

I was a twenty-one-year-old student majoring in religion at a Christian college that held a few beliefs that clashed with mine. One day in ethics class the professor remarked, “We are justified as long as we cling to Christ by faith.” My doctrinal antenna shot up. “Sir,” I responded, “I believe we don’t cling to Christ; He holds us.”

The rest of the class time was lively as the professor and I debated the doctrine of justification. After class, a number of students told me I had won the debate.

I believed then and still believe that justification is based on Jesus’ perfect sacrifice on the cross.

THE MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

I regret that I did not have the opportunity to take typing in high school or in college, but I have learned that a typist may choose to align his or her sentences on the right side of the page. This is called justified right. The other option is to let the sentences end in an unjustified format. This is called ragged right.

The justified person is correctly aligned to God. Justification is the act of God by which He declares the sinner who believes Christ died for his or her sins to be in a right relationship with Him.

The college professor’s concept of justification implied that a person must do something to be justified—namely, cling to Christ by faith. But Christ does the holding so that we will never perish (John 10:28). Furthermore, justification is not earned; it is received by faith. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul had tried to earn a right relationship with God by keeping the Mosaic law, but he learned that religious effort cannot obtain God’s favor. He wrote in Romans 3:24 and 25 that we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God hath set forth to be propitiation through faith in his blood.”

But doesn’t Christ’s resurrection justify us? Romans 4:25 points out that Jesus our Lord “was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” The act whereby Jesus shed His blood as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for our sins brought us into a right relationship with God, and His resurrection is the proof of that fact. If we want assurance that Jesus’ sacrifice at Calvary was sufficient, all we must do is realize that God fully accepted that sacrifice on our behalf.

Justification is not earned; it is received by faith.

PAID IN FULL!

A transaction in an Eastern marketplace may help us understand the theological difference between Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and His resurrection. A buyer in the marketplace puts on the vendor's table the amount of money he thinks will pay for the item he desires. When the vendor has received what he considers the adequate payment for the object, he allows the buyer to lift the item. When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the full price of our redemption. He called out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). The word translated "It is finished" was used in a contract to mean "paid in full." Who in his right mind would keep making mortgage payments after making the final payment? Nothing can be added to Jesus' sacrificial work on our behalf. The Father raised Jesus from the dead to show that the payment was sufficient.

The churches of Galatia had fallen for the mistaken idea that justification, a right standing in God's sight, must be earned. False teachers, called Judaizers, had sneaked into the churches and taught the believers that to be justified they had to become circumcised and keep the Mosaic law. In other words, they had to become Jews. Paul called the Galatians "foolish," and asked, "Who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?" (Galatians 3:1). Paul had proclaimed Jesus' crucifixion as the means of justification, but it seemed the Judaizers had cast a spell on the Galatians to make them believe religious works were the means of justification. Paul insisted that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God (v. 11). He affirmed that Christ hung on the cross to redeem us from the curse of the law (v. 13). Paul's defense of justification based on Christ's sacrifice was so indisputable that he warned, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (1:8). He even repeated this warning for emphasis and urged the Galatians to stand fast "in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not

entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (5:1). He explained that “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace,” meaning that they were fallen away from the teaching that God saves sinners by grace (v. 4). He assured the Galatians that the Judaizers were hypocrites. He said, “As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised, only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in you flesh” (6:12, 13).

But what about the apostle James’ insistence in James 2:24 that “by works a man is justified”? A study of James’ letter reveals that he focused on justification in the sight of man, not in the sight of God. He viewed good works as proof that a person’s faith is real. For example, such a person demonstrates faith when trials strike (James 1:1–6). The believer exhibits humility (vv. 9–11), endures temptation (vv. 12, 13), is teachable and even-tempered (vv. 19, 20), leads a pure life (v. 21), obeys Scripture (vv. 22–25), controls his or her tongue (v. 26), and is compassionate and separate from worldly attitudes and lusts (v. 27).

What James wrote should challenge every justified believer to live for the glory of Christ, Who died to bring us into a right standing with God. ■

Dr. Jim Dyet, a frequent contributor to Horizons, maintains a busy preaching and writing ministry. He is a retired pastor living in Colorado Springs, Colorado.



Are you interested in writing for *Horizons*?
View the writer’s guide at
RegularBaptistPress.org/write.

