



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

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 19.6 – The Doctrine of the Forgiveness of Sins

The Meaning of Justification

Instead of using the words “forgiveness” or “remission” to refer to the gift that Christ has won for us and that the Holy Spirit distributes to us through the Gospel, the apostle Paul often uses the terms “justify” and “justification”. What we have thus far learned from God’s Word about forgiveness is amplified and clarified by what God’s Word teaches about justification. Forgiveness and justification are very similar. Forgiveness removes what we have but must get rid of: our sin and guilt. Justification gives us what we need but don’t have: perfect righteousness.

Justification is a courtroom term. It has to do with a judge, a court of law, the accused, and the verdict. The verdict is either guilty or innocent, condemned or acquitted. When God justifies you, that does not mean that you are not guilty. It means that God does not count you guilty. He declares or pronounces you to be just. This is what the word “justify” means: to declare someone not guilty, to declare someone righteous and holy.

In human matters a good judge is one who examines the evidence and based on the evidence declares a person either guilty or not guilty. If the person is guilty according to the evidence, the judge declares the person guilty and condemns them. If the person is innocent according to the evidence, the judge declares the person not guilty – he justifies them; he acquits them. It is written: **“He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord”** (Proverbs 17:15). It is wrong for a human judge to declare a wicked man innocent and an innocent man guilty. The prophet Isaiah warned: **“Woe to men mighty at drinking wine, woe to men valiant for mixing intoxicating drink, who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away justice from the righteous man!”** (Isaiah 5:22-23). A corrupt judge is willing to declare a guilty man innocent when he is given a bribe, often a payment of money, but a just and fair judge cannot be swayed in his judgment by money or by any other favors.

How much righteousness do we need in order to be able to be declared righteous by God, the Judge of all? The holy God has a high standard: **“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy”** (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus Himself told His followers: **“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect”** (Matthew 5:48). If we want to stand as righteous before the holy God, we must be perfectly righteous and holy, as God Himself is holy. The holy God demands perfect righteousness from all human beings. There is no other way we can stand before God and expect to attain His favor and eternal life with Him in heaven. It is not enough for us to know what is right. We must do what is right in thought, word, and deed. The apostle Paul wrote: **“For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified”** (Romans 2:13).

This presents us with a very serious problem, for God’s Word and our own conscience join together to make us aware of the fact that we are far from being as holy and as perfect as God. This is true of both believers and unbelievers alike, for it is written: **“There is none righteous, no, not one”** (Romans 3:10). David was a servant of God, but He did not want God to judge him based on the evidence of his life. He prayed: **“Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous”** (Psalm 143:2). The prophet Isaiah shows how far we are from perfection: **“But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6).

Since sometimes we do not consider ourselves all that bad, God has given us His law to show us our sins and our innate sinfulness. The apostle Paul wrote: **“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:20). The fact that we sin and that we are sinners puts us under God’s curse. **“For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’”** (Galatians 3:10-11). There are no loopholes. It is not good enough to do some of the required things some of the time. We are to continue to do all things that are written in the law. There are no exceptions. For this reason, we cannot be saved by God’s law or by the Ten Commandments. If we could keep these commandments perfectly, we could be saved by the law. But if a person attempts to save himself by the law, all he can accomplish is to put himself under a curse. **“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; ... but that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident”** (Galatians 3:10-11).

God has not given us the Ten Commandments so that we could save ourselves by keeping them. That is clearly impossible. Martin Luther wrote in his *Large Catechism*: *“The Ten Commandments do not succeed in making us Christians, for God’s wrath and displeasure still remain on us because we cannot fulfill what God demands of us”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 440).

Questions

1. What is the difference between forgiveness and justification?
2. What is the meaning of the word “justify”?
3. On what basis must earthly judges pronounce their verdict?
4. What are the two verdicts that a judge can pronounce?
5. Who is the judge of all, and what kind of judge is he?
6. What must be this judge’s verdict on everyone, according to the law?
7. Prove your answer to question 6 is correct based on Scripture.
8. Why must even believers in Christ be judged as guilty according to law?
9. Why is it that the Ten Commandments cannot save anyone?