

Romans Iv.

by John Owen

Justification is by faith alone, and not by works, as demonstrated by the example of Abraham's justification.

Scripture: Romans 4:2

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Grace and Righteousness"

Description

John Owen expounds on Romans chapter 4, emphasizing that Abraham was justified not by works but by faith alone, which serves as a model for all believers. He clarifies that the works referred to are not those of the Jewish law but rather moral obedience, which does not contribute to justification. Owen argues that justification is a gracious act of God, where faith is counted as righteousness, and that all men are ungodly before justification, highlighting the radical nature of God's grace. He asserts that faith itself is not a work that earns righteousness but is the means through which God's righteousness is imputed to us. The sermon concludes by affirming that God justifies the ungodly, a truth that challenges conventional views on the necessity of good works for salvation.

Transcript

Chap. iv., design of the disputation of the apostle therein Analysis of his discourse Verses 4, 5, particularly insisted on; their true sense vindicated What works excluded from the justification of Abraham Who it is that works not In what sense the ungodly are justified All men ungodly antecedently unto their justification Faith alone the means of justification on our part Faith itself, absolutely considered, not the righteousness that is imputed unto us Proved by sundry arguments

Rom. chap. iv. In the beginning of the fourth chapter he confirms what he had before doctrinally declared, by a signal instance; and this was of the justification of Abraham, who being the father of the faithful, his justification is proposed as the pattern of ours, as he expressly declares, verses 2224. And some few things I shall observe on this instance in our passage unto the fifth verse, where I shall fix our discourse.

1. He denies that Abraham was justified by works, verse 2. And, (1.) These works were not those of the Jewish law, which alone some pretend to be excluded from our justification in this place; for they were the works he performed some hundreds of years before the giving of the law at Sinai: wherefore they are the works of his moral obedience unto God that are intended. (2.) Those works must be understood which Abraham had then, when he is said to be justified in the testimony produced unto that purpose; but the works that Abraham then had were works of righteousness, performed in faith and love to God, works of new obedience under the conduct and aids of the Spirit of God, works required in the covenant of grace.

afforded unto him: but the expression is to be limited by the subject-matter treated of; he who worketh not, with respect unto justification; though not the design of the person, but the nature of the thing is intended. To say, he who worketh not is justified through believing, is to say that his works, whatever they be, have no influence into his justification, nor has God in justifying of him any respect unto them: wherefore, he alone who worketh not is the subject of justification, the person to be justified; that is, God considers no mans works, no mans duties of obedience, in his justification, seeing we are justified δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦχάριτι, freely by his grace. And when God affirms expressly that he justifies him who works not, and that freely by his grace, I cannot understand what place our works or duties of obedience can have in our justification; for why should we trouble ourselves to invent of what consideration they may be in our justification before God, when he himself affirms that they are of none at all? Neither are the words capable of any 316evading interpretation. He that worketh not is he that worketh not, let men say what they please, and distinguish as long as they will: and it is a boldness not to be justified, for any to rise up in opposition unto such express divine testimonies, however they may be harnessed with philosophical notions and arguings; which are but as thorns and briars, which the word of God will pass through and consume.

But the apostle farther adds, in the description of the subject of justification, that God justifieth the ungodly. This is that expression which has stirred up so much wrath amongst many, and on the account whereof some seem to be much displeased with the apostle himself. If any other person dare but say that God justifies the ungodly, he is personally reflected on as one that by his doctrine would overthrow the necessity of godliness, holiness, obedience, or good works; for what need can there be of any of them, if God justifies the ungodly? Howbeit this is a periphrasis of God, that he is ὁδικαιῶν τὸνἀσεβῆ, he that justifieth the ungodly. This is his prerogative and property; as such will he be believed in and worshipped, which adds weight and emphasis unto the expression; and we must not forego this testimony of the Holy Ghost, let men be as angry as they please.

But the difference is about the meaning of the words. If so, it may be allowed without mutual offence, though we should mistake their proper sense. Only, it must be granted that God justifieth the ungodly. That is, say some, those who formerly were ungodly, not those who continue ungodly when they are justified. And this is most true. All that are justified were before ungodly; and all that are justified are at the same instant made godly. But the question is, whether they are godly or ungodly antecedently in any moment of time unto their justification? If they are considered as godly, and are so indeed, then the apostles words are not true, that God justifies the ungodly; for the contradictory proposition is true, God justifies none but the godly. For these propositions, God justifies the ungodly, and God justifies none but the godly, are contradictory; for here are expressly κατάφασις and ἀπόφασιςἀντικείμεναι, which is ἀντίφασις.

Wherefore, although in and with the justification of a sinner, he is made godly, for he is endowed with that faith which purifies the heart and is a vital principle of all obedience, and the conscience is purged from dead works by the blood of Christ, yet antecedently unto this justification he is ungodly and considered as ungodly, as one that works not, as one whose duties and obedience contribute nothing unto his

justification. As he works not, all works are excluded from being the *causa per quam*; and as he is ungodly, from being the *causa sine qua non* of his justification.

317The qualification of the subject, or the means on the part of the person to be justified, and whereby he becomes actually so to be, is faith, or believing: But believeth on him who justifieth the ungodly; that is, it is faith alone. For it is the faith of him who worketh not; and not only so, but its especial object, God as justifying the ungodly, is exclusive of the concomitance of any works whatever.

This is faith alone, or it is impossible to express faith alone, without the literal use of that word alone. But faith being asserted in opposition unto all works of ours, unto him that worketh not; and its especial nature declared in its especial object, God as justifying the ungodly, that is, freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; no place is left for any works to make the least approach towards our justification before God, under the covert of any distinction whatever. And the nature of justifying faith is here also determined. It is not a mere assent unto divine revelations; it is not such a firm assent unto them as should cause us to yield obedience unto all the precepts of the Scripture, though these things are included in it; but it is a believing on and trusting unto him that justified the ungodly, through the mediation of Christ.

Concerning this person, the apostle affirms that his faith is counted for righteousness; that is, he is justified in the way and manner before declared. But there is a difference about the sense of these words. Some say the meaning of them is, that faith, as an act, a grace, a duty, or work of ours, is so imputed. Others say that it is faith as it apprehends Christ and his righteousness, which is properly imputed unto us, that is intended. So faith, they say, justifies, or is counted for righteousness relatively, not properly, with respect unto its object; and so acknowledge a trope in the words. And this is fiercely opposed, as though they denied the express words of the Scripture, when yet they do but interpret this expression, once only used, by many others, wherein the same thing is declared. But those who are for the first sense, do all affirm that faith here is to be taken as including obedience or works, either as the form and essence of it, or as such necessary concomitants as have the same influence with it into our justification, or are in the same manner the condition of it. But as herein they admit also of a trope in the words, which they so fiercely blame in others, so they give this sense of the whole: Unto him that worketh not, but believeth in him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith and works are counted to him for righteousness; which is not only to deny what the apostle affirms, but to assign unto him a plain contradiction.

And I do a little marvel that any unprejudiced person should expound this solitary expression in such a sense as is contradictory unto the design of the apostle, the words of the same period, and 318the whole ensuing context. For that which the apostle proposes unto confirmation, which contains his whole design, is, that we are justified by the righteousness which is of God by faith in the blood of Christ. That this cannot be faith itself shall immediately be made evident. And in the words of the text all works are excluded, if any words be sufficient to exclude them; but faith absolutely, as a single grace, act, and duty of ours, much more as it includes obedience in it, is a work, and in the latter sense, it is all works. And in the ensuing context he proves that Abraham was not justified by works. But not to be justified by works, and to be justified by some works, as faith itself is a work, and if, as such, it be imputed unto us for righteousness, we are justified by it as such, are contradictory. Wherefore, I shall oppose some few arguments unto this feigned sense of the apostles words:

1. To believe absolutely, as faith is an act and duty of ours, and works are not opposed, for faith is a work, an especial kind of working; but faith, as we are justified by it, and works, or to work, are opposed: To him

that worketh not, but believeth. So Gal. ii. 16; Eph. ii. 8, 9.

2. It is the righteousness of God that is imputed unto us; for we are made the righteousness of God in Christ, 2 Cor. v. 21; The righteousness of God upon them that believe, Rom. iii. 21, 22; but faith, absolutely considered, is not the righteousness of God. God imputeth unto us righteousness without works, chap. iv. 6; but there is no intimation of a double imputation, of two sorts of righteousnesses, of the righteousness of God, and that which is not so. Now faith, absolutely considered, is not the righteousness of God; for,

(1.) That whereunto the righteousness of God is revealed, whereby we believe and receive it, is not itself the righteousness of God; for nothing can be the cause or means of itself; but the righteousness of God is revealed unto faith, chap. i. 17; and by it is it received, chap. iii. 22; v. 11.

(2.) Faith is not the righteousness of God which is by faith; but the righteousness of God which is imputed unto us is the righteousness of God which is by faith, chap. iii. 22; Phil. iii. 9.

(3.) That whereby the righteousness of God is to be sought, obtained, and submitted unto, is not that righteousness itself; but such is faith, Rom. ix. 30, 31; x. 3, 4.

(4.) The righteousness which is imputed unto us is not our own antecedently unto that imputation: That I may be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, Phil. iii. 9; but faith is a mans own: Show me thy faith, and I will show thee my faith, James ii. 18.

(5.) God imputeth righteousness unto us, Rom. iv. 6; and that righteousness which God imputes unto us is the righteousness whereby we are justified, for it is imputed unto us that we may be justified; but we are justified by the obedience and blood of Christ: By the obedience of one we are made righteous, chap. v. 19; Much more now being justified by his blood, verse 9; He hath put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, Heb. ix. 26; Isa. liii. 11, By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. But faith is neither the obedience nor the blood of Christ.

(6.) Faith, as we said before, is our own; and that which is our own may be imputed unto us. But the discourse of the apostle is about that which is not our own antecedently unto imputation, but is made ours thereby, as we have proved; for it is of grace. And the imputation unto us of what is really our own antecedently unto that imputation, is not of grace, in the sense of the apostle; for what is so imputed is imputed for what it is, and nothing else. For that imputation is but the judgment of God concerning the thing imputed, with respect unto them whose it is. So the act of Phinehas was imputed unto him for righteousness. God judged it, and declared it to be a righteous, rewardable act. Wherefore, if our faith and obedience be imputed unto us, that imputation is only the judgment of God that we are believers, and obedient. The righteousness of the righteous, saith the prophet, shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him, Ezek. xviii. 20. As the wickedness of the wicked is upon him, or is imputed unto him; so the righteousness of the righteous is upon him, or is imputed unto him. And the wickedness of the wicked is on him, when God judges him wicked as his works are; so is the righteousness of a man upon him, or imputed unto him, when God judges of his righteousness as it is. Wherefore, if faith, absolutely considered, be imputed unto us as it contains in itself, or as it is accompanied with, works of obedience; then it is imputed unto us, either for a perfect righteousness, which it is not, or for an imperfect righteousness, which it is; or the imputation of it is the accounting of that to be a perfect righteousness which is but imperfect. But none of these can be affirmed:

[1.] It is not imputed unto us for a perfect righteousness, the righteousness required by the law; for so it is not. Episcopus confesses in his disputation, dispute. 45, sect. 7, 8, that the righteousness which is imputed unto us must be absolutissima et perfectissima, most absolute and most perfect. And thence he thus defines the imputation of righteousness unto us, namely, that it is, gratiosa divinæ mentis æstimatio, quâ credentem in Filium suum, eo loco reputat ac si perfectè justus esset, ac legi et voluntati ejus per omnia 320semper paruisset. And no man will pretend that faith is such a most absolute and most perfect righteousness, as that by it the righteousness of the law should be fulfilled in us, as it is by that righteousness which is imputed unto us.

[2.] It is not imputed unto us for what it is, an imperfect righteousness; for, First, This would be of no advantage unto us; for we cannot be justified before God by an imperfect righteousness, as is evident in the prayer of the psalmist, Ps. cxliii. 2, Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight no man living (no servant of thine who has the most perfect or highest measure of imperfect righteousness) shall be justified. Secondly, The imputation of any thing unto us that was ours antecedently unto that imputation, for what it is, and no more, is contrary unto the imputation described by the apostle; as has been proved.

[3.] This imputation pleaded for cannot be a judging of that to be a perfect righteousness which is imperfect; for the judgment of God is according to truth. But without judging it to be such, it cannot be accepted as such. To accept of any thing, but only for what we judge it to be, is to be deceived.

Lastly, If faith, as a work, be imputed unto us, then it must be as a work wrought in faith; for no other work is accepted with God. Then must that faith also wherein it is wrought be imputed unto us; for that also is faith and a good work. That, therefore, must have another faith from whence it must proceed; and so in infinitum.

Many other things there are in the ensuing explication of the justification of Abraham, the nature of his faith and his righteousness before God, with the application of them unto all that do believe, which may be justly pleaded unto the same purpose with those passages of the context which we have insisted on; but if every testimony should be pleaded which the Holy Ghost has given unto this truth, there would be no end of writing. One thing more I shall observe, and put an end unto our discourse on this chapter.

Rom. iv. 68. The apostle pursues his argument to prove the freedom of our justification by faith, without respect unto works, through the imputation of righteousness, in the instance of pardon of sin, which essentially belongs thereunto. And this he does by the testimony of the psalmist, who places the blessedness of a man in the remission of sins. His design is not thereby to declare the full nature of justification, which he had done before, but only to prove the freedom of it from any respect unto works in the instance of that essential part of it. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, (which was the only thing he designed to prove by this testimony), saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven. He describes 321their blessedness by it; not that their whole blessedness does consist therein, but this concurs unto it, wherein no respect can possibly be had unto any works whatever. And he may justly from hence describe the blessedness of a man, in that the imputation of righteousness and the non-imputation of sin (both which the apostle mentions distinctly), wherein his whole blessedness as unto justification does consist, are inseparable. And because remission of sin is the first part of justification, and the principal part of it, and has the imputation of righteousness always accompanying it, the blessedness of a man may be well described thereby; yea, whereas all spiritual blessings go together in Christ, Eph. i. 3, a mans blessedness may be

described by any of them. But yet the imputation of righteousness and the remission of sin are not the same, no more than righteousness imputed and sin remitted are the same. Nor does the apostle propose them as the same, but mentions them distinctly, both being equally necessary unto our complete justification, as has been proved.

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