

Galatians ii. 16

by John Owen

The epistle of Galatians is designed to vindicate the doctrine of justification by Christ, without the works of the law, and to assert that justification is by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Scripture: Romans 3:28, Romans 4:5, Galatians 2:16, Galatians 2:21, Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Justification By Faith", "Righteousness In Christ"

Description

John Owen delves into the epistle of Galatians, emphasizing the core message of justification by faith in Christ alone, without the works of the law. He highlights how believers transitioned from Judaism to the gospel based on their conviction of this fundamental truth. Owen explains that all works, regardless of type or manner of performance, are excluded from playing a role in our justification, emphasizing the danger of seeking righteousness through the law. He underscores the apostle's assertion that if righteousness could be attained through the law, then Christ's sacrifice would be in vain, emphasizing the pivotal role of faith in Jesus Christ for our justification.

Transcript

Gal. ii. 16

Gal. ii. 16. The epistle of the same apostle unto the Galatians is wholly designed unto the vindication of the doctrine of justification by Christ, without the works of the law, with the use and means of its improvement. The sum of his whole design is laid down in the repetition of his words unto the apostle Peter, on the occasion of his failure, there related, chap. ii. 16, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even 355we 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."

That which he does here assert, was such a known, such a fundamental principle of truth among all believers, that their conviction and knowledge of it was the ground and occasion of their transition and passing over from Judaism unto the gospel, and faith in Jesus Christ thereby.

And in the words, the apostle determines that great inquiry, how or by what means a man is or may be justified before God? The subject spoken of is expressed indefinitely: "A man," -- that is, any man, a Jew, or a Gentile; a believer, or an unbeliever; the apostle that spoke, and they to whom he spoke, -- the Galatians to whom he wrote, who also for some time had believed and made profession of the gospel.

The answer given unto the question is both negative and positive, both asserted with the highest assurance, and as the common faith of all Christians, but only those who had been carried aside from it by seducers. He asserts that this is not, this cannot be, "by the works of the law." What is intended by "the law," in these disputations of the apostle, has been before declared and evinced. The law of Moses is sometimes signally intended, -- not absolutely, but as it was the present instance of men's cleaving unto the law of righteousness, and not submitting themselves thereon unto the righteousness of God. But that the consideration of the moral law, and the duties of it, is in this argument anywhere excepted by him, is a weak imagination, -- yea, it would except the ceremonial law itself; for the observation of it, whilst it was in force, was a duty of the moral law.

And the works of the law are the works and duties of obedience which this law of God requires, performed in the manner that it prescribes, -- namely, in faith, and out of love unto God above all; as has been proved. To say that the apostle excludes only works absolutely perfect, which none ever did or could perform since the entrance of sin, is to suppose him to dispute, with great earnestness and many arguments, against that which no man asserted, and which he does not once mention in all his discourse. Nor can he be said to exclude only works that are looked on as meritorious, seeing he excludes all works, that there may be no place for merit in our justification; as has also been proved. Nor did these Galatians, whom he writes unto, and convinces them of their error, look for justification from any works but such as they performed then, when they were believers. So that all sorts of works are excluded from any interest in our justification. And so much weight does the apostle lay on this exclusion of works from our justification, as that he affirms that the admittance of it overthrows the whole gospel, verse 21. 356"For," says he, "if righteousness be by the law, then Christ is dead in vain;" and it is dangerous venturing on so sharp a fence.

Not this or that sort of works; not this or that manner of the performance of them; not this or that kind of interest in our justification; but all works, of what sort soever, and however performed, are excluded from any kind of consideration in our justification, as our works or duties of obedience. For these Galatians, whom the apostle reproves, desired no more but that, in the justification of a believer, works of the law, or duties of obedience, might be admitted into a conjunction or copartnership with faith in Christ Jesus; for that they would exclude faith in him, and assign justification unto works without it, nothing is intimated, and it is a foolish imagination. In opposition hereunto he positively ascribes our justification unto faith in Christ alone. "Not by works, but by faith," is by faith alone. That the particles *ἐὰνμή* are not exceptive but adversative, has not only been undeniably proved by Protestant divines, but is acknowledged by those of the Roman church who pretend unto any modesty in this controversy. The words of Estius on this place deserve to be transcribed: "Nisi per fidem Jesu Christi; sententiam reddit obscuram particula nisi" (so the Vulgar Latin renders *ἐὰνμή*; instead of "sed" or "sed tantum") "quæ si proprie ut Latinis auribus sonat accipiatur, exceptionem facit ab eo quod præcedit, ut sensus sit hominem non justificari ex operibus Legis nisi fidees in Christum ad ea opera accedat, quæ si accesserit justificari eum per legis opera. Sed cum hic sensus justificationem dividat, partim eam tribuens operibus legis, partim fidei Christi, quod est contra definitam et absolutam apostoli sententiam, manifestum est, interpretationem illam tanquam apostolico sensui et scopo contrariam omnino repudiandam esse. Verum constat voculam 'nisi' frequenter in Scripturis adversative sumi, ut idem valeat quod 'sed tantum'." So he according to his usual candour and ingenuity.

It is not probable that we shall have an end of contending in this world, when men will not acquiesce in such plain determinations of controversies given by the Holy Ghost himself.

The interpretation of this place, given as the meaning of the apostle, -- that men cannot be justified by those works which they cannot perform, that is, works absolutely perfect; but may be so, and are so, by those which they can and do perform, if not in their own strength, yet by the aid of grace; and that faith in Christ Jesus, which the apostle opposes absolutely unto all works whatever, does include in it all those works which he excludes, and that with respect unto that end or effect with respect whereunto they are excluded; cannot well be supposed to be suitable unto the mind of the Holy Ghost.

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