

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-FIVE)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL”

(PART 11)

GALATIANS 2:16

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

“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 our previous Lesson, we stated that Paul is making the point that even though Peter and himself were Jews by birth, and therefore not regarded as “sinners,” at least, not in the same sense that the Gentiles were, they both were aware of the truth that sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, could not be justified by the works of the Law, but only by faith in Christ. The word “*know*” is the translation of a Greek word which refers to knowledge gained by perception. It speaks of fullness of knowledge, knowledge that is certain. The word is **plural**, indicating that this truth was something that Paul, Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers

knew beyond a shadow of a doubt. They had themselves been under the works of the Law all their life and knew that that system did not work. It was impotent to save!

We observed that in **Galatians 2:16**, the word “**Justification**” is mentioned for the first time in the letter. We also noted that if, as most Bible scholars believe, **Galatians** was the first letter written by Paul, this would be the first appearance of the word in any of his writings!

Justification is the free and gracious **act** by which God **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.

Thus 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 the imputation of a righteousness, even Christ Jesus Himself, in whom the believer stands not only guiltless and uncondemned for all of time and eternity, but also positively righteous in the sight of God.

Properly understood, justification has to do with God’s declaration **about** the sinner, not any change **within** the sinner. In other words, in the act of justification, God does not **make** the believing sinner righteous; He simply **declares** him or her to be not guilty before God for all of time and eternity.

The great reformer **Martin Luther**, in defining who a Christian is, made the following statement:

“We make this definition of a Christian: that a Christian is not he which **hath** no sin, but he to whom God **imputeth** not his sin, through faith in Christ.”

The actual change toward holiness in the believing sinner occurs with **sanctification** which is a life-long **process**. In sanctification, the believer is gradually conformed by the Holy Spirit to the image of Jesus Christ.

In **Galatians 2:16** Paul categorically states that, “*a person is **not** justified by works of the law.*” Brothers and sisters, this is a seminal truth. It is the foundation-stone of all true Gospel preaching! And yet, such is the pride and deceitfulness of the human heart that it is very difficult for us to build on this foundation. The old adamic nature, or the **flesh**, is always endeavouring to persuade us to trust in our own works-righteousness, instead of the righteousness of Jesus Christ which is imputed to us. Instead of celebrating the grace of God and seeking to grow in it by the Holy Spirit’s enablement, we try to work out our salvation, in the energy of the flesh, by a strict observance of rules and regulations.

Kenneth Wuest explains that Paul uses the word “*law*” in this verse, in a legalistic sense. He says that Paul is speaking of divine law as a purely legalistic system, consisting of rules and regulations. If a person obeys the law, he or she secures God’s approval. If he or she disobeys it, he or she is subject to God’s condemnation. The divine approval therefore is a matter of debt which God owes and pays to the person who obeys. This is a salvation which the person merits, and which is given on the basis of works, not grace.

Wuest states that the Bible does not teach this concept of divine law. Nowhere in the Bible is it taught that a person can be saved or earn God’s approval by observing the law. This concept he says, had its origin in the thought and practice of man all through the ages since its inception in the heart of Cain. Paul himself had held this view as a self-righteous Pharisee. In verse **16** he is admitting, that with all the racial superiority and religious privileges that the Jews believed they had with reference to the Gentiles, he, Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers had found out that they could not be declared righteous by

virtue of their obedience to the legal enactments of the Mosaic law, but only by faith in Jesus Christ Who fulfilled the provisions of the Law on their behalf.

Paul is saying that he, Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jewish believers, all knew that attempts to keep the Law could not make a person perfectly righteous before God. The reason of course is that the heart of the problem is the radically corrupt state of the unregenerate human being. It is not possible for external works to change the depraved nature of the human heart! Our problem is not merely that we commit sin. Our problem is that we are sinners! To put it another way, our problem is not what we **do** but who we **are**! What we **do** is the fruit of who we **are** in our fallen condition. Both **Ephesians 2:1** and **Colossians 2:13** clearly state that unsaved humanity is in a spiritually dead condition. And **Romans 3:9-19** describes the absolute inability of human beings in their natural state to be righteous, to understand the things of God, to seek after God and to do good. How then could a fallen unregenerate human being ever be saved by keeping the Law?

Brothers and sisters, we are not saved by **doing** but by **being**!

Persons are not justified by works of the law “*but through faith in Jesus Christ.*” The word “*but*” is exceptive, indicating one of the most important contrasts in the entire Bible, as it definitively differentiates between the way most human beings, including many professing Christians, think they can be saved (i.e. by **works**), versus the way that God has ordained for sinners to be saved (i.e. by **faith**).

The word “*through*” is a translation of the Greek preposition **dia** and describes the channel through which we are justified. It is through faith alone in Christ alone, Who is the faithful One! The way of salvation is clearly stated here by Paul. Sinners are justified through faith in Christ Jesus. They are declared righteous before God through their belief in Christ. The key that unlocks the door to the Kingdom of Heaven and eternal life is faith, and not just faith but faith which is in Christ Jesus.

As we noted in our previous Lesson, Paul in this verse, clearly contrasts the two ways human beings have sought to be justified. It is either by **law and works**, or by **grace and faith**. His repetition of the phrase, “*by works of the law*” is to be noted. Three times—at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the verse—he states that it is impossible for a person to be declared righteous or justified “*by works of the law.*”

It is also noticeable that Paul speaks of the role of faith three times in the verse—“*through faith in Jesus Christ,*” “*we also have believed in Christ Jesus,*” and “*in order to be justified by faith.*”

In verse **16**, Paul uses faith in Christ to counter the three-fold mention of the works of the Law. Can there then be any doubt about what Paul wants to emphasize? Please note that it is faith in Christ **plus nothing** that saves a sinner! Anything added to Christ is **not** the Gospel and cannot save the soul of any person! Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, and since faith, according to **Ephesians 2:8**, is, “*the gift of God,*” then salvation must also be by grace alone!

In **Hebrews 11:6**, we read the following: “*Now without faith it is impossible to please him, for the one who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*” (**New English Translation**).

Scripture emphasizes that the worth of a person’s faith is determined by the **object** of that faith. In **1 Chronicles 16:25-26**, for example we read the following:

25 For the LORD is great and certainly worthy of praise, he is more awesome than all gods.

26 For all the gods of the nations are worthless, but the LORD made the heavens.

(New English Translation)

Clearly, it would not make sense for any person to place their trust in the “worthless” gods of the nations. On the other hand, it would make a lot of sense for persons to place their trust in the “awesome” God who “made the heavens.” True, biblical faith is not a mere mental assent to the truth of a proposition, although that is part of it. Biblical faith is the actual entrusting of oneself to the one true God for one’s salvation.

In **Hebrews 11:6**, the author explains that pleasing God is impossible without faith. He then gives us a further definition of faith, which expands on his earlier point in verse 1 that “*faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see*” (**New English Translation**). Faith, he says, means believing that God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.

Obviously a belief in God’s existence is necessary to true, biblical faith. Clearly, one must believe that God exists before one can believe in God! Yet, believing that God exists is insufficient for biblical faith. Many people believe that God exists. In fact, according to **Romans 1:18-20**, every human being knows that there is a Creator even if they suppress this knowledge. And **James 2:19** informs us that, “*Even the demons believe that—and tremble with fear*” (**New English Translation**).

There is the element of personal trust that is essential to biblical faith. It is possible for anyone to believe that God exists, but the faith that is pleasing to God is the faith that actually believes that He will respond and bless those who approach Him through Jesus Christ. Faith is an act of personal commitment in which the one who is exercising faith rests his or her eternal destiny in the hands of the Father through Christ Jesus and receives Christ for salvation.

The Greek word translated “*faith*” is **pistis**, which refers to a firm persuasion or conviction based upon hearing. In classical Greek, **pistis** meant, “to believe, trust in, put faith in, rely upon a person or thing.” The word is always used in the New Testament of faith in God or Christ, or things spiritual.

As faith relates to Christ, it represents a strong conviction or belief that He is the Saviour, through Whom we obtain eternal salvation and entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. To put it another way, eternal salvation comes **only** through personal belief in Jesus Christ and no other way.

The main elements of faith in its relation to the invisible God are **1 a firm conviction**, producing a full acknowledgement of God's revelation of truth, **2 a personal surrender** to Him, **3 a conduct inspired by such surrender**. The object of Abraham's faith was not God's promise; his faith rested on **God Himself** according to **Romans 4:17-21**:

*17 (as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"). He is our father in the presence of God **whom he believed**—the God who makes the dead alive and summons the things that do not yet exist as though they already do.*

18 Against hope Abraham believed in hope with the result that he became the father of many nations according to the pronouncement, "so will your descendants be."

19 Without being weak in faith, he considered his own body as dead (because he was about 100 years old) and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

*20 He did not waver in unbelief about the promise of God but was strengthened in faith, **giving glory to God**.*

*21 He was fully convinced that what God promised **he** was also able to do.*

22 So indeed it was credited to Abraham as righteousness.
(New English Translation)

In **Hebrews 10:23** the author writes, "*And let us hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess, for **the one who made the promise is trustworthy***" **(New English Translation)**.

When the word **pistis** refers to the faith which a lost sinner must place in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved, it includes the following ideas: the act of considering the Lord Jesus worthy of trust as to His character and motives, the act of placing confidence in His ability to do just what He says He will do, the act of entrusting the salvation of his or her soul into the hands of the Lord Jesus, and 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.

Having made a **general** statement concerning faith as it relates to salvation, Paul makes a more **personal** statement. He says, "*So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.*"

The word "*we*" refers to the Jewish believers in Antioch, including Paul, Peter, and Barnabas who had access to the Law unlike the Gentiles who were ignorant of it. The phrase "*have believed*" speaks of an act of total commitment **to** Jesus Christ and not merely agreeing with a set of facts **about** Him.

Paul is saying in effect to Peter, "Our certainty about the Gospel is more than intellectual; **we** have proved it personally in our own experience." This is an important addition. It shows that Paul is presenting a doctrine which he has himself put to the test. He says, "We know it, and we have ourselves believed in Christ, in order to prove it."

In his commentary on this verse, **Matthew Henry** has Paul saying to Peter,

"If we have thought it necessary to seek justification by the faith of Christ, why then should we hamper ourselves with the law? What did we believe in Christ for? Was it not that we might be justified by the faith of Christ? And, if so, is it not folly to go back to the law, and to expect to be justified either by the merit of moral works or the influence of any ceremonial sacrifices or purifications? And if it would

be wrong in us who are Jews by nature to return to the law, and expect justification by it, would it not be much more so to require this of the Gentiles, who were never subject to it, since by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified?"

Sadly, Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers, by their withdrawal from table-fellowship with the Gentile believers, were negating what they themselves knew to be true by virtue of their own experience!

In the last clause of verse **16**, Paul makes a **universal** statement. A universal statement is one that asserts that something is true of all members of a class; it is applicable to all members of a group. The statement is, "*Because by works of the law no one will be justified.*"

The word "*no*" is the translation of a Greek word which is a direct and absolute negation. The word Greek word translated "*all*" means, "all without exceptions." 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!

John Stott explains that Paul confirms the **general** truth and the **personal** truth by Scripture and to do this Paul quotes **Psalms 143:2** which says, "*Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you*" (**English Standard Version**). Thus it is a **universal** truth as well.

In **Romans 3:20** Paul echoes his statement in **Galatians** writing: "*For no one is declared righteous before him by the works of the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.*" (**New English Translation**).

Stott says,

"Whatever our religious upbringing, educational background, social status or racial origin, the way of salvation is the same. None can be justified by works of the law; all flesh must be justified through faith in Christ. It would be hard to find a more forceful statement of the doctrine of justification than this. It is insisted upon by the two leading apostles, confirmed from their own experience and endorsed by the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament. With this threefold guarantee we should accept the biblical doctrine of justification and not let our natural self-righteousness keep us from faith in Christ."

We will conclude our Lesson this evening with a quote from **Greg Stier**:

"Every world religion, other than true Christianity, has some sort of works-based way for their adherents to earn their way to heaven, paradise, nirvana or whatever. Sadly, many who claim to be Christians, think we have to keep some kind of list (turn, try, cry, commit, confess, get baptized, do penance, etc.) to be saved.

But the scandal of the Gospel is in its simplicity. We are saved by faith alone in Christ alone based on his death, burial and resurrection. We bring nothing to salvation but our sin. We cling to Christ and his cross as our only hope of salvation. Faith is a transfer of trust. The moment we put our faith in Christ we are transferring our trust from ourselves and our good deeds to save us, to Christ and Christ alone. That transfer of trust is so easy that a child could do it and so difficult that a self-righteous religious person could choke on it.

Have you transferred your trust from yourself and your good deeds to Jesus and Jesus alone to save you from your sin? Don't trust in your good deeds to save you. They are filthy rags compared to his required righteousness (**Isaiah 64:6**). They are like putting white frosting on a burnt cake. Trust in Jesus alone. He died to save you from your sin. He rose from the dead to give you new life.

The moment you trust in Jesus you are given a new life, eternal life, a new King, King Jesus, a new identity, a child of God, a new family, the church of Christ, a new power, the Holy Spirit and a new purpose, to know God and make him known."