

Christ Did Not Die in Vain

by Robert Traill

Sermon Five of Six Sermons on Galatians 2:21.

"If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." — Gal. 2:21.

"I do not frustrate the grace of God; for if righteousness come by the law, then is Christ dead in vain." You have heard of the connection of this verse with the preceding part of the chapter; and of its relation to the scope of the apostle, and to that point of gospel doctrine that he is there proving; and that is, "That a man is not justified by the law, but by Christ, or by faith in him. And this verse contains two arguments, the first of which I have already spoken to, and finished. In the former part of the words, "I do not frustrate the grace of God," would the apostle say, "If I seek righteousness by the works of the law, I should frustrate the grace of God;" and from this I have spoken at some length to four points of doctrine.

1st, The grace of God shines gloriously in justifying a sinner by faith in Jesus Christ.

2^{dly}, That it is a horrible sin to frustrate the grace of God.

3^{dly}, That all who seek to be justified by the law, do frustrate the grace of God.

4^{thly}, This is a sin that no godly man, no sound believer, can be guilty of; and this I observed from the apostle's saying, "I do not frustrate the grace of God." And this was spoken by him as he was a believer, and not as an extraordinary officer of the church.

I am now to enter upon the apostle's second argument, in the latter part of the words, "For if righteousness *come* by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." You may see, by the different character, that the word "come" is there added by our translators, to make the sense more smooth. According to the running of the word in the original, it is, "If righteousness by the law, the Christ is dead in vain." — If it be by the law, if it come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. There are implied and contained in these words two negatives, and two positives; and I would speak a little to each. The two negatives are these:—

I. That the righteousness that justifies a sinner comes not by the law.

II. That Christ died not in vain.

The two positives that are contained in the words are these:—

I. That if righteousness came by the law, then Christ died in vain.

II. That it is a horrible sin to make Christ's death to be in vain. And how a sinner can be guilty of it, you shall hear.

I. The first negative in the text is, That righteousness comes not by the law; and this is implied, when the apostle speaks of it, as a principle from whence so absurd a conclusion would follow: it is plainly intimated that righteousness comes not by the law, because the apostle saith, if it did do so, "Christ was dead in vain."

I would speak a little to this — that the righteousness of a sinner for justification before God, comes not by the law. There is nothing that a man doth according to the law, there is nothing that a man suffers according to the law, that can be his righteousness before God; and there is something of both these attempted by men, but both in vain. This I would prove, that no sinner can have righteousness by the law.

1. The law uncovers sin, and that is the apostle's argument: "Therefore by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin;" (Rom. 3:20). There is no sin in the law; but the knowledge of sin by the law, is the knowledge of a contrary by its contrary. The law is perfectly holy; but this strict rule reveals the crookedness that is in man's heart. By the law is the knowledge of sin," (Gal. 3:11). But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident, for "the just shall live by faith." It was evident to Paul, and it is evident to believers, but it can never be evident to an unbeliever, that no man is justified by the law, or by the works of it.

2. No man can be justified by the law, because the law condemns every sin, and every sinner for every sin. The law of God is so strict, that it condemns every sin. Now, that which condemns, cannot justify: for these two are contrary, "As many as are of the works of the law, are under the curse," (Gal. 3:10). The apostle Paul was a bold divine; he spoke the truth of God boldly, and cared not what men thought of it. Had the apostle said, "As many as break the law, are under the curse," we would have thought that pretty tolerable; but saith he, "As many as are of the works of the law, are under the curse." Why so? Because their works are not perfect; for it is written, saith the apostle, "Cursed is every one

that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." The law curseth every one that cannot fulfil it; if a man could fulfil the whole law of God, and transgress but in one point, yet that one sin would be condemned by the law, and the sinner for it.

3. No man can be justified by the works of the law, because every man is a sinner: "What things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and that all the world may become guilty before God: therefore by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God; for by the law is the knowledge of sin," (Rom. 3:19, 20) The question that the apostle is there upon, is on this point, that is so great a point in the Christian religion, How shall a sinner be justified before God? It is not how a holy man may be justified;— it is not how a man that never sinned may be justified; but it is, How shall a *sinner* be justified? A man that is flesh be justified? Now, saith the apostle, there is no *flesh* justified in the sight of God.

4. The law knows no mercy. Mercy and grace belong to another court than the law: "The law came by Moses; but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ," (John 1:17). Condemnation for sin belongs to the law, but justification from sin belongs to the gospel. The law hath nothing to do with the one, and the gospel hath nothing to do with the other. The law hath nothing to do to condemn them that the gospel absolves. But you will say, "Is not this a great fault in the law, that it cannot justify a man?" The apostle speaks some way like this in Heb. 7:18, 19; though I do believe that the apostle there rather means the Old Testament dispensation, than this law, in its more general comprehensive sense, that I am now speaking of: "For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before, for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof; for the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did, by the which we draw nigh to God." This is a common thought arising in the hearts of men, "Is it not a fault in the law, that it cannot justify a man? Is it not a fault that the law can send men to hell, but not bring them to heaven?" I answer, No: It is the excellency of the law; not its fault, but its glory; for let us consider a little what the law doth about righteousness.

1st, The law discloses and reveals a perfect righteousness; there is no surer, no better rule of righteousness in this world, than the holy law of God: therefore, when our Lord is dealing with a poor carnal legalist, a puffed-up young man, that came to him, in great haste, with great zeal, running to him like a man that would be in heaven before any body else, "Good master, what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Saith our Lord, "You know, no man can come to heaven, but he that is perfectly righteous; now the only rule of perfect righteousness is the law of God; and seeing thou art in the vein for doing," "keep the commandments." The poor man, not knowing his own heart, nor the breadth of God's law, replies, "All these things have I kept from my youth up." Saith our

Lord, "I will prove thee a breaker of the law, and a gross one too;" "Go and sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor; and follow me, and thou shalt have treasures in heaven." Not that a title to eternal life comes to any man by giving his estate to the poor; but our Lord hereby reveals the rottenness of the poor self-justified man's heart, that the man quickly, before all the company, revealed that his estate was more valuable to him than eternal life. Our Lord would have him give an evident proof, that his heart was disengaged from the world, and then follow him, and he should be saved; but he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions, (Matt. 19:16), There is a perfect rule of righteousness in the law of God, for the most perfect creature that ever was: for sinless Adam in his state of innocency. "The law of God is perfect:" so it is often called in the word of God.

2d, This righteousness that the law of God reveals, it also commands by its authority; all manner of righteousness is commanded by the law of God.

3d, All sin is threatened by the law of God; yea, the lack of this righteousness which it commands, is threatened by the law.

4th, By the law, the promise of eternal life is made to the righteous; for the law of God, completely considered, hath the promise of eternal life to all the obeyers of it; but never man shall reach it, because the righteousness of the law is impracticable; it requires that righteousness that no man can perform; and, therefore, what it promises no man can attain to. This the apostle calls the impossibility of the law: so it is in the original; we read it, "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh," (Rom 8:3). The true reason why the law cannot give life, is because of the *flesh* of them that are under it; no man can fulfil the righteousness of the law, and therefore no man can attain to life by the law. So much for the *first* negative implied here, That no righteousness can come by the works of the law.

II. The other negative is this, That Christ died not in vain. Now, this word, in *vain*, respects two things:— 1st, That is said to be done in vain which is needless. 2dly, That is said to be in vain, that is unprofitably done. Now, neither of these can be said of the death of Christ: there was great *need* of his dying, and great *good* came by his dying, and therefore he died not in vain.

1st, There was great *need* of Christ's dying, and that upon manifold respects; I will name a few.

1. In regard of the decree of God, there was a necessity of his dying; and this our Lord had in his eye, when he was come just upon the borders of dying:

"Now is my soul troubled, What shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour;" (John 12:2-7), — where our Lord hath respect to the necessity of his dying, upon the account of the divine appointment.

2. It was necessary upon the account of the covenant between the Father and the Son: Christ promised to die, and, therefore, he must be as good as his word:— "A body thou hast prepared me; then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me, to do thy will) O God." And what was that will of God? *Dying* was his will, and the blessed *consequences* of it. (Heb. 10:5, 7).

3. It was needful upon the account of the scriptures; and this our Lord insists on frequently. The scriptures of the Old Testament foretold Christ's death: there were many predictions and prophecies of it; many types and shadows of it; therefore our Lord tells his disciples: "These are the words that I spake unto you, whilst I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which are written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning me," (Luke 24:44). And again, (ver. 46), "Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day." There was a necessity of it for the fulfilling of the scriptures, and, therefore, our Lord rebuked Peter, when he offered to make a defence for his master: "How then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" (Matt. 26:54). "Put up thy sword, man, this is no place for that work: the scriptures are fulfilling."

4. There was a necessity of Christ's death, for the salvation of his people. Their justification and their salvation were only brought about by the death of Jesus Christ.

2dly, And that leads me to the *second* head — Christ's death was not in vain: for there was great fruit and profit by it.

1. It brought in an everlasting righteousness, which should stand accepted before God: this is what our Lord wrought out by his death, foretold by the prophet Daniel, "To bring in everlasting righteousness," (chap. 9:24).

2. There was not only a righteousness brought in, but by Christ's death there was a purchase made; a purchase of grace and glory for his people. The death of our Lord Jesus Christ purchased great things for us, even all things that we enjoy. It did not indeed purchase the covenant of grace; for the covenant of grace sent Christ; but yet it purchased all the blessings of the covenant; for the grand condition of that covenant was, that Christ must buy all the good things contained in it by the price of his own blood.

3. Christ died not in vain, for his blood confirmed and sealed the charter: "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins, drink ye all of it," (Matt. 26:27, 28). Christ's death confirmed the covenant, and made it a testament, (Heb. 9:15, 20).

4. Christ's death was not in vain, but for great profit: for thereby a way to heaven was made plain to believers, a patent way to heaven. How blessedly doth the apostle speak of this, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus: by a new and living way which he hath consecrated for us, through the vail, that is to say, his flesh," (Heb. 10:19, 20). The meaning is, his *flesh rent*; the consecrating of the way, was by rending the flesh of Jesus Christ. The righteousness that justifies us — the blessings that make us happy — the covenant that secures them — and the way to heaven, are all by the death of Jesus Christ: — and they are strangers to all these things, who do not know that their way to them lies through this vail of the slain Son of God. So much for the two negatives.

Secondly, I am now to speak to the two positives in the words.

1. That if righteousness come by the law, then is Christ dead in vain. I have told you that righteousness comes not by the law, and that Christ did not die in vain. Now, the apostle joins them together, and shews what a strange aspect they have one upon another. "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." This is an inference that will necessarily follow, If righteousness comes by the law, then Christ died in vain, to work out righteousness; — if righteousness comes by the law, Christ's death was in vain in the main end of it, viz., to work out righteousness. My friends, I would have you consider this with yourselves, and this one thought may serve to rectify many mistakes: — Our Lord Jesus Christ did not die to make hard things easy, to make a hard way to heaven easy; but Christ died to make impossible things *certain*. He did not die to make it more easy to get to heaven than it was before; but he died to make *certain* a way to heaven, that was *impossible* before. "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin condemned sin in the flesh," (Rom. 8:3). And again, "If there had been a law that could have given righteousness, verily righteousness had been by the law;" (Gal. 3:21). But because there was no law that could give righteousness to man, therefore Christ came to bring about that which was altogether impossible. How unworthily do they think of Jesus Christ, and the grand concern of his death, that look upon it only as purchasing a new law, whereby men might come to heaven on easier terms than they could by the old! Christ came to purchase a new way to heaven: a way that none could make but he: a way without which none could ever have come to heaven: — and really

(though I acknowledge that about things unrevealed, and about the secret things of God, men should be sober) that notion of the possibility of the salvation of the heathen, that never heard of Jesus Christ, is condemned in this text. If a Pagan that never heard of Christ, may be saved, then is Christ dead in vain. If the end that Christ died for, can be reached any other way, then certainly Christ died in vain. If the righteousness that Christ died for, could have been attained any other way; if the fulfilling of the law that Christ underwent, in order to this righteousness; if these could have been done any other way, Christ died in vain. But these things are not so.

2. The second positive is, That making Christ's death to be in vain, is a horrible sin. The apostle is here arguing from absurdities; and he argues from two of the greatest that can enter into the minds of men. "If you seek righteousness by the law, you frustrate the grace of God, and what a wretched creature is that! If you seek righteousness by the law, you make Christ's death in vain; and can you do anything worse, than to kick against the grace of God, and to make the death of Christ in vain?" These sins are very great. But you will say, Can any man make Christ's death in vain? No. No man, nor any devil neither, nor all the devils together, can frustrate the virtue of Christ's death; it is above the reach of hell and earth. The devil, and the wicked world, thought to make Christ's life in vain, by putting him to death; to put an end to his doctrine, and life, and disciples, by killing him; and to put an end to all, by keeping him in the grave: but to make Christ's death in vain is utterly impossible; it is so certain, so reverend a transaction of divine Providence, contrived in so much wisdom, that its end must necessarily be reached. But, though no man can make Christ's death to be in vain really — yet,

1st, A man may make it in vain to *himself*; he may reduce himself into the same case as if Christ had never died. "Behold, I Paul, say unto you, that if you be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing," (Gal. 5:2). A strange word! "Christ shall profit you nothing!" Was the apostle Paul a man that preached an unprofitable Christ? No; but you render him vain, if you seek righteousness by the law. (Vet. 4), "Christ is become of no effect to you; whosoever is justified by the law, is fallen from grace." A justified man by the law, there never was in this world; but the apostle speaks of it here as supposing the best; supposing they had got all that they could have devised, for their justification by the law, supposing that they had obeyed the law more perfectly than any sinner ever had done, saith the apostle, "This is all the benefit you would reap by it, Christ's righteousness would be of no effect to you." A man makes Christ's death to be in vain to himself, when he doth not lay hold of its power and virtue by faith.

2d, A man makes Christ's death to be in vain, by doing all that *he* can to make it so; though he doth not do so in fact. And you will find this the rule of God's dealing; he measures men's wickedness, and judges of their actions, by the native design of them, though they never reach it. In all acts of dishonouring God, and rebellion against him, God deals with men according to their sinful *intentions* in these sins, though they fall far short of taking effect. A sinner, by his self-righteousness, cannot make Christ's death to be in vain; but he doth all that he can to make it so: and this is what the apostle means here when he saith, "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain." "You do all that you can to make Christ's death in vain," I should now come to speak something of the greatness of this sin, of making Christ's death in vain; of entertaining any principles or practices that have a tendency that way. But I cannot enter upon this now.