 23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; 24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; 26 To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him **which believeth in Jesus**. 27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. 28 Therefore **we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law**. 29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: 30 **Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith**. 31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.*
 - **Romans 5:1** — *Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:*
 - **Galatians 3:22–26** — *22 But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. 24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. 26 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.*

E. What about James?

- **James 2:14–26** — *14 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, 16 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? 17 Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. 18 Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. 19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. 20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? 22 Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? 23 And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed*

¹⁴ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 618.

unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. 24 Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. 25 Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? 26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

1. It may seem as though James is teaching something contrary to what Paul taught about justification. James literally wrote that man is justified by works and not faith alone in verse 24. What is going on here? Is the Bible contradicting itself?
2. The answer is that James uses the word “justified” (Gk. *dikaioō*) in a different sense than Paul uses it in the above texts. James speaks of justification in the sense of “vindication” or “the demonstration of righteousness.”¹⁵
3. We see this to be true in the examples that James uses. He cites the patriarch of faith, Abraham, and says that he was justified by works, citing the example of his offering Issac as a sacrifice at the Lord’s command. This part of Abraham’s life occurs in Genesis 22. But many years earlier, the Lord already justified Abraham by faith.
 - **Genesis 15:6** — *And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.*
4. Abraham demonstrated the righteousness he possessed by faith by performing good works. True faith will produce works.
 - **James 2:18** — *Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.*
5. John Calvin famously wrote, “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”¹⁶

II. Adoption

- It is vital for us to realize that many things happen at the moment of conversion. We are regenerated, we call out in faith and repentance, we are justified, adopted into the family of God, and positionally sanctified. But each of these things is rich in its own right and shouldn’t be confused with the others.

A. Definition

1. We may define adoption as follows: adoption is an act of God whereby he makes us members of his family.¹⁷
2. Adoption is sometimes confused with regeneration. The idea of being “born again” sounds like a child being born into his earthly family. But the New Testament never connects adoption with regeneration; indeed, the idea of *adoption* is opposite to the idea of being born into a family!¹⁸ It is possible to be spiritually alive, not separated from God by sin, and not be in the family of God. Isn’t that the position of the angels? Regeneration deals with our spiritual life.
3. Adoption is also distinct from justification. We could have had our sins forgiven and been in right legal standing with God without being a part of His family. That would have still been very gracious and kind! Justification deals with our legal status before God.

¹⁵ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 621.

¹⁶ Ibid., 623.

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 913.

¹⁸ Ibid., 915.

4. Adoption has to do with our *relationship* with God as our Father, and in adoption, we are given many of the greatest blessings that we will know for eternity.¹⁹

B. Privileges of Adoption

- This list comes from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, pp. 916-920

1. Adoption gives us the ability to talk to God and relate to Him as our loving Father.
 - **Matthew 6:9** — *After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*
 - **Galatians 4:7** — *Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.*
 - **Romans 8:15–16** — *15 For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. 16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:*
2. Adoption demonstrates that God loves us, understands us, and takes care of our needs.
 - **1 John 3:1** — *Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.*
 - **Psalms 103:13–14** — *13 Like as a father pitieth his children, So the LORD pitieth them that fear him. 14 For he knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust.*
 - **Matthew 6:32–33** — *32 (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. 33 But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*
3. Because of adoption, our Father gives us good gifts, especially the gift of the Holy Spirit.
 - **Matthew 7:11** — *If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?*
 - **Luke 11:13** — *If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?*
4. Because we have been adopted into the family of God, we have a great inheritance as an heir of God.
 - **Galatians 4:7** — *Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.*
 - **Romans 8:17** — *And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.*
 - **1 Peter 1:4** — *To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,*
5. Being led by the Spirit is a benefit of adoption.
 - **Romans 8:14** — *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.*
6. God only disciplines those who are His children, which is a privilege of adoption.
 - **Hebrews 12:5–6** — *5 And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: 6 For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*

¹⁹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 916.

Conclusion:

In justification, God declares the sinner righteous through faith alone in the finished work of Christ. In adoption, He brings that same justified sinner into His household as a beloved child and heir. These twin truths remind us that salvation is not only a pardon from guilt but also an invitation into a family, secured eternally by the love and righteousness of God.