

Justification By Faith Alone

Galatians 2:15-21

This Week's Prayer
Requests:

Memory Verse: Galatians 3:22 - "But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe."

Text: "We who are Jews by nature and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the 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 the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

"But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which 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 set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

Monday

How is a person
saved?

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

I was sharing the Gospel with an elderly woman in Clovis, New Mexico once and she told me that she was born and raised in a protestant denomination. So I asked her "Do you believe that Christ is God in the flesh, who died and rose again, giving Himself to pay for our sin that those who trust in Him might be saved?" She said, "Well my mother always told me when I was a little girl that what you said might be true. So we should pretend that it is just in case and live the best lives that we could. And if we were good, then it will be alright with God." I was a little shocked by this answer and wanted to clarify. So I asked, "**Pretend** that it's true and do the best you can?" to make sure that I had understood her. She said, "Yes."

So I asked her a simple question. I asked, "Is that real faith in Jesus?" Well she, of course, knew already that this wasn't true faith, but her response to my second question was even more surprising, because the question flipped a switch in her and this seemingly sweet elderly woman let loose with a torrent of angry hateful speech and cursing,

demonstrating beyond any doubt the true condition of her heart. It was a fearful thing to see, especially in someone so close to eternity. I excused myself and went to the car so that I could pray for her.

How do most people believe that a person is saved?

But really, as I think back on the incident, the first part of her response was not surprising at all. For her trust in her own human effort and working to put her in a right relationship with God is the most common belief that men and women have. It is the belief that the natural man tends to; and, it is the teaching of every major world religion other than Christianity.

Trusting in one's own works goes back to the dawn of time, when Cain decided to offer a sacrifice that did not come from a heart of love and devotion, unlike his brother Abel's offering. His was the first act of works-righteousness as a means of coming to God. He relied on his own efforts and ideas, his own merits.

What are the two ways that people try to come to God?

The Bible says that Abel, on the other hand, offered a blood sacrifice to God by faith. He believed in the coming Promised One and his faithful act of worship leaped across the millennia and touched the cross. Since that time two divergent lines have characterized man's religious life. One is the way of works, which seeks to come before God on its own terms, the terms which man establishes for himself in his own heart. This way relies on human works and human effort. The other is the way of faith in the promised one, Jesus Christ. The person who follows the way of man, whatever form it may take, follows the way of Cain. The person who follows God's way follows the way of Abel. One is the way of works and subsequent judgment and the other is the way of faith, grace and forgiveness.

What is wrong with a person creating his or her own way to God?

The vast majority follow the way of Cain. If you ask them, "Why should God accept you?" They will say, "Well I've tried to be a good person" or "I'm basically a good person, so He will accept me." They hope to stand before God accepted because they expect God and even demand that God conform to their standards, that He be bound by their definition of good, that He judge them and receive them according to the standards they have determined and established in their own hearts rather than according to His own standards. They want God to be satisfied with their own efforts, just like Cain.

And of course, if God were to do that, then man would be God instead of God being God. He's not going to do that Beloved. God will be God, not you and I. God will be God. He has set the standards; and He

has determined the means by which a man or a woman can have fellowship and peace with Him. The elderly woman that I shared the Gospel with that day in Clovis was trusting in her own merits, in her own ideas about how things should be. She was trusting in her own works, her own efforts at being good, her own mocking pretenses at worship and attempts at being religious. She was standing in the way of Cain.

What does the word “justified” mean?

The Judaizers also stood in the way of Cain. Rather than accepting God’s gracious provision and simply trusting in Christ, they rejected the message of the Gospel and came to the churches of Galatia teaching, “In order for you to be saved you must be circumcised according to the law of Moses and conform to Jewish religious traditions. These works must be added to your faith, and if you do that, then you will be saved.” Paul, however, had taught them that they were saved not on the basis of works, not on the basis of their own righteousness, but by faith in Christ alone.

But before we begin looking at the specific lessons that Paul is teaching us in this passage this week, it is necessary to define one very important term. That is the term “justified,” which Paul uses five times in this text. In verse 21 it is translated “righteousness.”

On what basis can a sinner be declared “not guilty” before God?

This word is an absolutely critical term for you to know, which appears over and over again throughout the NT. It is a judicial term. It is a term that would ordinarily be used in a court of law. It pictures a person, who has been accused of criminal charges, being brought before a judge to hear the verdict. Will he be found guilty, or will he be found not-guilty? The judge opens up the envelope with the verdict in it. He pulls out the piece of paper and he reads the verdict. “Not guilty,” *dikaiosune*, “righteous,” “justified.” That is the word.

God is the judge, the courtroom is His place and time of judgment on each of our souls. He is the one who determines and hands down the verdict. The question Paul is answering is on what basis, how is it possible for a sinful, disobedient guilty man or a woman, which we all are, to stand in the court room of God and hear Him say, “Not guilty?” How can that be? Does it happen because a person has worked hard and been good enough in life to somehow balance out his or her sin debt, to somehow pay off the debt and the penalty owed God? Can a person say as the Judaizers would, “Lord I was circumcised. I kept strict dietary laws. I sacrificed to pay my debt”? Is that good enough? Is that possible, or must there be some other means for a person to be declared

“not guilty”? That is the bottom line issue.

Tuesday

In the text that we come to this week in the book of Galatians, Paul is teaching the churches that justification before God is by faith alone and not by works; and he is giving several lessons to demonstrate this truth.

Why was Peter's failure in verses 12-13 so dangerous for the Gentile Christians in Antioch?

You will remember from last week that we talked about Peter's hypocrisy which was born of fear according to verse 13. He had come to Antioch and before some other Jews came from Jerusalem, Peter would freely eat with and engage in fellowship with the Gentile Christians. Then after these Jews came, Peter withdrew and separated himself from the Gentiles, fearing those who were of the circumcision, the Judaizers who taught this false message of works-righteousness. By doing this, Peter was sending an unspoken message to the Gentiles that the Judaizer's taught the right way. To really be in the “in crowd” and accepted fully in the church, one had to conform to Jewish religious customs.

Now when Peter and Barnabas and the rest of the Jews cut off table fellowship from the Gentile Christians in Antioch, because they weren't keeping Jewish dietary laws, Paul rebuked Peter, and said that his behavior amounted to compelling Gentiles to keep the Jewish laws as a means of full acceptance with God and the church. It was as John Piper says “out of sync with the gospel” and inconsistent with Peter's own deep convictions. We saw abundant evidence for this last week. The church was being threatened by a false legalistic message. So Paul is forced to confront and rebuke Peter publicly. Now what we are looking at this week is Paul's rebuke and argument against the behavior of Peter.

The first lesson from this text is very simple and yet one of the most profound realities in the history of creation, not only for all of mankind but for you and me personally. We need to understand this, and we need to let it sink deep within and penetrate our very souls. Because Beloved, it affects not only salvation, but how we live all of the Christian life afterwards, whether by loving and worshipful obedience, or by joyless self-imposed legalism. It is this:

1. Seeking to be justified before God by works is futile (vv.15-16).

It is useless, vain, impossible. Paul says, “We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles....” Now when Paul uses that phrase

How do you understand the phrase “sinners of the Gentiles” in verse 15?

“sinners of the Gentiles,” he does not mean that the Gentiles are sinners and the Jews are not, but he means that the sin of the two groups is of a different order, a different kind of sin. In fact the Jews used this term “sinner” to refer to those who engaged in flagrant and constant neglect of Jewish dietary laws and either did not know or disregarded the rigorous legal standards of Jewish life. They constantly criticized Christ for being in the company of “sinners” and eating with them. He was with people that disregarded these requirements.

According to verse 16, are Jews justified in the same manner as Gentiles or do they receive a different “dispensation” from God for salvation?

Paul continues, “knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the 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 the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.”

If you want to earn your way to God by living a righteous life, Beloved, the standard that God has established is perfect holiness. For God has said, “Be holy as I am holy.” **One sin** is enough to prevent you from meeting that perfect standard. James says plainly, “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). God sets a standard of absolute perfection, because that is who He is, the One who is holy, holy, holy, and He will not excuse sinfulness. It would require Him to deny Himself and His own perfect pure nature.

If a person was to try and be justified by works how, many sins would it take to disqualify him or her? See James 2:10 before answering.

Think about the grand canyon. Imagine that God is one side of the grand canyon and all of humanity is on the other side. God says, “If you want to come to heaven and live with me, it’s very simple, all you have to do is run and jump across the canyon, and you’re in.” So all of humanity runs up to the edge and they take flying leaps. Now some people would be world class long jumpers, Olympians, and they would jump 30 or more feet. Some would be in excellent health and they might be able to jump 18 to twenty feet. The average Joe would jump 8 to 10 feet. And some people like me would run up to the edge and just kind of stumble and roll over the side. Now how much consolation is it, if while everyone is plummeting to their death, for a person who jumped 20 feet to look back at a person who only jumped 8 feet and say, “Nanny-nanny-boo-boo, I jumped further than you!”

They are both going to die! They are both still impossibly short of the goal. How much consolation is it for a Jew to look back and say, “Hey at least I’m not a ‘sinner of the Gentiles.’ I’m an Olympic legalist. I didn’t eat Maryland blue crabs!!” He’s still lost and headed to hell without Christ.

So God sets an impossible standard. And though many may not understand this standard, it was no secret to Peter and the Jews that were with him. Paul says in effect in verse 16, “Hey, we know that a man is not justified by the works of the law.” This, by the way, was not some kind of stunning revelation. All the way back in the Pentateuch Moses saw the need of a new covenant involving circumcised hearts and based on the righteousness of faith (e.g. Deut. 30:6, 32:20). He told them right from the very start that it was hopeless, and the point of the law wasn’t so they would try to be righteous before God based on their own human effort, but it was to drive them to their knees so that they would cry out to God for mercy and place their hope in the promised seed, the Messiah who would come and crush the head of the serpent, Gen. 3:15. Even as their father Abraham, their great example, was justified by faith, believing God’s promise and having that credited to him for righteousness as the Bible says, they were to do so as well.

So the utter futility of trying to be justified by obeying the law and being a basically good person was no secret to the Jews. If you think that God will accept you because you have tried to live a basically good life and avoid the worst sins as you measure them, then you are dead wrong because you have failed to understand the true standard of God. The Scripture is very clear at the end of verse 16, “for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” Those who try to adhere to God’s revealed law as a means of righteousness fail miserably. It’s like the grand canyon, and all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Wednesday

Not only is seeking to be justified by works before God futile, Paul teaches a second lesson:

2. Seeking to be justified before God by works is sinful (vv.17-19).

In verse 17 Paul writes, “But if while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.” You need to follow Paul’s line of thinking here. He has just said emphatically, three times in fact in the previous verse that a person is not justified by works of law, by human effort. – Incidentally, the article “the” doesn’t appear in the original text in verse 16, so Paul is saying clearly that there is no system of works, Jewish or otherwise, which could ever make a man right with God: “For by works of law no flesh shall be justified.”

Does the doctrine of justification by faith alone, give men a license to sin? Why or why not?

This teaching, though, leaves him open to an objection by the Judaizers; and that is, “Well Paul, if a person can be justified simply by faith in Christ, then why should he ever bother to live a moral life at all? You’re Gospel gives a person the freedom to live a life of complete unrestrained sin without any worries whatsoever. What if you are found to be a sinner, while you seek to be justified by faith in Christ. Your Gospel, therefore, makes Christ a minister of sin.”

Who is at fault if you abuse God’s grace according to verse 18?

Paul anticipates and answers this objection in verse 17 with the phrase, “Certainly not!” This is the absolutely strongest negative he could use in the Greek language. “Absolutely not,” or “God forbid.” The idea that someone would take the grace of God in Jesus Christ and use it as a license for sin was absolutely abhorrent to Paul. Then he takes this simple answer and expands it saying, “If I build again those things which I destroyed, [when I repented of sin and put my faith in Christ,] I make myself a transgressor.” Christ is not a minister of sin, but I am a transgressor if I abuse His grace. Verse 19, “For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God.”

What was your chief besetting sin prior to salvation? What was Paul’s?

Here, make sure you get this, Paul is saying something that will absolutely get the Judaizers all twisted up in knots complete with gnashing teeth. Let me see if I can give you the force of it with an analogy. Imagine that before you were saved the chief besetting sin of your life was that you were a compulsive liar. You trust Christ. He sets you free from compulsive lying. That sin is destroyed. Now along come a group of teachers that tell you, “Faith in Christ isn’t good enough. If you want to truly be saved, you must trust Christ and also tell at least one lie every week.” Ridiculous right? Or imagine that before you were saved the chief sin that characterized your life was violent, aggressive and abusive behavior. Now a false teacher says comes along and says, “In order to be saved you must trust Christ and beat your spouse once a week. Plus, you probably ought to get in a bar room brawl periodically just for good measure.” You would say, “That’s outrageous.”

Well, what was Paul’s chief sin prior to his salvation? It was legalism, a sin every bit as bad as lying or violence. His sin was trying to be righteous before God through his own pride-filled human efforts. Now we have already learned from this letter that he advanced far beyond his contemporaries in Judaism and was far more zealous in his efforts to fulfill the religious traditions of his people. He was the strictest of Pharisees and his zeal for the law would have put the Judaizers troubling the Galatians to shame. Now he is saying in effect “You might say that

Paul says that he not only “died to the law” but that he did so “through the law”. What then was the gracious function of the law in his life, if it was not to bring justification? See Gal. 3:24 & Rom. 7:7.

the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone makes Him a minister of sin, but that is absolutely false. If I Paul, though, were to build again those things which I destroyed. Then I would become a transgressor. For I gave up that wicked sin. I forsook it. I died to the law that I might live to God.” That’s what verse 19 means. It wasn’t Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith that was drawing people back into sin, but it was the false doctrine of justification by works that was really enticing people back into wickedness.

Seeking to be justified before God by works, then, is not only futile, it is a sin that actually makes one a transgressor before God. It is a prideful self-righteous sin that actually increases one’s guilt before God rather than lessening it. That is why Christ would say of the Pharisees that they make their converts twice as much a son of hell as themselves (Matt. 23:15), just heaping up more sin on top of the sin they already have.

Thursday

A third lesson this week comes from verse 20:

3. Seeking to be justified before God by works is in opposition to a Christ-centered life (v. 20). Or another way of saying this is that it is against the Christ life. Legalism, just like any other sin, is contrary to dying to yourself daily and living a new life in Christ.

What does it mean practically to say that the life which I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God?

Jesus says “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). We are to deny ourselves and die to our own sinful desires and way of life as we follow Christ. So Paul continues his argument in verse 20, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

This was a very personal thing to Paul, this self-denial, this putting his old way of life in legalism to death that he might have a new life lived by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The “I” in the verse is emphatic in the original language. He is giving a piece of his personal testimony. He says I through the law died to the law. When he says in verse 19 that he died to the law, through the law. He means that it was the law that killed him by showing him the truth. It was the law that proved to Paul

the futility and sinfulness of his previous life, even a life of legalism.

How is one
“crucified with
Christ”?

We’ve pictured the standards of God reflected in His law as the Grand Canyon. Now picture it as a mountain 10 times the height of Mount Everest. God says in order for you to be saved you must physically climb this mountain by yourself. There is only one big catch: it is impossible to do it. The sides of the mountain are sheer. There are treacherous overhangs. It is filled with crags and pits and there is no breathable atmosphere after you get just a tenth of the way to the top. At first, Paul looked at the mountain and said, “I can do it.” Then, he tightened his belt and threw himself against the mountain. He threw himself into the effort with great zeal and energy. Maybe he even did better than others. But in no time at all he lay at the foot of the mountain helpless and spiritually dead. The law revealed his sinful self-righteousness and pride, condemned him and killed him on the spot.

In order to live to God Paul had to repent. He had to forsake all of His self-reliance, his self-glorifying attempts at righteousness and his efforts to earn his way to God through self-righteous legalistic pharisaical efforts. He had to die to the law in that sense. He had to crucify his old way of life and cling to Christ alone as his only hope. He identified with Christ in His death, that his sinful old way of life was condemned and deserved to receive the judgment of God. He denied himself and followed after Christ.

How does Christ
“live in you”?

This is Paul. Now along come the Judaizers and say, “Paul, you’ve got to pick up the old legalism again if you want to be right with God.” It’s no wonder Paul was so angry. To him its like saying “Pick up adultery, pick up fornication, pick up blasphemy, pick up pride, pick up alcoholism, pick up murder as a way to get to God. Take it back into your life.” So he says, “No, I died to that way of life. I died to that sin. I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live. The old Paul is dead. I don’t go after that fruitless evil way of life again. But Christ lives in me now.”

“It is no longer I who live. The vain, proud, self-exalting legalist is gone. But the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God. He is the one who loved me and gave Himself for me.” That verse beloved is true of every person that is a real Christian. A true Christian is one who has denied himself, put the old way of life to death, has been united with Christ so that He lives in him or her, and now clings to Christ by faith.

You're old way of life may not have been self-righteous bigoted legalism as Paul's was. But whatever it was, if you are in Christ, the old sinful way of life is gone. The true Christian is a person who now pursues a new Christ-centered life.

If you haven't ever chosen a life verse. A verse to meditate on, memorize and love, a verse you use to define yourself by and to guide you in the decisions of your life for as many days as God grants you, a verse that you pray through and long for others to see in you, if you haven't ever chosen a life verse, I recommend that you seriously consider Galatians 2:20. So we see that seeking to be justified before God by works is in opposition to a Christ-centered life.

Friday

A final lesson from our text for this week is this:

If you can be justified before God by human effort, what does this say about the cross?

4. Seeking to be justified before God by works denies the necessity of Christ's death (v. 21). Look at verse 21 again, "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

Seeking to be justified by works denies the cross. It says in human arrogance that God's plan was pointless, useless, stupid, and unnecessary. It makes nonsense of the cross. But I tell you, Beloved, that God does nothing unnecessary, least of all putting the all glorious Son to death on the cross. And those who deny the necessity of the cross as the means to forgiveness and righteousness before God are in for a terrible awakening when God shows them in wrath, "No it is not the cross on which the Lord died that is useless, it is your vain petty attempts at self-righteousness that are useless!" Such people will be cast away from His presence for all eternity because of their horrific blasphemy and mocking of the Lord of Glory and the necessity of His cross in their hearts.

Beloved, if there had been another way for mankind to be justified before God, then Christ would not have gone to the cross. Did not Jesus pray in the garden the night before His death, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me..." (Matt. 26:39)? Did it pass? No, it did not pass, because there was no other possible way to make atonement for our sin. There was no other way for you and I to be saved, except by the payment for our sin that Christ gave on that cross.

How many ways are there to be saved?

Our offense was not against a small sovereign, but it was an offense against and infinite holy Almighty God, who has only ever done good to us. The horror of an offense rises with the beauty and honor of the one offended. The offense is something none of us can ever satisfy even with an eternity, nor even could an angel in heaven. Failure to understand this is a failure to understand who God is. No Beloved, the payment had to be something, someone, of equally infinite worth, God the Son. He, in infinite love, gave Himself to bear our curse. The gift of that payment is received when we in our hearts put our faith in Christ alone just as Paul did.

How does the Lord's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane prove this?

Paul's logic in this verse is incontrovertible. God will never allow the death of His Son to be viewed as pointless, unnecessary, to no purpose or vain. If justification is by anything but faith in Christ, then the cross is denigrated and the glory of God is given to another, two things which God will never, ever allow to happen.

Could a mere man or even an angel have done what Christ did on the cross? Why not?

In conclusion we might say that if anybody insists that justification is by works and that he can earn his salvation by his own efforts, he is undermining the very foundations of true Christianity. Even though such a person may call himself a Christian, he in the words of Scripture "sets aside" the grace of God. Because, if salvation is by works then it is not by grace, and that person is proclaiming in his heart that Christ's death was unnecessary.

Such a person may think in his or her heart that to earn his salvation is somehow praiseworthy and noble, but he is actually living a life that is nothing but empty vain boasting, and he is upholding and clinging to a lie that tramples the blood of the Son underfoot, a lie that is an infinite wicked rebellious insult to the glorious wonderful Father. One must either receive God's offer of salvation or grievously insult him.

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