

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-THREE)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL” (PART 9)

GALATIANS 2:14-16

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

14 But when I saw that they were not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

15 We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners,

16 yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

In our previous Lesson we stated that in verses **14-21** of **Galatians** chapter **2**, Paul explains the justification for his rebuke of Peter.

In verse **14** he writes, *“But when I saw that they were not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, ‘If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”*

As we said last week, Paul understood clearly that Peter, by his withdrawal from the Gentile believers in Antioch, had contradicted and thus compromised the truth of the Gospel. Peter’s separation from

fellowship with the Gentile believers implied that salvation for Gentiles required strict adherence to the Law and incorporation into the Jewish nation. The Gentile believers could not help but conclude from Peter's action that he was of the opinion that their standing before God was not as secure as his own, and that if they wanted to enjoy fellowship with himself and other Jewish believers, they would have to become Jews. The Gentile believers would have seen these implications of Peter's action even if he himself did not.

Paul says that Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers were “*not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel.*” The word “*consistently,*” is the translation of a Greek word which speaks of straightforward, unwavering, sincere conduct in contrast to a crooked, wavering, and more or less insincere course, such as Peter and the other Jews were guilty of. The idea is that Peter and the other Jews did not pursue a straight course in relation to the truth of the Gospel. He did not deal honestly and consistently with it. His was an attitude that led him to compromise its sacred truth, to twist it, to misrepresent it, to deal crookedly with it.

Warren Wiersbe has pointed out five basic Christian doctrines that were being denied by Peter as a result of his separation from the Gentiles. They are:

- 1 The unity of the church (verse **14**)
- 2 Justification by faith (verses **15-16**)
- 3 Freedom from the law (verses **17-18**)
- 4 The very gospel itself (verses **19-20**)
- 5 The grace of God (verse **21**)

Peter had experienced God's grace in his own salvation, and he had proclaimed God's grace in his own ministry. But when he withdrew

from table-fellowship with the Gentile believers, he openly denied the grace of God.

Because of the gravity of the situation, Paul had to confront Peter publicly. He informs us in verse **14** that he spoke to Peter, “*in front of them all.*” Paul’s rebuke of Peter was not given before the officers of the church only, or before a specially convened and restricted number of people, but before all the members of the Antioch church, both Jew and Gentile, who were present.

Paul’s rebuke must have stung Peter: “*If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?*”

One commentator has observed that, “It is fascinating to see God’s omnipotent, omniscient hand take the failure of Peter to stand firm on the truth of the Gospel and to use Peter’s failure as the launching pad into one of the great sections in all of Scripture on the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone! God uses the negative event and works it out for good...Who else could do that but God!”

The English Anglican bishop **J. C. Ryle**, noted that,

“There are three great lessons from Antioch, which I think we ought to learn from this passage.

1 The first lesson is, ‘That great ministers may make great mistakes.’

2 The second is, ‘That to keep the **truth** of Christ in His Church is even more important than to keep **peace**.’

3 The third is, ‘That there is no doctrine about which we ought to be so protective about, as **justification by faith** without the deeds of the law.’”

In verse **15**, Paul says to Peter, “*We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.*” The word “*we,*” at the beginning of the verse is emphatic and serves to emphasize the sharp contrast which Paul is about to make between the Jew and the Gentile. The Greek verb carries its own person in itself, and when the pronoun is used with it, the writer wishes to call particular attention to the subject of the verb. It is to be noted that Paul includes **himself** with Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers in the church at Antioch, and places himself and them in contrast to the Gentile believers. He says that he and they are Jews by birth, not only are they not Gentiles, but they are not even Gentile proselytes. Paul implies that as such, the Jews have special privileges and prerogatives.

Paul says that he, Peter and the other Jewish believers are not, “*Gentile sinners.*” He is not using the word “*sinner*” here in its strict sense where it refers to persons who are guilty of sin and therefore not righteous. He is using the word as it is often used in the New Testament, to refer to persons who were preeminently sinful, sinners above others, or habitual sinners. The phrase “**publicans and sinners**” which we encounter often in the Gospels is an example. It was the Pharisaic point of view in relation to persons guilty of specific violations of the law. The word “*sinner*” is used here as a generic description or name for the Gentiles, whom the Jews regarded as unclean and dogs. Paul is speaking to Peter on the common ground of their former Judaism and in an ironical fashion using the language of Judaism. Paul was not saying that he, Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers were not in reality sinners. Theologically, he knew that all people, Jew and Gentile are sinners. What he was saying was that he, Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers, as Jews, were not **regarded** as sinners in the same sense that the Gentiles were.

John MacArthur explains that the word “*sinner*” is used here in the **legal** sense since the Jews considered the Gentiles to be sinners by nature because they had no revealed divine written law to guide them toward salvation or living righteously. Quite often, The Jews could scarcely mention Gentiles without calling them “Gentile sinners.” And

yet, in Paul's eyes, the sinners were the Jewish believers, not the Gentile believers.

Theologians differ on the question as to where Paul's conversation with Peter ends. We are not certain if Paul's words in verse **14** are all that is reported of his rebuke of Peter, or if verses **15-21** are a continuation of the conversation. The matter is not very important, but it is my opinion that verses **15-21** form a part of what Paul said to Peter. It seems to me that the short rebuke in verse **14** is not in keeping with the serious nature of the situation in Antioch. Would this brief response have been enough to convince the believers in Galatia of the critical nature of the conflict and of how disappointed, frustrated and indignant Paul felt at Peter's betrayal of the Gospel? I do not think so. I am of the view that Paul resumes his direct words to the Galatians in chapter **3** and verse **1** with the expression, "*O foolish Galatians.*"

In any case, as we noted earlier, the matter is not very important, since the entire section deals with the same topic: the liberty of believers in Jesus Christ. We will assume that the entire section represents Paul's rebuke of Peter.

In verse **16** Paul writes, "*Yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*"

The **English Standard Version** translates the verse as follows: "*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.*"

In this verse, Paul is stating categorically that a person can only be saved through faith in Jesus Christ, the faithful One, and not by keeping the Law! He says the same thing three times, in a slightly different sense:

1 The General Truth: *“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”*

2 The Personal Truth: *“so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.”*

3 The Universal Truth: *“Because by works of the law no one will be justified.”*

This is the first appearance of the word **“Justification”** in this letter and if, as most Bible scholars believe, Galatians was the first letter written by Paul, it is the first appearance of the word in any of his writings. “Justification by faith alone” is one of the most important doctrines of Scripture and it was the watchword of the **Protestant Reformation**. It is therefore very important that we understand this doctrine.

The word *“justified”* is a translation of the Greek word **dikaioó: (dik-ah-yo'-o)**, which means, “to show to be righteous; to declare righteous.” It is evident from the meaning of the word that there is a definite and vital connection between the act of justifying and the righteousness of the individual who has been justified.

Justification in the biblical sense, is the act of God removing from the believing sinner, his or her guilt and the penalty incurred by that guilt, and bestowing a positive righteousness. That positive righteousness is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in whom the believer stands, not only innocent and uncondemned, but actually righteous **in point of law** for all of time and eternity.

The root idea in justification is the **declaration of God**, the righteous judge, that the individual who believes in Christ, sinful though he or she may be, is viewed by Him as being righteous, because in Christ, he or she has come into a righteous relationship with God. According to Scripture, justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It is a one-time act of God. It is distinct, therefore, from

sanctification which is an ongoing work of God's grace in the believer's life. Once God accepts a sinner on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ, that person can never lose his or her right standing before God.

Properly speaking, justification does not describe the way that God inwardly renews and changes a person. It is, rather, a **legal declaration** in which God pardons the sinner of all his or her sins, and accepts and accounts the sinner as righteous in His sight. God declares the sinner righteous at the very moment that he or she believes in, or puts his or her trust in Jesus Christ. The basis of this legal declaration is the obedience and death of the sinner's representative, Jesus Christ. Christ's perfect obedience and full satisfaction for sin are the **only** ground or basis upon which God declares a believing sinner righteous.

We are not justified by our own works; we are justified solely on the basis of Christ's work on our behalf. It is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to the sinner. In other words, in justification, God puts the righteousness of His Son to the sinner's account. Just as the believer's sins were transferred to, or laid upon Christ at the Cross, so also His righteousness is transferred to the believer. We read of this double transfer, or imputation in **2 Corinthians 5:21**: "*God made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we would become the righteousness of God*" (**New English Translation**).

By what means is the sinner justified? The sinner is justified through **faith alone**, when he or she places his or her trust in Christ for salvation. Paul informs us of this in **Romans 10:4-13**:

4 For Christ is the end of the law, with the result that there is righteousness for everyone who believes.

5 For Moses writes about the righteousness that is by the law: "The one who does these things will live by them."

6 But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)

7 or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

8 But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we preach),

9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation.

11 For the scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

12 For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him.

13 For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.
(**New English Translation**)

Justification is said to be **forensic**, which means that it is **legal**. We are declared “not guilty” in God’s courtroom because Jesus lived an obedient life and paid the penalty for our sins. Because it is “the judge of all the earth,” God Almighty, who pronounces the verdict of “not guilty” in respect of the believing sinner, he or she is acquitted forever. No charges can ever be brought against him or her ever again! This is what Paul tells us in **Romans 8:33-34**:

33 Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.

34 Who is the one who will condemn? Christ is the one who died (and more than that, he was raised), who is at the right hand of God, and who also is interceding for us.

(**New English Translation**)

Faith is the **only** instrument of justification. Faith adds nothing to what Christ has done for us in justification. Faith merely receives the righteousness of Jesus Christ offered in the gospel. Because justification is wholly by faith, apart from any good works of ours, we are simultaneously just and yet sinners. Sinfulness still resides in us, yet we are cleared in God's courtroom.

As we said earlier, justification is a complete and finished act. Justification means that every believer is completely and finally freed from condemnation and the wrath of God. **Sanctification**, however, is an ongoing and progressive work in our lives. Although every believer is brought out, once and for all from bondage to sin, we are not immediately made perfect. We will not be completely freed from sin until we receive our resurrection bodies at the last day. This complete and final freedom from sin is referred to as **glorification**.

The question arises, "Is justification just? If God is holy, how can He forgive a guilty sinner?" The answer is that justification does not excuse our sin, ignore our sin, or endorse our sin. Rather, our sin is fully punished in Christ who took our sin upon Himself and bore the penalty for us. He was our substitute (**1 Peter 3:18**). Because the wrath of God is satisfied in Christ, we are free from condemnation and God remains just.

Because God justifies us by His grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, we now have peace with God according to **Romans 5:1**: "*Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (**New English Translation**).

Like Joshua the High Priest, we have been stripped of our "*filthy clothes*" (**Zechariah 3:4**), and, like the prodigal son in the parable, we are now clothed with "*the best robe*" (**Luke 15:22**). God the Father sees us as perfect and unblemished, and we are to "*engage in good works*" (**Titus 3:14**).