

# Philippians iii. 8, 9

by John Owen

*Our acceptance with God is based on the righteousness of God by faith in Christ Jesus, and not on our own righteousness.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 64:6, Romans 3:22, Romans 4:6, Romans 5:17, Galatians 2:16, Philippians 3:8, Titus 3:5

**Topics:** "Justification By Faith", "Righteousness Of God"

## Description

John Owen preaches on Philippians 3:8-9, emphasizing the importance of understanding the righteousness that leads to acceptance with God. He highlights the twofold righteousness considered by the apostle - our own righteousness of the law versus the righteousness of God through faith in Christ. Owen passionately declares his adherence to the righteousness of God by faith, denouncing reliance on personal righteousness. He addresses the opposition faced by this doctrine, the weight of embracing God's righteousness, and the necessity of experiencing grace and acknowledging sin. Owen urges believers to choose Christ's righteousness over their own, as the only way to justification before God.

## Transcript

Phil. iii. 8, 9. Heads of argument from this testimony -- Design of the context -- Righteousness the foundation of acceptance with God -- A twofold righteousness considered by the apostle -- Opposite unto one another, as unto the especial end inquired after -- Which of these he adhered unto, his own righteousness, or the righteousness of God; declared by the apostle with vehemency of speech -- Reasons of his earnestness herein -- The turning point whereon he left Judaism -- The opposition made unto this doctrine by the Jews -- The weight of the doctrine, and unwillingness of men to receive it -- His own sense of sin and grace -- Peculiar expressions used in this place, for the reasons mentioned, concerning Christ; concerning all things that are our own -- The choice to be made on the case stated, whether we will adhere unto our own righteousness, or that of Christ's, which are inconsistent as to the end of justification -- Argument from this place -- Exceptions unto this testimony, and argument from thence, removed -- Our personal righteousness inherent, the same with respect unto the law and gospel -- External righteousness only required by the law, an impious imagination -- Works wrought before faith only rejected -- The exception removed -- Righteousness before conversion, not intended by the apostle

Phil. iii. 8, 9. "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is

through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."

This is the last testimony which I shall insist upon, and although it be of great importance, I shall be the more brief in the consideration of it, because it has been lately pleaded and vindicated by another, whereunto I do not expect any tolerable reply. For what has since been attempted by one, it is of no weight; he is in this matter &#959;&#8020;&#964;&#949; &#964;&#961;&#943;&#964;&#959;&#962;&#959;&#8020;&#964;&#949; &#964;&#941;&#964;&#945;&#964;&#961;&#959;&#962;. And the things that I would observe from and concerning this testimony may be reduced into the ensuing heads:--

1. That which the apostle designs, from the beginning of this chapter, and in these verses, is, in an especial manner, to declare what it is on the account whereof we are accepted with God, and have thereon cause to rejoice. This he fixes in general in an interest in, and participation of, Christ by faith, in opposition unto all legal privileges and advantages, wherein the Jews, whom he reflected upon, did boast and rejoice: "Rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh," verse 3.

2. He supposes that unto that acceptance before God wherein we are to rejoice, there is a righteousness necessary; and, whatever it be, [it] is the sole ground of that acceptance. And to give evidence hereunto, --

3. He declares that there is a twofold righteousness that may be pleaded and trusted unto to this purpose:-- (1.) "Our own righteousness, 364which is of the law." (2.) "That which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." These he asserts to be opposite and inconsistent, as unto the end of our justification and acceptance with God: "Not having mine own righteousness, but that which is," etc. And an intermediate righteousness between these he acknowledges not.

4. Placing the instance in himself, he declares emphatically (so as there is scarce a greater &#960;&#940;&#952;&#959;&#962;, or vehemency of speech, in all his writings) which of these it was that he adhered unto, and placed his confidence in. And in the handling of this subject, there were some things which engaged his holy mind into an earnestness of expression in the exaltation of one of these, -- namely, of the righteousness which is of God by faith; and the depression of the other, or his own righteousness. As, --

(1.) This was the turning point whereon he and others had forsaken their Judaism, and betaken themselves unto the gospel. This, therefore, was to be secured as the main instance, wherein the greatest controversy that ever was in the world was debated. So he expresses it, Gal. ii. 15, 16, "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." (2.) Hereon there was great opposition made unto this doctrine by the Jews in all places, and in many of them the minds of multitudes were turned off from the truth (which the most are generally prone unto in this case), and perverted from the simplicity of the gospel. This greatly affected his holy soul, and he takes notice of it in most of his epistles. (3.) The weight of the doctrine itself, with that unwillingness which is in the minds of men by nature to embrace it, as that which lays the axe to the root of all spiritual pride, elation of mind, and self-pleasing whatever, -- whence innumerable subterfuges have been, and are, sought out to avoid the efficacy of it, and to keep the souls of men from that universal resignation of themselves unto sovereign grace in Christ, which they have naturally such an aversation unto, -- did also affect him. (4.) He had himself been a great sinner in the days of his ignorance, by a peculiar opposition unto Christ and the gospel. This he was deeply sensible of, and wherewithal of the excellency of the grace of God and the righteousness of Christ, whereby he was

delivered. And men must have some experience of what he felt in himself as unto sin and grace, before they can well understand his expressions about them.

5. Hence it was that, in many other places of his writings, but in this especially, he treats of these things with a greater earnestness and vehemency of spirit than ordinary. Thus, -- (1.) On the part of Christ, whom he would exalt, he mentions not only the knowledge of him, but *the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord,* -- with an emphasis in every word. And those other redoubled expressions, "all loss for him;" "that I may win him;" "that I may be found in him;" "that I may know him," -- all argue the working of his affections, under the conduct of faith and truth, unto an acquiescence in Christ alone, as all, and in all. Somewhat of this frame of mind is necessary unto them that would believe his doctrine. Those who are utter strangers unto the one will never receive the other. (2.) In his expression of all other things that are our own, that are not Christ, whether privileges or duties, however good, useful, excellent they may be in themselves, yet, in comparison of Christ and his righteousness, and with respect unto the end of our standing before God, and acceptance with him, with the same vehemency of spirit he casts contempt upon [them], calling them *"dog's meat,"* -- to be left for them whom he calls "dogs;" that is, evil workers of the concision, or the wicked Jews who adhered pertinaciously unto the righteousness of the law, Phil. iii. 2. This account of the earnestness of the apostle in this argument, and the warmth of his expressions, I thought meet to give, as that which gives light into the whole of his design.

6. The question being thus stated, the inquiry is, what any person, who desires acceptance with God, or a righteousness whereon he may be justified before him, ought to betake himself unto. One of the ways proposed he must close withal. Either he must comply with the apostle in his resolution to reject all his own righteousness, and to betake himself unto the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Christ Jesus alone, or find out for himself, or get some to find out for him, some exceptions unto the apostle's conclusion, or some distinctions that may prepare a reserve for his own works, one way or other, in his justification before God. Here every one must choose for himself. In the meantime, we thus argue:-- If our own righteousness, and the righteousness which is of God by faith, or that which is through the faith of Christ Jesus (namely, the righteousness which God imputes unto us, Rom. iv. 6, or the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness thereby which we receive, chap. v. 17), are opposite and inconsistent in the work of justification before God, then are we justified by faith alone, through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ unto us. The consequent is plain, from the removal of all other ways, causes, means, and conditions of it, as inconsistent with it. But the antecedent is expressly the apostle's: "Not my own, but that of God." Again, --

That whereby and wherewith we are "found in Christ" is that whereby alone we are justified before God; for to be found in Christ expresses the state of the person that is to be justified before God; whereunto is opposed to be found in ourselves. And according unto these different states does the judgment of God pass concerning us. And as for those who are found in themselves, we know what will be their portion. But in Christ we are found by faith alone.

All manner of evasions are made use of by some to escape the force of this testimony. It is said, in general, that no sober-minded man can imagine the apostle did not desire to be found in gospel righteousness, or that by his own righteousness he meant that; for it is that alone can entitle us unto the benefits of Christ's righteousness. "Nollem dictum." (1.) The censure is too severe to be cast on all Protestant writers, without exception, who have expounded this place of the apostle; and all others, except

some few of late, influenced by the heat of the controversy wherein they are engaged. (2.) If the gospel righteousness intended be his own personal righteousness and obedience, there is some want of consideration in affirming that he did desire to be found in it. That wherein we are found, thereon are we to be judged. To be found in our own evangelical righteousness before God, is to enter into judgment with God thereon; which those who understand any thing aright of God and themselves will not be free unto. And to make this to be the meaning of his words: "I desire not to be found in my own righteousness which is after the law, but I desire to be found in mine own righteousness which is according to the gospel," -- whereas, as they are his own inherent righteousness, they are both the same, -- does not seem a proper interpretation of his words; and it shall be immediately disproved. (3.) That our personal gospel righteousness does entitle us unto the benefits of Christ's righteousness, -- that is, as unto our justification before God, -- is "gratis dictum;" not one testimony of Scripture can be produced that gives the least countenance unto such an assertion. That it is contrary unto many express testimonies, and inconsistent with the freedom of the grace of God in our justification, as proposed in the Scripture, has been proved before. Nor do any of the places which assert the necessity of obedience and good works in believers, -- that is, justified persons, -- unto salvation, any way belong unto the proof of this assertion, or in the least express or intimate any such thing; and, in particular, the assertion of it is expressly contradictory unto that of the apostle, Tit. iii. 4, 5. But I forbear, and proceed to the consideration of the special answers that are given unto this testimony, especially those of Bellarmine, whereunto I have as yet seen nothing added with any pretence of reason in it:--

1. Some say that by his own righteousness, which the apostle rejects, he intends only his righteousness &#7952;&#954; &#957;&#972;&#956;&#959;&#965;, or "by the works 367of the law." But this was only an outward, external righteousness, consisting in the observation of rites and ceremonies, without respect unto the inward frame or obedience of the heart. But this is an impious imagination. The righteousness which is by the law is the righteousness which the law requires, and those works of it which if a man do he shall live in them; for "the doers of the law shall be justified," Rom. ii. 13. Neither did God ever give any law of obedience unto man, but what obliged him to "love the Lord his God with all his heart, and all his soul." And it is so far from being true, that God by the law required an external righteousness only, that he frequently condemns it as an abomination to him, where it is alone.

2. Others say that it is the righteousness, whatever it be, which he had during his Pharisaism. And although he should be allowed, in that state, to have "lived in all good conscience, instantly to have served God day and night," and to have had respect as well unto the internal as the external works of the law; yet all these works, being before faith, before conversion to God, may be, and are to be, rejected as unto any concurrence unto our justification. But works wrought in faith, by the aid of grace, -- evangelical works, -- are of another consideration, and, together with faith, are the condition of justification.

Ans. 1. That, in the matter of our justification, the apostle opposes evangelical works, not only unto the grace of God, but also unto the faith of believers, was proved in the consideration of the foregoing testimony.

2. He makes no such distinction as that pretended, -- namely, that works are of two sorts, whereof one is to be excluded from any interest in our justification, but not the other; neither does he anywhere else, treating of the same subject, intimate any such distinction, but, on the contrary, declares that use of all works of obedience in them that believe which is exclusive of the supposition of any such distinction: but he directly expresses, in this rejection, his own righteousness, -- that is, his personal, inherent righteousness, -- whatever it be, and however it be wrought.

3. He makes a plain distinction of his own twofold estate, -- namely, that of his Judaism which he was in before his conversion, and that which he had by faith in Christ Jesus. In the first state, he considers the privileges of it, and declares what judgment he made concerning them upon the revelation of Jesus Christ unto him: &#7973;&#947;&#951;&#956;&#945;&#953;, says he, referring unto the time past, -- namely, at his first conversion. "I considered them, with all the advantages, gain, and reputation which I had by them; but rejected them all for Christ: because the esteem of them and continuance in them as privileges, was inconsistent with faith in Christ Jesus."

Secondly, he proceeds to give an account of himself and his thoughts, as unto his present condition. For it might be supposed that although he had parted with all his legal privileges for Christ, yet now, being united unto him by faith, he had something of his own wherein he might rejoice, and on the account whereof he might be accepted with God (the thing inquired after), or else he had parted with all for nothing. Wherefore, he, who had no design to make any reserves of what he might glory in, plainly declares what his judgment is concerning all his present righteousness, and the ways of obedience which he was now engaged in, with respect unto the ends inquired after, Phil. iii. 8: &#7944;&#955;&#955;&#8048; &#956;&#949;&#957;&#959;&#8166;&#957;&#947;&#949;&#954;&#945;&#8054; &#7969;&#947;&#959;&#8166;&#956;&#945;&#953;.

The bringing over of what was affirmed before concerning his Judaical privileges into this verse, is an effect of a very superficial consideration of the context. For, -- (1.) There is a plain &#945;&#8021;&#958;&#951;&#963;&#953;&#962; in these words, &#7944;&#955;&#955;&#8048; &#956;&#949;&#957;&#959;&#8166;&#957;&#947;&#949; &#954;&#945;&#8054;. He could not more plainly express the heightening of what he had affirmed by a proceed unto other things, or the consideration of himself in another state: "But, moreover, beyond what I have already asserted." (2.)

The change of the time expressed by &#7973;&#947;&#951;&#956;&#945;&#953;, [which] respects what was past, into &#7969;&#947;&#959;&#8166;&#956;&#945;&#953;, wherein he has respect only unto what was present, not what he had before rejected and forsaken, makes evident his progress unto the consideration of things of another nature. Wherefore, unto the rejection of all his former Judaical privileges, he adds his judgment concerning his own present personal righteousness. But whereas it might be objected, that, rejecting all both before and after conversion, he had nothing left to rejoice in, to glory in, to give him acceptance with God; he assures us of the contrary, -- namely, that he found all these things in Christ, and the righteousness of God which is by faith.

He is therefore in these words, "Not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law," so far from intending only the righteousness which he had before his conversion, as that he intends it not at all.

The words of Davenant on this passage of the apostle, being in my judgment not only sober, but weighty also, I shall transcribe them: "Hic docet apostolus quænam illa justitia sit qua nitendum coram Deo, nimirum quæ per fidem apprehenditur, at hæc imputata est: Causam etiam ostendit cur jure nostra fiat, nimirum quia nos Christi sumus et in Christo comperimur; quia igitur insiti sumus in corpus ejus et coalescimus cum illo in unam personam, ideo ejus justitia nostra reputatur," De Justif. Habit. cap. xxxviii. For whereas some begin to interpret our being "in Christ," and being "found in him," so as to intend no more but our profession of the faith of the gospel, the faith of the catholic church in all ages concerning the mystical union of Christ and believers, is not to be blown away with a few empty words and unproved assertions.

369The answer, therefore, is full and clear unto the general exception, -- namely, that the apostle rejects our legal, but not our evangelical righteousness; for, -- (1.) The apostle rejects, disclaims, disowns, nothing at all, not the one nor the other absolutely, but in comparison of Christ, and with respect unto the especial end of justification before God, or a righteousness in his sight. (2.) In that sense he rejects all our own righteousness; but our evangelical righteousness, in the sense pleaded for, is our own, inherent in us, performed by us. (3.) Our legal righteousness, and our evangelical, so far as an inherent righteousness is intended, are the same; and the different ends and use of the same righteousness are alone intended in that distinction, so far as it has sense in it. That which in respect of motives unto it, the ends of it, with the especial causes of its acceptance with God, is evangelical; in respect of its original prescription, rule, and measure, is legal. When any can instance in any act or duty, in any habit or effect of it, which is not required by that law which enjoins us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbour as ourselves, they shall be attended unto. (4.) The apostle in this case rejects all the "works of righteousness which we have done," Tit. iii. 5; but our evangelical righteousness consists in the works of righteousness which we do. (5.) He disclaims all that is our own. And if the evangelical righteousness intended be our own, he sets up another in opposition unto it; and which, therefore, is not our own, but as it is imputed unto us. And I shall yet add some other reasons which render this pretence useless, or show the falseness of it:--

(1.) Where the apostle does not distinguish or limit what he speaks of, what ground have we to distinguish or limit his assertions? "Not by works," says he sometimes, absolutely; sometimes "the works of righteousness which we have done." "That is, not by some sort of works," say those who plead the contrary. But by what warrant? (2.) The works which they pretend to be excluded, as wherein our own righteousness that is rejected does consist, are works wrought without faith, without the aid of grace: but these are not good works, nor can any be denominated righteous from them, nor is it any righteousness that consists in them alone; for "without faith it is impossible to please God." And to what purpose should the apostle exclude evil works and hypocritical from our justification? Whoever imagined that any could be justified with respect unto them? There might have been some pretence for this gloss, had the apostle said his own works; but whereas he rejects his own righteousness, to restrain it unto such works as are not righteous, as will denominate none righteous, as are no righteousness at all, is most absurd. (3.) Works wrought in faith, if applied unto our justification, do give occasion 370unto, or include boasting, more than any others, as being better and more praiseworthy than they. (4.) The apostle elsewhere excludes from justification the works that Abraham had done, when he had been a believer many years; and the works of David, when he described the blessedness of a man by the forgiveness of sins. (5.) The state of the question which he handles in his Epistle unto the Galatians, was expressly about the works of them that did believe; for he does not dispute against the Jews, who would not be pressed in the least with his arguments, -- namely, that if the inheritance were by the law, then the promise was of none effect; and if righteousness were by the law, then did Christ die in vain; for these things they would readily grant. But he speaks unto them that were believers, with respect unto those works which they would have joined with Christ and the gospel, in order unto justification. (6.) If this were the mind of the apostle, that he would exclude one sort of works, and assert the necessity of another unto the same end, why did he not once say so -- especially considering how necessary it was that so he should do, to answer those objections against his doctrine which he himself takes notice of and returns answer unto on other grounds, without the least intimation of any such distinction?

Bellarmino considers this testimony in three places, lib. i. cap. 18, lib. i. cap. 19, lib. v. cap. 5, De Justificat. And he returns three answers unto it; which contain the substance of all that is pleaded by others unto the

same purpose: He says, -- (1.) "That the righteousness which is by the law, and which is opposed unto the righteousness which is by faith, is not the righteousness written in the law, or which the law requires, but a righteousness wrought without the aid of grace, by the knowledge of the law alone." (2.)

"That the righteousness which is by the faith of Christ is 'opera nostra justa facta ex fide', -- our own righteous works wrought in faith; which others call our evangelical works." (3.) "That it is blasphemous to call the duties of inherent righteousness &#950;&#951;&#956;&#943;&#945;&#957;&#954;&#945;&#8054; &#963;&#954;&#973;&#946;&#945;&#955;&#945;, -- 'loss and dung.'&#8197;" But he labours in the fire with all his sophistry. For as to the first, -- (1.) That by the righteousness which is by the law, the righteousness which the law requires is not intended, is a bold assertion, and expressly contradictory unto the apostle, Rom. ix. 31; x. 5.

In both places he declares the righteousness of the law to be the righteousness that the law requires. (2.) The works which he excludes, he calls "the works of righteousness that we have done," Tit. iii. 5, which are the works that the law requires. Unto the second, I say, -- (1.) That the substance of it is, that the apostle should profess, "I desire to be found in Christ, not having my own righteousness, but having my own righteousness;" for evangelical inherent righteousness was properly his own.

And I am sorry that some should apprehend that the 371apostle, in these words, did desire to be found in his own righteousness in the presence of God, in order unto his justification; for nothing can be more contrary, not only unto the perpetual tenor and design of all his discourses on this subject, but also unto the testimony of all other holy men in the Scripture to the same purpose; as we have proved before. And I suppose there are very few true believers at present whom they will find to comply and join with them in this desire of being found in their own personal evangelical righteousness, or the works of righteousness which they have done, in their trial before God, as unto their justification.

We should do well to read our own hearts, as well as the books of others, in this matter. (2.) "The righteousness which is of God by faith," is not our own obedience or righteousness, but that which is opposed unto it; that which God imputes unto us, Rom. iv. 6; that which we receive by way of gift, chap. v. 17. (3.) That by "the righteousness which is through the faith of Christ;" our own inherent righteousness is not intended, is evident from hence, that the apostle excludes all his own righteousness, as and when he was found in Christ; that is, whatever he had done as a believer.

And if there be not an opposition in these words, between a righteousness that is our own and that which is not our own, I know not in what words it can be expressed. Unto the third, I say, -- (1.) The apostle does not, nor do we say that he does, call our inherent righteousness "dung;" but only that he "counts" it so. (2.) He does not account it so absolutely, which he is most remote from; but only in comparison with Christ. (3.) He does not esteem it so in itself; but only as unto his trust in it with respect unto one especial end, -- namely, our justification before God. (4.)

The prophet Isaiah, in the same respect, terms all our righteousness "filthy rags," chap. lxiv. 6; and &#1489;&#1462;&#1490;&#1462;&#1491; &#1506;&#1460;&#1491;&#1468;&#1460;&#1497;&#1501; is an expression of as much contempt as &#963;&#954;&#973;&#946;&#945;&#955;&#945;.

3. Some say all works are excluded as meritorious of grace, life, and salvation, but not as the condition of our justification before God. But, -- (1.) Whatever the apostle excludes, he does it absolutely, and with all respects; because he sets up something else in opposition unto it. (2.) There is no ground left for any such distinction in this place: for all that the apostle requires unto our justification is, -- [1.] That we be found in

Christ, not in ourselves. [2.] That we have the righteousness of God, not our own. [3.] That we be made partakers of this righteousness by faith; which is the substance of what we plead for.

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