

GROUNDDED  
*in the*  
FAITH

*An Essential Guide to Knowing  
What You Believe and Why*

KENNETH ERISMAN  
With a Foreword by J. I. PACKER



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# Foreword

Every church member a disciple? A sweet dream, but how may it be made reality? A step in the right direction is the provision of this interactive, user-friendly teaching tool for disciple and friend to work through together. Its theology is mainstream evangelical at its crisp, clear best; its choice of ground to cover reveals good judgment; and its interactions are thoughtfully calculated. All in all, it is a very useful adult catechetical resource. I commend it most warmly.

J. I. Packer

Board of Governors' Professor of Theology, Regent College



# How This Guide Works

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**The Aim:** J. I. Packer, after an extraordinary lifetime of scholarship, concludes that the greatest challenge for the twenty-first-century church is catechesis. By “catechesis” Packer means the process whereby believers in Christ are grounded in the essentials of the faith. He concludes, “Where wise catechesis has flourished, the church has flourished. Where it has been neglected, the church has floundered.”<sup>1</sup> The aim of this book is to see the church flourish for the glory of God. We are convinced that by designing this guide to be user-friendly but at the same time keeping Reformation depth, followers of Christ will have a transferable tool to become grounded in the faith.

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## EVERYONE NEEDS A COACH

Even world-class athletes need coaches. And you are in a real sense a spiritual athlete because the Christian life is described in the New Testament as a race—“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:1–2). In order to run well we need the encouragement and wisdom that comes from God’s Word. There is no better training than to get grounded in the faith. These sessions will give you the opportunity to become established in those timeless essentials of the Christian faith. What you will gain from this guide is classic, historic, sound biblical theology that is a reflection of the best biblical scholarship through the centuries. This training guide will give you important, in-depth knowledge to understand God and his plan for your life. This process of coaching and training is what is called “discipleship.” We have designed a training method that has three simple steps—Listen, Absorb, and Interact. This creates an easy-flow format that allows the discipleship process to virtually run on its own.

The first step is *Listen*. It should be no surprise that this guide is deliberately formatted “to teach”—to impart to you valuable information. If you entered medical school and were introduced to a class on the makeup of the brain, you would not be expected to immediately come up with your own answers about brain surgery, but you would want to learn and build upon the history

of medical knowledge that has been passed down through the years. This is what we are seeking to do with this guide—help disciples learn by passing on historic, sound, biblical theology so that individuals can build their faith upon that foundation. We believe that followers of Christ can grasp deep biblical truths if they are presented in manageable-sized bites. After the material is presented there is then a much better platform from which to interact and engage in meaningful discussion.

The second step is *Absorb*. It often takes a moment of time to think about and process new concepts, so we designed a moment to pause and allow our minds to concentrate on the most essential elements presented in the *Listen* step. It's a way to pull everything together and focus on what matters most as well as reinforce what was presented in step one.

The third step is *Interact*. The questions under the *Interact* step are intentionally crafted to enhance your understanding of the truths being presented. Interaction is valuable because it is during this time that we come to grips with how well we are comprehending the truth being conveyed. Also, in the process of interaction, more questions naturally surface that give a greater breadth of comprehension. Quite often the questions help us think about how we can apply the material to real life. It is also noteworthy that friendships and relationships are deepened as we interact with one another. We desperately need fellowship with one another, especially in the context of seeking to grow in our faith. If discussion and interaction take up more time than you had anticipated, then next time simply pick up where you had left off. It is often better to be “relationship driven” rather than “cover-the-content driven.”

You will notice that at the end of each session there are two brief sections, *Reflect* and *Cultivating Spiritual Habits*. The *Reflect* segment is primarily a challenge to take what you have learned in the session and think about how to live it out in real life. Discipleship is not just about growing in knowledge of the Christian faith, but it is equally about letting biblical knowledge shape how we actually trust God and treat people. *Cultivating Spiritual Habits* is designed to get us into the habit of reading the Bible, journaling, and memorizing key verses. Journaling has been a helpful spiritual discipline for many, assisting them in meditating upon the truth of the Scriptures. Also, memorizing key verses in the Bible can be invaluable. It is noteworthy that Jesus, the Son of God, memorized much of the Old Testament. If the Son of God found it important to memorize Scripture, then we know it is indispensable for us. One way to begin the process is to jot down the verse on a note card and tape it on your mirror, or use it as a bookmark, or carry it with you during the week. Reviewing the verse just a few times a day will embed it in your memory, and you will discover that if you keep reviewing, the verses will stay in your mind for a lifetime.

When you are finished with these twenty-four sessions, you will have discovered that this methodology is highly transferable. Somewhere in the future you will no doubt feel the confidence to help coach someone else to become *grounded in the faith*.





# LEVEL ONE

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1. Declared Not Guilty: Understanding Justification (Part 1) 13
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# Declared Not Guilty

## Understanding Justification (Part 1)

**Purpose of Session One:** In this session, you will learn that all humans are lawbreakers—we all have broken at least one of God’s laws. You will also learn that God declares the Christian righteous—morally perfect—not by the Christian’s good acts but by faith in Jesus Christ. This amazing truth is called “justification,” and understanding it will give you an astonishing appreciation of God’s love and mercy and a deep sense of relief from guilt. Justification—being declared righteous before God—is one of the most significant and encouraging truths of the Christian faith.

### LISTEN: Are You Good Enough?

As we start this initial session, it would be interesting to discover how you view our society. How do you think most people in our culture would answer this question: *How does a person get into heaven?*

The most common responses given go something like this:

- “By trying to be a good person—or doing enough good.”
- “By not hurting people and not being selfish.”
- “By being the best I can be—doing what is right.”
- “By trying to live a moral life—letting the good you do outweigh the bad.”

- “There are lots of different ways and different religions but by being sincere in whichever one you choose.”
- “By keeping the laws of God (or trying not to break the commandments).”
- “By trying to be religious in some way.”

The New Testament describes these types of attempts to get right with God as “works.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, people try to “work” for God’s approval by trying to keep the laws of God and trying to do enough good. The New Testament also describes this attempt to gain God’s approval as “observing the law,” “deeds of the law” (or “works of the law”), and “law” (as a system of salvation).

Whenever you see phrases such as “observing the law,” “deeds of the law,” and “works of the law” in the New Testament, you will know what they normally mean: a strategy where you try to *work for* your salvation so that you will become righteous enough in God’s assessment of you. It means you are trying to do enough good or to be moral enough to gain eternal life. It describes what people do when they turn the commandments into a virtual job description for how to earn salvation. In other words, it means using the law as a *system of salvation*. Understanding the meaning of these phrases is an important key to understanding many parts of the New Testament.

“To be justified” means that you are “declared (or pronounced) righteous before God.” In Romans 3:20, we learn that no person will ever be declared righteous before God by keeping the law: “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh [no one] will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

ABSORB

According to the New Testament, our moral record could never be good enough to be accepted by God.

INTERACT

- Why do you think no person will be declared “righteous” before God by trying to keep the laws of God or by trying to be a good person?
- Rephrase in your own words what Romans 3:20 means to you.

## **LISTEN:** The Law Itself Tells Me I'm a Sinner

Again, Romans 3:20 reads, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, *for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*” This verse says that you cannot be justified (declared righteous) by trying to keep the law of God, and it says that one of the primary purposes of the law is *to make you aware that you actually do sin.* When you look carefully at the Ten Commandments (often called “the Law”) and comprehend the spirit of the law as Jesus explained them, it is eye-opening to see how miserably we fail. We are clearly found to be sinners.

While this might be a little uncomfortable, we’re going to look at each of the Ten Commandments and evaluate how we measure up. Be thinking about how you measure up. Remember: “By the law is the knowledge of sin.” One of the main purposes of the law is to help us see that truly we are sinners. Although this can be very hard, it is not until we admit we are sinners that we will ever look to God for his mercy and grace. And by looking at the Ten Commandments we can better appreciate what God has done for us so that we can be justified (declared righteous).

### **ABSORB**

**One of the primary purposes of the law is to make us aware that we do in fact sin against God. The law is designed to show us that we have, without a doubt, violated God’s moral code. If we are humble enough to admit that we are sinners, then the law can lead us to see how much we need God’s grace.**

### **INTERACT**

Below are a series of questions concerning how well we have kept the Ten Commandments. How we answer these questions can tell us a great deal about our spiritual need.

1. “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exod. 20:3).

*This means nothing should have first place in our lives other than God. Oftentimes people put jobs, relationships, possessions, and money before him. God should have center stage in our affections, priorities, goals, and so on.*

- What do you think it means to put God first in your life? Have you always kept God first?

2. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4).

*Although most people in Western societies do not carve or shape physical idols, many people do shape a mental image of God from their own ideas. They say, “To me God is like . . .,” even though their ideas about God contradict the Scriptures. When they do this they are mentally shaping an image of God to fit what they want God to look like.*

- What was your concept or mental image of God as you were growing up? (The nature of discipleship is to help us align our concepts of God to his Word.)

3. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain” (Exod. 20:7).

*The phrase “in vain” means “with no good purpose.”<sup>2</sup> Most people have spoken the name of God in vain by using it in a profane way or by the habit of saying, “Oh my God!” That is using his name “with no good purpose”!*

- How does our culture go against this commandment?

4. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exod. 20:8).

*Because Jesus was resurrected on Sunday, first-century Christians set aside time to worship together on that day—the Lord’s Day. Throughout church history Christians have gathered together on Sunday to corporately worship Christ. The spirit of this command is carried out when Christians gather together each week to worship the Lord.*

- How much importance is put on this commandment in our society?

## The Human Heart Is an “Idol Factory”

“When most people think of ‘idols’ they have in mind literal statues—or the next pop star anointed by Simon Cowell. Yet while traditional idol worship still occurs in many places of the world, internal idol worship, within the heart, is universal. In Ezekiel 14:3, God says about elders of Israel, ‘These men have set up their idols in their hearts.’ Like us, the elders must have responded to this charge, ‘Idols? What idols? I don’t see any idols.’ God was saying that the human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them. . . . Most people know you can make a god out of money. Most know you can make a god out of sex. However, anything in life can serve as an idol, a God-alternative, a counterfeit. . . . But counterfeit gods always disappoint, and often destructively so.”

Timothy Keller<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xiv–xvi.

### 5. “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod. 20:12).

*When you are young, this means to obey them. As a grown adult, this means to respect them and treat them as valuable. The respect and honor we show our (imperfect) parents is closely related to the respect and honor we show God.*

- Why might God command us to obey, honor, and value our parents, who cannot parent perfectly?

### 6. “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13).

*Jesus recognized that murder stems from resentment, anger, and hate in our hearts. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said that sin is not only related to our external actions but has to do with what goes on inside our hearts. So if someone has unrighteous anger, according to Christ, the spirit of this command is broken.*

- Have you ever had anger that got out of hand or had bitterness in your heart toward someone?

7. “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14).

*Again, Jesus makes it plain that sin is not just an external act; it also involves our inward thoughts. He explains that if we lust, we have broken the spirit of this command. Jesus said that “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).*

- Do you think our culture takes Jesus’s words seriously? What are some indicators that show this?

8. “You shall not steal” (Exod. 20:15).

*When a person steals, he or she takes possession of something that does not belong to him or her. You normally do not feel the depth of the wrongness of stealing until you have something of value stolen from you!*

- Have you ever had something stolen from you? If so, how did you feel at the time? Have you ever stolen something?

9. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16).

*This commandment includes lying. It is interesting that Jesus connects the origin of lying with the devil. The Lord said of the devil in John 8:44 that “there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.” C. S. Lewis recognized the subtlety of lying; in his novel, *The Last Battle*, at a critical moment he has one of the main characters realize a terrible truth: “And then she understood the devilish cunning of the enemies’ plan. By mixing a little truth with it they had made their lie far stronger.”<sup>3</sup>*

- Why does mixing a little truth with a lie make the lie stronger?



10. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exod. 20:17).

*Coveting is to intensely desire something that God doesn’t want you to have. It is an inordinate desire. At the core of coveting is being discontent with God. Often we ignore God’s will by trying to acquire something he has chosen not to give us. Although we can be blessed with affluence, it is easy to become discontented.*

- In our society, what types of things are most often coveted?
  
- After looking closely at how you’ve kept the Ten Commandments, ask yourself: If God were to judge me purely on the basis of keeping the Ten Commandments perfectly, how would I measure up? Why do you think there are people who, although they have clearly broken some of the Ten Commandments, still consider themselves fairly good people?



The law never came to save men. It never was its intention at all. It came on purpose to make the evidence complete that salvation by works is impossible.

—Charles Spurgeon, “Law and Grace”



## LISTEN: God’s Definition of “Good”

To be *good*, by God’s definition, means to have *absolute moral perfection*. Humans settle for a less strict definition of what it means to be a good person. However, God’s evaluation is what counts! Listen to what the apostle Paul says about God’s evaluation of you and me and all humanity from Romans 3:20: “Therefore by the deeds of the law [by trying to keep the Ten Commandments] *no flesh* will be justified.” The Scriptures also categorically state: “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). Humans don’t like to think of themselves as not being good enough to go to heaven. It is hard for us to admit that we are that desperate. In our pride we do not want to admit that we are not good enough to be accepted by God.

### ABSORB

**Only God is absolutely morally perfect. God says no one is justified by “works” or “deeds of the law.”**

## INTERACT

- Why do you think it is so common that people try to be justified by the good things they do?
  
- Do you think most people have done a self-evaluation by going through the Ten Commandments and being honest about how well they have kept God's moral law? Why not?

## LISTEN: What It Means to Be Justified

Listen carefully to this amazing verse: “Knowing that a man is *not justified by the works of the law* but by *faith in Jesus Christ*, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

“Justification” is a technical, legal, courtroom term; it is a legal pronouncement and a legal rescue. God is pictured as the majestic, righteous, perfect judge over all the universe. In his heavenly courtroom you and I will either be acquitted or condemned and sentenced. “To be justified” means that God declares that you are acquitted—free from condemnation and free from the sentence of hell. It implies the removal of our guilt and of God's wrath against us. “To be justified” means to be *pronounced righteous* (or *declared righteous*) in the sight of God.<sup>4</sup>

Theologian John Stott explains what justification is in legal terms and what it is not.

“Justification” is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of “condemnation.” “To condemn” is to declare somebody guilty; “to justify” is to declare him . . . righteous. In the Bible it refers to God's act of unmerited favor by which He puts a sinner right with Himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting him and treating him as righteous.<sup>5</sup>

Justification is not a synonym for amnesty, which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets—wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice. . . . When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all. He is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking.<sup>6</sup>

As we think more deeply about what Galatians 2:16 means, we realize that we are justified only by faith in Jesus Christ and not at all by works of the law (that is, not by trying to keep the Ten Commandments). This means that when you believe in Christ Jesus—when you believe that Christ died in your place and took your punishment—it is only then that you are justified, only then that you are acquitted and are free from condemnation.

### ABSORB

According to God's Word, the only way you can  
be justified is by faith in Jesus Christ.

### INTERACT

- How does it make you feel to know that even though you have broken the laws of God, you can still be declared righteous before God by faith alone in Christ?
  
- Write out the meaning of the phrase “to be justified” so that the definition can be firmly fixed in your mind.
  
- If God has shown so much mercy to us, how should we, then, treat people who don't deserve our mercy?



**Reflect:** One of the most important traits of being a follower of Christ is to “follow Christ.” This means the more we integrate the truth we learn about God with real-life experiences, the more real our spiritual lives feel. After understanding even a little bit about justification, be thinking this week how that knowledge could make a difference in the way you think about God and treat people.

## Our Desperate Predicament

“Picture the scene: An accused criminal stands before an impartial judge to receive his just sentence. The legal proceedings begin with a court official reciting the laws of the kingdom. As he listens, the criminal starts to realize that he is doomed to be condemned, for it turns out that he has violated every single law in the book. Whatever the charge, he is certain to be found guilty. When the judge finally turns to the defendant and asks how he pleads, the man is speechless. He stands before the judge in mute terror, unable to utter anything in his defense. This is the desperate legal predicament described in the opening chapters of Romans. . . . The problem of humanity is sin, plain and simple. We are guilty sinners who deserve nothing except God’s wrath. Nor is there anything we can do to save ourselves. God’s righteous requirements cannot save us; they can only condemn us because we cannot keep them. Therefore, when we stand before God for judgment, there is not the slightest chance that we can be accepted on the basis of anything that we have done. This is not a trial in which we are innocent until proven guilty; instead, it is a trial in which we have already been proven guilty and must remain guilty until we are declared righteous. It is only when we recognize how desperate our situation is from the legal standpoint that we can begin to understand the biblical doctrine of justification. It is only when we see the stark and ugly reality of our sin that we are truly ready to turn to God for help—specifically, for the forgiveness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ.”

Philip Graham Ryken<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>“Justification,” in *The Gospel as Center*, ed. D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 151–53.

Are there any questions that this session has raised in your mind? Is there anything I can be praying about for you until we meet for the next session? Where do you feel the most pressure in your life at this point in time?

### CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL HABITS

**Read:** Matthew 27:1–50 and Romans 3:9–31

**Journal:** Write down any verse or thought from your reading that stands out to you or encourages you. Also, jot down any questions you might have concerning your reading or the Christian faith. We’re here to learn together, and one of the best ways we can grow is to search the Scriptures and find answers for our questions.

**Memorize**

*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law\* but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.*

GALATIANS 2:16

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\* Remember the phrase “works of the law”? It describes when someone is trying to *work* for God’s acceptance by keeping the law or trying to do enough good in order to have a right standing before God—in order to be saved. Also, remember that “to be justified” means “to be declared righteous” by God.



## SESSION TWO

# God Pays the Price

## Understanding Justification (Part 2)

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**Purpose of Session Two:** In the last session you learned how you are justified (declared righteous before God)—it is by faith in Christ. In this session, you will learn how God can be just when he justifies you. You will also be introduced to three important biblical concepts that will help explain what it cost God to justify you.

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### LISTEN: Our Inborn Sense of Justice

C. S. Lewis, well-known author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was a brilliant writer and had unusual insight into human nature. In one of his books, *Mere Christianity*, he describes how all humans have a built-in sense of what is right and wrong.

Everyone has heard people quarrelling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: “How’d you like it if anyone did the same to you?”—“That’s my seat, I was there first”—“Leave him alone, he isn’t doing you any harm”—“Why should you shove in first?”—“Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine”—“Come on, you promised.” People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups. Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man’s behavior does not happen to please him. He

is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis is saying that every person has a built-in sense of what is just and what is unjust. We are simply hardwired to want justice—because we are made in the image of God.

### ABSORB

Because humans are made in the image  
of God we value justice and fair play.

### INTERACT

- Choose one of the following three questions to answer:
1. What are justice and injustice?
  2. Have you ever experienced something in your life that you felt was an injustice?
  3. What do you think of when you hear the phrase “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”?

## LISTEN: A Judge’s Dilemma

When we learn about how God justifies us there appears at first to be a dilemma: “How can God justify (pronounce righteous) people who are absolutely guilty? How can God justify guilty people and still be a just judge? How can God justify the ungodly?”

For example, try to imagine the worst injustice someone could ever carry out against you. Maybe it would be kidnapping or injuring someone you deeply love. Maybe it would be taking something that is irreplaceable—your health, your most treasured keepsakes, or the life of a loved one. We all would agree that the perpetrator of such a crime should be severely punished. But suppose the judge decided to show the criminal mercy by ruling: “Because I am a merciful judge and feel compassion for this criminal, I will therefore let him go free.”

ABSORB

**Because God is a just judge he must have a way to satisfy his own sense of justice when he lets offenders (sinners like you and me) go free.**

INTERACT

- If the judge mentioned above were to simply show mercy, would you have a problem with that? Why?

### **LISTEN: Your Release Was Paid For (Redemption)**

Justice matters to you and me, but it matters infinitely more to God! Justice is part of the glory of God. That is why when God justifies sinners, when he pronounces the sinner acquitted—no longer condemned—he does it in such a way that he demonstrates that he is just. God is both the justifier and just. Our inborn desire to see justice carried out is completely satisfied in Christianity! There are three biblical concepts that you need to understand concerning how God can be just when he justifies you. They are redemption, propitiation, and imputation.

Redemption means “deliverance at a cost” or “release by payment” of a price.<sup>2</sup> The Bible says that God has redeemed you at an immeasurably great cost to himself. It cost him the sacrifice of his own Son. God redeemed you out of your slavery to sin. You and I were in bondage to sin; that is, we were in the bondage of guilt and condemnation because of our sin. The sentence of death and hell was held over our heads. We were on *death row*, spiritually speaking. We were enslaved to the enemy, the devil, because we had given in to his temptations to sin. But thank God we were released by the payment of a price—God purchased our redemption. Christ paid the ransom price to free you from your slavery to sin. Every genuine follower of Christ has been redeemed!

The classic nineteenth-century hymn written by the poet Fanny Crosby captures how we love to praise God because he has purchased our redemption:

Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it!  
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;  
Redeemed through His infinite mercy,  
His child and forever I am.



When you consider the idea of redemption, remember that there is always a price paid to set the slave free. This price is called the “ransom” or “ransom price.”<sup>3</sup> The ransom price that God paid was the *blood of Christ*. The unique feature of your redemption is that the price was paid to God *by God himself*. This surprising idea will be explained later in this session. Christ came from heaven to be crucified for our sins. Jesus said that he came “to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Listen to what the apostle Peter writes: “knowing that you were not *redeemed* with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the *precious blood of Christ*, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18–19). God purchased our redemption with the blood of his Son! Any parent understands that there could be nothing more valuable to you than your own child and nothing more difficult to give away.

### ABSORB

**God is just when he justifies us because God himself  
redeemed us with the blood of Christ.**

### INTERACT

- Can you imagine giving your child as a sacrifice—giving up your child to die so that others could be set free? Why do you think it would be such an outrageous insult to God to try to be justified on the basis of your own works rather than through the blood of Christ?
  
- If you had been living as a slave back in the days of slavery in the United States, what would you have disliked most?

## **LISTEN: God’s Wrath Is Satisfied . . . by God (Propitiation)**

The second reason why God is just when he justifies us is that Christ’s death on the cross was a sacrifice that satisfied God’s wrath against injustice. “Propitiation” means “to satisfy God’s wrath by an offering.” Propitiation is the

## Jesus Came to Give His Life a Ransom for Many

“Jesus Christ came not to be served but to die, to give his life. That sets him apart from the founder of every other major religion. Their purpose was to live and be an example; Jesus’s purpose was to die and be a sacrifice. . . .

“Jesus came to pay that kind of ransom. But since the slavery he is dealing with is of a cosmic kind—that is, cosmic evil—it required a cosmic payment. Jesus is saying, ‘I will pay the ransom that you couldn’t possibly pay, and it will procure your freedom!’ The payment is Jesus’s death on the cross. . . .

“This will be hard for you if you’re among those who struggle with the Christian teaching about the cross. It’s natural to assume that the Bible is giving us one more example of those ancient, primitive, bloodthirsty gods worshiped by those ancient, primitive, bloodthirsty societies. In *The Iliad* by Homer, for example, Agamemnon didn’t get fair winds to Troy until he sacrificed his daughter. That appeased the wrath of the gods, and then they let him go to Troy. What Jesus says in Mark [10:45] may seem to be just another variation on that theme. . . .

“But that’s not what’s going on here at all. And why not, you may say? If God is really a loving God, why doesn’t he just forgive everybody? Why did Jesus have to go through suffering into death? Why did he have to be a ransom?

“Here’s the beginning of an answer: Jesus didn’t have to die despite God’s love, he had to die *because* of God’s love. And it had to be this way because *all life-changing love is substitutionary sacrifice.*”

Timothy Keller<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*The King’s Cross* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 141–42.

removal of God’s wrath by providing a substitute offering.<sup>4</sup> According to the Scriptures, the substitute offering given to remove God’s wrath is Christ himself, shedding his blood on the cross. Romans 3:24–25 describes how God set forth Jesus as a propitiation: “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith.”

Many tribal religions employ the concept of people satisfying the wrath of “the gods.” But Christianity is totally different—propitiation is a work that God himself does. God’s nature is such that his justice must be satisfied. So God (not humans) provides the offering, which turns out to be God’s own Son, and the ransom price (the blood of Christ) is paid by God himself, to himself. The death of the Son of God satisfied the wrath of God against the injustice of our sin.

John Stott points out that propitiation “does not make God gracious. . . . God does not love us because Christ died for us, Christ died for us because God loves us.”<sup>5</sup> The fourth-century theologian Augustine also observes, “Our being reconciled by the death of Christ must not be understood as if the

Son reconciled us, in order that the Father, then hating, might begin to love us.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, it was God’s love that prompted him to give Christ as the substitute offering to remove his wrath: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

### ABSORB

God is just when he justifies us because God gave his own Son as the propitiation (offering) for our sins.

### INTERACT

- Explain this saying, “God’s grace is free, but it is not cheap.”

## **LISTEN: The Unfair Trade (Imputation)**

The third reason why God is just when he justifies us is that our sin is *imputed* (credited) to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.

Imputation means that God did something amazing, which could be described as “The Great Exchange.”<sup>7</sup> God exchanged Christ’s perfect life of obedience for our disobedience. Our sins were placed on Christ as he suffered for us. Therefore, although Christ was just, he was judicially credited with our sins, and the Father executed judgment on him. As a result we are clothed in Christ’s righteousness, and therefore we are judicially counted as righteous in God’s sight. God thinks of Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us. This is imputation! Our sin was imputed to Christ and Christ bore the punishment for our sin. Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the sinner through faith in Christ. One of the clearest passages in the Bible that teaches this is 2 Corinthians 5:21: “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” This does not mean that Christ personally committed any acts of sin, nor does it mean he was morally a sinner. What it does mean is that our sin was judicially credited to Christ so that his sufferings satisfied the justice of God.<sup>8</sup>



According to the Christian revelation, God’s own great love propitiated his own holy wrath through the gift of his own dear Son, who took our place, bore our sin and died our death. *Thus God himself gave himself to save us from himself.*

—John R. W. Stott,  
*The Message of Romans*



ABSORB

God is just when he justifies us because Christ's perfect life of obedience is imputed (credited) to us and our sins are imputed to Christ. God executed perfect justice on his Son.

INTERACT

- Analogies often break down at certain points, but discuss one of the following analogies:

Analogy 1: Suppose you had a diseased heart, and it was certain that you would die. Someone with a perfect heart offered to do a double heart transplant—his good heart would be transplanted into you and your bad heart would be transplanted into him. How would you feel about this person? Now relate that to what God has done for you.

### Martin Luther's Famous Latin Formula— *Simul Justus et Peccator*

"*Simul* is the word from which we get the English *simultaneous*; it means 'at the same time.' *Justus* is the Latin word for 'just' or 'righteous.' *Et* simply means 'and.' *Peccator* means 'sinner.' So, with this formula—'at the same time just and sinner'—Luther was saying that in our justification, we are at the same time righteous and sinful. Now, if he had said we are just *and* sinful at the same time and in the same relationship, that would have been a contradiction in terms. But that is not what he was saying. He was saying that, in one sense, we are just. In another sense, we are sinners. In and of ourselves, under God's scrutiny, we still have sin. But by God's imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ to our accounts, we are considered just. This is the very heart of the gospel. In order to get into heaven, will I be judged by my righteousness or by the righteousness of Christ? If I have to trust in my righteousness to get into heaven, I must completely and utterly despair of any possibility of ever being redeemed. But when we see that the righteousness that is ours by faith is the perfect righteousness of Christ, we see how glorious is the good news of the gospel."

R. C. Sproul<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Are We Together?* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2012), 43–44.

Analogy 2: Suppose you incurred an enormous financial debt that you could never repay. Someone, at a great cost to himself or herself, stepped forward and credited to your bank account the money to pay off your debt. How would you feel about this person? Now relate that to what God has done for you.

## LISTEN: God Pays, You Receive

God can justify the ungodly because when a sinner trusts in Christ, God imputes (credits) the righteousness of Christ to the sinner. Because the sinner (the ungodly one) is now clothed in the righteousness of Christ, God then makes the legal declaration, “you are righteous.” In this way God is just when he justifies us because he has executed judgment on his own Son, and the obedience of Christ has been credited to us who are sinners. If you enjoy language of the 1640s, then you will appreciate this description of justification given in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (a teaching tool to educate lay people in theology): “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (a. 33).

### ABSORB

God is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Christ.

### INTERACT

- Justification is not about you and me becoming good enough for God to declare us righteous, but it is about God stepping in and doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. Why does “justification” give all the glory to God, not humans? Are you glad that this is the way God justifies you?



**Reflect:** It is amazing that God would go to such lengths to justify us. That reality creates gratefulness in our hearts. Think about



A major difference between Christianity and all other religions is that in some form or some way, other religions try to appease the displeasure of the deity by offering something that *people* do—whether it be self-denial, or kind deeds, or moral improvement. But in Christianity, *God himself* satisfies his displeasure of our injustice and sin. Can you see the vast difference between these two approaches?



how having a grateful spirit could affect our attitudes and outlook at work, home, school, or wherever. This good news about justification has the potential of changing everything about how we respond to life!

Look back at the main “Absorb” points for a few moments, and then rephrase in your own words what redemption, propitiation, and imputation mean. Is there anything I can be praying about for you until we meet for the next session?

### CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL HABITS

**Read:** 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; John 6:28–65; Romans 8:14–39

**Journal:** Review the first and second sessions, jot down the main points of each session, think about them, and meditate on them.

#### Memorize

*For even the Son of Man\* did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*

MARK 10:45

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\* The term “Son of Man” was a favorite title and description Jesus used to refer to himself. The term alludes to the reality that although Jesus is divine (the Son of God), he is also *fully human* (the Son of Man). It is also a messianic title. Daniel 7:13–14 uses it in this description of a messianic scene: “I was watching in the night visions, / And behold, One like the *Son of Man*, / Coming with the clouds of heaven! / . . . to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, / That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion.”