

# Is there an eschatological justification?

## Introduction: a question

A correspondent has asked me a lengthy question regarding a matter being discussed in some American theological circles about a final justification on the Day of Judgment based upon human works. This has been driven by writings by John Piper who teaches this erroneous concept.

The essential questions are:

- ‘Is there an eschatological justification on judgment day, based on our works?’
- ‘Does Jm 2, 21, 24, 25 support such a notion?’

What do we say about this?

## The answer

### *The word used*

The first thing is that the same Greek root word is used by James as used by Paul in Galatians and Romans. So we cannot say that the problem is solved by a major semantic difference.

However, there is a wide range of meanings in that Greek word (*dikaioo*):

- To make right or just.
- Behaving in a way expected.
- To obey God's requirements, live right, do right.
- Demonstrating that one is just.
- To vindicate, show to be right.
- Acknowledging that one is just; justify, vindicate.
- Imputed righteousness; God's saving activity in relation to people; justify, declare righteous, put right with God.
- Of imparted righteousness as freedom from sin's power; make free, release, set free; pass.
- To be set free.

### *Different meanings*

It is important, therefore, to note that Scripture uses the word ‘justify’ in several different senses.

For instance, God is said to be justified in Ps 51:4 (KJV; ‘just’ NKJV). Clearly this simply means ‘declared to be righteous’, or ‘seen to be right’; God needs no forensic justification as we do because he is perfectly holy. While most translations use the word ‘justify’ two versions do not:

Against you, you only, have I done wrong, working that which is evil in your eyes; so that your words may be seen to be right, and you may be clear when you are judging. *The Bible In Basic English*

Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done the evil thing in thine eyes, so that Thou art righteous in Thy words, Thou art pure in Thy judging. *Young's Literal Translation*

The verses in James are similarly to be translated as ‘declared to be righteous’. The faith of OT saints was manifested in their actions which demonstrated that they were righteous.

There is no implication that the righteous deeds of the OT saints contributed in any way to a forensic justification based upon faith alone.

### *Justification*

Despite searching, I am not aware of any verse that says that we will be ‘justified’ at the end by our works. In fact, Paul goes out of his way to affirm that we cannot be justified by our works in any forensic sense.<sup>1</sup> Justification is a Trinitarian work; it is by faith;<sup>2</sup> by the blood of Jesus;<sup>3</sup> by the work of Jesus;<sup>4</sup> by the resurrection of Jesus;<sup>5</sup> by the grace of God;<sup>6</sup> and by the Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

The erroneous doctrine of ‘eschatological justification’ comes from John Piper and is a mistake (as I have pointed out before<sup>8</sup>). Instead of justification being at the end, it is at the beginning of the Christian life.

Justification by faith (forensic or legal justification) changes a person from being judged a sinner into being declared a saint before God (a ‘holy one’). It means that a sinner is legally transformed into being accepted as righteous in the court of heaven by the work of Christ. This is achieved through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

The corollary of this is adoption into God’s family by spiritual union with Christ; i.e. becoming a new creature, a spiritual person living by faith (regeneration is the organic means of this<sup>9</sup> and adoption is the legal declaration of filial heirship in heaven<sup>10</sup>).

These acts of God enable believers to do good works that no ordinary man can do.<sup>11</sup> Such good works are accepted by God (indeed he predetermined that we should walk in them<sup>12</sup>) and he has sovereignly chosen to reward saints for doing what comes naturally to a justified man – doing good.<sup>13</sup>

The righteous deeds are but the demonstration of the justified state, the union with Christ. They have nothing to do with adding to, or strengthening, forensic justification; this is a finished work. So we cannot say that there is an eschatological justification in any forensic sense, but there is a demonstration of the righteousness of the saints in deeds as well as imputation, which is symbolised in Revelation as wearing fine linen<sup>14</sup> as well as being a redeemed soul.

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<sup>1</sup> Rm 4:2-16; Eph 2:8.

<sup>2</sup> Rm 5:1; Gal 2:16, 3:24.

<sup>3</sup> Rm 5:9.

<sup>4</sup> Rm 5:18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Rm 4:25.

<sup>6</sup> Rm 5:16-17; Titus 3:7.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor 6:11.

<sup>8</sup> See ‘*A short assessment of John Piper*’.

<sup>9</sup> Through receiving a new nature like Christ; being reborn into a new creature in Christ; 2 Cor 5:17.

<sup>10</sup> Biblical adoption is not sonship but the legal declaration of heirship with Christ.

<sup>11</sup> No sinner can do any good work at all; Rm 3:10.

<sup>12</sup> Eph 2:10.

<sup>13</sup> Col 2:18, 3:23-24; 2 Jn 1:10; Rev 11:16.

<sup>14</sup> Rev 19:8.

### *Conclusion*

Using new theological terms such as ‘eschatological justification’ only clouds the issue and tends to deception. It has the clear implication of finishing the work of salvation by human merit, which is anathema. We should stick to Scriptural terms.

Coining such novel terms as ‘eschatological justification’ helps establish a writer’s celebrity and develops a new discussion with much froth and bubble; but this is all vanity and pointless. Anything that confuses the flock is to be avoided.

[Aside: Note that forensic justification is once only and not repeated constantly as taught by David Engelsma following Wilhelmus à Brakel.<sup>15</sup> It occurs once but the effect of it is applied every time we sin.]

### **Conclusion**

Justification, as a theological term, is a once-for-all-time event which legally establishes a believer as righteous in God’s eyes, standing in the merits of Christ. It is not achieved by, aided by or strengthened by human meritorious works. Even the faith that initiates justification is not a human work but a gift from God to the elect alone.

Justified believers demonstrate that they are genuine by the fruit that they bear; a good tree bears good fruit.<sup>16</sup> Their righteous deeds prove their justified heart. Indeed, the lack of good works demonstrates that a person is not justified at all, whatever they claim. Thus OT saints are stated to have proved their faith by their righteous acts in James’ letter. They were not justified by these acts but their deeds merely proved that they were already justified.

At the end, justified believers will have their good deeds made manifest as a demonstration of their righteous state before God and be rewarded for their faithful service to God.<sup>17</sup> This is not called a ‘justification’ in Scripture. To call it such is confusing and unhelpful.

Scripture quotations are from The New King James Version  
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<sup>15</sup> Wilhelmus a’ Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, Volumes I and II.

<sup>16</sup> Jn 15:8; Rm 7:4; Col 1:10.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 25:21; 1 Cor 4:5; 1 Pt 1:7.