

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 7th Sunday After Pentecost, July 23, 2017

Justification and Righteousness

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Genesis 12:1-4a Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

In reading scripture we often encounter the words “justification” and “righteousness”. What exactly do those two words mean? To understand them you need to interpret them in theological terms, not in everyday language.

Justification, in Christian theology, is God's act of removing the guilt and penalty of sin while at the same time declaring a sinner righteous through Christ's atoning sacrifice. In Protestantism, righteousness from God is viewed as being credited to the sinner's account through faith alone, without works.

Righteousness is a theological concept in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It is an attribute that implies that a person's actions are justified, and can have the connotation that the person has been "judged" or "reckoned" as leading a life that is pleasing to God.

Have you ever heard someone say “Can you justify your actions?” A parent might say that to a child or one adult might say it to another adult who did something that causes concern.

In that context the person being asked must show or prove that whatever he or she did was reasonable. They must show that they deserve the confidence of the person asking the question.

Justify yourself. Explain why you did what you did and defend why you did it.

Do that adequately and your actions will be accepted. A good example is when a Board of Directors of a corporation is asked at a stockholders meeting to justify a major corporate expenditure. If the stockholders are convinced that the response of the Board was adequate, they will be satisfied. The Board will have justified itself. If they fail to do so, the stockholders are likely to dismiss the Board and elect a new Board.

Justification is necessary in all walks of life, but never more so than in our relationships with God.

The difference is that God is the judge and must decide that the individual is leading a life that pleases God.

In our scripture reading from Genesis, God tells Abram, or Abraham as he is later known, *“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”*

“Wait a minute Lord, I’m 75 years old and you want me to pull up stakes and head out to an unknown land. Can’t you at least tell me where you want me to move to and why you want me to move?”

Those sorts of thoughts might have gone through Abram’s head but he didn’t ask those questions of God. He just gathered his possessions and took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot, and he did as God instructed. He trusted God and because of that trust, he was justified in God’s eyes.

But what does it mean to be justified in God’s eyes?

Simply speaking, it means that the person has been judged by God as leading a life which is pleasing to God. It means that the person is righteous.

Our reading from Romans talks about trying to be justified by good works, by good deeds and actions. That is all well and good but it alone does not count for a lot with God.

God expects your trust, just as he saw Abram’s trust in Him. Abram did not question God. He had faith in God and he trusted God. He was justified before God and received God’s grace.

Our Daily Bread (June 14, 2016) said, *“It’s easy to think that if God showed up in astonishing ways for us like he did for Abraham, then we would be more inspired to be faithful servants of God.”*

God does show up to us but rarely via a face-to-face meeting. God wants us to pray and to listen for what he is telling us. Certainly as Christians he expects us to do good works for others, to love our neighbors as ourselves. But God wants us first and foremost to trust in Him. We are saved by God’s grace but we must remember that salvation implies that we trust Christ and God.

These Days (March 1, 2015) said, *“We may justify the church by talking about its good works --- how much it benefits surrounding communities, advances justice, and advocates for the poor and downtrodden ...*

What if the church, all of us collectively, simply stopped trying to carry out the second great commandment and just “... turned over everything to the Lord in prayer [and] thanksgiving? ... “ What if we simply decided to let God take care of those social

needs?

If we did that, if we stopped the good works, we would be failing. We must put our trust in the Lord that he sees what we are doing and approves. If we trust God, we will be justified; we will be righteous in God's eyes. We must trust God and be willing to follow wherever God leads us, even if, like Abraham. We can't see our destination; even if we don't have a GPS to guide us.

In Romans 4, Paul points out that Abraham was righteous because of his faith in God; that he was justified by his faith, not by his good works.

Walter Bruggemann, et al ⁽¹⁾ explains that Paul, in discussing Abraham, is saying that *"... The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals God's initiative for the salvation of all people, even in the face of sinful rebellion against God. Even Abraham, a prime example of **obedience** to God, is not an exception to this claim. It is because of Abraham's **faith** that he can become the spiritual father of all believers, both Jew and Gentile.*

"... Had Abraham been involved with God in a world of work, God would have been obliged to pay Abraham, and Abraham would have had a cause for boasting of his accomplishments."

But, of course, this is not an employer-employee situation. Yes there is an exchange between God and Abraham but one which is radically different.

"The question of how Abraham came to be regarded as righteous, then, has its answer: He believed God and God gave him the designation of "righteous.""⁽¹⁾

Paul argues that Abraham was the father of all those who share his faith, Jew and Gentile, all of us. Abraham and all of us cannot earn righteousness, either by believing or by good works. Righteousness is ours solely as a gift from God through grace.

BibleStudyTools.com states that *"God the Father is righteous; Jesus Christ his son is the Righteous One; the Father through the Son gives the gift of righteousness to repentant sinners for salvation; such believing sinners are declared righteous by the Father through the Son, are made righteous by the Holy Spirit working in them, and will be wholly righteous in the age to come. They are and will be righteous because they are in a covenant relation with the living God, who is God of all grace and mercy and will bring to completion what he began by declaring them righteous for Christ's sake."*

This is a long definition which simply says that, by accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we have received his grace and salvation.

We are righteous. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

(1) Walter Bruggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching, Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1995

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011