

Calvin's Institutes, Book Three, *The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ* [cont'd]

## CHAPTER XI: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: ITS DEFINITION, PART 1

1. The Definition of the "Double Grace"

Calvin:

I believe I have already explained above, with sufficient care, how for men cursed under the law there remains, in faith, one sole means of recovering salvation. I believe I have also explained what faith itself is [in Chapter II, Faith], and those benefits of God which it confers upon man, and the fruits it brings forth in him [in Chapter III, Repentance]. Let us sum these up. Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace; namely,

1. that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and
2. that, sanctified by Christ's spirit, we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.

Of regeneration,<sup>1</sup> indeed, the second of these gifts, I have said what seemed sufficient [in Chapter III, Repentance]. The theme of justification was therefore more lightly touched upon because it was more to the point to understand first how little devoid of good works is the faith, through which alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God; and what is the nature of the good works of the saints, with which part of this question is concerned.<sup>2</sup> Therefore we must now discuss these matters [of justification] thoroughly. And we must so discuss them as to bear in mind that this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation [justification] nor one on which to build piety toward God [sanctification]. ...

2. The Nature of Justification

Calvin:

But that we may not stumble on the very threshold – and this would happen if we should enter upon a discussion of a thing unknown – first let us explain what these expressions mean:

1. that man is justified in God's sight, and
2. that he is justified by faith or works.

<sup>1</sup> "Regeneration," in this context means the same as "repentance," or what we call "sanctification."

<sup>2</sup> One of the objections to justification by faith is that it supposedly eliminates the need for Christian perseverance – that it is "easy believism." Calvin's previous chapters, especially chapters II and III on faith and repentance, respectively, were written to show that this is not so.

Calvin now gives definitions to each of the two concepts listed above. First, consider the definition of justification. This definition is supposed to apply whether we are talking about justification by faith or justification by works. It is strictly the idea of “justification” that is being defined:

He is said to be justified in God’s sight who is both

1. reckoned<sup>3</sup> righteous [by any method] in God’s judgment, and
2. has been accepted [by God] on account of his righteousness.

Indeed, as iniquity is abominable to God, so no sinner can find favor in his eyes

1. in so far as he is a sinner, and
2. so long as he is reckoned as such.

Accordingly, where there is sin, there also the wrath and vengeance of God show themselves.

Now he is justified who is reckoned [by God] in the condition not of a sinner, but of a righteous man; and for that reason, he stands firm before God’s judgment seat while all sinners fall.

Calvin now shows how justification by works operates:

If an innocent accused person be summoned before the judgment seat of a fair judge, where he will be judged according to his innocence, he is said to be “justified” before the judge. Thus, justified before God is the man who, freed from the company of sinners, has God to witness and affirm his righteousness. In the same way, therefore, he in whose life that purity and holiness will be found which deserves a testimony of righteousness before God’s throne will be said to be justified by works, or else he who, by the wholeness of his works, can meet and satisfy God’s judgment.

Now Calvin shows how justification by faith operates:

On the contrary, justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “reckon,” as used throughout the Scripture, may be defined as follows (BibleWorks):

Greek verb: **logizomai**

—1. *reckon, calculate*

—a. *count, take into account*: [Ro 4:8](#); [1 Cor 13:5](#); [2 Cor 5:19](#); [2 Ti 4:16](#).  
*credit*: [Ro 4:3f](#), [5f](#), [9](#), [11](#); [2 Cor 12:6](#); [Js 2:23](#).

—b. *evaluate, estimate, look upon as, consider*: [Ac 19:27](#); [Ro 2:26](#); [9:8](#); [1 Cor 4:1](#); [2 Cor 10:2b](#).  
*class*: [Lk 22:37](#).

—2. *think (about), consider, let one's mind dwell on*: [J 11:50](#); [2 Cor 10:11](#); [Hb 11:19](#).  
*propose*: [2 Cor 10:2a](#).  
*reason, make plans*: [1 Cor 13:11](#).

—3. *think, believe, be of the opinion*: [Ro 2:3](#); [3:28](#); [14:14](#); [2 Cor 11:5](#); [Phil 3:13](#); [1 Pt 5:12](#).

Now comes the summary:

Therefore, we explain justification [by faith] simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men.<sup>4</sup> And we say that it consists in

1. the remission<sup>5</sup> of sins and
2. the imputation (= reckoning) of Christ's righteousness.<sup>6</sup>

The picture is that our sins are taken away and Christ's righteousness is put in their place.

### 3. Scriptural Usage

Calvin gives the following examples to help us visualize what justification means:

Jesus, speaking about John the Baptist:

**Luke 7:28** <sup>28</sup> "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." <sup>29</sup> And when all the people heard *Him*, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John.

This does not mean that the people conferred righteousness upon God. It means that they reputed God to be just, or right. The act of rightly justifying the works of God gives an example of what "justification" means.

But, ... when Paul says that Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith [Gal 3:8], what else may you understand but that God imputes (= reckons) righteousness by faith? Again, when he says that God justifies the impious person who has faith in Christ [Rom 3:26], what can his meaning be except that men are freed by the benefit of faith from that condemnation which their impiety deserved? This appears even more clearly in his conclusion, when he exclaims: "Who will accuse God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who will condemn? It is Christ who died, yes, who rose again ... and now intercedes for us" [Rom 8:33-34]. For it is as if he had said: "Who will accuse those whom God has absolved? Who will condemn those whom Christ defends with his protection?" Therefore, "to justify" means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed. Therefore, since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation (=reckoning) of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ. Thus it is said in Paul's sermon in the thirteenth chapter of The Acts: Through Christ is forgiveness of sins announced to you, and everyone who believes in him is justified of all things from which the law of Moses could not justify him [Acts 13:38-39].

<sup>4</sup> It's worth noting that Calvin's definition does not state that our justification, or acceptance, consists only in elimination of the demerit of our sins, but that it also includes God's regarding us as positively righteous.

<sup>5</sup> remission = release [Lk 4:18](#). Pardon, cancellation of an obligation, a punishment, or guilt, hence forgiveness of sins [Mk 1:4](#); [3:29](#); [Lk 3:3](#); [Ac 10:43](#); [Eph 1:7](#).

<sup>6</sup> There is also no distinction made by Calvin between the "active" righteousness of Christ and the "passive" righteousness. It is not presented as if the "passive" righteousness cancels our sins, and the "active" righteousness is put to our account as positive righteousness. We have seen in the section on Atonement, that Calvin does not divide the work of Christ into parts, such that the parts of his work could be separately applied to us (or not). It is all one work, and it is applied as a unit.

You see that, after forgiveness of sins, this justification is set down, as it were, by way of interpretation. You see that it is plainly understood as absolution, you see that it is separated from the works of the law. You see it as the mere benefit of Christ, and you see that it is received by faith. You see finally that a satisfaction is introduced where he says that we are justified from our sins through Christ. Thus when the publican is said to have gone down from the Temple justified [Luke 18:14], we cannot say that he achieved righteousness by any merit of works. This, therefore, is what is said: after pardon of sins has been obtained, the sinner is considered as a just man in God's sight. Therefore, he was righteous not by approval of works but by God's free absolution. ... .

#### 4. Justification as gracious acceptance by God and as forgiveness of sins

Calvin goes on providing Scripture support for his description of justification, mentioning that justification is also described in Scripture as "acceptance": "We are destined for adoption through Christ according to God's good pleasure, to the praise of his glorious grace by which he has accounted us acceptable and beloved" [Eph 1:5-6]. This, Calvin says, is the same as saying that "God justifies us freely" [Rom 3:24]. Furthermore, he points out that Paul, in the fourth chapter of Romans, calls justification the "imputation (=reckoning) of righteousness." Furthermore, Paul includes within it [i.e., within the reckoning] the forgiveness of sins.

Paul says: "That man is declared blessed by David whom God renders acceptable or to whom he imputes (= reckons) righteousness apart from works, as it is written: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions have been forgiven'" [Rom 4:6-7; Ps 32:1].

The idea is that forgiveness of sins and the imputing, or reckoning of righteousness to a person really amount to the same thing, since the passage equates the effect of imputing righteousness apart from works and the effect of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>7</sup> Calvin goes on to say that the imputed righteousness of which Paul speaks is simply set in opposition to guilt.

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<sup>7</sup> This is important since it shows that Calvin does not see that forgiveness only takes away our demerits. Forgiveness also involves the positive reckoning of righteousness to us. If our "sins of omission" are forgiven – that is, if we are forgiven for not doing all the righteousness acts we were supposed to have done, then we are reckoned as having done them. That is, we are reckoned to be righteous.

Calvin:

But the best passage of all on this matter is the one in which he teaches that the sum of the gospel embassy is to reconcile us to God, since God is willing to receive us into grace through Christ, not counting our sins against us [2 Cor 5:18-20].<sup>8</sup> Let my readers carefully ponder the whole passage.

Following Calvin's exhortation, we will ponder the whole passage. Note the following:

<sup>18</sup> Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, <sup>19</sup> that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

This indicates that the reconciliation of the world to God was done (in the past) by removing the imputation, or reckoning, of their own sins to their account. The record of their sins was taken away by the work of Christ. Since the work of reconciliation is finished, it only needs be accepted, that is, believed. Therefore the appeal:

<sup>20</sup> Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

The emphasis here is not that God is angry with sinners, but that sinners are angry with God. But, God appeals to them on behalf of Christ's finished work which has already provided the reconciliation. God appeals: "Be reconciled to me, because I am reconciled to you, in Christ!"

Our being reconciled to God does not make our reconciliation with him come to pass. The reconciliation has already happened. It only remains to believe it, to simply receive it – to rest in it! This is salvation.

Paul goes on to explain how it works:

<sup>21</sup> For He made Him [Christ], who knew no sin, [*to be*] sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

It's clear in the Greek as well as the English that "we might become the righteousness of God" is a reference to a change in our real spiritual relationship to God, not simply a reference to our (or the apostles') ministry. Christ was reckoned to be a sinner, for our sakes, though he knew no sin, and was not a sinner by nature, even after he was reckoned to be a sinner. In him, we are likewise reckoned to be righteous, even though we are not. If we cannot be reckoned to be righteous in Christ, having the righteousness of God, then Christ cannot be reckoned a sinner in our stead. Reckoning cuts both ways. This is a "blessed exchange" between us and Christ. It cannot be separated into pieces such that our sins could be reckoned to Christ, but his righteousness not be reck-

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<sup>8</sup> **2 Corinthians 5:18** <sup>18</sup> Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, <sup>19</sup> that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore *you* on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

oned to us. We either have the dual imputation, the imputed (reckoned) exchange of sin and righteousness between us and Christ (both ways), or we do not have any such thing at all!

Calvin goes on to comment:

For a little later Paul adds by way of explanation: “Christ, who was without sin, was made sin for us” [2 Cor 5:21], to designate the means of reconciliation. Doubtless, he means by the word “reconciled” nothing but “justified.” And surely, what he teaches elsewhere – that “we are made righteous by Christ’s obedience” [Rom 5:19]<sup>9</sup> – could not stand unless we are reckoned righteous before God in Christ and apart from ourselves.

Let us also examine this passage:

**Romans 5:19** <sup>19</sup> For as by one man's [Adam's] disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's [Christ's] obedience many will be made righteous.

Calvin clearly understands, considering the context of his argument in the Institutes, that our being “made righteous” begins with our union with Christ, and the reckoning of ourselves as righteous, even though we are not – though we will be in the end. In the parallelism of Romans 5:19, this is parallel to Adam not only giving birth to a race in which sin is propagated down through the generations, but also that all Adam’s offspring were regarded (reckoned) in God’s mind to be sinners, as soon as Adam sinned (once). It is the immediate reckoning of sin to all Adam’s offspring which constitutes them sinners, and eventuates in a life of sin and rebellion against God. Likewise, it is the reckoning of Christ’s righteousness to all his offspring (the church), through faith only, which constitutes them righteous even though they are sinners, and eventuates in a life of spiritual warfare against the sin remaining in them, and ultimately sees them delivered from the very presence of sin, and admitted to the presence of God in eternal life – righteous!

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<sup>9</sup> **Romans 5:17-19** <sup>17</sup> For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) <sup>18</sup> ¶ Therefore, as through one man's offense *judgment* came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act *the free gift* came to all men, resulting in justification of life. <sup>19</sup> For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.