

2 Corinthians v. 21

by John Owen

Christ's sinlessness and our sinfulness are reconciled through the imputation of our sins' guilt to Christ and the imputation of his righteousness to us.

Scripture: Leviticus 16:21, Isaiah 45:24-25, Isaiah 53:6, Romans 4:6, Romans 8:33, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 2:20, Hebrews 7:26, 1 Peter 2:22

Topics: "Imputation", "Righteousness of God"

Description

John Owen expounds on 2 Corinthians 5:21, emphasizing the profound truth that Christ, who knew no sin, was made sin for us through the imputation of our sins to Him. He clarifies that this does not imply any inherent sinfulness in Christ but rather highlights the grace of God in our reconciliation. Owen addresses misconceptions regarding this passage, particularly the arguments against the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers, affirming that we are made the righteousness of God in Him. He argues that our justification is solely by God's act of imputing Christ's righteousness to us, contrasting it with the imputation of sin to Christ. Ultimately, Owen underscores the significance of understanding Christ's role in our salvation and the nature of our righteousness before God.

Transcript

2 Cor. v. 21. In what sense Christ knew no sin -- Emphasis in that expression -- How he was made sin for us -- By the imputation of sin unto him -- Mistakes of some about this expression -- Sense of the ancients -- Exception of Bellarmine unto this testimony answered, with other reasonings of his to the same purpose -- The exceptions of others also removed

2 Cor. v. 21. The truth pleaded for is yet more emphatically expressed: "For he has made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." The paraphrase of Austin on these words gives the sense of them: "Ipse peccatum ut nos justitia, non nostra sed Dei, non in nobis sed in ipso; sicut ipse peccatum non suum sed nostrum, non in se, sed in nobis constitutum," Enchirid. ad Laurent., cap. iv. And the words of Chrysostom upon this place, unto the same purpose, have been cited before at large.

To set out the greatness of the grace of God in our reconciliation by Christ, he describes him by that paraphrasis, τὸν μὴ γνόνταἁμαρτίαν; -- "who knew no sin," or "who knew not sin." He knew sin in the notion or understanding of its nature, and he knew it experimentally in the effects which

10, Ezek. xliii. 22, a "propitiation," a "propitiatory sacrifice;" sometimes by Num. xix. 19, and "purification," or "cleansing." But absolutely, does nowhere, in any good author, nor in the Scripture, signify a sacrifice for sin, unless it may be allowed to do so in this one place alone.

For whereas the LXX. do render constantly by *ἁμαρτία*, where it signifies sin; where it denotes an offering for sin, and they retain that word, they do it by *ἑστία*; an elliptical expression, which they invented for that which they knew *ἁμαρτία*; of itself neither did nor could signify, Lev. iv. 3, 14, 32, 35; v. 6-11; vi. 30; viii. 2.

And they never omit the preposition unless they name the sacrifice; as *ἁμαρτίας*; *ἁμαρτίας*. This is observed also by the apostle in the New Testament; for twice, expressing the sin-offering by this word, he uses that phrase *ἁμαρτίας*; *ἁμαρτίας*; Rom. viii. 3, Heb. x. 6; but nowhere uses *ἁμαρτίας*; to that purpose.

If it be, therefore, of that signification in this place, it is so here alone. And whereas some think that it answers "piaculum" in the Latin, it is also a mistake; for the first signification of *ἁμαρτία*; is confessed to be sin, and they would have it supposed that thence it is abused to signify a sacrifice for sin. But "piaculum" is properly a sacrifice, or any thing whereby sin is expiated, or satisfaction is made for it. And very rarely it is abused to denote such a sin or crime as deserves public expiation, and is not otherwise to be pardoned; so Virgil, --

"Distulit in seram commissa piacula mortem."

Æn. vi., 569.

But we shall not contend about words, whilst we can agree about what is intended.

The only inquiry is, how God did make him to be sin? "He has made him to be sin;" so that an act of God is intended. And this is elsewhere expressed by his "laying all our iniquities upon him," or causing them to meet on him, Isa. liii. 6. And this was by the imputation of our sins unto him, as the sins of the people were put on the head of the goat, that they should be no more theirs, but his, so as that he was to carry them away from them. Take sin in either sense before mentioned, either of a sacrifice for sin, or a sinner, and the imputation of the guilt of sin antecedently unto the punishment of it, and in order whereunto, must be understood.

For in every sacrifice for sin there was an imposition of sin on the beast to be offered, antecedent unto the sacrificing of it, and therein its suffering by death. Therefore, in every offering for sin, he that brought it was to "put his hand on the head of it," Lev. i. 4. And that the transferring of the guilt of sin unto the offering was thereby signified, is expressly declared, Lev. xvi. 21. Wherefore, if God made the Lord Christ a sin-offering for us, it was by the imputation of the guilt of sin unto him antecedently unto his suffering.

Nor could any offering be made for sin, without a typical translation of the guilt of sin unto it. And, therefore, when an offering was made for the expiation of the guilt of an uncertain murder, those who were to make it by the law, -- namely, the elders of the city that was next unto the place where the man was slain, -- were not to offer a sacrifice, because there was none to confess guilt over it, or to lay guilt upon it; but whereas the neck of a heifer was to be stricken off, to declare the punishment due unto blood, they were to wash their hands over it to testify their own innocence, Deut. xxi. 1-8.

But a sacrifice for sin without the imputation of guilt there could not be. And if the word be taken in the second sense, -- namely, for a sinner, that is, by imputation, and in God's esteem, -- it must be by the imputation of guilt; for none can, in any sense, be denominated a sinner from mere suffering. None, indeed, do say that Christ was made sin by the imputation of punishment unto him, which has no proper sense; but they say sin was imputed unto him as unto punishment: which is indeed to say that the guilt of sin was imputed unto him; for the guilt of sin is its respect unto punishment, or the obligation unto punishment which attends it.

And that any one should be punished for sin without the imputation of the guilt of it unto him, is impossible; and, were it possible, would be unjust: for it is not possible that any one should be punished for sin properly, and yet that sin be none of his. And if it be not his by inhesion, it can be his no other way but by imputation. One may suffer on the occasion of the sin of another that is no way made his, but he cannot be punished for it; for punishment is the recompense of sin on the account of its guilt.

And were it possible, where is the righteousness of punishing any one for that which no way belongs unto him? Besides, imputation of sin, and punishing, are distinct acts, the one preceding the other; and therefore the former is only of the guilt of sin: wherefore, the Lord Christ was made sin for us, by the imputation of the guilt of our sins unto him.

But it is said, that if "the guilt of sin were imputed unto Christ, he is excluded from all possibility of merit, for he suffered but what was his due; and so the whole work of Christ's satisfaction is subverted. This must be so, if God in judgment did reckon him guilty and a sinner." But there is an ambiguity in these expressions. If it be meant that God in judgment did reckon him guilty and a sinner inherently in his own person, no such thing is intended. But God laid all our sins on him, and in judgment spared him not, as unto what was due unto them. And so he suffered not what was his due upon his own account, but what was due unto our sin: which it is impiety to deny; for if it were not so, he died in vain, and we are still in our sins. And as his satisfaction consists herein, nor could be without it, so does it not in the least derogate from his merit. For supposing the infinite dignity of his person, and his voluntary susception of our sin to answer for it, which altered not his state and condition, his obedience therein was highly meritorious.

In answer hereunto, and by virtue hereof, we are made "the righteousness of God in him." This was the end of his being made sin for us. And by whom are we so made? It is by God himself: for "it is God that justifieth," Rom. viii. 33; it is God who "imputeth righteousness," chap. iv. 6. Wherefore it is the act of God in our justification that is intended; and to be made the righteousness of God is to be made righteous before God, though emphatically expressed by the abstract for the concrete, to answer what was said before of Christ being made sin for us. To be made the righteousness of God is to be justified; and to be made so in him, as he was made sin for us, is to be justified by the imputation of his righteousness unto us, as our sin was imputed unto him.

No man can assign any other way whereby he was made sin, especially his being made so by God, but by God's laying all our iniquities upon him, -- that is, imputing our sin unto him. How, then, are we made the righteousness of God in him? "By the infusion of a habit of grace," say the Papists generally. Then, by the rule of antithesis, he must be made sin for us by the infusion of a habit of sin; which would be a blasphemous imagination. "By his meriting, procuring, and purchasing righteousness for us," say others. So, possibly, we might be made righteous by him; but so we cannot be made righteous in him. This can only be by his righteousness as we are in him, or united unto him. To be righteous in him is to be righteous with his righteousness, as we are one mystical person with him. Wherefore, --

To be made the righteousness of God in Christ, as he was made sin for us, and because he was so, can be no other but to be made righteous by the imputation of his righteousness unto us, as we are in him or united unto him. All other expositions of these words are both jejune and forced, leading the mind from the first, plain, obvious sense of them.

Bellarmino excepts unto this interpretation, and it is his first argument against the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, lib. ii. cap. 7, De Justificatione, "Quinto refellitur quoniam si vere nobis imputetur justitia Christi ut per eam justi habeamur ac censemur, ac si proprie nostra esset intrinseca formalisque justitia, profecto non minus justi haberi et censemi deberemus quam ipse Christus: proinde deberemus dici atque haberi redemptores, et salvatores mundi, quod absurdissimum."

So full an answer has been returned hereunto, and that so frequently, by Protestant divines, as that I would not have mentioned it, but that divers among ourselves are pleased to borrow it from him and make use of it. "For," say they, "if the righteousness of Christ be imputed unto us so as thereby to be made ours, then are we as righteous as Christ himself, because we are righteous with his righteousness." Ans. 1. These things are plainly affirmed in the Scripture, that, as unto ourselves and in ourselves, "we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags," Isa. lxiv. 6, on the one hand; and that "in the Lord we have righteousness and strength; in the Lord we are justified and do glory," Isa. xlv. 24, 25, on the other; -- that "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves:" and yet we are "the righteousness of God in Christ."

Wherefore these things are consistent, whatever cavils the wit of men can raise against them; and so they must be esteemed, unless we will comply with Socinus's rule of interpretation, -- namely, that where any thing seems repugnant unto our reason, though it be never so expressly affirmed in the Scripture, we are not to admit of it, but find out some interpretation, though never so forced, to bring the sense of the words unto our reason. Wherefore, -- 2. Notwithstanding the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto us, and our being made righteous therewith, we are sinners in ourselves (the Lord knows greatly so, the best of us); and so cannot be said to be as righteous as Christ, but only to be made righteous in him who are sinners in ourselves. 3.

To say that we are as righteous as Christ, is to make a comparison between the personal righteousness of Christ and our personal righteousness, -- if the comparison be of things of the same kind. But this is foolish and impious: for, notwithstanding all our personal righteousness, we are sinful; he knew no sin. And if the comparison be between Christ's personal, inherent righteousness, and righteousness imputed unto us, inhesion and imputation being things of diverse kinds, it is fond and of no consequence.

Christ was actively righteous; we are passively so. When our sin was imputed unto him, he did not thereby become a sinner as we are, actively and inherently a sinner; but passively only, and in God's estimation.

As he was made sin, yet knew no sin; so we are made righteous, yet are sinful in ourselves. 4. The righteousness of Christ, as it was his personally, was the righteousness of the Son of God, in which respect it had in itself an infinite perfection and value; but it is imputed unto us only with respect unto our personal want, -- not as it was satisfactory for all, but as our souls stand in need of it, and are made partakers of it.

There is, therefore, no ground for any such comparison. 5. As unto what is added by Bellarmine, that we may hereon be said to be redeemers and saviours of the world, the absurdity of the assertion falls upon himself; we are not concerned in it. For he affirms directly, lib. i., De Purgator., cap. 14, that "a man may be rightly called his own redeemer and saviour;" which he endeavours to prove from Dan. iv. And some of his church affirm that the saints may be called the redeemers of others, though improperly.

But we are not concerned in these things; seeing from the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, it follows only that those unto whom it is imputed are redeemed and saved, not at all that they are redeemers and saviours. It belongs also unto the vindication of this testimony to show the vanity of his seventh argument in the same case, because that also is made use of by some among ourselves; and it is this: "If by the righteousness of Christ imputed unto us, we may be truly said to be righteous, and the sons of God; then may Christ, by the imputation of our unrighteousness, be said to be a sinner, and a child of the devil."

Ans. 1. That which the Scripture affirms concerning the imputation of our sins unto Christ is, that "he was made sin for us." This the Greek expositors, Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Œcumenius, with many others, take for "a sinner." But all affirm that denomination to be taken from imputation only: he had sin imputed unto him, and underwent the punishment due unto it; as we have righteousness imputed unto us, and enjoy the benefit of it. 2. The imputation of sin unto Christ did not carry along with it any thing of the pollution or filth of sin, to be communicated unto him by transfusion, -- a thing impossible; so that no denomination can thence arise which should include in it any respect unto them.

A thought hereof is impious, and dishonourable unto the Son of God. But his being made sin through the imputation of the guilt of sin, is his honour and glory. 3. The imputation of the sin of fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, etc., such as the Corinthians were before their conversion unto Christ, does not on any ground bring him under a denomination from those sins. For they were so in themselves actively, inherently, subjectively; and thence were so called. But that he who knew no sin, voluntarily taking on him to answer for the guilt of those sins, -- which in him was an act of righteousness, and the highest obedience unto God, -- should be said to be an idolater, etc., is a fond imagination.

The denomination of a sinner from sin inherent, actually committed, defiling the soul, is a reproach, and significative of the utmost unworthiness; but even the denomination of a sinner by the imputation of sin, without the least personal guilt or defilement being undergone by him unto whom it is imputed, in an act of the highest obedience, and tending unto the greatest glory of God, is highly honourable and glorious. But, -- 4. The imputation of sin unto Christ was antecedent unto any real union between him and sinners, whereon he took their sin on him as ³⁵⁴he would, and for what ends he would; but the imputation of his righteousness unto believers is consequential in order of nature unto their union with him, whereby it becomes theirs in a peculiar manner: so as that there is not a parity of reason that he should be esteemed a sinner, as that they should be accounted righteous.

And, -- 5. We acquiesce in this, that on the imputation of sin unto Christ, it is said that "God made him to be sin for us," which he could not be, but thereby, -- and he was so by an act transient in its effects, for a time only, that time wherein he underwent the punishment due unto it; but on the imputation of his righteousness unto us, we are "made the righteousness of God," with an everlasting righteousness, that abides ours always. 6. To be a child of the devil by sin, is to do the works of the devil, John viii. 44; but the Lord Christ, in taking our sins upon him, when imputed unto him, did the work of God in the highest act of holy obedience, evidencing himself to be the God of God thereby, and destroying the work of the devil. So foolish and impious is it to conceive that any absolute change of state or relation in him did ensue thereon.

That by "the righteousness of God," in this place, our own faith and obedience according to the gospel, as some would have it, are intended, is so alien from the scope of the place and sense of the words, as that I shall not particularly examine it. The righteousness of God is revealed to faith, and received by faith; and is not therefore faith itself. And the force of the antithesis is quite perverted by this conceit; for where is it in this, -- that he was made sin by the imputation of our sin unto him, and we are made righteousness by the imputation of our own faith and obedience unto ourselves? But as Christ had no concern in sin but as God made him sin, -- it was never in him inherently; so have we no interest in this righteousness, -- it is not in us inherently, but only is imputed unto us. Besides, the act of God in making us righteous is his justifying of us. But this is not by the infusion of the habit of faith and obedience, as we have proved. And what act of God is intended by them who affirm that the righteousness of God which we are made is our own righteousness, I know not. The constitution of the gospel law it cannot be; for that makes no man righteous. And the persons of believers are the object of this act of God, and that as they are considered in Christ.

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