

SAN PEDRO PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Adult Discipleship Class | Summer 2025

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Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen

A Summary Worksheet

Justification and Sanctification: How Grace Makes Us Right with God and Changes How We Live

Introduction

Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen both carry the same title in Guthrie's table of contents — “Are You a Christian?” — because he refuses to let that question resolve into either pure belief or pure behavior. Instead he treats justification and sanctification as two inseparable aspects of one gift. Justification is God's free acceptance of us, as we are, apart from anything we do to earn it. Sanctification is that same grace at work, growing in us the kind of life that acceptance makes possible. Neither, on Guthrie's account, can be rightly understood apart from the other — which is why he answers his own question with two chapters instead of one. What follows summarizes both chapters and highlights some of Guthrie's own words along the way, each cited to its page in the text. Guthrie frames both chapters around the same blunt pastoral question — not “what do you believe,” and not “what have you done,” but something closer to “what has been done for you, and what is it doing in you now?”

Chapter Sixteen — “Are You a Christian?”

The Doctrine of Justification

The Problem of Justification

Guthrie starts with the ordinary ways people try to justify their own existence: proving their worth through work, through appearance, by criticizing others to feel superior, by criticizing themselves to stay driven, or by “being good” as a strategy rather than receiving it as a gift. Every one of these routes fails, because at some level — Guthrie says even if only at three in the morning on a bad night — we already know it. This was Martin Luther's problem too: years of monastic effort could not produce a gracious God for him, until he reread Romans and found that God had already forgiven him by grace, through faith, apart from his effort. Guthrie's point in retelling this old story is that our version of Luther's problem rarely feels the same on the surface — most of us are not medieval monks — but the underlying anxiety, the sense that we are not yet “enough,” is exactly the same.

Justification by Grace

The answer is not a better technique for justifying ourselves; it is the news that we do not have to. God already loves and accepts us as we are — not blind to our faults, but gracious despite them: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Justification is not something we produce. It is something we are told is already true.

The Justice of Justification

The courtroom language behind the word “justification” can make this sound like a legal trick — Christ's righteousness swapped in for our guilt, as if God is simply looking away from the problem. Guthrie offers a different picture: a troubled student at school, defiant or withdrawn, who cannot be fixed by punishment alone. What that student needs first is relationship — acceptance and friendship that precedes any change in behavior. Justification by grace re-establishes our relationship with God first; the changed life follows from that acceptance, and never replaces it. This is also why Guthrie thinks the common complaint — that grace “lets God off the hook” for taking sin seriously — gets things backward. The relationship has to be restored before the underlying problem can be addressed at all; punishment by itself never touched it in the first place.

Justification by Grace Through Faith

Guthrie heads off a common distortion: the idea that faith itself is just a subtler “work,” something we have to produce enough of to qualify. The real thing is simpler. We are already justified by grace, as a gift; faith is how we receive and live inside that gift — the way trusting a spouse's love lets us actually experience it, instead of suspiciously refusing to believe it is real. Faith, in Guthrie's sense, is trust in a person, not agreement with a set of propositions.

Christians are people who know that they are guilty of offending God and of hurting other people and themselves by their attempts to justify themselves. They are people who believe that nevertheless, despite everything, they are forgiven, loved, and accepted by God's grace in Jesus Christ. (Guthrie, 327)

Postscript: Justification and Social Justice

Guthrie will not let justification stay a private transaction. Scripture's God acts on behalf of groups as much as individuals, so justifying grace also means that God helps those who cannot help themselves and gives rights to those the world has denied them — the poor, the excluded, the victims of unjust systems. Individual and social justification, Guthrie insists, come from the same grace and lead to the same place.

Justification means that God helps those who cannot help themselves and gives rights to those who have no rights. (Guthrie, 328)

Chapter Seventeen — “Are You a Christian?”

The Doctrine of Sanctification

Christian Faith and Christian Action

If justification is about God's acceptance, sanctification is about what that acceptance is for: the growing fruit of a redeemed life. Guthrie will not let “grace alone” become an excuse for inaction. “Justification-faith and sanctification-action,” he writes, “can never be separated. They are two different aspects of the one gracious work of the same God.” Faith without a corresponding way of life risks becoming what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace — comfort offered without any transformation asked for in return. Guthrie is careful, though, not to reverse the order: it is not that sanctification earns or completes justification. “God's action makes possible our action” — sanctification is still entirely God's grace at work, just now visible as a changed life rather than an accepted one.

God does not forgive, accept, and love us on condition that we become righteous, but God does forgive, accept, and love us in order that we may become righteous. (Guthrie, 334)

Being a Christian Is Growing Up

Sanctification is a process, not an instant transfer from sinner to saint. Guthrie compares it to growing from infancy to maturity — gradual, uneven, and never finished. Crucially, growth does not graduate us out of our need for grace; a mature Christian still needs forgiveness at every stage, not less than a new one does.

A Christian is one who every day, all through his or her life, lives both from God's sanctifying and justifying grace. (Guthrie, 337)

In but Not of the World

Guthrie rejects the picture of holiness as separation — pulling away from the world to stay pure. Jesus is holy not despite his full immersion in the world's life, but because of it. Christian holiness therefore takes two forms at once: it stands against the world, confronting and contradicting unjust power the way the reign of God does; and it stands for the world, seeking its good with the same self-giving love Jesus showed, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Both have to happen visibly, inside the world, or neither one means anything at all. Guthrie calls Christians “resident aliens” for this reason — genuinely at home enough in the world to love and serve it, genuinely different enough from it to be recognized as living by another loyalty altogether.

The Holiness Jesus Commands

Guthrie takes seriously several of Jesus' specific, uncomfortable commands: releasing our attachment to wealth and possessions, renouncing violence even in self-defense, treating family loyalty as relative rather than absolute, and refusing a piety that changes behavior while leaving the heart untouched. He is careful to note that these words were spoken to specific people in specific situations, so applying them takes discernment — but he resists the temptation to simply spiritualize them away into harmlessness. And he insists that holiness is finally a gift the church receives together, not a private achievement one Christian can win alone.

individuals (and churches!) cannot place their faith and hope in God and in financial security at the same time (Guthrie, 342)

Putting It Together

Read together, Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen refuse a choice many Christians feel forced to make — between grace and effort, between believing and doing, between what God has done and what we're supposed to do about it. Guthrie's answer throughout is that this is a false choice. Justification names the fact that God has already accepted us, unconditionally, before we do anything to deserve it. Sanctification names the fact that this same grace does not leave us where it found us — it keeps working in us a life that actually looks like the love we have received. Neither is possible without the other: sanctification without justification collapses into anxious self-improvement or quiet self-righteousness; justification without sanctification collapses into the cheap grace of a faith that asks nothing of us. Guthrie's own question, asked twice, turns out to have one answer with two inseparable halves — a Christian is someone who knows they are already forgiven, and someone whose life is, however slowly, being changed by that forgiveness. It's worth noticing, too, that Guthrie never lets either doctrine settle into something purely private. Justification reaches outward into questions of social justice; sanctification reaches outward into concrete, uncomfortable commands about money, violence, family, and honesty. Grace, on Guthrie's telling, is never just a transaction between God and an individual soul — it is always also a summons into a different way of being human together.

Discussion Questions

Read through these questions before Wednesday if you can. There are no right answers to perform here — just honest thinking about grace and the life it makes possible. Write your initial thoughts and bring them with you.

On Justification (Chapter 16)

1. Guthrie lists several everyday strategies people use to justify their own worth — through work, appearance, criticizing others, criticizing themselves, or “being good.” Which of these do you recognize most in your own life?
2. Guthrie compares justification to a troubled student who needs relationship before correction, not punishment first. Does that change how you picture God dealing with your own faults?
3. Guthrie distinguishes faith as trust from faith as another kind of “work” we have to produce enough of. Where do you catch yourself turning faith into a performance?
4. Guthrie insists justification is also social — that it means God “gives rights to those who have no rights.” Where do you see that dimension of the gospel showing up, or being ignored, in the church today?
5. Guthrie is candid that our anxiety about being “enough” often looks nothing like Luther's monastic struggle on the surface, even though it's the same problem underneath. What does your own version of that anxiety look like?

On Sanctification (Chapter 17)

6. Guthrie writes that God accepts us “in order that,” not “on condition that,” we become righteous. Why does the difference between those two phrases matter?
7. Guthrie compares sanctification to growing up — gradual, uneven, never finished, and never outgrowing our need for grace. Where in your own life do you feel that unfinished growth most?
8. Guthrie says Christian holiness is “in but not of the world,” both against unjust power and for the world's good. Which half of that comes more naturally to you, and which is harder?
9. Guthrie takes seriously Jesus' specific commands about wealth, nonviolence, family, and inward transformation. Which of these do you find yourself most tempted to “spiritualize away” rather than live out?
10. Guthrie insists holiness is finally a gift the church receives together, not a private achievement. How does that sit with the way you tend to think about your own spiritual growth?