

JUSTIFIED: IS "JUST AS IF I'D NEVER SINNED" BIBLICAL?

Justified has been defined using a popular phrase "Just-as-if-I'd never sinned," which sounds very catchy, but the important question to ask "Is it completely Biblical? Is it an accurate definition of **justified**?" I think not!

Let's look at an example from a popular commentary by William Barclay on Romans 3:24 in which he describes the meaning of the Greek verb [dikaioo](#) which is translated "justified" 24 times in the New Testament. Barclay writes

"If God justifies a sinner, it does not mean that he finds reasons to prove that he was right - far from it. It does not even mean, at this point, that he makes the sinner a good man. It means that God **treats the sinner as if he had not been a sinner at all.**"

Basically Barclay is paraphrasing the catchy phrase "**Just-as-if-I'd never sinned.**" So the question one must ask, is this cute saying truly sound doctrine? Or as Paul might say to us today, we must...

Retain ([present imperative](#) see [our need to depend on the Holy Spirit to obey](#)) the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 14 **Guard** ([aorist imperative](#) see [our need to depend on the Holy Spirit to obey](#)), through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you. (2 Timothy 1:13-14+)

Even a respected writer like David Guzik uses the preceding quote by Barclay as part of his explanation for "righteousness." (See [Romans 1 comments on v16-17](#)) But again we must ask the question every good Berean (Acts 17:11+) should ask - "Is it Biblical?" You may be surprised (as I was) to discover that a number of sound Biblical scholars seem to not have asked the question "Is it Biblical?"

In a commentary I penned years ago on Romans 3:24, I wrote "At God's Lighthouse Mission in Manhattan the men who attended services in the '50s were drilled nightly in Bible verses and in a particular definition of "**justified.**" **Justified**, they were taught to repeat, means "**just as if I had never sinned in the sight of God.**" I was taught this same phrase in Men's Bible Study Fellowship - "Justified" ~ "Just As If I Had Never Sinned". This teaching is not entirely accurate for as discussed above [dikaioo](#), means to be acquitted or to be pronounced righteous. It is not "just as if I had never sinned" and thus it does not go far enough. More accurately it is "just as if I had lived as perfect a life as Jesus did!" Once, when my normal green-tinted sunglasses were lost, I put on a rose-colored pair. And everything I saw through them was rose colored. Justification is a little like this. God sees you and me through "Christ-colored glasses." When God looks at the person who believes in His Son, He sees the righteousness of Jesus Himself." (Commentary on Romans 3:24)

Here are some more examples of use of this questionable phrase from some highly respected saints, many of whom I quote on this website...

- M R De Haan ("When I'm justified through Christ's merits, God looks at me `Just as if I'd" never sinned." - Our Daily Bread)
- Ken Hemphill ("justification means this: God looks at me "just as if I'd never sinned." - "We Are")
- Robertson McQuilkin ("This we call justification, or being justified, "just-as-if-I'd" never sinned." - Life in the Spirit")
- Bruce Barton ("To use a familiar but helpful explanation, the person who is justified can claim that his condition before God is "just as if I'd never sinned." Commentary on Galatians)
- June Hunt ("A popular amplification for justified is just-as-if-I'd never sinned." BORROW [Seeing Yourself Through God's Eyes](#))
- Wayne Barber (one of my mentors) ("What does it mean to be justified? It means "just as if I had never sinned." in a sermon on Romans 5:1-2)
- Adrian Rogers ("I am now justified, and justified means just as if I'd never sinned." Sermon on Isaiah 53)
- Wayne Detzler ("Many years ago a youth speaker explained the meaning of justification in a simple phrase. Justification means that I stand before God "just-as-if-I'd" never sinned." - BORROW [NT Words in Today's Language](#))

As alluded to above, even Miss Weatherall Johnson's explanatory notes in Bible Study Fellowship used this catchy phrase and clearly I respect BSF because God used their course on the Minor Prophets to justify me in 1984! John Phillips in "100 NT Sermon Outlines" writes without adding any disclaimer "Justified! In popular, everyday language the word can be paraphrased: "just as if I'd never sinned!" Popular? Yes. But pure? No! This saying is so catchy that some find it difficult to not use in preaching and teaching, doing so by adding disclaimers or caveats. For example, Charles Wood in "Sermon Outlines on Great Doctrinal Themes" says "Sometimes we teach children short sayings. For instance—**justified** means "**Just as if I'd never sinned.**" **It is not very**

theological, but it is not too bad as a definition." So even after acknowledging that it is not **"very theological,"** he still gives tacit approval. Theology and sound doctrine matter! I submit therefore that we should avoid this phrase altogether!

In sum, it is clear that this catchy phrase has crept into the Christian jargon in the teaching and preaching of many highly respected men and women. At first hearing it sounds very good and admittedly it is easy to remember, but maybe too easy to remember! I personally do not believe it passes muster for **sound doctrine**. I am not going to go into great detail but will offer a few quotes to help you arrive at your own conclusion about whether *"just as if I'd never sinned"* is doctrinally sound.

Dr Wayne Grudem in his magnum opus [Systematic Theology](#) gives a good explanation of the problem with **just as if I'd never sinned** - One sometimes hears the popular explanation that justified means **"just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned."** The definition is a clever play on words and **contains an element of truth** (for the justified person, like the person who has never sinned, has no penalty to pay for sin). But the definition is misleading in two other ways because (1) it mentions nothing about the fact that Christ's righteousness is reckoned to my account when I am justified; to do this it would have to say also **"just-as-if-I'd-lived-a-life-of-perfect-righteousness."** (2) But more significantly, it cannot adequately represent the fact that I will never be in a state that is **just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned,** because I will always be conscious of the fact that I have sinned and that I am not an innocent person but a guilty person who has been forgiven. This is very different from **"just as if I had never sinned"**! Moreover, it is different from **"just as if I had lived a life of perfect righteousness,"** because I will forever know that I have not lived a life of perfect righteousness, but that Christ's righteousness is given to me by God's grace. Therefore both in the forgiveness of sins and in the imputation of Christ's righteousness, my situation is far different from what it would be if I had never sinned and had lived a perfectly righteous life. For all eternity I will remember that I am a forgiven sinner, and that my righteousness is not based on my own merit, but on the grace of God in the saving work of Jesus Christ. **None of that rich teaching at the heart of the gospel will be understood by those who are encouraged to go through their lives thinking "justified" means "just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned."** (See [Footnote 4 on page 632 of Systematic Theology](#)) (Bolding added)

C H Spurgeon agrees that **"Just as if I'd never sinned"** is not an accurate statement writing that "I said that clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we are accepted **as if we had never sinned**. I correct myself—had we never sinned, we could only have stood in the righteousness of man. But this day by faith we stand in the righteousness of God himself. The doings and the dying of our Lord Jesus Christ make up for us a wedding dress more glorious than human merit could have spun, even if unfallen Adam had been the spinner."

Daniel Hill - Justification is not a return to innocence. It is not **"just as if I'd never sinned"**. It is a state of righteousness not innocence. The fact that we have sinned and fallen so short is the basis for greatness of what God had done in justification. ([Studies in Romans](#))

Henrietta Mears uses the term but correctly qualifies it writing "You have become acquainted with one great word of Scripture, "salvation." Here is another: "justification"—"just-as-if-I'd ..." Everything Christ did has been credited to my account. Justification buries all of my sins and guilt in the grace of Jesus Christ and sets me in heavenly places with Christ our Savior. His righteousness is mine! Justification happens when Christ's righteousness is looked at as ours—we are counted just (or righteous) before God. (BORROW [What the Bible is All About](#))

Erwin Lutzer - There are some who have defined the term justification as meaning **"just as if I'd never sinned."** But that is only half the story. It's not just that our slates are clean, wonderful though that is. It also means that God looks at us as if we have lived lives of perfect obedience. He sees us as being loving, submissive, pure. He sees us as having done everything Christ has done. (BORROW [Life Changing Bible Verses You Should Know](#))

Jerry Bridges uses the term but qualifies and explains it - There's an old play on the word **justified**: **"just-as-if-I'd never sinned."** But here's another way of saying it: "just-as-if-I'd always obeyed." Both are true. The first refers to the transfer of our moral debt to Christ so we're left with a "clean" ledger, just as if we'd never sinned. The second tells us our ledger is now filled with the perfect righteousness of Christ, so it's just as if we'd always obeyed. (Bookends of the Christian Life) (**Ed**: the only caveat I have here is that we did not always obey. Justification is "justified" because One Person always obeyed, so it takes somewhat from Christ's work and righteousness imputed to our account).

Michael Horton in his chapter on **Justification by Faith Alone** writes that "we are spiritually bankrupt, broke. Not only don't we have a single penny in our accounts; we are deep in debt. We are born into Adam's family with an estate that is in foreclosure, and we pile up that debt ourselves each day. Even if we got a job to put food on the table, it would never begin to pay off the unbelievable debt that has piled to the heavens. It would be similar to an average daily laborer thinking he can pay off the national debt of the United States. We not only have a lack of funds; we have an abundance of debts. So we need two things in order to settle the account with God. We need a payment of all the debts. And then we need a full line of credit. God requires both: negatively, we must be guilty of no sins, but, positively, we must also be just as morally perfect, righteous, and holy as God himself. The glass must not only be empty of unrighteousness; it must be full of righteousness. **This is where the popular definition of**

justification—“**just as if I'd never sinned**”—falls short. Rather, it is just as if I'd never sinned and had, instead, loved God and my neighbor perfectly all my life. (BORROW [Putting Amazing Back Into Grace](#))

William Newell in his commentary on Hebrews writes "Sad to say, for centuries, beginning with the so-called Christian Fathers themselves, in one way or another, the effect both upon God and upon the believing sinner, of the shedding of Christ's blood, has been perverted. For instance, a phrase has been current among some (**ED: KEEP IN MIND THIS WAS WRITTEN IN 1947**), which, (never dreamed of by them) defeats grace. I refer to the shallow, thoughtless rendering of "**justified**" by the words "**just-as-if-I'd never sinned.**" This would merely seek to view the pardoned sinner as being restored to the position in which Adam was before he sinned. It comes infinitely short of the truth....Now "**just-as-if-I'd never sinned**" not only looks at our escape from punishment as the chief object to be attained at the Cross, but minimizes that Divine forsaking and judgment, that sparing not of His own Son, as well as the unutterable glory of being placed in that Son and one with Him. It falls so far short of the work Christ did and of the place the believer is in, that I am ashamed to speak of it further. (See Newell's Note on Hebrews 8)

[Justification] is, "Although I am terribly sinful, He declared me righteous,"
NOT "just as if I'd never been sinful."

Charles Swindoll on **justification** - Someone once told me, "Justification is the sovereign act of God whereby He declares righteous the believing sinner while he is still in his sinning state." It means that while we were still prone to sin, God saw us in Christ and said, "You're righteous! I declare you to be right in My eyes. You don't have to work to find favor with Me." Grace says, God reached down in Christ, captured us, declared us righteous and said, "You're right from now on in My eyes." Some people have misused this word and taught that it means "**just as if I'd never sinned,**" taking the little syllables "**just-if-ied.**" That's too shallow. That doesn't say enough. It is, "Although I am terribly sinful, He declared me righteous," not just as if I'd never been sinful. **Let me illustrate it.** A couple of friends of mine from the church and I rented a rototiller to replant the backyard for the fourth time. Out there in that dirt, we began to run that rototiller. Dust and dirt and junk went everywhere, and all of it settled on our bodies, so that from head to foot we were really dirty. We finished up and I walked into the shower and turned on that fresh water. I got all cleaned up and toweled off. I could have walked in front of the mirror and said, "*Ah, it's just as if I'd never been dirty!*" But that wouldn't have adequately conveyed the power and the value of the water and soap. I could otherwise look in the mirror and say, "*I was filthy and now I'm clean.*" That's the difference. (Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes)

John MacArthur in a sermon on Romans 3 after mentioning the fact that some say "Justified means **Just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned**" asked his congregation "Have you ever heard that? I hope you haven't heard that, but **if you have you don't need to remember it.** God isn't playing games and saying "Well, I'm going to pretend that it was just as if they never did it."

Jack Cottrell - This is why I have said that to be **justified** (declared righteous) **does not mean that I am treated just as if I'd never sinned,** but just as if I'd already paid the penalty of eternal hell. As sinners justified by the blood of Christ we do not have to worry about hell because (as far as God is concerned) we have already been there, have paid our eternal debt, and have been released (Rom 8:1). (BORROW [The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine for Today - Page 322-323](#))

Knute Larson on Titus 3:7 - Paul told us God's purpose in providing salvation: so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs. Some people claim that justification means "**just as if I'd never sinned.**" **That may be cute, or clever, but it does not do salvation justice.** Actually, "salvation" is a legal term describing a guilty person before the bar who is then pronounced blameless by the judge. This does not mean the individual has been found guiltless. Instead, it means that the person has been released from guilt, his offense paid for. All of this is by God's grace, apart from human merit. (Holman NT Commentary on Titus 3:7)

Erik Raymond - How would you define justification? I've heard some say that justification means that God treats me "just-as-if-I'd never sinned. Is this a helpful way to explain it? In one sense there is truth here. God does treat those who are justified as if they have never sinned. We have peace with God (Rom. 5:1-2) rather than judgment from God. However, this just doesn't go far enough. It leaves us short of what the Bible teaches and conveys an insufficient understanding of justification. Justification is the instantaneous and irreversible divine declaration of the unrighteous as positionally righteous, based upon the merit of Christ's obedience, applied by grace and received through faith (Rom. 3.24-28; 4.1-5; 5.1-2). God declares the unjust to be just based upon Christ's work for them. To simply say that justification is "just-as-if-I'd never sinned is to stop far short of what the Bible says. It does not take us far enough. ([The "Just-as-if-I'd" definition of Justification](#) - a good, simple refutation of this popular catchy statement)

Dr Dan Fabricatore - Normally, I don't say much when I hear Christian *clichés* from the pulpit or elsewhere in church, but there is one popular saying that causes me *agita* (you'll have to look that up). It is when the preacher attempts to define the doctrine of *justification* as "just as if I'd never sinned." I think the reason I find it troubling is because it betrays a lack of basic exegetical skill on the part of the preacher who should know better. Worse yet, instead of an appeal, for example, to Greek lexicography, it relies on a seemingly cute English tweak to make an important theological truth. ("**Just as if I'd never sinned**" – [Please don't preach this](#))

Dr. C. Matthew McMahon writes "The modern church has a bad habit of dumbing down doctrine....The phrase which the modern

church believes is this doctrine of justification is that God treats me “just as if I’d never sinned.” Have you heard this catchy phrase? Some like to think that this phrase is an acceptable and easy way of understanding the word “justification.” In other words, they believe the phrase is a sufficient definition (over simplified) of the doctrine of justification. But is it right? Is the biblical doctrine of *justification* the same as saying that God treats me as if I’d never sinned? No, not really. As a matter of fact – no, absolutely not! The phrase is pithy, but not very accurate. Why? Justification is an affect of the forensic judgment of God (a declaration he makes about me) in lieu of the imputed righteousness of Christ on me *as a sinner*. Men are wicked, and [this is not difficult to prove](#). Simply look in the mirror and see this fact for yourself. You know your sin, and you know you are sinner. Even as a redeemed sinner, you still know, ever more now than before your conversion, that you are a worm.... First, since men are sinners, God must deal with men *as sinners*. God never deals with men at any time *as if they never sinned*. It is precisely because they have sinned that they are justified, or can be justified, by the work of Jesus Christ.....Another reason this phrase is objectionable, is that it is Arminian at the core – its theological essence exalts man to a measure that he should not be.....This little catchy phrase also attacks the work of Christ, which culminates in the cross. (I recommend reading his entire article which goes into great detail to explain why this phrase is not good - [Just As If I'd never sinned? Not Really](#))

Chris MacLeavy - Lately I’ve been hearing preachers declare the good news of justification – a word central to the Christian Gospel. They frequently use the catchy word-play that justified means “just-as-if-I’d never sinned”. It seems like a clever phrase, and something that we as Christians can celebrate. But it’s not really that clever, because justification is **so much more** than this. ([Justification is Not ‘Just-as-if-I’d Never Sinned’](#))

Lisa Roettger - Why can’t we then say justified means ‘just as if I’d never sinned’? We can’t because it leaves out a large part of reality. It allows us to think of the results, the blessings we have—peace with God and freedom from his wrath, without thinking of what it cost to give us those blessings. And our justification was costly. All it costs me is to admit my sinfulness and accept God’s gift of salvation through Jesus. But it cost Jesus more, a lot more. ([Does justified really mean “Just as if I’d never sinned”?](#))

Some writers like **Paul Little** use the phrase but qualify it - Justification has often been defined as “just as if I’d never sinned.” This thought conveys forgiveness, acquittal of the past sin at the time of new birth. But justification goes even further: God positively declares the person to be righteous. When God justifies us, His forgiveness does not merely make us neutral—moral and spiritual zeroes. His forgiveness brings Him to look on us “in Christ,” as having His perfect righteousness. He credits or assigns Christ’s righteousness to the trusting person. This does not make one personally righteous, but it declares that person righteous in a legal sense: his debt has been paid, his sins have been forgiven, and he is brought into right relationship with God. (BORROW [Know What You Believe](#))

Here is another example of how this phrase "Just-as-if-I'd" is misused by a well respected preacher **David Jeremiah** who offers a very questionable definition for **justification** - "This verse (Ro 3:24) contains an important theological word that needs defining: **justified**. My father used to say, when I was growing up, that “justified” means **“Just-as-if-I’d never sinned.”** That’s a pretty good definition. **The problem with it is, we really did sin!** (ED: IT SEEMS THAT THIS WOULD MAKE IT NOT SUCH A "GOOD DEFINITION" FOR IT ACTUALLY IS NOT ACCURATE!) When a president of the United States pardons someone, all he does is make the person not-accountable for their crime or misdeed. The president can pardon, but he can’t justify. **Justification** means restoring you to the status you had before you sinned—making it as if you’d never sinned. (ED: I DON'T AGREE WITH THIS DEFINITION OF JUSTIFICATION BECAUSE IT DOES NOT EVEN MAKE SENSE. WHY? BECAUSE "BEFORE YOU SINNED" WAS NEVER OUR STATUS. WE WERE ALWAYS SINNERS. WE WERE BORN IN SIN. SINNERS WAS OUR STATUS!). That’s what God does through Christ. He sees us as if we had never sinned (though we have) because Christ took our sins upon himself. And He does that by his grace. (Captured by Grace, page 26)