LD 23; Rom. 3:21-31; Rom. 4:22-5:2; The Benefit of Believing I. The Context of our Justification II. The Reception of our Justification

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Judge Judy was one of the longest running TV Courtroom series. One of the reasons that this show was so popular is because of her no-nonsense approach to justice. She did not mess around with semantics, and she gave no mercy to the lawbreaker. The fact is, every human has a sense of right and wrong and a desire for justice to be served. Even the thief recoils at the thought of his own possessions being stolen. We find the same thing in our movies- we want and expect the good guys to win in the end and the bad guys to be caught and punished. We desire for the laws of the land to be upheld. In the US, the Supreme Court is supposed to be the highest court of the land. But sometimes, even the Supreme Court gets it wrong. Sometimes the wicked do get away with their crimes and the Supreme court is not perfect. So then, will justice ever be done? Is there a court or ruler that is higher and greater- even perfect in all its ways? Well, today as we consider justification we are centering ourselves in the sphere of legal account. We find ourselves in a heavenly courtroom- and we are the ones on trial. What will God declare about us? What will His verdict be concerning our state? As we have just concluded our consideration of the Apostles Creed, our Catechism asks us about the benefit of it all. What good does it do us to know and believe these truths about God and His work? Well, the clear benefit is this- that those who believe in the Triune God are justified in His sight. So we consider this theme: the Father justifies His people on the basis of His Son’s perfect life and work. So what is justification? To start off, justification is the legal declaration of the Father.

**I. The Context of our Justification**

In our first point we consider the context of our justification. Who are the ones that the Father justifies? Well, the Father is pleased to justify us- His people. But more specifically, the context for justification is a pressing context of need. In other words, we are the ones who need to be justified! But why do we need to be justified? Well, the reason we need to be justified is because we are unjust- we are at odds with God. We are estranged, guilty and condemned. We cannot justify ourselves because we are the offending party. So in order to understand the benefit of justification, we have to be reminded of our need for justification. So the catechism starts by saying in QA 60 that we are sinners. Our sin make us unjust and in line for condemnation. Our conscience accuses us. The inner self declares that we are unjust- we feel this truth in our heart. The Holy Spirit has given us eyes to see this truth- I am the man! I am the one who is guilty! I no longer suppress the truth in unrighteousness- my conscience is awakened to this reality. I have sinned- I have fallen short- I have transgressed. I have missed the mark and my hands are stained. Not only have I sinned- I have grievously sinned! I have trampled upon God’s Law and rebelled with my heart and hands. My secret and hidden sins are plainly in God’s sight- and I confess that I have gone my own way and done what is right in my own eyes. Do we really think this about ourselves- do we really think that we have grievously sinned? That we have broken all of God’s commandments and that we have never kept any of them perfectly? James 2 says that if you break God’s Law in any part or in any way you have broken the whole. The Law of God is a unity- it stands or falls together. And Jesus would have us see that the heart, motivation and desire is connected to every law as well. As our reading in Rom. 3:23 puts it, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You are included in this all- all men stand in need of justification because all are born sinners. Added to this- even as a Christian- I am still inclined towards evil. As Rom. 7 puts it, the law of sin still dwells in my members. The default position of every person is this- to do what is easy. The natural inclination is to do what feels good and to avoid any hardship or pain. Why do you think that the life of obedience is so hard? Because it goes against our fallen nature! For example, is it easier to watch what you eat or to indulge? To fast or to feast? Why is it easier to give into temptation than to resist the devil? Because our own flesh is fighting against us! Why do little children learn the word “no” before the word “yes”? Because everyone wants what they want. That is why justification cannot be a work of our hands. That is why Paul says in Rom. 3:28 that justification is not by works of the Law. To be clear- as QA 60 puts it- the basis for our justification is not and cannot be our own works. We are justified by God without any merit of our own. So if we put ourselves back in the legal setting- we are sitting in the courtroom and when we look at the prosecutor we see ourselves! We condemn ourselves- our own conscience accuses us! No one will be righteous before God- no not one as Rom. 3:10 put it. So the context and setting of our justification is this- we need it but we can’t earn it! This was one of the main issues that Jacob Arminius denied. Just how depraved are we? Just how capable are we of helping ourselves? Are we only partially depraved? Does God help those who help themselves? Are we only in need of a crutch- a little help to get us over the line? Do we do our part and God does the rest? Is justification partly God’s work and partly mans? Surely Not! We are dead in our sins and trespasses! The only thing we bring to the table is our sin and misery! All we contribute to the equation is our need! By our works, no human being will be justified in His sight! The Law only serves to expose our sin- giving us knowledge of our need. So no one is justified by his own works- no one is righteous in God’s sight based on what they have done!

**II. The Reception of our Justification**

So then, if justification will take place, it must come to us from the outside! It must be the work of another- as no man can change the decree of God! How then can sinners be righteous? How can fallen humanity be justified? We read the answer in Rom. 3:24- we are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. And again in Rom. 5:1- we have been justified by faith and so now we have peace with God. So justification is clearly a work of God- a gift of His grace. It is an undeserved work that we freely receive. God makes the declaration- and He grants and credits to me the necessary righteousness. Romans 4:4 says that righteousness is counted towards those who believe. So we are counted or reckoned as righteous as a gift. So God freely adds to my account what is lacking- or grants and credits what is necessary in the place it is lacking. To be clear, this is a complete work of God that He does freely in His grace. It is also a sufficient and complete work of God- all that is needed has been provided. The Father makes a legal and binding declaration and this proclamation is clear. This sinner is now a saint and my son. This rebel is now considered as my dearly loved child. Now this declaration is based upon what we call a double imputation. God takes my sins from me and places them on His Son’s account. He then takes the perfect righteousness of Jesus and places that righteousness on my account. So the double imputation is that my sins go to Jesus and His righteousness is granted to me- or placed on my account – written into my records. So that when the Father sees me He sees the works of Jesus. And when the Father looked at His Son on the cross, He saw my sins. Having been declared righteous, now I appear before God as if I had been as perfect and obedient as Christ was for me. All my sins are taken off my record- all His obedience placed on my account! That is the glory and beauty of justification! As an act of God, it cannot be lost or cancelled!

Now how or when does this event of justification take place? Well, our justification is secured by Jesus on the cross and at His resurrection- He was raised for our justification as Rom. 4 puts it. But the moment when we experience this justification is when we place our faith in Jesus Christ. Here we are talking about the instrumentality of faith. Although our faith it not a work that earns our righteousness, faith is the means by which we are jointed to Christ who is our righteousness. Faith then acts like a channel through which Christ’s righteousness flows to us- or the hand that receives the gift of righteousness. As our own QA 60 puts it, all we can do is accept this gift with a believing heart. As we read in Rom. 3:22- we have the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus. A righteousness that is for all who believe. So faith is the instrument or manner by which we enjoy justification. But here again we must be clear, true faith is not a work we do but rather it is a full dependence on Jesus Christ. It is not the strength of our faith that makes us righteous- but rather the strength of the One in whom we believe! The object of true faith is Jesus Christ- the basis of our justification is what Jesus has done. As QA 60 puts it, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ! Rom. 3:24- we are justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. In order to be declared innocent by God, someone has to pay the debt of your sins for you- and that is what the passive obedience of Christ achieved. In order to be declared righteous and holy, someone has to live a perfect life in your place- and that is what he active obedience of Jesus has secured. Jesus lived a perfect, obedient, holy and righteous life. Even His baptism was to fulfill all righteousness!

Before we close, it has often been said that justification is the central doctrine of the reformation- it is the hinge upon which the gospel hangs. Luther stated that the church stands or falls on this doctrine! Justification then is the declaration of the Father by which He grants righteousness. It is as if I had never been a sinner but rather as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was. We are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone! This truth is central and it is moving. Rom. 5 gives us 3 applications or consequences- we now have peace with God, we have access into God’s presence and we have joyful hope of the glory to come! Rom. 3 applies our justification this way- we have no room for boasting but rather only thanksgiving! If our access to and acceptance by God is not our work but a gift of grace, the only proper response is thanksgiving! Thank you for your justifying work- that you have granted and credited to me the righteousness of Jesus Christ! The Father justifies His people on the basis of His Son’s perfect life and work. The Father’s declaration is just- because our debt is paid for and righteousness has been won. Justice is upheld, the accuser is silenced, and the Judge of all the earth has made us right!