

Work Out Your Own Salvation

The first words one hears from God in a near-death experience is: "I will protect you." The second and final message you may hear from him in his presence is: "You must justify your soul." The dictionary defines justify as "to show to be just, right, or in accord with reason, to warrant." In the Old Testament, a just person was referred to as being one who was acquitted or vindicated before a judge's tribunal. That happened before God by keeping the Mosaic Law. Keeping the Law perfectly was and is a tremendously difficult task. Forgiveness is half of the story. The other half of justification is proving yourself virtuous. How can we be justified?

We are told in the New Testament, that Jesus is our justification. (1 Corinthians 6:11). Galatians 2:16 tells us clearly that we are not justified by our own works but in faith in Jesus. If you ever meditated on the Stations of the Cross, the first station says: Jesus is condemned. Was Jesus taking our place standing before Pilate? Should we be condemned because of our sins? Mysteriously, God accepts Jesus' willing sacrifice of himself on our behalf. Because Jesus was condemned, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1). Jesus' condemnation, suffering, death, and resurrection is meant for each one of us. We are baptized into Jesus, we are baptized into his death so that we can rise to a new life of justification.

There are two components of justification. One has to do with the state of being forgiven for all our sins. Because of the grace of forgiveness, we can stand before the Holy One. The other dimension that many forget about has to do with the process of being made righteous or just. In justification, we are declared right before God and made upright. In Jesus we have been vindicated and declared innocent and forgiven by his blood. In addition, in Jesus we "become the very righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21).

What does it mean to become the righteousness of God? Essentially there must be grace and our cooperation. God has freely communicated to us the virtue of Christ his son. This infusion of the Justice of Jesus is a major part of justification. All that Jesus is, lives within us. This free gift is in all of us in seed form because Jesus is present. The fruit of the Spirit is in us and needs to ripen. (Galatians 5:22 – 23). God's righteousness is his forgiving, generous, merciful, compassionate, just and loving character. The goal of our lives is to allow this character of God to emerge from us. (It must be worked out of us.)

When you stand before God in a near-death experience, you understand that you must justify your soul. Through God's grace, you are forgiven and declared upright before him by the blood of Jesus. This all happens through the blood of the Cross. However, if you are selfish and lacking in virtue, God will tell you that you need to change.

A major part of justification has to do with a continuous act of will. This means that your thoughts become Christ-like and your emotions are managed. Then you must allow Jesus to come within you and make you all that you are. Your heart must be reshaped. It must be molded and transformed. You must become a new creation. The seeds of this new life are within us. Every day we are in the process of making the decision to let the seeds blossom fully.

Make no mistake about it, there is a responsibility on our part in the area of justification. While some would say that we are totally justified, once and for all, by Christ, and that we are already justified in that we are forgiven, you still need to become Christ-like in order for that to happen, our effort is required. Our responsibility is to participate in and cooperate with the grace of God. This means agreeing to surrendering to the Spirit of Jesus daily. As we change and grow, we are not earning heaven in any way; rather, we are becoming a new person in Christ.

Have This Mind Among You... (Philippians 2:5)

In the process of justification, you allow Jesus to "work out of" yourself so he becomes all that you are. You begin to think like him (we have the mind of Christ – 1 Corinthians 2:16), behave like him and surrender our will to God as he did. "He was the firstborn of many brothers and sisters," we are told in Romans 8:29. This extremely crucial verse in the New Testament tells us that we are actually predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus. Justification and our life in Christ is the process of being conformed and transformed. Becoming justified doesn't mean that we are another Christ, but we are Christ-ians, partisans of Christ and his disciples. There is only one master and Messiah. Now through God's free gift, we are mystically grafted on the vine and become one with him. He is the vine and we are the branches.

Justification is a process. Being transformed takes time. So in a very real sense we can say that we are justified (forgiven, acquitted and possessing Christ within) and we also are being justified (becoming virtuous and holy).

One of the sticking points of the Protestant Reformation is this doctrine of justification. Martin Luther sensed that people were trying to get right with God through their own deeds, prayers and good works. People were purchasing indulgences and seemingly "buying" their way into heaven. This provoked him and flew in the face of what he knew to be true from the Scriptures. The Bible clearly teaches that no one is good enough and that all of us have sinned. If we break one command, we have broken them all. Therefore, no matter how hard we try we can never earn or buy our way into heaven. We need a Savior. One of the major reasons for the split in Christendom was Luther's teaching that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. In Luther's opinion, Catholics were teaching that we are saved by works as well as grace.

As recently as the year 2000, Catholics and Lutherans finally reached an agreement about how to be right with God. The Joint Declaration of Justification by Faith states the new position, "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." In other words, it is not by faith and good works that we are saved, but rather, our faith in the saving action of Jesus that justifies us, shapes our character, and spurs us on to do good works. God does the renewing with our constant cooperation.

This modern day declaration states what the Catholic Church has always believed. The Reformation has helped us to define this more clearly. The Catechism of the Catholic Church proclaims, "Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons and daughters, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life." (#1996). Justification, therefore, has to do with being put right before God through God's initiative. We are justified when we are forgiven and made righteous. Since we lost our initial innocence through sin and none is righteous, we need a Savior. It is our faith in Jesus and his transforming presence within us that secures for us a place in the divine presence.

The only reason you have this experience before God in a near-death experience is because you are justified through the free gift of Jesus at the Cross.

Not only does Jesus take our place at Calvary; justification has to do with the process of Jesus taking our place in our hearts. In this way it is closely related to sanctification. Sanctification is the process of being purified and made holy. When we come to Christ by faith, he literally gives us a new heart. The process of rebirth, regeneration and transformation occurs. Ezekiel the prophet had prophesied that God would "give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them." (Ezekiel 11:19). Paul the apostle put it this way, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20). The miracle of justification is becoming one with Christ who lives in us. It is allowing Jesus to influence our thoughts, decisions, emotions and actions.

Justification, then, is all about being right with God. It occurs primarily through the free gift of God. We cannot earn this. Nothing we can do merits eternal life. As we come to Jesus in faith and accept, receive and believe in his Cross-death for us, we are redeemed from sin and made right with God. We are now justified in his presence. Through the blood of Jesus we are declared right and are just—as-if we have never sinned. This is wonderful Good News. The Blood of a Spotless Lamb (Jesus) is central. In the Old Testament the countless blood sacrifices of animals foreshadowed the blood sacrifice of Jesus. We are told in the book of Hebrews, "Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins." (9:22).

However, being innocent and forgiving isn't enough. We must show that we belong in God's holy presence. We must be just-ified (infused with justice). God's call for us is to show forth virtue and "be holy as God is holy." (1 Peter 1:16). Justification is the lifelong process of becoming Christ-like. We already have the righteousness of God in us through the free gift of his Son in us. We must allow Christ—in-us to become Christ-through-us and out-of-us. In other words, what is in us must be worked out through us and become all that we are.

We can be sure that our sins are forgiven now. We can also be certain that God is calling each of us to become the fullness of a new creature in his Son. We must cooperate with the grace of God in us. Cooperating with grace means that we avoid sin by the strength of the Holy Spirit. Additionally, our life must be about allowing God and the character of Christ to work out of us. We must grow in virtue and maturity. We choose to develop an excellent character. We choose to become a loving person. We allow the mind of Christ to possess our mind. We are called to achieve our potential. God's will is that we become the image of Jesus of Nazareth. This is what it means to be justified.

In a near-death experience if God tells you, "You must be justified," you understand that you need to change. You are convicted and convinced that you need to change, both at the same time. God is giving you another chance. He is giving you more time when he sends you back into time. He is telling you of your life's purpose. At first, you do not understand that this is a lifelong process. Later in life, you begin to develop a deeper understanding and the goal God has set for you. This goal ought to be the striving of every person on earth. "God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn of many brothers and sisters." (Romans 8:29)

Divine Encounter

God wants us to encounter (coming together or meeting) his presence. It may not always be in a dramatic meaning like a near-death experience, but God wants us to know him nevertheless. The epiphany (manifestation of God) can occur anywhere. Examples are, the apostle Paul traveling, Peter working, and Isaiah worshipping, all three encountered God in the midst of their daily activities.

There are a multitude of examples of God revealing himself to people in the Bible. Moses met God at the burning bush. Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple. Paul met the Lord on the road to Damascus. The Virgin Mary had a visitation from an angel in her home. All the stories have common elements. First, there is an encounter with God. Next there is fear. Lastly there is a call of some sort. One story that illustrates these elements involves the Apostle Peter. This story has been called the story of the "unexpected catch" and it comes from Luke 5:1–11.

In this story, Peter, a professional fisherman, has worked hard all night and caught nothing. Jesus asked to get into his boat in order to use it for preaching purposes. What was it that he taught that day? Perhaps it was about how our lives can be incredibly fruitful if we follow him. Maybe he taught that if we live by grit we will be frustrated, but if we live by grace, we can experience abundance. Could it be that he taught us how he came to free us from the law and bring our hearts to rebirth. Whatever it was that he taught the people, he was about to demonstrate something to Peter. He invited Peter to put out into the deep for a catch.

Before this story, we haven't met Peter in the Gospel of Luke. We can infer that Peter knew something about Jesus because he let him use his boat. Another indication is that Peter answered Jesus' request with "Master." In Luke, this is a remark of respect because the word used is the Greek translation of Rabbi or teacher. Apparently Peter already had been impressed with this Galilean preacher.

The Fear of the Lord

When Peter launched his boat out into the deep, although the apostles knew how to fish and had fished all night and caught nothing, they caught so many fishes that their nets began to break and their boats began to sink. Suddenly Peter came face-to-face with the divine side of Jesus for the first time. It was an eye-opening encounter that led to an interesting response. We are told that "When Peter saw the catch, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'" (Luke 5:8).

First of all, there was the recognition of Jesus as Lord. Notice the progression. He began by calling him a teacher, but now he realized exactly who was aboard his boat. Then came the classic response that a person has when they meet God: he was afraid. We know this because he felt sinful, knelt down and asked Jesus to go away from him. At this Jesus told Peter, "Don't be afraid."

This fear is the fear of the Lord. When Moses encountered God at the burning bush, "he hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." (Exodus 3:6). When Isaiah met God in the temple, he cried, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for with my own eyes I have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:6). During the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John fell on their faces and they were exceedingly afraid. (Matthew 17:6). Even Mary was so troubled that the angel said, "Don't be afraid Mary." (Luke 1:30).

All of these biblical characters experienced a sense of their own unworthiness and felt fear. This fear came as they became aware of the imminent presence of God. The fear was a sense of awe and reverence. Peter knew that Jesus was more than just an ordinary human being. He wasn't quite sure what to do.

The fear of the Lord is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit listed by the prophet Isaiah in 11:2-3. Isaiah was telling us that when the Messiah comes, he will have these gifts. It is inspiring to think that Jesus' "delight" was the fear of the Lord. In other words, he walked in God's holy presence. He revered God and never sinned. He knew that God was always present and watching and willed never to offend God in any 4

way. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to any believer and are celebrated at the sacrament of confirmation. When a person becomes a mature Christian, he or she ought to be walking in the fear of the Lord, always with a sense of God's presence. Because of the fear of the Lord, a person will guard their heart, mind, mouth and actions.

The wisdom literature of the Bible (Proverbs, Sirach and Wisdom) has a lot to say about the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation, and gladness and a crown of rejoicing. The fear of the Lord delights the heart, and gives gladness and joy and long life. With the one who fears the Lord it will go well at the end; on the day of his death he will be blessed. To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Sirach 1:11–14).

The fear of the Lord is not about the 1950s perception when preachers tried to scare people into holiness and where God watched people's every movement and if they made any false step, they were bound for hell. This is the image of a harsh, angry, vindictive God that was proclaimed in the 1950s. The fear of the Lord that is being proclaimed is not about harshness and punishment, but about reverence. It has to do with appreciating how close our God is to us. It is about realizing his presence and not wanting to offend his love. Yes, to some degree, it is about fear of being judged, but that is not the primary message.

While God is loving and very compassionate and forgiving, we cannot just presume God's mercy because of some culture-shaped idea of God that we may imagine. We need to ground ourselves in the true biblical notion of just who God is. God is mercy, by he is also justice. There needs to be balance and reverence for God. In the 1950s the pendulum swung too far to the side of punishment, and much in the same way, it has swung too far to the side of "God will forgive anything" in the new millennium.

The fear of the Lord has a lot to do with faith and believing that God is always near. If we know that God is near and notices every thought, motivation and deed, we will want to live uprightly and be pleasing to God. In a near-death experience you may be given the gift of the fear of the Lord. It is a gift that does not go away. It is the sense that God is present in every activity and scrutinizes the person that we are. The fear of the Lord is also the truth that one day we will have to stand before God and account for the person we become.

The Precious Name of Jesus

When Isaiah had his spectacular vision of God, he became tormented by his sinful words. After a near-death experience, one of the first areas that God may call you to change is your speech. If you are using God's name carelessly, that is, not in prayer, whether you realize it or not, God begins to deal with you about your speech. You become aware of how you are using his name wrongly. Jesus may say to you, "By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned." (Matthew 12:37). Words are indicators of where your heart is. Are you right with God? Are you justified? You must pay attention as to how you speak so that you may know where you stand with God.

You can tell that you fear the Lord when you think before you speak. You don't just spout off at the mouth when something happens. Because you know God is there you are careful. We need to control ourselves because we know God is there.

Controlling our speech through God's grace and cooperation is part of the justification process. First, you must become aware that you have a problem. Then you must admit to yourself that you have a problem and are powerless over the problem. You must have the will to overcome the problem because you cannot do it on your own accord. Ask God to help you. Think before you speak. If you are unable to control yourself, ask God to help you. Keep persevering and never give up. Before long, as you surrender your will and words to God your mouth is purified and you gain mastery in this area. In the Old Testament, an angel's blazing tong touched the tongue of Isaiah and he was cleansed. This signified the forgiving and cleansing power of grace. We also need grace to have victory in any area and especially to cooperate with God's grace by taking responsibility for our words.

When you pray for the gift of the fear of the Lord, you are praying to encounter God's presence so that you will live in holy awe and reverence of him. You will have a sense of God wherever you go and you will not want to offend God. You will have the grace to want to please God at all times. You will think before you act and even before you talk. God's marvelous presence is with us always. Love him so much that you "delight in the fear of the Lord."

God Pleaser Or People Pleaser

When you have the gift of the fear of the Lord, you will begin to prize what God thinks of you more than you care about what people think. As we grow up, we begin to sense of wanting to be people pleasers and worry about being accepted and agonize over "what people think." When God touches a person with his presence a new freedom occurs. The classic example was Peter. He denied Jesus on the night he was betrayed. He was afraid of the Jews and lived behind locked doors. Then on Pentecost Sunday, the powerful presence of God overwhelmed him. Suddenly, he went from a marshmallow to a bold proclaimer of Jesus. People were struck at the boldness of the apostles in the face of danger. Peter and the others were thrown into prison and then brought before the Jewish Council of religious leaders and warned not to speak in Jesus' name. They replied, "We must obey God rather than people." (Acts 5:29).

It is fearing God more than people that helps you to become a bold authoritative messenger of God. John tells us that perfect love casts out all fear. (1 John 4:18). One facet of loving God is that fearing him helps you to overcome the public perception of you. Let God help you to manage the fear of what people may think of you.

Be bold, try to reach out to more and more people. Face your fears of being rejected, but continue to try to do good for the sake of the greater good.

Give Your All To Your Call

There are many young people who are gifted and talented. Others have untapped potential. In order for a young person to reach their potential, they first of all, must have an encounter with God. Without an encounter, a touch, young people who sincerely and authentically seek Jesus, especially to a religious vocation, may never experience his mercy. His mercy will fill you with the Holy Spirit and power. This touch of God is what is necessary to discover your true vocation.

Our vocation in life is to proclaim Jesus. You must have a personal relationship with him so as to find this "pearl of great price." For some, this discovery will lead to another treasure within, a call to religious life. In addition to this basic call to relationship with Jesus, if you already know Jesus, look within and discover what is his will for your life. Some may have a call to religious life; others a call toward married life and raising children. There is also recognized in the Church the gift of a call to the single life. Being single for the Lord, is a valid, powerful call. What is important is living for Jesus, no matter what vocation calls you.

The simple truth is that God has a plan for our lives! This plan is for our welfare, our future and to give us hope. (Jeremiah 29:11). As we search out this plan, we can discover it. It may not be easy, but searching for God's call takes a lot of self-honesty and faith. It also takes trusting, risking and launching out into the deep. Nothing is written in stone or black-and-white, but God does write his will within our hearts and consciousness. We can only understand God's will through prayer and discernment.

I'll Get By With A Little Help From My Friends

When someone is trying to discern their vocation in life, they will need a mature person of faith who they can trust and talk to easily. Everyone needs help in sorting out what their call in life is. You may also need the help of a community to discern. Talking with someone else will help you hear what is within you. It will help you to clear up the confusion and the conflicting feelings. You also need objective views. This will help you to get in touch with your heart. To understand what is within you. What are your desires? Be assured that God wants you to be happy. He does not call you to a life of misery.

Besides prayer and reflection, and speaking with someone, you must give yourself time. A call to an authentic vocation will not fade. The desire within may not always be burning and be at the forefront of your thoughts, but it will consistently appear. Time will tell whether you are called or not to your specific vocation. If the desire remains in you over time, most likely you will understand your vocation as Jeremiah said, "If I say I will not mention God or speak anymore in his name, there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, I am weary with holding it in and I cannot." (Jeremiah 20:9).

Even if you have discovered a certain call, it still takes faith to believe that it actually is a personal call for you from God. You must always walk by faith and not by sight. The validity of your call is shown not just by how we feel but how we perform. In a major decision such as a life call, God does not dupe us or let us miss the mark.

Sometimes, individuals seek advice as to whether or not they chose the wrong vocation. People follow their heart as best as they can at the particular time when they are making life choices. We must trust God to work through any choice we make. God wants us to be happy and live for him. If you are married, try not to regret your choice. Live your marriage wholeheartedly. If you are religious, live passionately for Jesus. God is pleased with whatever vocation you have discerned as long as you stay committed and live faithfully.

Any authentic vocation from God is a call to selflessness. Discipleship is all about denying yourself, taking up your cross daily and following Jesus. We are all called to service by God for the sake of the kingdom. Sometimes, that may mean giving up our own wants and needs, for example, playing golf or watching television, for the sake of the community (that is, our neighbor). At the end of the day you will have a sense of accomplishment because you are fulfilling God's will in your life and sowing seeds of blessing into others' lives. When this is done, you are saying "Yes" to God because you are giving of yourself to your particular vocation.

Marriage is a call to say "Yes" to God by honoring your spouse. Selflessness is shown when you let an argument drop or forgive for the thousandth time. It means cleaning the house or going to work with a good attitude. Having children and the demands they impose on a relationship requires self-surrender also. Similarly, single people deny themselves when they serve their community. Others, may selflessly remain home and pray instead of partying. Every vocation has its sacrificial nature to it. All vocations are demanding and have their challenges. Jesus desires that we give our all to our call.

While we may have our own individual and distinct vocation (married life, religious life, single life), we are all called to share a common call. This call is really our primary call, that of a personal relationship with Jesus. Our one true vocation is to know Jesus. Discipleship is everyone's call. And, as Jesus put it to so many, "Follow me." God calls everyone on the face of the earth to a relationship with him. Then he calls us to live out that relationship in specific ways. We are to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" in whatever walk of life we find ourselves.

In addition, we all share a universal call to holiness. A major part of holiness is to become a loving person. Holiness also means to be "set apart" for God and his use. To be consecrated means to be separated from evil. It also means to be proactive in your daily surrender to God. In order for holiness to happen, God will be at work sanctifying and purifying us through the people and circumstances of our vocations. It is important that each of us become holy. This is the meaning of our life's journey.

We are all called to a vocation. You have been chosen. Seek Jesus and you will find and discover what your vocation is. God will never dupe you. He is faithful. Those who have been married for many years have lived out their vocation from God with their spouse and by having children. Once you have found your vocation, live it to the fullest with love. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of God who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9). Get in touch with the light that is God. God is light and in him there is no darkness. (1 John 1:5). In your vocation, strive to be loving and you will be walking in light.

