

Romans Iii. 24-26

by John Owen

Our justification before God is by faith alone in Christ's blood, without any consideration of our own works or merits.

Scripture: Romans 3:24

Topics: "Justification", "Grace through Faith"

Description

John Owen expounds on Romans 3:24-26, emphasizing that justification is solely by God's grace through faith in Christ's redemptive work, excluding any personal righteousness or works as a basis for justification. He argues that all have sinned and cannot achieve righteousness on their own, thus highlighting the necessity of Christ's sacrifice as the propitiation for sin. Owen asserts that boasting is excluded in the matter of justification, as it is entirely a work of grace, and concludes that faith alone is the means by which we receive this justification. He reinforces that the law is not made void through grace but is established through faith in Christ. Ultimately, Owen's message centers on the sufficiency of God's grace and the centrality of faith in the believer's justification.

Transcript

Chap. iii. 24-26 explained, and the true sense of the words vindicated -- The causes of justification enumerated -- Apostolical inference from the consideration of them

Having fully proved that no men living have any righteousness of their own whereby they may be justified, but are all shut up under the guilt of sin; and having declared that there is a righteousness of God now fully revealed in the gospel, whereby alone we may be so, leaving all men in themselves unto their own lot, inasmuch as "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God;" -- he proceeds to declare the nature of our justification before God in all the causes of it, Rom. iii. 24-26, "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, I say, at this time his righteousness; that he might be just, and the justifier of them that believe in Jesus."

Here it is that we may and ought, if anywhere, to expect the interest of our personal obedience, under some qualification or other, in our justification to be declared. For if it should be supposed (which yet it cannot, with any pretence of reason) that, in the foregoing discourse, the apostle had excluded only the works of the law as absolutely perfect, or as wrought in our own strength without the aid of grace, or as

meritorious; yet having generally excluded all 310works from our justification, verse 20, without distinction or limitation, it might well be expected, and ought to have been so, that, upon the full declaration which he gives us of the nature and way of our justification, in all the causes of it, he should have assigned the place and consideration which our own personal righteousness had in our justification before God, -- the first, or second, or continuation of it, somewhat or other, -- or at least made some mention of it, under the qualification of gracious, sincere, or evangelical, that it might not seem to be absolutely excluded. It is plain the apostle thought of no such thing, nor was at all solicitous about any reflection that might be made on his doctrine, as though it overthrew the necessity of our own obedience. Take in the consideration of the apostle's design, with the circumstances of the context, and the argument from his utter silence about our own personal righteousness, in our justification before God, is unanswerable. But this is not all; we shall find, in our progress, that it is expressly and directly excluded by him.

All unprejudiced persons must needs think, that no words could be used more express and emphatical to secure the whole of our justification unto the free grace of God, through the blood or mediation of Christ, wherein it is faith alone that gives us an interest, than these used here by the apostle. And, for my part, I shall only say, that I know not how to express myself in this matter in words and terms more express or significant of the conception of my mind. And if we could all but subscribe the answer here given by the apostle, how, by what means, on what grounds, or by what causes, we are justified before God, -- namely, that "we are 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," etc., -- there might be an end of this controversy.

But the principal passages of this testimony must be distinctly considered. First, the principal efficient cause is first expressed with a peculiar emphasis, or the "causa
προηγουμένη·"
Δικαιούμενοι"
δωρωὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ"
χάριτι,, -- "Being justified freely by his grace." God is the principal efficient cause of our justification, and his grace is the only moving cause thereof. I shall not stay upon the exception of those of the Roman church, -- namely, that by τῇ"
χάριτι αὐτοῦ (which their translation renders "per gratiam Dei"), the internal, inherent grace of God, which they make the formal cause of justification, is intended; -- for they have nothing to prove it but that which overthrows it, namely, that it is added unto δωρεάν,, "freely;" which were needless, if it signify the free grace or favour of God: for both these expressions, "gratis per gratiam," "freely by grace," are put together to give the greater emphasis unto this assertion, wherein the whole of 311our justification is vindicated unto the free grace of God. So far as they are distinguishable, the one denotes the principle from whence our justification proceeds, -- namely, grace; and the other, the manner of its operation, -- it works freely. Besides, the grace of God in this subject does everywhere constantly signify his goodness, love, and favour; as has been undeniably proved by many. See Rom. v. 15; Eph. ii. 4, 8, 9; 2 Tim. i. 9; Tit. iii. 4, 5.

"Being justified δωρεάν (so the LXX. render the Hebrew particle חִנָּם), -- "without price," without merit, without cause; -- and sometimes it is used for "without end;" that is, what is done in vain, as δωρεάν is used by the apostle, Gal. ii. 21; -- without price or reward, Gen. xxix. 15; Exod. xxi. 2; 2 Sam. xxiv. 24; -- without cause, or merit, or any means of procurement, 1 Sam. xix. 5; Ps. lxxix. 4; in this sense it is rendered by δωρεάν,, John xv.

25. The design of the word is to exclude all consideration of any thing in us that should be the cause or condition of our justification. "favour," absolutely considered, may have respect unto somewhat in him towards whom it is showed. So it is said that Joseph found grace or favour, in the eyes of Potiphar, Gen. xxxix. 4: but he found it not, without any consideration or cause; for he "saw that the Lord was with him, and made all that he did to prosper in his hand," verse 3. But no words can be found out to free our justification before God from all respect unto any thing in ourselves, but only what is added expressly as the means of its participation on our part, through faith in his blood, more emphatical than these here used by the apostle: "Freely by his grace." And with whom this is not admitted, as exclusive of all works or obedience of our own, of all conditions, preparations, and merit, I shall despair of ever expressing my conceptions about it intelligibly unto them.

Having asserted this righteousness of God as the cause and means of our justification before him, in opposition unto all righteousness of our own, and declared the cause of the communication of it unto us on the part of God to be mere free, sovereign grace, the means on our part whereby, according unto the ordination of God, we do receive, or are really made partakers of, that righteousness of God whereon we are justified, is by faith: "By faith alone." Nothing else is proposed, nothing else required unto this end. It is replied, that there is no intimation that it is by faith alone, or that faith is asserted to be the means of our justification exclusively unto other graces or works. But there is such an exclusion directly included in the description given of that faith whereby we are justified, with respect unto its especial object, -- "By faith in his blood;" for faith respecting the blood of Christ as that whereby propitiation was made for sin, -- in which respect alone the apostle affirms that we are justified through faith, -- admits of no association with any other graces or duties. Neither is it any part of their nature to fix on the blood of Christ for justification before God; wherefore they are all here directly excluded. And those who think otherwise may try how they can introduce them into this context without an evident corrupting of it, and perverting of its sense. Neither will the other evasion yield our adversaries the least relief, -- namely, that by faith, not the single grace of faith is intended, but the whole obedience required in the new covenant, faith and works together. For as all works whatever, as our works, are excluded in the declaration of the causes of our justification on the part of God ("Freely by his grace"), by virtue of that great rule, Rom. xi. 6, "If by grace, then no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace;" so the determination of the object of faith in its act or duty, whereon we are justified, -- namely, the blood of Christ, -- is absolutely exclusive of all works from an interest in that duty; for whatever looks unto the blood of Christ for justification is faith, and nothing else. And as for the calling of it a single act or duty, I refer the reader unto our preceding discourse about the nature of justifying faith.

Three things the apostle infers from the declaration he had made of the nature and causes of our justification before God, all of them farther illustrating the meaning and sense of his words:--

1. That boasting is excluded:

θξεκλείσθη, chap. iii. 27. Apparent it is from hence, and from what he affirms concerning Abraham, chap. iv. 2, that a great part, at least, of the controversy he had about justification, was, whether it did admit of any καύχησις or καύχημα in those that were justified. And it is known that the Jews placed all their hopes in those things whereof they thought they could boast, -- namely, their privileges and their righteousness. But from the declaration made of the nature and causes of justification, the apostle infers that all boasting whatever is utterly shut out of doors, -- θξεκλείσθη. Boasting, in our language is the name of a vice; and is never used in a good sense. But καύχησις and καύχημα, the words used by the apostle, are θκτῶν μέσων, -- of an indifferent signification; and, as they are applied, may denote a virtue as well as a vice: so they do, Heb. iii. 6.

But always, and in all places, they respect something that is peculiar in or unto them unto whom they are ascribed. Wherever any thing is ascribed unto one, and not unto another, with respect unto any good end, there is fundamentum καυχήσεως, -- a "foundation for boasting." All this, says the apostle, in the matter of our justification, is utterly excluded. But wherever respect is had unto any condition or qualification in one more than another, especially if it be of 313works, it gives a ground of boasting, as he affirms, Rom. iv. 2. And it appears, from comparing that verse with this, that wherever there is any influence of our own works into our justification, there is a ground of boasting; but in evangelical justification no such boasting in any kind can be admitted. Wherefore, there is no place for works in our justification before God; for if there were, it is impossible but that a καύχημα, in one kind or other, before God or man, must be admitted.

2. He infers a general conclusion, "That a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law," chap. iii. 28. What is meant by "the law," and what by "the works of the law," in this discourse of the apostle about our justification, has been before declared. And if we are justified freely through faith in the blood of Christ, that faith which has the propitiation of Christ for its especial object, or as it has so, can take no other grace nor duty into partnership with itself therein; and being so justified as that all such boasting is excluded as necessarily results from any differencing graces or works in ourselves, wherein all the works of the law are excluded, it is certain that it is by faith alone in Christ that we are justified. All works are not only excluded, but the way unto their return is so shut up by the method of the apostle's discourse, that all the reinforcements which the wit of man can give unto them will never introduce them into our justification before God.

3. He asserts from hence, that we "do not make void the law through grace," but establish it, verse 31; which, how it is done, and how alone it can be done, has been before declared.

This is the substance of the resolution the apostle gives unto that great inquiry, how a guilty convinced sinner may come to be justified in the sight of God? -- "The sovereign grace of God, the mediation of Christ, and faith in the blood of Christ, are all that he requires thereunto." And whatever notions men may have about justification in other respects, it will not be safe to venture on any other resolution of this case and inquiry; nor are we wiser than the Holy Ghost.

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