Section: Doctrine of Christ (Christology)

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**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q70.** **How is Jesus our righteousness?**

**His perfect life of obedience is credited to us. God sees Christ’s righteousness when He looks on those who are saved.**

Many of us parents have endured wayward children. Perhaps those children are young, small, and defiant. Perhaps to some of us, those children are grown. Nevertheless, in both instances, whether young or old, we have an illustrative insight into our subject matter tonight.

As parents, we stand as a type of judge toward our children. We hear evidence, we present sentences and enact discipline. In tears many have watched their kids venture into the world and declare that they will figure things out for themselves.

But imagine, if you would, that your wayward son or daughter were to come home. They had run hard, squandered it all, made a wreck of their life. But what if they came back to you and asked for forgiveness? What would you do? The nuance of life and its many difficulties can cloud situations like these. Perhaps they have done this before, and you simply know it’s the same game they always play. Or perhaps not, how would you respond?

Regardless, we know from the parable of the prodigal son that the father welcomes his repentant son in, he lavishes him with a great meal, with additional inheritance, etc. In light of the son’s repentance, there is no reprisal to be had. There is only acceptance, forgiveness, and a new life together in community. There was no payment asked for the debt. Nothing. Just grace.

How is it that the father, the judge, would forgive his son? How would he find the capacity to take the debt upon himself? There is no good in the wayward son, none. The son has not earned any favor, that’s for sure.

This parable takes us to the bigger question for tonight: The theological question we must ask is this, “How does God justify sinners?”

The 2LBCF says, “Those God effectually calls he also freely justifies. He does this, not by infusing righteousness into them but by pardoning their sins and accounting and accepting them as righteous. He does this for Christ’s sake alone and not for anything produced in them or done by them. He does not impute faith itself, the act of believing, or any other gospel obedience to them as their righteousness. **Instead, he imputes Christ’s active obedience to the whole law and passive obedience in his death as their whole and only righteousness by faith.** This faith is not self-generated; it is the gift of God.”

What glorious truth!

Tonight, we wade into the deep waters of a foundational doctrine that is at the very heart of our salvation. This is the core of Christianity. No other religion offers this. Nothing comes close.

My plan tonight is to show you why this doctrine of Justification is gloriously universe-shattering and why we cannot just idly cast it off or be indifferent to it.

To start, let’s read our catechism question and answer: *“How is Jesus our righteousness? His perfect life of obedience is credited to us. God sees Christ’s righteousness when He looks on those who are saved.”*

Look around. You are sitting in a church. A particularly interesting church. Admittedly, this is no St. Peter’s Basilica. Yet, I would claim that the truths claimed on this campus are of more greatness than any such modern day word taught in any of Rome’s cathedrals. Though majestic in stature and beauty, they lack in truth and substance.

But, what does this have to do with anything? Tonight’s doctrine is a historic tenant of our faith. Behind our catechism question tonight is a singular word. That word is: justification. This is one of the major words that gave birth to the biggest split known to the earthly church institution, the Protestant Reformation. You are sitting in this room as an heir to those ‘protesters’ who stood up to those who would deny the Christian teaching of *justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone*.

Martin Luther said of this matter, “Justification is that article upon which the church stands or falls.” John Calvin said that justification is “The main hinge on which religion turns.” Why? Because at the heart of justification is the gospel. If we distort justification, we preach an alternate gospel. And if we do that, we are not Christians.

I will cover three sections tonight entitled,

1. What is justification? Why must we be justified?
2. How are we declared (or counted as) righteous? What is imputation?
3. Why is justification important? What are the implications of denying justification?

**What is justification? Why must we be justified?**

So, what is it? According to an online theological [source](http://www.theopedia.com/justification), “Justification is the doctrine that God pardons, accepts, and declares a sinner to be ‘just’ on the basis of Christ's righteousness (Rom 3:24-26; 4:25; 5:15-21) which results in God's peace (Rom 5:1), His Spirit (Rom 8:4), and salvation. Justification is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from all works and merit of the sinner (cf. Rom 1:18-3:28).”

The 2LBCF says, “By his obedience and death, Christ fully paid the debt of all those who are justified. He endured in their place the penalty they deserved. By this sacrifice of himself in his bloodshed on the cross, he legitimately, really, and fully satisfied God’s justice on their behalf. Yet their justification is based entirely on free grace, because he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction were accepted in their place. These things were done freely, not because of anything in them, so that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God would be glorified in the justification of sinners.”

Our Word of Truth Catechism defines Justification succinctly as, quote “God declares a believer not guilty based on the believer being credited Jesus Christ’s perfect righteousness.”

Turn with me to Romans 1:16-17. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Rom 1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

Let’s start with verse 17: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed” Stop. For in what? What is the ‘it’ here referring to? It is referring to the gospel. “It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” How is the gospel the power of God for salvation?

Look at verse 17 again, Paul uses a word: righteousness. What is righteousness?

According to the Webster’s dictionary of 1828, righteousness “is nearly equivalent to holiness, comprehending holy principles and affections of heart, and conformity of life to the divine law. It includes all we call justice, honesty and virtue, with holy affections; in short, it is true religion.” Now, not only does Webster’s dictionary happen to give us an awesome God saturated definition, but it shows us something important. Righteousness is a holiness, purity and conformity of the heart unto the divine law, all of God’s law. God’s law is both the applicable positive laws that God decreed for a people, purpose and time, and also His eternal moral law as seen summarized in our study of the Ten Commandments.

We know that God possesses true and complete righteousness. That is obvious. Daniel 9:7a says “To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness.” But Paul says that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. How is that?

By nature because of the fall, what is our station, position, stature, rank? Romans 3:23 says that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We are sinners. Specifically, we are dead in our sin. The consequence of sin is death. Romans 6:26a says, “The wages of sin is death.” Adam’s sin is credited to us all since we have all fallen in Adam. 1 Corinthians 15:22 says that in Adam, we all die.

We have a fundamental problem.

Isaiah 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

We are dead. We are without fellowship with our Creator. In our unregenerate position, we are without hope. God was just in making a covenant of works with Adam by which we bear the covenantal consequence of death and eternal punishment. We are owed nothing good, certainly not redeeming grace.

But, we all know that the story doesn’t end here. God, in His gracious mercy, extends the protoevangelium, the proclamation of the gospel, to Adam and Eve. He tells them that by Eve’s offspring the serpent’s head will be crushed. We have hope. The Old Testament quickly gets to this hope. Through types and shadows, hope for God’s elect is displayed. Israel is to look forward to the work of Christ as their redeemer from the bondage of sin.

This redemption narrative is a true story that we’re all familiar with. It is the story of the fall and of a coming Redeemer. But, the Apostle Paul labored to answer a question that few of us rightly ask. Romans 3:23-26 gives us a glorious insight into the mind of Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, as he worked this theological point.

He says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul labors to explain to us, *How God could effectively “pass-over” sin and remain righteous?*

Because we’re made in the image of God, we desire justice to be served. We love shows like Law and Order precisely because they resonate with our innate desire for justice. We demand payment for sin, as does God. It’s part of our nature. If God does not demand payment for sin, how then can He be God? God would cease to be God if He was not just and righteous. And so that’s the dilemma Paul is resolving. How can God be holy and just if he pardons sinners without just payment?

Enter the Christ: our divine Champion. Jesus, who perfectly submitted to the demands of the applicable positive law and the whole moral law; who took on flesh to become a sacrifice for sin that mere animal sacrifices could not satisfy. Our Christ, who was and is fully man and fully God. He satisfied the wrath of God in His death and was triumphant victory over death by His resurrection. He purchased the elect’s salvation as planned in the Covenant of Redemption. He allows for God to remain righteous in his condemnation of sinners and in His mercy and salvation for the elect. God IS “just and the justifier” (Romans 3:26) *because of* the victory of Jesus and the salvation plan of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

So, let’s go back to our scripture: “Rom 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” The righteousness of God is the gospel, it is Jesus Christ, in the flesh, submitting, working, and paying for our sin through His death and resurrection. But, this is not all that this scripture involves, “For in (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from FAITH for FAITH.” What does that mean? I admit, this portion of scripture has been confusing for me. To understand what this means, Paul gives us a clue. He now quotes Habakkuk 2:4, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

Do you remember when Pastor Joshua preached through Habakkuk? Habakkuk was an Old Testament minor prophet. Habakkuk 1:6 announces the Lord’s intent to raise up the Chaldeans to judge Judah. In this, God makes clear to Habakkuk that he is “doing a work…that you would not believe if told (Hab 1:5).” There is a theme in Habakkuk of difficult circumstances and great faith. Indeed, one commentary says, “Habakkuk argues with God over his ways that appear to him unfathomable, if not unjust. Having received replies, he responds with a beautiful confession of faith.” So, with that theme, think back to our Romans passage. Paul is speaking of the righteousness of God, the gospel, and how it’s revealed *from* God’s faithfulness (through Christ) for our faith/belief.

Habakkuk was justified by his faith, he believed in God and His promises in spite of the coming circumstances. This is key, God gives us righteousness through Christ. Upon His sovereign work of salvation, God credits the elect righteousness that He demands from all people everywhere. And we must understand, the only way to receive this righteousness is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Indeed, Habakkuk ends with these magnificent words: “Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.”

To recap, the Romans 1 passage is teaching us that the gospel of Christ is the one and true way that God is able to justly save sinners, while remaining righteous.

By now, hopefully we understand our need to be justified, we understand that justification is ONLY done via God through the gospel, and we understand that God could not simply overlook our sin. But, how exactly are we declared (or counted as) righteous? And that brings us to our next section.

**What is imputation?**

There is the somewhat technical term that we use in theological circles. It’s called imputation. Our catechism has a great definition: **Imputation**- When something not of your own is credited (accounted) to you. Adam’s guilt was imputed to all persons. The sin of the elect was imputed to Jesus at the cross, and Jesus’ perfect righteousness is imputed to the elect at conversion.

So, the mechanistic way we obtain justification is by the reality of the doctrine of imputation. As I said earlier, Adam was our first representative. Theologically speaking, he was our first ‘federal head.’ Romans 5:12 teaches us that “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.” We’ve got a problem here. We’re dead in our sin. We have a negative balance in our bank account. We are declared guilty because of Adam, and we add to this by our own subsequent sin.

What do you need when you overdraw your bank account? You need cash. You need someone, a person, a bank, an employer, etc. to give you more money so you can put something into your bank account so that it no longer has a negative balance. Your account needs to be *imputed* with cash (credited with cash). Think of our soul as an account. However, we must truly get that our “negative balance” of sin cannot be paid back by anything we do. To sin against the holy, eternal, perfect God is not something we can overcome in ourselves.

We have a need to have our account imputed with something. Think about it for a moment. If sin gives birth to death. What is the opposite of sin? It’s righteousness which leads to life. What we need, as dead beggars with no hope, is a whole lot of righteousness in our coffers. Getting our negative account back to Zero will not do—we’d still not have the riches we need, that is, the righteousness we need. No, instead, we need to be like Scrooge McDuck swimming around in a vat of gold. But, rather than gold, we need righteousness. This is the doctrine of imputation. By the sovereign will and work of God, the elect are credited Christ’s righteousness at the moment of salvation.

Turn with me to Romans 4:3-5, “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

Paul shows that Abraham was justified and *counted as* righteous through faith. Think back to the Romans 1 passage- and this is so crucial, so follow me here- in the Romans passage, Paul says that through the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This righteousness is what God demands from all of us. God demands this, but in ourselves we do not have it. Only Christ can credit it to us through the gospel, and so we obtain Christ’s righteousness in a moment – at salvation – by grace through faith. And thusly, because of this faith, we are *counted as* righteous. Christ’s righteousness is counted to us (each of God’s elect). God credits us what He demands of us. This is glorious!

If you read through the entire chapter of Hebrews 11, you will see the Old Testament faith hall of fame. You will see the saints of old justified and reconciled to God through faith. It is no different for us, we obtain our justification by grace alone through faith, faith *alone*. It is important to note that justification is not based on or maintained by a mixture of our works and faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Think about it for a moment. If our salvation is achieved by our work, even the work of using our agency to choose Christ, then is that really faith? Ephesians 2:8 teaches us that faith is not our work, rather it’s the gift of God. Not only is it a gift, the reason that faith is a gift is because if we were to somehow work our faith from our so-called “free-will” then we would boast in our salvation.

We may be tempted to say, “I just don’t understand why that person won’t put his trust in Jesus? I was able to figure it out, why can’t he? I figured it out, but he’s just too prideful to figure it out.” This is precisely *NOT* what Paul is teaching. Faith is worked in us by God based on His work of grace in our hearts.

**Faith is worked in us by God based on His work of grace in our hearts!**

We do not boast in our faith because it is a gift from God. The details of how we are saved, how this saving faith happens in more detail, is coming in our next section. So, you can look forward to that.

Now back to imputation. Turn with me to Romans 5:18-19 “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”

The one trespass that Paul is referring to is the sin committed by Adam. Paul speaks of this sin as being credited to all of humanity. We are all guilty because Adam was guilty. But, Paul turns a corner and speaks of Christ’s righteousness as the basis for the justification of the elect. In verse 18, the ESV uses the term “all men” again at the end. But we know that scripture teaches that there are people who will not believe and will rightly be condemned for their sin. Therefore, the correct understanding of this verse reads this way: “One trespass led to condemnation for **every person** who was represented by Adam, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for **every person** who is subsequently represented by and united to Christ.”

Paul goes on to speak of the encompassing manner of imputation. Because sin spread to all men, justification will spread to all of the elect. We are declared (or counted as) righteous at conversion. God looks upon the lowly sinner and sees the righteousness of Christ. This is the doctrine of imputation.

**Why is justification so important?**

So far we’ve defined justification and we’ve defined imputation. But, why is justification that big of a deal? I mean, does it really matter? To that, I heartily say, “YES!” It is of crucial importance. If we deny justification by faith alone, we have to say that we obtain a justification based off of some mixture of our merits or works combined with Jesus’ works.

If you stand before God and tell God that the reason he should not condemn you to hell is IN ANY WAY because YOU this, or YOU that or YOU did right by choosing Jesus of your own will, then you are putting yourself forth as a reason for justification and **that’s not Christian.** If we approach God with our own work, then we fundamentally misunderstand that Christ paid for our sin and has credit us the righteousness we need. We fundamentally misunderstand that His righteousness is credited to us since we have none of our own. If we are counting on pointing to ourselves IN ANY WAY rather than Christ for justification, then we show that we do not understand the gospel. We fundamentally misunderstand that if we do not stand justified by Christ, then everything we say and do is from a nature that is dead. We are still trying to earn it. We are still boasting in something that we have done.

Why can’t we be justified by something that we have done? Isaiah 64:6 “​We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

Matt 5:48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Romans 14:23 ... whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

If you stand separated from God, which under Adam you do, then nothing you do can earn or contribute to your salvation. We have to have righteousness imputed to us by Christ. Period. We need to be made new and transferred to the headship of Jesus. If we are not coming to God and fully falling flat on our face and saying, “It’s all Christ, I am righteous NOT of my own accord, but it’s all Christ.”, then you are damned and you stand apart from God.

Let me repeat myself: **If we are not coming to God and fully falling flat on our face and saying, “It’s all Christ, I am righteous NOT of my own accord, but it’s all Christ.”, then you are damned and you stand apart from God.**

**What are the implications of denying justification?**

At the top of the lesson I brought up the Protestant Reformation. I spoke of Martin Luther. The Reformation is a broad term that cannot be fully taught in a single lecture. But, I feel that this point is worth mentioning.

Martin Luther had an “ah- ha moment” when he was meditating on Romans 1:16-17. He had been taught that the “righteousness” that was being referred to in this passage was not something that man could possess. He was taught that righteousness in scripture was only God’s to have and to use in His judgment of sinners. But that all changed in a moment.

Luther said, “I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”

Luther had understood that God was righteous to judge sin. He even went so far as to say that he hated God prior to understanding justification. Why? Jesus says in Matthew 5:48 “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Luther was terrified of verses like this. What power would he possess to “be perfect”? He was taught that there was no such power and thus we just live in constant guilt and shame. Luther hated God for his holy requirements of us.

When Luther saw that our justification is something that happens at conversion, and we likewise are counted righteous before God, everything changed for him.

To better understand this, I want to speak of the Roman Catholic Church for a moment. In response to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church held The Council of Trent. In that, they made a few pronouncements about the doctrine that Luther and others worked to legitimize. The council pronounced that those who believe that nothing is required by way of cooperation between God and man in the receiving of the grace of justification are accursed. Basically, if you believe in justification by faith alone, then you are accursed!

The Roman Catholic Church does believe in a type of justification, but not justification by faith alone with an imputed righteousness. This is crucial to understand! Roman Catholics believe that at baptism man is made justified by Christ’s work on the cross. But, this justification does nothing in the way of imputing Christ’s righteousness to the man. It’s up to the individual, after baptism, to perform good works to maintain his/her salvation. According to an online apologetics [resource](http://carm.org/catholic-salvation-maintain), “In Catholicism, a person can gain salvation and lose it many times depending on the number of sins committed, their severity, and how much of the sacraments they participate in--in order to regain grace which enables them to do good works by which they are justified. Furthermore, justifying grace is infused into the Catholic upon baptism and via the sacraments. This grace can be gradually lost through venial sins or forfeited all together with mortal sins.”

This is not good news. This was the crushing reality that Luther grappled with. **This is the doctrine that taught him to hate God.** If God saves us unto a tally sheet where we have to continually do the right things, so that we will be glorified in heaven, God has not saved us. If God saves us unto the reality that we may screw up so bad that God will forfeit his love for us and condemn us to hell, then we run the risk of minimizing the payment of Christ on the cross. Within Roman Catholicism you are saved unto works, and if you don’t perform, you’ll lose it.

If Christ pays for our sins, past, present and future, then how does the Roman Catholic view of salvation and justification glorify Jesus? The theological errors in Roman Catholicism are grievous and have many damning realities.

Let me be clear, there are Christians in Roman Catholicism who understand justification by faith alone and imputed righteousness. Not because the Roman Catholic church has taught it, but because they have heard the true gospel elsewhere.

What are the implications of denying justification by faith alone and imputed righteousness? I’ve already hit upon this with regards to Catholicism, but let’s look at each one of these points.

Justification is the doctrine by which we are declared *not-guilty and righteous* before God. We are declared not guilty because of Christ’s righteousness that is imputed to us at salvation. We obtain this righteousness through faith. Our faith is a gift from God after God has regenerated our hearts. If you’ve put your faith in Christ, you did this after God graciously regenerated your heart. God is the sovereign actor in salvation.

If we deny justification, we effectively state that we are still condemned and have no hope. If we deny imputation, then we effectively have to work for our salvation, which in turn is equal to having no hope. We are completely dead in our sin. If we deny that our justification is by faith alone, then it’s by something else, and that won’t cut it on judgment day.

It’s quite popular in this day and age to claim that God is a God of love who will continually lavish unceasing love, blessing and acceptance toward all people. Beloved, beware of damning religious philosophies that masquerade as truth. That view of God attempts to turn God into a false god who is simply a servant for the whims of his creation. A god like this is not the God of the Bible, that false god is not perfect in all of his affections and attributes. An imperfect god is merely a sinful and fallen idol. In order for God to lavish His perfect love upon His elect, He must be perfect in every respect. And so, you see the need for Christ as the propitiatory sacrifice for sinners. We cannot reduce God to a grab-bag of our favorite theological concepts.

We must uphold the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone! Any attempt to alter the biblical doctrine of justification will only result in a gospel of works, which is no gospel at all. These are crucial tenants of our faith that we must believe in and accept.

**Closing**

To close, I want to speak of the gospel. Justification by faith alone is glorious because of what it says about God and His nature. God is so loving, so merciful, so majestic, and so glorious that He would send His only begotten son for the elect. For you and myself. For those who would have faith by grace. Romans 4:25 “[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

How is Jesus our righteousness? His perfect life of obedience is credited to us. God sees Christ’s righteousness when He looks on those who are saved.

I pray that we, the church—the saved, would understand that right now we are free and loved and pure as white snow. We are looked upon as righteous. We are beloved- as God’s son. Let this sink in. Let this be the aroma for our souls, and let this be the fuel to help us fight our sin. We do not stand burdened to be ‘good’ for God, we stand as a criminal who was headed for the electric chair, but who is now set free. I pray that we would have an overflowing heart of gratitude towards God and that that gratitude would drive us to obey our gracious and loving Father. We look forward to that day when we are MADE righteous by the power of God, where He will keep us entirely free from sin for the new creation. That is coming and we eagerly await.

Tonight, if you’re hearing this distinctive doctrine and you’ve yet to fully trust into Christ and His work, then I implore you to turn from your sin. Agree with God that you are dead from your own fallen attempts to make yourself righteous and bend the knee to Christ and His work. Repent and believe and be accepted into God’s fold as a beloved adopted son or daughter.

Let’s pray.