



Subjective and Objective Justification

LEADER'S GUIDE

Session 2

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Session 2:

1. Subjective or Individual Justification

In Session 1 we talked primarily about “subjective” or individual justification.

Justification is receiving the forgiveness of sin — of all sin, so that we are free from the condemnation of the Law. We are justified through the Gospel, the Good News. The Gospel is a promise that comes to us in preaching, Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Absolution. We receive this Good News in faith alone because a promise is received only by one who believes it.

Therefore, we speak of justification by *faith alone*. This is how God applies the saving work of Christ to the individual person — through faith in the Gospel. That is what we mean by subjective justification: the justification of the individual person.

2. Objective Justification

We also started to look at what is meant by “objective” or “universal” justification. By that we mean Christ is the Savior of *all* people and that He bore and atoned for *all* sins. The message of the Gospel, therefore, is that all your sins *are* forgiven (not *may* be or *will* be forgiven!) because

of what Christ has done. Look again at 1 Timothy 4:10 and 1 Timothy 2:3–6:

“For this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 TIM. 4:10).

“This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” (1 TIM. 2:3–6).

3. Things to Watch for When Talking about Subjective or Individual Justification

Let's look now at another text that is important for the teaching of objective justification.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–19.

“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not

counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 COR. 5:18–19).

What does “reconciling” mean?

Reconciliation means that there was strife between God and human beings, but that this strife is over and now there is peace. The strife between God and people is because of sin that provokes God’s wrath. Thus, the problem between God and humanity is one of sin and God’s wrath. Reconciliation concerns human sin and God’s wrath.

How did God reconcile the world to Himself?

God did it “*through Christ*.” If God’s wrath and our sin are the issue, how does Christ deal with these things? God made Christ for our sake to be sin for us (2 COR. 5:21). He became the sacrifice for the sins of the world (JOHN 1:29) and thus He is “the propitiation for our sins” (1 JOHN 2:2). “Propitiation” means that God deals with the punishment for our sins.

Does “world” mean all people or only believers?

It applies to *everyone*. There is no indication that the term “world” here is used in any restricted sense. The work of God in Christ is for the entire world.

In what way are unbelievers reconciled to God?

They are reconciled to God because God has set aside His wrath and His condemnation of their sins. He is at peace with humanity because of what Christ has done. He “does not count their trespasses against them.”

What does it mean when God does not count our trespasses against us?

It means nothing less than the forgiveness of sins for all people. To be forgiven means to be justified.

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (PS. 32:1–2)

“We are justified on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness” (FC SD III, 9).¹

¹ All quotations from the *Book of Concord* are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

We see here that God, through His action in Christ, has done something before anyone else. Before any human being could do anything, God reconciled Himself to the world. No one else did anything to make that possible. For Christ’s sake, God does not count people’s trespasses against them — this includes all people. Paul does not say: God does not count men’s trespasses against all *believers*; He says: God does not count men’s trespasses against “them” (“the world”). And this covers *everything and everyone* — not only some sins, or some people’s sins, but all the sins of the world, past, present and future. Reconciliation is something that has already *happened* in Christ. The message of reconciliation, therefore, is that God is fully reconciled with the world in Christ. God is at peace with the world in Christ. In His Word God assures the entire world that He is at peace with us — reconciled. Everyone who believes enjoys the benefits of this reconciliation.

4. Romans 5:18–19

Read Romans 5:18–19 (see below). What is the context here?

“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (ROM. 5:18–19).

The context of this passage has to do with the parallel between Adam and Christ. How are Adam and Christ alike? Each set in place a particular reality for all the world. In one man, Adam, sin, death and condemnation have come to all people. In the other man, Jesus Christ, justification comes to all people.

What is meant by the “act of righteousness”?

“This expression encompasses the incarnation, righteous life, atoning death, and resurrection of Jesus as his obedient and salvific ‘one righteous act.’”²

What does Paul mean when he says that this act of Christ “leads to justification and life for all men?”

It means that *all* people are justified.

“For as it is a fact that the offense of Adam resulted in the condemnation of death for all men, so it is a fact that the righteousness of Christ resulted in the justification of life to all men. What Paul, therefore, teaches in this section is

² Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8 Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 431.

briefly this, that, as the sin of Adam brought upon all men the condemnation of death, so, and much more so, did the righteousness of Christ bring upon all men the justification of life.”³

5. Summary of Objective Justification

Let’s review once again the definition of objective justification with which we started:

“By ‘objective’ or ‘universal’ justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ’s sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God’s unilateral act prior to and in no way dependent upon man’s response to it, and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ’s sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness.”⁴

- Illustration: Pardon and the prisoner

Objective justification has often been compared to the issuing of a pardon. The president or the governor has the right of pardon, so that a person who has been sentenced will not suffer the consequences of his crime. Years ago, those who fled to Canada to evade being drafted during the Vietnam War were pardoned by the president, so that they did not have to fear punishment when they came back to the United States. This pardon, as all pardons, was pure grace. It was universal. It was an objective fact and reality.

But what if a person were to think that this was “too good to be true” — that this was just a cunning trick of the government to get them back in the United States where they could be punished? Someone who did not trust the president’s word and did not believe the promise of pardon would not enjoy the result of the pardon. He would continue to exclude himself from the benefit of returning to the United States.

Objective justification is a similar pardon. God, because of what Christ has done, announces a general amnesty to all people. Those who believe this good news will enjoy it. Those who do not believe it in this life but reject it, will (tragically) suffer the punishment from which God has already freed them in Christ.

³ Edward W. A. Koehler, “Objective Justification,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 16 (1945): 224.

⁴ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theses on Justification* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1983), Thesis 23.

6. The Relationship between Objective (Universal) and Subjective (Individual) Justification

- The justifying act of God

We have looked at objective justification, that is, God’s declaration that all people are forgiven because of the work of Christ. God is reconciled to the world through Christ, in Christ and on account of Christ, who bore the sins of all people and satisfied the wrath of God. This declaration is good news for all who fear the punishment of God because of their sins.

We have also talked about *subjective or individual* justification. Besides objectively declaring the whole world justified, God also addresses individual persons or subjects. “Subjective” here means “belonging to an individual person” not “existing only in one’s mind,” or something that has no reality in eternal life.

- The proclamation of the gracious judgment of God in the Gospel

Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–20. What is meant by the “message of reconciliation”?

It is the proclamation of the Good News by the apostle, that is, the Gospel. The good news of Christ’s death for the sins of the world is called the “message of reconciliation” because it is the reassuring announcement that God for Christ’s sake has forgiven the sins of the world. He is reconciled to us because of Christ.

Why is the “message of reconciliation” necessary after the *act* of reconciliation? It is necessary because God wants to impart this forgiveness to each individual person, so that each person is reconciled to God. God’s grace, the work of Christ for the reconciliation of the world, and the word of reconciliation belong together. What Christ has gained for the entire world is given to me individually through the message of reconciliation.

- The acceptance of this proclamation on the part of the individual through faith

What is the appropriate response to this message of reconciliation?

Read Acts 13:32–39. Why is faith so important?

The message of reconciliation can be either believed or rejected. Faith is a work and gift of God. Through faith,

by believing the message, the Gospel is received to one's benefit.

7. Why Is Objective Justification Important?

Maybe you have never heard the term “objective justification” before. If so, you might wonder if this teaching is all that important for the ordinary Christian. After all, if it were important, you would have heard of it! But even if you have never heard the *term* “objective justification,” you have almost certainly heard and learned about what it means — in confirmation instruction, in sermons and Bible classes.

The Gospel without “if”

When the Good News is spoken, does it sound like, “God is ready and willing to forgive you — *if* you believe?” Or perhaps, “Forgiveness of sins is now a possibility!”

Hopefully, this is not what you remember hearing. The Gospel is not the Good News with an “if” (God forgives you all your sins, if ...). No, it is a declaration, a factual announcement, and sheer good news, PERIOD: “God forgives you all your sins.” No “ifs.”

For when one says that a person is forgiven *IF ... , then* the question is: What do I have to do? If I still have to do something to be forgiven, then faith becomes my half of the bargain or my contribution to forgiveness. Faith becomes something I have to bring to the table to receive God's gift. But faith is not my part in accomplishing the forgiveness of sins. Faith is God's gift created by the Gospel itself. “So faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ” (ROM. 10:17).

“As far as the sins of men are concerned, the Gospel does not tell us that God is ready and willing to forgive them if and when a man believes; it does not offer a potential forgiveness of sins; it does not tell us that the actual forgiving on the part of God takes place, but not before the believing takes place on the part of man; but the Gospel tells us that when God in Christ reconciled the world unto Himself, he then did not impute the trespasses unto men, He then forgave all their sins to all of them. The act of forgiving is not held in abeyance, but it is finished, it is accomplished, the sins are forgiven to all men. Therefore, we do not preach of and about forgiveness of sins, but we *preach forgiveness itself*; we offer to men a finished product, not a future possibility.”⁵

⁵ Koehler, 226.

8. Preaching and Absolution

Because God has forgiven the sins of all the world, therefore a preacher of the Gospel can say: “God has forgiven all your sins.”

A preacher of the Gospel can say: “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” For God has already said that, and the preacher is simply repeating the Word of God. Without objective justification, there is no objective Gospel.

If there were no objective justification, how would one speak the Gospel? One could only say: “God will forgive your sins, once you believe.” With such a “gospel,” faith is no longer trusting in what Christ has already accomplished. Would the following still be an absolution in any real sense of the word? “To those who believe, I pronounce the forgiveness of sins; but to those who do not believe, God has no forgiveness to offer you.” How could such a “gospel” bring anyone to faith? Without objective justification, subjective justification is impossible to imagine.

The Lutheran Confessions speak this way about justification:

“The only essential and necessary elements of justification are the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and the faith that receives this grace and merit in the gospel's promise, through which Christ's righteousness is reckoned to us” (FC SD III, 25).⁶ Thus, the Confessions speak about that which is universal and objective — the grace of God, the merit of Christ, the promise of the Gospel, and how this comes to be ours personally (subjectively), namely through faith.

The teaching of objective justification, therefore, thus does not neglect faith; rather, it puts faith in its proper place. Faith believes in the reconciliation and forgiveness of sins that God has proclaimed in the death and resurrection of Christ. Faith does not reconcile God to us, it believes in the God who has forgiven us and reconciled Himself to us. Faith does not cause God to forgive us our sins, but rather faith receives the forgiveness that Christ has gained, the forgiveness delivered to us through the Gospel.

9. Objections to Objective Justification

Depending on how the discussion has gone to this point, the instructor may want to select or focus on specific

⁶ Kolb/Wengert, 566.

objections that are most relevant to the particular context of his hearers.

The teaching of God's objective justification may seem to some to deny that God hates sin and that sinners are by nature "children of wrath" (EPH. 2:3). It is true that God hates sin. The reconciliation in Christ does not mean that God no longer hates sin, but rather that in Christ there is forgiveness. Both are true. We are by nature sinful and unclean and therefore under God's punishment (God's wrath). We are also, because of Christ, reconciled to God. Those who believe the Good News will live with God the Father as His dear children, forgiven and reconciled in the relationship that Christ has established. Those who reject Christ and do not believe the message of reconciliation have chosen to reject God's absolution and will bear the punishment of their sins.

Thus, the Church preaches both: God's Law and God's Gospel. The preeminent purpose of the Law is to make sin known and to show God's wrath over sin. This will be preached until the last day. God's wrath is on the sinner, and it abides on him if he does not believe in the Gospel. The preaching of the Gospel proclaims that God has forgiven all people in Christ.

"These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified. One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture" (Ap XII, 53). One is the Law, which proclaims God's wrath against sin, and the other is the Gospel, which imparts God's mercy and forgiveness. "Since the beginning of the world these two proclamations have continually been set forth side by side in the church of God with the proper distinction." (FC SD V, 23).

It is true that Jesus died for all people; but (some may object) is it not going too far to say that all people are justified? Here again, we have to look at 2 Corinthians 5. If God does not impute sins, then He forgives them and justifies sinners, since justification and forgiveness of sins are the same. This language is not going too far. It says what St. Paul says.

Does this mean that all people will go to heaven?

To answer that, let's start with the basis of all talk about justification: Christ's work. Christ bore the sins of all men on the cross. He paid for the sins of all men.

If He paid for the sins of all people, how can it be that there are still people who will have to pay for their sins in hell?

We believe in the perfect, all-atoning sacrifice of Christ *and* that those who reject Christ enjoy no benefit of this sacrifice.

We do not say that Christ's sacrifice did not pay for all their sins. We say that because of the sacrifice of Christ, all are forgiven. Those who reject this sacrifice of Christ as it is proclaimed to them as the forgiveness of all their sins will get what they want. They do not want to be forgiven, and so God will regard their sin as they want it to be regarded — as not covered by Christ's sacrifice. He who rejects God's absolution will be treated as one who has rejected God's absolution and will be judged according to the Law.

To help us understand this "hard teaching," we can turn to the words of our Lord in the Gospel according to John. There, Jesus speaks of the one thing that the Father wants us to do — to believe in the one He sent, that is, to believe in His Son (JOHN 6:29, 40). Later Jesus tells His disciples that the Holy Spirit will show the world that it is all wrong about sin, for sin is not believing in Jesus (JOHN 16:9). To reject God's word of promise in Christ Jesus is to judge oneself unworthy of eternal life (ACTS 13:46).⁷

10. Conclusion

The terms "subjective" ("individual") justification and "objective" ("general") justification are rather technical. But they are used to express something that is not merely technical, but essential — and very practical and comforting! — for every Christian: God has forgiven the sins of all people on account of Christ. The Gospel is the announcement of this forgiveness. Faith does nothing more than receive this forgiveness.

⁷ The doctrinal essay to the first meeting of the Synodical conference in 1872 put it this way: "If it be asked how this is to be rhymed that on the one hand Scripture teaches that through Christ's resurrection the whole world is absolved, and that on the other hand it testifies that the debt remains on the unbelievers, as long as they continue in unbelief, it must be answered: One must distinguish two ways in which God regards men. When God regards the world in Christ, His Son, He looks at it with the most fervent love; but when He regards the world outside of Christ, then He cannot look at it otherwise than with burning wrath. Whoever therefore does not believe in Christ, yes rejects Christ, upon him the wrath of God remains, despite the fact that when God regards him in His Son, and remembers how He has made satisfaction also for him, the He looks upon him with eyes full of love; as Scripture says in John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son.' According to this God did two things, He was wroth towards sinners, and at the same time He loved them so ardently that He gave His only-begotten Son for them ... When God now looks at the world in this respect, in which satisfaction has been made for it and its debt paid by His Son, then he sees it as a reconciled world. But *NOW* the individual comes along and rejects this reconciliation: him God cannot regard otherwise than with eternal burning wrath, since he is without Christ. *Speaking according to the acquisition of salvation, He is wroth with no man any longer, but speaking according to appropriation ... He is wroth with everyone who is not in Christ.* One may say therefore: In so far as a man is a part of the whole redeemed mankind, God is not wroth with him, but in so far as he is for his own person an unbeliever, God is wroth with him." (Justification – Objective and Subjective: A Translation of the Doctrinal Essay Read at the First Convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872, p. 10, available at: <https://archive.org/details/Justification-objectiveAndSubjectiveATranslation>

