

Opposition Between Works and Grace

by John Owen

The Bible teaches that our justification before God is not by our own works, but by the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.

Scripture: Romans 1:17, Romans 3:22

Topics: "Grace vs. Works", "Justification By Faith"

Description

John Owen addresses the critical opposition between works and grace in the context of justification, emphasizing that true righteousness comes solely from faith in God rather than from human efforts or obedience. He highlights the Apostle Paul's teachings in Romans, which assert that justification is a gift of grace, not earned through works, and that all attempts to achieve righteousness through personal merit are ultimately futile. Owen argues that both Gentiles and Jews, despite their different understandings of righteousness, fall short and cannot attain justification through their own means. He concludes that the safest course for believers is to place their complete trust in God's mercy and grace, as exemplified by the testimonies of Scripture. The sermon calls for a total reliance on Christ's righteousness rather than any self-derived merit.

Transcript

Fourthly, Opposition between works and grace, as unto justification Method of the apostle, in the Epistle to the Romans, to manifest this opposition A scheme of others contrary thereunto Testimonies witnessing this opposition Judgment to be made on them Distinctions whereby they are evaded The uselessness of them Resolution of the case in hand by Bellarmine, Dan. ix. 18; Luke xvii. 10

Fourthly. The opposition that the Scripture makes between grace and works in general, with the exclusion of the one and the assertion of the other in our justification, deserves a previous consideration. The opposition intended is not made between grace and works, or our own obedience, as unto their essence, nature, and consistency, in the order and method of our salvation; but only with respect unto our justification. I do not design herein to plead any particular testimonies of Scripture, as unto their especial sense, or declaration of the mind of the Holy Ghost in them, which will afterward be with some diligence inquired into; but only to take a view which way the eye of the Scripture guides our apprehensions, and what compliance there is in our own experience with that guidance.

The principal seat of this doctrine, as will be confessed by all, is in the Epistles of Paul unto the Romans and Galatians, whereunto that also to the Hebrews may be added: but in that unto the Romans it is most

eminently declared; for therein is it handled by the apostle ex professo at large, and that both doctrinally and in the way of controversy with them by whom the truth was opposed. And it is worth our consideration what process he makes towards the decoration of it, and what principles he proceeds upon therein.

He lays it down as the fundamental maxim which he would proceed upon, or as a general thesis, including the substance of what he designed to explain and prove, that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith, Rom. i. 17. All sorts of men who had any knowledge of God and themselves, were then, as they must be always, inquiring, and in one degree or other labouring, after righteousness. For this they looked on, and that justly, as the only means of an advantageous relation between God and themselves. Neither had the generality of men any other thoughts, but that this righteousness must be their own, inherent in them, and performed by them; as Rom. x. 3. For as this is the language of a natural conscience and of the law, and suited unto all philosophical notions concerning the nature of righteousness; so whatever testimony was given of another kind in the law and the prophets (as such a testimony is given unto a righteousness of God without the law, chap. iii. 21), there was a vail upon it, as to the understanding of all sorts of men. As, therefore, righteousness is that which all men seek after, and cannot but seek after, who design or desire acceptance with God; so it is in vain to inquire of the law, of natural conscience, of philosophical reason, after any righteousness but what consists in inherent habits and acts of our own. 25 Neither law, nor natural conscience, nor reason, do know any other. But in opposition unto this righteousness of our own, and the necessity thereof, testified unto by the law in its primitive constitution, by the natural light of conscience, and the apprehension of the nature of things by reason, the apostle declares, that in the gospel there is revealed another righteousness, which is also the righteousness of another, the righteousness of God, and that from faith to faith. For not only is the righteousness itself reveals alien from those other principles, but also the manner of our participation of it, or its communication unto us, from faith to faith (the faith of God in the revelation, and our faith in the acceptation of it, being only here concerned), is an eminent revelation. Righteousness, of all things, should rather seem to be from works unto works, from the work of grace in us to the works of obedience done by us, as the Papists affirm. No, says the apostle, it is from faith to faith; whereof afterward.

This is the general thesis the apostle proposes unto confirmation; and he seems therein to exclude from justification every thing but the righteousness of God and the faith of believers. And to this purpose he considers all persons that did or might pretend unto righteousness, or seek after it, and all ways and means whereby they hoped to attain unto it, or whereby it might most probably be obtained, declaring the failing of all persons, and the insufficiency of all means as unto them, for the obtaining a righteousness of our own before God. And as unto persons,

1. He considers the Gentiles, with all their notions of God, their practice in religious worship, with their conversation thereon: and from the whole of what might be observed amongst them, he concludes, that they neither were nor could be justified before God; but that they were all, and most deservedly, obnoxious unto the sentence of death. And whatever men may discourse concerning the justification and salvation of any without the revelation of the righteousness of God by the gospel, from faith to faith, it is expressly contradictory to his whole discourse, chap. i., from verse 19 to the end.

2. He considers the Jews, who enjoyed the written law, and the privileges wherewith it was accompanied, especially that of circumcision, which was the outward seal of Gods covenant: and on many considerations, with many arguments, he excludes them also from any possibility of attaining justification before God, by any of the privileges they enjoyed, or their own compliance wherewithal, chap. ii. And both

sorts he excludes distinctly from this privilege of righteousness before God, with this one argument, that both of them sinned openly against that which they took for the rule of their righteousness, namely, the Gentiles against the light of nature, and the Jews against the law; whence it inevitably follows, that none of them could attain unto the righteousness of their own rule. But he proceeds farther, unto that which is common to them all; and,

3. He proves the same against all sorts of persons, whether Jews or gentiles, from the consideration of the universal depravation of nature in them all, and the horrible effects that necessarily ensue thereon in the hearts and lives of men, chap. iii; so evidencing that as they all were, so it could not fall out but that all must be shut up under sin, and come short of righteousness. So, from persons he proceeds to things, or means of righteousness. And,

4. Because the law was given of God immediately, as the whole and only rule of our obedience unto him, and the works of the law are therefore all that is required of us, these may be pleaded with some pretence, as those whereby we may be justified. Wherefore, in particular, he considers the nature, use, and end of the law, manifesting its utter insufficiency to be a means of our justification before God, chap. iii. 19, 20.

5. It may be yet objected, that the law and its works may be thus insufficient, as it is obeyed by unbelievers in the state of nature, without the aids of grace administered in the promise; but with respect unto them who are regenerate and do believe, whose faith and works are accepted with God, it may be otherwise. To obviate this objection, he gives an instance in two of the most eminent believers under the Old Testament, namely, Abraham and David, declaring that all works whatever were excluded in and from their justification, chap. iv.

On these principles, and by this gradation, he peremptorily concludes that all and every one of the sons of men, as unto any thing that is in themselves, or can be done by them, or be wrought in them, are guilty before God, obnoxious unto death, shut up under sin, and have their mouths so stopped as to be deprived of all pleas in their own excuse; that they had no righteousness wherewith to appear before God; and that all the ways and means whence they expected it were insufficient unto that purpose.

Hereon he proceeds with his inquiry, how men may be delivered from this condition, and come to be justified in the sight of God. And in the resolution hereof he makes no mention of any thing in themselves, but only faith, whereby we receive the atonement. That whereby we are justified, he says, is the righteousness of God which is by the faith of Christ Jesus; or, that we are justified freely by grace through the redemption that is in him, chap. iii. 22, 24. And not content here with this answer unto the inquiry how lost convinced sinners may come to be justified before God, namely, that it is by the righteousness of God, revealed from faith to faith, by grace, by the blood of Christ, as he is set forth for a propitiation, he immediately proceeds unto a positive exclusion of every thing in and of ourselves that might pretend unto an interest herein, as that which is inconsistent with the righteousness of God as revealed in the gospel, and witnessed unto by the law and the prophets. How contrary their scheme of divinity is unto this design of the apostle, and his management of it, who affirm, that before the law, men were justified by obedience unto the light of nature, and some particular revelations made unto them in things of their own especial private concernment; and that after the giving of the law, they were so by obedience unto God according to the directions thereof! as also, that the heathen might obtain the same benefit in compliance with the dictates of reason, cannot be contradicted by any who have not a mind to be contentious.

Answerable unto this declaration of the mind of the Holy Ghost herein by the apostle, is the constant tenor of the Scripture speaking to the same purpose. The grace of God, the promise of mercy, the free pardon of sin, the blood of Christ, his obedience, and the righteousness of God in him, rested in and received by faith, are everywhere asserted as the causes and means of our justification, in opposition unto any thing in ourselves, so expressed as it uses to express the best of our obedience, and the utmost of our personal righteousness. Wherever mention is made of the duties, obedience, and personal righteousness of the best of men, with respect unto their justification, they are all renounced by them, and they betake themselves unto sovereign grace and mercy alone. Some places to this purpose may be recounted.

The foundation of the whole is laid in the first promise; wherein the destruction of the work of the devil by the suffering of the seed of the woman is proposed as the only relief for sinners, and only means of the recovery of the favour of God. It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel, Gen. iii. 15. Abraham believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness, Gen. xv. 6. And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat; and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited, Lev. xvi. 21, 22.

I will go in the strength of the Lord God: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only, Ps. lxxi. 16. If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared, Ps. cxxx. 3, 4. Enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified, Ps. cxliii. 2. Behold, he put no trust in his servants; and his angels he charged with folly: how much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust?

Job iv. 18, 19. Fury is not in me: who would set the briers and thorns against me in battle? I would go through them, I would burn them together. Or let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me; and he shall make peace with me, Isa. xxvii. 4, 5. Surely, shall one say, In the Lord have I righteousness and strength: in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory, chap. xlv. 24, 25. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities, chap. liii. 6, 11. This is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness, Jer. xxiii. 6. But ye are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags, Isa. lxiv. 6. He shall finish the transgression, and make an end of sins, and make reconciliation for iniquity, and bring in everlasting righteousness, Dan. ix. 24. As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name, John i. 12.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life, chap. iii. 14, 15. Be it known unto you, therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses, Acts xiii. 38, 39. That they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me, chap. xxvi. 18.

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and

the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay; but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law, Rom. iii. 24-28.

For if Abraham were justified by works, he has whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the Scriptures Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin, chap. iv. 28. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, has abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. For if by one mans offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one mans disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous, chap. v. 15-19. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, chap. viii. 14. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth, chap. x. 4. And if by grace, then is it no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace; otherwise work is no more work, chap. xi. 6.

But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, 1 Cor. i. 30. 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, 2 Cor. v. 21. Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified, Gal. ii. 16.

But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us, chap. iii. 11-13. 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, Eph. ii. 8-10.

Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, 30not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith

of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith, Phil. iii. 8, 9. Who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, 2 Tim. i. 9.

That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life, Tit. iii. 7. Once in the end of the world has he appeared, to put away sin, Heb. ix. 26, 28. Having by himself purged our sins, chap. i. 3. For by one offering he has perfected forever them that are sanctified, chap. x. 14. The blood of Jesus Christ Gods Son cleanseth us from all sin, 1 John i. 7. Wherefore, Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen, Rev. i. 5, 6.

These are some of the places which at present occur to remembrance, wherein the Scripture represents unto us the grounds, causes, and reasons, of our acceptation with God. The especial import of many of them, and the evidence of truth that is in them, will be afterwards considered. Here we take only a general view of them. And every thing in and of ourselves, under any consideration whatever, seems to be excluded from our justification before God, faith alone excepted, whereby we receive his grace and the atonement. And, on the other side, the whole of our acceptation with him seems to be assigned unto grace, mercy, the obedience and blood of Christ; in opposition unto our own worth and righteousness, or our own works and obedience. And I cannot but suppose that the soul of a convinced sinner, if not prepossessed with prejudice, will, in general, not judge amiss whether of these things, that are set in opposition one to the other, he should betake himself unto, that he may be justified.

But it is replied, These things are not to be understood absolutely, and without limitations. Sundry distinctions are necessary, that we may come to understand the mind of the Holy Ghost and sense of the Scripture in these ascriptions unto grace, and exclusions of the law, our own works and righteousness from our justification. For, 1. The law is either the moral or the ceremonial law. The latter, indeed, is excluded from any place in our justification, but not the former. 2.

Works required by the law are either wrought before faith, without the aid of grace; or after believing, by the help of the Holy Ghost. The former are excluded from our justification, but not the latter. 3. Works of obedience wrought after grace received may be considered either as sincere only, or absolutely perfect, according to what was originally required in the covenant of works. 31 Those of the latter sort are excluded from any place in our justification, but not those of the former. 4.

There is a twofold justification before God in this life, a first and a second; and we must diligently consider with respect unto whether of these justifications any thing is spoken in the Scripture. 5. Justification may be considered either as to its beginning or as unto its continuation; and so it has divers causes under these diverse respects. 6. Works may be considered either as meritorious *ex condigno*, so as their merit should arise from their own intrinsic worth; or *ex congruo* only, with respect unto the covenant and promise of God.

Those of the first sort are excluded, at least from the first justification: the latter may have place both in the first and second. 7. Moral causes may be of many sorts: preparatory, dispositive, meritorious, conditionally efficient, or only *sine quibus non*. And we must diligently inquire in what sense, under the notion of what cause or causes, our works are excluded from our justification, and under what notions they are necessary thereunto. And there is no one of these distinctions but it needs many more to explain it; which, accordingly, are made use of by learned men.

And so specious a colour may be put on these things, when warily managed by the art of disputation, that very few are able to discern the ground of them, or what there is of substance in that which is pleaded for; and fewer yet, on whether side the truth does lie. But he who is really convinced of sin, and, being also sensible of what it is to enter into judgment with the holy God, inquires for himself, and not for others, how he may come to be accepted with him, will be apt, upon the consideration of all these distinctions and sub-distinctions wherewith they are attended, to say to their authors, *Fecistis probè, incertior sum multo, quam dudum.*

My inquiry is, How shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? How shall I escape the wrath to come? What shall I plead in judgment before God, that I may be absolved, acquitted, justified? Where shall I have a righteousness that will endure a trial in his presence? If I should be harnessed with a thousand of these distinctions, I am afraid they would prove thorns and briers, which he would pass through and consume.

The inquiry, therefore is, upon the consideration of the state of the person to be justified, before mentioned and described, and the proposal of the reliefs in our justification as now expressed, whether it be the wisest and safest course for such a person seeking to be justified before God, to betake himself absolutely, his whole trust and confidence, unto sovereign grace, and the mediation of Christ, or to have some reserve for, or to place some confidence in, his own graces, duties, works, and obedience? In putting this great difference unto umpirage, that we may not be thought to fix on a partial arbitrator ³²we shall refer it to one of our greatest and most learned adversaries in this cause. And he positively gives us in his determination and resolution in those known words, in this case: *Propter incertitudinem propriæ justitiæ, et periculum inanis gloriæ, tutissimum est fiduciam totam in solâ misericordiâ Dei et benignitate reponere*, Bellar. de Justificat., lib. v. cap. 7, prop. 3; By reason of the uncertainty of our own righteousness, and the danger of vain glory, it is the safest course to repose our whole trust in the mercy and kindness or grace of God alone.

And this determination of this important inquiry he confirms with two testimonies of Scripture, as he might have done it with many more. But those which he thought meet to mention are not impertinent. The first is Dan. ix. 18, We do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies; and the other is that of our Saviour, Luke xvii. 10, When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants. And after he has confirmed his resolution with sundry testimonies of the fathers, he closes his discourse with this dilemma: Either a man has true merits, or he has not. If he has not, he is perniciously deceived when he trusts in any thing but the mercy of God alone, and seduces himself, trusting in false merits; if he has them, he loses nothing whilst he looks not to them, but trusts in God alone. So that whether a man have any good works or no, as to his justification before God, it is best and safest for him not to have any regard unto them, or put any trust in them. And if this be so, he might have spared all his pains he took in writing his sophistical books about justification, whose principal design is to seduce the minds of men into a contrary opinion. And so, for aught I know, they may spare their labour also, without any disadvantage unto the church of God or their own souls, who so earnestly contend for some kind of interest or other for our own duties and obedience in our justification before God; seeing it will be found that they place their own whole trust and confidence in the grace of God by Jesus Christ alone. For to what purpose do we labour and strive with endless disputations, arguments, and distinctions, to prefer our duties and obedience unto some office in our justification before God, if; when we have done all, we find it the safest course in our own persons to abhor ourselves with Job in the presence of God, to betake ourselves unto sovereign grace and mercy with the publican, and to

place all our confidence in them through the obedience and blood of Christ?

So died that great emperor, Charles V, as Thuanus⁸ gives the account of his Novissima. So he reasoned with himself: *Se quidem indignum esse, qui propriis meritis regnum clorum obtineret; set Dominum Deum suum qui illud duplici jure obtineat, et Patris hæreditate, et passionis merito, altero contentum esse, alterum sibi donare; ex cujus dono illud sibi merito vendicet, hacque fiducia fretus minime confundatur; neque enim oleum misericordiæ nisi in vase fiduciæ poni; hanc hominis fiduciam esse a se deficientis et innitentis domino suo; alioquin propriis meritis fidere, non fidei esse sed perfidiæ; peccata deleri per Dei indulgentiam, ideoque credere nos debere peccata deleri non posse nisi ab eo cui soli peccavimus, et in quem peccatum non cadit, per quem solum nobis peccata condonentur;* That in himself he was altogether unworthy to obtain the kingdom of heaven by his own works or merits; but that his Lord God, who enjoyed it on a double right or title, by inheritance of the Father, and the merit of his own passion, was contented with the one himself, and freely granted unto him the other; on whose free grant he laid claim thereunto, and in confidence thereof he should not be confounded; for the oil of mercy is poured only into the vessel of faith or trust: that this is the trust of a man despairing in himself, and resting in his Lord; otherwise, to trust unto his own works or merits, is not faith, but treachery: that sins are blotted out by the mercy of God; and therefore we ought to believe that our sins can be pardoned by him alone, against whom alone we have sinned, with whom there is no sin, and by whom alone sins are forgiven.

This is the faith of men when they come to die, and those who are exercised with temptations whilst they live. Some are hardened in sin, and endeavour to leave this world without thoughts of another; some are stupidly ignorant, who neither know nor consider what it is to appear in the presence of God, and to be judged by him; some are seduced to place their confidence in merits, pardons, indulgences, and future suffrages for the dead: but such as are acquainted with God and themselves in any spiritual manner, who take a view of the time that is past, and approaching eternity, into which they must enter by the judgment-seat of God, however they may have thought, talked, and disputed about their own works and obedience, looking on Christ and his righteousness only to make up some small defects in themselves, will come at last unto a universal renunciation of what they have been, and are, and betake themselves unto Christ alone for righteousness or salvation. And in the whole ensuing discourse I shall as little as is possible immix myself in any curious scholastical disputes. This is the substance of what is pleaded for, that men should renounce all confidence in themselves, and every thing that may give countenance whereunto; betaking themselves unto the grace of God by Christ alone for righteousness and salvation. This God designs in the gospel, 1 Cor. i. 29³¹; and herein, whatever difficulties³⁴ we may meet withal in the explication of some propositions and terms that belong unto the doctrine of justification, about which men have various conceptions, I doubt not of the internal concurrent suffrage of them who know any thing as they ought of God and themselves.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-owen/opposition-between-works-and-grace/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net