

In trouble... Themo Justficate

More concentration
taking notes might help

How to Have a Personal Relationship with God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, March 18, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-25

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you have a personal relationship to God? How would you answer someone who asked you that point-blank? Suppose you answer, "Yes, I belong to the Oxford Presbyterian Church." But what if your questioner were to say, "Why, I know old so and so whose been a member of that church for years and never goes. Do you mean to tell me simply belonging to that church gives you a personal relationship to God?" Church membership is no guarantee that we have a personal relationship to God.

The word that the Bible uses to explain how we're brought into a personal relationship to God is *justification*. Listen again to what St. Paul wrote to the church in Rome. "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Justification brings us into a personal relationship.

Justification is a word every Christian ought to know. It's a word that's played an extremely important role in the life of the church, especially Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Justification isn't necessarily a word that you should use when talking with people who aren't familiar with the Bible but it's an important word for Christians to know and have some understanding of. My boys are learning new vocabulary words every week. Every new word broadens their understanding of the world. When Christians learn biblical vocabulary words we broaden our understanding of who God is and we're able to read the Bible with greater understanding.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is justification?" The answer:

Justification is an *act* of God's free grace,
by which he *pardons* all our sins,
and *accepts* us as righteous in his sight,
only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us,
and received by faith alone.

Let's take a look at that definition.

1. *Justification is an act of God's free grace.* That means that God is under no obligation to enter into a personal relationship to us. Yet God does so out of sheer grace, out of pure love for us. God is always the one who initiates the personal relationship. God reveals himself to us. God sends prophets to tell us who he is. God, in the person of Jesus, comes to us, proclaims his love for us, calls us to trust him, offers us his friendship. God creates the church to tell the world that he desires a personal relationship with him.

God is like an unwanted friend who stops over to visit but we're too busy to take time for him and so we tell him to call again. He calls us the next day to go out for lunch but we've already made other plans. Like an unwanted friend, God comes to us smiling, with his hand extended, and we say, "Oh, no. There he is again" and we try to ignore him and act as if he isn't there.

Francis Thompson describes our natural relationship to God so well in his classic poem, *The Hound of Heaven*.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter,
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

2. *Justification is an act of God's free grace by which he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for*

the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

St Paul uses three words to describe the relationship we have with God before he justifies us. He says, for one thing, that Christ died for the *ungodly*. *We were ungodly*, he says. That simply means that we had a natural tendency to leave God out. Seven-up is called the un-cola because it doesn't include cola, as in Pepsi or Coca Cola. Paul says we were ungodly because we didn't include God in our plans.

Secondly St Paul says "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." We were *sinners* Paul writes. That doesn't mean we were all murderers or rapists. It simply means that we were people who failed to do what God required of us and who did the things God forbids.

The third and strongest word St Paul uses is *enemies*. "*We were God's enemies*" he says. Our natural relationship to God was one of hostility, enmity. That doesn't mean that we shook our fists at God. Sometimes we simply ignore the people we hate. The way most people express their hostility toward God is simply through ignoring him.

Now, if this was true of us you'd think God would want to do us in. But it's precisely while we were ungodly, sinners and God's enemies that Christ died for us, the righteous for the unrighteous. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ...i.e., in our place. God imputes ... charges or attributes to us Christ's righteousness & imputes our sin to him.

3. So justification is an act of God's free grace, by which he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

St Paul doesn't say, "Trust God and he'll pardon and accept you." He says, "God already loves you, God already has pardoned your sins and accepted you through Christ." *We are justified by Christ's blood* Paul says ... i.e. *Christ's death*. *Because* this is true, trust him. Our faith doesn't force God to love us, rather it's our way of acknowledging,

receiving, enjoying - and returning - the love Christ had for us long before we ever thought of believing in him and loving him.

The big question is how can we have that kind of faith? Faith is gift God gives. We can no more simply decide to trust God than we can decide to trust any human by sheer will power. Faith is a gift. This doesn't mean, however, that we have to adopt a fatalistic attitude. There are some things we can do to put ourselves in a situation where the gift of faith is promised and received.

First, if we want a faith that trusts in the love of God we can admit honestly that none of us has such faith, at least not always. Even those who don't have intellectual doubts don't have such confidence in God's love that they're free from all fears and never try to justify themselves. None of us has a pure faith. We all need to pray daily, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!"

Secondly, faith becomes possible when we put ourselves in the situation where we can hear about and experience God's love over and over again. That situation is above all the church, the community of God's people. Just as our children need to hear over and over again from parents that they're loved, so we Christians need to hear over and over again the unbelievably good news that God loves, forgives and accepts us ^{on the basis of what He has done for us...} despite everything we've been or done or failed to do.

Third, we can risk doing what faith requires. Faith in Christ is only possible when we live by faith. How can we really trust God if we're not willing to obey him? Faith comes with obedience. Without obedience, there can be no faith.

Now lets go back to the question that we began with. Do you have a

personal relationship with God? According to the doctrine of justification, those who have a personal relationship to God are--

1. those who know that they're guilty of offending God and of hurting other people and themselves by their attempts to justify themselves;
2. They believe that nevertheless, despite everything, they're forgiven, loved and accepted by God's grace in Jesus Christ. And as they experience freedom from the anxious or proud need to justify themselves, they also experience a personal relationship with God and a new freedom to accept and be themselves.

We rejoice in you, O Lord, through whom we have not received reconciliation. Amen.

Thanks for God's limitless love & grace
for the way we have been enjoying

Pray for hostages

" " Churches ... especially those in Soviet Union
For Sunday committees ... committees of the church ... the mission of our church
For the families of the school children who died

For the sick, hospitalized, grieving

Cephalos@cornu - Klonas disease