No. 178

On being justified by the deeds of the law.
Romans III, 20. "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

Everyone who has read the N.T. with attention, must have observed that there is no portion of it attended with more obscurity and difficulty, than the Epistles to the Romans sometimes. This obscurity arises from several causes, from our ignorance of the precise structure of mind in the writer, and those to whom he wrote, from the peculiar manner of St. Paul's reasoning, which is rapid, discursive, interrupted by parenthetical digressions, and from the difficulty of fixing upon the exact meaning of particular words. In the signification of which much of the doubt, respecting the import of the whole... And in addition to all this, there is all the obscurity necessarily attending the epistolary mode of writing. A letter is, from its very nature, more difficult to be understood, except by the parties concerned. There are many abstr
...sions of intimations, some wholly unintelligible to us, which many of them, not to all, which, those who know what is to be supplied, must never make in the sense of another; the interpretation. On these facts, the apostles are among the hardest parts of the Acts, in these, the doctrine of the Rom., is peculiarly difficult to be understood.

The passage I have selected for our present consideration is one, about which much has been said, and a little has been formerly partly said. The great source of conflict concerning it, has been a misunderstanding of the word “laws.” It has been supposed to mean just what we mean in modern times by the expression “national laws” or “laws of duty.” But in the words of St. Paul, “the connection in which it is here used, has a very different meaning.” It means simply only the Jewish laws, the Mosaic, ceremonial law. He tells his hearers that he knew and had maintained that the true spirit of the law had been kept constantly in mind, though never have been pressed into the service of false notions in theology; it is but one instance among others of the disorderly, and the waters of sin have received by the soil through which they have passed, after issuing from the sacred fountain.

“By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight.” In order to understand this, you must consider the connexion of the Apostle’s reasoning. He states the necessity of the immeasurable value of the gospel, the grace given in his letter to the Romans, after a short introduction, with a representation of the children of Israel as children of the world, with regard to religion and morals. At first gives a glowing picture of the situation of the heathen-world, the state of degradation and corruption into which they had sunk. They had abused the reason, and God had placed within them, as elsewhere in the world, the light of nature, which was spread around them. They became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts were darkened; they refused to be wise, and became foolish, the glory of the incomprehensible God they changed into an image made like to corruptible man. From the state of idolatry, of forgiveness of God, among the gentiles, but blackness of mind it makes one month to mention, more than of the most common occurrences, dreams of the forlorn, those once not only enwrapped, but commanded. With regard to this portion of the world, then there could be no doubt of the necessity of the enlightening purifying en...
churches of the Gospel. But there was another set of peo-

deople, besides the heathen, with whom the Apostle argued.

In the north, there were his own countrymen, the Jews. He

does not met them; he holds them responsible for while

cynicism the heathen, they must too condemn themselves.

To proceed to tell them in the next ch. He said they

abused the rights of privilege, and they engaged in,

stead of gaining better, became worse under the effect of

misery. They could no more hope for the favour of the

people. Some of the objections are a few might be well said to

take against his argument, dwells upon the folly of suppos-

ing, that there was any virtue in the ceremonial forms

of their law, while there was iniquity of corruption abban-

ted. There can be no mistake here as to the meaning of these

laws; it can be nothing but the Mosaic law. The law

could not understand it otherwise; it was to the Jew

that St. Paul was then addressing himself. When then,

for in this connection he tells them, that by the deeds of

the law there shall no flesh be justified in the sight of

god, what can be in any fair construction be understood to

mean, but the ritual ceremonial law as the Jews had

received from their fathers. But it does not sustain the sig-

nificance of the whole passage would be this: “By the mere

observance of the Mosaic law, without something better

no man can expect the favour of God.” The Gospel then

even now is less necessary to the Jew, than it was to the heath-

en, they too needed better guidance of more sanctifying

heart-searching dispensation.

We shall not wonder at the earnest, possible manner,

in which St. Paul has stated the principle in our text, who

are we remember, what was that error, to which his country-

men were by constantly prone, for the evil effects of which are

to be destroyed. They were found of their ungodly superiority to

the Gentiles. I thought there was a great deal of merit

in observing the forms of their law. — Never perhaps was a

people more arrogant, insolent than they; deeming

themselves the favorite people of God, they thought them-

selves entitled to look down with contempt on all others.

They supposed that not only the privileges and blessings of the

world were all their own, but that the happiness of

life would belong exclusively to them. Heaven was to be

filled by none but the descendants of the house of Israel.

as, as became proselytes to this favored system. They

found themselves within an enclosure, beyond with the coun-

try.
of God himself were not to stir. At this distance of time we perhaps can scarcely have a conception of the strength or extent of this collective feeling. It was a greatissonament wherein stood forth on every side, with the first compulsory slavery were obliged to meet. At every step of encounter, of course, their arguments this false trust in their laws was the enemy of the Jews. It affected materially at the foundation their religious morality. How then to regard this religion as a sort of outside thing, set aside in modes of observance, had nothing to do with the life and conduct. They trusted in the Mosaic law, as their bulwark of salvation, but it was like trusting in the shadow of a rock. One may see at one that to combat this delusion must have been a primary object with those who went forth in the name of Jesus to spread the light of a universal religion, a religion that had to do only with the soul. The same with a greater dispensation that from upon the Son the irresistible one he had bestowed. I can teach you that the pillars on which he leaned was not other than a broken race. All in all, the mistrust that they were not righteous to desire others to claim merit, because the faster time is through he gave his full, all that the process. In the same way the law was a refuge of lies, from which he was to depart.
to wholly to finish feelings, opinions, prejudices. The
spirit of the arguments may be applicable to us, but the
form of clothing of it were designed for a different age in
different circumstances, as were in their nature entirely
social, of temporary. We have no Mosaic laws, in a literal
beastial attachment to which we have been educated from
early childhood; if therefore reasoning directly against
dependance on the Mosaic law, as such, has no concern
with us. We may have similar errors. But then the
truth of the reasoning may be transferred to our case. We
are solemnly bound to make this use of all these parts
of Scripture, the application of which was local and temporary;
then they become fruit full of the richest national instruc-
tion. But in order to understand the manner of the argu-
ment, the phrases used, we must advert to the times,
the circumstances of the case. Thus it is with our text.
I have read in a sort of its meaning, as it was intended
by the writer; we must, we must go back in imagination
300 years, and place ourselves in the midst of a peo-
ple of the most exclusive of proud feelings, residing them-
scars in the merit of their ancestors, confiding in the un-
agreed peculiar favours of God, educated in a legalistic
attachment to their Mosaic law, making their boast of the
obedience of it. Stating to that for salvation, most
suppose the prophet to come of teach to such a people all
the blessings: - we shall then feel what he meant
when he said that "by the deeds of the law no flesh shall
be justified in the sight of God": we shall understand
the to teach his defined circumstances, that they must but
using all this way but false confidence in the Mosaic
law; the assurance that the observance of the law could
never win for them the prize of God's favour.
We may now pass to the consideration of these instruc-
tions, as we may derive from this a similar passage of
Scripture, for our own improvement. In their original in-
trinsic, it is true, they were designed for a Gentile purpose;
still valuable hints may be drawn from them to be applied
to our own case.
1. We must learn not to trust to outward observances, as did
the Jews, nor to attribute to them any efficacy but as a
means. They imagined there was virtue enough in their sacrifices
and abominations, their purifications, their holy rites, to save
them; though we have not the same system of laws,
neat we have others, are in similar danger of being misled
by them. It is as true now, as it was in the days of Paul.
that by outward observances no flesh shall be justified in the sight of God." It has been a grand mistake of men in all ages to place an undue value upon external services or meaningless compliances. Any thing has been supposed to be religious, but purity of heart is life. Every degree of obtaining the favor of God, except that of being good, is not good. 

Sacrifices have been erected, with entire abandonment, who have been raised, piles of sacrifice, have all of them been, as it were, done for nothing. In this way, men fondly imagine that with such things God was well pleased. But without something better, all this pageantry is in vain. It is the oldest and bulwark in all we can engage, to try to find some substitute for internal purity is real goodness. But simple as our religion is, in regard to its external form, we are by no means free from the dangers of this error, who has at all times disfigured the religion of mankind? If it is true, does it not press itself in order to draw around itself the grandeur of a glorious establishment? It does not walk in faith preceded by a train of ceremonies, burdensome by a heavy attendance of rites and forms. It does not call upon its moralizers to prefer through an abode of outward alices; it tells them that religion dwells in the lips or in the hands. It is simple, plain, majestic, presenting itself in the unbridled dignity of a message from heaven. It needs, if it has, no childish fun or elaborating ornaments, it brings an ear to cry without a heart to bawl. Still, simple as our religion is, we see so much more in love with the form than with the reality, that we often fall into the same errors, and destroy the religious comfort of pages who, when they read the religious comfort of pages on moral truth, on moral conduct, on all the eternal realities, the necessary means to conduct to a good end, are in the present state, are spiritual enough to make religion entirely an affair of inward exercise, without any help from external means. And as they are the indispensable means, as a part, we are after the next, by making them the whole. This we are better much disposed to rest in the few forms and styles of the one or the other, in the empty observances of them. We are not the better for the ordinances, means of religion, unless our lives, our hearts are made better by them. Going to meeting, for instance, is not religion; though it is but its means. It is very possible for us to be regular in our attendance at public worship, to gain on the houses with an apparent or even a real devotion, to listen with an apparent or even a real devotion, to listen with apparent or even an apparent adherence to the instructions of divine truth, to do all this from idleness to duty, at great week after week, to go into the world, or to remain impatient of
as little of the spirit of the law as if we had never been within the doors of a church. And these deeds of outward observance, will serve to justify us in the sight of God, any more than would the deeds of the Mosaic law justify the Jews of old. So it is with the external professions of faith; we may give our names to the cause of good, and give nothing else. We may outwardly exhibit the semblance of righteousness, and yet not be conformable to these things, nor that which God commanded. He, therefore, who depends on maiming the name of goodness, without being at heart his follower, is, in that respect, the law to mere deeds of the law, by whose flesh can begin to please. In that, all outward observances, alone are seen as the deeds of the law, good for nothing, except they lead to something beyond themselves. By keeping them we may make the mind, manner, compliance, as did the hypocrites of old, neglect the weightier matters of the law, good profit money. Let us apply these considerations, and, therefore, let us remember that the declaration of St. Paul in the text has a meaning for us. There are things, oh to be worse than the same as the deeds of the law more to the very law we used not then work in them, without any thing else we are found in the end, that we have been building our hopes on a mistaken, dishonoring a joint diat of deficiency, with the first glance of the eye of Omniscience, at the great day, will raise in mind a zeal we cannot support.

2. We must learn to avoid all such interpretations of the page in question, as would lead up to think, in any way, of the value of morality. The caution is not unnecessary. Our text has often been quoted as a proof that pure goodness, if it has not the least effect, towards our salvation. The deeds of the law have been supposed to mean moral duties; and hence it has been judged that by moral duties we can be justified, and have our just recompense of righteousness. But, it is clear, from the right of the word, that the meaning is something very different from this; and of course no such inference can be drawn from this passage. No, indeed, can this opinion be maintained; it is that we are to be doing according to the sense of Scripture from reason. So at one, if by good works they are meant, these external works can have nothing to do with the heart, or their ability, if only we have put on chaste, spiritual and carnal flesh, that they are of no value or efficacy in the sight of God. The offerings of our lips, or the observance of forms, must surely not save us. But if by good works be meant that, like charity, goodness, should proceed from a pure good heart, we cannot in any way mistake the meaning.
...ing his precepts: then assuredly they must be the main
essential grounds of the favor we hope from you. Hence
expressly told without difference no man shall see the Lord.
Now we are told likewise, that we must be saved by faith
without the deeds of the law; but then we are to remember,
that in these expressions faith does not signify the act of believing or trusting, in opposition to moral
goodness, but its means the system of the faith which
all its purifying of heretick influences, in opposition to
to the empty forms of religion's service. The law
is not an end, but the means only for that end. This language of Scripture does not remain
ignorant of this distinction, with its interpretation of the
tenure for a minute. The idea, that good works are not
necessary to our salvation. They are in truth eventually
necessary. We can be saved no further, than we are free
from such an effect by moral goodness. I know
there is strong dispossession to deny this, yet by saying
that we rely on our own merits for salvation. But this
is not true. We do not expect to be saved by our
own merits, nor by the merits of any being. It is because
God in his infinite wisdom and mercy has an amendable
mercy to us, that he in truth so arranged things that
we shall be happy in spite of the same. For it is agreed
that we are good to one another, at least it is in this account, that
the same office or the same was done...
is the life, soul, and all the true religion there ever was
been in the world. All else is 0. The copies of matters
with religion stands forth to embrace the constitution
of influences. The state, the central point of all is moral
purity, let us be careful then that we do not speak
itself with contempt, that we do not call
it false
works of the law of me efficacy towards me
salvation, for this we may be great enquiry to religion
itself. I am persuaded that one of the greatest engines
religion, men have received in being separated from morality.
They, the morality of religion are one of the main things,
not tell you, is of a vastly higher character than the moral
ity of the world...it goes to the heart, it requires great
in its utmost sources: it claims admiration not omissions
outward acts, but was inward motives, it will have
out of the heart, its efforts of running away in it
it rules over the inner man, purges away impurity,
strengthens all that is pure, it makes him in whom it re
sides go forth, like his eye, in doing good, performing the
will of God. It is the moral the more, all the power
itself. Its is the very soul of religion, the very spirit of
itself. It is salvation implies being made perfect, done
be made perfect except by this elective deifica
tional morality, pervading our souls...for
then, we even let be saved, let us be saved in heart of life.
the rest are may safely leave to the ordinance of God.
The concluding sentence of our text may read a future
marks: "for by the law is the knowledge of sin...to know
sin, is not merely to know that there has been a deviation
from a law, but to be convinced, that the deviation is con
sidering...It is therefore true to assert, that the
Though law could merely show them, that they had ac
red transgressors without pointing out any remedy or es
take from the actions of transgression...For that, they must
be the pure's, better dispensation of after days, we
ought them by spiritual directions, assisted them by spi
ritual influences, to escape from the evil brother of
transgression...This was a consideration well adapted to
bring down the bride of those who rejected the helpen
the law of their forefathers...For this purpose it was
advanced by the second mortality.

Where only to remark, may, in conclusion, the caution
we should use in the application of Scripture language.
From the passage we have considered, as well as from the
passages, however, infinite we have been drawn, when in
friendly to the cause of virtue, to the true interests of the
kingdom of God. The waters, that come from the
of divine truth, are of themselves pure and salutary.
we may mix them prison as polluting streams; i.e.
do not too often cease to be us, what they ever were:
hydrants of life.

Feb. 18.

At home. Feb. 4. 1823. afternoon.
At Mr. Priestly's. Feb. 16. 1823. afternoon.
At Salem. Mr. Brattle. April 29. 1823. afternoon.
At Dr. Lowell's. April 18. 1824. afternoon.
At Dr. Porter's. Aug. 12. 1824. afternoon.