

“Justification and the Life of Faith”

Galatians 2:17-21

Introduction:

1. Review: Last week we saw that no one can be saved by keeping the law. The only way to be declared right with God or justified is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now before we proceed farther in this letter to the Galatians, I want to press this matter on you. Are you right with God through faith in his one and only Son, Jesus Christ? Have you entrusted yourself, your life, your standing before God to him? Our great joy is to tell you good news! You may be right with God. Turn from your sinful, empty way of life and trust in Jesus Christ.

2. After giving such a clear statement about justification by faith in Christ Jesus, Paul answers an objection to this truth. So then, our job this morning is to understand the objection and the answers that Paul, who was one of Christ’s apostles (sent ones), declares. If we are going to grasp what he says, we must understand the way he speaks.

[1] This is probably a summary of what he said to Peter.

[2] When he mentions “the law”, he means the covenant made with Israel on Sinai; that is, the Ten Commandments with all the other laws, the priesthood, and sacrifices necessary to administer it. In the light of the finished work of Christ, we can also call the law the old covenant.

[3] When Paul uses the first person, it is a way of presenting an argument to take the full force of it out of the face of the other person. It’s the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down.

Exposition:

I. The objection: the teaching of justification by faith in Christ makes Christ a minister of sin (2:17).

A. We must understand the objector’s point of view.

1. To those who had lived under the law covenant, the whole concept of sin was defined by one’s relationship to the law. If you failed to honor your parents, you broke the law and sinned. If you picked up sticks on the Sabbath, you broke the law and sinned. If you did not purify yourself from ritual uncleanness, you broke the law and sinned. If you lied, you broke

the law and sinned. The law with its rules and rituals was a unit. If you broke one part, you broke the whole law and were a sinner. The law produced a comprehensive worldview about sin. They looked at sin in relation to the law covenant.

2. However, something new happened in the history of redemption that changed everything. Jesus Christ died and so paid the penalty for those sinners who trust in him, and fulfilled the law. He rose that we might be right with God and that we might relate to him through a new covenant. But it was very difficult for those who had lived under the law to define sin and holiness apart from the law. To them, to eat with Gentiles was to become ritually unclean, when the law commanded cleanliness. Therefore to them, it was evident that to eat with Gentiles, although they were right with God by faith, was to be a “sinner” like “Gentile sinners”.

B. Paul must answer a couple questions.

1. What is the place of the law? He needs to move them beyond relying on the law for their definitions of sin and holiness.

2. How do we live for God? He needs to show them how the believer in Christ is able to live for God.

II. Paul answers this objection. After stating it, he is filled with horror at such an idea and vehemently denies it by saying, “Absolutely not” or in more common talk, “No way!” Then he gives a more detailed answer.

A. Those trying to rebuild the law (the old covenant) are lawbreakers (2:18-19).

1. Here Paul shows what those who refused to eat with the Gentile believers were doing. Peter and those following his wrong example were rebuilding what they had demolished (the law covenant) when they believed in Jesus Christ. To believe in Christ and so to be justified (declared right with God) had been a confession of the futility of keeping the law for salvation. Their faith had declared that the only way anyone could be right with God was to trust Jesus as Lord and Savior. But by refusing to eat with Gentile believers, it seemed that part of the law covenant was necessary. Their practice was rebuilding what their faith had demolished.

2. This kind of conduct placed them in the category of transgressors—of going beyond what God had established in Christ and his better covenant. For you see, if you do not obey what God tells you, you are a transgressor. Peter should have known this from all the

events recorded in Acts ten. If God tells you something is clean, you must never dare to do anything that makes it look like it is unclean.

3. Next, Paul continues to demonstrate the total emptiness of trying to live in conformity with the law. The believer in Christ through the law died to the law. How can this be? The answer is found in our union with Christ. When he died on the cross, he was bearing the full penalty of what the law required of lawbreakers (a curse and death), since he died for our sins. So when he died to satisfy justice fully, we died with him, sharing in the benefits of his death. The law cannot touch us with its curse and judgments.

4. However, what Paul says next is remarkable, though generally ignored by the commentators. Believers died to the law, in order that we might live for God. The law had no life-giving power. It could show us what God required, but offered no life to do it. The law could only condemn the lawbreaker. So when we died with Christ, we also died to the law, in order that we might live for God. As Paul says in another place, we are joined to Christ who has life-giving power (Rm 7:4).

Apply: Learn well the contrast between living under the law covenant and living in the new covenant. Everything is better now.

B. Union with Christ changes the relation of the Christian to everything (2:20). Using the first person, Paul describes the position of every believer in Christ.

1. We are crucified with Christ. Paul uses the perfect tense, which means a past action with continuing results. As Christ is always in the character of the Crucified One (cf. 1 Cor 1:23; Rev 5:6, 12), so we always share in his crucifixion. That is always our position before God and the law. We must look at ourselves in this way. We have died to a whole way of life under the law, sin, and condemnation. We deal with all temptations to return to the old way of life in whatever form by saying in **faith**, "I stand crucified with Christ. I have nothing to do with the old life."

2. But Christ also is alive, and he lives in us! This is an ongoing reality (present tense). Through faith (Eph 3:17), Christ is living in us. This also gives us a new outlook on life. I can live for God, because I am united to him who lives forever in God. Jesus Christ is continually living out his life in us by the Holy Spirit. Since Christ is in us, we can live a new way of life. The law offered no power for life; in Christ we have divine power. We can be spiritually fruitful (Jn 15:1-17).

3. This union with Christ does not obliterate our personality. We still live, but we live in a new way—by faith in the Son of God. And what motivates us is his sacrificial, redeeming love. Christ’s love radically rebuilds our lives to live in love, because we have experienced his amazing love (cf. Eph 5:1-2; Jn 13:34-35).

Apply: Our lives are now a mission to proclaim and to affect others with his love. Christian, look at your life with new eyes—Christ’s eyes. Who can you touch with his redeeming, sacrificial love? Are people seeing and experiencing Christ’s love through you?

C. Those trying to rebuild the law or old covenant set aside the grace of God (2:21).

1. To live under law requires a person to do the works of the law and to earn righteousness by his or her obedience. The law does not offer grace but condemnation to the sinner. To go back under the law is to exchange God’s grace for the sinner’s attempted and hopeless performance. Near the end of his life, the Puritan John Owen wrote *A Treatise of the Dominion of Sin and Grace*. In it he strongly asserted the following points (Vol. 7, pp. 542-551):

a. “The law *giveth no strength against sin* unto them that are under it, but grace doth.”

b. “The law gives no liberty of any kind...”

c. “The law doth not supply us with effectual motives and encouragements to endeavour the ruin of the dominion of sin in a way of duty...”

d. “Christ is not in the law; he is not proposed in it, not communicated by it—we are not made partakers of him thereby. This is the work of grace, of the gospel... The like may be spoken of the communication of the Holy Spirit...”

2. Paul’s final statement is devastating to anyone attempting to join the law with the gospel of Christ. If righteousness could be gained through the law, then Christ died for no purpose, which would slander the wisdom of God and Christ. “The notion that Christ died for nothing is scandalous, of course. Luther considered it ‘an intolerable and horrible blasphemy to think up some work by which you presume to placate God, when you see that He cannot be placated except by this immense, infinite price, the death and blood of the Son of God, one drop of which is more precious than all creation’ (Ryken, *Galatians*, p. 78).

Apply: Where are you spiritually? Are you still trying to please God by living a religious or moral life? Don’t waste your life! The only way to be right with God is through trusting Jesus

Christ as Lord and Savior. Right now, rely on Christ alone. If you want to know more, please come and talk to me or one of our deacons afterwards.

Apply: Christian, is your life showing forth the surpassing excellence of Jesus? Are you touching others with his love? Our lives should be a present demonstration of Jesus Christ.