

Ephesians ii. 8-10

by John Owen

John Owen's sermon on Ephesians 2:8-10 emphasizes that salvation is a gift of grace through faith, excluding any merit from works to prevent boasting.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Grace", "Salvation"

Description

John Owen expounds on Ephesians 2:8-10, emphasizing that salvation is solely by grace through faith, not by works, to prevent any boasting on our part. He highlights the apostle's method of illustrating our dire state of sin before presenting the grace of God as the sole cause of our deliverance. Owen argues that while good works are essential, they are the result of God's grace and not a means to justification. He addresses common objections regarding the role of works in salvation, affirming that true faith naturally produces good works as evidence of salvation. Ultimately, Owen underscores the importance of recognizing grace as the foundation of our relationship with God.

Transcript

Eph. ii. 8-10. Evidence of this testimony -- Design of the apostle from the beginning of the chapter -- Method of the apostle in the declaration of the grace of God -- Grace alone the cause of deliverance from a state of sin -- Things to be observed in the assignation of the causes of spiritual deliverances -- Grace, how magnified by him -- Force of the argument and evidence from thence -- State of the case here proposed by the apostle -- General determination of it, "By grace are ye saved" -- What is it to be saved, inquired into -- The same as to be justified, but not exclusively -- The causes of our justification declared positively and negatively -- The whole secured unto the grace of God by Christ, and our interest therein through faith alone -- Works excluded -- What works? -- Not works of the law of Moses -- Not works antecedent unto believing -- Works of true believers -- Not only in opposition to the grace of God, but to faith in us -- Argument from those words -- Reason whereon this exclusion of works is founded -- To exclude boasting on our part -- Boasting, wherein it consists -- Inseparable from the interest of works in justification -- Danger of it -- Confirmation of this reason, obviating an objection -- The objection stated -- If we be not justified by works, of what use are they? answered

Eph. ii. 8-10. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

Unless it had seemed good unto the Holy Ghost to have expressed beforehand all the evasions and subterfuges which the wit of man in after ages could invent, to pervert the doctrine of our justification before God, and to have rejected them, it is impossible they could have been more plainly prevented than they are in this context. If we may take a little unprejudiced consideration of it, I suppose what is affirmed will be evident.

It cannot be denied but that the design of the apostle, from the beginning of this chapter unto the end of verse 11, is to declare the way whereby lost and condemned sinners come to be delivered, and translated out of that condition into an estate of acceptance with God, and eternal salvation thereon. And therefore, in the first place, he fully describes their natural state, with their being obnoxious unto the wrath of God thereby; for such was the method of this apostle, -- unto the declaration of the grace of God in any kind, he did usually, yea, constantly, premise the consideration of our sin, misery, and ruin. Others, now, like not this method so well. Howbeit this hinders not but that it was his. Unto this purpose he declares unto the Ephesians that they "were dead in trespasses and sins," -- expressing the power that sin had on their souls as unto spiritual life, and all the actions of it; but withal, that they lived and walked in sin, and on all accounts were the "children of wrath," or subject and liable unto eternal condemnation, verses 1-3. What such persons can do towards their own deliverance, there are many terms found out to express, all passing my understanding, seeing the entire design of the apostle is to prove that they can do nothing at all. But another cause, or other causes of it, he finds out, and that in direct, express opposition unto any thing that may be done by ourselves unto that end: "But God, who is rich in mercy." The adversative includes an opposition unto every thing on our part, and encloses the whole work to God. Would men have rested on this divine revelation, the church of God had been free from many of those perverse opinions and wrangling disputes which it has been pestered withal. But they will not so easily part with thoughts of some kind of interest in being the authors of their own happiness. Wherefore, two things we may observe in the apostle's assignation of the causes of our deliverance from a state of sin, and [of our] acceptance with God:--

1. That he assigns the whole of this work absolutely unto grace, love, and mercy, and that with an exclusion of the consideration of any thing on our part; as we shall see immediately, verses 5, 8.

2. He magnifies this grace in a marvellous manner. For, -- First, He expresses it by all names and titles whereby it is signified; as "mercy," "love," "grace," and "kindness:" for he would have us to look only unto grace herein. Secondly, He ascribes such adjuncts, and gives such epithets, unto that divine mercy and grace, which is the sole cause of our deliverance, in and by Jesus Christ, as rendered it singular, and herein solely to be adored: "rich in mercy;" "great love wherewith he loved us;" "the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness," verses 4-7. It cannot reasonably be denied

but that the apostle does design deeply to affect the mind and heart of believers with a sense of the grace and love of God in Christ, as the only cause of their justification before God. I think no words can express those conceptions of the mind which this representation of grace does suggest. Whether they think it any part of their duty to be like-minded, and comply with the apostle in this design, who scarce ever mention the grace of God, unless it be in a way of diminution from its efficacy, and unto whom such ascriptions unto it as are here made by him are a matter of contempt, is not hard to judge.

But it will be said, "These are good words, indeed, but they are only general; there is nothing of argument in all this adoring of the grace of God in the work of our salvation." It may be so, it seems, to many; but yet, to speak plainly, there is to me more argument in this one consideration, -- namely, of the ascription made in this cause unto the grace of God in this place, -- than in a hundred sophisms, suited neither unto the expressions of the Scripture nor the experience of them that do believe. He that is possessed with a due apprehension of the grace of God, as here represented, and under a sense that it was therein the design of the Holy Ghost to render it glorious and alone to be trusted unto, will not easily be induced to concern himself in those additional supplies unto it from our own works and obedience which some would suggest unto him. But we may yet look farther into the words.

The case which the apostle states, the inquiry which he has in hand, whereon he determines as to the truth wherein he instructs the Ephesians, and in them the whole church of God, is, how a lost, condemned sinner may come to be accepted with God, and thereon saved? And this is the sole inquiry wherein we are, or intend in this controversy to be, concerned. Farther we will not proceed, either upon the invitation or provocation of any. Concerning this, his position and determination is, "That we are saved by grace."

359This first he occasionally interposes in his enumeration of the benefits we receive by Christ, verse 5. But not content therewith, he again directly asserts it, verse 8, in the same words; for he seems to have considered how slow men would be in the admittance of this truth, which at once deprives them of all boastings in themselves.

What it is that he intends by our being saved must be inquired into. It would not be prejudicial unto, but rather advance the truth we plead for, if, by our being saved, eternal salvation were intended. But that cannot be the sense of it in this place, otherwise than as that salvation is included in the causes of it, which are effectual in this life. Nor do I think that in that expression, "By grace are ye saved," our justification only is intended, although it be so principally. Conversion unto God and sanctification are also included therein, as is evident from verses 5, 6; and they are no less of sovereign grace than is our justification itself. But the apostle speaks of what the Ephesians, being now believers, and by virtue of their being so, were made partakers of in this life. This is manifest in the whole context; for having, in the beginning of the chapter, described their condition, what it was, in common with all the posterity of Adam, by nature, verses 1-3, he moreover declares their condition in particular, in opposition to that of the Jews, as they were Gentiles, idolaters, atheists, verses 11, 12. Their present delivery by Jesus Christ from this whole miserable state and condition, -- that which they were under in common with all mankind, and that which was a peculiar aggravation of its misery in themselves, -- is that which he intends by their being "saved." That which was principally designed in the description of this state is, that therein and thereby they were liable unto the wrath of God, guilty before him, and obnoxious unto his judgment. This he expresses in the declaration of it, verse 3, -- answerable unto that method and those grounds he everywhere proceeds on, in declaring the doctrine of justification. Rom. iii. 19-24; Tit. iii. 3-5. From this state they had deliverance by faith in Christ Jesus; for unto as many as receive him, power is given to be the sons of God, John i. 12. "He that believeth on him is not condemned;" that is, he is saved, in the sense

of the apostle in this place, John iii. 18. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" (is saved); "and he that believeth not the Son, the wrath of God abideth on him," verse 36. And in this sense, "saved," and "salvation," are frequently used in the Scripture. Besides, he gives us so full a description of the salvation which he intends, from Eph. ii. 13 unto the end of the chapter, that there can be no doubt of it. It is our being "made nigh by the blood of Christ," verse 13; our "peace" with God by his death, verses 14, 15; our "reconciliation" by the blood of the "cross," verse 16; our "access 360 unto God;" and all spiritual privileges thereon depending, verses 18-20, etc.

Wherefore, the inquiry of the apostle, and his determination thereon, is concerning the causes of our justification before God. This he declares, and fixes both positively and negatively. Positively, -- 1. In the supreme moving cause on the part of God; this is that free, sovereign grace and love of his, which he illustrates by its adjuncts and properties before mentioned. 2. In the meritorious procuring cause of it; which is Jesus Christ in the work of his mediation, as the ordinance of God for the rendering this grace effectual unto his glory, verses 7, 13, 16. 3. In the only means or instrumental cause on our part; which is faith: "By grace are ye saved through faith," verse 8. And lest he should seem to derogate any thing from the grace of God, in asserting the necessity and use of faith, he adds that epanorthosis, "And that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God." The communication of this faith unto us is no less of grace than is the justification which we obtain thereby. So has he secured the whole work unto the grace of God through Christ; wherein we are interested by faith alone.

But not content herewith, he describes this work negatively, or adds an exclusion of what might be pretended to have a concernment therein. And therein three things are stated distinctly:-- 1. What it is he so excludes. 2. The reason whereon he does so. 3. The confirmation of that reason, wherein he obviates an objection that might arise thereon:--

1. That which he excludes is works: "Not of works," verse 9. And what works he intends, at least principally, himself declares. "Works," say some, "of the law, the law of Moses." But what concernment had these Ephesians therein, that the apostle should inform them that they were not justified by those works? They were never under that law, never sought for righteousness by it, nor had any respect unto it, but only that they were delivered from it. But it may be he intends only works wrought in the strength of our own natural abilities, without the aids of grace, and before believing. But what were the works of these Ephesians antecedent unto believing, he before and afterwards declares. For, "being dead in trespasses and sins," they "walked according to the course of this world in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind," verses 1-3. It is certain enough that these works have no influence into our justification; and no less certain that the apostle had no reason to exclude them from it, as though any could pretend to be advantaged by them, in that which consists in a deliverance from them. Wherefore, the works here excluded by the apostle are those works which the Ephesians now performed, when they were believers, quickened with Christ; 361 even the "works which God has before ordained that we should walk in them," as he expressly declared, verse 10. And these works he excludes, not only in opposition unto grace, but in opposition unto faith also: "Through faith; not of works." Wherefore he does not only reject their merit, as inconsistent with grace, but their co-interest on our part with, or subsequent interest unto faith, in the work of justification before God.

If we are saved by grace, through faith in Christ, exclusively unto all works of obedience whatever, then cannot such works be the whole or any part of our righteousness unto the justification of life: wherefore, another righteousness we must have, or perish for ever. Many things I know are here offered, and many distinctions coined, to retain some interest of works in our justification before God; but whether it be the

safest way to trust unto them, or unto this plain, express, divine testimony, will not be hard for any to determine, when they make the case their own.

2. The apostle adds a reason of this exclusion of works: "Not of works, lest any man should boast." God has ordained the order and method of our justification by Christ in the way expressed, that no man might have ground, reason, or occasion to glory or boast in or of himself. So it is expressed, 1 Cor. i. 21, 30, 31; Rom. iii. 27. To exclude all glorying or boasting on our part is the design of God. And this consists in an ascription of something unto ourselves that is not in others, in order unto justification. And it is works alone that can administer any occasion of this boasting: "For if Abraham were justified by works, he has whereof to glory," chap. iv. 2. And it is excluded alone by the "law of faith," chap. iii. 27; for the nature and use of faith is to find righteousness in another. And this boasting all works are apt to beget in the minds of men, if applied unto justification; and where there is any boasting of this nature, the design of God towards us in this work of his grace is frustrated what lies in us.

That which I principally insist on from hence is, that there are no boundaries fixed in Scripture unto the interest of works in justification, so as no boasting should be included in them. The Papists make them meritorious of it, -- at least of our second justification, as they call it. "This," say some, "ought not to be admitted, for it includes boasting. Merit and boasting are inseparable." Wherefore, say others, they are only "causa sine qua non," they are the condition of it; or they are our evangelical righteousness before God, whereon we are evangelically justified; or they are a subordinate righteousness whereon we obtain an interest in the righteousness of Christ; or are comprised in the condition of the new covenant whereby we are justified; or are included in faith, being the form of it, or of the essence of it, one way or other: for herein men express themselves in great variety. But so long as our works are hereby asserted in order unto our justification, how shall a man be certain that they do not include boasting, or that they do express the true sense of these words, "Not of works, lest any man should boast?" There is some kind of ascription unto ourselves in this matter; which is boasting. If any shall say that they know well enough what they do, and know that they do not boast in what they ascribe unto works, I must say that in general I cannot admit it; for the Papists affirm of themselves that they are most remote from boasting, yet I am very well satisfied that boasting and merit are inseparable. The question is, not what men think they do? but, what judgment the Scripture passes on what they do? And if it be said, that what is in us is also of the grace and gift of God, and is so acknowledged, which excludes all boasting in ourselves; I say it was so by the Pharisee, and yet was he a horrible boaster. Let them, therefore, be supposed to be wrought in us in what way men please, if they be also wrought by us, and so be the "works of righteousness which we have done," I fear their introduction into our justification does include boasting in it, because of this assertion of the apostle, "Not of works, lest any man should boast." Wherefore, because this is a dangerous point, unless men can give us the direct, plain, indisputable bounds of the introduction of our works into our justification, which cannot include boasting in it, it is the safest course utterly to exclude them, wherein I see no danger of any mistake in these words of the Holy Ghost, "Not of works, lest any man should boast;" for if we should be unadvisedly seduced into this boasting, we should lose all the benefits which we might otherwise expect by the grace of God.

3. The apostle gives another reason why it cannot be of works, and withal obviates an objection which might arise from what he had declared, Eph. ii. 10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." And the force of his reason, which the causal conjunction intimates the introduction of, consists in this:-- that all good works, -- those concerning which he treats, evangelical works, -- are the effects of the grace of God in them that are

in Christ Jesus, and so are truly justified antecedently in order of nature unto them. But that which he principally designed in these words was that which he is still mindful of, wherever he treats of this doctrine, -- namely, to obviate an objection that he foresaw some would make against it; and that is this, "If good works be thus excluded from our justification before God, then of what use are they? we may live as we list, utterly neglect them, and yet be justified." And this very objection do some men continue to manage with great vehemency against the same doctrine. We meet with nothing in this cause 363more frequently, than that "if our justification before God be not of works, some way or other, if they be not antecedaneously required whereunto, if they are not a previous condition of it, then there is no need of them, -- men may safely live in an utter neglect of all obedience unto God." And on this theme men are very apt to enlarge themselves, who otherwise give no great evidences of their own evangelical obedience. To me it is marvellous that they heed not unto what party they make an accession in the management of this objection, -- namely, unto that of them who were the adversaries of the doctrine of grace taught by the apostle. It must be elsewhere considered. For the present, I shall say no more but that, if the answer here given by the apostle be not satisfactory unto them, -- if the grounds and reasons of the necessity and use of good works here declared be not judged by them sufficient to establish them in their proper place and order, -- I shall not esteem myself obliged to attempt their farther satisfaction.

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