



Subjective and Objective Justification

LEADER'S GUIDE

Session 1

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1333 S. Kirkwood Road
St. Louis, MO 63122
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Session 1:

INTRODUCTION OF TERMS

Did Jesus die for the sins of the whole world, or did He die only for the sins of those who believe in Him? Has the entire world been justified, or only those who believe?

In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we use terms like subjective (individual) justification and objective (general or universal) justification to answer the above questions. In this Bible study we examine these terms and what they mean. We also seek to discuss their scriptural foundation and why these terms are important.

1. Subjective or Individual Justification

Most of the time, when we talk about justification, we talk about the justification of the individual person. Justification means that God forgives sin and declares an individual righteous. Read Romans 4:5–8:

“To the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are

covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin” (ROM. 4:5–8).

Justification is thus by faith, not by works. God justifies a person when that individual hears the Gospel and the Holy Spirit creates faith in the Gospel in that person.

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (ROM. 10:17).

Faith receives what God promises in the Gospel: forgiveness of sins on account of Christ. The Gospel promises Christ's righteousness to the individual: Christ's righteousness as atonement and His fulfillment of the Law. This is what is called subjective or individual (personal) justification because it speaks about how God justifies and saves individuals when they believe His Gospel promise. Here, subjective does not mean “only according to one's opinion” or “not really true.” It means that justification spoken of in this way concerns the subject, or the individual person.

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (ROM. 3:28).

Subjective justification means the justification of the individual. Subjective justification talks about the way in which Christ's work comes to you through the Gospel and is received in faith.

2. The Factors in Subjective or Individual Justification

- What Christ has done

The foundation of justification is what God has done in Christ. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (JOHN 1:29). He bore the curse of the law in our stead, so that we would be free from it (GAL. 3:13). He has redeemed us with His blood (1 PETER 1:18–19), the blood that cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 JOHN 1:7).

- The Gospel

The Gospel is the Good News about what God has done in Jesus Christ. But it is not only good “news” in the sense that it is informational. The Bible also speaks of the Gospel as a *promise*. One knows and accepts information. One trusts — or does not trust — a promise. “But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (GAL. 3:22). Our Lutheran Confessions put it this way:

“But since justification takes place through a free promise, it follows that we cannot justify ourselves. Otherwise, why would a promise be needed? And since the promise cannot be grasped in any other way than by faith, the gospel (which is, strictly speaking, the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the law does not teach.” (Ap IV, 43)¹

- Faith

Faith is trust in this promise. It is believing God's promise and, as such, it is the instrument and means by which we cling to Christ. Christ is given to us through the Gospel and received only in faith. Faith is individual and personal. It is the *person* who believes; therefore, one person cannot believe for another person. Faith is a gift from God; it is not anything a person can produce in himself or herself (COL. 2:12; PHIL. 1:29; JOHN 6:28–29). We are justified by faith (ROM. 3:28).

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

- Christ has accomplished salvation.

What Christ has done on the cross and through the empty tomb is sufficient for the salvation of all people. Our salvation does not need to be, in fact cannot be, supplemented by anything beyond what Christ has already accomplished in His life and death, nor by anything we may or must do. Thus, salvation is never something like this:

Christ's work + our works = salvation.

God wants us to do good works. But Christians do good works *because* they are God's children, not to *become* God's children or to remain God's children. Good works are a sign that we are children of God, or, in other words, a sign of faith. The absence of good works is a sign that someone is not a child of God and does not have faith.

Another false view of salvation looks like this:

Christ's work + our faithfulness unto death = salvation.

Of course, we are admonished to stay faithful to Christ as long as we live. But this faithfulness is not something we do by our own power. Rather, God works faithfulness in us. By means of His Gospel He preserves and strengthens our faith so that we do not fall away from Christ.

So, this is the proper “salvation equation:”

Christ's work + Gospel (Means of Grace) + God's gift of faith = salvation!

- The Gospel is not an offer.

We live in a consumer society. The customer is king, and a multitude of goods vie for our attention. Special offers flood our emails and social media. The Gospel, however, is not an offer from God that we are free to choose or not choose. It is the powerful Good News that creates faith when and where it pleases God. It is the powerful Word that makes alive those who are dead in their sins. Whatever your path to faith is — whether you are a life-long believer or someone who came to faith in Christ as an adult — you became a Christian not because you chose to, but because God created faith in you. He made you a Christian. Maybe you think: “But I did choose to be a Christian, I did choose the Gospel.” But if you “chose” the Gospel, it is only because you *could* choose the Gospel.

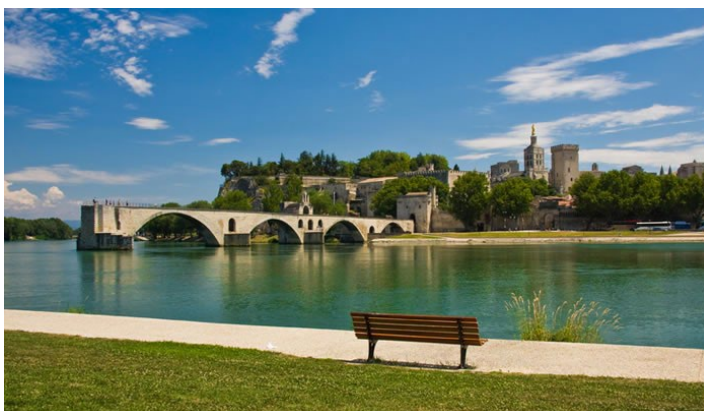
¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 127.

And the only reason you could choose the Gospel is because God had already acted to make you alive. “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 COR. 12:3). Your yes to Jesus is only possible because God has already given you His Spirit.

- Faith has no value in and of itself.
What about this equation?

Christ’s work + a person’s faith = salvation.

This one can be tricky! Lutherans certainly emphasize the importance of faith, as does the Bible. Read Romans 3:28 again. There are two ditches to avoid if one wants to stay on the straight road. The first ditch to avoid is the refusal to talk about faith at all, as if *any* discussion of faith and its role in justification would turn faith into *our* part of the equation. The other ditch to avoid is that of thinking that faith is *my* half of the work, what I “bring to the equation.” In this point of view, what God has done in Christ is only half of what is needed for justification — as if God’s work is the unfinished bridge in the French city of Avignon — and our faith is what completes the building project.



How, then, should we understand and talk about faith so that we stay on the straight, biblical path?

We must see that faith itself is a gift. God the Holy Spirit works faith through the Gospel. We cannot make ourselves believe in Christ.

Faith is not a human work, even though it is we as human beings (not God) who believe. To reject Christ and refuse to believe in Him is to declare God’s promises null and void for oneself.

Faith is always faith *in* something or someone. There is no such thing as “absolute” or “abstract” faith — faith as something that I possess or produce myself. Rather, faith is trusting in the Gospel and thus trusting in Christ as my Savior.

Faith is more than mere knowledge. It affects the entire person.

Without faith in the Gospel, a person does not receive the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection.

4. Objective or Universal Justification

What do we mean when we talk about “objective” (“general” or “universal”) justification?

Until now, we have talked about the way in which God justifies an individual through the Word of the Gospel which is received in faith. Objective justification refers to the promise that God has justified the entire world. Justification and forgiveness of sins are the same thing. In subjective justification, this word of justification or forgiveness is received by the individual. When we talk about objective justification, we are confessing the biblical truth — the Bible’s declaration and promise — that God has forgiven the sins of the whole world. Here is a helpful summary of this teaching:

“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.”²

We will start to unpack the content of this thesis in the remainder of this study (Session 1) and continue to explore it more fully in Session 2.

² Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theses on Justification* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2015), Thesis 23.

5. The Basis of Objective Justification: The Universality of Grace and the Universal Extent of the Work of Christ.

To understand what is meant by objective or universal justification, we need to start by looking at God's universal grace.

Read 1 Timothy 4:10. In what sense is God the "Savior of all people"? Does this simply mean that God makes salvation possible, that He is the "possible Savior of all people"? Or is God really only the Savior of the believers? Has God saved all people or only those who believe?

God is the Savior of all people. The Bible explicitly teaches that He desires *all* to be saved:

"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).

According to this passage, for whom did Christ die?

Christ is the Savior of *all people*. His death is for the sins of all people, those who will believe and those who will not believe. The Gospel is a promise to *all people*. The grace of God extends over *all people*, and so does the merit of Christ. That is, what Christ has done *merits* the forgiveness for *all sins*. The Gospel is the Good News for *all people*. All these *universal* statements are *objective*, that is, they are factual and not influenced by human opinion or perspective. They declare absolute truths. They become mine (*subjectively*) through faith in this Gospel.

The first thing to remember about objective or universal justification, therefore, is that it is about the object of faith (what faith believes *in*), namely the work of Christ. This work of Christ is universal, that is, it concerns all people. Christ died for *all people*.

6. Conclusion

Objective justification means that God has justified the entire world. Subjective justification describes the way in which we, as individuals, are justified through the Gospel. Christ's work on the cross becomes ours and is received by faith. We will explore both teachings more fully in Session 2.

