

Romans X. 3, 4

by John Owen

The sermon explores the distinction between righteousness attained through faith in Christ and that sought through personal works of the law.

Scripture: Romans 10:3

Topics: "Righteousness by Faith", "The End of the Law"

Description

John Owen expounds on Romans 10:3-4, emphasizing that the Jews, despite their zeal for God, failed to attain righteousness because they sought it through their own works rather than through faith in Christ. He contrasts the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness but received it through faith, highlighting the futility of self-righteousness. Owen argues that true righteousness comes from submitting to God's righteousness, which is fulfilled in Christ, the end of the law for all who believe. He warns against the dangers of relying on personal merit and stresses that justification is solely by faith, not by works. Ultimately, Owen calls for a complete reliance on Christ for righteousness and justification before God.

Transcript

Rom. x. 3, 4, explained and insisted on to the same purpose

Rom. x. 3, 4. "For they" (the Jews, who had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge), "being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness unto every one that believeth."

What is here determined, the apostle enters upon the proposition and declaration of, chap. ix. 30. And because what he had to propose was somewhat strange, and unsuited unto the common apprehensions of men, he introduces it with that prefatory interrogation, "What shall we say then?" (which he uses on the like occasions, chap. iii. 5; vi. 1; vii. 7; ix. 14) -- "What shall we say then?" that is, "Is there in this matter 'unrighteousness with God?'" as verse 14; or, "What shall we say unto these things?" or, "This is that which is to be said herein." That which hereon he asserts is, "That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith; but Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness;" that is, unto righteousness itself before God.

Nothing seems to be more contrary unto reason than what is here made manifest by the event. The Gentiles, who lived in sin and pleasures, not once endeavouring to attain unto any righteousness before God, yet attained unto it upon the preaching of the gospel. Israel, on the other hand, which followed after righteousness diligently in all the works of the law, and duties of obedience unto God thereby, 339came short of it, attained not unto it. All preparations, all dispositions, all merit, as unto righteousness and justification, are excluded from the Gentiles; for in all of them there is more or less a following after righteousness, which is denied of them all. Only by faith in him who justifies the ungodly, they attain righteousness, or they attained the righteousness of faith. For to attain righteousness by faith, and to attain the righteousness which is of faith, are the same. Wherefore, all things that are comprised any way in following after righteousness, such as are all our duties and works, are excluded from any influence into our justification. And this is expressed to declare the sovereignty and freedom of the grace of God herein, -- namely, that we are justified freely by his grace, -- and that on our part all boasting is excluded. Let men pretend what they will, and dispute what they please, those who attain unto righteousness and justification before God, when they follow not after righteousness, they do it by the gratuitous imputation of the righteousness of another unto them.

It may be it will be said: "It is true in the time of their heathenism they did not at all follow after righteousness, but when the truth of the gospel was revealed unto them, then they followed after righteousness, and did attain it." But, -- 1. This is directly to contradict the apostle, in that it says that they attained not righteousness but only as they followed after righteousness; whereas he affirms the direct contrary. 2. It takes away the distinction which he puts between them and Israel, -- namely, that the one followed after righteousness, and the other did not. 3. To follow after righteousness, in this place, is to follow after a righteousness of our own: "To establish their own righteousness," chap. x. 3. But this is so far from being a means of attaining righteousness, as that it is the most effectual obstruction thereof.

If, therefore, those who have no righteousness of their own, who are so far from it that they never endeavoured to attain it, do yet by faith receive that righteousness wherewith they are justified before God, they do so by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto them; or let some other way be assigned.

In the other side of the instance, concerning Israel, some must hear, whether they will or not, that wherewith they are not pleased.

Three things are expressed of them:-- 1. Their attempt. 2. Their success. 3. The reason of it.

1. Their attempt or endeavour was in this, that they "followed after the law of righteousness." 916;953;974;954;969;, the word whereby their endeavour is expressed, signifies that which is earnest, diligent, and sincere. By it does the apostle declare what his [endeavour] was, and what ours ought to be, in the duties and exercise of gospel obedience, Phil. iii. 12. 340They were not indiligent in this matter, but "instantly served God day and night." Nor were they hypocritical; for the apostle bears them record in this matter, that "they had a zeal of God," Rom. x. 2. And that which they thus endeavoured after was 957;972;956;959;962; 948;953;954;945;953;959;963;973;957;951;962;, -- "the law of righteousness," that law which prescribed a perfect personal righteousness before God; "the things which if a man do them, he shall live in them," chap. x. 5. Wherefore, the apostle has no other respect unto the ceremonial law in this place but only as it was branched out from the moral law by the will of God, and as the obedience unto it belonged thereunto. When he speaks of it separately, he calls it "the law of

commandments contained in ordinances;" but it is nowhere called "the law of righteousness," the law whose righteousness is fulfilled in us, chap. viii. 4. Wherefore, the following after this law of righteousness was their diligence in the performance of all duties of obedience, according unto the directions and precepts of the moral law.

2. The issue of this attempt is, that they "attained not unto the law of righteousness,"
εἰς νόμον
δικαιοσύνης οὐκ
ἔφθασε, -- that is, they attained not unto a righteousness before God hereby. Though this was the end of the law, namely, a righteousness before God, wherein a man might live, yet could they never attain it.

3. An account is given of the reason of their failing in attaining that which they so earnestly endeavoured after. And this was in a double mistake that they were under; -- first, In the means of attaining it; secondly, In the righteousness itself that was to be sought after. The first is declared, chap. ix. 32, "Because not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law." Faith and works are the two only ways whereby righteousness may be attained, and they are opposite and inconsistent; so that none does or can seek after righteousness by them both. They will not be mixed and made one entire means of attaining righteousness. They are opposed as grace and works; what is of the one is not of the other, chap. xi. 6. Every composition of them in this matter is, "Male sarta gratia nequicquam coit et rescinditur." And the reason is, because the righteousness which faith seeks after, or which is attainable by faith, is that which is given to us, imputed unto us, which faith does only receive. It receives "the abundance of grace, and the gift of righteousness." But that which is attainable by works is our own, inherent in us, wrought out by us, and not imputed unto us; for it is nothing but those works themselves, with respect unto the law of God.

And if righteousness before God be to be obtained alone by faith, and that in contradiction unto all works, -- which if a man do them, according unto the law, "he shall even live in them," -- then is it by faith alone that we are justified before God, or, nothing else on our 341part is required thereunto. And of what nature this righteousness must be is evident.

Again: if faith and works are opposed as contrary and inconsistent, when considered as the means of attaining righteousness or justification before God, as plainly they are, then is it impossible we should be justified before God by them in the same sense, way, and manner. Wherefore, when the apostle James affirms that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only, he cannot intend our justification before God, where it is impossible they should both concur; for not only are they declared inconsistent by the apostle in this place, but it would introduce several sorts of righteousness into justification, that are inconsistent and destructive of each other. This was the first mistake of the Jews, whence this miscarriage ensued, -- they sought not after righteousness by faith, but as it were by the works of the law.

Their second mistake was as unto the righteousness itself whereon a man might be justified before God; for this they judged was to be their own righteousness, chap. x. 3. Their own personal righteousness, consisting in their own duties of obedience, they looked on as the only righteousness whereon they might be justified before God. This, therefore, they went about to establish, as the Pharisee did, Luke xviii. 11, 12: and this mistake, with their design thereon, "to establish their own righteousness," was the principal cause that made them reject the righteousness of God; as it is with many at this day.

Whatever is done in us, or performed by us, as obedience unto God, is our own righteousness. Though it be done in faith, and by the aids of God's grace, yet is it subjectively ours, and, so far as it is a righteousness, it is our own. But all righteousness whatever, which is our own, is so far diverse from the righteousness by which we are to be justified before God, as that the most earnest endeavour to establish it, -- that is, to render it such as by which we may be justified, -- is an effectual means to cause us to refuse a submission unto, and an acceptance of, that whereby alone we may be so.

This ruined the Jews, and will be the ruin of all that shall follow their example in seeking after justification; yet is it not easy for men to take any other way, or to be taken off from this. So the apostle intimates in that expression, "They submitted not themselves unto the righteousness of God." This righteousness of God is of that nature that the proud mind of man is altogether unwilling to bow and submit itself unto; yet can it no otherwise be attained, but by such a submission or subjection of mind as contains in it a total renunciation of any righteousness of our own. And those who reproach others for affirming that men endeavouring after morality, or moral righteousness, and resting therein, are in no good way for the participation ³⁴²of the grace of God by Jesus Christ, do expressly deride the doctrine of the apostle; that is, of the Holy Ghost himself.

Wherefore, the plain design of the apostle is, to declare that not only faith and the righteousness of it, and a righteousness of our own by works, are inconsistent, that is, as unto our justification before God; but also, that the intermixture of our own works, in seeking after righteousness, as the means thereof, does wholly divert us from the acceptance of or submission unto the righteousness of God. For the righteousness which is of faith is not our own; it is the righteousness of God, -- that which he imputes unto us. But the righteousness of works is our own, -- that which is wrought in us and by us. And as works have no aptitude nor meekness in themselves to attain or receive a righteousness which, because it is not our own, is imputed unto us, but are repugnant unto it, as that which will cast them down from their legal dignity of being our righteousness; so faith has no aptitude nor meekness in itself to be an inherent righteousness, or so to be esteemed, or as such to be imputed unto us, seeing its principal faculty and efficacy consist in fixing all the trust, confidence, and expectation of the soul, for righteousness and acceptance with God, upon another.

Here was the ruin of those Jews: they judged it a better, a more probable, yea, a more righteous and holy way for them, constantly to endeavour after a righteousness of their own, by duties of obedience unto the law of God, than to imagine that they could come to acceptance with God by faith in another. For tell them, and such as they, what you please, if they have not a righteousness of their own, that they can set upon its legs, and make to stand before God, the law will not have its accomplishment, and so will condemn them.

To demolish this last sort of unbelief, the apostle grants that the law must have its end, and be completely fulfilled, or there is no appearing for us as righteous before God; and withal shows them how this is done, and where alone it is to be sought after: for "Christ," says he, "is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth," Rom. x. 4. We need not trouble ourselves to inquire in what various senses Christ may be said to be ^{τ}^{έ}^{λ}^{ο}^{ς} ^{ν}^{ό}^{μ}^{ο}^{υ}, -- "the end," the complement, the perfection, "of the law." The apostle sufficiently determines his intention, in affirming not absolutely that he is the end of the law, but he is so ^{ε}^{ἰ}^{ς} ^{δ}^{ι}^{κ}^{α}^{ι}^{ο}^{σ}^{ύ}^{ν}^{η}^{ν}, "for righteousness," unto every one that believes. The matter in question is a righteousness unto justification before God. And this is acknowledged to be the righteousness which the law requires. God looks for no righteousness from us but what is prescribed in the law. The law is nothing but the rule of righteousness, -- God's prescription of a

righteousness, and all the duties of it, unto us. That we should be righteous ³⁴³herewith before God was the first, original end of the law. Its other ends at present, of the conviction of sin, and judging or condemning for it, were accidental unto its primitive constitution. This righteousness which the law requires, which is all and only that righteousness which God requires of us, the accomplishment of this end of the law, the Jews sought after by their own personal performance of the works and duties of it. But hereby, in the utmost of their endeavours, they could never fulfil this righteousness, nor attain this end of the law; which yet if men do not they must perish for ever.

Wherefore, the apostle declares, that all this is done another way; that the righteousness of the law is fulfilled, and its end, as unto a righteousness before God, attained; and that is in and by Christ. For what the law required, that he accomplished; which is accounted unto every one that believes.

Herein the apostle issues the whole disquisition about a righteousness wherewith we may be justified before God, and, in particular, how satisfaction is given unto the demands of the law. That which we could not do, -- that which the law could not effect in us, in that it was weak through the flesh, -- that which we could not attain by the works and duties of it, -- that Christ has done for us; and so is "the end of the law for righteousness unto every one that believeth."

The law demands a righteousness of us; the accomplishment of this righteousness is the end which it aims at, and which is necessary unto our justification before God. This is not to be attained by any works of our own, by any righteousness of our own. But the Lord Christ is this for us, and unto us; which, how he is or can be but by the imputation of his obedience and righteousness in the accomplishment of the law, I cannot understand; I am sure the apostle does not declare.

The way whereby we attain unto this end of the law, which we cannot do by our utmost endeavours to establish our own righteousness, is by faith alone, for "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness unto every one that believeth." To mix any thing with faith herein, as it is repugnant unto the nature of faith and works, with respect unto their aptitude and meekness for the attaining of a righteousness, so it is as directly contradictory unto the express design and words of the apostle as any thing that can be invented.

Let men please themselves with their distinctions, which I understand not (and yet, perhaps, should be ashamed to say so, but that I am persuaded they understand them not themselves by whom they are used), or with cavils, objections, feigned consequences, which I value not; here I shall forever desire to fix my soul, and herein to acquiesce, -- namely, that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that doth believe." And I do suppose, that all ³⁴⁴they who understand aright what it is that the law of God does require of them, how needful it is that it be complied withal, and that the end of it be accomplished, with the utter insufficiency of their own endeavours unto those ends, will, at least when the time of disputing is over, betake themselves unto the same refuge and rest.

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