

Class Objective: To refine our faith and understanding by dismantling misconceptions regarding God, the Bible and the Christian life.

Class Overview

1. Introduce *Urban Legends of Theology* by Michael Wittmer
2. Clarify the meaning of the term urban legend as used in this class
3. Understand the degree of personal impact connected with various misconceptions
4. Elevate the pursuit of truth as the ultimate goal of analyzing error
5. Emphasize edification as the primary purpose of this study
6. Explore the following misconceptions in light of biblical truth:
 - a. The name of the Son of God is Jesus.
 - b. Unbelievers are annihilated in hell.
 - c. Justification means “just as if I had never sinned.”
 - d. We should forgive others for our own good.
 - e. Christianity is not a religion—it’s a relationship.
 - f. I don’t need church to have a relationship with God.

Notes

Urban legend: Justification means “just as if I had never sinned.”

I. What is Justification

A. Justification is the instantaneous and irreversible divine declaration of the unrighteous as positionally righteous, based upon the merit of Christ’s obedience, applied by grace and received through faith (Rom. 3.24-28; 4.1-5; 5.1-2). God declares the unjust to be just based upon Christ’s work for them. . . . Justification by faith alone is the declarative act by God the judge that we are forever wrapped in the everlasting righteousness of Christ! His record is now your record. His merit is yours. God treats you as righteous because he treated Christ as unrighteous—for our sake (2 Cor. 5:21). *E. Raymond*

B. This understanding of justification is distinctly different from the Roman Catholic view of justification which was specifically clarified at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). In the following excerpt R. C. Sproul gives a helpful summary of the difference between the reformed Protestant view of justification and the view of the Catholic Church:

1. There are two sides to the gospel, the good news of the New Testament: an objective side and a subjective side. The objective content of the gospel is the person and work of Jesus—who He is and what He accomplished in His life. The subjective side is the question of how the benefits of Christ’s work are appropriated to the believer. There the doctrine of justification comes to the fore .
2. There was no great disagreement between the Roman Catholic Church authorities and the Protestant Reformers about the objective side. All the parties agreed that Jesus was divine, the Son of God and of the Virgin Mary, and that He lived a life of perfect obedience, died on the cross in an atoning death, and was raised from the grave. The battle was over the second part of the gospel, the subjective side, the question of how the benefits of Christ are applied to the believer.
3. The Reformers believed and taught that we are justified by faith alone. Faith, they said, is the sole instrumental cause for our justification. By this they meant that we receive all the benefits of Jesus’ work through putting our trust in Him alone. We receive all the benefits of Jesus’ work through putting our trust in Him alone.
4. The Roman communion also taught that faith is a necessary condition for salvation. At the seminal Council of Trent (1545–1563), which formulated Rome’s response to the Reformation, the

Roman Catholic authorities declared that faith affords three things: the initium, the fundamentum, and the radix. That is, faith is the beginning of justification, the foundation for justification, and the root of justification. **But** Rome held that a person can have true faith and still not be justified, because there was much more to the Roman system.

5. In reality, the Roman view of the gospel, as expressed at Trent, was that justification is accomplished through the sacraments. Initially, the recipient must accept and cooperate in baptism, by which he receives justifying grace. He retains that grace until he commits a mortal sin. Mortal sin is called “mortal” because it kills the grace of justification. The sinner then must be justified a second time. That happens through the sacrament of penance, which the Council of Trent defined as “a second plank” of justification for those who have made shipwreck of their souls. [Following, I have inserted three quotes directly from the Council of Trent not included in Sproul’s quotation.]

a) *If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified; let him be anathema.* Council of Trent Canon XII

b) *If any one saith, that a man, who is born again and justified, is bound of faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; let him be anathema.* Council of Trent Canon XV

c) *For even as no pious person ought to doubt of the mercy of God, of the merit of Christ, and of the virtue and efficacy of the sacraments, even so each one, when he regards himself, and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension touching his own grace; seeing that no one can know with a certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.* Council of Trent, 6, IX

6. The fundamental difference was this. Trent said that God does not justify anyone until real righteousness inheres within the person. In other words, God does not declare a person righteous unless he or she is righteous. So, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, justification depends on a person’s sanctification. By contrast, the Reformers said justification is based on the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus. The only ground by which a person can be saved is Jesus’ righteousness, which is reckoned to him when he believes.

7. These were radically different views of salvation. They could not be reconciled. One of them was the gospel. One of them was not. Thus, what was at stake in the Reformation was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though the Council of Trent made many fine affirmations of traditional truths of the Christian faith, it declared justification by faith alone to be anathema, ignoring many plain teachings of Scripture, such as Romans 3:28: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/what-does-roman-catholic-church-believe-about-justification>

II. Is the expression, “just as if I never sinned” an adequate summary of the biblical meaning of justification by faith?

A. A psychological problem: We inherently expect that even when one is forgiven, they will still have memory of their sin and that it will be accompanied by some degree of corresponding humility.

B. A biblical problem: Biblical forgiveness does not erase the reality of sin but rather acknowledges it.

1. Christian maturity is portrayed as virtue rooted in the memory of the cleansing of sin.

a) ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. 2 Peter 1:5-9

b) Paul always thought of himself as a redeemed sinner.

(1) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 1 Timothy 1:15

2. The praise of heaven itself implicitly calls to mind the reality of sin as it heralds Christ's victory.

a) ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying,
 "Worthy are you to take the scroll
 and to open its seals,
 for you were **slain**, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
 from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
 and they shall reign on the earth."

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

"Worthy is the Lamb who was **slain**,
 to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
 and honor and glory and blessing!" Revelation 5:9-12

C. Theological problems:

1. God does not gain or lose knowledge, including knowledge of our sin.

a) ¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.

³ You search out my path and my lying down
 and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. Psalm 139:1-4

b) One might object that God does not remember our sins.

(1) I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Isaiah 43:25

(2) For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. Hebrews 8:12

(3) God's remembering is a way of acting in accordance with some human fact or event.

(a) “The Bible often speaks of God remembering or not remembering, but not in the same way we talk about remembering to get the mail or forgetting a doctor’s appointment. When God remembers, he responds. The Hebrew word *zakar* does not imply that God forgot and then suddenly remembered, but that he called something to mind. To remember in this sense is to act in accordance with something. . . . God ceasing to remember our sin is not voluntary amnesia. But, in his mercy, he does not act against us according to our sin. . . . ‘I will remember their sins no more’ doesn’t mean our sin slips his mind, but that he doesn’t hold it against us (Heb. 8:12).” *J. Kimbrel*

- (i) Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD! Psalm 25:7
- (ii) Thus says the LORD concerning this people: “They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet; therefore the LORD does not accept them; now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.” Jeremiah 14:10

2. Redemption requires positive moral righteousness not neutral innocence.

- a) Righteousness from God and before God is what is required of us.
 - (1) ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Philippians 3:8, 9
 - (2) For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21
- b) “If . . . God merely treats us ‘just-as-if-I’d’ never sinned then we’d be morally neutral. We would be back in the garden with untested holiness like Adam before he sinned. This is a far cry from being clothed in the everlasting righteousness of the last Adam. Not only has God taken away the debt of our sin but he has given us his righteousness! Sinclair Ferguson rightly observes, ‘We are not simply like Adam, beginning all over again; we are in Christ. In the sight of God we are not only innocent, but as righteous as Christ is, because [we are] righteous with his personal righteousness!’” *E. Raymond*
- c) The good news is as encompassing as the bad news—it’s even more so, since it doesn’t announce a mere return to a pristine condition. Rather, it announces a future consummated condition that’s never been experienced by any mortal except for our exalted brother, Jesus (1 Cor. 2:9; Heb. 2:8–9). *M. Horton*