A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 7.2.1 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

Justification: The Meaning of the Word

The Hebrew word that is translated "justification" is generally used in a forensic or judicial sense. Thus, to justify means to declare or pronounce someone righteous (not guilty) as a judge would do. For example, God through Moses says to His Old Testament people: **"You shall not pervert the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify the wicked"** (Exodus 23:6-7). God was instructing the Israelite judges to determine on the basis of the evidence whether a person is guilty or innocent. If the evidence indicates guilt, then the judge must not justify the person but condemn him, that is, he must declare the person guilty; he must make that judgment. On the other hand, if the evidence indicates that the person is innocent, the judge must pronounce the person "just" or innocent; he must declare the person righteous, that is, he must justify the innocent. Faithful judges are to **"justify the righteous and condemn the wicked"** (Deuteronomy 25:1).

King Solomon asked God to carry out the same kind of righteous judgment: **"When anyone sins against his neighbor, and is forced to take an oath, and comes and takes an oath before Your altar in this temple, then hear in heaven, and act, and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked, bringing his way on his head, and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness"** (1 Kings 8:31-32). So, the opposite of "justify" is "condemn" or "find guilty." Other words that mean about the same as "justify" are "acquit" and "pardon."

Solomon recognized that perversion of justice is a serious crime in the eyes of God. He wrote: **"He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD"** (Proverbs 17:15). The prophet Isaiah agreed, saying: **"Woe to men…who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!"** (Isaiah 5:21, 23).

The Greek word that is translated "justification" is also generally used in a forensic or judicial sense. For example, Jesus said: **"By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned"** (Matthew 12:37). Jesus is speaking about the day of judgment, when the Judge will pronounce a person either "not guilty" or "guilty", "justified" or "condemned." We read: **"Even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John"** (Luke 7:29). It is clear here that "to justify" does not mean "to make righteous": the tax collectors did not make God just, but they pronounced Him just, or declared Him to be just, by being baptized with the baptism of repentance by John the Baptist. They agreed with God that they were sinners who needed to have their sins washed away in baptism. Jesus accused the Pharisees of declaring themselves righteous when He said to them: **"You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts"** (Luke 16:15).

Most often in the New Testament the word "justify" (together with its related Greek words) is used with reference to God's action of declaring sinners righteous. Earthly judges are called to judge innocent people righteous. But God declares *sinners* righteous. For example, in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, it is the sinful tax collector that goes home "justified" (Luke 18:14) rather than the proud Pharisee. It is especially in Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans that he uses the concept of justification to explain the Gospel. For example, we read in Romans 3:23-24: **"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."**

It is important that we remember that justification is not a process by which God makes us gradually better and better until we are just and righteous, as though God were giving us some kind of medicine to improve our spiritual health. No, justification is complete in an instant – God simply declares a person to be righteous. It is the act of a judge who, after investigation or examination, acquits a defendant and declares them totally pardoned.

The only One who can pronounce sinners righteous is God Himself, for all sins are in reality sins against God, and He is the supreme Judge. King David in the Old Testament was guilty of the gross sins of adultery and murder. Nevertheless, he recognized that he was declared forgiven by God Himself. David wrote: **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity"** (Psalm 32:1-2). Notice that it is the Lord Jehovah (YHWH) who has pardoned him by not counting his sin against him. The apostle Paul quoted this psalm of David in speaking of God as the One **"who justifies the ungodly"** (Romans 4:5). If an earthly judge would justify a guilty person, this would be wrong, even **"an abomination"** (Proverbs 17:15), but the righteous God is altogether **"just"** in acquitting sinners (Romans 3:26), as we shall see in the following lessons.

To be justified (or to be declared righteous) is the same thing as being forgiven. When my sins are forgiven, I am just and righteous in the sight of God. The sin that separated me from God has been taken away and is not counted against me. Forgiveness of sins is the negative expression of the same thing that is expressed by the positive term: justification. Forgiveness takes away the bad stuff; justification is receiving the good stuff in its place. In one of his sermons recorded in the book of Acts the apostle Paul declared to his audience: **"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man** (Jesus) **is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses"** (Acts 13:38-39).

The official Roman Catholic teaching defines justification in a way that is contrary to Bible teaching. The Council of Trent, which met around the time of Martin Luther's death, defined justification in this way: "Justification…is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner man through voluntary acceptance of grace and of the gifts by which an unjust person becomes a just one and an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to the hope of eternal life" (Session 6, chapter 7). Notice that the Roman definition of justification makes it a gradual process of improvement by which the sinner is not simply declared just but actually becomes just in his life. This is a dangerous teaching, as we shall see in the following lessons.

Questions

1. What is the Old Testament meaning of the word "justify"?
2. What is the New Testament meaning of the word "justify"?
3. What is meant when we say that "justify" is used in a forensic sense?
4. What was the duty of earthly judges in the Old Testament?
5. How did the tax collectors justify God?
6. How did God justify the tax collector in Jesus' parable?
7. Why is it important that we don't think of justification as a gradual process?
8. What is so unusual about the fact that God justifies sinners?
9. What is the relationship between justification and forgiveness?
10. What is wrong with the Roman Catholic definition of justification?