

## Justification by Faith Alone

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book III, 11.13-23; 14.13, English updated and emphasis added.

13. But since a great part of mankind imagine a righteousness compounded of faith and works let us here show that **there is so wide a difference between justification by faith and by works, that the establishment of the one necessarily overthrows the other.**

The Apostle says, "Yes 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 my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:8, 9). You here see a comparison of contraries, and an intimation that every one who would obtain the righteousness of Christ must renounce his own.

Hence he elsewhere declares the cause of the rejection of the Jews to have been, that "they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3). If we destroy the righteousness of God by establishing our own righteousness, then, in order to obtain His righteousness, our own must be entirely abandoned.

This also he shows, when he declares that boasting is not excluded by the Law, but by faith (Romans 3:27). Hence it follows, that so long as the minutest portion of our own righteousness remains, we have still some ground for boasting. Now **if faith utterly excludes boasting, the righteousness of works cannot in any way be associated with the righteousness of faith.** This meaning is so clearly expressed in the fourth chapter to the Romans as to leave no room for cavil or evasion. "If Abraham were justified by works he has something of which to glory;" and then it is added, "but not before God" (Romans 4:2). The conclusion, therefore, is, that he was not justified by works.

He then employs another argument from contraries, which is, that **when reward is paid to works, it is done of debt, not of grace; but the righteousness of faith is of grace: therefore it is not of the merit of works.** Away, then, with the dream of those who invent a righteousness compounded of faith and works (see Calvin. ad Concilium Tridentinum).

14. The Sophists, who delight in sporting with Scripture and in empty cavils, think they have a subtle evasion when they expound works to mean, such as unregenerated men do literally, and by the effect of free will, without the grace of Christ, and deny that these have any reference to spiritual works. Thus according to them, man is justified by faith as well as by works, provided these are not his own works, but gifts of Christ and fruits of regeneration; Paul's only object in so expressing himself being to convince the Jews, that in trusting to their own strength they foolishly arrogated righteousness to themselves, whereas it is bestowed on us by the Spirit of Christ alone, and not by studied efforts of our own nature. But they observe not that in the antithesis between Legal and Gospel righteousness, which Paul elsewhere introduces, all kinds of works, with whatever name adorned, are excluded (Galatians 3:11, 12). For he says that **the righteousness of the Law consists in obtaining salvation by doing what the Law**

**requires, but that the righteousness of faith consists in believing that Christ died and rose again** (Romans 10:5-9).

Moreover, we shall afterwards see, at the proper place, that the blessings of sanctification and justification, which we derive from Christ, are different. Hence it follows, that not even spiritual works are taken into account when the power of justifying is ascribed to faith. And, indeed, the passage above quoted, in which Paul declares that Abraham had no ground of glorying before God, because he was not justified by works, ought not to be confined to a literal and external form of virtue, or to the effort of free will. The meaning is, that though the life of the Patriarch had been spiritual and almost angelic, yet he could not by the merit of works have procured justification before God.

15. The Schoolmen treat the matter somewhat more grossly by mingling their preparations with it; and yet the others instill into the simple and unwary a no less pernicious dogma, when, under cover of the Spirit and grace, they hide the divine mercy, which alone can give peace to the trembling soul. We, indeed, hold with Paul, that those who fulfill the Law are justified by God, but because we are all far from observing the Law, we infer that the works which should be most effectual to justification are of no avail to us, because we are destitute of them.

In regard to vulgar Papists or Schoolmen, they are here doubly wrong, both in calling faith assurance of conscience while waiting to receive from God the reward of merits, and in interpreting divine grace to mean not the imputation of gratuitous [freely bestowed] righteousness, but the assistance of the Spirit in the study of holiness. They quote from an Apostle: "He that comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). But they observe not what the method of seeking is.

Then in regard to the term *grace*, it is plain from their writings that they labor under a delusion. For Lombard holds that justification is given to us by Christ in two ways. "First," he says (Lombard, Sent. Lib. 3, Dist. 16, c. 11) "the death of Christ justifies us when by means of it the love by which we are made righteous is excited in our hearts; and, secondly, when by means of it sin is extinguished, sin by which the devil held us captive, but by which he cannot now procure our condemnation." You see here that the chief office of divine grace in our justification he considers to be its directing us to good works by the agency of the Holy Spirit. He intended, no doubt, to follow the opinion of Augustine, but he follows it at a distance, and even wanders far from a true imitation of him both obscuring what was clearly stated by Augustine, and making what in him was less pure more corrupt.

The [theological] Schools [of the Papists] have always gone from worse to worse, until at length, in their downward path, they have degenerated into a kind of Pelagianism. Even the sentiment of Augustine, or at least his mode of expressing it, cannot be entirely approved of. For although he is admirable in stripping man of all merit of righteousness, and transferring the whole praise of it to God, yet he classes the grace by which we are regenerated to newness of life under the head of sanctification.

### ***The Scriptural explanation of justification***

16. **Scripture**, when it treats of justification by faith, leads us in a very different direction. **Turning away our view from our own works, it bids us look only to the mercy of God and the perfection of Christ.**

**The order of justification** which it [Scripture] sets before us is this: **first**, God of His mere gratuitous goodness is pleased to embrace the sinner, in whom He sees nothing that can move Him to mercy but wretchedness, because He sees him altogether naked and destitute of good works. He, therefore, seeks the cause of kindness in Himself, that thus He may affect the sinner by a sense of His goodness, and induce him, in distrust of his own works, to cast himself entirely upon His mercy for salvation.

This is the meaning of faith by which the sinner comes into the possession of salvation, when, according to the doctrine of the Gospel, he perceives that he is reconciled by God; when, by the intercession of Christ, he obtains the pardon of his sins, and is justified; and, though renewed by the Spirit of God, considers that, **instead of leaning on his own works, he must look solely to the righteousness which is treasured up for him in Christ.**

When these things are weighed separately, they will clearly explain our view, though they may be arranged in a better order than that in which they are here presented. But it is of little consequence, provided they are so connected with each other as to give us a full exposition and solid confirmation of the whole subject.

17. Here it is proper to remember the relation which we previously established between faith and the Gospel; **faith being said to justify because it receives and embraces the righteousness offered in the Gospel.**

By the very fact of its being said to be offered by the Gospel, all consideration of works is excluded. This Paul repeatedly declares, and in two passages, in particular, most clearly demonstrates.

In the Epistle to the Romans, comparing the Law and the Gospel, he says, "Moses describes the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which does those things shall live by them. But the righteousness which is of faith speaks in this way—If you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved," (Romans 10:5, 6:9). Do you see how he makes the distinction between the Law and the Gospel to be, that the former gives justification to works, whereas the latter bestows it freely without any help from works? This is a notable passage, and may free us from many difficulties if we understand that **the justification which is given us by the Gospel is free from any terms of Law.**

It is for this reason he more than once places the promise in diametrical opposition to the Law. "If the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise" (Galatians 3:18). Expressions of similar import occur in the same chapter. Undoubtedly the Law also has its promises; and, therefore, between them and the Gospel promises there must be some distinction and difference, unless we are to hold that the comparison is inept. And in what can the difference consist unless in this that the promises of the Gospel are gratuitous [freely bestowed], and founded on the mere mercy of God, whereas the promises of the Law depend on the condition of works?

But let no prater here allege that only the righteousness which men would obtrude upon God of their own strength and free will is repudiated; since Paul declares, without exception, that the Law gained nothing by its commands, being such as none, not only of mankind in general, but none even of the most perfect, are able to fulfill. Love assuredly is the chief commandment in the Law, and since the Spirit of God trains us to

love, it cannot but be a cause of righteousness in us, though that righteousness even in the saints is defective, and therefore of no value as a ground of merit.

18. The second passage is, "That no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that does them shall live in them" (Galatians 3:11, 12; Habakkuk 2:4). How could the argument hold unless it is true that works are not to be taken into account, but are to be altogether separated?

The Law, he says, is different from faith. Why? Because to obtain justification by it, works are required; and hence it follows, that to obtain justification by the Gospel they are not required. From this statement, it appears **that those who are justified by faith are justified independent of, no, in the absence of, the merit of works, because faith receives that righteousness which the Gospel bestows.** But the Gospel differs from the Law in this, that it does not confine justification to works, but places it entirely in the mercy of God.

In like manner, Paul contends, in the Epistle to the Romans, that Abraham had no ground of glorying, because faith was imputed to him for righteousness (Romans 4:2); and he adds in confirmation, that the proper place for justification by faith is where there are no works to which reward is due. "To him that works is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt." What is given to faith is gratuitous, this being the force of the meaning of the words which he there employs. Shortly after he adds, "Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace" (Romans 4:16); and hence infers that the inheritance is gratuitous because it is procured by faith. How so but just because faith without the aid of works leans entirely on the mercy of God?

And in the same sense, doubtless, he elsewhere teaches, that the righteousness of God without the Law was manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, (Romans 3:21); for excluding the Law, he declares that it is not aided by works, that we do not obtain it by working, but are destitute when we draw near to receive it.

19. The reader now perceives with what fairness the Sophists of the present day cavil at our doctrine, when we say that a man is justified by faith *alone* (Romans 4:2). They dare not deny that he is justified by faith, seeing Scripture so often declares it; but as the word *alone* is nowhere expressly used they will not tolerate its being added.

Is it so? What answer, then will they give to the words of **Paul**, when he **contends that righteousness is not of faith unless it is gratuitous [freely given]**? How can it be gratuitous, and yet by works? By what cavils, moreover, will they evade his declaration in another place, that in the Gospel the righteousness of God is manifested? (Romans 1:17). If righteousness is manifested in the Gospel, it is certainly not a partial or mutilated, but a full and perfect righteousness. The Law, therefore, has no part in it, and their objection to the exclusive word *alone* is not only unfounded, but is obviously absurd.

**Does he not plainly enough attribute everything to faith alone when he disconnects it with works?** What I would ask, is meant by the expressions, "The righteousness of God apart from the law is manifested;" "Being justified freely by His grace;" "Justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law?" (Romans 3:21, 24, 28).

Here they have an ingenious subterfuge, one which, though not of their own devising but taken from Origen and some ancient writers, is most childish. They pretend that the

works excluded are ceremonial, not moral works. Such profit do they make by their constant wrangling, that they possess not even the first elements of logic. Do they think the Apostle was raving when he produced, in proof of his doctrine, these passages? "The man that does them shall live in them" (Galatians 3:12). "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them" (Galatians 3:10). Unless they are themselves raving, they will not say that life was promised to the observers of ceremonies, and the curse denounced only against the transgressors of them. If these passages are to be understood of the Moral Law, there cannot be a doubt that moral works also are excluded from the power of justifying. To the same effect are the arguments which he employs. "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). "The law brings about wrath" (Romans 4:15), and therefore not righteousness. "The law cannot pacify the conscience," and therefore cannot confer righteousness. "Faith is imputed for righteousness," and therefore righteousness is not the reward of works, but is given without being due. Because "we are justified by faith," boasting is excluded. "Had there been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness should have been by the law. But the Scripture has concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe" (Galatians 3:21, 22). Let them maintain, if they dare, that these things apply to ceremonies, and not to morals, and the very children will laugh at their effrontery. The true conclusion, therefore, is, that **the whole Law is spoken of when the power of justifying is denied to it.**

20. Should any one wonder why the Apostle, not contented with having named works, employs this addition, the explanation is easy. However highly works may be estimated, they have their whole value more from the approbation [approval] of God than from their own dignity. For who will presume to plume himself before God on the righteousness of works, unless insofar as He approves of them? Who will presume to demand of Him a reward except insofar as He has promised it? **It is owing entirely to the goodness of God that works are deemed worthy of the honor and reward of righteousness; and, therefore, their whole value consists in this, that by means of them we endeavor to manifest obedience to God.**

Wherefore, in another passage, the Apostle, to prove that Abraham could not be justified by works, declares, "that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of no effect" (Galatians 3:17).

The unskillful would ridicule the argument that there could be righteous works before the promulgation of the Law, but the Apostle, knowing that works could derive this value solely from the testimony and honor conferred on them by God, takes it for granted that, previous to the Law, they had no power of justifying. We see why he expressly terms them works of Law when he would deny the power of justifying to them, namely, because it was only with regard to such works that a question could be raised; although he sometimes, without addition, excludes all kinds of works whatever, as when on the testimony of David he speaks of the man to whom the Lord imputes righteousness without works (Romans 4:5, 6).

No cavils, therefore, can enable them to prove that the exclusion of works is not general. In vain do they lay hold of the frivolous subtlety, that the faith alone, by which we are justified, "works by love," and that love, therefore, is the foundation of justification. We, indeed, acknowledge with Paul, that the only faith which justifies is that which works by love (Galatians 5:6) but love does not give it its justifying power. No, its only means of justifying consists in its bringing us into communication with the righteousness of Christ.

Otherwise the whole argument, on which the Apostle insists with so much earnestness, would fall. "To him who works is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." **Could he express more clearly than in this word, that there is justification in faith only where there are no works to which reward is due, and that faith is imputed for righteousness only when righteousness is conferred freely without merit?**

21. Let us now consider the truth of what was said in the definition, which is, that **justification by faith is reconciliation with God, and that this consists solely in the remission of sins.**

We must always return to the axioms that the wrath of God lies on all men so long as they continue sinners. This is elegantly expressed by Isaiah in these words: "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1, 2).

### ***Sin defined***

We are here told that **sin is a separation between God and man**; that His countenance is turned away from the sinner; and that it cannot be otherwise, since, **to have any intercourse with sin is repugnant to His righteousness.** Hence the Apostle shows that **man is at enmity with God until he is restored to favor by Christ,** (Romans 5:8-10). When the Lord, therefore, admits him to union, He is said to justify him, because He can neither receive him into favor, nor unite him to Himself, without changing his condition from that of a sinner into that of a righteous man.

He adds that this is done by remission of sins. For if those whom the Lord has reconciled to Himself are estimated by works, they will still prove to be in reality sinners, while they ought to be pure and free from sin. It is evident therefore, that **the only way in which those whom God embraces are made righteous, is by having their pollutions wiped away by the remission of sins, so that this justification may be termed in one word the remission of sins.**

22. Both of these become perfectly clear from the words of Paul: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and has committed unto us the word of reconciliation." He then subjoins the sum of His embassy: "He has made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5: 19-21). He here uses righteousness and reconciliation indiscriminately, to make us understand that the one includes the other.

The mode of obtaining this righteousness he explains to be, that our sins are not imputed to us. Therefore, you cannot from this time forth doubt how God justifies us when you hear that He reconciles us to Himself by not imputing our faults.

In the same manner, in the Epistle to the Romans, he proves, by the testimony of David, that righteousness is imputed without works, because he declares the man to be blessed "whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered," and "unto whom the Lord does not impute iniquity" (Romans 4:6; Psalm 32:1, 2). There he undoubtedly uses blessedness for righteousness; and as he declares that it consists in forgiveness of sins, there is no reason why we should define it otherwise.

Accordingly, Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, sings that the knowledge of salvation consists in the forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77).

The same course was followed by Paul when, in addressing the people of Antioch, he gave them a summary of salvation. Luke states that he concluded in this way: "Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses," (Acts 12:38, 39). Thus **the Apostle connects forgiveness of sins with justification in such a way as to show that they are altogether the same**; and hence he properly argues that justification, which we owe to the indulgence of God, is gratuitous [freely given].

Nor should it seem an unusual mode of expression to say that believers are justified before God not by works, but by gratuitous acceptance, seeing it is frequently used in Scripture, and sometimes also by ancient writers. Thus Augustine says: "The righteousness of the saints in this world consists more in the forgiveness of sins than the perfection of virtue" (August. de Civitate Dei, lib. 19, cap. 27.) To this corresponds the well-known sentiment of Bernard: "Not to sin is the righteousness of God, but the righteousness of man is the indulgence of God" (Bernard, Serm. 22, 23 in Cant.). He previously asserts that Christ is our righteousness in absolution, and, therefore, that those only are just who have obtained pardon through mercy.

23. Hence also it is proved, that **it is entirely by the intervention of Christ's righteousness that we obtain justification before God**. This is equivalent to saying that **man is not just in himself, but that the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation, while he is strictly deserving of punishment**.

Thus vanishes the absurd dogma that man is justified by faith, inasmuch as it brings him under the influence of the Spirit of God by whom he is rendered righteous. This is so repugnant to the above doctrine that it never can be reconciled with it.

There can be no doubt that he who is taught to seek righteousness outside of himself does not previously possess it in himself. This is most clearly declared by the Apostle, when he says, that he who knew no sin was made an expiatory victim for sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). You see that **our righteousness is not in ourselves, but in Christ; that the only way in which we become possessed of it is by being made partakers with Christ, since with Him we possess all riches**.

There is nothing repugnant to this in what he elsewhere says: "God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Romans 8:3, 4). Here the only fulfillment to which he refers is that which we obtain by imputation. Our Lord Jesus Christ communicates His righteousness to us, and so by some wondrous ways insofar as pertains to the justice of God, transfuses its power into us. That this was the Apostle's view is abundantly clear from another sentiment which he had expressed a little before: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

**To declare that we are deemed righteous, solely because the obedience of Christ is imputed to us as if it were our own, is just to place our righteousness in the obedience of Christ**. Wherefore, Ambrose appears to me to have most elegantly

adverted to the blessing of Jacob as an illustration of this righteousness, when he says that as he who did not merit the birthright in himself personated his brother, put on his garments which gave forth a most pleasant odor, and thus introduced himself to his father that he might receive a blessing to his own advantage, though under the person of another, so we conceal ourselves under the precious purity of Christ, our first-born brother, that we may obtain an attestation of righteousness from the presence of God. The words of Ambrose are—“Isaac’s smelling the odor of his garments, perhaps means that we are justified not by works, but by faith, since carnal infirmity is an impediment to works, but errors of conduct are covered by the brightness of faith, which merits the pardon of faults” (Ambrose de Jacobo et Vita Beati, Lib. 2, c. 2.). And so indeed it is; for **in order to appear in the presence of God for salvation, we must send forth that fragrant odor, having our vices covered and buried by His perfection. . . .**

### ***The Sinfulness of Sin***

Here all I say is, that those who thus trifle with sin do not at all consider how execrable it is in the sight of God; if they did, they would assuredly understand, that **all the righteousness of men collected into one heap would be inadequate to compensate for a single sin.**

For we see that by one sin man was so cast off and forsaken by God, that he at the same time lost all power of recovering salvation. He was, therefore, deprived of the power of giving satisfaction. Those who flatter themselves with this idea will never satisfy God, who cannot possibly accept or be pleased with anything that proceeds from His enemies. But all to whom He imputes sin are enemies, and, therefore, our sins must be covered and forgiven before the Lord has respect to any of our works.

From this it follows, that the forgiveness of sins is gratuitous [freely given], and this forgiveness is wickedly insulted by those who introduce the idea of satisfaction. Let us, therefore, after the example of the Apostle, “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,” “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:13, 14).