

## JUSTIFICATION

### *Lexical Data*

The New Testament words *justification, justify, righteous, and righteousness* come from a single set of Greek cognates: words with the δικαιο- root. The main words in this word group are δίκαιος, δικαιοσύνη, δικαίωμα, δικαίωσις, and δικαίω. The adjective δίκαιος is the core of this group, expressing a quality or characteristic. From that core are built the other forms: the noun δικαιοσύνη for the “qualitative abstract,” the verb δικαίω for the factitive (causing the quality or condition to be), the noun δικαίωμα for result of that process, and the noun δικαίωσις for the process itself.<sup>1</sup> Because etymology alone does not prove word meaning, it will be necessary undertake an examination of each lexeme in the word group to identify its possible senses.

### Δικαίος

The adjective δίκαιος serves as the etymological foundation for the word group. At its most basic level, δίκαιος is a legal term meaning “right, accurate, in conformity with a given standard.” Throughout the New Testament, δικαιο- words occur in close context with νόμος (law), κρίσις/κρίμα (judgment), κρίνω (to judge), and κριτής (judge).<sup>2</sup> It is most frequently translated *righteous* or *just*; other suitable English glosses include *right, fitting, accurate, fair, and appropriate*.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Funk, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> Lk. 12.57; Jn. 5.30; 7.24; 16.8; Acts 4.19; 13.38; 17.31; 24.25; Rom. 2.13, 26; 3.4, 20, 21, 28; 4.13; 5.16; 7.12; 8.4; 9.31; 10.4, 5; Gal. 2.16, 21; 3.11, 21, 24; 5.4; Phil. 3.6, 9; II Th. 1.5; I Tim. 1.9; Heb. 12.23; I Pet. 2.23; Rev. 16.7; 19.2, 11.

When δικαίος refers to men, its broader meaning is *blameless*. This blamelessness is a form of conformity to moral, ethical, or judicial standards. In this sense, it describes specific people like Joseph (Mt. 1.19), Jesus (Mt. 27.19; Lk. 23.47), John the Baptist (Mk. 6.20), Simeon (Lk. 2.25), and Joseph of Arimathea (Lk. 23.50). In this sense it is synonymous with words like ἄμεμπτος (blameless – Lk 1.6), ἅγιος (holy – Mk. 6.20), ἄγαθος (good – Lk. 23.50), and εὐλαβής (devout – Lk. 2.25). Jesus uses this word with a Jewish religious connotation: the standard in view is the Mosaic Law. *Righteous* people need no repentance (Lk. 5.32), they inherit eternal life (Mt. 25.46), and they shine in the Kingdom (Mt. 13.43). In this sense, it stands as a sharp contrast to ἀδικός (unjust – Mt. 5.45), ἁμαρτωλός (sinful – Mt. 9.13), and πονηρός (evil – Mt. 13.49). This outward righteous condition can be feigned (Mt. 23.38; Lk. 18.9).

Actions can be δικαίος as well. This simply means that they are in conformity to the standard under consideration. *Just* wages match the work done (Mt. 20.4), *just* judgment conforms to God's will (Jn. 5.30), and *right* reminders are accurate considering the circumstances (II Pet. 1.13).

God is certainly δικαίος. There is no external standard to which He must conform; rather, He is the ultimate standard to which all other *righteous* things, people, and actions must conform. God is called *righteous* specifically with reference to his position as judge (II Tim. 4.8; Rev. 16.5) and to his redemptive work (I Jn. 1.9; 2.29). The collocation of *righteous* and *judgment* confirms the idea that righteous is conformity to a standard. One can *judge* how close to a standard something really is.

Paul uses the word δικαίος with a primarily God-ward focus; that is, he writes about being just and righteous in God's eyes. There is no one who falls into that category naturally (Rom. 3.10), not even those who receive the Law

(Rom. 2.13); instead men are *made* (καθίστημι) righteous by faith (Gal. 3.11) through Christ's obedience (Rom. 5.19).

### Δικαιοσύνη

The noun δικαιοσύνη communicates the abstract quality of *justness* and *righteousness*. Christ often uses this word for visible actions like baptism (Mt. 3.15), alms-giving (Mt. 6.2), prayer (Mt. 6.5), and fasting (Mt. 6.16). Peter carries on the use of δικαιοσύνη as righteous actions (Acts 10.35; I Pet. 3.14), as does John (I Jn. 2.29; Rev. 22.11).

Paul's writings convey another kind of righteousness. His focus is on δικαιοσύνη as a standing or position that one has before God. His view of righteousness can be summarized by an overview of its presentation in Romans. Paul begins with God's righteousness which consists of his justice in dealing with sin through wrath (3.5) or patience (3.25), and his desire for faith (3.26). Then Paul moves from *God's* justice to a δικαιοσύνη which is imputed to Abraham. This is how God deals with all men: none have δικαιοσύνη of their own; it must be credited to their accounts by faith (4.13, 20-22). This is possible because Jesus conformed to God's will perfectly (5.17). Paul moves to behavioral righteousness (6.13) only after establishing that objective righteousness belongs solely to God and can be credited to sinners because of Jesus' obedience. Paul clarifies in chapters 9-11 that righteousness cannot be gained by Law-observance; it must be imputed by faith. Paul's other letters reflect this two-fold δικαιοσύνη: imputed by faith, worked out in faith.

### Δικαιόω

In the non-Pauline writings, the verb δικαιόω often means *to acquit*, or *to vindicate*. This can be the vindication of God or wisdom through obedience (Mt. 11.19; Lk. 7.29; 18.14). It can be the attempt to vindicate oneself through

argument (Lk. 10.29). It can be the vindication of a sinner by God's judgment in his favor (Mt. 12.37) or his evidential good deeds (Jas. 2.21ff).

For Paul, however, δικαίω takes on a new meaning: *to make righteous*. While other authors use δικαίω for the declaration of a true condition, Paul uses the word to describe God's granting to sinners a status that is contrary to their current condition. This is the point at which faith and works are most strongly contrasted. Paul's use of δικαίω does not so much concern *being* in conformity to God's standard as it concerns *becoming* conformed to God's standard. This change in status does not come about as a result of human effort, but by faith (Rom. 3.28). Previously, *righteousness* had been viewed largely as conformity to the Law. Now, Paul vehemently argues that Law-obedience does not produce *righteousness*. Again, the "conformity" of a δικαιο- word is relative to a given standard. Paul's concern is not with Law-conformity, but with Christ-conformity.

Since sinners are not instantly conformed to God's character in every area of practice and habit, one might question whether a legal declaration in their favor is actually a form of falsehood. God's declaration brings with it life and energy. He does not merely make a claim about a sinner's status when that sinner believes; God works in that sinner to desire and to perform his will (Phil. 2.12-13), actively bringing that sinner into real conformity with his standard. Salvation, of course, is much broader than conversion, and there is a future justification that will take place.

#### Δικαίωμα and Δικαίωσις

Two other nouns describe that action of justification. Δικαίωμα has two senses: a *requirement* to which one must conform (Lk. 1.16; Heb. 9.1) and *deeds of*

*righteousness* (Rom. 5.18; Rev. 19.8). Δικαίωσις is the *act* of justifying (Rom. 4.25; 5.18).

### *Distinctions from English Glosses*

Perhaps the biggest problem in the popular understanding of justification is the colloquial mis-definition: “just-as-if-I’d never sinned.” While this mnemonic is certainly memorable and does convey the ultimate result of justification, it doesn’t actually define or explain the word at all. Justification for the believer is based on imputation of Christ’s righteousness. It is not a magic eraser (as the slogan implies), but a legal declaration.

English readers also find a difficulty with the variety of English glosses assigned to the δικαιο- word group in translation. The words *righteous* and *justify* are not related at all, yet they translate closely linked Greek cognates. Furthermore, those words have been granted an almost exclusively moral connotation, when in reality, ethics and morality is only area of conformity to a standard that the δικαιο- words describe.

### *Exegetical Application: Justification and the New Perspective on Paul*

Debate currently rages over Paul’s understanding of justification. Theologians promoting a so-called New Perspective on Paul have redefined justification entirely. For example, N. T. Wright’s starting point for defining the words *righteousness* and *righteous* is the courtroom.<sup>3</sup> The definitions he gives are tempered by the question, “How does this apply to the judge, the plaintiff or the defendant?” He finds the phrase “the righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) to be a technical term. God is the judge; a judge’s righteousness is his impartial,

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 68.

accurate judgment; God has set the covenant as his standard; therefore, “the righteousness of God” is his faithfulness to his covenant.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, if a plaintiff or defendant is declared “righteous” by the judge, that means that the judge decides the case in that person’s favor, setting them in the right.<sup>5</sup> Wright holds these definitions strictly and concludes that it “makes no sense at all” for God to transfer his “righteousness” to a defendant in his court.<sup>6</sup> Further, Wright denies that “righteousness has any moral meaning at all.”<sup>7</sup>

Because he insists that righteousness is non-transferable, Wright cannot define “justify” as “impute righteousness.” Instead, δικαιόω only means “to vindicate.”<sup>8</sup> Wright gives justification an eschatological meaning: it does not relate to conversion but to final vindication. The future vindication will be based ultimately on an obedient life lived in the Spirit; present declaration of this future justification is based on faith.<sup>9</sup>

Wright’s insistence that imputation (the idea of the Judge transferring his own righteousness to a defendant) “makes no sense at all” is mistaken because it does not take the entire courtroom scene into account. The “trial” of justification is not a scene in which God and man stand alone in the courtroom; Jesus Christ stands at the bar as the sinner’s Advocate (I Jn. 2.1). To be precise, *justification* is not an act of the Father-Judge crediting his own righteousness to a sinner; it is

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 103.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Justification*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *St. Paul*, 126-7; “Justification: The Biblical Basis and its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism,” *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, ed. Gavin Reid (London: Collins, 1980) [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Justification\\_Biblical\\_Basis.pdf](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Justification_Biblical_Basis.pdf) (accessed September 19, 2009), 6.

the act of the Father-Judge crediting the sinner's transgression to the Son-Substitute and crediting the Son-Substitute's active obedience to the sinner.

Contrary to Wright's claim, there are passages in Paul's letters that speak of righteousness in a moral sense. In Rom. 5.13-19 (18 especially), Paul builds a parallelism between Adam's sin and the condemnation of many on one side and Jesus' obedience and the justification of many on the other. Paul's use of "condemnation" and "justification" is far deeper than mere "membership in the covenant community;" he is speaking about a moral standing that men have – a point of meaning that Wright flatly denies to the word "justification."

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