

Justification by Faith Ezekiel 18:14-17; 20:11

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 235-239, 296-299, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

Ezekiel 20:11 “And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them.”

. . . [God] thus briefly reminds them, that it was not His fault if the Israelites were not in any sense happy; for when He stipulated with them for the observance of His law, He bound them in turn to Himself, that they should lack nothing which contributed to a good and happy life; for in the name of life solid happiness is comprehended.

Yet it is here asked how the Prophet testifies *that men should live by the works of the law*, when the law, on the testimony of Paul, can only bring us death (Romans 4:15; Deuteronomy 30:15). He took this testimony from Moses, and we shall see immediately that he cites it in a different sense. Moses there pronounces that the life of man rests on the observance of the law; that is—life was surely to be expected through satisfying the law. . . .

And from this passage it is easy to infer that works are of no value before God, and are not estimated for their intrinsic value, so to speak, but only by agreement. Since, then, it pleased God to descend so far as to promise life to men if they kept His law, they ought to accept this offer as springing from His liberality. There is no absurdity, then, if men do live, that is, if they deserve eternal life according to agreement.

But if any one keeps the law, it will follow that he has no need of the grace of Christ. For of what advantage is Christ to us unless we recover life in Him? but if this is placed in ourselves, the remedy must not be thought anywhere but in ourselves. Every one, then, may be his own savior if life is placed in the observance of the law. But Paul solves this difficulty for us when he determines for us a twofold righteousness of the law and of faith (Romans 10:5, 6). He says that this righteousness is of the law when we keep God’s precepts. Now, we are far distant from such obedience; no, the very faculty of keeping the law is altogether defective in us. Hence it follows that **we must fly to the righteousness of faith.**

For he defines the righteousness of faith as this: if we believe Christ to be dead and to be risen again for our justification. We see, therefore, although God promised salvation to His ancient people, if they only kept the law, yet that promise was useless, since no one could satisfy the law and perform God’s commands.

Here another question arises. For if this promise does not take effect, God vainly reckons that as a benefit to the Israelites which we see was offered them in vain. Hence no utility or fruit would arise from it. But some one may say that the imagination was fallacious, when God promised life and now by His Prophet blames the Israelites for despising such a benefit. But the reply is easy: although men are not endued with the power of obeying the law, yet they ought not on that account to depart from the goodness of God; for men’s declension by no means hinders them from estimating the value of so liberal a promise. God is dealing with men. He might then, as I have said, imperiously [like a sovereign king] demand whatever He pleased, and exact it with the

utmost rigor; but He treats according to an agreement, and so there is a mutual obligation between Himself and the people.

No one will surely deny that God here exhibits a specimen of His mercy when He condescends thus familiarly to make a covenant with men. "Ah! but this is all in vain: God's promise is of no effect, because no one is able to keep the law." I confess it. But man's declension cannot, as I have said, abolish the glory of God's goodness, since that always remains fixed, and God still acts liberally in being willing thus to enter into covenant with His people. We must then consider the subject simply, and by itself: man's declension is accidental [not essential]. God then put forth a remarkable proof of His goodness, in promising life to all who kept His law, and this will remain perfect and entire.

Ezekiel 18:14-17

"If, however, he begets a son who sees all the sins which his father has done, And considers but does not do likewise; who has not eaten on the mountains, nor lifted his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, nor defiled his neighbor's wife; has not oppressed anyone, nor withheld a pledge, nor robbed by violence, but has given his bread to the hungry and covered the naked with clothing; who has withdrawn his hand from the poor and not received usury [unlawful interest] or increase, but has executed My judgments and walked in My statutes—He shall not die for the iniquity of his father; he shall surely live!"

Now at last he concludes: *he shall not die through his father's iniquity; he shall surely live*. He does not repeat that this is just, yet we must understand it so; but he stops at the immediate effect, since God's blessing awaits all the just, as Isaiah says: surely there is a reward to the just (Isaiah 3:10); and the Prophet exclaims as if it were believed with difficulty: for, since we see all things revolving promiscuously in the world, we directly imagine either that God is at rest in heaven, or that chance governs all things here on earth. But we must strive against this perverse supposition, and determine, as Isaiah teaches, that there is a reward for the just.

The Prophet now expresses this, while a difficult question arises from the passage; for he says *that he is just who has kept the law*, and so God will bestow a recompense upon him. Hence these two things are connected together, and the question which I mentioned arises from the former clause; **for the whole Scriptures teach that no one is just, and that none can be justified by the law**. But these things are contrary to each other; to be just and worthy of reward through keeping the law, since none is just, all are transgressors, all devoid of justice, and so but one remedy remains—that of seeking our safety from the gratuitous mercy of God.

But although, at first sight, this kind of inconsistency disturbs the rude and partially-exercised commentator, yet this solution is easy, since, strictly speaking, justice is the observance of the law. If any one asks, then, what justice is, the proper definition is, the observance of law. Why so? Because the law, as I said yesterday, lays down the solid rule of justice; whoever observes it will be esteemed just; and **thus justification is properly said to be placed in works**.

But, on the other hand, Scripture pronounces what is very true, and entirely confirmed by experience, that no one can satisfy the law, and, on account of this defect, we are all deprived of justification by works. What I have said may be made much clearer by many testimonies of Scripture. Not the hearer of the law, says Paul, in the second chapter of the epistle to the Romans, but the doer of the law, shall be justified (Romans 2:13).

There Paul speaks naturally, that those are just who conform their whole life to the obedience of God's law. So also John, in his canonical epistle: He who does righteousness is righteous (1 John 3:7). Now, if any one asks whether any perfect observer of the law can be found, or one who does justice in every respect, the answer is at hand, that we are all by nature very far gone from all righteousness, and all our senses and affections are enemies which contend against God's law, as Paul teaches: The whole soul of man is perverse, and we are not fit to think anything of ourselves, and that all our sufficiency is of God, since we are slaves of sin (Romans 8:7; 2 Corinthians 3:5; Romans 11). But it would be superfluous to heap together many testimonies. **Let it suffice, then, that we are by nature all together rebels against God, so that not the slightest particle of good can be found in us.**

Justification by faith in Christ alone!

As far as concerns the faithful, they aspire indeed to righteousness, but lamely, and at a great distance from their aim; they often wander from the way, and they often fall, so that they do not satisfy the law, and hence require God's pity. Hence we must come to the second kind of righteousness, which is improperly so called, namely, that which we obtain from Christ. **He who does righteousness is righteous** (1 John 3:7). **None of us does it; but Christ, who fulfilled the law, is esteemed just before God.** Hence it is necessary that we should be approved by God through His righteousness; that is, **it is imputed to us [reckoned to our account], and we are accepted through His righteousness.** Hence **justification by faith**, as it is called, is not properly righteousness; but on account of the defect of true righteousness, it is necessary to fly to this as to a sacred anchor; and Paul, in the tenth chapter to the Romans, explains this briefly and clearly. The righteousness of the law, says he, thus speaks: He who has done these things shall live in them; but the righteousness of faith says, He who has believed shall be just. The Apostle here speaks of a double righteousness—that of the law and of faith: he says, that the righteousness of the law is situated in works, since no one is thought just unless he fulfills the law (Romans 10:5-8). **Since all are far distant from this standard, another is added and substituted, namely, that we may embrace the righteousness of Christ by faith, and so become just, by another righteousness without us [outside of us].**

If any one again objects that justification by the law is superfluous, I answer, that it profits us in two ways; first, because the law brings in those convicted of their own unrighteousness to Christ [cf. Galatians 3:24: "Therefore the law was our tutor [schoolmaster] to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."]. This, then, is one fruit of the law, **that we renounce our own righteousness**, when our iniquity so discloses itself, that it compels us to be silent before God, as we formerly saw. A more fruitful result follows; because, when God regenerates His elect, He inscribes a law on their hearts and in their inward parts, as we have elsewhere seen, and shall see again in the thirty-sixth chapter (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26, 27).

But the difficulty is not yet solved; because the faithful, even if regenerated by God's Spirit, endeavor to conform themselves to God's law, yet, through their own weakness, never arrive at that point, and so are never righteous: I answer, although the righteousness of works is mutilated in the sons of God, yet it is acknowledged as perfect, since, by not imputing their sins to them, He proves what is His own. Hence it happens, that although the faithful fall back, wander, and sometimes fall, yet they may be called observers of the law, and walkers in the commandments of God, and observers of His righteousness. But this arises from **gratuitous imputation**, and hence also its reward.

Rewards await true believers.

The works of the faithful are not without reward, because they please God, and pleasing God, they are sure of remuneration. We see, then, how these things are rightly united, that no one obeys the law, and that no one is worthy of the fruits of righteousness, and yet that God, of His own liberality, acknowledges as just those who aspire to righteousness, and repays them with a reward of which they are unworthy.

Faith and works—Calvin reconciles Paul’s teaching in Galatians and Romans with James’ teaching in his epistle.

When, therefore, we say that the faithful are esteemed just even in their deeds, this is not stated as a cause of their salvation, and we must diligently notice that the cause of salvation is excluded from this doctrine; for, when we discuss the cause, we must look nowhere else but to the mercy of God, and there we must stop.

But **although works tend in no way to the cause of justification,** yet, when the elect sons of God were justified freely by faith, at the same time their works are esteemed righteous by the same gratuitous liberality. Thus it still remains true, that **faith without works justifies,** although this needs prudence and a sound interpretation; for **this proposition, that faith without works justifies is true and yet false, according to the different senses which it bears.**

The proposition, that faith without works justifies by itself, is false, because faith without works is void. But if the clause “without works” is joined with the word “justifies,” the proposition will be true, since faith cannot justify when it is without works, because it is dead, and a mere fiction. He who is born of God is just, as John says (1 John 5:18). Thus **faith can be no more separated from works than the sun from his heat** yet faith justifies without works, because works form no reason for our justification; but **faith alone reconciles us to God,** and causes Him to love us, not in ourselves, but in His only begotten Son. Now, therefore, that question is solved, when the Prophet teaches that life is reposed in the just, even if they are born of wicked and unholy parents.

Lastly, we must notice the word “life,” since the word “living” ought not to be understood only of life on earth, but looks to eternal life. . . . Moses is speaking of life eternal. Hence we must hold, not only that a reward is promised in this life to the just observers of the law, but that eternal life is also a promised reward. Besides, as I have said, since we are all destitute of righteousness, so we ought not to hope for any reward, since we are all under the law and under the curse, as Paul says: neither is there any means of escape, as Paul again says (Galatians 3:10, 13), unless we fly with complete and abject faith to the mercy of God alone, and to the satisfaction by which Christ has reconciled us to His Father. Here I shall finish.

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, since you have pointed out to us the true way of safety, since You did perceive us all deficient in this respect, and since the law which ought to have given us life brought death through our transgressing it: Grant, I pray, since You have set before us Your only Son in whom we may be reconciled and obtain the perfect righteousness which we need, that we may so embrace the grace which is offered to us in the gospel, that we may strive more and more to proceed in the pursuit of piety, until we arrive at length at the blessed inheritance which the same, Your only-begotten Son, has acquired for us. — Amen.