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JOINED BY FAITH TO CHRIST AS RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR OUR JUSTIFICATION: OUR EVALUATIVE STANDARD

1.0 INTRODUCTION

*Who shall bring a charge against God's chosen ones?
It is God who justifies.
(Paul, To the Romans, 8:33)*

The apostle who trumpeted this truth had discovered the victory of justification, that is, the victory of God the Justifier and of all those justified by Him through faith in Christ. That it is God—and God alone—who justifies stirred the apostle Paul, as it should stir us, to accept, to exult, and to boast in God with all boldness and assurance, for the only One qualified to condemn us, to “bring a charge” against us, has approved us according to His righteousness. Paul was keenly aware that the God who justifies is righteous in all His acts,¹ that righteousness is the foundation of His throne,² and that He judges everything according to righteousness. But in reading Romans 8, we get the impression that Paul was not cringing in fearful expectation or wallowing in self-condemnation but rejoicing with exuberance in the righteous God who justifies. How could he rejoice in the God who justifies and even boast that he was justified, and how can we do the same today?

The answer has everything to do with Jesus Christ the Righteous,³ the One who is absolutely righteous in both His divinity and humanity.⁴ As God, certainly He is righteous; but as the God-man, He lived a human life of

¹ Psa. 103:6. ² Psa. 89:14. ³ 1 John 2:1.

⁴ E.g., Heb. 1:8-9; Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; 1 Pet. 3:18.

absolute righteousness and suffered death under God's righteous judgment for our sake, "the Righteous on behalf of the unrighteous,"⁵ thus satisfying the demand of God's righteousness and redeeming us from the curse of the law.⁶ This wonderful God-man is the very righteousness of God. God the Father delights in Him⁷ and has approved Him.⁸ And as incomprehensible as it may seem, God the Father delights in and approves all those who turn from themselves to Jesus Christ and believe into Him, thereby discarding the filthy rags of their own righteousness⁹ and donning Christ Himself as their righteousness.¹⁰ To those who believe into Christ, the Father does something most remarkable and almost unutterable: He approves the believers as righteous—He justifies them—based on Christ as their righteousness. He makes Christ Himself their righteousness for their justification. One of the wonders of justification, then, is that the believers' righteousness before God is not a condition or a status that they possess in themselves but a person whom they are joined to, the living Christ Himself. Those who receive Christ are approved by God according to Christ as righteousness. God sees them as righteous, for they have Christ as their righteousness. Their righteousness before God is perfect because the Christ who is their righteousness is perfect, and their righteousness before God is unchanging because the Christ who is their righteousness is unchanging. Those who have laid hold of such a righteousness by laying hold of Christ can surely exult, as the apostle Paul exulted, in the victory of justification and in the God who alone justifies.

Another wonder of justification is that God justifies the believers *through faith in Jesus Christ*.¹¹ This faith is not blind, nor is it a mere assent. The apostles taught that faith in Christ issues in receiving Him through the Spirit.¹² Thus, faith ushers those who believe in Christ into an organic union with Him, and God approves them based on their oneness with Christ as righteousness. The Epistles of Paul disclose the relationship between the believers' union with Christ through faith and their justification in Him, and it is manifest that the apostle's consideration of justification was enriched and buoyed by his deep knowledge of Christ and of the believers' union with Him. As his Epistles testify, Paul was intimately familiar with Christ, not in the way of doctrine but in the way of spiritual knowledge and experience. He knew Christ,¹³ pursued Christ,¹⁴ aspired to be found in Christ,¹⁵ and even described himself as a man in Christ.¹⁶ In Acts 13:39 Paul preaches Christ as the One in whom "everyone who believes is justified." In 1 Corinthians 1:30 he declares that we who believe are "in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom to us from God: both righteousness and sanctification and redemption" and in Romans 8:1 that "there is now then no condemnation to those who are in

⁵ 1 Pet. 3:18. ⁶ Gal. 3:13. ⁷ Matt. 3:17. ⁸ See Rom. 4:24-25. ⁹ See Isa. 64:6.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:27. ¹¹ E.g., Rom. 3:22, 26; Gal. 2:16. ¹² John 1:12; 7:39.

¹³ Phil. 3:8, 10. ¹⁴ Phil. 3:12, 14. ¹⁵ Phil. 3:9. ¹⁶ 2 Cor. 12:2.

Christ Jesus.” Further, in Galatians 2:16-17 he speaks of believing “into Christ Jesus that we might be justified out of faith in Christ” and of “seeking to be justified in Christ.” According to the apostle’s profound realization, justification is by faith because faith brings the believers into an organic union with Christ, the righteousness of God. Viewed intrinsically, justification is thus a matter of Christ becoming the believers’ righteousness in their union with Him through faith and of God approving the believers on account of their union with Christ as righteousness. The work of God the Justifier appears all the more wondrous when we realize, as the apostle Paul surely realized, that this work is centrally concerned with bringing fallen but repentant human beings into Christ—through the faith of Jesus Christ—so that in Christ and with Christ as their righteousness they might be approved by the God who “justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus.”¹⁷

Having touched something concerning justification’s victory and intrinsic meaning, we should address a few elementary matters concerning justification by faith in order to lay the groundwork for a fuller consideration of this important scriptural truth in the sections and chapters to come. We should point out that which is likely obvious: justification is related to righteousness. Witness *Lee (d. 1997) helpfully explains that “righteousness means to be right with God in every way. It means that in no matter are you wrong or unfair in the eyes of God. Every part of your being is right according to God.”¹⁸ We are righteous only when we are right with God. Concerning our fundamental need for righteousness before God, Watchman *Nee (d. 1972) writes:

Righteousness has a great deal to do with God. If we did not have to stand before God, the question of righteousness would not come in. Once we think about God, we think of righteousness. For example, when we have to meet people, we always think of our dress. In the same way, when a man meets God, he must have righteousness. Without righteousness, no one can see God. Hence, righteousness is a basic item in the Christian life. The matter of righteousness involves the means by which we come to God every time we approach Him. If a Christian has not settled this matter, he does not have a solid foundation. A Christian who has doubts about righteousness cannot come to God with assurance. Many Christians desire to grow, and they would like to go on in God’s way. But one of the reasons they go back and forth is that they are not clear about righteousness. Righteousness is a simple matter, yet it is foundational. Brothers and sisters, if we are not clear about righteousness, we cannot go on in peace;

¹⁷ Rom. 3:26. ¹⁸ Lee, *LS Rom.*, 604.

we will always have trouble. Hence, we must be clear about the matter of righteousness.¹⁹

Justification brings us into a right relationship with the righteous God so that we correspond to Him according to His righteousness. It resolves the fundamental issue of how sinful human beings, who are altogether unrighteous, can be right with God, who is altogether righteous. Further, it settles the foundational matter—spoken of in the passage above from Watchman Nee—of how we as believers can approach and stand before God with assurance. Justification thus grounds our relationship with God and secures our righteous standing before Him. Perhaps even more importantly, it lays the foundation for God in His righteousness to impart His life into us²⁰ that we might be saved in His life.²¹ Justification by faith is therefore something of foundational importance in the economy of God's salvation and the believers' experience of this salvation.

That justification by faith is a foundational truth makes it all the more important that we apprehend it properly and fully. To neglect this truth is to neglect something fundamental to our participation in God's salvation. In his ministry concerning the need for the saints in the Lord's recovery to be equipped with the truth, Witness Lee consistently identified justification by faith as one of the basic truths that the saints need to be equipped with, and he often expressed his concern that probably most of the saints were not equipped to give a clear word concerning this basic truth. For example, in a sobering word given in Taiwan in 1984, Witness Lee shared the following:

There are approximately forty-five thousand saints in Taiwan. However, of these forty-five thousand, are there even four hundred fifty who can give a clear, thorough, and logical word concerning the truth of justification that would supply light and life to others? I am afraid that not even forty-five saints can speak such a word. You may think that I am being too pessimistic and that instead we should be optimistic and appreciative of our work. If we think this, can we say that there are forty to fifty saints attending the training who can speak concerning justification? Yet we still may consider this to be too elementary and instead want to speak on something higher, such as the twelve precious stones. We need to lay a firm foundation in our education in the Lord's recovery. We must begin with the most basic spiritual matters.²²

We hope that what we present in this chapter will be accounted by the Lord and His saints as “a clear, thorough, and logical word concerning the

¹⁹ Nee, “Wisdom” (CWWN 36:175-176). ²⁰ E.g., Rom. 1:17; 5:18, 21; 8:10.

²¹ Rom. 5:10. ²² Lee, *Leading 3*, ch. 5 (CWWL, 1984, 4:79-80).

truth of justification that would supply light and life to others” and that it will help to “lay a firm foundation in our education in the Lord’s recovery.” To this end, we have arranged this chapter in three sections. In the first section we will present the truth concerning justification by faith from the Scriptures, for our understanding of this basic truth (and all truths) should be derived from and anchored in God’s holy Word. In the second section we will introduce key excerpts from the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee to develop, enrich, and strengthen the presentation of justification offered in the first section. In the third section we will then offer some necessary clarifications concerning our understanding of justification, mainly to indicate what justification is not. Together the three sections of this chapter will lay the groundwork for our evaluation, in subsequent chapters, of the progress in the understanding of justification throughout the centuries of the Christian church after the time of the apostles. This evaluation can be carried out properly only by God’s mercy and grace, with His guidance, and under His shining, and we look to Him for these.

As our evaluation will cover a considerable amount of development over roughly two millennia of Christian thought, it will be published in two parts. Part 1 (this volume) will first give a survey of contemporary understandings concerning justification so as to situate this important truth among Christians today and a brief overview of the historical development in the understanding of justification so as to help orient our readers for the later evaluative chapters. Then, we will trace the understanding of justification in the patristic period in chapter 3 and in the medieval West in chapter 4 and then conclude this part with an examination of Martin *Luther’s (d. 1546) great recovery of justification by faith in chapter 5. In the believers’ steadily progressing understanding of the truth throughout the centuries, it was Luther whom the Lord used to recover the basic but essential truth that justification is by faith, and faith alone, and to sweep away much of the confusion concerning this truth that had crept in over the centuries. It is not too much to suggest that the Lord gifted Luther to His church for the purpose of recovering a proper, albeit incomplete, understanding of justification by faith among His people. Much of what had been written concerning justification prior to Luther found resolution in Luther, and much of what has been written concerning justification since Luther bears some relation, whether affirmative or critical, to Luther’s understanding of justification. Given Luther’s significant contribution to the recovery of justification by faith in the believers’ understanding, we feel it is fitting for the first part of our evaluation to conclude with Luther. Part 2 (the next volume) will then proceed with an evaluation of the understandings of justification that were generated within the major theological traditions primarily in response to Luther’s understanding, whether as developments of his understanding or as objections to it. As we hope the reader will notice, our two-part evaluation will consistently

reference and draw upon the view of justification by faith presented in this chapter, a view rooted in the Scriptures and opened with the help of the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

1.1 JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AS REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES

The truth concerning God's justification of the believers by faith is profound and multifaceted. In the presentation that follows we aim to present this truth from the Scriptures as clearly as possible. We will consider the crucial matters related to justification by faith, including its importance and purpose in God's salvation, but the heart of our presentation will focus on *how* God justifies the believers. The striking revelation in Scripture is that God justifies the believers "through the faith of Jesus Christ,"²³ and we will consider in detail how God produces this faith in the believers and why this faith alone justifies them before God.

1.1.1 *A brief presentation of God's complete salvation*

To fully appreciate the truth concerning justification by faith, it is helpful to consider what Scripture reveals concerning the place of justification in God's salvation and the purpose of God's salvation in His economy. In brief, justification by faith is an integral part of the righteous procedure by which God carries out His complete salvation, which is directed toward the producing and building up of the Body of Christ as the goal of God's economy. Although justification is not the goal of God's salvation in His economy, it is a foundational matter that we should treasure and seek to understand more fully. Our earnest hope is that what we present concerning justification will heighten the appreciation for this truth among us while also directing us toward the purpose of God's complete salvation.

We can see the purpose of God's complete salvation most clearly in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. As the antidote to God's condemnation of fallen humankind described in Romans 1:18—3:20, Romans 3:21—5:11 reveals the truth of justification in God's way. Justification is God's action of approving human beings according to His standard of righteousness; it is by God's grace, based upon Christ's redemption, and through the faith of Jesus Christ. Romans, however, does not end with justification, and justification is not an end in itself. Romans 5:18 indicates that justification is "of life." As part of God's righteous procedure, justification affords God the basis to impart the divine life into those whom He has justified, making them sons of God.²⁴ Romans 5:12—8 shows that God sanctifies²⁵ and glorifies²⁶ the believers

²³ Rom. 3:22.

²⁴ Rom. 8:14-17.

²⁵ Rom. 5:12—8:13.

²⁶ Rom. 8:14-39.