Sermon Notes 7-30-17
Reformations 500 Series – Justification
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Three sermons were hardly enough to even scratch the surface of the Reformational doctrine of justification, or the parable in Luke 18:9-14. But I'm going to have move on, so I wanted to wrap things up with some follow-up notes. I have written about the doctrine of justification extensively elsewhere (and preached on it many times), so these notes are not aiming at completion but rather a few thoughts to further things I did not get to give attention to in the sermons, but probably should have.

In these sermon notes for the website, I usually try to include a lot of quotations and bibliography. In this case, there is just no way to do that. Time does not permit me to try to deal comprehensively with such a huge topic. Pages and pages could be filled with beautiful summaries of the doctrine of justification from the Reformers. Likewise, it would be impossible to provide a full bibliography, whether of historical or biblical or theological studies, of justification. Despite their limitations, I hope these notes will be somewhat helpful.

First, a further note on justification and identity. Luther used the formula *simul iustus et peccator*. This is certainly true as far as it goes. God declares us righteous even though we still sin. There is no question we are sinners even as Christians. See 1 Timothy 1:15, 1 John 1:8; see also Heidelberg Catechism 114. And yet the biblical emphasis is obviously that we are saints. We are not saints *and* sinners; we are saints who sometimes sin. We do not belong to the category of sinners in the same way we did before baptism/conversion. Becoming a Christians did not *add* a saintly identity to a sinner's identity, but has redefined us and transformed a sinner into a saint (however incomplete the process of transformation may be at any given moment). We acknowledge our ongoing sin every week in the liturgy, while also rejoicing in the saintly identity we have been given in Christ. God's Word defines us, not our sin. If you are a Christian, you do not belong to the category of sinners, you belong to the category of the righteous.

This is very relevant to several current debates. In the last few years there has been a lot of discussion over whether or not Christians who struggle with same sex attraction should identity as "gay Christians." The answer is NO. Our sins and struggles do not define us or label us because *we are who we are in Christ.* The deepest reality about us is our justification and sanctification in Christ. Likewise, no Christian should identify as a "lustful Christian" or a "greedy Christian" or a "lying Christian." Sure, you have probably committed all of those sins in the last week. *But those sins do not define your identity.* As I said in the sermon: Don't argue with God. When God says you are righteous, you should say, "Amen!" To say anything else is simple unbelief. There is no word that can define you more deeply,

comprehensively, or powerfully than God's word of justification, spoken over you in Christ.

The sermon explored the psychology of justification (our identity in Christ), the sociology of justification (how this doctrine shapes the communal and missional life of the church), and the eschatology of justification (how justification leads to joy and peace). In each of these areas we barely scratched the surface, but especially the first two are very relevant to numerous cotemporary issues such as racism, class and gender divides, victim culture, guilt over "white privilege" and other "positional privilege" theories, political correctness and the "social justice warrior" movement, etc. The modern/postmodern world is very much a world in search of justification. We see people seeking to justify themselves in false ways (e.g., I am righteous because I am part of an oppressed people group, I am justified because I recycle and feed my three dogs organic pet food, I am righteous because I stand up for trangendered and gay persons, I am righteous because I voted for candidate X, etc.). we also people flailing in false guilt, trying like Macbeth the get the "damned spot" out, but unable to do so; in these cases attempts to overcome the guilt often lead to disaster and can be utterly paralyzing. We declare ourselves guilty for pseudo-sins (e.g., I am guilty because I am white or male or American; I am guilty because I am wealthy and successful; etc.), and then try to make atonement by punishing ourselves and groveling before others we consider our victims.

The reality is plain: We simply do not know what to do with the nagging feeling that our guilt feelings are not just feelings. We know we have sinned, but we do not know how to find atonement. The only answer to all of these problems – whether seeking to justify ourselves through some variety of political correctness, or membership in the right subculture, or beating ourselves up for things we actually cannot change – is the blood of Jesus. Jesus' blood and righteousness (resurrection status) shared with us is the only escape. If our civilization is to be saved from petty legalisms and self-flagellation that will ultimately destroy us, we must recover justification by faith. Only in Christ can we find confidence to admit our real sins without being utterly crushed in despair. Only in Christ can we find the resources to forgive those who have wronged us instead of requiring them to atone for their own sins.

Michael Lockwood's book *Unholy Trinity,* chapter 6, does an excellent job with these issues. Lockwood shows the wide-ranging social and cultural implications of self-justification vs. Christ-justification.

Most of the evil in the world is done by people convinced of their goodness. Self-justification opens the door to incredible wickedness.

Catching the echo of Psalm 51 is really key to the whole parable.

The Pharisee does not approach God with a cry for mercy. He believes he can approach God on his own, without mercy. It will not to do say that this man is trusting God's work in him (his sanctification) rather than God's work for him (his justification). If God had really worked in him, he would have the same humble faith as the tax collector. He's only paying lip service to God when he thanks him; he is really much more interested in thanking and congratulating himself, which is the antithesis of Psalm 51.

Further, by despising the one who prays for mercy – the one who prays Psalm 51 out of desperation – the Pharisee actually ends up despising King David, the great Jewish hero. Do you despise people who need to pray Psalm 51? Do you realize how much you need to pray Psalm 51?!

The Pharisee needs to hear and heed the parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15. That parable, this parable in Luke 18, and several other parable in Luke all make the same point about what true faith and piety look like. We all need to become like the tax collector, pleading for mercy, or like the younger brother casting himself on the mercy of his father. (Rich Mullins' song "Growing Young" is about precisely this point – to "grow young" is to become more and more like the younger brother who despaired of fixing himself, and ran to his father's hope in hope of receiving mercy. To 'grow young" is to grow in contrition and brokenness; it's to beat one's chest in self-abandonment; it's to become more and more broken, contrite, and repentant; it's to bank everything on the mercy of the father.)

The echo of Psalm 51 is the key to the parable in another way. It helps us to understand what's going on with the tax collector. Because Psalm 51 is a psalm of repentance (not presumption), we can surmise that the tax collector went on to live a changed life (just like it is with other tax collectors who come to Jesus, such as Levi and Zacchaeus).

Noting the Psalm 51 connection helps us grasp "the rest of the (untold) story" in other ways. The tax collector did not continue to pound his chest in remorse; the groveling came to an end. Once he received mercy, like David in Psalm 51, we can be sure he went on to rejoice in his salvation, even bursting with joy to tell others the good news. Of course, this is the same trajectory we see with other tax collectors and sinners who come to Jesus. When Levi came to Jesus, he ended up throwing a party so he could tell all his friends and introduce them to Jesus. Zacchaeus rejoiced to have met Jesus, and his new found joy in the treasure of the gospel was seen in his willingness to release so much of his earthly treasure to those he had defrauded.

The implication of Luke 18:9 is that if the Pharisees did not trust in themselves, they would not despise others. Their contempt for others is the corollary of their efforts at self-justification. So: Are there persons, or categories of people, you despise? If so, that contempt is more than just a violation of the command to love. It is a sign that you are seeking to justify yourself before God. If you despise the poor, it may be because you think your work ethic commends you to God. If you despise people of another race, it is because you have racial pride in your own heart, assuming you are loved and superior because of your skin color or ethnicity, rather than Jesus. Who we have contempt for can often reveal our idols.

Of course, this means that justification by faith transforms the way we treat "the other" – sinners, enemies, etc. Justification does not mean we condone sin, but it does mean we can show mercy because we have been shown mercy. We empathize with others, we can show compassion rather than condemnation. We can be kind to our moral and theological inferiors.

I want to further develop what I said in the sermon about humility. Tim Keller makes the point very well:

> C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity makes a brilliant observation about gospel-humility at the very end of his chapter on pride. If we were to meet a truly humble person, Lewis says, we would never come away from meeting them thinking they were humble. They would not be always telling us they were a nobody (because a person who keeps saying they are a nobody is actually a self-obsessed person). The thing we would remember from meeting a truly gospel-humble person is how much they seemed to be totally interested in us. Because the essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less.
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> Gospel-humility is not needing to think about myself. Not needing to connect things with myself. It is an end to thoughts such as, 'I'm in this room with these people, does that make me look good? Do I want to be here?' True gospel-humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself. The freedom of self-forgetfulness. The blessed rest that only self-forgetfulness brings.
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> True gospel-humility means an ego that is not puffed up but filled up. This is totally unique. are we talking about big self-esteem? No. So is it low self-esteem? Certainly not. It is not about self-esteem. Paul simply refuses to play that game (I Cor. 4). He says 'I don't care that much about my opinion' – and that is the secret.
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> A truly gospel-humble person is not a self-hating person or a self-loving person, but a gospel-humble person. The truly gospel-humble person is a

> self-forgetful person whose ego is just like his or her toes. It just works. It does not draw attention to itself. The toes just work; the ego just works. Neither draws attention to itself.

We often think there are two ways to get the gospel wrong: there are legalists who try to earn God's favor, and antinomians who presume on God's favor. Legalists try too hard, antinomians are too lax. Legalists are slaves to the law, antinomians reject it altogether. Legalists do not understand justification by faith, antinomians forget that the final judgment is according to works. This taxonomy is fine, and very useful, pastorally and otherwise.

But it is not the only way of looking at the matter. In another sense, because feelings of guilt are virtually universal, everyone (outside of Christ) is engaged in some kind of self-justification process. This is as true of the legalists, who misuses the law by turning it into a ladder or to heaven, as is it of the antinomians, who silences the law. Both end up substituting their own law for God's law, tailoring the law to their owns tastes, and at root both are driven by pride and idolatry. We put something in Christ's place, making something other than Christ our righteousness. But in doing so, we make ourselves equal to God, so all forms of self-justification are really self-idolatry. We must recognize God alone is righteous, and God alone can justify.

Consider how even antinomians practice self-justification through silencing, denying, or redefining God's law.

Often times, even the most hardened criminal will try to give a justification for what he has done. We are rationalizing creatures, highly skilled at making excuses for ourselves.

Theological antinomians will silence the law in the name of grace. Instead of fulfilling the law by grace, grace abolishes the law. This leads to a religion of pseudo-mercy – mercy without real forgiveness, mercy without sincere repentance. Luther considered antinomians who used the gospel as a license to sin as even worse than the papists. Antinomians end up being just like the legalists in that they seek to establish their own righteousness. They will not accept a law that condemns them; thus, they insist that their sins be approved of, rather than forgiven. The antinomian is actually just as proud of himself as the legalist. Luther was very clear about this, accusing antinomians not only of lawlessness, but also self-righteousness; thus he lumps them in with the legalists. He calls antinomianism "an alien and new way of teaching justification." But this strategy is no more successful than that of the legalist.

Further, more theologically minded antinomians may end up separating Christ from the Spirit. They presume upon Christ for forgiveness, but separate him from the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This is the cheap grace Bonhoeffer railed

against, and it is a false gospel. A gospel which leaves us in our dehumanizing sin is really no gospel at all. They have, as it has been put, a Christ who ends up justifying sin rather than sinners.

Insofar as antinomianism gets rid of God who is holy and who judges, it is idolatry. Some antinomians admit they sin, but treat as too trivial to really matter. Some view God as too distant or uncaring or tame or indulgent to do anything about sin. But this is so far from the biblical view of who God is, it may be considered functional atheism. Antinomians who go so far as to eliminate any kind of sin eliminate Christ as savior. But this leaves self as the only savior.

Self-justification is always a recipe for hypocrisy. It leads to a pretense of righteousness rather than the real thing. Luther called the self-righteous "the devil's martyrs" because all their showy acts of piety and sacrifice are all for naught in the end, only piling up condemnation and wrath.

Self-justification in any form always leads to a sense of entitlement. Thus, to justify ourselves, we must condemn God. If we declare ourselves holy, then God must be unholy. Either we condemn ourselves so that God can justify us, or we justify ourselves and condemn God. If we are seeking to justify ourselves, every time God allows us to suffer, he has wronged us. God *owes* us! Any misfortune he sends our way is undeserved. We have a sense of entitlement rather than gratitude. As Lockwood says, "if God's favor can be bought and we have paid our dues, then God owes us."

Another form of the same thing: We can assume that because we have suffered so much, there is no way God will let us suffer more in the afterlife. This is "justification by suffering." But the only suffering that can actually justify us is the suffering of Christ.

Another variation of this dynamic at work is found the modern day obsession with victimization. Victims can claim to be righteous precisely because they are victims. Their victim status automatically makes them righteous.

An excellent discussion of all this and more can be found in Michael Lockwood's *The Unholy Trinity.* Lockwood makes a very compelling case that for Luther all forms of self-justification, whether from the right or the left, from the legalist or the antinomian, are acts of idolatry, ultimately because they replace Christ with a false god. Lockwood cites Luther on the various ways we can attempt a false justification: "There is no end or limit to the variety of methods. But they all prescribe heavenward journeys on which the travelers will break their necks."

Self-justification has all kinds of consequences, many of which Lockwood points out. For example, because programs of self-justification do not really deal with guilt, guilt endures. No idol can cover our sins or take our guilt away. Thus, the fear of judgment, at some deep level, remains. We can deceive ourselves, which the self-

righteous certainly do, but only to a point. We know in our heart of hearts we are not righteous and therefore we fear God's wrath. Our consciences are uneasy, and the guilty man is afraid of a rustling leaf. There is no security in the law – not God's law, or even our own made substitutes for the law. This is why the gospels tell us the Pharisees – who just as antinomian as they were legalistic – were only concerned with looking good and gaining approval in the eyes of men. At bottom, their righteousness was really a sham, aimed at self-exaltation is the eyes of others. They pretended to be so secure and confident, as they looked down on others and pretended to be superior, but this was a mask; in the depths of their hearts, they were insecure and anxious.

In the end, Luther says that what drives us the self-righteous to multiply idols is an uneasy conscience, a sense of guilt that will not go away. Luther teaches that "whenever people are without faith in Christ's justifying work, they will inevitably be driven by guilt to create idols in the false hope they will justify. This involves two basic strategies: self-justification by attempting to keep the law, and self-justification by attempting to silence the law. In practice both strategies end up at the same point: self-justification through tailoring the law to excuse our sins and commend our works. This is a highly unstable enterprise, since it is based on self-deception regarding both the true content of God's law and our standing before him. It leads to arrogance while this deception holds, but despair when the cracks appear." (Lockwood).

What are the social and political consequences of self-justification? And of Christ-justification? Rushdoony's *Politics of Guilt and Pity* explores this theme quite a bit, but Lockwood's book does so even more perceptively.

Lockwood also explores the psychological implication of justification for the modern world. He starts with the premise/diagnosis that modern psychology's obsession with self-esteem is not exactly wrong: "People do have a deep-seated need to be justified, so they can hold their heads high instead of hang them in shame. Luther would disagree with remedy modern psychologists usually prescribe. He would have no time for the suggestion that we should redouble our efforts to justify ourselves, either by reducing the demands we place on ourselves (i.e., trying to silence the law), or by constantly affirming ourselves and trying to excel (trying to measure up before the law)" (115). Lockwood goes on from there to look at how modern psychology describes the process of self-justification, starting with ways we pass the buck and blame everyone else. You will look in vain for anyone taking responsibility for atrocities like Auschwitz. Everyone involved excuses themselves. Menninger writes, "Every slayer finds reasons for making his particular violation an exception, a non-crime if not a non-sin. Hitler had his reasons…" Again, we are rationalizing creatures rather than rational creatures. We have a self-serving bias built in. If we want to believe we are good people, we can invent reasons to justify that conclusion and to dismiss any contrary evidence. As Lockwood points out, we

do exactly what Luther said we do: we fit the law to our works, redefining God's requirements to match how we have lived. This was certainly the move of the Pharisees, and was a way of keeping their guilt buried deep in their subconscious. Lockwood points out that people often justify their cruelty by convincing themselves their victims deserved it. And, of course, the most powerful justifications are always religious. No sins more than those who sin in the name of God – but of course in doing so, they call their evil good.

Lockwood shows that we have an innate ability to take credit for our successes and blame others for our failures. In this way, we keep winning the self-justification game in our minds. For example students who get good grades assume they are smart; students who fail tend to blame the exam. This is why most people think they are "above average" – a statistical impossibility. We tend to vastly overrate how good we are, how much we contribute, etc. These self-deceptions allow us to keep passing favorable judgments over our performance so that we can justify ourselves in the end.

Lockwood also explains self-justification in Terror Management Theory. TMT says that virtually all humans operate with the view that they are assured a happy afterlife; otherwise the fear of death would overwhelm us. Self-justification mechanisms become a way of coping with and overcoming the fear of death. This is why idols so easily grip us: we need something to clam our fears and anxieties, above all the fear of death.

Lockwood goes on to explore another basic question: What is humanity's root problem: too much pride/self-esteem or too low a view of self? He shows that these are not actually not opposites but corollaries. For example, outward manifestations of pride (e.g. the humble-bragging of the Pharisee in Luke 18) actually mask a deeper insecurity. And those who go overboard in self-deprecation are actually taking pride in their show of humility, and thus also acting out of insecurity. Psychologists have actually shown that pride and self-hatred go together; they are part of the same program, often driving us to measure ourselves against an idealized view of ourselves (see p. 118ff for a complete explanation). All attempts at self-justification are neurotic and narcissistic. Self-justification always requires us to create an fantasy version of ourselves, a false and imagined self-image, and then to maintain the illusion that this is the "real me." Again the only escape is justification by faith in Christ: only in Christ can we face who we truly are, in the depths of our depravity, and still hold our heads high because of what we are in union with him. The idol of the self wants to establish worth apart from Christ, and thus is an idol put in his place. The gospel tears down this idol so we can face the horrific truth, but assures us of mercy so that the truth about ourselves does not utterly crush us. Lockwood drives this home with the story of a woman who was counseled to use self-esteem boosting methods to fight off her depression (see p. 130). This simply caused her to swing wildly between pride and despair. Only in Christ can we find an answer.

Lockwood explores self-justification through attempts to keep the law, which in our context can be regarded as "moral therapeutic deism" (120ff). When religion is reduced to mere morality, it is easy to assume that all religions are basically the same, and that religion is not really needed to live and decent and moral life since we already know right from wrong. If non-Christians can be basically moral people, why do we need the baggage of traditional Christianity (except perhaps as window dressing)?

Lockwood also examines self-justification through silencing the law (123ff). He shows the bankruptcy of our moral relativism. Because God has built the law into the very fabric of creation, and because we cannot the memory of our Christian past (we are a Christ-haunted civilization), moral absolutes keep slipping back in. So those who profess that morality is relative based on the culture and context, also treat it as self-evident that you should not be cruel. The result is a confused, watered down ethic of niceness – and it assumed that this ethic of niceness is what religion is all about. J. Budziszewski (one of my graduate school profs) calls this "the cannibalizing of the conscience." The only way to suppress the conscience is to sear it and malform it (e.g., Nazis who did this by vilifying their victims as subhuman so they could slaughter them in the name of the common good). Lockwood says, 'People in western society today attack the institution of marriage in the name of love, promote homosexual marriage in the name of fairness, and justify the murder of children in the womb in the name compassion for women and respect for freedom." This is the shape of moral relativism in our society: we rename evil good, we do evil in the name of good. By renaming the world, we are able to justify all kinds of wickedness – and ourselves in the process. Thus, those who champion destructive practices like homosexuality, or outright murder like abortion, are hailed as heroes who defend "love" and "health" when in reality they are doing the exact opposite. This is the perverse form so much self-justification takes in our own day.

Lockwood goes on to show how this has impacted the church, with our false gospels of inclusivity and affirmation. William Abraham has shown that inclusivism has become the new moralism, as it attacks patriarchy, racism, sexism, etc. – but if justification is to be found in liberating victims from oppression, we must always be finding new victims to rescue, and so we try to help more and more perverse people (e.g., transgenders, trans-species, etc.) find "liberation." Of course, this is done largely by castigating those who are the oppressors, e.g., those who think homosexuality is morally wrong as a misuse of the body/sexuality, or those who think that gender dysphoria is a mental illness to treated not indulged. Of course, we are now seeing the results of this: the oppressed claim the moral high ground, and become the new oppressors. This makes everyone live in fear, wondering if they will be the next target of the thought police. A legitimate virtue, love and a desire to help the oppressed, has become infected with self-righteous zeal, and thus has been

separated from all other virtues (e.g., chastity). Lockwood shows that this "gospel of inclusivism" has replaced the "gospel of redemption."

In order to justify ourselves we must condemn God. Lockwood uses Frued to illustrate this principle on p. 127f. People who do not sense they are sinners tend to put on trial rather than feeling like God will put them on trial. And they feel justified in accusing God, rather than in facing God's accusations.

Lockwood also has interesting story about Tim Keller's ministry in Manhattan. While conventional Evangelism Explosion type methods failed, Keller discovered that modern day New Yorkers are just legalistic as the ancient Pharisees, albeit in different ways (p. 128f). The church must finds way to preach the gospel into the liberal legalism, the legalism of the left. Keller's idolatry model of evangelism is very helpful in a postmodern context, where people do not have much Christian morality left, but still think of themselves as good people. The question is where they can find the satisfaction and validation they crave.

Much more attention needs to be given to a sociology (or ecclesiology) of justification. This is one of the legitimate contributions of the so-called New Perspective on Paul. The New Perspective has many flaws – largely in how it understands Judaism, and especially (in some variants) how it understands Paul's message of salvation. But the best insights of the NPP are fully compatible with the so-called Old Perspective on Paul of the Reformers – I have argued this in many places over the years. The gist of the NPP is really crystallized in Gal. 2:11-21, where Paul uses the doctrine of justification to argue (against the lapsing apostle Peter) that Gentiles can be fully included in the church by faith in Christ alone (apart from living Jewishly).

President Trump is an interesting case study in self-justification. I hope his profession of Christian faith is genuine but he is, at best, very confused. During the election he said he had never asked forgiveness because he did not need to; indeed, the inability of his critics to shame him is one thing that made him so appealing to many. He had a bold conscience. On other hand, the recent Russia investigation has led the Trump administration to investigate the range of limits of the president's pardoning powers. Some have rumored that perhaps Trump was preparing to pardon himself in the investigation went badly for him. Would that not be the height of irony: the President who says he has never asked God for forgiveness pardoning himself?!!

One aspect of justification I have not touched on is its relationship to prayer and worship. In medieval Catholicism, you could not approach God directly because you were unworthy. You could plead for mercy, but there was no assurance of receiving it. Thus, you would approach God through an intermediary, such as Mary or one of the other saints.

The Reformation transformed worship and prayer. In Christ, believers could not serve as priests, coming into the very presence of God. There was a new sense of intimacy with God. The book of Hebrews is largely about this reality.

Likewise, the medieval formula basically told people, "Do your best to be good and God will make up for the rest." This was a way of incredibly minimizing both the problem of sin and the depth and width of God's mercy. It also made assurance. After all, how do you know when you have done your best? Has anyone ever really done their best?

We might clean up really nice for Sunday mornings, but are we as good as we look. Our social media profiles may make us appear happy and put together, but are we really? One of the best things about the doctrine of justification is that it lets come clean and be honest about who we really are, while also giving us a way to deal with the same and pain of that realization.

Luther:

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. **Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.** We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign.

Luther:

It would be spectacular and amazing, prompting all the world to open its ears and eyes, mouth and nose in uncomprehending wonderment, if some king's son were to appear in a beggar's home to nurse him in his illness, wash off his filth, and do everything else the beggar would have to do. Would this not be profound humility?

Any spectator or any beneficiary of this honor would feel impelled to admit that he had seen or experienced something unusual and extraordinary, something magnificent.
But what is a king or an emperor compared with the Son of God? Furthermore, what is a beggar's filth or stench compared with the filth of sin which is ours by nature, stinking a hundred times worse and looking infinitely more repulsive to God than any foul matter found in a hospital?
And yet the love of the Son of God for us is of such magnitude that the greater the filth and stench of our sins, the more He befriends us.
For how amazing it is that the Son of God becomes my servant, that He humbles Himself so, that He cumbers Himself with my misery and sin. . . . He says to me: "You are no longer a sinner, but I am. I am your substitute. You have not sinned, but I have. The entire world is in sin. However, you are not in sin; but I am. All your sins are to rest on Me and not on you." No one can comprehend this. In yonder life our eyes will feast forever on this love of God. (Sermon on John 1:29)

A story about Luther:

In a dream, Martin Luther found himself being attacked by Satan. The devil unrolled a long scroll containing a list of Luther's sins, and held it before him. On reaching the end of the scroll Luther asked the devil, "Is that all?" "No," came the reply, and a second scroll was thrust in front of him. Then, after a second came a third. But now the devil had no more. "You've forgotten something," Luther exclaimed triumphantly. "Quickly write on each of them, 'The blood of Jesus Christ God's son cleanses us from all sins.'" From *Occult, Bondage, and Deliverance*, K. Koch, p. 10.

C. S. Lewis with his own version of the parable of Luke 18, in his classic *The Great Divorce*. The whole book is a parable about a bus-load of Ghosts from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven and get a visit from the Bright Men of heaven. In this conversation, a Ghost recognizes a Bright Man who he knew in life whom he knew him to be a murderer.

> GHOST: Look at me now (says the ghost, slapping its chest – but the slap made no sound). I've gone straight all my life. I don't say I have no faults, far from it. But I done my best all my life see. I done my best by everyone – that's the sort of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights. If I wanted a drink, I paid for it, see. And if I took my wages, I done my job see. That's the sort of man I was.
> BRIGHT MAN – It would be much better (said the Bright man) if you wouldn't talk like that. You're never going to get there like that.

GHOST: What are you talking about. (says the Ghost) I'm not going on, I'm not arguing. I'm just asking for nothing but my rights. I just want to have my rights. Same as you see
BRIGHT MAN: Oh no, (said the Bright man) It's not as bad as that. I never got my rights and you won't get your rights either. You'll get something so much better.
GHOST: That's just what I mean (says the Ghost). I haven't got my rights. I've always done my best and I've never done anything wrong. And here's the thing. Well, if you don't mind my saying so – here's the thing I wonder about. Why should I be put down there below a bloody murderer like you. What's a murderer doing up there? And what is a sort like me doing down there?
BRIGHT MAN: Well (the Bright man says) I don't know where you'll be put, just be happy and come.
GHOST: What do you keep on arguing for (says the Ghost) I only want my rights. I'm not asking for anyone's bleeding charity.
BRIGHT MAN – Oh then do (said the Bright man) – at once. Ask for the bleeding charity. Everything is here for the asking and absolutely nothing can be bought
GHOST: That may be alright for you (said the Ghost) if they choose to let a bloody murderer in just because he makes a poor mouth at the last minute, that's their look-out. I don't want charity though. I'm a decent man, and if I had my rights I'd have been there long ago and you can tell them I said so.
(The Ghost was almost happy now that it could in a sense threaten)
GHOST: That's what I'll do – I'll go home. I didn't come here to be treated like a dog. I'll go home. Damn and blast the whole pack of you.
And still grumbling but whimpering a little bit as it picked its way over the sharp grasses – it left.

Gene Veith, following Oswald Bayer:

Bayer begins by showing that the concept of "justification" is not an arcane theological concept. Rather, it's something we are preoccupied with all the time. We are always engaged in trying to justify ourselves. We are always maintaining that we are right, particularly when other people say that we are wrong. At work, in our casual conversations, in our relationships with others, we are always defending ourselves, making excuses, scoring points, and seeking approval. I mean, you see it in the comments on this and other blogs.
Bayer seems the need to justify ourselves in the social dimension, as well, from our political arguments to nations going to war. We insist that we are right. And so is the other person or group who insists that we are wrong.
Underlying the need to be justified, Bayer says, is our yearning for approval, for affirmation, for thinking that our existence matters in some positive way, for our need to think that our life is worthwhile.

That we all are engaged in justifying ourselves is an understandable, normal facet of being human. Of course, we are not always right and are often wrong–though we continue to justify ourselves–creating all kinds of inner turmoil. The problem, though, is that *we* are trying to justify *ourselves*.

I am seeing where Bayer is going with this: What if, instead of having to justify ourselves, we are justified by *Christ*? What if Christ gives us approval, affirmation, assurance that our existence matters, that our life is worthwhile?

The grace of God–in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ–forgives our wrongdoing and makes us "right." Thus, on the deepest level, we do not have to justify ourselves because Christ has justified us. Believing in His Word of justification is faith. And living in that realization is what it means to live by faith.

Again, Veith:

Our impulse to justify and accuse is the source of our conflicts. We insist that we are right [because our sense of worth depends on being right]. This is the pattern in marital strife,, in political arguments, and when nations go to war. It is also the pattern of guilt, disillusionment, and despair.

Underlying the need ti be justified, says Bayer, is our yearning for approval, for affirmation, for thinking that our existence matters in some positive way, for our need to think that our life is worthwhile. We keep being accused and condemned, so we continually have to justify ourselves, proving that we are right, insisting how good we are, getting defensive, accusing and condemning our critics in retaliation. We want approval. We want to be accepted. We want to be considered good, even when we aren't. So we rationalize our behavior, justifying what we do. This may involve a simple excuse or devising a new ethical system, in which our vice is transformed into something good.

Not only are we always judging – condemning or justifying – ourselves and one another, but we also judge – condemn or justify – God. "How can God allow evil in the world?" both believers and unbelievers ask. "He must not be good." Believers can form arguments to justify God. Unbelievers justify the intellectual concept of a righteous God by concluding that he does not actually exist. But Bayer shows that that problems of theodicy (the justifying of God) do not go away even when God's existence is rejected. Bayer describes a "secular theodicy." It is no longer "why does God allow evil and suffering?" but "why does existence allow evil and suffering?" Thus, many people today believe that is meaningless, absurd, pointless, and (in a tragic number of cases) not worth living. They cannot justify the physical world. They cannot justify existence.

But what is, instead of having to justify ourselves, we are justified by Christ? What if God gives us approval, affirmation, assurance that our existence matters, that our life is worthwhile? When we no longer have to justify ourselves, observes Bayer, but know the "passive righteousness" of faith that comes from being justified by Christ, we are reconciled to ourselves (no longer having to justify ourselves), we are reconciled to God (no longer having to justify him), we are reconciled to others (no longer having to justify them), we are reconciled to the world (no longer having to

justify existence). This latter point is because, as he says with great "Lutheran-ness," God uses the physical world of his creation to bring us to our justification: water, bread, wine, language, pastors….we can live with a spirit of freedom…

Several years ago when I preached on this parable, I used Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation" as an illustration. You read about it here (taking the view of "the rest of the story," pondering what might have happened after the Pharisee left the temple):

http://newtheologicalmovement.blogspot.com/2010/10/after-pharisee-left-temple-area.html

O'Connor's story is full of highly charged and clever symbolism. For example, ponder the meaning of the human development textbook. Or the fact that Mrs. Turpin, a seemingly grateful but obviously judgmental woman, is hosing down (baptizing) pigs (!) when she has her vision. The whole story is scandalous, just like the parables of Jesus. It includes that immortal line, spoken by Mrs. Turpin to God: "If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then"…which of course is exactly what God has done.

While O'Connor was a Catholic, in a certain sense she grasped justification by faith through grace very clearly (in the story "Revelation" those who are saved have even their virtues burned away – not even Luther, perhaps, would have gone that far!). She understood "the smug shall be last" – and many of her stories take shots at those who, like the Pharisees, think of themselves as better then others because they are trying to justify themselves. I heartily recommend her work to you. It is full of the gospel and of wisdom.

Calvin on justification:

We explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

As Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable—namely, righteousness and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image. (*Institutes* 3:11:6)
Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. (*Institutes* 3:16:1)

Now, both repentance and forgiveness of sins—that is, newness of life and free reconciliation—are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith. (*Institutes* 3:3:1)
Our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, … we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ. (*Institutes* 3:11:23)
We say that faith justifies, not because it merits righteousness for us by its own worth, but because it is an instrument whereby we obtain free the righteousness of Christ. (*Institutes* 3:18:8)

The power of justifying, which faith possesses, does not lie in any worth of works. Our justification rests on God's mercy alone and Christ's merit, and faith, when it lays hold of justification, is said to justify. (*Institutes* 3:18:8)

It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as it is the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light. (*Acts of the Council of Trent: with the Antidote*, 6th Session, can. 11)

We confess with Paul that no other faith justifies "but faith working through love" [Gal. 5:6]. (*Institutes* 3:11:20)
We dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them. This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together, we still lodge justification in faith, not in works. (*Institutes* 3:16:1)

More Calvin:

To have a proper understanding of the gospel, we must recognise that we need to lean entirely upon the Lord Jesus Christ and his mercy alone as our only hope of salvation. ... No one can be justified by the law; justification is through faith alone.

We explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Justification by faith is the hinge on which all true religion turns.

Luther gets the last word:

When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus, “I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does

this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also.