



Subjective and Objective Justification

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Session 2

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Session 2:

1. 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.

2. Objective Justification

“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

“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?

How did God reconcile the world to Himself?

Does “world” mean all people or only believers?

In what way are unbelievers reconciled to God?

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

“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).

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”

What is meant by the “act of righteousness”?

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

“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 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.”²

5. Summary of Objective Justification

“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.”³

- Illustration: Pardon and the prisoner

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

- The justifying act of God
- 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”?

² Edward W. A. Koehler, “Objective Justification,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 16 (1945): 224.

³ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theses on Justification* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1983), Thesis 23.

- 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?

7. Why Is Objective Justification Important?

- 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!”

“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.”⁴

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.”

“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).⁵ 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.

⁴ Koehler, 226.

⁵ Kolb/Wengert, 566.

9. Objections to Objective Justification

Does this mean that all people will go to heaven?

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?

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. My faith does nothing more than receive this forgiveness.

