

**Proper 6**  
**Year C**

**[RCL] 1 Kings 21:1-10 (11-14) 15-21a; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3**

As Christians we believe that God freely justifies us by faith in Jesus Christ.

“Justification” and the related verb “to justify” are funny words because they can have different meanings depending on the context. In regular modern American English, to justify something (often an action like a big purchase or some bold statement) is to be put on the defensive possibly after being accused. It requires answering the why’s and why not’s of judges and questioners. It usually feels acutely negative. Alternatively, when it comes to using a word processor on a computer, justification is about which margin to make straight. Aside from editors and English teachers, no one gets very excited over the subject. However, in the context of Christian theology justification is word with a positive meaning that ought to resonate in every heart. It is an idea that is at the very core of the Gospel and the Church’s understanding of God’s great and merciful love. Unfortunately, it seems all too often that even in the Church people misunderstand what justification is all about.

So what is the Christian understanding of justification? In short, justification is how we are reconciled and placed in a right relationship with God. Despite some historic arguments among theologians about certain nuances of the doctrine of justification, Christians of all stripes recognize that the Holy Scriptures offer one clear answer to the question of how sinners are restored to communion with God. The answer is that our relationship to God is restored by faith in Jesus Christ.

In today’s reading from Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we hear: “We know that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ. . . by works of the Law no one will be justified.” It seems to be a straightforward message. We are restored to communion with God, and we are made right with God by trusting in Jesus Christ to save us. It is something that God does for us when we believe in God’s Son.

*The Articles of Religion* that are printed in the *Book of Common of Prayer* beginning on page 867, state this idea in words that Episcopalians have affirmed for centuries: “We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings.”

Despite the clarity of the New Testament and historic Christian theology, our sinful pride often gets the better of us, and we begin to think that we have fellowship with God because we are well behaved and do the right things. We look at our good things, the things we have accomplished in life and the good things we would like to do, and we begin to believe that we are closer to God because of them. We become good people in our own eyes rather than seeing ourselves for what we are, sinners in need of forgiveness. Sometimes, acknowledging our mistakes, we become convinced that if we put in the effort to fix some of our problems, God will love us more. Perhaps the worst version of this bad theology is when people try and fail so much that they start to believe that God could not and would not ever love them or forgive them.

These errors are nothing new. They are simply versions of an old heresy known as Pelagianism, named for the British monk who promoted the idea. Pelagianism is the belief that we can earn favor with God on the basis of our own merits and good behavior. It is an ideology that leads to spiritual pride. The words of the Psalmist “Braggarts cannot stand in [God’s] sight” remind us there is no place for pride or self-righteousness in God’s kingdom. We know that such self-righteousness is wrong because the Scriptures tell us, “By the works of the Law, no one shall be justified.”

The Good News for those who will receive it is that God’s love and mercy for us are not dependent on our good works, our feelings, or our failings. God does not love us more because we give money to the right causes or protest the wrongs of the world. God does not love us less because we as broken creatures keep trying to improve ourselves and we still fall short. God does not justify us because we deserve it - we certainly do not - rather God justifies us because God loves us.

Theologians call this gift of God’s love “grace.” Grace is simply a gift. Grace is wildly gratuitous and undeserved. It is something we have not earned and frankly cannot earn, because, as Paul reminds us, if we as sinners could have earned our justification, Christ would have died for no purpose. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Apostle writes, “By grace you have been saved not by works, and this is so that no one can boast.”

Jesus provides a good example of what justification looks like in today’s Gospel reading. Luke tells us about a dinner party at the house of a very religious man named Simon. Simon apparently believed he was right with God because he was a devoted Pharisee and was therefore different from the common lot of sinners. The Pharisees were known for trying to make themselves holy by following the precepts of the Law and by performing good works. In contrast, by all accounts the woman at the dinner was a sinner. She made no appeal to her righteousness or her good works. Instead, threw herself at Jesus’ feet, seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness. Jesus forgave her. He told her to go in peace because her faith had saved her. He restored her to communion with the Father, and he justified her because she trusted in him. The woman’s signs of affection were responses to Jesus’ overwhelming love and kindness.

So long as we are convinced of our own righteousness like Simon the Pharisee, we will miss the point of the Gospel, and the point is that God gives us what we cannot earn when we trust in Jesus Christ. He justifies us freely by his grace. Jesus restores our broken relationship with God the Father through the merciful gift of his love.

Upon hearing Jesus’ words to the woman: “Your faith has saved you,” we might ask, “What is faith?” The best answer to that question is that faith is trust. Faith is trust that God truly loves us and wants to forgive us and to restore us to his family. Like the woman who trusted Jesus not to condemn her, we trust that Jesus will not condemn us, and we trust that he will forgive us because he died for our sins and rose from the dead to give us eternal life.

The fruit of God’s gift of justification then is that we have a new life in Jesus Christ. At Holy Baptism when our faith in Christ is proclaimed before the world, God’s love is poured into our

hearts in such a way that we can join the Apostle in saying, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loves me and gave himself for me.” This new life in Christ sets us free from sin and dead works that could never justify us before God. We are now free to know, love, and serve God. Our response to God’s incredible gift should be to share his love and mercy with the whole world. Amen.

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