

Salvation - Justification by Faith

Could You Keep the Law Perfectly, But Still Not Be Saved?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

From the **TeachingtheWord** Bible Knowledgebase

Romans 2:13 has been at the crux of the controversy over the doctrine of justification during the past forty years. Heretics continue to abuse this verse - and so much other Scripture - to teach justification by faith plus works. But many who are sound on the doctrine of justification by faith alone also miss the point of Romans 2:13 in context: You could be legally faultless, but you would still not be right with God.

January 2017 - The Apostle Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote the following in Romans 2:13 - "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified." Debate over the meaning of this passage has been at the center of the "justification controversy" during the last forty years.

Just last week someone wrote us a lengthy letter attempting to prove that every time you see the word "faith" in the Bible in connection with salvation, it really means not belief but *faithfulness* - in other words, works. If that is true, then not one single soul ever has been or will be saved. It seems that to the person who wrote the letter, these verses mean nothing:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

I do not set aside [i.e., nullify] the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain. (Galatians 2:21)

You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (Galatians 5:4)

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work. (Romans 11:5-6)

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:19-26)

A Much-Abused Verse

Apostate teachers say that Romans 2:13 means that sinners are justified by faith plus works. Norman Shepherd, a Christian Reformed minister and former professor of theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote this:

The Pauline affirmation in Romans 2:13, "the doers of the Law will be justified," is not to be understood hypothetically in the sense that there are no persons who fall into that class, but in the sense that faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will be justified.¹

Following Shepherd's example, Orthodox Presbyterian Church ruling elder John Kinnaird says that Romans 2:13 teaches that "it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous on that Day of Judgment."²

Abuse of Romans 2:13 is also central to the Federal Vision heresy. In an essay titled "Future Justification of the Doers of the Law," Richard Lusk echoes Norman Shepherd and other false teachers:

Paul states just as emphatically as James that the doers of the law will be justified (Rom. 2:13; James 2:14ff). But who are these doers of the law? Is Paul speaking hypothetically of a class of sinless people who do not really exist? Or does he have something else in mind?

Let's start by unpacking what it means to keep the law. The law simply did not require perfect obedience. It was not designed for the angels or sinless humans. It was given to a fallen-but-redeemed nation at Sinai, and was perfectly adapted to their maturity level and ability. God was not mocking the people when he called on them to obey the whole law (Dt. 28:1ff). He had given them grace and they had no excuse for apostasy.

Law keeping in this context is not a matter of scoring 100% on an ethics test. It is not even a matter of scoring 51%. It simply doesn't work that way. Conformity to the law was a matter of relationship, not something mechanical. The law called for a life of faith (Hab. 2:4), a life of full-orbed loyalty to the Lawgiver. If one sinned, one did not automatically become a "law breaker," except in a highly technical sense.³

Apparently Lusk has never read (or at least not rightly understood) James 2:10 - "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all."

False teaching regarding Romans 2:13 is also a centerpiece of the doctrinal deviancy known as the New Perspective on Paul. Anglican bishop N. T. Wright, a principal advocate of this heresy, writes that "the first mention of justification in Romans is a mention of justification by *works* - apparently with Paul's approval (2:13)."⁴

The Sad Response

How have churches responded to these false teachings about Romans 2:13? Far too often, the response has been to accommodate the heretics. Here are just a few examples.

The board of trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia declared that Shepherd's teachings "fall within the limits tolerated by Scripture and the Confession" (i.e., the Westminster Confession of Faith). Shepherd was even commended for his "fresh insights".⁵ A presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church declared that Shepherd's teachings were consistent with the OPC's ordination vows.⁶

John Kinnaird was found not guilty of teaching heresy by the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. A General Assembly Advisory Committee stated, "There is strong evidence that it is allowable in the OPC to interpret Romans 2:13 (as Mr. Kinnaird does) as a description of something that will be done to the righteous at the day of judgment."⁷

Richard Lusk was allowed to leave the Presbyterian Church in America without ever being disciplined, and is now a minister of the Confederation of Reformed and Evangelical Churches (CREC), where he continued to teach this heresy. The CREC as a body is riddled with the heresy of justification by faith plus works, and the teaching that salvation comes through water baptism.

N. T. Wright is welcomed as a speaker and lecturer in Evangelical and Reformed circles. According to his website, in the past decade he has received six honorary doctor of divinity

degrees from Evangelical, Anglican, and Reformed colleges and seminaries. In recent times, Wright has also become a favored theologian of the Emergent Church movement.

What Romans 2:13 Actually Says: It's an Axiom

Romans 2:13 in context says something entirely different from the false teachers' claims - and even different from what many preachers who are sound on the doctrine of justification by faith alone mistakenly teach. The following material is adapted from *The Complete Word Study New Testament* by Spiros Zodhiates (AMG Publishers, 1991), pages 897-898.

The word translated "justified" in Romans 2:13 is from the Greek verb *dikaoo*. In the New Testament it means to recognize as righteous, to set forth as righteous, to justify as a judicial act.

Romans 2:13 says, "For not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." The contrast is between the hearers (Greek *akroatai*) and the doers (*poietai*). The verb used here for "will be justified" is *dikaiotesontai*. It is a future passive punctiliar, which means that at a particular time in the future those who kept the law would be judicially declared as righteous.

The first part of the verse literally reads, "For the hearers of the law not just by the side of, or before, God." There is no verb at all, which in the Greek makes the statement true without any time limitation. What it declares was, is, and will be true. It is axiomatic. On the face of it, and in isolation, Romans 2:13 seems to say that justification by works (law-keeping) is theoretically possible.

You Could Be Legally Faultless But Still Not Right With God

But in Romans 3:20 we find this statement: "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Does this mean there is a paradox in Scripture? Not at all. Whereas Romans 2:13 declares the norm that the doer of the law will be declared just, Romans 3:20 flatly declares that such a thing is impossible. Even if man is able to do the works of the law, he still cannot be justified. Why? *Because a person can be legally perfect but still stand condemned before God.* Scripture explains how this is true.

Paul said in Philippians 3:6 that concerning the righteousness which is in the Law, he was "blameless" (Greek *amemptos*, faultless, without defect). But, he says in the next verse, "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ." Paul tells Timothy that despite his law-keeping he was "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man" who stood in need of God's mercy (1 Timothy 1:13).

The Law cannot place a person in right standing before God, even if that person could be proven to be fully conforming to the Law. Why? Another insurmountable obstacle would remain: Our sin nature inherited from Adam -

"For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Romans 5:15-20).

We Need a Righteousness That Is Not Our Own

The Greek syntax and the context of Romans 2:13 combine to show us that it does not mean that a person could be made righteous before God by keeping the law. Romans 2:13 speaks of an outward righteousness, not an inherent, saving righteousness. As we read further, we find that Romans 4:2 supports this: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God." The verb used here for "was justified"

(*edikαιοthe*) does not carry the meaning of being declared righteous in terms of an inward personal righteousness, but only in terms of outward conformity.

Paul is saying that even if Abraham had kept the Law, he still would not receive a "not guilty" verdict from God. Abraham, even if he obeyed the Law, would have nothing to boast about before God. The New Testament declares that we are justified before God by the righteousness of Christ alone. Moreover, that righteousness is not only His perfect law-keeping, as marvelous and precious as that is. Christ's righteousness is His inherent perfection as the God-man. We need a righteousness that is not our own, a righteousness that only Christ has, and which is only appropriated by grace through faith:

"And be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:9).

"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." (Galatians 2:16)

"But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith.' " (Galatians 3:11)

"But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:4-7)

"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:21-24).

If "faith" really means not belief but faithfulness - in other words, works - then not one single soul ever has been or will be saved. We are by nature utterly incapable of faithfulness. But praise God, Scripture gives hope to the otherwise hopeless - through the only One who has been completely faithful, Jesus Christ!

References:

1. Norman Shepherd, *Thirty-four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance, and Good Works*, theses 22 and 23; privately published by the author, 1978; reproduced by permission at www.hornes.org/theologia/content/norman_shepherd/the_34_theses.htm.
2. John A. Kinnaird, *Kinnaird Declaration and Theological Statement*, reproduced at www.trinityfoundation.org/KinnairdDeclarationTheologicalStatement.php.
3. Richard Lusk, "Future Justification of the Doers of the Law," www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/future_justification_to_the_doers_of_the_law.htm.
4. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 126. Emphasis in the original.
5. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2003), page 50.
6. Minutes of the Committee of the Whole, Presbytery of Philadelphia of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, January-February 1979, pages 248-253.
7. *Minutes of the 70th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, page 35. This statement implies that such diametrically opposite views on salvation are allowable in the OPC but might not be allowable elsewhere. This raises the question: Is there one authentic Gospel, or not?

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