



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## Missiology

### Lesson 16 – Objective Justification and Christian Missions

Many Christian missionaries who work in the world today do not have a clear understanding of the Bible's teaching concerning what we call objective or universal justification. Therefore, it is good at this point to review this teaching and show how it applies to our mission. As one teacher has said: objective justification provides the motive, the message, and the method in mission outreach.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **"If One died for all, then all died; and He died for all"** (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). All human beings are sinners, and Jesus died for them all. He died not only for the benefit of all, but in place of all. Thus, Jesus' death on the cross in place of sinful mankind has the same result as if all mankind had died for their own sins. In other words, the punishment endured by Jesus on the cross for all human sins was the payment for all sins. Since Jesus was punished for the sins of all sinners, all sinners have been freed from the punishment they deserve.

A few verses later in this letter, Paul spelled this out even more clearly. He wrote: **"Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation"** (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Notice that we do not reconcile God to ourselves by our actions or by who we are. God is the One who has done the reconciling, and He has done it through Jesus Christ, His Son. How did He do it? **"He (God) made Him (Jesus) who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The question then becomes this: Who is meant by the **"us"** in 2 Corinthians 5:18 and the **"us"** in 2 Corinthians 5:21? Not just Jews! Not just white people! Not just professing Christians! Not just those born and raised in so-called "Christian" countries! No, if One died for all, then they all died. If Jesus took the punishment for sin in place of all sinners, then all sinners have had their sins punished. This is spelled out in 2 Corinthians 5:19, where we read: **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them."** Paul is talking about the reconciliation of the world, not just some persons in the world; he is talking about the entire world: all sinners of every age and every place. All sinners the world over were enemies of God because of their sin – sin which God hates and must punish. But God counted the sins of the world as the sins of Christ, for He punished Christ in place of the world because He was bearing the sins of the world. He counted our

sins as the sins of Christ and punished Christ in full for all our sins. That is what was happening on the cross when Jesus cried out that God had forsaken Him. The curse of our sin was laid on Jesus, and He bore it all in His own body.

Since God counted the world's sins as Christ's sins and punished Him for them, God does not count the sins of the world against the world. These are wonderful words for us who are in the world: **"Not imputing their trespasses to them."** God does not count the sins of the world against the world. He does not impute their trespasses to them, that is, to the world. Since He does not count the sins of the world against the world, that means He declares the world forgiven; He declares the world righteous. The world becomes the righteousness of God in Christ.

This is what we mean by the term "objective justification" or "universal justification". God has declared the whole world forgiven and righteous because of Christ. It is called "objective" because it is a fact based on a factual happening regardless of whether it is believed or accepted or not. It is called "universal" because it is true for every individual sinner, because Jesus died for all, and God has declared the whole world righteous in Christ. In essence, this is what the Gospel or Good News is. God in Christ has won forgiveness for all, and therefore He has accomplished salvation for all and won eternal life for all. What better news could there possibly be?

When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, the status of the world before God was changed from an unredeemed world to a redeemed world, from an unreconciled world to a reconciled world, from an unjustified world to a justified world, from an unsaved world to a saved world.

What happened on the cross did not change God, for God is unchangeable; He has always desired the salvation of sinners; this has been His attitude from eternity. The Good News of Jesus Christ has been God's plan from the beginning.

What happened on the cross and at Easter did not change man either. But it changed his *status* before God. But this change in status cannot do the individual sinner any good until he or she knows about it and begins to trust in it. Unless someone tells a person about this status change, they cannot trust in it. That is why Paul wrote to the Romans: **"How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?"** (Romans 10:14-15). Those who have already been brought to faith in Christ by hearing the Good News become those who tell others of what Christ has done. They become preachers of the Gospel of Christ. And certain ones among the Christians are called by God through His Church to be missionaries and spokesmen on behalf of those who sent them. Their task is to be ambassadors for Christ to whom the word of reconciliation has been committed. As Paul wrote: **"Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God"** (2 Corinthians 5:20). In other words, accept the Good

News we bring you. Receive the forgiveness and salvation that Jesus won for you. This forgiveness and salvation is for the world, for every individual in the world, and therefore also for you. Take it and trust in it. That is why God has brought this Good News to you.

But we must also understand that not everyone who hears this Gospel – the Good News that God has reconciled the world to Himself through Christ – accepts it or believes it or trusts in it. In fact, it is impossible for human beings to accept the Gospel of Christ when it is brought to them. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth: **“As it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him’”** (1 Corinthians 2:9). Why is that so? Paul explained: **“The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him”** (1 Corinthians 2:14).

But what is impossible for human beings is not impossible for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit works through the Gospel that is heard to change the sinner’s heart from unbelief to faith. **“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”** (Romans 10:17). **“God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ”** (Ephesians 2:4-5). Therefore, **“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”** (1 Corinthians 12:3). Jesus Himself said: **“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him”** (John 6:44). Jesus said: **“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”** (John 6:63). **“No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father”** (John 6:65).

The Holy Spirit does His work of conversion and creating faith through the Word of God, as it is spoken or read or remembered from a previous hearing. He also uses God’s Word connected with the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Holy Spirit does not do His work outside of or apart from these means of grace: the Gospel in both Word and Sacrament.

This is why Jesus wants all His followers to proclaim and teach the Gospel. He said, **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15). Everyone needs to know that God has reconciled the world to Himself through Christ, so that the Holy Spirit will be able to use this message to persuade and convince sinners to trust in Christ and His work of reconciliation for their salvation. God does not want the precious Good News of what Jesus accomplished for the world to be wasted by not being heard by those who need to hear it. It is the Christian mission to bring this message to the world; it is the Holy Spirit’s task to use the Gospel of Christ to create saving faith in Christ in the hearts of sinners who hear the Gospel.

What is to motivate us believers in Christ to bring this Gospel to as many persons as possible? Paul answers that it is the love of Christ: **“The love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died: and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again”** (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). When we see Christ’s love reaching out to all sinners and crediting Christ’s righteousness to the whole world, this love of Christ moves us – even compels us – to bring this good news to the world.

How should we think about the individual sinners in the world? **“From now on, we regard no one according to the flesh”** (2 Corinthians 5:16). Rather, we regard every person we meet as someone for whom Christ died, as someone whom Christ redeemed, as someone whom God has declared righteous because of Christ’s reconciliation of the world to God. We no longer judge others as the world does. We do not see people as male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, black or white or yellow or red or brown, young or old, healthy or sick, handsome or ugly, educated or ignorant. They are all persons for whom Christ died; they are all part of the world that Christ reconciled to God.

We have been made alive again spiritually by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel. Jesus’ death had this very purpose: **“that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again”** (2 Corinthians 5:15). Believers have Christ’s love for them and the world He has saved as a motive for wanting to bring the Gospel of Christ to others. **“We make it our aim ... to be well pleasing to Him”** (2 Corinthians 5:9). **“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me”** (Galatians 2:20).

Besides giving us the motivation for our Christian mission, the teaching of objective justification gives us the content of what we are to say to sinners. Paul says: **“We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God”** (2 Corinthians 5:20). So, on the one hand we say that God has reconciled the world to God through Christ. In other words, the reconciliation has already been completed. Nevertheless, when we say: **“Be reconciled to God”**, we are pleading with and imploring our listeners to take and receive the gift of reconciliation which

Christ has won for them. This implies that we must show sinners their great need for reconciliation. This means talking to them about sin and God's Law and the threat of punishment, but only as preparation for the good news of world reconciliation and world justification through Christ. What can give us greater joy than to share this good news with someone who recognizes their sins against God and the horrors of what they deserve because of their sins? For **"Jesus Christ the righteous ... is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world"** (1 John 2:1-2).

As an ambassador for Christ, the missionary is deeply concerned that the message of reconciliation he brings will be received. He cannot on his own make people believe his message. Conversion cannot be forced or commanded. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit alone can bring it about. But the ambassador certainly wants his listeners to receive and benefit from the blessing he is bringing them. For that reason, a missionary will earnestly pray for God's blessing on the words he speaks. He knows the value of the blessing he is bringing because he treasures this blessing in his own heart. He knows that those who reject the Gospel he brings will be damned eternally, not because Jesus did not redeem them, but because they refuse to accept the Gospel, which is the only way by which they can be saved. He wants his listeners to be assured of their eternal salvation through faith in the Christ that he is proclaiming, so there will be a concern and an urgency in his message. There will be a sense of concern and urgency as he implores and pleads with his hearers to take God's free gift of forgiveness in Christ and enjoy its blessings now and for eternity. Paul wrote: **"We then as workers together with Him (God) also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ... Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation"** (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

Since an understanding of objective justification is so important for the proper preaching of the Gospel, the devil has worked through the centuries to introduce various false teachings that lead away from this truth. Most missionaries today go astray in their presentation of the Gospel by telling people that God will forgive their sins if they, on their part, make a free will decision to accept Christ and follow Him. In other words, they say that God is making an offer to them, and it is up to them to use their free will to accept the message. They use this style of speaking: "If you believe, God will forgive your sins and save you." In other words, a person's salvation depends on the person.

These teachers are correct when they say that Jesus died for everyone on the cross and that He rose again. But they err when they imply that any sinner has the free will to accept Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that by nature we are all dead in sins and therefore cannot contribute a single thing to bring ourselves to spiritual life. God is the only One who can bring us to faith, and He does that through the preaching of the true Gospel of Christ. This true Gospel is that Jesus died for all sinners on the cross, that God has accepted Christ's sacrifice and that everyone's sins, therefore, have already been punished in Christ. Everyone

has forgiveness already because of Christ. It is not something that will be given to person only when and if they do something first.

Here are some examples of what we mean. Some people say: “God is willing to forgive your sins if you do good works of love others to earn your salvation.” Others say: “God is willing to forgive your sins if you are sorry for your sins.” Others say: “God is willing to forgive you if you believe.” In other words, man must contribute something to earn the forgiveness of sins for himself. All these statements are denials of the Bible’s teaching that we are saved by grace alone. Some of the preachers and missionaries who have placed conditions the Gospel by their “ifs” include Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and Billy Graham.

Martin Luther, on the other hand, was taught by the Holy Spirit in Scripture that man can do nothing to contribute to his own salvation; salvation is entirely a gift of God. He wrote in the *Small Catechism*: “*I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common true faith*” (*Book of Concord*, pp. 355-356, Kolb-Wengert Edition, explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed).

On the other hand, the devil has led other teachers into an opposite error that changes the true Gospel into something that is not good news at all. John Calvin, for example, taught that from eternity God decided to save some people and decided to condemn everyone else. According to this teaching Jesus came into the world, not to save all sinners, but only those whom God wanted saved. Therefore, we cannot tell sinners the Good News that Jesus died for all, or that God has declared the whole world forgiven because of Christ’s atonement. We must even say that God does not want to save all sinners, but only those whom God chose to be His. This is not the true Gospel of Christ! It is contrary to what Scriptures clearly teach about Jesus’ death for all, about God’s desire to save all, and it certainly does not agree with the Bible’s teaching concerning universal reconciliation and universal justification.

We conclude this section by quoting from David Kuske, a Bible teacher who understands why the teaching of objective justification is so important. He has written:

“It is of little comfort for a troubled soul to hear an ambassador of Christ say to him: ‘Son, be of good cheer; the moment you believe your sins will be forgiven you.’ This is of little comfort to him because requiring faith as a condition which man must fulfill before being forgiven turns the blessed gospel into law. The law does make promises, but they are always conditional (e.g., “*If* a man does my statutes, he shall live in them”). The gospel promises are unconditional. The gospel then can only be an announcing of what God has done for us, never a suggestion of what we must still do. As soon as even one condition is attached to God’s gift of salvation, the gospel ceases to be the offer of a free gift, and it becomes instead the proposal of a bargain.

“But didn’t the jailer of Philippi ask: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ and wasn’t the answer given: ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved’? Yes, but if we understand this statement of Paul in the light of what he writes a dozen times elsewhere, this exhortation by Paul is not a law order telling the jailer that there was only one big hurdle left between him and heaven. Instead it was an invitation which encouraged the jailer to stop thinking about what he must do and rather accept what Christ had done for him.

“This too is the way that we want to carry on our mission outreach, namely, according to our Lutheran heritage which is firmly founded on the Scriptural truth of objective justification. Luther wrote, ‘What sin, then, remains on earth? Nothing remains except the failure to accept this Savior and the will not to accept Him who puts away sin. ... Therefore the world is no longer punished or damned because of other sins, since Christ has wiped out all of them. Only the resolve not to acknowledge or accept Him remains sin in the New Testament.’

“May we then who by God’s grace have learned to know God as the one who reconciled all men to Himself in Christ and as one who has laid on us the responsibility of administering his word of reconciliation – may we be faithful ambassadors who in our mission outreach are compelled by Christ’s love to approach all men with this concerned and earnest appeal: **‘We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’** And as we thus administer God’s-Christ-worked-world-reconciliation, may God bless His Word with rich fruit which redounds to His glory.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kuske, David “Making Use of Our Lutheran Heritage: ‘Objective Justification’ in our Mission Outreach Based on an Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:18–19,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 77, 1 (January 1980)).

## Questions

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1. What is meant by objective justification?
2. What is meant by universal justification?
3. Where is object/universal justification taught in the Bible?
4. What makes the Gospel of Christ such good news for sinners everywhere?
5. How can sinners lose out on the salvation that has been won for them?
6. What is the only way by which sinners can receive justification?
7. Why is it impossible for sinners to receive justification for themselves?
8. Whose work is it to persuade sinners to receive God's forgiveness?
9. How does this One do His work of persuading and converting sinners?
10. What is the missionary's part in this work?
11. What can the missionary not do in carrying out his mission?
12. What is wrong with the presentation of many missionaries today?
13. What is the difference between: "If you believe, you will be forgiven" and: "You have been forgiven. Believe it."
14. How did John Calvin change the Good News of Christ into bad news?
15. What did Luther mean when he said that unbelief is the only sin that remains on earth?