How Did We Get Here?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History



Lesson 3

Justification

How is a person made right with God?

The Question

Acts 16:30

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

This is the lesson’s framing question: saved from what, by whom, and how?

The Answer

Acts 16:31

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved…”

- Salvation is centered on Jesus Christ.
- The required response is faith.
- The rest of the lesson asks what God does when He saves.

01 Jesus and the Language of Salvation

Mark 1:15
“Repent and believe in the gospel.”

John 3:3–8
“Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Luke 18:13–14
“God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” … “went down to his house justified.”

John 3:16
“Whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Mark 10:26–27
“With men it is impossible, but not with God.”

Luke 19:8–10
“Today salvation has come to this house…”

John 14:15
“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”

What Happens When We Are Saved?

The language of salvation

Grace
God’s undeserved favor and saving action toward sinners.

Repentance
Turning from sin toward God.

Faith
Trusting in Christ and receiving what God promises in Him.

Regeneration
New spiritual life given by God; the new birth.

Justification
Being declared or made right with God.

Righteousness
Right standing before God, right conduct, or righteousness received from God.

Sanctification
The believer’s growth in holiness.

Adoption
Being received as a child of God.

Redemption
Deliverance from bondage through the work of Christ.

Reconciliation
Restored relationship with God.

Glorification
The final completion of salvation.

02 Paul and Justification by Faith

Paul, faith, and works

Romans 3:28
“A man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”

Romans 4:3–5
“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Romans 5:1
“Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God…”

Galatians 2:16
“A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 3:8–9
“Not having a righteousness of my own… but that which is through faith in Christ.”

Abraham: Faith Counted as Righteousness

Genesis 15:6 / Romans 4

Key word: “reckoned” / “credited” / “counted”

Paul uses Abraham to show that righteousness is received by faith, not earned as wages. This prepares the later Reformation language of imputed righteousness.

Discussion: What does it mean for righteousness to be counted to someone?

Paul and James

Contradiction or different questions?

Paul — Romans 3:28
A man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

James — James 2:24
A man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.

- Paul attacks reliance on works as the basis of justification.
- James attacks empty profession and faith without fruit.
- Key question: What does each writer mean by “faith,” “works,” and “justify”?

03

Historical Development

How did Christians explain the relationship between grace, faith, righteousness, and works?

The Early Church

Later technical categories were still developing.

- Early Christians speak often of faith, repentance, baptism, grace, obedience, perseverance, and holiness.
- The later distinction between justification and sanctification is not yet fully systematized.
- Avoid forcing later Catholic/Protestant categories directly onto early writers.

Main point: the vocabulary is biblical, but the later doctrinal precision develops over time.

Pelagius and Augustine

Can fallen humanity turn to God unaided?

Pelagius

Human beings retain sufficient moral freedom to respond to God’s commands; grace assists but is not necessary in the Augustinian sense.

Augustine

Humanity has been so damaged by sin that God’s grace must precede and enable the saving response.

Central question: Can fallen humanity turn to God without God first acting upon the sinner?

Augustine → Medieval Christianity

Developing terms and categories

Augustine's legacy
necessity of grace, original sin, divine initiative

Sacramental grace
grace communicated through the sacramental life of the Church

Merit
reward for works done in grace, not autonomous self-salvation

Increasing righteousness
righteousness can grow as the believer is renewed

Infused grace
grace given inwardly, changing the believer

Cooperation with grace
the believer responds and grows by grace-enabled obedience

Penance
repentance, confession, satisfaction, and restoration

04

The Reformation

Justification becomes one of the central dividing lines of Western Christianity.

Martin Luther

Key Reformation terms

Sola fide
justification through faith alone

Forensic justification
God’s judicial declaration that the sinner is righteous because of Christ

Imputed righteousness
Christ’s righteousness is credited to the believer

Simul iustus et peccator
at the same time righteous and sinner

John Calvin and Reformed Theology

Justification, sanctification, and regeneration

Distinct but inseparable

Justification and sanctification remain distinct, but God gives both to everyone united to Christ.

Forensic justification

God declares the believer righteous because of Christ.

Sanctification

The Spirit actually transforms the believer in holiness.

Order of salvation

In classic Reformed theology, regeneration logically precedes saving faith.

The Council of Trent

Catholic response to the Reformation

Council of Trent
Catholic response to the Reformation, 1545–1563

Forgiveness and inward renewal
justification includes both pardon and transformation

Infused righteousness
righteousness is given inwardly by grace

Cooperation with grace
the believer responds through grace-enabled love and obedience

Faith working through love
faith must be living and formed by love

Imputed and Infused Righteousness

Two accounts of how righteousness relates to justification

Imputed righteousness

Christ's righteousness is credited to the believer.

At justification: God changes the believer's standing and declares the sinner righteous because of Christ.

Inward renewal: Real, but distinguished from justification as sanctification.

Infused righteousness

God gives grace inwardly, making the believer righteous.

At justification: God forgives and inwardly renews the believer by grace.

Inward renewal: Included within justification and grows through cooperation with grace.

Key difference: Is the righteousness that justifies credited to the believer, or given inwardly so the believer becomes righteous?

05 Where Major Traditions Stand Today

Tradition summaries

Roman Catholic

Justification begins by grace and includes forgiveness and inward renewal. Righteousness is infused, and the believer grows in grace through faith working through love.

Lutheran

Justification is God’s declaration that the sinner is righteous by faith in Christ. Good works are necessary as fruit, not as the basis of justification.

Reformed

Justification is forensic and received by faith alone through the imputed righteousness of Christ. Sanctification is distinct but inseparable, and regeneration logically precedes faith.

Anglican

Historically affirms justification by faith and usually distinguishes it from sanctification. Anglican theology can range from more Protestant to more catholic emphases.

Wesleyan / Arminian

Prevenient grace is grace that comes before conversion and enables the sinner to respond in faith. Justification is by faith, and sanctification emphasizes growth in holiness.

Baptist / Evangelical

Usually emphasizes personal conversion, repentance, faith in Christ, and justification by faith. Views vary on regeneration and the order of salvation.

Return to the Question

Acts 16:30–31

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved…”

The later debate does not erase the biblical answer. It asks how to explain everything God does in and for the person who believes.

What Did Christians Disagree About?

Synthesis

- What does grace do?
- What does justification mean?
- Is righteousness imputed, infused, or both in different senses?
- How are justification and sanctification related?
- Does regeneration precede faith?
- What role do works play?
- How do Paul and James relate?