

CAN THE UNGODLY BE JUSTIFIED?

Romans 5:8 tells us that God “justifies the ungodly.” In other words, the holy and absolutely righteous God makes a pronouncement that certain ungodly people are no longer to be viewed by Him as ungodly, but are to be viewed now as perfectly righteous and acceptable to Him.

It does seem unjust for a holy God to simply make a decision and declare one who is unholy as holy. This is where many people struggle with the doctrine of justification. Most of the time we do not pause and reflect on the seriousness of the problem presented here and so we do not appreciate what Christ has done for us in His death. We need to understand that our sin is a real problem that must be dealt with. Sin is not something casual God can simply pass over or sweep under the rug and try to forget. His Holiness has been insulted. One sin renders us guilty of breaking His entire law (James 2:10).

The doctrine of justification has been taught clearly for centuries as a declaration of righteousness. However, this declaration cannot happen without righteousness actually being present. God will not simply declare one righteous who has no righteousness at all. So how does this happen? We know from Scripture that God will not accept our works to merit righteousness before Him (Eph. 2:8-9). If we cannot merit righteousness and yet righteousness must be present, what can we do? Romans 3:21-26 has been described by some as among the most important paragraphs ever written. It is in this paragraph that Paul explains that the saving righteousness of God is not available through the law, but has been revealed in Jesus Christ and his atoning death. Righteousness must be present for God to declare one righteous, but that righteousness cannot be one's own. It must be the righteousness of another, and this paragraph explains who is able to achieve perfection on our behalf. Verse 26 shows that the explanation Paul has just given regarding obtaining the righteousness of Christ through faith proves that God is just. According to Culver's Systematic Theology, Paul seems to be asserting that up to now the righteousness of God in forgiving sin (justifying sinners) could be in question (v.21). This is the case because there was not perfect righteousness present in David, Abraham or any of the other Old Testament saints. But God still declared them righteous. When Christ died, God was publicly vindicated because now His wrath against sin had been satisfied and He could declare those for whom Christ died as righteous. Verse 24 explains that our acceptance by God is a gift given by grace and that this gift is made possible through the redemption in Christ

Jesus. In other words, through faith we can have the life and death of Jesus Christ imputed to our account and God will view us as if we have never sinned and have completely fulfilled the law by loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It is only through the imputation of the life and death of Christ to us that this is made possible. There are a multitude of passages in Scripture that make the connection between Christ and justification. In Acts 13:38-39, Paul speaks of Jesus and explains that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and that through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. Romans 8:1 tells us that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Those who are in a vital union with Jesus Christ, who are in Christ, do not have to be concerned over condemnation. They are as fully acceptable before God as Christ Himself.

One of the greatest summaries of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to our account is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For he hath made him [Christ Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." This verse is packed full of important theological truth. Christ was sinless; He suffered for our sins with the purpose that we might have righteousness applied to our account. Finally, it is because of the perfect obedience of Christ that we are justified. Romans 5:19 says, "For as by one man's disobedience [Adam's] many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one [Jesus] shall many be made righteous."

It is true that we must be perfect to stand before God. This can only happen through the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is our all in all and we must rely on Him alone for the appeasement of God's wrath toward us. The obedience of Christ must therefore be regarded as the grounds of justification; it is this righteousness, which God not only takes into account but reckons to our account when he justifies the ungodly.

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