
Christ: the Work of Grace

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Notes

21. *But now without the law, &c.* It is not certain for what distinct reason he calls that the righteousness of God, which we obtain by faith; whether it be, because it can alone stand before God, or because the Lord in his mercy confers it on us. As both interpretations are suitable, we contend for neither. This righteousness then, which God communicates to man, and accepts alone, and owns as righteousness, has been revealed, he says, *without the law*, that is, without the aid of the law; and the law is to be understood as meaning works; for it is not proper to refer this to its teaching, which he immediately adduces as bearing witness to the gratuitous righteousness of faith. Some confine it to ceremonies; but this view I shall presently show to be unsound and frigid. We ought then to know, that the merits of works are excluded. We also see that he blends not works with the mercy of God; but having taken away and wholly removed all confidence in works, he sets up mercy alone.

It is not unknown to me, that *Augustine* gives a different explanation; for he thinks that the righteousness of God is the grace of regeneration; and this grace he allows to be free, because God renews us, when unworthy, by his Spirit; and from this he excludes the works of the law, that is, those works, by which men of themselves endeavour, without renovation, to render God indebted to them. (*Deum promereri*—to oblige God.) I also well know, that some new speculators proudly adduce this sentiment, as though it were at this day revealed to them. But that the Apostle includes all works without exception, even those which the Lord produces in his own people, is evident from the context.

For no doubt Abraham was regenerated and led by the Spirit of God at the time when he denied that he was justified by works. Hence he excluded from man's justification not only works morally good, as they commonly call them, and such as are done by the impulse of nature, but also all those which even the faithful can perform. Again, since this is a definition of the righteousness of faith, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven,"

there is no question to be made about this or that kind of work; but the merit of works being abolished, the remission of sins alone is set down as the cause of righteousness.

They think that these two things well agree,—that man is justified by faith through the grace of Christ,—and that he is yet justified by the works, which proceed from spiritual regeneration; for God gratuitously renews us, and we also receive his gift by faith. But Paul takes up a very different principle,—that the consciences of men will never be tranquillized until they recumb on the mercy of God alone. Hence, in another place, after having taught us that God is in Christ justifying men, he expresses the manner,—“By not imputing to them their sins.” In like manner, in his Epistle to the Galatians, he puts the law in opposition to faith with regard to justification; for the law promises life to those who do what it commands, (Gal. 3:12;) and it requires not only the outward performance of works, but also sincere love to God. It hence follows, that in the righteousness of faith, no merit of works is allowed. It then appears evident, that it is but a frivolous sophistry to say, that we are justified in Christ, because we are renewed by the Spirit, inasmuch as we are the members of Christ,—that we are justified by faith, because we are united by faith to the body of Christ,—that we are justified freely, because God finds nothing in us but sin.

But we are *in Christ*, because we are out of ourselves; and justified by *faith*, because we must recumb on the mercy of God alone, and on his gratuitous promises; and *freely*, because God reconciles us to himself by burying our sins. Nor can this indeed be confined to the commencement of justification, as they dream; for this definition—“Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven”—was applicable to David, after he had long exercised himself in the service of God; and Abraham, thirty years after his call, though a remarkable example of holiness, had yet no works for which he could glory before God, and hence his faith in the promise was imputed to him for righteousness; and when Paul teaches us that God justifies men by not imputing their sins, he quotes a passage, which is daily repeated in the Church. Still more, the conscience, by which we are disturbed on the score of works, performs its office, not for one day only, but continues to do so through life. It hence follows that we cannot remain, even to death, in a justified state, except we look to Christ only, in whom God has adopted us, and regards us now as accepted. Hence also is their sophistry confuted, who falsely accuse us of asserting, that according to Scripture we are justified by faith only, while the exclusive word *only*, is nowhere to be found in Scripture. But if justification depends not either on the law, or on ourselves, why should it not be ascribed to mercy alone? and if it be from mercy only, it is then by faith only.

The particle *now* may be taken adversatively, and not with reference to time; as we often use *now* for *but*. But if you prefer to regard it as an adverb of time, I willingly admit it, so that there may be no room to suspect an evasion; yet the abrogation of ceremonies alone is not to be understood; for it was only the design of the Apostle to illustrate by a comparison the grace by which we excel the fathers. Then the meaning is, that by the preaching of the gospel, after the appearance of Christ in the flesh, the righteousness of faith was revealed. It

does not, however, hence follow, that it was hid before the coming of Christ; for a twofold manifestation is to be here noticed: the first in the Old Testament, which was by the word and sacraments; the other in the New, which contains the completion of ceremonies and promises, as exhibited in Christ himself: and we may add, that by the gospel it has received a fuller brightness.

Being proved [or approved] by the testimony, &c. He adds this, lest in the conferring of free righteousness the gospel should seem to militate against the law. As then he has denied that the righteousness of faith needs the aid of the law, so now he asserts that it is confirmed by its testimony. If then the law affords its testimony to gratuitous righteousness, it is evident that the law was not given for this end, to teach men how to obtain righteousness by works. Hence they pervert it, who turn it to answer any purpose of this kind. And further, if you desire a proof of this truth, examine in order the chief things taught by Moses, and you will find that man, being cast from the kingdom of God, had no other restoration from the beginning than that contained in the evangelical promises through the blessed seed, by whom, as it had been foretold, the serpent's head was to be bruised, and through whom a blessing to the nations had been promised: you will find in the commandments a demonstration of your iniquity, and from the sacrifices and oblations you may learn that satisfaction and cleansing are to be obtained in Christ alone.² When you come to the *Prophets* you will find the clearest promises of gratuitous mercy. On this subject see my Institutes.

22. *Even the righteousness of God, &c.* He shows in few words what this justification is, even that which is found in Christ and is apprehended by faith. At the same time, by introducing again the name of God, he seems to make God the founder, (*autorem*, the author,) and not only the approver of the righteousness of which he speaks; as though he had said, that it flows from him alone, or that its origin is from heaven, but that it is made manifest to us in Christ.

When therefore we discuss this subject, we ought to proceed in this way: *First*, the question respecting our justification is to be referred, not to the judgment of men, but to the judgment of God, before whom nothing is counted righteousness, but perfect and absolute obedience to the law; which appears clear from its promises and threatenings: if no one is found who has attained to such a perfect measure of holiness, it follows that all are in themselves destitute of righteousness. *Secondly*, it is necessary that Christ should come to our aid; who, being alone just, can render us just by transferring to us his own righteousness. You now see how the righteousness of faith is the righteousness of Christ. When therefore we are justified, the efficient cause is the mercy of God, the meritorious is Christ, the instrumental is the word in connection with faith. Hence faith is said to justify, because it is the instrument by which we receive Christ, in whom righteousness is conveyed to us. Having been made partakers of Christ, we ourselves are not only just, but our works also are counted just before God, and for this reason, because whatever

imperfections there may be in them, are obliterated by the blood of Christ; the promises, which are conditional, are also by the same grace fulfilled to us; for God rewards our works as perfect, inasmuch as their defects are covered by free pardon.

Unto all and upon all, &c. For the sake of amplifying, he repeats the same thing in different forms; it was, that he might more fully express what we have already heard, that faith alone is required, that the faithful are not distinguished by external marks, and that hence it matters not whether they be Gentiles or Jews.

There is indeed no difference, &c. He urges on all, without exception, the necessity of seeking righteousness in Christ; as though he had said, "There is no other way of attaining righteousness; for some cannot be justified in this and others in that way; but all must alike be justified by faith, because all are sinners, and therefore have nothing for which they can glory before God." But he takes as granted that every one, conscious of his sin, when he comes before the tribunal of God, is confounded and lost under a sense of his own shame; so that no *sinner* can bear the presence of God, as we see an example in the case of Adam. He again brings forward a reason taken from the opposite side; and hence we must notice what follows. Since we are all sinners, Paul concludes, that we are deficient in, or *destitute of*, the praise due to righteousness. There is then, according to what he teaches, no righteousness but what is perfect and absolute. Were there indeed such a thing as half righteousness, it would yet be necessary to deprive the sinner entirely of all glory: and hereby the figment of partial righteousness, as they call it, is sufficiently confuted; for if it were true that we are justified in part by works, and in part by grace, this argument of Paul would be of no force—that all are deprived of the glory of God because they are sinners. It is then certain, there is no righteousness where there is sin, until Christ removes the curse; and this very thing is what is said in Gal. 3:10, that all who are under the law are exposed to the curse, and that we are delivered from it through the kindness of Christ. *The glory of God* I take to mean the approbation of God, as in John 12:43, where it is said, that "they loved the glory of men more than the glory of God." And thus he summons us from the applause of a human court to the tribunal of heaven.

24. *Being justified freely, &c.* A participle is here put for a verb according to the usage of the Greek language. The meaning is,—that since there remains nothing for men, as to themselves, but to perish, being smitten by the just judgment of God, they are to be justified freely through his mercy; for Christ comes to the aid of this misery, and communicates himself to believers, so that they find in him alone all those things in which they are wanting. There is, perhaps, no passage in the whole Scripture which illustrates in a more striking manner the efficacy of his righteousness; for it shows that God's mercy is the efficient cause, that Christ with his blood is the meritorious cause, that the formal or instrumental cause is faith in the word, and that, moreover, the final cause is the glory of the divine justice and goodness.

With regard to the efficient cause, he says, that we are *justified freely*, and further, by his grace; and he thus repeats the word to show that the whole is from God, and nothing from us. It might have been enough to oppose grace to merits; but lest we should imagine a half kind of grace, he affirms more strongly what he means by a repetition, and claims for God's mercy alone the whole glory of our righteousness, which the sophists divide into parts and mutilate, that they may not be constrained to confess their own poverty.—*Through the redemption*, &c. This is the material,—Christ by his obedience satisfied the Father's justice, (*judicium*—judgment,) and by undertaking our cause he liberated us from the tyranny of death, by which we were held captive; as on account of the sacrifice which he offered is our guilt removed. Here again is fully confuted the gloss of those who make righteousness a quality; for if we are counted righteous before God, because we are redeemed by a price, we certainly derive from another what is not in us. And Paul immediately explains more clearly what this redemption is, and what is its object, which is to reconcile us to God; for he calls Christ a propitiation, (or, if we prefer an allusion to an ancient type,) a propitiatory. But what he means is, that we are not otherwise just than through Christ propitiating the Father for us. But it is necessary for us to examine the words.

25. *Whom God hath set forth*, &c. The Greek verb, $\pi\rho\omicron\tau\acute{\iota}\theta\acute{\epsilon}\nu\alpha\iota$, means sometimes to determine beforehand, and sometimes to set forth. If the first meaning be taken, Paul refers to the gratuitous mercy of God, in having appointed Christ as our Mediator, that he might appease the Father by the sacrifice of his death: nor is it a small commendation of God's grace that he, of his own good will, sought out a way by which he might remove our curse. According to this view, the passage fully harmonizes with that in John 3:16, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son." Yet if we embrace this meaning, it will remain still true, that God hath set him forth in due time, whom he had appointed as a Mediator. There seems to be an allusion in the word, $\acute{\iota}\lambda\alpha\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\rho\iota\omicron\nu$, as I have said, to the ancient propitiatory; for he teaches us that the same thing was really exhibited in Christ, which had been previously typified. As, however, the other view cannot be disproved, should any prefer it, I shall not undertake to decide the question. What Paul especially meant here is no doubt evident from his words; and it was this,—that God, without having regard to Christ, is always angry with us,—and that we are reconciled to him when we are accepted through his righteousness. God does not indeed hate in us his own workmanship, that is, as we are formed men; but he hates our uncleanness, which has extinguished the light of his image. When the washing of Christ cleanses this away, he then loves and embraces us as his own pure workmanship.

A propitiatory through faith in his blood, &c. I prefer thus literally to retain the language of Paul; for it seems indeed to me that he intended, by one single sentence, to declare that God is propitious to us as soon as we have our trust resting on the blood of Christ; for by faith we come to the possession of this benefit. But by mentioning *blood* only, he did not mean to exclude other things connected with redemption, but, on the contrary, to include the whole under one word: and he mentioned "blood," because by it we are cleansed. Thus,

by taking a part for the whole, he points out the whole work of expiation. For, as he had said before, that God is reconciled in Christ, so he now adds, that this reconciliation is obtained by faith, mentioning, at the same time, what it is that faith ought mainly to regard in Christ—his blood.

For (propter) the remission of sins, &c. The causal preposition imports as much as though he had said, “for the sake of remission,” or, “to this end, that he might blot out sins.” And this definition or explanation again confirms what I have already often reminded you,—that men are pronounced just, not because they are such in reality, but by imputation: for he only uses various modes of expression, that he might more clearly declare, that in this righteousness there is no merit of ours; for if we obtain it by the remission of sins, we conclude that it is not from ourselves; and further, since remission itself is an act of God’s bounty alone, every merit falls to the ground.

It may, however, be asked, why he confines pardon to preceding sins? Though this passage is variously explained, yet it seems to me probable that Paul had regard to the legal expiations, which were indeed evidences of a future satisfaction, but could by no means pacify God. There is a similar passage in Heb. 9:15, where it is said, that by Christ a redemption was brought from sins, which remained under the former Testament. You are not, however, to understand that no sins but those of former times were expiated by the death of Christ—a delirious notion, which some fanatics have drawn from a distorted view of this passage. For Paul teaches us only this,—that until the death of Christ there was no way of appeasing God, and that this was not done or accomplished by the legal types: hence the reality was suspended until the fulness of time came. We may further say, that those things which involve us daily in guilt must be regarded in the same light; for there is but one true expiation for all.

Some, in order to avoid what seems inconsistent, have held that former sins are said to have been forgiven, lest there should seem to be a liberty given to sin in future. It is indeed true that no pardon is offered but for sins committed; not that the benefit of redemption fails or is lost, when we afterwards fall, as *Novatus* and his sect dreamed, but that it is the character of the dispensation of the gospel, to set before him who will sin the judgment and wrath of God, and before the sinner his mercy. But what I have already stated is the real sense.

He adds, that this remission was *through forbearance*; and this I take simply to mean gentleness, which has stayed the judgment of God, and suffered it not to burst forth to our rain, until he had at length received us into favour. But there seems to be here also an implied anticipation of what might be said; that no one might object, and say that this favour had only of late appeared. Paul teaches us, that it was an evidence of forbearance.

26. *For a demonstration, &c.* The repetition of this clause is emphatical; and Paul designedly made it, as it was very needful; for nothing is more difficult than to persuade

man that he ought to disclaim all things as his own, and to ascribe them all to God. At the same time mention was intentionally made twice of this demonstration, that the Jews might open their eyes to behold it.—*At this time, &c.* What had been ever at all times, he applies to the time when Christ was revealed, and not without reason; for what was formerly known in an obscure manner under shadows, God openly manifested in his Son. So the coming of Christ was the time of his good pleasure, and the day of salvation. God had indeed in all ages given some evidence of his righteousness; but it appeared far brighter when the sun of righteousness shone. Noticed, then, ought to be the comparison between the Old and the New Testament; for then only was revealed the righteousness of God when Christ appeared.

That he might be just, &c. This is a definition of that righteousness which he has declared was revealed when Christ was given, and which, as he has taught us in the first chapter, is made known in the gospel: and he affirms that it consists of two parts—The first is, that God is just, not indeed as one among many, but as one who contains within himself all fulness of righteousness; for complete and full praise, such as is due, is not otherwise given to him, but when he alone obtains the name and the honour of being just, while the whole human race is condemned for injustice: and then the other part refers to the communication of righteousness; for God by no means keeps his riches laid up in himself, but pours them forth upon men. Then the righteousness of God shines in us, whenever he justifies us by faith in Christ; for in vain were Christ given us for righteousness, unless there was the fruition of him by faith. It hence follows, that all were unjust and lost in themselves, until a remedy from heaven was offered to them.

27. *Where then is glorying?* The Apostle, after having, with reasons abundantly strong, cast down men from their confidence in works, now triumphs over their folly: and this exulting conclusion was necessary; for on this subject, to teach us would not have been enough; it was necessary that the Holy Spirit should loudly thunder, in order to lay prostrate our loftiness. But he says that glorying is beyond all doubt excluded, for we cannot adduce anything of our own, which is worthy of being approved or commended by God. If the material of glorying be merit, whether you name that of congruity or of condignity, by which man would conciliate God, you see that both are here annihilated; for he treats not of the lessening or the modifying of merit, but Paul leaves not a particle behind. Besides, since by faith glorying in works is so taken away, that faith cannot be truly preached, without wholly depriving man of all praise by ascribing all to God's mercy—it follows, that we are assisted by no works in obtaining righteousness.

Of works? In what sense does the Apostle deny here, that our merits are excluded by the law, since he has before proved that we are condemned by the law? for if the law delivers us over to death, what glorying can we obtain from it? Does it not on the contrary deprive us of all glorying and cover us with shame? He then indeed showed, that our sin is laid open by what the law declares, for the keeping of it is what we have all neglected: but he means

here, that were righteousness to be had by the law of works, our glorying would not be excluded; but as it is by faith alone, there is nothing that we can claim for ourselves; for faith receives all from God, and brings nothing except an humble confession of want.

This contrast between faith and works ought to be carefully noticed: works are here mentioned without any limitation, even works universally. Then he neither speaks of ceremonies only, nor specifically of any external work, but includes all the merits of works which can possibly be imagined.

The name of *law* is here, with no strict correctness, given to faith: but this by no means obscures the meaning of the Apostle; for what he understands is, that when we come to the rule of faith, the whole glorying in works is laid prostrate; as though he said—“The righteousness of works is indeed commended by the law, but that of faith has its own law, which leaves to works, whatever they may be, no righteousness.”

28. *We then conclude, &c.* He now draws the main proposition, as one that is incontrovertible, and adds an explanation. Justification by faith is indeed made very clear, while works are expressly excluded. Hence, in nothing do our adversaries labour more in the present day than in attempts to blend faith with the merits of works. They indeed allow that man is justified by faith; but not by faith alone; yea, they place the efficacy of justification in love, though in words they ascribe it to faith. But Paul affirms in this passage that justification is so gratuitous, that he makes it quite evident, that it can by no means be associated with the merit of works. Why he names the works of the law, I have already explained; and I have also proved that it is quite absurd to confine them to ceremonies. Frigid also is the gloss, that works are to be taken for those which are outward, and done without the Spirit of Christ. On the contrary, the word *law* that is added, means the same as though he called them meritorious; for what is referred to is the reward promised in the law.

What James says, that man is not justified by faith alone, but also by works, does not at all militate against the preceding view. The reconciling of the two views depends chiefly on the drift of the argument pursued by James. For the question with him is not, how men attain righteousness before God, but how they prove to others that they are justified; for his object was to confute hypocrites, who vainly boasted that they had faith. Gross then is the sophistry, not to admit that the word, to justify, is taken in a different sense by James, from that in which it is used by Paul; for they handle different subjects. The word, faith, is also no doubt capable of various meanings. These two things must be taken to the account, before a correct judgment can be formed on the point. We may learn from the context, that James meant no more than that man is not made or proved to be just by a feigned or dead faith, and that he must prove his righteousness by his works. See on this subject my Institutes.

29. *Is he the God of the Jews only?* The second proposition is, that this righteousness belongs no more to the Jews than to the Gentiles: and it was a great matter that this point

should be urged, in order that a free passage might be made for the kingdom of Christ through the whole world. He does not then ask simply or expressly, whether God was the Creator of the Gentiles, which was admitted without any dispute; but whether he designed to manifest himself as a Saviour also to them. As he had put all mankind on a level, and brought them to the same condition, if there be any difference between them, it is from God, not from themselves, who have all things alike: but if it be true that God designs to make all the nations of the earth partakers of his mercy, then salvation, and righteousness, which is necessary for salvation, must be extended to all. Hence under the name, *God*, is conveyed an intimation of a mutual relationship, which is often mentioned in Scripture,—“I shall be to you a God, and you shall be to me a people.” (Jer. 30:22.) For the circumstance, that God, for a time, chose for himself a peculiar people, did not make void the origin of mankind, who were all formed after the image of God, and were to be brought up in the world in the hope of a blessed eternity.

30. *Who shall justify, &c.* In saying that some are justified by faith, and some through faith, he seems to have indulged himself in varying his language, while he expresses the same thing, and for this end,—that he might, by the way, touch on the folly of the Jews, who imagined a difference between themselves and the Gentiles, though on the subject of justification there was no difference whatever; for since men became partakers of this grace by faith only, and since faith in all is the same, it is absurd to make a distinction in what is so much alike. I am hence led to think that there is something ironical in the words, as though he said,—“If any wishes to have a difference made between the Gentile and the Jew, let him take this,—that the one obtains righteousness *by* faith, and the other *through* faith.” But it may be, that some will prefer this distinction,—that the Jews were justified by faith, because they were born the heirs of grace, as the right of adoption was transmitted to them from the Fathers,—and that the Gentiles were justified through faith, because the covenant to them was adventitious.

31. *Do we then make, &c.* When the law is opposed to faith, the flesh immediately suspects that there is some contrariety, as though the one were adverse to the other: and this false notion prevails, especially among those who are imbued with wrong ideas as to the law, and leaving the promises, seek nothing else through it but the righteousness of works. And on this account, not only Paul, but our Lord himself, was evil spoken of by the Jews, as though in all his preaching he aimed at the abrogation of the law. Hence it was that he made this protest,—“I came not to undo, but to fulfil the law.” (Matt. 5:17.)

And this suspicion regards the moral as well as the ceremonial law; for as the gospel has put an end to the Mosaic ceremonies, it is supposed to have a tendency to destroy the whole dispensation of Moses. And further, as it sweeps away all the righteousness of works, it is believed to be opposed to all those testimonies of the law, by which the Lord has declared, that he has thereby prescribed the way of righteousness and salvation. I therefore

take this defence of Paul, not only as to ceremonies, nor as to the commandments which are called moral, but with regard to the whole law universally.

For the *moral* law is in reality confirmed and established through faith in Christ, inasmuch as it was given for this end—to lead man to Christ by showing him his iniquity; and without this it cannot be fulfilled, and in vain will it require what ought to be done; nor can it do anything but irritate lust more and more, and thus finally increase man’s condemnation; but where there is a coming to Christ, there is first found in him the perfect righteousness of the law, which becomes ours by imputation, and then there is sanctification, by which our hearts are prepared to keep the law; it is indeed imperfectly done, but there is an aiming at the work. Similar is the case with *ceremonies*, which indeed cease and vanish away when Christ comes, but they are in reality confirmed by him; for when they are viewed in themselves they are vain and shadowy images, and then only do they attain anything real and solid, when their end is regarded. In this then consists their chief confirmation, when they have obtained their accomplishment in Christ. Let us then also bear in mind, so to dispense the gospel that by our mode of teaching the law may be confirmed; but let it be sustained by no other strength than that of faith in Christ.¹

¹ Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). [*Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*](#) (pp. 134–152). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.