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Justification—A Word Study

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The term “justification” along with its related forms—just, justify, righteous, and righteousness—holds a significant place in Christian theology. Believers everywhere depend on God’s justifying work in their lives. For these reasons it’s essential for Christians to clearly understand the meaning of the word group that refers to justification.

Basic Lexical Definitions of Justification

While secular Greek can be informative to our understanding of the term “justification,” the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) forms the backdrop for the use of this term in the New Testament. “*Dikaioō* and its cognates were used in secular Greek, but the widespread and theologically significant use of the terminology in the LXX, along with Paul’s frequent appeal to the OT in discussing the words (e.g., Rom. 3:22; 4:1-25), shows that the OT/Jewish background is decisive.”¹

The Old Testament terms related to justification are primarily based on the root Hebrew *šdq*. The range of meaning includes right, just, righteous, to be justified, to declare to be justified, justice, and righteousness.²

In the New Testament the Greek adjective *dikaios*, the noun *dikaioσynē*, and the verb *dikaioō* include within their range of

meaning upright, just, righteous, uprightness, justice, righteousness, to show justice, to do justice, to justify, to vindicate, to be acquitted, and to be pronounced and treated as righteous.³ As always, the context of these words will determine their precise meaning in any given setting.

The biblical concept of righteousness or moral justice implies alignment with God’s holy standard, that is to say, being right in God’s sight. Consequently, justification refers to the act of aligning an individual with God’s holy standard.

Justification in the Old Testament

The Old Testament uses the term “righteousness” to refer to both God and people. When used of people, it refers to moral qualities that are rightly aligned with God’s character. “The word becomes a general way of describing what is ‘well pleasing’ to God and takes on definitely ethical connotations.”⁴ For example, Proverbs 11:4 says, “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (NIV). When used of God, righteousness refers to His attributes of moral uprightness and justice, including the application of His righteousness in salvation or judgment. Isaiah 46:13 says, “I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed” (NIV), and Psalm 9:8 states, “He will judge the world in righteousness” (NIV). “To summarize, then, we find that God’s *dikaioσynē* in the OT can denote God’s character as that of a God who will always do what is right, God’s activity of establishing right, and even, as a product of this activity, the state of those who have been, or hope to be, put right.”⁵

Justification in the New Testament

While the classical Greek concept of righteousness carries the connotation of personal accomplishment, the New Testament use of this word group leans on the Old Testament standard of God’s

righteousness. “There is a deep gulf between the NT δικαιοσύνη and the Greek ideal of virtue, which isolates man in independent achievement. . . . The term obviously follows very strictly the OT understanding, though with a new application to the sphere of salvation as defined in the NT.”⁶

The New Testament use of “righteousness” and “justify” often carries a forensic or legal courtroom connotation. For example, in His parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector Jesus states, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God” (Luke 18:14 NIV). This legal aspect of justification is especially pronounced in Paul’s writings. “Particularly characteristic of Paul’s usage is his insistence that justification takes place by faith and not by ‘works’ (Rom. 4:2), or ‘works of the law’ (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16). That Paul preserves the thoroughly forensic flavor of the word is clear from his addition of the phrase ‘before God’ to the verb (Rom. 2:13; 3:20) and from the contrast between *dikaioō* and *katakrinō* (‘condemn’) in Rom. 8:33.”⁷

This divine work of justification is a legal act, relating to the believer’s position with God, rather than the mere addition of moral qualities to the believer’s checklist.

In Paul the legal usage is plain and indisputable. . . . For Paul the word δικαιοσύνη does not suggest the infusion of moral qualities, a *justum efficere* in the sense of the creation of right conduct. It implies the justification of the ungodly who believe, on the basis of the justifying action of God in the death and resurrection of Christ.⁸

Justification and the New Perspective on Paul

Recent studies that have attempted to reinterpret justification have come to be known as the “New Perspective on Paul,” including the writings of N. T. Wright. This new perspective regards justification as God’s recognition of the believer’s position rather than a legal declaration of righteousness. “In Wright’s thinking,

‘justification’ is about God’s recognition of those who are in the covenant by His faithfulness and their assurance of this status, rather than about God’s declaration of a sinner’s righteousness in Christ and His effecting that status.”⁹ This new perspective, however, gives too little emphasis to the actual declaration of righteousness that comes by faith. “Wright’s view . . . collapses under the weight of the passages in Romans that indicate that justification *does something to the sinner*. . . . Romans 5:1, for example, indicates that justification *produces* peace with God.”¹⁰ Therefore, the more traditional understanding of justification as a legal declaration of righteousness based on faith in the merits of Jesus Christ alone best captures the concept. We are rightly aligned with God through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 79.

² Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958) 793-795.

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 195-197.

⁴ Moo, 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶ Gottlob Schrenk, “δικη,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company) 187.

⁷ Moo, p. 86.

⁸ Schrenk, 215

⁹ Michael Vanlaningan, “Romans,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningan (Chicago: Moody Publishers) 1743.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1743.