

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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FRUSTRATING THE GRACE OF GOD AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Samuel Bolton (1606-1654) was a notable Puritan preacher. In his remarkable book, *The Assignment of Error*, he wrote, “There is no man who can plead immunity from all kinds of errors. There is no man who is not in danger of being led aside with some error or another, as we say of sin (there is no man who sins not), so we may say of error (there is no man who errs not). There is no man on earth who has an unerring privilege, an unerring spirit; no, not all the men on earth together – not church Fathers, synods, councils – are free from error, as is confessed by all and largely proved against the papists. That is the first point: no man can plead an immunity and freedom from and kind of error. Even the best men are subject to the worst of errors. What does *subject* mean? That is, they are vulnerable to them; they are liable to them. As our bodies are vulnerable to all sicknesses, so our souls are liable to all sin and error too. But that is not all. To be subject to error is not only to be vulnerable to it, but to be inclinable; and that’s more. A man may be vulnerable to many sicknesses to which yet he is not inclined. Inclination does not only imply a passive capacity in the subject, but a prepared disposition. In hard wax there is a passive capacity, but in soft wax there is a prepared disposition to receive the impression of the seal. And in saying the best of men are in themselves subject to the worst of errors, I do not only mean they are vulnerable, but inclined; they not only have a passive capacity to be corrupted, but they have a prepared disposition to sin in practice and to err in judgment. Yet this inclination is not alike in all. It is capable of degrees, not as it is by nature, for so all are equally corrupted, but as some have improved their corruptions more than others: some are more inclined, and some to one error more than another. Though none can plead immunity from all kinds of errors, nay, though the best of men may be subject to the worst of errors in themselves, yet the saints are secured from such kinds of errors by the grace of Christ. I have formerly told you from 1 Corinthians 3:10 that as there are foundation-truths and building-truths, so there are foundation-errors and building-errors, damning and defiling errors. All errors are defiling, but not all are damning; all are dangerous, but not all are not destructive.”¹ The error that the Galatians were exposed to falls into the latter category. The Gospel is at stake, as John Owen pointed out, “And so much weight doth 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: *For, saith he, if righteousness be by the law, then Christ is dead in vain*; and it is dangerous venturing on so sharp a fence.”² Our text has been translated by the KJV this way: “I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.” The NASB (New American Standard Bible) reads: “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.” The ASV (The American Standard Version) has, “I do not make void the grace of God: for if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nought.” The NIV (New International Version) says: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” The NLT (New Living Translation): “I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.” And the ESV (English Standard Version) reads, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” The Merriam/Webster Collegiate Dictionary on *frustrate* (a) to balk or defeat in an endeavor; (b) to induce

feelings of discouragement; (c) to make ineffectual; bring to nothing, to make void or invalid. syn. thwart, foil, baffle. The Bible clearly teaches that God cannot be frustrated the way that humans can.

Robert Letham underscores this aspect of God's will when he writes: "The stress throughout Scripture is that all that happens is a consequence of God's decretive will, his particular determination that this or that will transpire. Paul speaks of *him who works all things according to the counsel of his will* (Eph. 1:11). This includes random events, such as when a Syrian soldier fired his arrow at random and killed the king of Israel, who had taken every precaution to make himself *incognito*, having heard the word of the Lord that he was to fall in battle that day (1 Kings 22:13-36, esp. 34). It also covers the casting of lots (Prov. 16:33). Acts intended to bring evil and harm can nevertheless be part of God's overriding purpose to accomplish good (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23). Each thought and policy of the most powerful ruler is ordered by God to fulfill *his will* (Prov. 21:1; Rev. 1:5). The book of Esther is full of seemingly fortuitous events, lucky breaks, all clearly – if subtly and implicitly – testifying to the sovereignty of God, who is not mentioned by name in the entire book. The ultimate destiny of the universe, the earth, its inhabitants, and the church is all to work out in line with the eternal plan of God."³ Robert Traill (1642-1716) made this important point, "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, *viz.* 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."⁴

I. ***THE APOSTLE'S LANGUAGE.***

- A. The verb *athetō* has the sense of rejecting something as invalid. It is used this way in Mark 7:9, Hebrews 10:28 and Galatians 3:15, where it means "to set aside." In 1 Thessalonians 4:8 it means "to nullify or declare invalid." It is a rather strong term that has legal overtones usually in connection with invalidating a treaty or will or covenant.⁵ John Eadie, the great Scottish commentator from the 19th century, comments, "For if anyone puts faith in works or reverts to work, or in any way, either wholly or in part, give them place in justification either as opposed to faith or as supplementing it – if any one hope to merit what God so freely bestows, he frustrates the grace of God, regards it as void or an unneeded arrangement."⁶
- B. The Greek word *dōrean* is likewise very telling. It is usually translated "without cause." William Perkins (1558-1602) points out that the word "has a double signification. One is when it signifies as much as *without price or merit: Ye have received freely, give freely* (Matt. 10:8). The second is when it signifies *rashly, without just or sufficient cause, as, Mine enemies hate me freely* (Ps. 69:4, as the Seventy translate), that is, wrongfully, or without just cause. Thus here is Christ said to die *freely*, that is, in vain, or without cause, because if we be justified by obedience to the law, then Christ died in vain to make any satisfaction to the law for us. These words are an answer to an objection. The objection is this: If you teach that a sinner is justified only by his faith in Christ, then you abolish the grace of God. The answer is negative. I do not by this doctrine abrogate the grace of God. And there is a reason also of this answer. If we be justified by our own fulfilling of the law, then Christ died in vain to fulfill the law for us."⁷ Chrysostom justly remarks that if works are in anyway added, "The death of Christ would be superfluous!" David Clarkson (1623-1686) declared: "If you rest in your own righteousness, you are enemies to the righteousness of Christ. This confidence in self-righteousness thrusts Christ's righteousness out of doors, leaves no place for it, no use of it. It counts the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, a thing of no use or value; tramples upon the blood of Christ as an useless, a fruitless thing; counts Christ to have done and

suffered so many things in vain, Gal. 2:21. Now the self-confident says he has a righteousness that comes by the law, by some outward works and acts which the law requires; places his righteousness in some outward works and acts which the law requires; places his righteousness in some outward observance of and conformities to the law, and so would make Christ to have died in vain; for why did he die, but that lost man might have a righteousness to bring him to heaven? If men have this in themselves, Christ's undertaking, and his sufferings too, were vain and needless. In vain did he take upon him *the form of a servant*, in vain was he *made under the law*, in vain did he *fulfill all righteousness*, in vain did he become a *man of sorrow*, in vain did he bear the wrath of God, in vain was he wounded, scourged, and crucified. All this was needless and waste if men have a righteousness of their own to be rested on. Oh, what a horrid reflection does this case upon Christ! What a monstrous provocation is this! No imagination can fathom the depth of it. If you rest on your own righteousness, you are enemies to the righteousness both of the law and of the gospel, for by thus doing, you give the lie to both. The law says, there is no life to be had without perfect obedience; the self-confident says, he shall have life, though he have neither such an obedience, nor faith to be justified from the defects of it. The law says, *Cursed is every one that continues not in all things*, &c., Gal. 3:10; he says he shall be blessed, though he continue not in all things, no, nor anything, as it is prescribed in the law, though he rest not only upon him who only can free a sinner from the curse."⁸

CONCLUSION: Luther famously declared, "Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater. . . . For when this article has been taken away, nothing remains but error, hypocrisy, godlessness, and idolatry, although it may seem to be the height of truth, worship of God, holiness, etc. The reason for this is that God neither wants to be known nor can be known in any other way except through Christ, according to this word in John 1:18: *The Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.*"⁹ Ligonier Ministries recently released the State of Theology, which once again documented how ignorant many professed Evangelicals are when it comes to theological matters. R. K. McGregor Wright captured the nature of this sad predicament when he wrote: "Today's evangelicals do not look so much to the Bible, to the reformation principle of *sola Scripture*, for clues about how to present the gospel to the world of unbelief. They look instead to the smorgasbord of secular psychologies, philosophies and spiritualities to find contact points. And their gospel is no longer the theologically articulated gospel of forty years ago. Today it is a syncretistic combination of secular methodologies and superficial biblical language aimed at *felt needs* rather than hellbound sinners. Can we really imagine the apostle Paul insisting that the gospel be made *user-friendly*? Paul taught that the power of the gospel is located in the preaching of God's Word, not in its ability to absorb intellectual pop culture."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Samuel Bolton, *The Arraignment of Error* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), p. 102.

² *The Works of John Owen V* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1976), p. 355.

³ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Crossway, 2019), p. 169.

⁴ *The Works of Robert Traill IV* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 160.

⁵ See the excellent analysis in Richard Longenecker, *Galatians: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1990), p. 94.

⁶ John Eadie, *Galatians: Greek Text Commentaries* (rpt. Baker, 1976), p. 195.

⁷ *The Works of William Perkins II* (rpt. Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), p. 142.

⁸ *The Works of David Clarkson I* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1988), p. 126.

⁹ *What Luther Says: An Anthology II* (Concordia, 1959), p. 704.

¹⁰ R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place For Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (IVP, 1996), p. 12.

