

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 70

Halifax, 22 February 2009

Q. 70 What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which He pardoned all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in His sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

Introduction:

Last week, we were introduced to the subject of the communion we have with Christ in this life if we are members of the invisible church...

- We saw that He actually communicates benefits to us—
 - He gives us precious things...even now—in this life...
 - There is justification, adoption, sanctification, and other benefits as well.
 - We looked at these in a summary fashion last week.

- Today, we are going to take a close look at the first of these—justification!
 - You don't have to wait till you get to heaven to obtain this from Christ.
 - Justification is something that He gives to you in this life,
 - and unlike sanctification which is only partially given now—
 - justification is full and complete!

 - As soon as you believe, you are as justified as you possibly could be because in justification, Christ imparts *His* righteousness to you...
 - You cannot have a righteousness that is more complete than that!

- But let me tell you more of what this entails...
 - For our Scripture reading, I have chosen Romans 3:19-31.
 - This passage teaches us about how God justifies us or declares us to be righteous in His sight even though we are sinners.

 - READ> Romans 3:19-31.

TRANS> Now you see that this passage speaks a great deal about being justified...

I. What does it mean to be justified?

A. It means that you are approved as someone who measures up to what is right or expected.

1. It is important to understand that when someone justifies you, he does not **make** you to be righteous,

- but he either declares you to be righteous or demonstrates that you are righteous.
- Your lawyer is there to try to demonstrate that you are righteous, and it is up to the judge to declare you to be righteous (if he accepts your lawyer's arguments)

a. Think about a judge for a minute...

- In Deuteronomy 25:1, it speaks about a judge "justifying the righteous and condemning the wicked."
- That is what a judge is supposed to do, right?
- Well now let me ask you something,
 - When he condemns the wicked—does that mean that the judge does something to the character or nature of that person to make him wicked?
 - No, of course not—
 - He does not change the wicked man at all—he simply declares by the judgement of the court that he is wicked.

b. And is it not the same when he justifies the righteous?

- Does the judge change the man's character to make him a righteous man?
 - Of course not—he is simply declaring what the man is before the court.
- If justifying someone meant that you actually changed that character,
 - then Prov 17:15 certainly would not make sense when it says:
 - Prov 17:15: "**He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.**"
 - If justification meant actually making someone righteous who was wicked,
 - that would certainly not be an abomination!
 - It would be a very marvellous virtue!

- c. So the judge is not changing what the person is, he is declaring what he is in the eyes of the law...
 - Yet, that declaration does determine how he is to be regarded once it is made.

- B. So to be properly justified, you have to measure up to what is expected of you.
 - 1. All of you know what it means to measure up...
 - a. If you work in a store, there are certain things you are expected to do, and certain things you are expected not to do...
 - You expected to be courteous and helpful to the customers...
 - You are expected to refrain from stealing from the cash register or from spending the afternoon on the phone.
 - If you don't measure up to the expectations your employer has for you, it won't be long until he fires you—
 - He won't let you keep working there.
 - You may try to justify yourself and explain that you were on the phone for three hours trying to build customer relations or that you were rude to the customer because "Did you see what he did to me?"
 - But chances are, you will not be able justify yourself.
 - He has determined that you don't measure up to what is required.
 - b. You children know about measuring up to expectations too...
 - 1) Your parents have different things that expect from you...
 - At church, they expect you to worship God properly—to listen to the sermon, to sing the songs, and to pray.
 - They do expect you not to play or talk or jump around.
 - At home, they expect you to do your chores...
 - to keep your room clean, perhaps to wash the dishes, or maybe to set the table.
 - And even when you play, they have certain things that are acceptable and others that are unacceptable.
 - Jumping on the living room furniture is probably not acceptable...
 - 2) But what happens when you don't do what they expect of you?
 - You get in trouble!
 - You are guilty and they have to punish you.

- You may try to justify yourself, but most of the time they will still declare you to be guilty.

c. But what happens if they make a mistake?

- What if you were supposed to clean your room and you did,
 - but your little brother went in later and pulled everything out and made a big mess?
- You will tell your parents that you **did** clean your room and if they find out you really did,
 - then you **will** be justified...
 - They won't hold you guilty because you did what was expected of you.
 - You will be righteous in their eyes.

TRANS> So you see that you are justified when someone in charge declares that you have done what is expected of you.

- But what happens when it comes to being justified before God?

C. God has certain expectations for us as His creatures.

1. He has given us these in His law.

- He tells us that we are to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that He expects us to love our neighbour as ourselves.
 - This is something we were perfectly able to do before the fall.
- In the Ten Commandments, He gives us a more detailed catalogue of what He expects of us...
 - That we have no other gods before Him...
 - That we do not make images of Him to worship...
 - That we do not take His name in vain...
 - That we remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy
 - That we honour our parents
 - That we do not murder or commit adultery, or steal, or lie and gossip, or covet anything that belongs to our neighbour.

2. In the Old Testament, God gave His law to Israel.

a. He told them all these things that He expects of a human being.

- And because He had given them the law, they were under the law.
- They knew what was expected of them.

- b. But all this did was cause them to see that they were guilty.
 - In fact, they were an example to all the whole world that no one measures up to God's expectation.
 - If they were guilty, who had God's law,
 - everyone else was guilty too.
 - That's why in verse 19 and 20, it says:
 - **Rom 3:19-20: Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.**
- c. We are all guilty...
 - 1) No one is able to keep God's law, even when you have been told what is expected of you.
 - If those who are told what is expected do not even measure up, how can those who have not ever been told?
 - The conclusion is that no one can be justified by keeping God's law.
 - 2) This puts you in a very undesirable position!
 - To be guilty before God means to be liable to His judgement.
 - We have looked before at the misery of sin—
 - loss of communion with God,
 - all the miseries of this life—
 - the wrath and curse of God—
 - eternal punishment in Hell.
 - There is nothing worse than to be guilty before God...
 - David talks about this in Psalm 32:3-4
 - **Ps 32:3-4: When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer.**

TRANS> But Romans 3:19-26 explains how guilty sinners can be justified.

- That is what I want us to look at next.

II. How can guilty sinners be justified?

A. v. 21 says that "Now the righteousness of God apart from the law has been revealed."

1. What does this mean?
 - a. Does it mean that we are finally able to see how righteous God is—“now the righteousness of God apart from the law has been revealed”?
 - No...
 - This is not talking about the righteousness of God as one of His attributes or as one of His characteristics...
 - b. The “righteousness of God” as it is used here means “the righteousness that God requires of us.”
 - It refers to the expectation that God has for us as His creatures...
 - It speaks about what God requires of us if we are to be justified in His sight.
2. This is saying that there is a way to measure up to what God requires other than by your perfectly keeping His law...
 - It seems impossible...
 - How can you be declared righteous if not by keeping His law?
3. But notice that that this “righteousness of God apart from the law” is new in the sense that it has now been revealed...
 - a. It is not a new way of righteousness in that it had never been God’s way of righteousness for sinners...
 - Abraham and David and all the other OT believers were justified by this “righteousness of God apart from the law,”
 - b. The new thing is that it has been revealed...
 - but it was witnessed by the law and the prophets.
 - In other words, the law and the prophets (the Old Testament scriptures) spoke about it...
 - And it was God’s way of righteousness then just as it is now.
 - Since the fall, there has never been a time when we could obtain the righteousness of God by the law, but there was a time when the way of righteousness had not yet been attained—
 - It was only testified about as something that would be accomplished in the future.
 - Paul is saying, now it has been accomplished.

- c. If I might illustrate, suppose you needed to clean your house, but you were in a body cast.
 - Someone could come and tell you that you ought to clean your house, but that wouldn't help you...
 - That is what the law (commandments) does.
 - It keeps telling you what you need to do.
 - But if that person with the helpful information said,
 - "You ought to clean your house, but seeing that you can't, I will go and clean it for you..."
 - That would give you hope that your house might be cleaned after all!
 - That is what the Law and the prophets do...
 - This expression, "the law and the prophets" is used to refer not to the commandments, but to the Old Testament scriptures as a whole.
 - The law and the prophets set forth the promise that the requirement was going to be met, even though you could not meet it yourself.
- d. And here in Romans 3, Paul comes along and says that **now** this way of righteousness apart from the law has been revealed...
 - It is not only witnessed to and promised,
 - it has been accomplished!
 - Your friend came and did what was required of you that you could not do for yourself because of the body cast.
 - Not only did he tell you he would come and clean your house...
 - He came and He did it!
 - "Now" the way of God's righteousness has been revealed—God's requirements have been met—
 - openly, in the sight of all the nations!

B. And just what is it that has been revealed?

- v. 22- "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ."
- 1. The way of righteousness has been revealed because Jesus Christ has been revealed.
 - Righteousness by keeping the law was impossible for you...

- But now Christ has come, bringing this new way of righteousness.
 - It is through faith because we are made righteous by trusting in Him to fulfil all of God's righteous requirements for us.
 - You had a big bill to pay, and He has come to pay it!
 - The righteousness is obtained by faith—
 - All you have to do is depend on Him who has now come and done the work that was promised in the Law and the Prophets.
2. Not only does Paul say that this righteousness is obtained by faith, but he adds that everyone who has faith obtains it...
- Everyone, without exception, who believes on Jesus Christ obtains God's righteousness.
 - verse 22 declares it to be so—
 - the righteousness of God is “to all and upon all that believe...”
 - “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
 - There is no difference between Jew and Gentile...
 - both have sinned and both are saved by faith in Jesus Christ...
 - There is no difference between a notorious sinner and a mild sinner—
 - both have sinned and both are saved only by faith in Jesus Christ...
 - The one just as much as the other—
 - If there is faith, then the righteousness of God is yours.

III. God's grace is absolutely free—

- **v. 24: “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”**
- A. The idea is that our justification is completely unmerited—it is free—based upon no contribution of our own!
1. This is similar to saying that it is God's righteousness “apart from the law.”
- The whole focus is not on what you do (obeying the law), but on what Jesus did.
 - That it was “freely by grace” does not at all mean that there was no cost,
 - it only means that there was no cost to you.
 - All the cost was borne by Jesus.

2. This cost is spoken of in the words:
 - “Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”
 - a. Redemption focuses on a payment that delivers us from bondage.
 - Jesus redeemed us in particular from bondage to the curse.
 - We had to pay the full penalty of the law, which is eternal death.
 - But He paid it for us in full.
 - b. Verse 25 explains how the penalty was paid to redeem us...
 - God “set forth [Christ] as a propitiation by His blood, through faith.”
 - A propitiation is that which turns away wrath...
 - In Romans 1, Paul made it clear that God’s wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...
 - Now He is saying that God has revealed Christ sacrificed as the thing which turns away His wrath from us.
 - Christ, by His death, by the shedding of His blood, took God’s wrath upon Himself so that we might be redeemed.
 - c. This is the great blessing of justification!
 - God’s holy wrath and anger is turned away from us because it was turned upon Jesus Christ!
 - It all fell upon Him until the penalty of the law had been paid...
 - And now we are justified in God’s sight—whoever of us believes on Jesus Christ!
 - What a change!
 - To have God condemning you and raging against you...
 - Then to have Him justifying you and delighting in you!
 - And all completely apart from any work on your part—all because of the work of Jesus Christ for you.

B. God set Christ forth in this way in order to **demonstrate** His own righteousness....

- That’s what it says in verse 25 and again in 26.

1. Now the phrase, “His righteousness,” as it is used here, speaks of righteousness as one of God’s attributes...
 - righteousness that is inherent to God,

- the righteousness that is a part of his nature.
 - This is different than the way that it is used in verse 21 and 22 where “the righteousness of God” speaks of the righteousness that God requires of **us**.
 - In verse 21 and 22 it is the righteousness He **requires** of us...
 - In verse 25-26 is it the righteousness that is **in** Him.
2. His righteousness is set forth by publicly setting forth Christ as a propitiation...
- a. Christ was not crucified in a corner, but in a very public way.
 - It was a public execution and it had the symbol of being God’s curse because the Bible says “cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”
 - b. Before Jesus had been publicly set forth as a propitiation,
 - a question could be raised about how God could accept Abraham and Moses and David and Daniel and all the other Old Testament believers...
 - How could He accept them and count them righteous when they were not righteous? when they were all sinners?
 - God Himself could be accused of being the judge who is called an abomination because he justifies the wicked.
 - This is what verse 25 is talking about when it speaks of His forbearance in passing over the sins that were previously committed.
 - How could God be just and not reject the Old Testament believers because of their unrighteousness?
 - By what means were they justified?
 - The answer is, of course, that they were justified by faith in the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ...
 - which was witnessed by the law and the prophets in the OT ceremonies and promises.
 - And which has now been revealed—now that Christ has actually been set forth publicly as a propitiation.
 - c. If Christ had not been offered, God’s righteousness could have been called into question for justifying the ungodly even now...
 - People could say, “What kind of God is this who justifies the wicked?”
 - But now there is an answer!
 - He does not justify them arbitrarily,
 - He justifies them through faith in Jesus Christ who was set forth publicly as an offering for sin.

- That is how God can be just (or righteous) and justify the ungodly.

C. If you are justified through faith in Jesus, boasting is absolutely excluded!

1. If you were justified by keeping God's law, then you would have something to boast about...

- You could say, "I am justified because I fulfilled all God's righteous requirement."
- But if you are justified by faith apart from the law (v. 28), then there is no place for boasting at all!
 - Jesus Christ had to procure righteousness for you!
 - It was nothing that you did at all—
 - it was not by your keeping of the law—
 - it was by His sacrifice on the cross.

2. Does this mean that God's law is worthless? (v. 31)

a. If you are justified by faith, then what use is the law?

- Has God simply discarded it and thrown it out?

b. Not at all!

- The law is rather established...
- It is established because every demand of the law had to be met by Christ.
 - Not one demand could be cast aside because the law sets for the righteous requirement of God.
 - Now that Christ has come, the law is seen to be completely inviolable.
- Christ's sacrifice testifies to us that every requirement had to be met.
 - The law was not cast away, but its requirements were fulfilled.

c. In other words,

- Christ's coming does not mean that God does not require righteousness of His people...
- It means that He has provided another way for us to attain it...
 - Not by our own works which fail...
 - But by the work of Jesus Christ for us which always succeeds.
 - The standard is still there...
 - It is still just as high a standard as it ever was...

- The difference is that now it is met by another.

This ought to give you great confidence!

- Your salvation is not dependant upon you doing something you can't do (keeping God's law)
- Nor is it dependant on God doing something He can't do (forgetting His law and not upholding His own righteous standard)
- Your salvation is dependant on Christ doing what only He could do—meeting the demands of God's law for you who trust in Him.
 - The law is upheld...
 - Yet sinners are justified.