

Galatians | The Grace Manifesto

The Main Thing

1.1-9

6.9.19

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),² and all the brethren who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,⁴ who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,⁵ to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

⁶ I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;⁷ which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!⁹ As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

Today we begin a series that we hope to consider all the way through the summer – Galatians: The Grace Manifesto. I hope you'll make a note to pray for me (and the others) as we prepare the sermons and that you'll pray for our whole congregation as we hear the sermons and read Galatians because THIS letter is revolutionary and has power to really change things.

Also, I got permission to reprint on our website Martin Luther's Preface to the Commentary he wrote on Galatians in 1545...astounding! (six pages)

This opening section is like the calm before a hurricane... it's a little different from St Paul's other letters. He gets right to business and we get the very real sense that there's going to be an explosion!

And today... we look at Paul's astonishment at a tendency in churches... in people in general...and in OUR OWN DAY a tendency seen perhaps more than at any other time in human history and that is the tendency to distractibility – that we all struggle to focus...to concentrate on what's before us.

And while some people DO seem to exhibit a kind of laser-beam, single-mindedness in performing some tasks – BUT all of us wrestle with a spiritual form of attention-deficit disorder.

All of us have a hard time keeping the Main Thing, the main thing.

And this, as we'll see, THIS is not only a universal spiritual condition but it's really serious...in fact it's destructive and even deadly... but if we know that we have this tendency and if we can GET the cure, the antidote and if we can just keep the Main Thing the main thing...to that extent we'll thrive and life becomes rich, fruitful, clear and free.

Let's look then at:

- 1) Amazing Distractibility
- 2) Amazing Grace
- 3) Amazing Simplicity

St Paul was a Presbyterian... he writes this letter NOT to an independent congregation but to a network of local churches – a presbytery. Galatia isn't a city – it's a region. And shortly after Paul and his team of church-planters visited the cities in the region of Galatia... and people believed the Gospel (basic message of Christianity) and some even paid a high price for joining this new "un-religion" (Christianity) but even after suffering for embracing this Way, QUICKLY many were distracted from the Main Idea.

Paul says it (v. 6): "I'm amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ..."

So let's ask some questions about this amazing distractibility. First, "Is Christianity so narrow that believers can't have a sincere difference of opinion?"

In other words, Paul is saying to these people who are still members in these local congregations in the region of Galatia – he's saying, "You've changed your mind and that is NOT acceptable!"

But can't we have, as Christians, can't we hold to a variety of political views...a variety of beliefs on certain practices/behaviors... how the church should be governed... difference in how we relate to people who are NOT Christians at all... can't we differ?

And Paul's answer is "Yes!" There's room for different races, different cultural expressions, and (what we might call) "grey areas". Paul has at least two major sections (Rom 14 and I Cor 8) where he discusses the breadth and latitude of beliefs and practices among believers in Jesus Christ.

But there is a point at which Paul will say, "This is NOT my opinion versus your opinion or his opinion or their opinion. I'm not selling my brand, my opinion, my formula for success or my methodology for getting spiritual or getting successful – that's NOT what concerns me here."

"I'm bringing you something from OUT OF THIS WORLD – Paul, an Apostle (one sent) but NOT

sent from men not through human agency.” The first three words in this whole letter express it’s big idea – “I didn’t invent this; no human being came up with this – the Main Idea comes from out of this world...”

This comes up again and again in the letter. “This is NOT my invention or spiritual program/concoction; it came DOWN from above. It was revealed to us by God Himself. And that makes all the difference!”

“And therefore”, says Paul, “to have a difference of opinion on THIS MAIN THING is a rejection NOT of MY OPINION but of God’s revelation. I’m amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ...”

In the final analysis it’s not WHAT they were leaving but WHOM they were leaving. “Deserting Him who called you...” The Main Thing is God and the Way that came down from God. The Way that was validated by something ONLY GOD COULD ACCOMPLISH – a dead Man was raised from the dead. That’s not an opinion: either it happened or it did NOT... but if it did. It changes everything.

So, why did they want to leave? Why would they desert God and His unique Way?

And to answer that question, we’ll have to read the whole letter but for now let’s say, “it’s too uncommon... We’ve never heard of anything like this. In every spiritual program and in every human negotiation or transaction it’s ALWAYS THE GOOD, the qualified, the diligent and disciplined who get rewarded but THIS WAY IS UPSIDE-DOWN! Strange.”

Therefore Paul’s opinion MUST BE WRONG... and Paul will be quick to say (from the very first words in the entire letter!) “Uh-uh! It’s NOT my opinion. It’s NOT something that was developed in a spiritual or religious laboratory or from a human think-tank – THIS CAME DOWN FROM GOD AND WAS VERIFIED BY AN EVENT THAT ONLY GOD COULD’VE ACHIEVED.”

And that’s why St Paul says, here at the start of the letter, not once but twice – “If you mess with THIS, then to hell with you.” And in v.9 “so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (anathema!)”

There can BE differences of opinion but this Main Thing, this Thing that came down from heaven and that differs from all religion and every spiritual program or self-help method is UNIQUE and to change it is to reject God Himself and to be accursed.

But WHY would you want to do that? Why, if you see this for what it really IS, WHY would anyone want to be distracted from it? Why would anyone leave this, i.e. leave HIM? This is INFINITELY better than any alternative!

“Really, Paul... how so?”

And as in so many places in the writings of St Paul, in this ominous/heavy opening, Paul finds a way to FOCUS ON THE MAIN THING – right in the middle of this super-serious, life-and-death intro, Paul summarizes the Gospel – the best news you’ll ever hear! It’s the middle paragraph: (3-5) “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.”

What’s really amazing about your distractibility is what YOU’RE leaving – it’s God and His richest and fullest blessing! Why would you leave THAT? Why would anyone leave that?!

Grace and Peace – that comprehensive summary-word of all the blessings of God from the Hebrew Bible: PEACE, the shalom of God, that whole condition of well-being and flourishing and joy and completeness – it’s yours! Why would you leave?

And grace – as someone has said, making the word an acronym: (G.R.A.C.E.) God’s riches at Christ’s expense. Forgiveness NOT earned or deserved but purchased by Another. Planned by God the Father and carried out by God the Son you are given a right standing before God – given what Jesus Christ deserves!

“Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age...” See, how God gave everything for us, how Jesus Christ, surrendered all – held back nothing – for YOU!

He came down from above. He became one with us and lived the life I failed to live, died the death I deserved to die. Because of Him, I am no longer guilty in the sight of God – my sins, past, present and future are covered – the debt of justice is PAID!

And this world – with it’s corruption and decay and all its sorrows and frustrations – this FALLEN AGE in which things are NOT the way they’re supposed to be – this age will not take me down with it – I’ll be rescued...I can’t possibly by my own efforts break free from the vortex/whirlpool of this “penultimate world” but there is a new, ultimate world coming and we have seen One from the Age to Come – we have seen the Risen Man, the dawn of a New Creation.

“To receive this gift – is”, says Paul, “the will of our God and Father to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.” If we will ourselves into heaven, if WE save ourselves – then to US be the glory... but this is God’s will and God’s rescue and to Him to be the glory.

And Paul, even as he prepares to unleash all his arguments against their foolish desertion, he pauses to hold up the Jewel, the Main Thing, Amazing Grace as if to say, “You’ve become distracted but why would you turn away from something so beautiful, the One Thing that is

Beauty Himself.” Paul rehearses it in a very short summary to say, “Behold, Amazing Grace!”

And at the end of that summary, Paul puts the one word that is also the very last word in the entire letter. It’s a word that some preachers use as a question when they look to the congregation and ask, “Amen?”

And I can’t help thinking that Paul (here and at the end of the letter) is asking these churches, “Can you say, ‘Amen’? Will you come back to the Main Thing?”

It’s NOT that we can’t have differing opinions but we MUST see – OR BE ACCURSED – we must see this One Simple Truth that will be unpacked, explained and illustrated and defended through the letter – that is right-standing (righteousness) with God NOT originating in us, our efforts, our racial superiority – but the Righteousness from God that comes down from above AS A GIFT. Can you say “Amen”?

Will you...will we as a congregation, come back, come again and again to this One Magnificent Obsession – the One Simple Truth – the grace of God as made known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

I’m not being “pie-in-the-sky” here. I’m not trying to say that life is simple. I’m aware that “it’s complicated” (I tend to mistrust any counselor who gives his or her advice/counsel beginning with the word, “Just”) I know it’s all complex.

BUT – there is something amazingly clarifying for the Church and for the whole Christian life if we will keep the Main Thing the main thing.

Christians are called to a whole immense number of callings. We take our stand on a variety of moral issues. We care for the hurting. We sometimes confront the powers that be. We live our lives together and we love one another. I love to invite friends and family to be among us because our love and good deeds point to God...

But... we have to keep the Main Thing the main thing because this is the engine that drives it all. So, we’ll keep on teaching it – that One True Alternative to synthetic, man-made religion and spirituality; NOT making a transaction with God...not being superior to others – but coming empty-handed to the One who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age according to the will of our God and Father – to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

The Argument of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians
 by Martin Luther
 (Paraphrase in modern English by Bill Slack)

Paul sets down the biblical teachings of faith, grace, forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness, so that we can know without a doubt the difference between 'Christian' righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness. There is political or civil righteousness that world leaders, philosophers and lawyers deal with. There's ceremonial righteousness (acting correctly at weddings or formal dinners, etc.) that deals with men's tradition. This righteousness parents and teachers can teach safely, because they don't claim that being righteous in these ways pays for sin or makes us perfect or pleases God or earns us God's favor, but they teach these righteous ways to correct our manners and teach us about our day-to-day life with other people. There is another type of righteousness called the 'righteousness of the law', or the Ten Commandments, that Moses teaches. The church teaches about this, too, but in light of faith.

There is another far better righteousness--that is, 'the righteousness of faith' or 'Christian righteousness.' This righteousness we must separate from the rest because it works in a completely opposite way from Christian righteousness. The other kinds of righteousness come out of the laws of governments (we obey the law and are righteous) or church tradition or even the Ten Commandments. The other kinds of righteousness we can work at ourselves by our own strength or by extra strength that God gives us, because we couldn't even be righteous in these ways without God's strength. He gives us all good things that we enjoy.

But this Christian righteousness is the greatest righteousness. God puts it on us without our lifting a finger. It's not political or ceremonial. It doesn't have to do with our obeying God's law. It has nothing to do with what we do or how hard we work, but it is given to us and we do nothing for it. It's 'passive righteousness' because we don't have to work for it. With this 'free righteousness' we don't do anything, we don't give anything to God, but we receive and allow someone else to do it. That's why we'll call it 'passive righteousness.'

This 'passive righteousness' is a mystery that someone who doesn't know Jesus can't understand. As a matter of fact, Christians don't completely understand it and don't take advantage of it when they're tempted. So we have to constantly teach it over and over again to others and repeat it to ourselves, because if we don't understand it and have it in our hearts, we will be defeated by our enemy, and we'll be totally depressed. There is nothing that gives us peace like this 'passive righteousness.'

But men are so weak and miserable that when we are close to death or afraid of God, we do not see anything but the Law (the Ten Commandments) and what we have done to be righteous or, how worthy we have made ourselves. And when we see the Law, we see our sin. The evil in our lives comes to mind, it tears us apart, and we groan and think, 'How bad I have been. My life is full of hate and evil. Please, God, let me live and I will fix up

what I have done wrong.’ Man is so evil that all he can see is what he should do to be righteous. He is so evil that he cannot see what Christ has done for him to be righteous.

On the other side, Satan, taking advantage of our natural weakness, increases and fires up those thoughts in us. Then our consciences are more troubled, terrified and confused. For it is impossible for a man’s mind by itself to find comfort, look for God’s grace, or reject Satan’s argument about works just because he feels sinful and is disgusted by it. These things are far above man’s strength and ability; in fact, it’s even beyond the power of God’s law. It is true that God’s law is the most excellent thing in the world, but it is not able to ease a man’s troubled conscience. Rather, it increases his fear and causes him to despair; ‘That through the commandment, sin might become utterly sinful.’ (Rom. 7:18).

So the afflicted and troubled conscience has no cure for desperation and death unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, that is ‘Christian’ or ‘passive’ righteousness. When the person realizes this, he is at peace and can say ‘I am not going to work for my righteousness, even though I need to have it, and I need to be righteous. Because even if I could work up to righteousness and fulfill what I thought was righteousness, still, I could not trust it to make me right at the judgment of God. So I throw away all my works, my attempts at obeying God’s law, and firmly hold on to ‘passive righteousness,’ that is the righteousness of grace, mercy and the forgiveness of sins. In short, I trust only in the righteousness that Christ and the Holy Spirit give me!!

It is like this: the earth does not produce rain, nor is it able by its own power or work to get it. The earth simply receives it as a gift of God from above. It is the same with ‘passive’ righteousness. It is given to us by God without our deserving it or working for it. So let’s look at what the earth is able to do to get the rain each season so that it can be fruitful, and we will see how much we are able in our own strength and works to do to get heavenly and eternal righteousness. We see we will never be able to attain it unless God Himself, by the great gift of His Son, gives us Jesus’ perfect righteousness. The greatest knowledge and wisdom a Christian can have then is not, to know the Law, but to forget works and to forget all our working toward righteousness especially when we think about God judging us. The person that does not know Christ, on the other hand, needs to know and earnestly seek the Law and good works.

But it is a very strange thing, and unknown to the world, to teach Christians not to know the law, and to live before God as if there were no Law or wrath of God, but total grace and mercy for Christ’s sake! But even though it is strange, unless one disregards the Law and is convinced in his own heart that there is no Law or wrath from God but only grace and mercy for Christ’s sake, he cannot be saved because all the Law does is show us our sin.

On the other hand, works and keeping of the Law must be required in the world as if there were no promise of grace because people are stubborn, proud, and hard-hearted. They only need the Law put in front of their faces so that they will be terrified and humbled. The Law is given to terrify and kill the proud, stubborn man and tear out his old

nature, and both the word of grace and wrath must be rightly understood according to Paul. (II Tim. 2).

A faithful and wise preacher or teacher of the Word will give out the Law in such a way that it is kept in perspective. The man who teaches that people are justified before God by obeying the Law gives the Law much more power than it has, and mixes up 'passive' righteousness with 'earned' righteousness, he is a bad teacher because he misunderstands the Word. On the other hand, he that uses the Law to cause a man to see his sinfulness and convict him, and who also shows how God forgives sin (by 'passive' righteousness) when the man repents and turns from that sin teaches the Word well, for the man that does not know Christ must be shown the Law and works. The new man (one who knows Christ) must be affirmed in God's promises and mercy. So when I see a man that is bruised enough already, burdened by the Law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for relief, that is when in truth it is time to take the Law and 'works' righteousness out of his sight and show him by the Gospel 'passive' righteousness (Christian righteousness) which offers the promise of Christ without the Law, that Christ came for the hurting and for sinners. Then the man is raised up and has good hope, he is no longer under the Law but covered by grace. How is he out from under the Law? Because he is a new man to whom the Law does not apply! For the Law does not reach past Christ as Paul says, 'For Christ is the end of the Law.' (Rom. 10:4). Since Christ has come, Moses' Law ends, circumcision ends, the sacrifices, the Sabbaths, yes, even all the prophets end.

This is our goal -- that we teach how to show the difference between the two kinds of righteousness, 'works' and 'passive,' to the end that outward actions and faith, works and grace, policy and religion should not be confused and mixed together or taken one for the other. Both are necessary, but both must be kept in their bounds. Christian or 'passive', righteousness, only applies to the new man (one who knows Christ), and 'works' righteousness only applies to the old man, who is born only of flesh and blood. Upon the old man, as upon a donkey, a great load must be placed to press him down. Until he becomes a new man by faith in Christ, he cannot know the Spirit of grace and enjoy the Kingdom, both that we are able to appreciate now and the fullness of the Lord's grace to come.

This I say so that no man thinks we reject or forbid good works as the Papists falsely accuse us, because they don't understand what they are saying themselves or what we teach. They only know the righteousness of the Law ('works' righteousness). Yet they pass judgment on the doctrine of 'passive' righteousness which is above the Law and which no carnal man is able to judge. That is why they are offended; they can't see any higher than the Law. Whatever is higher than the Law then is a great offense to them. But we see in our minds two worlds, one heavenly, the other earthly. We put these two kinds of righteousness ('works' and 'passive') in these two worlds being set far apart from each other. The righteousness of the Law (works) is earthly and has to do with earthly things, and by it we do good works. But just like the earth does not bring forth fruit unless it is first watered and made fruitful from above, even so by 'works' righteousness, by doing many things, we do nothing, and in obeying the Law, we do not really obey it unless first without deserving it or working for it, we are made righteous by the Christian (passive)

righteousness, which has nothing to do with 'works' righteousness of the Law or to earthly righteousness. But this righteousness is heavenly; which as we said, we do not do it ourselves, but receive it from heaven. We don't work for it, but by grace it is given to us, and we get it through faith. It takes us above all the Law and works. So, as we have looked and acted like, the earthly Adam, as Paul says, let us now look and act as the new man. This new man has: a heavenly image in a new world where there is no Law, no sin, no guilt or pain in our conscience, no death, but perfect joy, righteousness, grace, peace, life, salvation, and glory.

So do we do nothing? Don't we do any work to obtain this righteousness? I answer, nothing at all, for this is perfect righteousness, 'to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing of the Law or of works;' but to know and believe only this, that Christ is gone to the Father and is not now seen. He sits at His Father's right hand not as a judge but making us before God wise, righteous, holy, and redeemed; briefly, that He is our high Priest pleading for us and reigning over us and in us by grace. In this heavenly righteousness sin can have no place because there is no Law, and where there is no Law, there can be no breaking of the Law. (Rom. 4:15).

You see then that sin has no place here, so there can be no painful guilt, no fear, no weight on our shoulders. That is why John says (I John 5:18) 'He that is born of God cannot sin.' But if there is any fear or our conscience is bothered, it is a sign that our 'passive' righteousness is 'withdrawn' -- that is, grace is hidden from us, and Christ is darkened out of our sight. But when we truly see Christ, we have full and perfect joy in the Lord with peace of mind, and we certainly think: 'Although I am a sinner by the Law and under condemnation of the Law, still I don't despair, still I don't die, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my everlasting life.' In that righteousness and life I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, as a child of Adam; where the Law accuses me, death controls me and eventually would destroy me. But I have another life, another righteousness above this life which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death but is eternal righteousness and eternal life; by Him this body of mine being dead and turned to dust shall be raised up again and freed from the chains of the Law and sin and shall be made holy together with the Spirit.

So we have both these (the old man and the new man) with us while we are here. The flesh is accused, tempted, weighed down with sorrow, bruised by the 'works' righteousness of the Law; but the Spirit reigns, rejoices and is saved by this 'passive' and Christian righteousness, because our spirit knows that it has a Lord in heaven at the right hand of His Father who has done away with the Law, sin, death and has conquered all evil, captured it, and triumphed over it Himself. (Col. 2:15).

Because of this St. Paul sets out diligently in this letter to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness that is so great. For if the truth of our being justified by Christ alone is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. Those in the world that do not hold this truth are Jews, Turks, Papists, or heretics. For there is no middle ground between 'passive' and 'works' righteousness. The person who wanders

away from 'passive' righteousness has no other choice but 'works' righteousness; that is to say 'If he does not depend on the work of Christ, he must depend on his own work.'

So we must truthfully proclaim and continually repeat the truth of this 'passive' or 'Christian' righteousness so that Christians continue to hold to it and never confuse it with 'works' righteousness. Otherwise we will never be able to understand God's truth, because on this truth and only this truth the church is built and has its being; but eventually we will either become canonists, observers of ceremonies, observers of the Law, or Papists, and Christ will become so hidden that no one in the church will be taught the truth or comforted. So if we are to be leaders or teachers of others, we must pay close attention to these things and to mark well the difference between 'works' righteousness and 'Christian' righteousness. This is easier said than done. Even though we diligently practice it, it is very hard; because when we are about to die or when our consciences are troubled, these two 'righteousness' start to get confused and cluttered together.

'Wherefore I do admonish you, especially those who will become teachers and counselors, and each individual, that you practice this by study, by reading, by meditation of the Word, and by prayer, that when you are tempted you will be able to teach and comfort yourself and others, and bring them from the Law to grace, from 'works' righteousness to 'passive' righteousness and to conclude 'from Moses to Christ.' For when we are in trouble or conscience bothers us, the devil likes to make us afraid by using the Law, and he tries to lay on us the guilt of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, and eternal death to drive us to desperation, make us slaves to him and pluck us from Christ. Furthermore, he wants to set against us the parts of the Gospel where Christ requires works from us and with plain words threatens damnation to us if we do not do them. Now, if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness and we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting on the right hand of God (Heb. 7:25) who pleads our case, sinners that we are, to the Father, then we are under the Law, not under grace, and Christ is no more a Savior, but a Lawgiver; so that now there is no salvation, but a definite despair, and everlasting death, unless we repent.

Let's diligently learn to judge between these two kinds of righteousness so that we know how far to obey the Law. Now, we said before, the Law in a Christian's life must be kept in bounds and should only rule over the flesh which is subject to it and remains under it. When this is true, the Law stays in its bounds. But if it creeps into your conscience and tries to rule there be a shrewd thinker and draw the line on it. Give no more heed to the Law that what it deserves, and say to yourself, 'You, Law, would climb up into my conscience and rule me and reprove me of sin and would take away my joy that I have by faith in Christ and drive me to despair that I would be without hope and perish. This you try to do without authority, keep yourself within your bounds, and use your influence on my flesh, but do not touch my conscience, for I am baptized and by the Gospel am called to partake of 'passive' righteousness and of everlasting life to the Kingdom of Christ where my conscience is at rest, where there is no Law but total forgiveness of sin, peace, quietness, joy, health, and everlasting life. Don't bother me in those matters; I won't allow you, such a tyrant and cruel tormentor, to rule my conscience for conscience is the

seat and temple of Christ the Son of God who is the King of righteousness and peace and my most sweet Savior and Mediator. He will keep my conscience joyful and quiet and the sound and pure truth of the Gospel, and in the knowledge of this ‘passive Christian and heavenly righteousness.’”

When I have this righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven like rain making the earth fruitful that is to say, I enter into a new Kingdom and I do ‘good works’ whenever and however I get the opportunity. If I am a minister, I preach, I comfort the hurting, I administer the sacraments. If I am a parent, I govern my house and family, I raise my children in the knowledge and the fear of God. If I am a judge, that duty is given to me from above, and I do it diligently. If I am a servant, I do my master’s business faithfully. To conclude, whomever is convinced that Christ is his only righteousness, does not only do his work cheerfully, gladly and well, but also submits to the judges and the law, even when they are sharp and cruel, and if necessary submits to all kinds of burdens and dangers in this life with love because he knows this is God’s will, and God is pleased by his obedience. This is what the letter to Galatians speaks of. Here Paul shows us this by addressing the presence of false teachers among Galatians who had covered up this ‘passive’ righteousness. He sets himself against them and defends and commends his authority and office.

Preface to Galatians

by Martin Luther (Abridgment & Paraphrase by Rev. Tim Keller)

The most important thing in the world

The one doctrine which I have supremely in my heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth, day and night. This rock, which we call the doctrine of justification through faith, was shaken by Satan in paradise when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God. Ever since then the whole world has invented innumerable religions and ways through which, without the aid of Christ, use their works to redeem themselves from evil and sins.

When Paul discusses the biblical doctrine of justification by faith he explains that there are several kinds of “righteousness.” First, there is political or civil righteousness—the nation’s public laws—which magistrates and lawyers may defend and teach. Second, there is cultural righteousness—the standards of our family and social grouping or class—which parents and schools may teach. Third, there is ethical righteousness—the Ten Commandments and law of God—which the church may teach but only in light of Christian righteousness. So all these may be received without danger, as long as we attribute to them no power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace... These kinds of righteousness are gifts of God, like all good things we enjoy...

Yet there is another righteousness, far above the others, which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith”—Christian righteousness. God imputes it to us apart from our works—in other words, it is passive righteousness, as the others are active. For we do nothing for it, and we give nothing for it. We only receive it.

The need for Christian righteousness

This “passive” righteousness is a mystery that the world cannot understand. Indeed, Christians never completely understand it themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.

For human beings by nature, when they get near either danger or death itself, will of necessity examine their own worthiness. We defend ourselves before all threats by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But then the remembrance of sins and flaws inevitably comes to mind, and this tears us apart, and we think, “How many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! Please God, let me live so I can fix and amend them.” We become obsessed with our active righteousness and are terrified by its imperfections. But the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see what Christ has done for us...So the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness...If I tried to fulfill the law myself, I could not trust in what I had accomplished, neither could it stand up to the judgment of God. So...I rest only upon the righteousness of Christ...which I do not produce but receive, God the Father freely giving it to us through Jesus Christ.

Law and grace

It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world, to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no law or wrath or punishment. In a sense, they do not exist any longer for the Christian, but only total grace and mercy for Christ’s sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. In fact, to those outside of Christian righteousness, the law needs to be expounded in all its force. Why? So that people who think they have power to be righteous before God will be humbled by the law and understand they are sinners.

Therefore we must be careful to use the law appropriately. If we used the law in order to be accepted by God through obedience, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with earned/moral righteousness in our minds. If we try to earn our righteousness by doing many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness nor do we honor the purpose for which the law was given. But if we

first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all! For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only—that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become for us our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.

Living the Gospel

While we live here on earth, we will be accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, and bruised by the law with its demands of active righteousness. Because of this, Paul sets out in this letter of Galatians to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness. For if the truth of being justified by Christ alone (not by our works) is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work. On this truth and only on this truth the church is built and has its being.

This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So I challenge you to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer, so that in the time of trial you will be able to both inform and comfort both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, from active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ’s righteousness. In times of struggle, the devil will seek to terrify us by using against us our past record and the wrath and law of God. So if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness, and if we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting at the right hand of God (Heb 7:25) and pleading our case as sinners to the Father, then we are under the law, not under grace. Christ is no savior, but a lawgiver, and no longer our salvation, but an eternal despair.

So learn to “speak the Gospel” to one’s heart. For example, when the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician—learn to use arguments of the Gospel against it. Say: O law! You would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and condemn me for sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without hope. You have overstepped your bounds. Know your place! You are a guide for my behavior, but you are not Savior and Lord of my heart. For I am baptized, and through the Gospel am called

to receive righteousness and eternal life...So trouble me not! For I will not allow you, so intolerable a tyrant and tormentor, to reign in my heart and conscience—for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the Gospel, through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness.

When we are assured of this righteousness, we not only cheerfully work well in our vocations, but we submit to all manner of burdens and dangers in this present life, because we know that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him. This then is the argument of this Epistle, which Paul expounds against the false teachers who had darkened the Galatians' understanding of this righteousness by faith.