

GOD'S GRACE IN JUSTIFYING THE SINNER

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

The scope of the apostle Paul in this epistle, is to reprove the church that he writes to, for a great and sudden apostasy from that faith of the gospel that they were planted in: the apostle Paul himself was one of the main planters amongst them; and quickly after his removal from them false brethren crept in amongst them, and perverted them from the simplicity that was in Christ: their great error lay here, in mixing the works of the law with the righteousness of Christ, in the grand point of the justification of a sinner before God. Throughout this epistle the apostle argues strongly against this error: they had not renounced the doctrine of Christ; they did not deny justification by faith in him; but they thought that the works of the law were to be added to their faith in Christ, in order to their justification.

I shall only take notice briefly of a few of his arguments against this error, as they lie in the context, to lead you to the words that I have read, and mean to speak to.

The former part of the chapter is historical, telling them what he had done, and what had befallen him some years ago; how he was entertained and received by the great servants of Christ at Jerusalem, Peter, James, and John, that seemed to be pillars, and were indeed so: see the first ten verses. The next thing that he breaks forth into, in point of arguing with them, is upon the account of Peter's dissimulation, and Paul's reproof of him: the point seemed to be very small; Peter had made use of his Christian liberty in free converse with the believing Gentiles; but when some of the brethren of the Jews came from Jerusalem, he withdrew himself, and separated from them, fearing them of the circumcision; "fearing that they would take it ill:" a weak kind of fear it was, and upon this small thing the apostle set himself against him with great zeal. I withstood him, saith he, to the face, because he was to be blamed, ver. 11. By this withdrawing the use of his Christian liberty, he hardened the Jews, and he weakened the hands of the weaker Jewish converts, that thought the wall of partition between the Jews and Gentiles was not yet taken away.

First, his argument against mingling the works of the law with faith in justification, is taken from the practice of the believing Jews. What way did they take to be justified? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ; even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified, ver. 15, 16.

Secondly, his next argument is taken from the bad effect and sad consequence of seeking righteousness by the law, ver. 17, which, because it is something dark, I would explain it a little in a few words: But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves are also found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. If so be we that have sought righteousness in Jesus Christ, if we have yet any dealings with the law in point of righteousness, we are found sinners still; and if a justified man be found a sinner, why then Jesus Christ, instead of delivering us from the bondage of the law, is found a minister of sin.

Thirdly, his third argument is yet strongest of all, and some way the darkest, ver. 20. For I through the law am dead unto the law, that I might live unto God. As if he should have said, "For my part, all the use that I got of the law, the more. I was acquainted with it, it slew me the more, and I died the more to it, that I might live to God; all that the law can do to me in point of justification, is only to condemn me, and it can do no more;" and whenever the law enters into a man's conscience it always does this: When the commandment came, sin revived, and I died: the commandment slew me (Rom. 7:9, 11).

Fourthly, his next argument is taken from the nature of the new life that he led, ver. 20. I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Words of extraordinary form, but of more extraordinary matter: words that one would think seem to be some way cross to one another: but yet they set forth gloriously that gracious life that through Christ Jesus is imparted to justified believers. "Christ died for me, and I am crucified with Christ; and yet I live, but it is Christ that lives in me, and Christ lives in me only by faith."

My text contains two arguments more, drawn from a common natural head of arguing against error, by the absurdities that necessarily flow from it; and they are two the greatest that can be, "Frustrating the grace of God,"—and "making the death of Christ to be in vain." And greater sins are not to be committed by men: the greatest sin, the unpardonable sin, is expressed in words very like to this, Heb. 10:29—"Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite to the Spirit of grace?" And how near to one another are frustrating the grace of God, and doing despite to the Spirit of grace, and making Christ's death to be in vain, and counting the blood of the covenant an unholy thing!

There are two words to be explained before we go any further: First, what is the grace of God? Secondly, what is it to frustrate the grace of God?

First, what is the grace of God? The grace of God hath two common noted acceptations in the Scripture.

First, it is taken and used in the Scripture for the doctrine of the grace of God, and so it is frequently used; the gospel itself is called the grace of God (Tit. 2:12). The grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared unto all men: that is, the gospel; for it is the teaching grace of God that is there spoken of, called by the apostle, the gospel of his grace. And this grace of God may be received in vain. Many may have this grace of God and go to hell. Pray that you receive not the grace of God in vain.

Secondly, by the grace of God in the word is understood the blessing itself; and this is never frustrated; that grace that called Paul, that grace that wrought mightily with him, that was not given him in vain: the grace that was bestowed was not in vain, for I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. The gospel of the grace of God is frequently frustrated, but the grace itself is never so.

Secondly, what is it to frustrate this grace of God? The word that I remember in the original is used, Mark 7:9—Ye make void (or reject) the commandments of God. It is the same word with that in my text: to frustrate the grace of God, is to defeat it of its end, to miss the end of it. In Luke 7:30 it is said the Pharisees and Lawyers frustrated the grace of God against themselves; or, as we read it there, they rejected the counsel of God against themselves. The true grace of God itself can never be frustrated, it always reaches its end, for it is almighty: but the doctrine of the

grace of God is many times rejected; and the apostle here in the text speaks of it as a sin that they are guilty of that speak of righteousness by the works of the law. There is one thing that I would observe in general from the scope of the apostle, that in the great matter of justification the apostle argues from his own experience: the true way to get sound light in the main point of the justification of a sinner before God, is to study it in thy own personal concern; if it be bandied about by men as a notion only, as a point of truth, discoursing wantonly about it, it is all one in God's sight whether men be sound or unsound about it; they are unsound in heart how sound soever they are in head about it. The great way to know the right mind of God about the justification of a poor sinner, is for all to try it with respect to themselves. Would the apostle say, "I know how I am justified, and all the world shall never persuade me to join the righteousness of the law with the righteousness of Christ."

There are four points of doctrine that I would raise, and observe from the first part of these words:

First, that the grace of God shines gloriously in the justifying of a sinner through the righteousness of Christ.

Secondly, it is a horrible sin to frustrate the grace of God.

Thirdly, All that seek righteousness by the law do frustrate the grace of God in the gospel.

Fourthly, that no sound believer can be guilty of this sin.

I would speak to the first of these at this time: "That the grace of God shines gloriously in the justifying of a sinner by the righteousness of Christ alone." When the apostle speaks of it, how frequently is this term grace added? Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Rom. 3:24. That being justified by his grace, we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

There are four things to be explained here, that will make our way plain to the proof of this point. What is justification? Who is it that doth justify? Who are justified? And upon what account?

First, what is justification? We read much of it in our Bible, and the doctrine of it is reckoned one of the fundamental points of the true Christian religion, and so indeed it is. This grand doctrine, the fountain of our peace, and comfort, and salvation, was wonderfully darkened in the Popish kingdom; and the first light of the reformation, that God was pleased to break up in our forefathers' days, was mainly about this great doctrine. Justification is not barely the pardon of sin; it is indeed always inseparable from it, the pardon of sin is a fruit of it, or a part of it. Justification is God's acquitting a man, and freeing him from all attainder; it is God's taking off the attainder that the broken law of God lays upon every sinner. Who is he that shall condemn? It is God that justifies, Rom. 8:33. Justification and condemnation are opposites; every one is under condemnation that is not justified; and every justified man is freed from condemnation. Justification is not sanctification; it is an old Popish error, sown in the heads of a great many Protestants. to think that justification and sanctification are the same: justification' and sanctification are as far different as these two:—There is a man condemned for high treason against the king by the judge; and the same man is Sick of a mortal disease and if he dies not by the hands of the hangman today, he may die of his disease tomorrow: it is the work of the physician to cure the disease, but it is an act of mercy from the king that must save him from the attainder. Justification is the acquitting and repealing the law-sentence of condemnation; sanctification is the healing of the disease of sin, that will be our bane except Christ be our physician.

Justification and sanctification are always inseparable, but they are wonderfully distinct. Justification is an act of God's free grace; sanctification is a work of God's Spirit: sanctification is a work wrought within us, justification is something done about us, and therefore justification is every where spoken of in the word in the terms of a court act.

Secondly, who is he that justifies? I answer God only: Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies, who shall condemn? Rom. 8:33. He only can justify that gives the law: he only can justify that condemns for sin: he only can justify that is wronged by sin, Mark 2:7. The Pharisees blasphemed, it was in their darkness; but yet the truth that they spake was good, though the application of it was quite naught: Why doth this man speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sin, but God only? In the case of the man sick of the palsy, whose sins Christ first forgave before he healed him of the palsy—so that the forgiveness of his sins was his justification, and the healing of his disease was as if it were the type of his sanctification—their application was wrong, in that they did not know that Christ was God, and that he had power on earth to forgive sins: but the truth itself was sound—"none can forgive sins but God only."

Justification is an act of the judge; it is only the judge and lawgiver that can pronounce it: and there is but one law-giver, saith James, that can both save and destroy, chap. 4:12. "None properly offended by sin but God, and nothing violated by sin so immediately as the law of God."

Thirdly, who is justified? Every one is not justified. What sort of a man is he that is justified? Justification is the acquitting of a man from all attainder, and it is God's doing alone; but what sort of a man is it that is justified? Is it a holy man? A man newly come from heaven? Is it a new sort of a creature, rarely made and framed? No. It is a sinner: it is an ungodly man: "God justifies the ungodly."

The man is not made godly before he is justified, nor is he left ungodly after he is justified; he is not made godly a moment before he is justified, but he is justified from his ungodliness by the sentence of justification: when he is dead in sins and trespasses, quickening comes, and life comes, Eph. 2:1.

Fourthly, upon what account is all this done? And this is the hardest of all. You have heard that justification is the freeing of a man from all charge, and that it is done by God alone, and given to a man before he can do anything of good—for no man can do anything that is good till he be sanctified, and no man is sanctified till he is justified—but the grand question is, How can God justly do this? Saith the apostle, Rom. 3:26. That he might be just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. How can God be just, and yet justify an ungodly man? "To justify the wicked, and to condemn the righteous, are both an abomination in the sight of God," when practised by man, Prov. 17:15. How then can God justify the ungodly? The grand account of this is, God justifies the ungodly for the sake of nothing in himself, but solely upon the account of this righteousness of Christ, that the apostle is here arguing upon: Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, Rom. 3:24, 25. When God justifies a man, the righteousness of Christ is reckoned to him, and God deals with him as a man in Christ; and therefore his transgressions are covered, and the man is made the righteousness of God in Christ, because Christ is made of God unto him righteousness, I Cor. 1:30. Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us righteousness. Where is the poor man's righteousness that is justified? It is in Christ Jesus. For, 2 Cor. 5:21, he hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. And to be made the righteousness of God, is nothing else but to be made righteous before God in and through Jesus Christ.

These things considered, the proof of this point is very easy—That the grace of God shines gloriously in the way of justifying a sinner by the righteousness of Jesus Christ: I shall therefore add but a few things more in the proof of it.

First, in this way all is of God, and nothing of the creature's procuring, and therefore it is of grace. Grace always shines most brightly where man appears least; every thing that tends to advance the power and efficacy of man's working, always hinders the shining forth of the glory of the grace of God; but in this way of justifying us through the righteousness of Christ, grace shines forth most gloriously, because it is all of God: we do nothing in it. To instance in a few things here,

First, the finding out of this righteousness by which we are justified is of God alone. If the question had been put to all the angels in heaven, and to many worlds of men, if this one question had been put, How can a just and holy God justify a sinner?, no created understanding could ever have been able to find out how it could be done; it was the infinite wisdom of God alone that found out this way. He will send his own Son to be a sinless man, that shall sustain the persons, and bear the sins, and take away the sins of all that shall be justified. The native sense of all mankind is this: when we know any thing of God, we know that it stands with his nature to condemn sin, and hate the sinner; but how it can stand with his justice to acquit a sinner; it is God only that could find out that.

Secondly, as the finding out of the way of our justification is of God alone, so the working out of it is Christ's alone. There was no creature of God's counsel in finding out the way, so there was no creature Christ's helper in making the way. All the great work of fulfilling the righteousness of the law was done by Christ alone; none could offer to help in the great work of bearing the weight of his Father's wrath, and bearing the burden of the justice of God, for the sins of his church. Our Lord was the alone bearer of this, he alone brought in everlasting righteousness, and put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, Heb. 9:26.

Thirdly, the applying of this righteousness is only of God alone. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring it close unto the sinner by faith: and here we have as little to do as in the former. There was none of God's everlasting council in the finding out this way, nor had Christ any helper in the work of redemption; and we help the Spirit of God as little in his work of applying this: for till the grace of God prevails upon the heart, there is a constant struggling against it. There are many poor sinners that have struggled with the Spirit of God, seeking to save them, more than many believers have ever strove with Satan, seeking to destroy them. All unbelievers are led more tamely to hell by the devil, than believers are led quietly to heaven by the Spirit of God.

Fourthly, the securing all this by the everlasting covenant is of God only. We seal God's covenant by our faith for the benefit of it; but it is Christ's great seal that is its security, even the seal of his own blood. This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many, for the remission of sins, Matt. 26:28. And so much for this first thing: The grace of God shines gloriously in the way of justifying a sinner by the righteousness of Christ; because it is altogether of God, the sinner hath no hand in it.

Secondly, this will further appear, if we consider what vile creatures the receivers of it are; they have nothing to procure it, nothing to deserve it, but a great deal to deserve the contrary. In, that Romans 5 they have three names; ver. 6 we are called ungodly; In due time Christ died for the ungodly. Ver. 8 we are called sinners; Whilst we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Ver. 10 we are called enemies; When we were enemies, were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. Here are three names; Ungodly! Sinners! Enemies!

The highest words whereby ill-deserving can be well expressed; and it is the usual way of the Spirit of God, to lay open the worst in a poor sinner, when God is about to give the best and all they that receive it, receive this grace under these names. God be merciful to me a sinner, saith the poor publican; and this man, saith our Lord, went down to his house justified, Luke 18:13, 14. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief, saith Paul, I Tim. 1:15.

And not only is it so that they are undeserving and unworthy, but they are also very proud and vain, and have a great opinion of themselves; and must it not be great grace then to justify such men? Thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, saith our Lord to the church of Laodicea, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: even when Christ is courting them to buy of him his gold and white raiment, Rev. 3:17, 18.

Thirdly, the grace of God in justifying a sinner through the righteousness of Christ appears to be very glorious, even in the very naming of it: it is the grace of God: it must be great grace, for it is the grace of God: it is the grace of a holy God: it is the grace of a just God; it is the grace of a powerful God: it is the grace of that God that can do every thing; every name that exalts the glory of God, doth also raise the value of this grace: it is the grace of God towards vile sinners, and that makes it great indeed. Let us consider this grace of God a little.

This grace of God is dear to God; and therefore it is the more grace. The grace of God in justifying us is dear to God; it cost the Father dear to part with his own Son; it cost the Son dear to part with his own life to bring in this righteousness; and, if I may so say, it cost the Holy Ghost dear to work the faith of this righteousness in the heart of a poor sinner. When we consider how all things else that God did were easily done but this: when the world was to be made, no more is to be done, but "Let it be;" but when the world was to be redeemed, "Let it be" will not do; a body must be prepared for the Son, and that body must be sacrificed for sin, and be slain, and sustain the wrath of God, and the curse of the law; and all this to bring in an everlasting righteousness.

Again: This grace that was so dear to God comes to us good cheap, we give nothing for it: the Lord will take nothing for it, we have nothing to give: the apostle does not think it enough to say being justified by his grace, but he adds, being justified FREELY by his grace, Rom. 3:24. Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life FREELY, Rev. 22:17. Taking implies some freedom in it, but taking freely is a redoubling of the expression. This grace of God, that is so dear to God, comes good cheap to us, it cost us nothing.

Again, this grace of God is everlasting; it is the eternal raiment of all believers, even of them that are in heaven. Saith the apostle, Rom 5:21, Grace reigns through righteousness unto eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Observe, neither grace, nor righteousness, nor eternal life, nor Jesus our Lord, cease in heaven; they are all there together; Christ as the author of eternal life, and worker of righteousness; and the believer as the possessor of eternal life, and the enjoyer of this life; and grace as the high spring of all; grace is in heaven; the reign of grace is only in heaven. That of Revelation 19:8 is by most understood to relate to the other world; and it is said there, that "unto the Lamb's wife it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white;" and that fine linen is the righteousness of Christ, in which the saints stand everlastingly accepted before God. Behold I and the children that thou hast given me! saith our Lord, Heb. 2:13, and their glory in heaven is to behold the glory that he had with the Father, as their head, before the world began, John 17:24.

Again, it is grace, because it is very abundant: it is a usual thing in the Old Testament to call great things by the name of God, as the trees of God, the city of God, the river of God; now this grace of God is so-called because it is great, exceedingly abundant: saith the apostle Paul concerning it, The grace of our Lord Jesus was exceeding abundant towards me, I Tim. 1:14. Did ever any of you know how many sins you had? Yet you must have a great deal more grace, or you can never be saved; there must be more grace than sin, or you cannot be saved, Rom. 5:20. The law entered that sin might abound: but where sin abounded grace did much more abound. I do not say, no man can be saved unless he hath more inherent grace than he hath inherent corruption in him; but, unless there be a greater abundance of the grace of God for covering of sin, than there is of sin to be covered, no man can be saved: the apostle adds a much more abundance to it. One would think there was enough of sin and guilt in the disobedience of the first Adam; and so there was: but, saith the apostle, the matter is far greater here: And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift; for the judgment was by one to condemnation; but the free gift is of many offences unto justification: for if by one man's offence death reigned by one, much more they that receive abundance of grace, and of the gift of righteousness, shall reign in life, by one, Christ Jesus, ver. 16, 17 of that fifth chapter of Romans. There is abundance of grace, and of the gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ, needful to save any sinner. When the Lord makes this matter to balance in the eyes of his people, and there are great discoveries made to them of the aggravations and of the multitude of their sins; this is a common wicked thought arising in their awakened consciences: Can God forgive? Can God pass by so many and so great transgressions? It is a sinful thought, the plain meaning of it is, "Is there more grace in God than there is sin and guilt with me?" We were all undone if it was not so; if Christ's righteousness was not more able to justify than the first Adam's sin was to condemn, no man could be saved.—The grace of God shines in this way of the justification of a sinner by the righteousness of Christ, in that there is an abundance of it imparted to all them that partake of it.

APPLICATION. You have heard that the grace of God shines gloriously in the justification of a sinner by the righteousness of Christ: in all your dealings, then, with God, mind grace mainly: they that never had an errand to God for the blessing of justification, they may possibly be saved; but they are not yet in the way to salvation that were never yet concerned about this question, How shall a man be acquitted before God? Or that never treated, with God about justification? In all your dealings with God still remember grace: when you come for justification, plead for it as grace: when you receive it, receive it as grace: and when you praise for it, praise for it as grace; and thus will you behave as the people of God have done. When you plead for it, plead for it as grace; bring nothing with you in your hand, offer nothing to God for your justification; it is a free gift: if God be pleased to give it, in his great bounty, you shall be saved. You have no reason to quarrel if God doth not give it: you have nor reason to fear but God will give it. Though you do not deserve it, yet he hath promised it. As there is a fulness of righteousness in Christ to procure grace, so there is a fulness of grace in the tender of the gospel; and you are to believe that Christ is willing to make all this over to sinners.

When you receive justification, receive it as grace; sometimes we get it as an alms, and sometimes in the gospel the Lord offers it as a gift, and we are to receive it as such. if the Lord tenders you the gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ, do not say you cannot receive it; do not say you are not meet for it; the question is, Are you in need of it? Are you not guilty?. And is not a pardon suitable for the guilty? Receive it as a grace. The true reason why so many neglect right dealing with God for justification, and slight God's dealing with them about receiving it, is because their hearts stand at a distance from, and they have a sort of a quarrel with mere grace. As it is certain that nothing but grace can save the sinner, so it is as certain there is nothing more unpleasing to the sinner than grace; than that good, which when received he must always own the bounty of the giver, and never to eternity be able to say, "My own hand hath made me rich."

Christ will bring none to heaven that are in that mind. He that will not be rich in Christ, must be poor and condemned still in the first Adam. Know ye not, saith the apostle, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet he became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich, 2 Cor. 8:9. The riches of a believer stands in the poverty of Christ; and every true believer counts Christ's poverty his riches.