

Justification, Righteousness, and Sanctification

Such is the lexicon of words that swirl around St. Paul's letters to the *Romans* and the *Galatians*, as well as the *Letter of James*. If not the words specifically, then the underlying derived theological understanding. Note, that is different from the "meaning of the words." If you wanted a simple "state of the discussion" summary, it is this: Catholics, traditional Protestants (e.g. Lutheran, Anglican, Methodists, some Presbyterians), Reformed Christians (other Presbyterians, Baptists, others), Pentecostals, and unaffiliated Evangelical Churches - don't share common definitions. When each tradition speaks the words the instantiated meaning is different from the received understanding. Makes for cross-purpose conversations which are reduced to single line quotations of Bible verses.

And lest you think, "can't everyone simply look at the Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek to resolve the definition and meaning?" The Hebrew *šedeq-šēdāqâ* is neither a simple word nor a word used consistently across the OT. It is translated by a variety of words: acquittal, deliverance, honest evidence, integrity, judgment, justice, prosperity, right, righteousness, righteous deeds, righteous help, right order, salvation, saving help, victory, and vindication. The 8th century BC prophets use the word differently than the Psalmists who use the word differently from later works such as *Kings*, *Chronicles*, *Job*, and *Daniel* to name a few.

The range of the meaning/use of the word covers things in "right order", the one who puts things in "right order," the act of putting things in "right order" and a myriad of variations on all the other possible meanings of the word. For example, the king is described as *šaddîq* because he triumphed; in other words, not a personal characteristic, but more results oriented. Yet in the Psalms, the righteous seem possessed of a personal characteristic that allows them to prosper, be exalted, but with the note that it is all because of God's saving action. In this they are contrasted with the wicked. The *šaddîq* (now used to describe a person who is righteous) is the one who is innocent, or the one without fault who stands before the court and merits acquittal. He is the one who acts on his own responsibility and is guiltless before God.

One scholar offers this: Yahweh's *šedeq-šēdāqâ* describes an action of God, but an action that varies in the course of Israel's history:

1. in the pre-monarchical period, *šedeq-šēdāqâ* describes the military success given by Yahweh to Israel;
2. in the monarchy, Israel calls *šēdāqâ* (a) the actualization of the normal state of *šedeq*, or (b) the rescue of an individual in distress;
3. in the exilic period, *šēdāqâ* is God's saving action in the future.

...and of course, lots of other scholars disagree. And underlying all this is each denomination's theological confession as to the meaning of this lexicon of words which influences scholarly views (or so it would seem).

The Catholic Understanding of Justification, Righteousness and Sanctification.

The Catholic understanding (and resulting definition) of justification (and the other words) is not simply a linguistic study. The understanding and use is something that is anchored in the Scriptures and the earliest Church writings and traditions. The foundation is deep, consistent and 2000 years old. The writings of the Church Fathers provide critical insights into how justification (and all the words) was understood in the early centuries and how these ideas shaped Catholic doctrine. Below is a summary of the connection between early Church writings and the Catholic interpretation of justification, righteousness and sanctification:

Baptism and Initial Justification

- Catholics see baptism as the beginning of justification, rooted in **Romans 6:3-4**: *“We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death... we might live in newness of life.”*
- Baptism washes away sin, unites the believer to Christ, and infuses grace to begin a new life of sanctification. In Catholic usage, Baptism is an event that, by the grace of God, a person is made righteous (*şedeq*). This is the first event in the life-long process of justification, growing in sanctity by the grace of God, with an end result of salvation.

Early Church Fathers:

- **St. Cyprian of Carthage** (3rd century) wrote: *“Through baptism, the old man dies, and a new man is reborn in justification.”* This reflects Romans 6 and the ancient sacramental understanding of justification.
- **St. Ambrose** (4th century) tied baptism to the regeneration mentioned in Romans: *“The water of baptism cleanses the sinner, and through it, the righteousness of Christ is given to the soul.”*

Justification as Transformation

- The Catholic tradition views justification as a **transformative process**, not just a forensic (legal) declaration. This understanding is consistent with early Church teachings.
- **Romans 5:1** (*“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*) emphasizes initial justification by faith, but passages like **Romans 6:4** (*“We too might live in newness of life”*) show that justification involves a lifelong transformation through grace.

Early Church Fathers:

- **St. Augustine** (4th-5th century) highlighted justification as an internal renewal by God’s grace. He wrote: *“Grace makes a person righteous by changing the heart, not merely by covering sins.”* (cf. *De Spiritu et Littera*).
- Augustine’s interpretation of **Romans 5:5** (*“The love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit”*) reflects the idea that justification is a work of the Holy Spirit, transforming believers to live in love and holiness.

Cooperation with Grace

- Catholic doctrine emphasizes that justification (transformative process) involves cooperation with God’s grace, a concept that stems from early Church writings.
- **Romans 2:6-7** (*“God will repay everyone according to their works: eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works.”*) highlights the necessity of works empowered by grace.

Early Church Fathers:

- **St. Irenaeus** (2nd century) in *Against Heresies* (Book 4) affirmed that God’s grace enables human cooperation: *“God has granted his grace to humanity, but human effort must work alongside divine grace.”*

- **Origen** (3rd century) emphasized synergy between divine grace and human will, interpreting Romans 8:13 (“*If by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live*”) as evidence of the believer’s active participation in their sanctification.
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Faith and Works

- Catholics argue that the Letter to the Romans harmonizes faith and works in justification. Faith is the foundation, but it must express itself through love and obedience to God (Romans 13:8-10).
- **Romans 3:28** (“*For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law*”) refers to works of the Mosaic Law, not moral works done in grace. The context for this oft quoted passage is addressed to Jewish people.

Early Church Fathers:

- **St. Clement of Rome** (1st century) wrote in his *Letter to the Corinthians*: “*Let us be humble-minded, brethren, laying aside all arrogance, and self-conceit, and folly, and anger, and let us do that which is written... being justified by works and not by words.*” Clement emphasizes that works of love, humility, and obedience are an integral part of justification.
 - **St. John Chrysostom** (4th century), in his commentary on Romans, taught that faith initiates justification but must lead to a life of righteousness: “*Faith brings us into the race, but works crown us with victory.*”
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Justification as Lifelong Growth

- The Catholic Church teaches that justification is not a one-time event but a process that includes ongoing sanctification. **Romans 8:29-30** describes this process: “*Those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... those he justified he also glorified.*”

Early Church Fathers:

- **St. Gregory of Nyssa** (4th century) described Christian life as a journey of continual growth in righteousness: “*True justification is not static but a constant ascent toward God.*”
 - **St. Basil the Great** (4th century) echoed this in his teaching on justification as growing in holiness and conformity to Christ.
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Key Continuities Between Early Tradition and Catholic Doctrine

1. **Sacramental Role:** Baptism is the starting point of justification in which the righteousness of Christ is given through the Sacrament.
2. **Transformative Justification:** Justification changes the sinner internally, not just legally.
3. **Faith and Works:** Faith initiates justification, but works in grace complete it.
4. **Cooperation with Grace:** Grace enables but does not eliminate human responsibility.
5. **Ongoing Process:** Justification involves lifelong sanctification and perseverance.

These early Church teachings were formalized in Catholic doctrine, particularly at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), where the Church clarified its response to Protestant views.

Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification - 500 year after the Reformation

The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" is a document created and agreed to by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999 as a result of Catholic–Lutheran dialogue. It states that the churches now share "a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ." To the parties involved, this substantially resolves much of the 500-year-old conflict over the nature of justification which was at the root of the Protestant Reformation.

"Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."

As of 2017, the bodies representing 75% of the world's Christians have formally affirmed the Joint Declaration. Now as a five-way agreement between the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, it is, however, not without controversy.

