

What is the difference between “righteousness” and “justification”?

Although they arise from the same Greek word group “dikaios” and are similar in meaning, the terms “righteousness” and “justification” are not synonymous. How are words of this group similar and yet different? Of all the New Testament writers, Paul uses words from the word group “dikaios” most often and provides the widest range of meaning, thereby providing a means to understand the subtleties of this word group. This article will examine a few words of the “dikaios” word group.

The Greek adjective “dikaios” means “upright,” “just” and “righteous.”

When applied to God (Rom 3:26: “dikaios” - righteous), Paul speaks in context of the Old Testament (Rom 3:21: “Law and the Prophets” usually refer to the entire Old Testament). Paul’s statement of God’s righteousness is in regard to His covenant relationship with His people, and a reference to a new Israel comprising of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 3:9-20, 22). God is righteous, because He kept His unilateral covenant promise of salvation and provision of a King of the Davidic line despite man’s rebellion and failure to uphold their promise to the covenant.

When applied to Jesus Christ (2 Tim 4:8: “dikaios” - righteous), Paul refers to Jesus’ act of atonement (Rom 3:21, 25-26; 2 Cor 5:21). Jesus was righteous, because He was the means by which God kept His covenant promise and satisfied God’s judicial judgment of humanity’s sin.

When applied to men (Rom 1:17; [cf Gal 3:11]; Rom 2:13; 3:10; 5:7, 19; 1 Tim 1:9; Tit 1:8), Paul speaks of people who have faith in Jesus Christ. In some instances (Rom 2:13; Tit 1:8), instead of translating “dikaios” as righteous, the translation of “justify” or “just” is used. Because the pronouncement of righteousness is God’s divine prerogative made possible only if it is credited to a human being who has faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, “justify” or “just” is used to indicate that God has declared one as righteous in a judicial sense. Paul makes clear that man cannot on his own efforts keep the commands of God good enough to be declared righteousness.

When applied to aspects of God, Paul uses “dikaios” to describe the rightness or righteousness of the Law (Rom 7:12; Eph 6:1-2), of fruits of the Spirit (Phil 1:7; 4:8; Col 4:1) and of God’s judgment.

The Greek adjective “dikaios” describes the rightness of making decisions in accordance of God’s moral / legal standard. For God, it is the keeping of His divine covenant. For Believers, it is having faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ. For behavior, it is living by the example and in accordance with the grace of Jesus. The term describes a quality about the person.

The Greek feminine noun “dikaiosynē” means “righteousness” or “uprightness.”

When used of God, Paul refers to God’s moral character as “righteous” (Rom 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26; 10:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9).

When used of Believers, Paul clearly indicates that faith, the trusting belief in God and His promises are true, is the basis of determining if one is righteous or not (Rom 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 22; Gal 3:6).

Faith in God was God’s standard of determining if one is righteous in the Old Testament (Rom 4:6, 11, 13).

Faith in Jesus Christ is God’s standard of determining if one is righteous in the New Testament (Rom 5:17, 21; Gal 2:21; 3:21; Phil 3:6, 9).

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While righteousness is an assessment of one’s character by God (1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 3:9; 5:21; 6:7, 14; 9:9; Gal 5:5; Tit 3:5) and available to all (Rom 9:30; 10:4, 10), it provides a basis for a new mindset and virtue. Paul speaks of a freedom from sin (Rom 6:13, 16, 18; 8:10) and a new person (Eph 4:24; 5:9; 6:14; Phil 1:11) who is more discerning about adverse influences (2 Cor 6:14; 11:15; 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:22).

There is some aspect of training to righteousness (2 Tim 3:16) which culminates in the Kingdom of God (Rom 14:17) and an award for righteousness (2 Tim 4:8).

The noun righteousness (“dikaiosynē”) is about the quality of a person that would make one acceptable to God. To be free of the consequences of sin, one had to have, imputed on him, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which would result in the awareness of new moral standards. Implied in this understanding of righteousness is that God’s moral standard and basis of judgment of a person’s quality is objective and absolute; it cannot be capricious or a discretionary whim. Also rooted and embedded internally in His character, God’s moral standard cannot be external or higher in authority than Himself. Thus the moral standard that God judges by is based on His character and nature; it is fixed, absolute and timeless.

The Greek verb “dikaiō” means “justify”, “acquit” or “vindicate.”

God justifies those who believe in Him and whose conduct reveals their regenerate hearts (Rom 2:13).

God is justified to be Judge because of His words are true (Rom 3:4, [Ps 51:4]).

Good works does not meet God’s standard of righteousness (Rom 3:20).

God justifies those who have faith in God and trust in the redemptive work of Jesus (Rom 3:24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 8:30, 33; 6:11; Gal 2:16, 17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4; 1 Tim 3:16; Tit 3:7).

The verb justify (“dikaiō”) can be understood within the context of a court of law. It reflects the action of a judge after the defendant has been investigated and judgment made; it is the action of declaring the defendant righteous in accordance to God’s moral standard. It is a change of legal status.

The Greek feminine noun “dikaiōsis” means “justification” or “vindication.”

Paul indicates that Jesus’ death and resurrection were both essential to pay the redemptive price for the sins of all people so that God could freely forgive each person who responds by faith to the offer of forgiveness through Christ’s provision (Rom 4:25).

The resurrection of Christ was proof that God accepted Jesus’ sacrifice, and because Jesus lives, God can credit His provided righteousness to the account of each person who responds in faith to the offer (Rom 5:18).

Viewed from the perspective of a court of law, the Greek noun “dikaiōsis” is God’s declaration that a defendant is justified, free from guilt and acceptable to Him. Within the context of salvation, this change in legal status places an emphasis on the initial stage of salvation.

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In review, Paul uses “righteousness” in reference to the character of a person who meets God’s standard of behavior; it is about the quality of a person. “Justification” is the verdict of judgment that God makes after righteousness has been determined; it is about the status of a person.

It is important to note that in God’s courtroom, the determination of righteousness is based on one behavior: faith in the atonement of Jesus. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is imputed upon the Believer.

And while one may be acquitted of the guilt of sin, justification does not make one righteous in all of his thoughts and behavior. The pursuit of righteousness is a process that is enabled by the Holy Spirit, and every Believer is expected to learn and grow.

Righteousness entails faith and obedience. This is why simply obedience to the Law does not justify a person and is insufficient for righteousness.

References:

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