



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 173

Roman Catholic view of justification – Though the Roman Catholic Church teaches that God’s grace of justification, also referred to as the righteousness of Christ, is necessary for justification, they teach that this righteousness is not imputed but infused or poured into the sinner, which begins at baptism. Having received this infused grace at baptism, the believer must then cooperate with this grace through continued good works, and thus become more and more inherently righteous or holy. Such a person is said to be in a state of grace (or a state of justification). The person will stay in this state as long as he does not commit a mortal sin. The Catholic Church defines mortal sins as serious sins which cause spiritual death in the person, killing infused grace in the soul, and breaking his relationship with God. Such a person can be re-justified through the sacrament of penance, which requires confession of sins, repentance, and works of satisfaction to be performed, after which the person is re-infused with grace, and by cooperating with it can be restored to a state of justification. If a person dies in the state of mortal sin, he will be damned to hell; but if a person dies with less serious sins, known as venial sins, he will enter purgatory, where his sins will be purged away and he will become inherently righteous. This could last a moment or thousands of years, after which he will enter heaven.

We see a key difference is in the words imputation and infusion. Reformed doctrine teaches that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to our account for our justification; whereas Roman Catholic doctrine teaches that the righteousness of Christ is infused in us, works in us, and assists us for our justification. Reformed doctrine teaches that justification is not a declaration of our righteousness but of Jesus’s righteousness; whereas Romans Catholic doctrine teaches that God declares a person just because he inherently is just, possessing a righteousness that is his own and not one that is alien to him.

Rome teaches that there are degrees of justification, for the grace of justification can be increased in us by our good works, and thus it is a progressive process. In this they are confusing the one-time legal declaration of justification with the ongoing process of sanctification, which does increase in the life of the believer. Justification is equal and total in all persons who believe in Christ, which cannot be increased or diminished, because its ground is Christ’s righteousness, which is perfect.

In Reformed doctrine, justification does not affect an inward change in the nature of a person, but only a change in the person’s status. Thus we say that justification is positional, not existential. It affects the person’s state, not his condition. The believer is declared just before he is inherently just (Romans 3:24, 28; 4:9-10; Galatians 2:16; 3:11; Philippians 3:9; Titus 3:4-7). Rome on the other hand, affirms that through the process of justification the nature of a person is changed, after which God declares him just.

Rome teaches that without a special revelation from God, people cannot know for certain if they are in a state of grace or not. But the Bible calls us to have assurance of salvation right now, and to not be in a state of doubt wondering if we are saved or will be saved (John 3:36; 6:47; 1 John 5:12-13). When we believe in Jesus, apart from any goodness in us, we are declared as justified (Romans 5:1, 9; Titus 3:7).

These theological differences between Roman Catholicism and biblical Protestantism were substantial in the 16th century and remain so even today. For Rome the instrumental cause of justification is not faith alone; the material cause of justification is not Christ alone; and in reality the efficient cause of justification is not grace alone. We dare not minimize such differences, for the very gospel is at stake. When the gospel becomes a work of God and man, then it is no longer the biblical gospel, and in reality it is not good news at all, for its end is condemnation. But when the gospel is the news of sinners being saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone, then it truly is good news, and it spreads like wildfire, as it did in the time of Christ and His disciples, and as it has done every time this truth has been recovered and declared, which was the case in the 16th century Protestant Reformation.