

Works “of Law” versus Works “of Faith”

Recently, a friend pointed out to me that at least on the surface, Romans 2:13 seems to be saying the opposite of Romans 3:19-20 and Galatians 2:21. I paste below these verses along with a couple of others that should be considered with them.

Romans 2:12 *For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law* **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)*

Compare with....

Romans 3:19-20 *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 works “of law” no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (I left out the article “the” and just show “works of law” because the article is not in the Greek. Paul’s phrase is literally “works of law.”)*

And...

Galatians 2:21 *"I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."*

To the one suggesting that there seems to be a conflict, I say that there is no conflict at all. This demonstrates the danger of looking at a verse in isolation of its context. When we do, we will often misinterpret what the author (Paul) was trying to communicate. Romans 1:16-3:31 contains a lengthy argument and to understand it, we must not pick out one verse as if it is a self-contained, stand-alone statement.

Romans 2:13 is describing a group of people called “doers of the law” and this group of people will be justified rather than the people who only hear the law but don’t do it. Romans 3:20 and Galatians 2:21 are not talking about the people. Rather, they are talking about the means of justification. Specifically, in Gal 2:21 and Rom 3:20, Paul is making the argument that justification does not come (or result) from “works of law.” “Works of law” are not the means to justification. (“Works of law” is the exact translation of Paul’s phrase, not “works of the law.”)

Said another way, Romans 2:13 is not talking about the means to justification. It is merely talking about a group of people who will be justified. And these people happen to be people who are “doers of the law.” Paul is not saying in Romans 2:13 that these people will be justified BECAUSE they did “works of law.” We know from his entire argument that they were justified by faith. Actually, they lived their lives by faith. They did not seek to be justified on the basis of the “works of law” that they were doing. No, they trusted in Christ’s work and, having been reconciled through His blood, they lived out the rest of their lives gladly obeying Him because they love Him and were thankful to Him. By the end of their life, they had performed countless acts of obedience from the heart and this qualifies them in God’s sight as “doers of the law.” Even though they did not seek to be justified by doing “works of law,” their lives were filled with good works that please God and they did these works out of faith throughout their lives.

There is another point that can be made here that supports what I have already said above. This point has to do with a phrase that only Paul used and that phrase is “works of law.” In the Greek, this phrase is only two words: ἔργων νόμου (literally “works law.”) But because both of these words are in the genitive case, it is literally translated as “works of law.” The genitive case conveys the idea of association with or ownership. So, the works being talked about are in association with the law or “of law.” This specific phrase is used only by Paul so he clearly was trying to communicate a concept that he thought was important. (Note: This specific phrase is used only in

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Romans 3:20, 28; 9:32; Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10 and these verses appear in English and Greek at the very bottom of this article just for reference.)

Let your mind dwell on the idea expressed in Paul's use of the genitive case with these two words. The word "law" is the predominant word which seems to qualify the type of works Paul had in mind. They are works of law. Perhaps it might be good to contrast this type of works with the works conveyed by the phrase "works of faith." It appears that by using his phrase, "works of law," Paul was trying to distinguish between works associated with the useless attempt of a person trying to be justified by keeping the law. Such a person has wrongly assumed that he can merit God's acceptance by keeping the law (doing works "of law"). Paul talks about this bad assumption later in the book of Romans:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness (justification), even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. (Romans 9:30-32) The word justification in parenthesis is my insertion.

The people who ultimately qualify as "doers of the law" (per Romans 2:13) are the ones who did not attempt to be justified by doing "works of law." In contrast, while they were dead in their trespasses and sins, God raised them up to new life in Christ by His grace. Having this new life in them, they immediately began to serve God with thankful, obedient hearts doing good works because they love God.

For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

It was always God's plan to create a holy people whose lives are characterized by righteousness. Most religious people falsely assume that they can accomplish such a life by trying to do works "of law." They falsely assume that they can be justified before God this way. No matter how hard they try by doing "works of law," they utterly fail to accomplish righteous living that pleases God. It can't be accomplished this way.

To bring this about, God made a way of salvation that included the complete removal of all condemnation for sins committed. (Jesus took all the punishment and God's righteous demand for payment was fully met.) All those in Christ Jesus have been set free with no more hopelessness associated with the futile attempt to be justified by doing works of law. (Trying this only produces the awareness of one's just condemnation.) But being free from all condemnation, they now serve God with thankful, obedient hearts and as a result, their lives are filled with works that God counts as righteous because they are done by faith. In the end, they prove to be the actual doers of the law. And in the end, they will cast their crowns at the feet of Jesus and worship Him as the One who deserves all the credit.

Thomas Bear, 2/28/2020

Οὐαὶ μοί ἐστιν ἂν μὴ εὐαγγελίζωμαι (Προς Κορινθίους Α 9:16)

For reference, below are all the verses that include Paul's phrase "works of law:"

NKJ **Romans 3:19-20** 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 works “of law” no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

BYZ **Romans 3:19** Οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι ὅσα ὁ νόμος λέγει τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ λαλεῖ ἵνα πᾶν στόμα φραγῇ καὶ ὑπόδικος γένηται πᾶς ὁ κόσμος τῷ θεῷ·

Romans 3:20 διότι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ διὰ γὰρ νόμου ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας

NKJ **Galatians 2:16** "knowing that a man is not justified by the works “of 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 law”” for by the works “of law” no flesh shall be justified.

BYZ **Galatians 2:16** εἰδότες ὅτι οὐ δικαιούται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεῦσαμεν ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου διότι οὐ δικαιωθήσεται ἐξ ἔργων νόμου πᾶσα σὰρξ

NKJ **Romans 3:28** Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.

BYZ **Romans 3:28** λογιζόμεθα οὖν πίστει δικαιούσθαι ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου

NKJ **Galatians 3:10** For as many as are of the works of law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them."

BYZ **Galatians 3:10** ὅσοι γὰρ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσὶν ὑπὸ κατάραν εἰσὶν· γέγραπται γὰρ Ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὃς οὐκ ἐμμένει ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτά

NKJ **Romans 9:32** Why? Because *they did* not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works “of law”. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.

BYZ **Romans 9:32** διὰ τί ὅτι οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως ἀλλ ὥς ἐξ ἔργων νόμου προσέκοψαν γὰρ τῷ λίθῳ τοῦ προσκόμματος

NKJ **Galatians 3:2** This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works “of law”, or by the hearing of faith?

BYZ **Galatians 3:2** τοῦτο μόνον θέλω μαθεῖν ἀφ ὑμῶν· ἐξ ἔργων νόμου τὸ πνεῦμα ἐλάβετε ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως

NKJ **Galatians 3:5** Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, *does He do it* by the works “of law”, or by the hearing of faith? --

BYZ **Galatians 3:5** ὁ οὖν ἐπιχορηγῶν ὑμῖν τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ ἐνεργῶν δυνάμεις ἐν ὑμῖν ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἢ ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως