

The General Nature of Justification

by John Owen

John Owen explores the nature of justification, emphasizing reliance on Christ's righteousness for acceptance with God.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28, John 3:18, Romans 3:19, Romans 4:5, Galatians 3:10, Galatians 3:22

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Christian Obedience"

Description

John Owen delves into the doctrine of justification, emphasizing the state of the person to be justified as ungodly and guilty before God, highlighting the need for acceptance through faith in Christ's righteousness rather than inherent works. The proper ends of teaching this doctrine are to bring glory to God, promote peace, and encourage obedience among believers. Owen warns against getting lost in philosophical terms and distractions, stressing the importance of focusing on the peace and acceptance with God that justification brings. He urges believers to trust in Christ alone for mercy, righteousness, and glory, avoiding unnecessary contentions and disputes that detract from the essence of the gospel.

Transcript

First, The general nature of justification -- State of the person to be justified antecedently thereunto, Rom. iv. 5; iii. 19; i. 32; Gal. iii. 10; John iii. 18, 36; Gal. iii. 22 -- The sole inquiry on that state -- Whether it be any thing that is our own inherently, or what is only imputed unto us, that we are to trust unto for our acceptance with God -- The sum of this inquiry -- The proper ends of teaching and learning the doctrine of justification -- Things to be avoided therein

That we may treat of the doctrine of justification usefully unto its proper ends, which are the glory of God in Christ, with the peace and furtherance of the obedience of believers, some things are previously to be considered, which we must have respect unto in the whole process of our discourse. And, among others that might be insisted on to the same purpose, these that ensue are not to be omitted:--

1. The first inquiry in this matter, in a way of duty, is after the proper relief of the conscience of a sinner pressed and perplexed with a sense of the guilt of sin. For justification is the way and means whereby such a person does obtain acceptance before God, with a right and title unto a heavenly inheritance. And nothing is pleadable in this cause but what a man would speak unto his own conscience in that state, or unto the conscience of another, when he is anxious under that inquiry. Wherefore, the person under consideration (that is, who is to be justified) is one who, in himself, is [ungodly](#); Rom. iv. 5, -- "ungodly;" and thereon

ὑπόδικος τῷ Θεῷ, chap. iii. 19, -- "guilty before God;" that is, obnoxious, subject, liable, τῷ δικαιώματι τοῦ Θεοῦ, chap. i. 32, -- to the righteous sentential judgment of God, that "he who committeth sin," who is any way guilty of it, is "worthy of death." Hereupon such a person finds himself ὑπὸ κατάραν, Gal. iii. 10, -- under "the curse," and "the wrath of God" therein abiding on him," John iii. 18, 36. In this condition he is ἀναπολόγητος, -- without plea, without excuse, by any thing in and from himself, for his own relief; his "mouth is stopped," Rom. iii. 19. For he is, in the judgment of God, declared in the Scripture, συγκεκλεισμένος ὑφ' ἁμαρτίαν, 8Gal. iii. 22, -- every way "shut up under sin" and all the consequents of it. Many evils in this condition are men subject unto, which may be reduced unto those two of our first parents, wherein they were represented. For, first, they thought foolishly to hide themselves from God; and then, more foolishly, would have charged him as the cause of their sin. And such, naturally, are the thoughts of men under their convictions. But whoever is the subject of the justification inquired after, is, by various means, brought into his apprehensions who cried, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

2. With respect unto this state and condition of men, or men in this state and condition, the inquiry is, What that is upon the account whereof God pardons all their sins, receives them into his favour, declares or pronounces them righteous and acquitted from all guilt, removes the curse, and turns away all his wrath from them, giving them right and title unto a blessed, immortality or life eternal? This is that alone wherein the consciences of sinners in this estate are concerned. Nor do they inquire after any thing, but what they may have to oppose unto or answer the justice of God in the commands and curse of the law, and what they may betake themselves unto for the obtaining of acceptance with him unto life and salvation.

That the apostle does thus, and no otherwise, state this whole matter, and, in an answer unto this inquiry, declare the nature of justification and all the causes of it, in the third and fourth chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, and elsewhere, shall be afterwards declared and proved. And we shall also manifest, that the apostle James, in the second chapter of his epistle, does not speak unto this inquiry, nor give an answer unto it; but it is of justification in another sense, and to another purpose, whereof he treats. And whereas we cannot either safely or usefully treat of this doctrine, but with respect unto the same ends for which it is declared, and whereunto it is applied in the Scripture, we should not, by any pretences, be turned aside from attending unto this case and its resolution, in all our discourses on this subject; for it is the direction, satisfaction, and peace of the consciences of men, and not the curiosity of notions or subtlety of disputations, which it is our duty to design. And, therefore, I shall, as much as I possibly may, avoid all these philosophical terms and distinctions wherewith this evangelical doctrine has been perplexed rather than illustrated; for more weight is to be put on the steady guidance of the mind and conscience of one believer, really exercised about the foundation of his peace and acceptance with God, than on the confutation of ten wrangling disputers.

3. Now the inquiry, on what account, or for what cause and reason, 9a man may be so acquitted or discharged of sin, and accepted with God, as before declared, does necessarily issue in this:-- Whether it be any thing in ourselves, as our faith and repentance, the renovation of our natures, inherent habits of grace, and actual works of righteousness which we have done, or may do? Or whether it be the

obedience, righteousness, satisfaction, and merit of the Son of God our mediator, and surety of the covenant, imputed unto us? One of these it must be, -- namely, something that is our own, which, whatever may be the influence of the grace of God unto it, or causality of it, because wrought in and by us, is inherently our own in a proper sense; or something which, being not our own, nor inherent in us, nor wrought by us, is yet imputed unto us, for the pardon of our sins and the acceptance of our persons as righteous, or the making of us righteous in the sight of God. Neither are these things capable of mixture or composition, Rom. xi. 6. Which of these it is the duty, wisdom, and safety of a convinced sinner to rely upon and trust unto, in his appearance before God, is the sum of our present inquiry.

4. The way whereby sinners do or ought to betake themselves unto this relief, on supposition that it is the righteousness of Christ, and how they come to be partakers of, or interested in, that which is not inherently their own, unto as good benefit and as much advantage as if it were their own, is of a distinct consideration. And as this also is clearly determined in the Scripture, so it is acknowledged in the experience of all them that do truly believe. Neither are we in this matter much to regard the senses or arguing of men who were never thoroughly convinced of sin, nor have ever in their own persons "fled for refuge unto the hope set before them."

5. These things, I say, are always to be attended unto, in our whole disquisition into the nature of evangelical justification; for, without a constant respect unto them, we shall quickly wander into curious and perplexed questions, wherein the consciences of guilty sinners are not concerned; and which, therefore, really belong not unto the substance or truth of this doctrine, nor are to be immixed therewith. It is alone the relief of those who are in themselves guilty before, or obnoxious and liable to, the judgment of God, -- that we inquire after. That this is not any thing in or of themselves, nor can so be, -- that it is a provision without them, made in infinite wisdom and grace by the mediation of Christ, his obedience and death therein, -- is secured in the Scripture against all contradiction; and it is the fundamental principle of the gospel, Matt. xi. 28.

6. It is confessed that many things, for the declaration of the truth, and the order of the dispensation of God's grace herein, are necessary to be insisted on, -- such are the nature of justifying faith, the place and use of it in justification, and the causes of the new covenant, the true notion of the mediation and suretiship of Christ, and the like; which shall all of them be inquired into. But, beyond what tends directly unto the guidance of the minds and satisfaction of the souls of men, who seek after a stable and abiding foundation of acceptance with God, we are not easily to be drawn unless we are free to lose the benefit and comfort of this most important evangelical truth in needless and unprofitable contentions. And amongst many other miscarriages which men are subject unto, whilst they are conversant about these things, this, in an especial manner, is to be avoided.

7. For the doctrine of justification is directive of Christian practice, and in no other evangelical truth is the whole of our obedience more concerned; for the foundation, reasons, and motives of all our duty towards God are contained therein. Wherefore, in order unto the due improvement of them ought it to be taught, and not otherwise. That which alone we aim (or ought so to do) to learn in it and by it, is how we may get and maintain peace with God, and so to live unto him as to be accepted with him in what we do. To satisfy the minds and consciences of men in these things, is this doctrine to be taught. Wherefore, to carry it out of the understandings of ordinary Christians, by speculative notions and distinctions, is disserviceable unto the faith of the church; yea, the mixing of evangelical revelations with philosophical notions has been, in sundry ages, the poison of religion. Pretence of accuracy, and artificial skill in teaching, is that which gives

of teaching things practical), than in the most accurate philosophical expressions, is himself really ignorant of the whole truth in this matter. The propriety of such expressions belongs and is confined unto natural science; but spiritual truths are to be taught, "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual." God is wiser than man; and the Holy Ghost knows better what are the most expedient ways for the illumination of our minds with that knowledge of evangelical truths which it is our duty to have and attain, than the wisest of us all. And other knowledge of or skill in these things, than what is required of us in a way of duty, is not to be valued.

It is, therefore, to no purpose to handle the mysteries of the gospel as if Hilcot and Bricot, Thomas and Gabriel, with all the Sententiarists,⁴ Summists, and Quodlibetarians of the old Roman peripatetical school, were to be raked out of their graves to be our guides. Especially will they be of no use unto us in this doctrine of justification. For whereas they pertinaciously adhered unto the philosophy of Aristotle, who knew nothing of any righteousness but what is a habit inherent in ourselves, and the acts of it, they wrested the whole doctrine of justification unto a compliance wherewithal. So Pighius⁵ himself complained of them, Controv. 2, "Dissimulare non possumus, hanc vel primam doctrinæ Christianæ partem (de justificatione) obscuratam magis quam illustratam a scholasticis, spinosis plerisque quæstionibus, et definitionibus, secundum quas nonnulli magno supercilio primam in omnibus auctoritatem arrogantes," etc.

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