

# “Not by Works, But Through Faith”

## The Third in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Galatians

*Text: Galatians 2:15-21; Psalm 143:1-12*

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**P**aul opens his letter to the churches of Galatia by taking direct aim at the false gospel which those identified as Judaizers were preaching to the Galatians—and which many Galatians were embracing! The Apostle exposes the deceitful tactics the Judaizers used to infiltrate the Galatian churches spying on the liberty which Christians enjoyed. In response, Paul lays out the specifics of the gospel revealed to him by Jesus Christ—a gospel not of works, but of faith in Jesus.

No doubt, Paul was angry when he wrote Galatians. During his second missionary journey, Paul traveled throughout the region of Galatia, preaching Christ crucified—publically placarding Christ (Galatians 3:1) to all who would listen. God graciously granted Paul the privilege of seeing many Gentiles converted from paganism to faith in Jesus, the Son of God. Many Jews who lived in the region also came to believe that Jesus Christ was Israel’s Messiah as promised throughout the Old Testament. They too embraced the same Savior the Gentiles had through faith. It was not long after Paul left the region that a group of false teachers, known to us as Judaizers, infiltrated these churches, undermining Paul’s authority and distorting the gospel which he had just preached to them. The so-called gospel these Judaizers were proclaiming was a different gospel from that preached by Paul, which was, in reality, no gospel at all.

The Judaizers were a group of Jews who apparently converted to Christianity once convinced that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah. But as zealous Jews, and fully committed to the law of Moses, they were not eager to see the ways of their fathers overturned. In addition to faith in Jesus Christ, they contended, Gentile converts to Christianity must also submit to circumcision and keep elements of the ceremonial law in order to be justified, just as they were doing. Paul describes how these Judaizers deceptively entered into the Galatian churches by spying on the liberty that the Gentile Christians were enjoying. They had even been able to pressure Peter and Barnabas into withdrawing from Gentile believers who did not keep ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law such as the dietary laws.

In chapter 2:11-14 of this epistle, Paul recounts how he was forced to confront Peter to his face in Antioch, since Peter was hypocritically living as a Gentile—Peter had acquired a taste for pork chops and honey-baked ham—but after a visit from a group of Judaizers, Peter began insisting that Gentile converts keep the dietary laws that he had given up keeping. “Do as I say, not as I do,” became Peter’s motto, a reaction arising from his fear of the Judaizers. As Paul saw it, Peter’s actions compromised the gospel, since the gospel has nothing to do whatsoever with human merit, circumcision, and the obedience to the law of Moses, but is instead based upon the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In verses 15-16 of Galatians 2, we come to the very heart of Paul’s argument he will use throughout the rest of the letter. The apostle defines the gospel as a doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. Paul writes, “*we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*” Verse 16 has been correctly identified as “the

doctrine of justification in a nutshell.”<sup>1</sup> This is one of the clearest definitions in all of Scripture regarding the doctrine of justification, that is, of how we as sinners obtain a “right standing” before God.

Paul makes two critical points. Negatively speaking, Paul asserts in no uncertain terms that we *cannot* be justified by our obedience to the law of Moses. Positively speaking, Paul also asserts that we are justified *only* by faith in Christ. The logic of verse 16, takes the form of a syllogism, *if* by faith *then* not by works. Both of these points need to be fleshed out in some detail.

The word to “justify” (*dikaioō*) as used throughout the Scriptures, especially by Paul, refers to how we as sinners who are guilty before God are declared “not guilty.” Apart from Christ we stand guilty before God because of our sins—the actual sins we commit, as well as our sin in Adam, imputed us since Adam is our federal head. Justification refers to being “regarded,” “reckoned,” “accounted” or “credited” as “right,” “acquitted” or “not guilty” before God despite the fact that we continue to remain sinners.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, justification refers to the declaration that God makes about us when we come to faith in Christ. This once for all declaration has nothing whatsoever to do with the process wherein we are transformed from sinner into saint (that is sanctification). Negatively speaking, in Galatians 2:16, Paul explains that sinners (Jew or Gentile) cannot be justified—that is, given a right standing before God—through, because of, or on the basis of, our obedience to the law of Moses. According to Paul, there is absolutely nothing that we can do to earn this right standing before God through obedience. Positively speaking, such a “right” standing must be given to us by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. If we are not clear about this, we are not clear about the gospel.

In verse 15, Paul draws a contrast between those who are “Jews by birth” and those who are “Gentile sinners.” He makes this distinction to put into focus the “the sharp distinction between Jew and Gentile, for what made the Gentiles sinners in the estimation of the Jews was not only that they did not observe the law but also that they did not even possess it and consequently lacked the possibility of obtaining righteousness through it.”<sup>3</sup> The Jews viewed the Gentiles as sinners, because the Gentile nations did not possess the law, therefore, they could not obey the law, and were regarded as sinners.

The Jews, on the other hand, who did possess the law, should have known that they could not be justified by keeping it. Why then, would these “Judaizers” insist upon the notion that Gentiles must submit to the law of Moses in order to be justified? They did not understand their Scriptures or history. In what follows, there is some interesting and important word-play used by Paul, especially in the light of Psalm 143, to which Paul alludes in this section of Galatians. In response to the Judaizing deviation from the gospel (v. 14), Paul reminded Peter that even those who “are by nature Jews and not Gentile sinners” (v. 15) must understand that a human being is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 16). Paul explains why even Jews should recognize that works of law do not justify.

Paul asserts that no one can be justified by works of law—a rather bold assertion which seems to be unsupported by argument. But once we realize that Paul’s words contain a very loud echo from Psalm 143 (our Old Testament lesson) the biblical rationale for his assertion comes into view. The Psalmist pled

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<sup>1</sup> Fung, Galatians, 112.

<sup>2</sup> See the following discussions: Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 138; and Fung, Galatians, 113.

<sup>3</sup> Fung, Galatians, 113.

before YHWH (v. 2), “*enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.*” Paul replaces the word “living” with the word “flesh,” and adds a reference to the law of Moses (“works of law”). This is because the Judaizers in Antioch and Galatia saw the cutting of the flesh (circumcision) not as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace God made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17, but as a “work” performed by Jews to mark them off as “righteous” in contrast to Gentiles.

When Paul uses the term “flesh” (*sarx*), it is not in reference to our bodies, but to our innate sinfulness (our sinful nature) which is associated with this present evil age.<sup>4</sup> The sign and seal of the covenant of grace (circumcision), was distorted by these Judaizers into a work of the flesh, dividing Jew from Gentile. Paul reinterprets Psalm 143 in the light of Jesus’s appearance to him by applying it to what the Judaizers were claiming in both Antioch and Galatia. Psalm 143 is a confession that no one can claim to be righteous before God, so sinners must plead for YHWH’s mercy, not justice. Paul’s point is that no flesh (i.e., a sinful person), not even someone who has been circumcised—can claim to innocent of all wrong-doing. The Jews who claim superiority over the Gentiles because they have been circumcised, are just as guilty as the Gentiles they condemn and cannot claim to have kept the law sufficiently to be justified before God.<sup>5</sup>

No flesh, not even the flesh of circumcised Jews, can stand before God on the basis of good works or the merit of ceremonies. No one will be justified by law-keeping, since none of us keep the law perfectly in thought, word, and deed as God requires. In order to be regarded as righteous by law-keeping one must be perfectly obedient to the entire law. Since we are all sinners by nature and by choice, no one can be justified by works—*except one*—and his obedience is the basis or ground for our justification. The Scriptures are crystal clear that Jesus was virginally conceived without the stain of Adam’s sin and guilt, and throughout every moment of his life, Jesus Christ obeyed perfectly the law of Moses.

Back to Paul’s syllogism. *Negatively* speaking, we cannot be justified by any obedience that we may muster “*because by works of the law no one will be justified,*” since no one can obey the law of Moses perfectly. *Negatively* speaking, then, we cannot be justified through obeying the Ten Commandments, hence the phrase “not by works.”<sup>6</sup> *Positively* speaking, Paul states his case as clearly as human speech will allow. We are justified only “*through faith in Jesus.*” Justification is a forensic or legal declaration, meaning “to be declared righteous before God, that is, to enjoy a status or standing of being in a right relationship with God, of being accepted by him.”<sup>7</sup> This righteous status comes not through obedience to law [negatively], but as Paul says, this right standing comes only through faith in Christ [positively]. In other words, “**if** by faith then **not** by works.”

Because there is no other way to stand before God other than through the merits of Jesus, received through faith alone, the doctrine of justification distinguishes Christianity as a religion of grace from all other religions in the world, which are, essentially, religions of law and human merit. As Paul explains, when we come to faith in Christ, that is, when we come to realize that we cannot be delivered from God’s judgment through anything we can do, and we then look to Jesus Christ to have mercy upon us and deliver

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 64-69.

<sup>5</sup> Thielman, Paul and the Law, 125.

<sup>6</sup> Contra the view set forth by James D. G. Dunn in The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75-79.

<sup>7</sup> Fung, Galatians, 113.

us from the guilt of our sin, we are justified, or given this “right status before God,” since through faith, the merits of Christ (his death and righteousness) are imputed, credited or reckoned to us. Despite the contention of a cadre of critical New Testament scholars, it is the Apostle Paul, not Martin Luther, who sets up the antithesis between law and gospel. The law of Moses can only demand. The law gives us no power to obey its requirements. Once broken at but a single point, the law condemns us at every other point, reminding us of how unworthy we are, and great is our debt to God (cf. James 2:10).

This right status, or acquittal from sin, is given to us because Jesus Christ fulfilled the law perfectly, without sin, and because Christ died upon the cross so that God punished him as a satisfaction for all of our infractions of the Ten Commandments, as well as our guilt in Adam. In other words, Christ’s death pays for the guilt of our sins, and Christ’s law-keeping becomes ours, because through the means of faith, God reckons, credits or imputes to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself.

That God gives a right status to the sinner through faith alone, means that God regards the sinner as though he or she had never sinned, and as though they had kept the law perfectly, because Jesus Christ actually did. The only reason that God grants to us this “right status” when we are in reality still sinners, is because Christ earned this for us through his life and death. Faith then becomes the mode of reception of the merits of Christ and the forgiveness of sin. Even the faith which justifies us is not a work of our obedience, as it is faith which is an out-stretched hand which humbly receives the saving merits of Christ.

Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone and not by obedience to the law, i.e., works, is Paul’s gospel. To deny this and teach that justification comes by any means other than through faith in Christ, such as faith and obedience to the law of Moses, or through faith and circumcision as the Judaizers were erroneously teaching, is to teach what Paul calls “another gospel,” which is actually no gospel, and one which falls under the apostolic anathema (curse).

In the gospel—the proclamation of the doing and dying of Jesus—God himself freely offers to us in the person of his Son, exactly that which he requires of us under the law, namely the forgiveness of sin and a perfect righteousness which indeed will withstand the Holy scrutiny of his unfathomable judgment. Through the law, no one can be declared righteous since no one can perfectly obey the law. But through the gospel and faith in Christ, the believer is regarded as righteous, since the perfect obedience of Christ is reckoned to us through faith *alone* and not through faith and obedience. This is Paul’s gospel. If by faith, then not by works. This is why we declare we are justified *sola fide*, by faith alone.

In verses 17-21, Paul elaborates on the doctrine of justification a bit further, responding to the charge made against Paul’s gospel by the Judaizers, that such a gospel leads to sin and license. *“But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”*

Once again, Paul makes a two-fold defense of his teaching, laying out a negative assertion of what he does not mean in verses 17-18; and then offering a positive statement of what he does mean in verses 19-21. Paul must deal with a common objection against the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. Since some abuse their freedom in Christ, it is Paul’s doctrine which promotes sin, hence the charge made by the Judaizers, *“is Christ then a servant of sin?”*

The Judaizers were teaching that Paul's gospel leads to license, since Gentiles did not keep dietary laws, submit to ritual circumcision, and refused to live as Jews. This is same basic objection we so often hear today—too much grace leads to abuse. Paul will deal with this here, but he also takes up the subject later in Galatians 5. The claim that Paul's doctrine leads to sin was made against him repeatedly by Jewish Christians, and there are some Reformed folk such as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who have argued that unless this objection is raised when we are talking to someone about the gospel, we have not been clear enough about our justification being all of grace!<sup>8</sup> The fact that the gospel is centered entirely in God's gracious doing for sinners, should indeed raise the question about what role the sinner plays in salvation. Paul's answer is that the sinner contributes nothing by his obedience, and receives everything in Christ through faith. If by faith, then not by works.

Paul's answer is to affirm in words that are as clear as is humanly possible, to be justified by faith in Christ does not lead to sin. *"Is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!"* The expression *"certainly not!"* is a strong expression in the original language. It is a characteristic Pauline expression, of an unthinkable suggestion—"does Christ promote sin?" No way. No chance. Not on your life!

As he does throughout his letters, Paul connects justification, the right standing that sinners now have before God in Christ, with the fact that the faith through which sinners receive the merits of Christ, is a faith which also manifests itself through love. As our confessions state, justifying faith manifests itself in a life of gratitude for what God has done for us, in which the law which once condemned us, is now seen from the perspective of faith as the rule of gratitude. Another way of saying this is that justification (our right standing before God) is connected to sanctification, the process in which the power of sin over us is broken and the believer comes alive to God's commandments. In Paul's thinking, there is no one justified by means of faith in Christ, who does not also immediately enter into the process of sanctification, which includes the progressive "killing off" of the old self—what we were while enslaved in sin before we came to faith in Christ—as well as the steady and progressive strengthening of the new self, now made alive Christ.

Obedience to law cannot justify. We are not justified because we are circumcised or because we obey the law of Moses. But once justified, the new self stands in a different relationship to the law of Moses. The justified sinner will never stop to ask, "okay, I am justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. Now how many sins can I commit and still remain a Christian? Where is the line beyond which I cannot cross?" This will not happen for the law no longer condemns us. Once justified, we come alive to the commandments of God. With ever-faltering steps, we live a life of gratitude, struggling to obey God's law, not to be justified, but because we are justified!

When Paul says in verse 18, *"if I re-build what I tore down,"* he is probably speaking (hypothetically) of Peter, who is in a sense rebuilding the legalistic edifice through his compromise with the Judaizers, which he had earlier destroyed through his preaching of the gospel. When anyone, whether it be the Judaizers, or even someone such as the Apostle Peter, attempts to argue that law is a means of justification, they are, in fact, nothing more than a law-breaker, subject to God's curse for denying the biblical gospel.<sup>9</sup> That is why Paul can say that Peter's compromising with the Judaizers is "not in line with the truth of the gospel." While to some, a little compromise may seem like a good way to pacify both sides, as Paul sees it, when the gospel is at stake, even the slightest compromise or deviation is fatal.

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<sup>8</sup> "If your preaching of the gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ does not provoke the charge from some of antinomianism, you're not preaching the gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ." Unsourced.

<sup>9</sup> Moo, Galatians, 166.

In verse 19, Paul mentions that “*through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God*. Paul is focusing upon what theologians would later call the “second or theological use” of the law. According to this “second use” of the law, the law shows us our sin and drives us to Christ for forgiveness. Using the emphatic first person here for emphasis, Paul says through the law, “I” died. The idea is that “I, Paul, the natural man, the slave of the old covenant,” died through law, since, as he goes on to say, in verse 20 “*I have been crucified with Christ*.”

When Paul speaks of being “*crucified with Christ*,” he is not referring to some sort of subjective experience he had (“Christ mysticism”), but to the fact that his sin has been imputed to Christ, who then died upon the cross to make payment for that sin. Paul no longer lives as he did before his conversion as a slave to sin, a slave to the law, and under the law’s certain curse which is death, therefore, “*it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*.” “The self-righteous Pharisee who based his hope for righteousness and salvation on strict observance of law”<sup>10</sup> is no longer enslaved by these things. He is indwelt by Jesus Christ, who appeared to Paul and called him to faith, and baptized him with the Holy Spirit. Once united to Christ by faith, Paul is now dead to the law and alive to Christ, who, Paul says, lives through him.

Paul is not a mystic. He is not talking about a “channeling” of Christ through him. Rather he is speaking in terms of control. As a Pharisee, Paul was enslaved by the law and in bondage to sin. But as a Christian, Paul is a bond-servant of Christ, now under the control of the indwelling Christ. This is why Paul declares, *Christ lives in me*. Says Paul, *the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*. Jesus Christ lives through him, because Jesus Christ gave himself for Paul’s sins. Through faith, Paul is dead to the law, since he has been crucified with Christ.

In verse 21, Paul returns to his original response to the objection that the Judaizers had to Paul’s gospel—that it leads to license. *I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*” Paul is telling the Judaizers, “look, if a justifying righteousness could be earned by obedience to the law of Moses, why did God in his grace send Christ to die for our sins? Why would Christ die for sinners, if we could be justified by means of circumcision and obedience to the law? Here Paul states the obvious, the cross is itself a picture of human helplessness. Why did the Son of God suffer such unspeakable agony, *if* there were some other way? To argue as the Judaizers were doing, that justification came by faith in Christ *plus* obedience to the law, the Judaizers were, in effect, saying that the death of Christ was not sufficient to save sinners from their sins. The false gospel they were teaching means that Christ died for nothing. As Martin Luther once put it,

Anyone who is justified on the basis of the Law . . . has within himself the power to acquire righteousness....If this is true, then it necessarily follows that Christ died to no purpose. For what need would a man have of Christ who loves him and gives Himself for him [if he is able to obtain grace and eventually do good works and to merit eternal life . . . . Therefore let Christ be removed together with all his blessings because he is completely useless. But why is Christ born, crucified and dead? Why does He become my High Priest, who loves me and gives an inestimable sacrifice, Himself, for me? Why does he do all this? Simply to no purpose at all if the meaning of justification which the [false teachers] set forth is true, because I find righteousness in the Law or in myself, outside grace and outside Christ.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fung, *Galatians*, 123.

<sup>11</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, Vol. 26, 181-182.

If we can be justified by something we do—obedience to the law, circumcision—Christ died for nothing. But since Christ clearly died for sinners, as the Scriptures teach, weight of Paul’s argument begins to be felt. The death of Christ is itself a picture that fallen sinners can do nothing to save themselves, that Christ himself does what is necessary for sinners to be saved, or else Christ died in vain, which is where the false gospel inevitably takes us.

In conclusion, what does this text say to us today? An old friend once said that hearing about a familiar doctrine such as justification was like hearing your favorite song on the radio after you had not heard it in a while. The doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone is the gospel. We all need to hear it regularly, and we need to let its sweetness ring in our ears and so comfort our consciences. This is where we find rest for our weary souls and peace for our troubled hearts. No matter how bad things get and how difficult the struggles of life can be, once we are reminded that God’s anger towards our sin has been dealt with once and for all by Jesus Christ, in his life and death for us, everything else comes into proper perspective.

The doctrine of justification reminds us that in Jesus Christ, we have everything that we need—the forgiveness of sin and a perfect righteousness. Through faith we have been crucified with Christ, so that the law can no longer condemn us. We come alive to the commandments and we are able to obey God’s law, however imperfectly, without fear of God’s judgment or condemnation since we are clothed in Christ’s perfect righteousness. The man or woman who has Christ, through faith, knows that their own futile efforts to be obedient will not count against them, since Christ was perfectly obedient for them. The one who has Christ has everything—all the riches and treasures of heaven. There is no sin that the blood of Christ cannot remove, and all of my half-hearted and self-centered attempts to obey God’s law are now acceptable to God through Christ. As Paul says, it is for freedom that Christ set us free!

But if there be anyone who does not have Christ through faith, be warned, you have nothing. God will indeed judge you for your sins, and for your pitiful attempts to be obedient. Sin but a single time, and God will hold you guilty of breaking the whole law. This is why you must flee to Christ, and through faith, receive the free gift of a justifying righteousness—that of Jesus himself!

Your choice is simple: your own righteousness, which is as filthy rags, or the perfect righteousness of Christ? To be judged for your sins, or to have God place your sins upon Christ so that he is punished in your place, so that you can be forgiven. What will it be?

This is why the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone is the heart of the Christian faith. Christ has lived for us, Christ has died for us, Christ was raised for us. That little phrase, if by faith then not by works, is perhaps the most wonderful phrase the ear can hear. For through faith in Christ my sins have been washed away and Jesus Christ himself covers me with a robe of perfect righteousness. Free gift . . . All of grace . . . Received through faith in Christ, not by obedience to the law . . . Not by works, but through faith. This, beloved, is the gospel. Anything else is not!