

Life and Teachings of Paul

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Biblical terms often have meanings that differ from common usage; their meanings are determined by the way a word is used in its context. Just as often the common connotation (i.e., the popular understanding) of a biblical term is not used in its connotative sense, or the translation of a term does not reflect the sense of the word as used in the original language of the document in which it occurs; examples of this are the words underlying the English translations: believe, church, baptism, disciple, grace, miracle, and many more. These terms all have meaning that were different in first century usage than they have in the English versions of our time.

This is the case with the biblical term "justification," which is as diverse in meaning in common connotation as it is in theological usage. Our concern, however, is to determine the biblical sense of the term; i.e., its Old and New Testament usage, which requires us to look at the term in both Hebrew (OT) and Greek (LXX-OT/NT).

The Hebrew and Greek Meaning of Justification

The Hebrew words with which we are concerned here are *tsadaq* meaning, "right" and *tsedeq*, "to make right, declare right, to justify, to show oneself to be right or justified in one's course of action," and *tsedeqah* meaning, "righteous" or "righteousness." The Greek term is *dikaio'o* from *dike'* (right). *Dikaio'o* means, "to be declared right or just [in the vocabulary of the law courts - to be declared "not guilty," acquittal]." Both of these terms, both the Hebrew and the Greek, are important to the NT understanding of justification. The Greek idea has influenced or colored the Hebrew

idea by the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Septuagint/LXX) in 250 BC.

Paul's understanding of justification is both Hebrew and Greek; i.e., the Greek terms are colored by Paul's Hebrew understanding of the concepts. The Hebrew *sedekah* and Greek *dikaio'su'ne* are translated "righteous" or "righteousness," where the sense of the word has to do with "a right relationship" or "to be in good standing with God," (Gen 30:33; Deut 6:5; 1 Sam 26:23; 2 Sam 22:21; Psalms 71:2, 15, 16, 19).

In other contexts, however, they can be translated as "to justify" when used of what God does when someone cries out to him for vindication when they've been wronged, or for deliverance when they are oppressed. God "makes justice occur" or "makes things right" in times of oppression or wrongdoing (Psalms 4:1; 9:8; 11:7; 15:2; Prov 21:5; 29:7; Eccl 5:8; Isaiah 1:17).

This is especially seen in Isaiah, who speaks of the coming of God's righteousness and the justification of his people; i.e., his deliverance of them from the evil powers that oppress them. To the Hebrews, their God was the God who rights things (*tsedeq*); cf., Isaiah 45:15-25; 50:7-9. It is God who comes in Israel's time of need and makes things right when they've gone wrong (cf. also Micah 7:9). This theme is present in the Dead Sea Scrolls (*Manual of Discipline* [IQS] 11:12; and *Hymns of Thanksgiving* [IQH] 13:16-17), as well as the Pseudepigraphal literature (4 Ezra 45:15-25; 50:7-9).

The most common usage of the Greek word, and the Hebrew to some extent, is the idea of "fairness," to be just or fair is to be righteous (Exodus 23:6; 1 Kings 3:11, 28; 2 Chron 9:6; Job 19:7; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 5:15). So also to make things right is to be one who brings about justice. All of these concepts may be found in both the Hebrew and Greek terms of this discussion.

The array of meaning to be found in the words ancient languages can seem confusing to the English reader; but it is the case

that a word can have a variety of meanings depending on the context in which it appears, and that is the case with the word "justification."

The "Justice" Vs "Mercy" Dilemma

In Zech 7:9, the prophet says to Israel, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true **justice**; show mercy and compassion to one another." To the Greco-Roman courts this instruction is contradictory. To administer true justice is to render to a man that which is due him, whether punishment or reward. If he has violated the law, then justice requires that he be punished according to the law. But here God says that to show true justice is to show mercy and compassion where warranted. Paul, who was a Pharisee, would have had difficulty with this seeming contradiction.

The imagery Paul uses in his development of his doctrine of justification is the metaphor of the law court. When the accused before the bar has no case, he is guilty and that is that; all he can do is throw himself on the mercy of the court. If, however, mercy is shown, then true justice has not been shown.

If justice is rendering to every man that which is due him and mercy is not rendering to a man that which is due him, how can God be just and merciful at one and the same time? How can God not count a man's sins against him (i.e., show mercy) and still be just? This legalistic way of seeing was addressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard it said an eye for an eye," Jesus says, then goes on to say, "But I say to you" and discourages employing this *Torah* instruction in this legalistic way.

Here is where the idea of the justification of God (God's *tsedeq / dikaiosune*) distinguishes itself from the common connotation of justice. The Hebrew concept of "making things right again" and the Greco-Roman concept of justice as, "rendering to a person that which is due him," or if innocent "declaring one not guilty (acquittal)," are merged in Paul's theology.

How does he do this? God's righteousness or justice (*tesedeq / dikaiosune*) means "he makes things right." But how does he "make things right" when one stands before him as a sinner and the law says, "the soul that sins, it shall die?" The answer: he makes things right by making things new. Here is where the inspired genius of Paul shows itself. He resolves this dilemma with his doctrine of divine reversal; i.e. new or re-creation. The issue is this: How can a just God not hold a man's sins against him? How can he say to one who is guilty of sin, "not guilty"? How can he acquit someone if he is not innocent? How can he declare him righteous when he is guilty of sin? The answer: through regeneration. God re-creates him or creates him anew (2 Cor 5:13-19).

New Creation, Regeneration, and Justification

The thing in Paul's theology that makes his doctrine of justification work is his view of regeneration. A person who has been put to death and is then brought back to life as a new creation is no longer held accountable for the sins of his or her previous existence. The new man in Christ is not condemned for the deeds of the old man in Adam. In order for this to be believable one must see conversion to Christ as a total transformation of one's existence.

A question that immediately confronts us here is this: "What is just about punishing a person for something done if he is not the person who did it? Here we are talking about a life transformation (a metamorphosis) effected by the power of revelation from God. We are not talking about rehabilitation, but something far more significant and wondrous than that. We are talking about putting to death the person who is guilty and bringing a new creation out of the old creation that has been put to death. Only God can do that, and that is precisely what he does do through divine reversal.

An illustration that may be helpful here is one drawn from the TV series *Murder She Wrote*. The main character, J. B. Fletcher, was making a comment concerning a dead man who had murdered a man that had earlier raped his wife. When the question of justice for the person who had murdered the rapist was raised, Ms Fletcher

replied, "He (the man guilty of murdering the rapist) is dead now, and beyond punishment." The question here is this: If a person is accused of having committed a crime worthy of punishment is not the person who committed the crime, is justice served if he is punished? If a man in Christ has died to his old existence in Adam and has been given new existence in Christ, is he yet condemned by the sins committed while he was the man in Adam?

Justification as Satisfaction or Appeasement,

How is God justified in granting mercy to any of us instead of absolute justice? An argument that has been in existence since the twelfth century is that through Jesus' death the justice of God was satisfied by his acceptance of a substitute who was punished for the sins of others. But where is the justice in that? In the Hebrew Scriptures God said in familiar KJV language, "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die," (Ezek18:4). It is not "the soul that sinneth shall have someone else died for their sins." How can justice be satisfied by an innocent person being put to death for another person's sins? Justice is defined as rendering to a man the punishment due him, not the punishment due someone else. Here is a major flaw in the substitution doctrine of Anselm, the 12th century Catholic theologian, which was also embraced by many 16th century Protestant theologians.

According to this doctrine, Christ died for my sins (i.e., he took my place on the cross), but if he died in my place (i.e., took the punishment due me for my sins), why do I yet have to die? The doctrine of the vicarious suffering and death of Christ (or penal substitutionary atonement), owes its origins more to the Latin Church Father Anselm of Canterbury than to Paul.

We are justified before God, not because his justice has been satisfied or appeased by someone else; rather, we are justified (made not guilty or acquitted) by means of regeneration or new creation, which is effected by our re-enactment of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. We die to our old existence in Adam and

symbolically bury that existence in the waters of baptism, and are raised from that watery grave into new existence in Christ (Rom 6:1-10). That which makes it all work is our belief that God is re-creating us as he said he would do. God is the power that effects it and our faith is the power that actualizes it.

Conclusion

So then, why is God not amiss if he forgives a man and grants him mercy when he is guilty of sin? A man "in Christ," has been given forgiveness as a promise to those who have become new creations in Christ. Forgiveness is a gift of God not a stay of execution resulting from someone else being executed for us.

One needs to read Paul's words over and over again, especially those found in 1 Cor 15:22, 45-49; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Rom 6:1-10; the major motif running throughout all of these texts is that of "divine reversal," which is something God has done and continues to do. There are many metaphorical figures found in Scripture for the recreation or regeneration action of God: new birth, spiritual renewal, new creation, conversion, death burial, and resurrection.

But the doctrine of "justification" is a teaching of Paul, and it is to his writings one must turn to see his development of it: Rom 2:13; 3:20-28; 4:20-25; 5:1-2, 9-11, 18-21; Gal 2:15-21; 5:1-6. With this must be taken Paul's teaching of regeneration or new creation, which serves as a preface to his doctrine of justification. It is the doctrine of new creation that makes the doctrine of justification work.

MWLIII