

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-SIX)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL”

(PART 12)

GALATIANS 2:15-18

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

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.

17 But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves have also been found to be sinners, is Christ then one who encourages sin? Absolutely not!

18 But if I build up again those things I once destroyed, I demonstrate that I am one who breaks God’s law.

In verses **15** and **16**, Paul makes the point to Peter that notwithstanding the fact that they are both Jews by birth, and therefore not regarded as “sinners” in the same sense as the Gentiles, they understood from Scripture and their own experience, that sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, could not be justified by the works of the Law, but only by faith in Jesus Christ.

Justification is the free and gracious act of God by which He declares a sinner right with Himself—forgiving, pardoning, restoring, and accepting him or her on the basis of nothing but his or her faith in the Person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. The root idea in justification is the declaration of God, the righteous judge, that the person who believes in Jesus 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.

The act of God in justifying a believing sinner consists of taking away his or her guilt and its penalty, since Christ bore both on the Cross, and imputing to him or her the righteousness of Christ, in whom the believer stands not only guiltless and un-condemned for all of time and eternity, but also positively righteous in the sight of God.

The Greek word translated “*faith*” is **pistis**, which refers to a firm persuasion or conviction based upon hearing. When the word **pistis** refers to the faith which a sinner must place in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved, it includes the following 4 ideas:

- 1** the act of considering the Lord Jesus worthy of trust as to His character and motives,
- 2** the act of placing confidence in His ability to do just what He says He will do,
- 3** the act of entrusting the salvation of his or her soul into the hands of the Lord Jesus,
- 4** the act of committing the work of saving his or her soul to the care of the Lord. This means a definite taking of one’s self out of one’s own keeping and entrusting one’s self into the keeping of the Lord Jesus.

In the last clause of verse **16**, Paul makes a **universal** statement—a statement that asserts that something is true of all members of a class. The statement is, “*Because by works of the law no one will be justified.*”

Paul is stressing the point that it is absolutely impossible for any person, Jew or Gentile, to be justified by the Law or any other system of rule keeping. There is no work, no matter how strenuous, sacrificial or noble, that any person can perform that can earn or merit salvation!

In verse **17** Paul writes, *“But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves have also been found to be sinners, is Christ then one who encourages sin? Absolutely not!”*

Brothers and sisters, I must confess that I find this verse very difficult to interpret. Indeed, there are several different interpretations that have been presented by commentators. I have read several of them and will present the view which in my very humble opinion appears to be the most reasonable having regard to the context.

In verse **17**, Paul is reminding Peter that they, together with Barnabas and the other Jewish believers in Antioch, had been justified by faith alone in Christ alone, in the same way that the Gentile believers had been justified. Thus the Jewish believers were shown to be sinners in the same class as the Gentiles. When the Jewish believers sought justification by faith alone in Christ alone, and therefore by grace alone, it was an admission on their part that there was no possibility of anyone, Jew or Gentile being justified by works. They had discovered that the Law was an abject failure as a justifying agency.

Understanding that they were justified by faith alone, the Jewish believers had exercised their freedom in Christ to live like Gentiles and not like Jews. They were eating with the Gentile believers and perhaps disregarding other portions of the Mosaic Law as well. In doing so, they would have been considered to be “sinners” and “unclean,” from the perspective of the Judaizers. In the eyes of the Judaizers, the Jewish believers in Antioch had put themselves outside the Mosaic covenant, as the Gentiles were. As far as the Judaizers were concerned, Peter and the other Jewish believers were guilty of **antinomianism** or lawlessness.

The Judaizers would have argued as follows, “The doctrine of justification by faith alone promoted by Paul is dangerous, for by eliminating the Law a person’s sense of moral responsibility is also eliminated. If a person can be accounted righteous simply by believing that Christ lived and died for him, why then should he or she live by any standard of morality? He or she will have no compulsion to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. The result of such a doctrine is that persons will believe in Christ but thereafter live any way they want to live and still claim to be justified!

Paul is making the point to Peter that if indeed the Judaizers are correct in their doctrine that believers are saved in part by keeping the ceremonial Law of Moses and continue to be bound by that Law to maintain their salvation, then he, Peter, Barnabas, and all the other Jewish believers, had fallen back into the category of sinners by eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers, even before the Judaizers arrived in Antioch.

He also argues that if the Jewish believers became sinners because of eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers, then Jesus Christ Himself would be a minister of sin, for He had made it very clear that no food can contaminate a person in a spiritual sense, because food cannot affect the heart. We read of this in **Mark 7:14-19**:

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand.

15 There is nothing outside of a person that can defile him by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles him.”

17 Now when Jesus had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable.

18 He said to them, “Are you so foolish? Don’t you understand that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him?

19 For it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then goes out into the sewer.” (This means all foods are clean.)

(New English Translation)

The Lord had also given Peter direct evidence that the Gentile believers were in every way equal to Jewish believers through the thrice-repeated vision of the unclean animals and the dramatic conversion of Cornelius and his relatives and friends recorded in **Acts 10**. On many occasions He had taught that all those who belong to Him are one with Him and therefore one with each other. In **John 17:20-23**, shortly before His arrest, trial, and crucifixion, He had prayed to His Father as follows:

20 “I am not praying only on their behalf, but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their testimony,

21 that they will all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. I pray that they will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.

22 The glory you gave to me I have given to them, that they may be one just as we are one—

23 I in them and you in me—that they may be completely one, so that the world will know that you sent me, and you have loved them just as you have loved me.

(New English Translation)

In light of all this, Paul is arguing that if the Judaizers were right, then the Lord Jesus was wrong. If what they were teaching was the truth then He had taught falsehood and was thereby a minister of sin!

In a sermon entitled **“Keeping the Gospel Pure,”** John MacArthur said the following:

“So Paul says...‘If the Judaizers are right, demanding that we, in seeking to be justified by faith alone in Christ apart from works, are

turning out to be sinners because we don't keep the Law, then are you going to say Christ made us sinners?

The gospel sets us free from the Law, free from the Law's tyranny, free from the Law's dominance, free from the Law's penalty. Now that Christ has set us free...you're saying to us that if we don't go back to the Law, Christ has made us sinners. So are you saying Christ is a minister of sin?'

Now, remember, he's talking to Peter. He's talking to Peter and Barnabas, who's been a co-pastor with him for years. 'What are you doing? You are condemning Christ...When you eat and function with Gentiles, and accept them in a gracious way as being brothers and sisters in Christ because of faith alone, you're right. But if you, Peter, Barnabas, and the rest, if you go along with the Judaizing legalists, then you're saying that our former liberty, your former liberty, the way you've been living since **Acts 10** and the way you've been living in Antioch was sin; and therefore Christ freed you into sin. By telling you you're free from the Law, Christ made you a worse sinner than ever.'

Paul recoils from his own logic, because it's blasphemy, and says, 'May it never be!'...No, Christ isn't the sin promoter here. The Judaizers are the sin promoters."

The argument of the opponents of the Gospel of grace in Paul's day was that if people are not under some system of law then they will sin freely. They reasoned that people could believe in Christ but then live as they wanted and by their sinful actions make Christ a promoter of sin. The same argument is used by the opponents of the Gospel of grace today. But such a conclusion is false because Christ dealt with the sin issue on the Cross! Paul finds such a view utterly repulsive and answers this accusation with an emphatic, "***Absolutely not!***"

In **Romans 6**, he argues expertly and persuasively that it is impossible for a genuinely saved person to retain the same relationship with the sinful human nature or “the flesh,” that he or she did prior to his or her conversion. In verses **1-7** he writes,

1 What shall we say then? Are we to remain in sin so that grace may increase?

2 Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

3 Or do you not know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may live a new life.

5 For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united in the likeness of his resurrection.

6 We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

7 (For someone who has died has been freed from sin.)
(New English Translation)

If God declares a person right in His eyes by faith alone, does this cause him or her to gravitate towards sin? “*Absolutely not*” says the Apostle. The grace of God leads to freedom from sin’s slavery to obey God, not license to disobey him. The principle of grace does not endorse lawlessness. On the contrary it promotes genuine holiness. This is Paul’s argument in **Titus 2:11-14**:

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.

12 It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

13 as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

14 He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good.

(New English Translation)

As **John Stott** remarks in his commentary on this verse,

“Our justification takes place when we are united to Christ by faith. And someone who is united to Christ is never the same person again. Instead, he is changed. It is not just his standing before God which has changed; it is he himself—radically, permanently changed. To talk of his going back to the old life, and even sinning as he pleases, is frankly impossible. He has become a new creation and begun a new life. This amazing change, which comes over somebody who is justified in Christ, Paul now unfolds. He describes it in terms of a death and a resurrection. Twice in **Galatians 2:19** and **Galatians 2:20** he speaks of this dying and this rising to life again. Both take place through union with Christ. It is Christ’s death and resurrection in which we share.”

To believe that God justifies and sanctifies a person by faith does not imply lawlessness. In fact, to go back to the Law or any other system of rule keeping as a way of earning or maintaining salvation is to abandon grace. To do so implies that what Christ did on the Cross was not sufficient. If we start out by grace, then go back to the Law, or any other system of rule keeping, we repudiate grace. Peter’s return to legalism was therefore an attack on grace!

Commenting on Paul’s emphatic “*Absolutely not,*” **Charles Spurgeon** made the following comments:

"Justification by faith does not make us think lightly of sin. On the contrary, it creates in us such love to God that we loathe the very idea of offending Him. For the tendency of the gospel of grace is to excite gratitude in those who receive it. If I am freely pardoned, then I must love him who has thus generously forgiven me. Gratitude is the root of true virtue and the mainspring of all holiness. If there are base-minded men who can suck poison out of this honeycomb, is Christ to be blamed for their evildoing? God forbid! But if, on the other hand, you and I go back to trusting in works, then we are indeed guilty in the sight of God."