

Summer Conversation Cafe Week Seven: Bible Topic- Justification

The word, “justify,” has both a negative and positive suggestion. For example, “The man justified his theft because he was poor.” “The student justified his cheating because he lost his book.” To justify then, used in this way, has the idea of calling bad behavior right or acceptable because of an excuse or a reason.

A positive example of the word justify would be, “The interrogations... were legal, essential, *justified*, successful, and the right thing to do.” In this case, justify is used in a legal way, to prove someone innocent or not guilty.

The Bible uses the term justify in both ways. There are stories of people who try to justify their bad behavior with excuses. Then there are people who realize none of their excuses are good enough to earn forgiveness from God. The following story illustrates these two types of people. As you read it, keep in mind that a Pharisee is a respected community leader and often a teacher. A tax collector was generally hated by the community because they had a reputation of being dishonest.

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Talk about difficult words and concepts.

Explain the story in your own words.

What was the Pharisee’s chief sin and how did he attempt to justify himself?

What is the first requirement to be justified by God?

While God expects us to be humble and honest about ourselves, he also provides a legal means to justify people who want to be forgiven. Think of it like this. Let’s say that you had a large fine at the library because you did not return a book when it was due. And let’s say you had a friend who went to the library in your place and paid the fine. You then would be free to enter the library to check out more books because your friend took your pain/penalty. This is a picture, in a very small way, of what Jesus did for us. We broke God’s law; we do not love God most of all and we do not love our neighbors as ourselves. We deserve the punishment, but Jesus took the punishment for us. Consider the following Scriptures.

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.
We have left God's paths to follow our own.
Yet the Lord laid on him
the sins of us all. ~Isaiah 53

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.
~1 Peter 3

What is the metaphor used by Isaiah?

According to 1 Peter 3, what can people enjoy because Jesus took our sin?

Let's go back to the illustration of the library. What if you did not accept the payment your friend made for you at the library and insisted on paying it yourself? Most likely, the library would tell you that your payment is not necessary, because the fine has been paid. How do you think your friend would feel about your refusal to accept their gift? How would this affect your relationship with your friend?

In the same way, the Bible teaches that Jesus' sacrifice must be recognized by us if we wish to have a relationship with God and be justified, accepted. Faith or trust is the response God is looking for from us. He wants us to believe and trust him to justify us because he suffered for us.

We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. Romans 3:22

In your own words, describe the concept of justification. What do you think of this idea?

The opposite of faith is to rely on our own good efforts, like the Pharisee in the beginning of the story. Many people feel that if a person is mostly good, then it will outweigh the bad they have done and they will be justified.

What do you think of this idea in light of our discussion?

