

“If By Faith, Then Not By Works”

Texts: Galatians 2:15-21

We have previously worked our way through most of the first two chapters of this great book. As Paul opens this letter, he has focused upon the false gospel that the Judaizers were preaching to the Galatians, as well as their deceitful tactics in infiltrating the Galatian church and spying upon the liberty that Christians enjoyed in Christ. We now turn our attention to Paul’s gospel, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone.

Paul was angry when he wrote Galatians. He had recently traveled throughout the region of Galatia during what is known as the second missionary journey, preaching Christ crucified (publicly placarding Christ, as Paul puts it). In his grace, God granted Paul the privilege of seeing many converts from paganism to faith in the Son of God. In addition, many Jews who lived in the region also came to believe that Jesus Christ was Israel’s Messiah as promised throughout the Old Testament and they too embraced the Savior through faith.

But it was not long after Paul left the region that a group of false teachers, known to us as the Judaizers, infiltrated these churches that Paul had founded and began to deceptively undermine Paul’s authority and distort the gospel that he had preached to them. As we have seen, Paul says that the gospel these Judaizers preached was a different gospel. In reality it was no gospel at all.

The Judaizers were a group of Jews who had apparently converted to Christianity in the sense that they were now convinced that Jesus was indeed Israel’s Messiah. But as zealous Jews, and fully committed to the law of Moses, and not eager to see the ways of their fathers overturned, the Judaizers were teaching that in addition to coming to faith in Jesus Christ, Gentile converts to Christianity must also submit to circumcision and keep certain aspects of the ceremonial law in order to be justified, just as they had done. Paul has described how these Judaizers had deceptively entered into the Galatian churches, spied on the liberty that the Gentile Christians were enjoying, and 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.

Paul has also told us how he was forced to confront Peter to his face in Antioch, since Peter was hypocritically living as a Gentile—apparently, Peter had acquired a taste for pork chops and ham sandwiches—but was now insisting that Gentile converts keep the dietary laws that he had given up keeping. “Do as I say, not as I do,” was now Peter’s motto, a reaction arising from Peter’s 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 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 get to the heart of Paul’s argument, as the apostle now sets out the true gospel, the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. In verse 15, Paul writes,

15 “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ 16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Verse 16 has been correctly called by some, “the doctrine of justification in a nutshell.”¹ Indeed, this is one of the clearest definitions in all of Scripture regarding the means of justification, that is, of how we as sinners obtain a “right standing” before God.

The key to understanding this passage is really two-fold. Negatively speaking, we have Paul’s unequivocal assertion that we cannot be justified by our obedience to the law of Moses. Positively speaking, we have Paul’s equally unequivocal assertion that we are justified only by faith in Christ. Both of these points need to be fleshed out in some detail.

The word to “justify” as used throughout the Scriptures, especially by Paul, refers to how it is that we as sinners who are guilty before God for all of our sins—both the actual sins we commit as well as our sin in Adam—are declared “not guilty” before God. 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.²

Justification has to do with a declaration that God makes about us when we come to faith in Christ, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the process wherein we are transformed from sinner into saint. Negatively speaking, justification deals with the fact that we 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 our obedience to the law, rather, such 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.

The contrast that Paul makes here in Galatians between those who are “Jews by birth” and those who are “Gentile sinners” is perhaps meant 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.”³ 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.

¹ Fung, Galatians, p. 112.

² See the following discussions: Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, p. 138; and Fung, Galatians, p. 113.

³ Fung, Galatians, p. 113.

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 they insist upon demanding that Gentiles submit to the law of Moses? One writer points out that there is some interesting and important word-play used by Paul here, especially in the light of Psalm 143, to which Paul alludes. In response to this deviation from the gospel (v. 14), Paul reminded Peter that even those who “are by nature Jews and not Gentile sinners” (v. 15) understand that a human being is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 16). Paul then explains why even Jews recognize that works of law do not justify:

Even we have believed in Christ Jesus in order that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no flesh be justified (v. 16).” At first, this statement looks like a bland assertion—unsupported by proof—that works of the law do not justify Jews because works do not justify anyone. That Paul is saying much more than this, however, becomes clear when we recognize that his statement echoes Psalm 143:2: “Do not enter into judgement with your servant, because nothing living shall be justified before you.” Paul has replaced the term *living* with *flesh* and inserted a reference to “works of law”—probably because both at Antioch and at Galatia the rite of cutting the “flesh” [circumcision] had become the work of the law that had tragically separated believing Gentile from believing Jew. Nevertheless, the term *flesh* in Galatians, as elsewhere in Paul's letters, often suggests human frailty, and particularly human sinfulness. Paul then has skillfully altered [interpreted] Psalm 143:2 to make its meaning relevant to the situation at Antioch and Galatia. The psalm is a confession that no one can claim perfect innocence before the all-knowing gaze of God and a plea for God's mercy in spite of this. Paul uses the psalm's language to say that no flesh, not even circumcised flesh, can claim to be innocent of all wrongdoing. Even those who are Jews and not Gentile “sinners” know that no one can claim to have kept the law well enough to be justified by it before God.⁴

Thus, no flesh, not even the flesh of circumcised Jews can stand before God on the basis of good works or the merit of ceremonies, for no one will be justified by law-keeping, since none of us keep the law perfectly in thought, word and deed as God requires. Therefore, in order to be regarded as righteous by law-keeping one must be perfectly obedient to the entire law.

This means that 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 indeed quite clear that Jesus was not only virginally conceived without the stain of Adam's sin and guilt, but that throughout every moment of his life, Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed the law of Moses, in thought as well as action.

Thus, *negatively* speaking, we cannot be justified by any obedience that we may muster *because by observing the law no one will be justified*, since no one can obey the law perfectly. *Negatively* speaking, then, we cannot be saved by our obedience to the law of Moses, hence the phrase “not by works.”

⁴ Thielman, Paul and the Law, p. 125.

Positively speaking, however, Paul states his case as clearly as human speech will allow: “we are justified by faith in Christ Jesus.” As we have seen, 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.”⁵ As we have already seen, 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.”

This means that the only way we can enter into this “right status” before God is through faith in Christ. There is no other way to God, and this 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 elsewhere, when we come to faith in Christ, that is, when we come to realize that we cannot be delivered from God’s judgement through anything we can do and then look to Jesus Christ to have mercy upon us and deliver us from the guilt of our sin, we are thereby justified, or given this “right status before God,” since through faith, the merits of Christ are imputed, credited or reckoned to us.

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 could punish him for all of our infractions of the Ten Commandments. 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.

Therefore the right status that God gives to the sinner through faith, simply 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. Thus the only reason that God can grant to us this “right status” when we are in reality still sinners, is because Christ earned it for us through his life and death, and faith then becomes the 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 such faith is an outstretched hand which humbly receives the saving merits of Christ.

Let us be clear here. 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 and circumcision as the Judaizers were teaching, is to teach what Paul calls “another gospel,” which is actually no gospel, and therefore, falls under the apostolic anathema.

Notice too that 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. And once broken at but a single point, the law stands over us, condemning us at every other point, reminding us of how unworthy we are, and great is our debt to God (cf. James 2:10).

⁵ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 113.

But in the gospel, on the other hand, 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 judgements. 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. Here then is Paul's gospel. If by faith, then not by works. Thus we say, we are justified *sola fide*, by faith alone. To declare, to teach or to believe anything else is to deny Paul's gospel.

In verses 17-21, Paul moves on to elaborate 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.

17 "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. 19 For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Paul again offers an additional two-fold defense of his teaching, as Paul will offer a negative assertion of what he does not mean in verses 17-18; and then offer a positive statement of what he does mean in verses 19-21.

First, Paul has to deal with the most common objection against the gospel of free grace, and the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, namely that since some abuse their freedom in Christ, it is Paul's doctrine which promotes sin, hence the charge made by the Judaizers, which Paul mentions here—*does that mean that Christ promotes sin?*

The Judaizers were arguing 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 one and the same objection we so often hear today! Paul must not only deal with this here, but he takes up the subject later in Galatians 5 and then addresses this subject several years later in chapter 6 of his Letter to the Romans.

The charge that Paul's doctrine leads to sin was made against him repeatedly by Jewish Christians, and there are some Reformed writers 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! 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. 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 to this charge is to affirm once again in words that are as clear as is humanly possible that to be justified by faith in Christ does not lead to sin. *Does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!* The phrase which appears in the NIV as "Absolutely 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's answer to this charge is to connect 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, or as our confessions say, 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—a 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 both the steady and progressive "killing off" of the old self—i.e., 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.

But Paul's point here is that obedience to law cannot justify, and we are not justified because we stop sinning or because we are somehow able to obey the law of Moses. But once justified, however, the new self now inevitably stands in a new 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, and we come alive to the commandments of God and with ever-faltering steps, 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 destroy," he is probably speaking 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, and subject to God's curse for denying the biblical gospel. 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.

In verse 19, Paul mentions that *through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.* Here, 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 “*I have been crucified with Christ.*” In other words, Paul’s death to the law occurs because “I have been crucified with Christ,” which refers not . . . to a subjective experience that Paul had, but to the fact that Paul’s sin has been imputed to Christ, who then died upon the cross to make payment for that sin. Paul now no longer lives as he did before his conversion—a slave to sin, a slave to the law and under the law’s certain curse which is death.

In verse 20, when Paul introduces the theme of being “crucified with Christ,” he goes on to say that “he no longer lives, but Christ lives through him.” In other words, “the self-righteous Pharisee who based his hope for righteousness and salvation on strict observance of law”⁶ is no longer enslaved by these things, but is now indwelt by Jesus Christ, who had appeared to Paul and called him to faith, and baptized him by his Holy Spirit.

In other words, 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, and now under the control of the indwelling Christ.

This is why Paul can declare, *Christ lives in me.* In other words, says Paul, *the life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Paul can say that Jesus Christ lives through him, because Jesus Christ gave himself for Paul’s sins, and through faith in him, Paul is dead to the law, since he has been crucified with Christ.

In verse 21, Paul now returns to his original response to the objection that the Judaizers had to Paul’s gospel—namely 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!*” Simply stated, 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?” What was worse, 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. Martin Luther once put it this way.

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 . . . or surely be justified by performing the Law? 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

⁶ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 124.

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.⁷

If we can be justified by anything we do—obedience to the law, circumcision— Christ died for nothing. But since Christ clearly died for sinners, as the Scriptures teach, Paul’s argument now comes into focus. 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. And this is where the false gospel inevitably takes us.

In conclusion, what does this text say to us today?

An old friend once commented that hearing once again 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. For it is here, 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, which means that the law can no longer condemn us, and for the first time, we come alive to the commandments and we are able to obey God’s law, however imperfectly, without fear of God’s judgement 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. For 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, grasp the hem of his robe of righteousness!

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

⁷ Luther, Galatians, Vol. 26, p. 181-182

Christian faith. Christ has lived for us, Christ has died for us, and 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 . . .

This, beloved, is the gospel. Anything else is not!