

Do Not Seek Righteousness by the Law

by Robert Traill

The apostle Paul argues that seeking righteousness by the works of the law frustrates the grace of God and that true believers in Jesus Christ cannot frustrate the grace of God.

Scripture: Psalm 110:3, Acts 26:9, Romans 11:6, Galatians 2:21, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Legalism And Grace"

Description

Robert Traill preaches on the importance of not frustrating the grace of God by seeking righteousness through the law, emphasizing that true righteousness for justification is found only in Christ. He highlights the two grand absurdities of this doctrine: that it frustrates God's grace and renders Christ's death in vain. Traill explains that seeking righteousness through the law is a great and horrible sin, as it opposes the gospel's message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. He delves into the consequences of frustrating God's grace, cautioning against the dangers of self-righteousness and legalism.

Transcript

"I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." -- Gal. 2:21.

When I first entered on these words, I told you what the scope of the apostle was in this epistle: he is here brining forth arguments against that error that the Galatian churches were plagued with; and arguments for that truth of the gospel that he had planted amongst them, and taught them. The truth was this, That the righteousness of a sinner for justification was only in Christ. The error of the Galatians lay in this, That something of the righteousness of the law was to be mixed therewith. My text contains two arguments against this error, drawn from a common natural head of arguing against error, by the absurdities that necessarily flow from it. Now there are two grand absurdities that flow from this doctrine of the law in point of justification, 1st, That it frustrates the grace of God; 2dly, That it makes Christ's death to be in vain: and two more abominable things cannot be well thought of; and people have great need to fear, and to take heed of any doctrine that hath any tendency to either of them. The first of these the apostle expresses in his own person: "I do not frustrate the grace of God." And here he speaks as a believer, and not as a minister nor an apostle; so he discourses from ver. 16, speaking of himself and the rest of the godly, like ordinary believers, that betook themselves to this way of relief by Christ's righteousness alone. I propose four observations to speak to.

1st, That the grace of God shines gloriously in the justifying of a sinner through the righteousness of Christ: and this I have spoke to.

2dly, That frustrating the grace of God is a great and horrible sin; for so it is expressed by the apostle, "I do not frustrate the grace of God." As if he should have said, "Blessed be God, I am not in that road; I am not one that frustrates the grace of God; I am saved by it." How the grace of God is frustrated, and how great the sin is, I spoke to the last day. The revelation of the grace of God, and the tender of it, and the urging of it, may be frustrated, and is, by many: but the grace itself, in its powerful conveyance by the Holy Ghost on the hearts of men, always reaches its end. The grace of God is irresistible in its thorough powerful application: this I also spoke to; and would only add a word or two further about the greatness of this sin of seeking righteousness by the law, and thereby frustrating the grace of God.

1. This is a sin that but few in the world can commit. The greatest part of them that go to hell cannot commit this sin; they never frustrated the grace of God. Indeed all that are finally guilty of it go to hell; but all that go to hell are not guilty of this sin. The greatest part of the world never frustrated the grace of God, for they never heard of it; and, therefore, our Lord pronounces a woe against Capernaum, against Chorazin and Bethsaida, and tells them that they were in a worse case than Sodom and Gomorrah, than Tyre and Sidon, (Matt. 11:21), because the grace of God was never offered them as it was to the others. Sirs, let me tell you, the worst quarters in hell are for those persons that are nearest to Christ, and yet not in him by faith: of all sinners such drop deepest into the pit.

2. The devils are not guilty of this sin. There is not a devil in hell, nor out of it, that is so guilty of this sin of frustrating the grace of God, as thousands of professors in London are. The devils are haters of the grace of God; but the grace of God was never tendered to them: they only hate the grace of God as it is tendered to men, and envy it; but the grace of God was never offered to the devils. The way of preserving the holy angels, and the way of justice to the damned spirits, proclaim greatly the wonderful privilege that we have in the gospel. The holy angels are kept, and they received grace, for the election of grace fell on them: they are called the elect angels. When that great apostasy was in the upper house, all the reprobate angels fell of their own accord, and all the elect angels stood: and that election of grace towards angels ran through Jesus Christ, who was to be their preserving head. There is something that looks like this in the word of God.

But recovering grace to angels was never given; the angels that stood had preserving grace given them, to keep them in their first station; but the angels that fell had no recovering grace given them, "Christ took not on him," saith the apostle, "the nature of angels, but was born of the seed of Abraham." And thence it came to pass, that the devils themselves are not guilty of this sin of frustrating the grace of God. Surely then people had need to take great heed that they be not guilty of a worse sin than that which the devils can commit. There is no creature that hath frustrated the grace of God, but that creature that hath the offer of the grace of God.

3. Frustrating the grace of God is a sin that none that are in hell are guilty of. All that are finally guilty of it on earth are sent to hell, but none that are in hell are guilty of it; for when once that last sentence is executed upon them, the door of grace and mercy is for ever shut upon them. So that it is the gospel-sinner only who can frustrate the grace of God, who is guilty of that sin; and that but a small part of the world are guilty of it; that the devils in hell are not guilty of it, that all the damned in hell are not guilty of it, though they rage, and roar, and blaspheme; and ail sorts of wickedness we may well conclude to be in their miserable state: but frustrating the grace of God is a sin not to be found in hell, because grace enters

not there. So much shall serve for this second point of doctrine, That it is a horrible sin to frustrate the grace of God. I come now to speak to the next doctrine.

3dly, To seek righteousness by the works of the law, is to frustrate the grace of God: for this is the scope of the apostle's argument. It is to shew that there is no righteousness to be had by the law; and this is one argument that he proves it by, "I do not," saith he, "frustrate the grace of God." It is, as if he should have said, "If I sought righteousness by the works of the law, I should frustrate the grace of God; but I do not seek righteousness by the law, for I am dead to the law, and therefore I do not frustrate the grace of God." There are two things under this doctrine that I would speak to -- 1st, What is it to seek righteousness by the law? 2dly, How doth it appear that seeking righteousness by the works of the law is frustrating the grace of God? For they that are guilty of this sin of seeking righteousness by the works of the law, they are very loath to take in this, that they frustrate the grace of God: they will say, that they give all respect to the grace Of God; even the self-righteous Pharisee could claim to have the grace of God, (Luke 18:11), "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men;" "I thank God, that I am so good as I am;" when he was a poor, vain, self-conceited man all the while.

1. What is it to seek righteousness by the works of the law? By law here I mean the holy spotless law of God. The law of man hath nothing to do in the point of righteousness before God. This seeking of righteousness by the law is righteousness in God's sight; the apostle states the matter so. No man is justified by the law in the sight of God. That a man is justified by the law in the sight of men, nobody can deny. We should be very careful to justify ourselves in the sight of men by the law, and our conformity to it; but this righteousness here spoken of is righteousness in the sight of God, and righteousness by the law of God; and it stands in three things.

1st, Righteousness by the law is that which obtains a man's acceptance with God. That is righteousness by the law that procures a man's acceptance with God; upon the account of which he stands before God as a righteous man, and is dealt with accordingly. Now, he that seeks righteousness by the law in this sense, is one who dreams, that by doing and obeying what the law requires, he may work out that for which he may stand righteous and accepted in God's sight. And that is one way this sin is committed.

2dly, In this righteousness before God by the works of the law, there is an expectation of impunity for all that is past in transgressing the law. And we find that this must necessarily be the righteousness of a holy man, who stands in a state of acceptance with God; but the righteousness of a man who hath been once a sinner must be by having that which may bring him into a state of impunity and safety of all the transgressions that he hath been guilty of before. Now, men are guilty of seeking righteousness by the works of the law this second way, when they do, or think to do, that for which God will forgive all their transgressions, and forget all that they have done: and of this the Pharisee made no question: though he was a sinner, yet he comes and prays, and expects acceptation in God's sight, and the forgiveness of his sins, upon the account of the good that he had done.

3dly, In this righteousness by the works of the law there is a title to eternal life. He that, by what he doth, expects to have a right conferred upon him to eternal life, is a man that seeks righteousness by the law: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" said the poor young legalist, (Matt. 19:16). I would gladly have eternal life, and would gladly have a right to it: Master, tell me what good thing shall I do to get it. These are the three ways by which men seek righteousness by the law:--To do that whereby a man may obtain acceptance before God: To do that for which he may obtain pardon and impunity from God: To do that for which he may have a right conferred on him to eternal life. But, you will

say, this is so gross Popery, that there is no Protestant guilty of it. Alas! alas! every natural man is guilty of it; and it is only the almighty power of the Spirit of God that can erase it out of their hearts. I will offer you some plain proofs of this.

1. How many are there, when their hearts are examined, must acknowledge that their eyes are altogether on the precepts of the law, and not a thought on the promises of the gospel? How many poor creatures are there that begin to be thoughtful about their salvation, insomuch that they make people that are about them, who are ignorant and charitable, think that they are hopeful Christians. But try these people this way, and you will find that all the exercise of their religion is about the precepts of the law, and they have no exercise at all about the promises of the gospel, he that minds only the precepts, is only a doer; and he that minds not the promise, he is no believer: for the precept is the rule of practice; but it is the promise that is the foundation of faith. Now, how can that man be reckoned a believer, that hath no heart-exercise about the promises?

2. A great many people are mightily taken up about their own works, and but very little about Christ's. Our righteousness doth not stand in our own works; but stands in Christ's works, what Christ did, and suffered for us in his life, and death, and resurrection; therein stands our righteousness. Now, how many poor creatures are there that reckon it a great matter, and glory mightily in their own doings: if they pray, and hear, and read, and can but make any sort of reformation in their conversation, how big do these things appear in their eyes! But Christ's life and death, and all his great performances for our salvation, are mean and low, and of small esteem with them. And do not these sort of people seek righteousness by the law? Aye surely.

3. They look for eternal life, but they look for it as a reward of works, and not as an inheritance given by gift and grace; and all servants and slaves must do so, and all natural men are slaves, they are children of the bondwoman, (Gal. 4:31); they work for fear of punishment, and in hopes of the crown: they work for wages; the wages they love, and would have, but the work they hate. Whereas the believer acts just the contrary; he loves the work, and he expects the wages as the gift of grace from the blessed Father he serves. The apostle makes a great distinction between these two; "Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ, (Gal. 4:7). Every man that is for righteousness by the works of the law is a servant; he looks upon God as his master, and the law as his master's will, and he sets about obeying with all his might. Now, is not this a good servant? Yes. But all such servants go to hell: you must be children, for none but children are saved. And, indeed, there are none true servants to him, but they that are children: they are but slaves, and are cast out, that do not serve with their love, and expect the inheritance only as a gift of grace. So much for that first thing, What it is to seek righteousness by the works of the law.

2. I am now to shew you, that seeking righteousness by the works of the law, is to frustrate the grace of God: and I would shew it -- first in point of doctrine -- and then in point of practice.

1st, As to point of doctrine. In the matter of righteousness before God, the law and the gospel are perfectly opposite, and they are only so in this point. The law and the gospel agree sweetly together in all things else; but in this point of the righteousness of a man before God, the law and the gospel are quite opposite one to another. The gospel comes to bring in another salvation than the law thought of; and the law destroys the salvation of the gospel. The law and gospel, in point of righteousness before God, are exactly opposite; "And if by grace, then it is no more by works, otherwise grace is no more grace; but if it be of works, then it is no more of grace, for otherwise works were no more works," (Rom. 11:6). Grace and

works, in the point of righteousness before God, are perfectly opposite; "You are saved by grace," saith the apostle, "not of works, lest any man should boast," (Eph. 2:8, 9).

2dly, Let us bring this matter into practice, and you will find that all men express this in their attitude; both the self-righteous man, and he that is not so. Not only is it asserted in point of doctrine, that works and grace are thus inconsistent, but we always find it, even in the spirit and temper, both of the one and of the other.

1. He that seeks righteousness by the law, is a man that never saw his need of grace: and you may be well assured that that man will frustrate the grace of God, who never saw his utter need of it. He was never so far emptied, but he expects and imagines that he shall be able to work out a righteousness for himself, and so is not brought under any conviction of his utter need of the grace of God; whereas he that is for the grace of God in Christ alone, is a man that hath a great need of the grace of God, and sees himself undone without it.

2. This self-righteous man sees no glory in the grace of God shining through the righteousness of Christ; there is no excellency in it to him. Every natural man is in this mind; he sees a great deal of glory in his own doings: in a beautiful conversation, in brave gifts, and in a shining walk before men; he sees a great deal of beauty and glory here. Every natural man thinks there is a great deal of glory in his own performances. The self-righteous Pharisee came boasting in his own performances; "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican: I fast twice a week, and I give tithes of all that I possess," (Luke 18:11, 12). These were great things in the man's esteem, and so they are in the eyes of every natural man. But for that righteousness that is lodged in Christ, that is wrought out by a man without him, by one that came down from heaven, and is gone up thither again; that hath all this righteousness seated in him, and gives it forth to us by mere grace; no natural man thinks any thing of this. But the believer is a man that hath an high esteem of the righteousness of Christ. How doth the apostle Paul speak of this? "I count all things but dung, that I may win Christ; and be found in him, not having on mine own righteousness," (Phil. 3:8, 9).

3. Every natural man is averse from the grace of God, and therefore he must needs frustrate the grace of God. He is averse from it: but every believer is just of another mind. Sirs, if all men's hearts were known to us, as they are to God, here is one thing that would determine every man's state, What way do you best like to go to heaven in? "I would gladly be very holy," saith the poor man, "that I may be very happy when I die." Saith the believer, "I would gladly be clothed with Christ's righteousness, and get eternal life as the gift of his grace; and I know that by being in Christ I shall be sanctified." But no believer seeks sanctification as his righteousness, and title to glory: it is a preparation for glory, and the way that leads to glory, to all them that are saved according to that blessed method, "Whom he justified, them he also glorified," (Rom. 8:30); and by glorification there, both sanctification and eternal life are well understood by most. -- So much for the third doctrine, That seeking righteousness by the works of the law frustrates the grace of God.

I would now speak a few words to the fourth doctrine, and then make some application of both together.

Doctrine 4. No true believer in Jesus Christ can frustrate the grace of God. The apostle is here speaking of it in the account that he is giving of the grace of God working in him: "I through the law," saith he, "am dead to the law, that I might live to God;" and "I live by Christ, and by faith in him, and, therefore, I do not frustrate the grace of God." He is not speaking of the great attainment that some few Christians arrive at;

but he is speaking of that which is common to the state of all Christians: "I do not frustrate the grace of God." Before I come to the proof of this, I would lay down a few cautions, to prevent mistakes.

1st, It must be allowed that a great many who have been made Christians have been long enemies to the grace of God; and there is not a greater instance of this than the good man that speaks in my text, the apostle Paul. He was a great heart-enemy to Jesus Christ; and he was an enemy to Christ, if I may so say, with a good conscience, according to the real light that the poor man's blinded conscience had: "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth," (Acts 26:9). "I never heard a name that I hated so much as the name of this Jesus of Nazareth; and I hated it from the heart, and my conscience prompted me to it." When our Lord met him by the way, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" little did the poor man think Christ died for him, and should be a blessed fountain of life to him. A believer may be a great enemy to the grace of God, before the grace of God makes him a believer.

2dly, It may not be denied but that a true believer may take in doctrines contrary to the grace of Christ in their tendency, though he perceive it not. I should be loath to think that all these Galatians, that are here so sharply reprov'd by the apostle Paul, were rotten-hearted people; there might be many sincere people amongst them, imposed upon by the cunning of them that lay in wait to deceive. There may be, through darkness, perplexed heads in many honest hearts, about several points concerning the grace of God, It is not for us to measure, anybody's state according to the principles that they profess, unless they be very bad.

3dly, It is not to be denied but that in a fit of temptation, even a true believer may abuse the grace of God; he may turn it into wantonness, and may grow light and vain, because of his mistaking the nature of the grace of God. Several have done so, and God knows how to tame them that do so; and the severest fatherly rebukes of the law are upon them that wax wanton because of his kindness. These things being premised, I would briefly shew how it is that a good man cannot frustrate the grace of God.

1. Because good men are all grace's captives. Every believer, as a believer, and when he is made a believer, is made a captive of the grace of God. How are men saved, think you? We cannot see which way they are saved; the word goeth forth, and people hear it; but we do not know who gets good, and when they get good by it. I will tell you when men are saved; when the grace of God comes and lays hold of them, and claps hold of a poor sinner -- "This man shall be my captive, and I will save him." All believers are captives to the grace of God, and, therefore, they cannot frustrate the grace of God; they are all subdued by this grace, and made "willing in the day of his power." (Psalm 110:3).

2. No believer can frustrate the grace of God, because he is dead to the law, as the apostle's word is in the context, (Gal. 2:19). And there are two things needful to make a man dead to the law; -- to know the law; and to know himself: and whosoever knows both these, is a man dead to the law. He that knows the purity, and the spotlessness of the law of God, and he that knows his own heart, and its vileness, this man will naturally draw this conclusion, "Surely this law can never do me any good. I can never fulfil it, and it can never save me; if there be not another way of salvation than by the law, I am gone for evermore." "I through the law am dead to the law," saith the apostle; "I need no more, to make me despair of life by the law, than to see the law: it commands what I cannot do, it threatens what I cannot avoid nor bear; and therefore, I am dead to the law, that I might live to God;" -- "my life must come in another way than by the law."

So much shall serve for the opening of these truths. It would now follow to make some Application; which I shall do in two things, respecting all the doctrines that I have raised from this former part of the verse. By these doctrines here delivered by the apostle, you are called to try the spirits, to try the doctrines you hear, and you are called to try your own state; for every doctrine that is contrary to the grace of God is a doctrine that Christians should hate. And your eternal state is to be determined by these things -- What are your heart-thoughts of the law of God? What are your heart-thoughts of the righteousness of Christ? And what are your heart-thoughts of the grace of God? And every one that knows truly what his inward sense of these things is, may soon come to some conclusion concerning his spiritual state: but I shall speak more fully to these things the next opportunity.

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