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Galatians 2:15-21

Justified by Faith, Not by Works

At the beginning of the 1500s, at the end of the Middle Ages, there was a young Catholic monk in Germany named Martin Luther. This young monk was extremely zealous in his Catholic faith. He genuinely believed in GOD. He knew very well that he was a sinner. He desperately wanted to be considered righteous before God and be saved. And yet, he was not a Christian. He did not believe the gospel. He ardently followed the Catholic faith that he was taught: namely, that our righteousness before God is based on faith in Christ *plus* our own good works and merits, such as doing good works, giving alms, praying certain prayers and doing certain religious rites, observing sacraments, obeying the teachings of the Church, and so on. He was also taught that he needed to do penance for all of his sins, such as saying Hail Mary's, confessing sins to the priests, and doing many other acts of penance that often involving depriving himself of food and sleep, sleeping naked in the cold, or inflicting pain on his own body such as by whipping himself, all in an attempt to pay for his own sins and justify himself by his own works.

But after years of trying to do good works and be right before GOD, Martin Luther found that instead of taking away his guilt, all this did was make him even more aware of just how sinful, guilty, and condemned he was before God! Years after his conversion, when reflecting back on his days as a monk, Luther described it this way:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.¹

But, thankfully, Luther's story didn't end there. He kept searching and searching for a way to be justified before God. He became a theology professor and started studying the Bible - he studied the works of Paul, such as Romans and Galatians. And as he did, he had a

¹ Martin Luther, https://thirdmill.org/newfiles/mar_luther/CH.Luther.conversion.html.

breakthrough: he discovered the good news of the gospel of Christ, that guilty sinners can only be justified by grace through faith in Jesus! We call this the doctrine of justification by faith. All that means is this: that we can't do anything on our own to be righteous and have a right standing before God; the only way to be found righteous in God's sight is to truly believe that Jesus lived, died, and was raised in your place, doing everything necessary to pay the penalty for your sins, forgiving your sin and taking away your condemnation, and that his perfect righteousness is credited to your account, so that if you're trusting in Christ, then you receive the free gift of his righteousness, simply through faith!

This understanding of justification by faith is what set off the Protestant Reformation, where Luther and countless others broke away from the Catholic church to embrace the idea that we are righteous through faith alone, not by works. This teaching is at the heart of what separates Protestants from Catholics. But even more importantly, justification by faith is what defines a true *Christian*. Justification by faith is at the heart of the gospel - to be a Christian and be saved is to believe that we are saved, that we are righteous before God, purely on the basis of what Christ has done for us; we don't do anything to earn it or contribute to our righteousness whatsoever, but simply receive the righteousness of God as our own through faith, as a free gift.

When Martin Luther and the other Protestant Reformers rediscovered and recovered the biblical truth of justification by faith in Christ alone, it literally changed the world, bringing about a *reformation*, in which Christians returned to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was profound and revolutionary. Yet today, we may hear about the topic of justification by faith alone - the teaching that we are declared righteous not by works, but simply by faith in Christ - and we might be tempted to yawn and say, "Sure, I know that already," and move on. But we can never do that; we can never lose sight of the central importance of this beautiful truth - because without justification by faith alone, there is no good news of salvation - no gospel. If we get bored of the gospel, minimize it, or try to move on from it, then we very well might not actually understand it at all. That may very well be an indication that you don't think believing the gospel of Christ is what you need most - and that means you think you need something else more, such as help sinning less, or obeying more, being a better person, a better parent, better spouse, or so on. All those things are good and have their place - but if we think we need those things *more* than we need to trust that we're righteous in Christ simply by faith, then we may very well be trusting in our own efforts and good works as contributing to our righteousness! And the reality

is, we are all tempted to think and live that way at times. Which is why we *always* need to remember the truth of the gospel: that we are justified, that we are declared righteous before God, not because of any good works we can do, but purely by the finished work of Christ in His life, death, and resurrection, which we received purely through faith.

This is at the heart of the gospel. And this is at the heart of Galatians 2:15-21. In fact, this passage gives us a thorough definition and defense of this doctrine, and therefore, the gospel. Therefore, the main point of this passage is clear and straightforward: we are justified by faith in Christ alone, not by any of our own good works. It's simple. So I just have two points for us this morning, as we unpack this passage, and therefore, the truth of the gospel: we see here the *futility of works-based righteousness*, and the truth that *we are justified through faith in Christ alone*. So first, we see...

I. The Futility of Works-Based Righteousness: We Cannot be Justified by our Works (2:15-16)

Our passage begins in verses 15-16: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 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."

These words are probably a continuation of Paul's words in the previous passage, 2:11-14, where Paul rebuked Peter for denying the gospel with his actions. Now, in verses 15-21, Paul fleshes out that gospel. So when he begins in verse 15, saying "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners," Paul is referring to himself, Peter, and the other Jewish Christians there in Antioch. They were Jews - born into Israel, the covenant people of God in the Old Testament. They had received God's law-covenant, marked out as the special people of God. And yet, Paul says, "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." This phrase, "works of the law," refers to obeying and keeping the commandments that God gave Israel in the Law of Moses, in the Old Testament. God gave Israel specific laws and commands to keep, in order to fulfill the Old Covenant. God gave them to be God's holy people, live in God's place, and receive God's blessings. But if they disobeyed, they received covenant curses, God's judgment, and even death. But they all know good and well that, even as Jews, *no person is justified by the works of the law*.

The whole point of the law, all along, was to show Israel that they couldn't keep God's law. The law exposes our sin - it shows that we are all sinners, unable to rightly obey God and walk in righteousness. The law shows us that our sin cuts us off from God; our sin places us under the wrath of God; because of our sin, we are God's enemies, and we deserve the curse of death - not just physical death, but *eternal damnation in Hell*. And if it wasn't even possible for a Jew to be justified by obeying the Law of Moses, the very law that God Himself gave to Israel, well then it's *certainly not possible* to be justified by doing any *other* works as Gentile sinners, such as obeying another religion, or being a good enough person, or so forth. The point is, no person, no Jew or Gentile, can be justified by "works of the law" - by obeying and keeping the commands of God; "by works of the law no one will be justified." Now, why is this the case? It's because *we are all sinners*. Every single person - whether Jewish or non-Jewish - is born in this world with a sin nature. We've all disobeyed and done what is wrong - whether intentionally or unintentionally. We've all *decided not to do* good things that we *should have done* at times as well. We've even done good things for the wrong reasons - out of pride, or spite, or for selfish gain, or for our own glory and praise, rather than the glory of God.

If you ask the average person on the street if they think God would let them into Heaven, and they said yes, and then you asked them why, the most common you would get would probably be, "Because I think, overall, I'm a pretty good person." They might even give you some examples of how good they are by telling you about good works they do - giving to the poor, being faithful as a spouse or parent, being vegan, caring about the environment, fighting for moral causes, and so forth. They might point to someone who's really bad and show how they think they are better. But it just doesn't work that way; this is works-based righteousness. This is legalism - trying to live under law. We try to live by the law anytime we adopt a *legalistic mindset*, a works-based system of righteousness, where we say, "Ok, I'm going to try to do the right things, so that my good outweighs my bad, in order to be good enough in God's eyes and be declared righteous enough to be spared God's wrath in Hell and instead receive the God's blessings, even to live in His place, in Heaven, forever" - if we try to go down that route, *then it won't work, because we could never do enough good things to outweigh our sin!* AND this is because the standard we have to meet is the *absolutely perfect righteousness of God*. And perfection really does mean perfection. God is perfectly righteous, just, and holy. It would be *wrong* for God to let his standards slip, even a little. Even *one sin*, even one act of rebellion and disobedience on

our part, blows it for us. Because when we sin, we're trying to dethrone GOD, we're saying that He isn't good enough, that He doesn't know what He's talking about, and that we know better - when we sin, we're trying to be GOD. That's cosmic treason and rebellion. That's evil and wicked. THAT's idolatry. And God is the good guy - He is good, loving, holy, righteous, and just! That means He will surely punish wickedness - which is bad news, since we've all sinned. And there is nothing we can do to save ourselves from our sin and the punishment we deserve.

But thankfully, there is still hope for us! We can be justified through faith in Jesus Christ! But we also need to acknowledge that it's very possible for us, even as Christians who believe the gospel, to slip back into legalistic ways of thinking - to try and put ourselves back under law. We are all tempted to base our relationship with God on our own works - on how much we've sinned, or whether they are just small sins or big sins, on how much we've read the Bible, gone to church, prayed, given, or shared the gospel. When things are going well, this leads to *pride*: we think, "of course God loves me, of course He's happy with me, after all, I've been so good!" But then, when things are going so well, the law *crushes us*. YOU blow - you sin bad, and you know that you did. And you confess your sin to God, repent, and yet the next morning, you still feel weighed down with guilt and shame. You still feel like God is angry with you; like you have to do something to prove how sorry you are, so that you'll finally be right with God again. We've all been there hundreds of times - I know I have. But when we think that way, *this is legalistic, not the gospel!* When we turn to God, we don't come on the basis of what we have or haven't done! No, we *look to Jesus Christ, clinging to Him through faith!* We repent from legalism by turning to the gospel and truly believing that we are *justified by faith alone*.

II. Justified by Faith Alone: We Can Only be Righteous before God through Faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (2:16-21)

Paul, Peter, and the Jewish Christians knew very well they couldn't be justified by works of the law. This is why they believed in Christ. Verse 16 is worth repeating: "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." You see, even though the bad news is that none of us can justify ourselves by our own works, since we're all sinners, the good news is that *there is still a way that we can be justified!* The only way we can be justified before GOD is through faith in Jesus Christ.

The word “justified” means “to be declared in the right.” This is legal language, like we might find in a court room setting. So think of someone standing on trial before a judge, pleading their case. The evidence is presented, and then the judge will pronounce a verdict: either, “guilty,” or “not guilty.” If the judge finds the person “not guilty,” then that person is *justified* - they are shown to be in the right. So in relation to God, to be right in His sight is to be seen as righteous. Now, we’ve already seen that we’re all sinners, we’re guilty before God, and we all deserve God to give that verdict - “guilty sinner” - and give us the just sentence of eternal punishment in Hell. That’s what we all deserve. Yet Paul is now telling us that, even though we can’t be justified on the basis of our own works, we *can* be justified “through faith in Jesus Christ,” by “believing in Christ Jesus!” Now, how does that work? How does faith justify us? Well, it’s not like faith becomes the basis of us truly being righteous and good enough. It’s not like God looks at us and says, “Well, you are a guilty sinner, but you *do* believe in me, which I really like, so I guess I can overlook the bad!” No, that’s not it! Nor is it saying that if we believe *plus try our best to be good*, then God will meet us halfway. No, that’s not it either. We are not justified by our works in anyway - we’re only justified *through faith in Christ*. So what does this mean then? This means that, even though we are not righteous but are guilty sinners, God *declares us righteous* when we have faith in Jesus Christ! That if you trust in Jesus, then when you stand before God, He will look at you and declare you *righteous*, not just good enough, or not that your good outweighs the bad, but that He’ll look at you and declare that you are perfectly righteous, without spot of guilt or sin or shame, just as perfectly righteous as God is! Now, that’s a pretty sweet deal isn’t it? It sounds too good to be true!

So, Paul argues why this is the case in verses 17-21. As we’ve seen throughout Galatians so far, Paul is writing this book because the churches were being misled by false teachers, claiming that they had to believe in Jesus *plus* do the works of the law and become good Jews in order to be saved. At this point they could’ve said, “Listen, because you believe in Christ, you’re behaving like Gentile pagans and sinners! YOU’re no longer keeping the Law of Moses! Clearly, you are sinners condemned by God and faith in Christ leads to sin! Clearly, since you’re disobeying God’s law, and saying that it’s ok because of your faith in Jesus, then your faith in Jesus isn’t enough!” This is probably the kind of accusation Paul is referring to in the question he poses in verse 17: “But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?” Paul answers, “Certainly not!” He argues why in

verses 18-19: "For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God." He says again, in verse 21, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." In other words, he's saying that it would actually be *sinful* for him to put himself back under the law of Moses, or teach anyone else to do the works of the law in order to be justified. Why? Because *this law has been torn down* in Christ. Paul says, "through the law I *died to the law*." As we've seen, the law demands that the penalty for sin and disobedience is death. So once that penalty is paid, you're no longer under the condemnation of the law. Paul is saying, in effect, that Christians are no longer bound by the law of MOses (that we don't have to become good Jews, or do the works of the law in order to be justified and be saved).

But the problem is, you can't die twice, right? It's not like we could just pay the penalty we owe - which is death, even eternal, spiritual death in Hell - and then move on with our lives, right? Furthermore, it's not enough just to pay the penalty for our sins: that still wouldn't make us *righteous* before God; it would clear our slate, so to speak, but it still wouldn't make us good enough to go to Heaven and live with God in paradise, forever. So how can Paul say that he died to the law in order to live with God? He gives the answer in verse 20: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Now, this is an incredibly profound sentence. This is Paul's explanation for how we can be justified - be declared righteous by God - purely through faith in Christ, apart from our own works. The answer is that, when we trust in Jesus Christ as our savior, *we become united to Him*, so that what is true of CHrist becomes true of us. You see, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ came to live the perfect life, die on the cross to bear GOD's wrath against our sin, and was raised on the third day! He perfectly fulfilled God's righteousness, as a human being - what you and I could never do. He bore the penalty you and I deserve, bearing God's full wrath against sin on the cross and in His death. And God raised Him on the third day, vindicating and *justifying* Jesus Christ before all, showing that He is God's Son, and that God has accepted His sacrifice!

And here's the amazing thing: the promise of the gospel is that if you repent and believe this good news, if you *trust in Jesus Christ to save you*, believing that what Christ did is enough to *forgive and save you* from your sin, then this means that God accepts what Christ has done *in*

your place! And this is because, the second you and I believed in this gospel and trusted Christ, then we were *personally united Christ* through faith! God doesn't hold that sin against us anymore; God doesn't declare us guilty, or hold us to the standard of the law, because when he looks at the cross of Jesus Christ, He *sees you and me there, on the cross with Christ, since we're united to Christ through faith!* It means Jesus died *for you, in your place!* He bore GOD's wrath *against your sin!* He *payed your penalty, died your death!* THIS is why we, with Paul, can say that we have been *crucified with Christ.* We are dead to sin - we're no longer considered guilty sinners by God! We are dead to the law - we are no longer under the law of mOses, no longer under it's demands or condemnation! Our sin has been taken from our account and placed on Jesus! HE paid our debt for us!

And not only this - but Christ's perfect righteousness is now credited to our account! Jesus swapped places with us: what's true of him - perfectly righteous! - is now true of us! So think back on your life: everywhere that you and I have sinned and failed, Jesus Christ has perfectly obeyed and succeeded. And he lived that life *for us, in our place.* Then he went to the cross, loving you us so much that he willingly "gave himself up" for us, dying on the cross *in our place.* Then God raised him up, in third day, *in our place.* And it means we lived, died, and were raised with Him! AND it means we live *for God, in Christ* - that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"! We can live to God - we are declared righteous by God, justified before Him, and will be granted eternal life - because we are united to Christ through faith in Him, so that what Christ has done counts for you and me, in our place! If you're trusting in Christ this morning, you are already declared righteous before God, not because of anything you have done or could do, but purely because of what Christ has done for you! We are righteous! No, not with our own righteousness - not because we're good enough, or better than anyone else; not because we've earned it with our own works of the law or religious rituals. We have received the righteousness of God as a *free gift of grace!* We have received it simply by trusting in Jesus Christ, believing that He has done all this *for you specifically!*

On our best day, and on our worst, our only hope to be righteous before GOD and be saved is the good news that Jesus has done everything necessary for us to be forgiven and justified before God - this is our only hope, and it is more than enough! If you're trusting in Christ this morning, if you're a believer, a Christian, then *you are righteous! Period! No matter what you've done this week or haven't done!* So no matter what this morning, or last night, or this

week, or this year have looked like, if you're trusting in the gospel of Christ this morning, then *you are completely forgiven and declared perfectly righteous!* On your worst day, Christ's grace is enough - you are justified through faith in Christ alone, not by works! So when you sit down to read your Bible and pray, but you can't, because you're so overwhelmed with guilt and shame, thinking that God wants nothing to do with you because of what you said to your spouse or kid, or because of what you did last night, or because of how you've been living, then *look to Jesus:* truly believe that you died to the law and sin on the cross with Christ, that He paid the penalty for your guilt, and that you live in Christ, for He lives in you, in your place, so that God looks at you and says you are *righteous*, simply as a free gift of grace through faith in Jesus! And this means that if you're not a believer this morning, if you're not a Christian, then *you can be righteous, too!* Not by being good enough or doing any works; you can't justify yourself. But you *will* be justified if you simply receive the righteousness of God as a free gift of grace by believing in this good news, that Jesus Christ, the God-Man, has done everything necessary to save you! THAT his life, death, and resurrection was in your place! Turn to God in faith this morning; ask Him to forgive you, accept you as righteous, and save you, not because of anything you can do, but purely because of what Christ has done! *And He will!* Then, you can make your faith public through baptism - not that baptism saves you, but it's simply the first step of showing that we believe, making our faith known!

If you have any questions about this good news, about being a Christian, about baptism, or even about church membership, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.