

Justification by Faith, Not by Works of Law

Galatians 2:16

By Phil Johnson

We'll be looking at Galatians 2:15-21 this morning, and these are (I believe) the key verses in the whole epistle to the Galatians. These verses encapsulate the very heart of Paul's message. Here is where he makes his central point. Here is the best summary of his answer to the heretics whom he was writing to confront. Misunderstand this section and you will miss the point of the entire epistle.

So don't underestimate the importance of this passage. This is *the* pivotal passage in the book of Galatians.

If you have listened to me very long, you are aware that I often stress that the one key difference between the true worship of the true God and all forms of false religion is this: false religion always focuses on *human* righteousness. It's always about something we must do to make ourselves acceptable to God. That's why manmade religion is always prone to multiply rituals, ceremonies, sacraments, pageantry, clerical garb, and other externals, to the exclusion of authentic faith. Human religion is invariably man-centered, works-oriented, and self-righteous.

By contrast, authentic worship of the true God is focused on *God's* work, *His* grace, and *His* glory. It's not about something we do to make ourselves acceptable to God. Its focus is on what He has already done, through Christ to make atonement for our sins. It's not works-oriented, but grace-oriented. It's not man-centered, but God-centered. It's not self-righteous; it's all about *Christ's* righteousness.

Now bear in mind the context of this epistle. Here's a quick review: These false teachers, whom we always refer to as "the Judaizers," had come into Galatia, a predominantly Gentile region. They were from the church in Jerusalem, and they apparently claimed authority as leaders in the Jerusalem church.

Paul refers to them in verse 12 as "**certain men . . . from James.**" That is a reference to James the earthly half-brother of Christ, who plays a prominent role in the dispute with these same heretics in Acts 15, and who was a leader and apparently the main spokesman for the church in Jerusalem. This is the same James who wrote the epistle that bears his name—different from the apostle James who was brother to John. They were the Boanerges brothers, sons of Zebedee and Salome, a family of fishermen. This James was half brother to Jesus himself (according to Galatians 1:19). If you compare John 7:5 (which says Jesus own brothers did not believe in Him) with Acts 1:14 (which places James and the other brothers of Jesus in the upper room with the disciples, "**with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer,**" it seems James became a believer when he saw his resurrected brother alive after the crucifixion. And he became a leading voice in the Jerusalem church.

So these Judaizers, coming from that congregation in Jerusalem, are referred to in Galatians 2:12 as "**certain men [who] came from James.**"

Now, that *might* simply mean that these heretics falsely claimed to be official representatives of James. I'm more inclined to think that they really had been sent out in some official capacity by the Jerusalem church. That would explain why from the beginning to the end of Galatians 2, Paul seems a little bit perturbed at the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, because they were too slow to see and respond to the serious danger posed by the Judaizers. And if you missed our study of Galatians 2 several years ago, you might want to listen to those messages, because we talked about why Paul uses such sharp language here in Galatians 2, why he had this public conflict with Peter, and why he recounted the whole incident, and even named Peter by name, and spoke of some other leaders in Jerusalem with less than flattering language.

There was a much bigger issue at stake here than the dignity of Peter. The doctrine of the Judaizers was subtle but extremely dangerous. It undermined the main principle of the gospel, and it was an attempt to turn Christianity into a self-righteous religion like the religion of the Pharisees.

As a matter of fact, Acts 15:5 indicates that these false teachers were "**some believers [professing believers, that is,] who belonged to the party of the Pharisees.**" And their brand of religion was the religion of the pharisees—partly orthodox, in that they gave lip service to the truth of Scripture and professed to be true followers of the true God; but their doctrine was nevertheless dangerously heretical, because their focus was not on God's grace and Christ's provision for believers. Their teaching was all about what sinners must do to gain acceptance with God. That made their teaching fundamentally false, and it placed them at odds with the true gospel.

Paul is very blunt about how seriously wrong and spiritually destructive the doctrine of the Judaizers was. In Galatians 1:18-19 he says twice that people who twist the gospel like that are to be regarded as accursed—lost, unredeemed, and under the condemnation of God.

Now, the error of the Judaizers was in reality a fairly simple error. By that, I mean it wasn't complex or esoteric. They affirmed everything the apostles taught, except for the simplicity of the gospel of grace. They insisted that Gentiles who came to Christ needed to be circumcised before they could be saved. That's why we call them *Judaizers*. In essence they were teaching that only Jews could be saved. If you were a Gentile and wanted to come to Christ, they insisted that you had to become a proselyte to Judaism first. By teaching that, they were in effect adding a work as a prerequisite for justification. They were teaching a doctrine of justification where something other than faith was the instrument; and that fatally undermined the truth of the gospel.

Paul saw the problem clearly, because as the apostle to the Gentiles, he was regularly ministering to *goyim* who had trusted Christ and had their lives transformed. These were people who had never participated in any aspect of the Old Testament Jewish ceremonies—people who were deemed unclean by the standards of Old Testament law. Yet Paul knew and understood very well that Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jewish—because he had seen the gospel transform so many lives.

Peter knew that in his heart, too. After all, he was the apostle sent by God to deal with Cornelius at his conversion, and Peter had received every kind of evidence that God saves Gentiles through faith alone. He had received a divine vision, and a direct message from God, and he had been an eyewitness when Cornelius was filled with the Holy Spirit and miraculously spoke in tongues, repeating the miracle of pentecost in a dramatic way. And in Acts 11, Peter even reported the fact of the Gentiles' conversion back to the church in Jerusalem.

But if we look at the situation sympathetically, we might be able to understand why the other leaders in the Jerusalem church were slow to recognize the false doctrine of the Judaizers.

This heresy wasn't much of a direct threat in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was overwhelmingly if not exclusively Jewish. So every male believer in that congregation had already been circumcised. The doctrine of the Judaizers was under the radar of the apostles who oversaw that church. Perhaps it's not all that surprising that they missed the dangers inherent in the Judaizers' teaching. It doesn't shock me or surprise me that elders of the church in Jerusalem, steeped in Jewish traditions all their lives, sent these men out as official representatives of the church. If they were former Pharisees, they knew the Old Testament well. They were skilled teachers. And if the erroneous parts of their message had never come out in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem apostles wouldn't necessarily know how dangerous these guys were. The whole

church at Jerusalem probably thought these former Pharisees were the ideal group to send on a teaching mission.

But their teaching brought havoc to the churches in Asia minor, because it undermined the assurance of the Gentile believers there. The seriousness of the heresy quickly became obvious—and especially when even Peter began to separate himself from Gentile believers in the Asian church. So that's when Paul stepped in and addressed the problem. He rebuked Peter publicly and forcefully. That's what we looked at last time we were in Galatians 2, and that brings us to our passage this morning.

Galatians 2:15, and we'll go through the end of the chapter this morning.

Now before I read this, let me point out that it is not completely clear where Paul stops recounting what he said to Peter and starts addressing the readers of his epistle again. There are several passages of Scripture like this, where it's impossible to determine whether something is part of a quotation, or an editorial remark, because there are no quotation marks in the original Greek text. John 3:16, for example, the most famous verse in all of Scripture. Are those the words of Jesus, or is the apostle John making an editorial comment about what Jesus said? There's no way to know for certain. I think most red-letter Bibles put John 3:16 in red, to signify that those are the words of Christ, but there's no way to be absolutely sure.

You have a similar ambiguity here. Is the section from verse 15 through the end of the chapter part of Paul's speech to Peter, or has he left off quoting what he said to Peter and gone back to writing directly to the Galatians? You can't tell.

But you know what? It doesn't really matter (either here or in John 3:16) because "**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching.**" It's revealed truth either way. *What it teaches* is infinitely more important than the question of whether Paul *said* it

to Peter, or *wrote* it to the Galatians. It's just as true either way, and we don't need to get sidetracked by a lengthy academic discussion of when Paul first said it. But I do still have an opinion, and I'll get to it in a minute.

But now look at the passage itself. It's a slightly longer passage than we would normally deal with in one bite, but I want to get through it all this morning. So I'll read it in full. (Starting with verse 15.) Galatians 2:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 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.

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? Certainly not!

18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

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.

21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Now, as I have said, this passage contains the heart and soul of Paul's main message to the Galatians. He is defending the gospel. Specifically, he is defending the simplicity of justification by faith against the encroachment of the Old Testament law. That's the whole point of the entire epistle: to defend justification by faith against the encroachment of ceremonial law.

So I want to point out something you probably have not noticed. In that passage I just read, you have the very first appearance of the word *justified* and the concept of *justification*.

Verse 16 is the first time Paul has specifically mentioned justification—even though that is the doctrine he is writing to defend. He employs the past tense of the verb "to justify," three times in that verse.

Here's a second interesting fact. Verse 16 is also the first mention of faith as the instrument of justification. Back in chapter 1, verse 23, he spoke of "**the faith**," meaning the Christian worldview and religion. But here in verse 16 of chapter 2 is his first mention of personal faith as the means by which we lay hold of salvation.

Here's another one. Verse 16 is the first use of the word *law*. He has spoken of circumcision and described a conflict over the gospel with these false teachers, but verse 16 is the first time he spells out in specific terms what his conflict with the Judaizers is all about. It's a debate about the role of faith and the place of the law with respect to the doctrine of justification. And verse 16 is the key verse of the whole epistle. This is the place where the whole issue comes into focus for the first time—*the law, faith, and justification*. Keep those three words in mind. They'll make up our whole outline this morning.

Now, I'm inclined to think that this whole section is part of Paul's speech to Peter. He is still recounting what he said when he rebuked Peter in front of everybody. Notice: it's a long, doctrinal discourse. That's *why* Paul felt it was important enough to recount it in graphic detail. It's a rebuke with a reason. He's not just blustering at Peter. It's didactic—meaning that its main aim is to teach an important lesson. And it is a doctrinal lesson, proving definitively that Paul's whole conflict with Peter was about doctrine. It wasn't a conflict over personality differences. It wasn't a culture clash. It wasn't a petty squabble about who was in charge in Galatia. It was about doctrine.

Why do I think this is still Paul speaking publicly to Peter? When I first started to study this section, my inclination was to think that Paul left off the record of his rebuke at the end of verse

14 and started writing directly to the Galatians in verse 15. But it doesn't take much thought to see why that probably is not the case. Here's why: The Galatians were predominantly Gentiles. That's why the conflict arose in the first place. And verse 15, he is clearly still talking to a Jewish person: "**We ourselves are Jews by birth.**" It seems clear (doesn't it?) that he is still reporting what he said to Peter. Here's one Jewish guy rebuking another Jewish guy in front of a bunch of Gentiles. "**We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.**" That was the Jewish designation for Gentiles: "**sinners.**" The King James Version says, "**We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles.**"

But Paul isn't claiming that Jews *aren't* "sinners." He spent the first half of Romans 3 proving otherwise. He's simply using the common Jewish reference to Gentiles, who were deemed utterly unclean pagans: "**Gentile sinners.**" *We're not Gentile sinners; we're Jewish sinners.* That's the sense he conveys.

Now watch the key verse: he says to Peter, *Even though we are Jews, "We ourselves are Jews by birth . . . 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.."* *Even Jews* are justified by faith, and not by the works of the law. He's telling Peter, *"You know that, Peter! Why are you acting differently?"*

Now, I love this verse, and the passage that surrounds it, because it sets everything straight that was wrong with the Judaizers' false doctrine. It corrects their misconceptions about the law. It reminds them of the primary importance of authentic faith. And it rescues the doctrine of justification from their error. And as we work through this passage this morning, we'll let those three words be the outline that guides us.

The law, faith, and justification. Those are the same three crucial gospel words that each appear for the first time in verse 16. We'll take them up in a kind of reverse order compared to the

order in which Paul mentions them, so we'll start with the idea of the law. Here's point one if you want to take it down:

1. PAUL CORRECTS THEIR MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE LAW

Now remember, these false teachers were mostly if not exclusively from the tradition of Pharisaism, where the law was *everything*. The apostle Paul described his own lifelong devotion to the Law in Philippians 3:5: "**Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee.**" That's how he was raised, literally under the law from day one. Luke records Paul's testimony before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23:6, and Paul says this: "**Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.**" So his dad was a Pharisee, too. And when Paul says he was "**Circumcised on the eighth day,**" he is saying he was circumcised in exact accordance with what the law demanded. Genesis 17:12: "**He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,** Gen 17:13 **both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised.**"

But notice that in Philippians 3, Paul's testimony is that when he laid hold of Christ, he was covered with a better righteousness—a righteousness that was not his *own* righteousness—a perfect righteousness that was transferred to him by divine reckoning. And he came to regard his own flawed legal righteousness as garbage—literally, dung. Excrement. And he had no further use for it.

These Judaizing Pharisees, however, had only made a pretense of coming to Christ, and they had dragged their own legal righteousness along with them. Not only that, they were determined to impose all the Old Testament ceremonies, starting with circumcision, on any Gentiles who came to Christ. And that message obscured the perfect freeness of the gospel.

Notice the absolute clarity of verse 16: "**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."

During my student days, I once shared the gospel with a man in Chicago who was a member of the Worldwide Church of God, the cult that was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong. In recent years, they have abandoned most (but not all) of their cultish doctrines, but in those days, they blatantly taught and insisted that Christians are obligated to obey certain Old Testament ceremonial laws in order to be saved. They had roots in Seventh-Day Adventism, so they insisted on Saturday Sabbatarianism. They observed the Old Testament feast days. They required adherence to a number of the ceremonial requirements of the Old Testament, and they insisted that all these things were necessary for justification. It was a classic echo of the doctrine of the Judaizers.

And this fellow was an older black man, very intelligent, very familiar with all the favorite proof-texts used by his cult, and he insisted that obedience to certain aspects of the Old Testament ceremonial law was essential for ultimate justification. He was so steeped in that doctrine, and so well-schooled by his cult that he had an off-the-cuff answer for almost every verse I showed him where Scripture teaches that salvation is not by works. I showed him all the familiar ones: Ephesians 2:8-9 ("**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**") He said that's talking about good works *outside* the law, not the good works God's law demands of us. I showed him Titus 3:5 ("**he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.**") Same thing. He said that's our own good works, not the ones the law calls for. I gave him Romans 4:5: "**To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.**" Again, he said, that says nothing about the law, which spells out what God demands of us.

I tried explaining how we can't fulfill the law perfectly, so if we have to obey the law to be saved, we're doomed, because James 2:10 says, "**For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point**

has become [guilty of] all of it." He said yes, but we can be forgiven for our sins, as long as we keep trying to obey the law.

I was a student and still a fairly young Christian, so I wasn't quite sure where to go next. And something providentially directed me to this verse. I think I found it through a cross reference from Romans 4:5 in my Bible's margin. Galatians 2:16. When I showed it to him he had no answer. And I remember he talked himself in circles for awhile, and I thought he was convinced. But within five minutes, as we moved past this text, he went right back to insisting that the law was necessary for our justification.

So I brought him back to Galatians 2:16, and had him read it aloud: "**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.**" That's a long verse, but he was a smart man and interested in Scripture, and he saw the point again. But then once more, a few minutes later, he said, "Yeah, but . . . you *have* to obey the law." So I had him read the verse again. And again. And again.

I think as the conversation progressed, I must have asked him to read that verse aloud some thirty times. It was a long conversation. I have vivid memories of it. We were sitting in his living room in the low-rent district of Chicago, for probably at least three hours. And every now and then, in the middle of a sentence, he would take off a shoe and whack a roach crawling up the wall. I think he swatted at least six roaches during that conversation.

But what I remember even better is that the light began to dawn on him as we talked. He really began to embrace the truth that we cannot be justified if we place our hopes in our own obedience to the law, "**because by works of the law no one will be justified.**"

Now, bear this in mind, because this verse defines precisely what Paul means when he says in several places—chapter 5, verse

18, for instance: **"you are not under the law."** Romans 6:14: **"you are not under law but under grace."**

This is what he means: You are not under the law for justification. You are not dependent on the quality of your own legal obedience to determine your eternal destiny. You are justified apart from having to bring your own legal obedience into the equation.

That's what it means to be **"not under the law."** A lot of people get really confused by that. They imagine it means the moral principles of the law have no further application to Christians, as if the Ten Commandments had no authority to command our behavior. That's not what it means. We're not free to live as if we despised the moral standard set forth in the law. But we're not under the law as a means of justification. I know I have stressed that many times over the years, but it is vital. Furthermore, that principle is anchored in the truth of this verse. You are not under the law as a requirement for justification, **"because by works of the law no one will be justified."**

This also means that we are free from the ceremonial aspects of the Old Testament law. Those things in the law that foreshadowed Christ have no further relevance. When you have the real thing, you don't need the symbols that foreshadowed it. That's Paul's point in Colossians 2. And it's the whole point of the book of Hebrews. Since Christ has come, all the priestly and ceremonial aspects of the law are abolished. They have no further relevance. You don't need symbolic animal sacrifices when a once-for-all real and efficacious atonement has already been made for sin. You don't need a priesthood, because now there is **"one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."** So we're not under the law in that sense, either, although Paul mentions it only obliquely in our passage. I think that's what Paul is referring to in verse 18: **"If I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor."** If you reconstruct the ceremonial law, and reestablish an Old Testament relationship with the ceremonies and

ordinances, that's the worst kind of transgression, because in effect it tramples underfoot the work of Christ, as Hebrews 10:29 says.

Here's proof he's talking about the law in verse 19: "**For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.**" Dead to the law. Legally and judicially, then, the law has already extracted from me all it can, because Christ died in my place. And (verse 20) "**I have been crucified with Christ.**" The principle of substitution. We studied verse 20 in depth not long ago. But here's the embodiment of the main principle of justification: Christ died in my place, and therefore the law has no more claim on me. So I live with him, covered in His perfect righteousness, and with a perfect standing before God.

Now, I don't want to get ahead of myself. So hold that thought and we'll return to it in a moment when we look at the principle of justification.

Anyway, here's the point: the law has no role or relevance as an instrument whereby we can be justified or condemned. That is vital point number one, and it directly refutes the central point of the Judaizers' doctrine.

(So did you get that point? *Paul corrects their misconceptions about the law.*)

Here's point number 2:

2. HE REMINDS THEM THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF FAITH RULES OUT WORKS OF ANY KIND

Now, of course, this was the central and dominant theme of Pauline theology: faith alone is the instrument of justification. Paul had no place for the believer's own works in justification. As we have seen from Philippians 3, he counted his own righteousness as dung, and discarded a whole lifetime of fastidious obedience to the law, "**in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith**" (Philippians 3:8-9).

So throughout Paul's New Testament epistles, there is this constant stress on righteousness that we lay hold of by faith, rather than through our works. In Romans 4:4-5, he makes this point of doctrine the dividing line between true believers and people who have no hope at all: **"Now to the one who works** [that is, the one who wants to earn his own justification by doing good things to please God. To such a person] **his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.** [In other words, that person gets the wage that is coming to him. Since his righteousness is like filthy rags—sinful, self-righteousness—he's going to get paid accordingly. What are the wages of sin? Death. So if you want to work, you die. Eternal condemnation. However, Romans 4:5] **to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."**

Righteousness by faith. That was always the idea at the heart of Paul's gospel, and it was precisely the truth that the Judaizers' doctrine undermined.

Now what kind of faith does he have in mind here? Some have argued that Paul is saying the faithfulness of Christ is what saves us. Look at the middle of the verse: Twice he speaks of being justified **"through faith in Jesus Christ."** And a phrase or two later, **"in order to be justified by faith in Christ."** The King James Version famously says we justified **"justified by the faith of Christ"** *Christ's own faith*. That is one of the possible ways to translate the Greek phrase. And since the Greek word translated "faith" can also mean "faithfulness," maybe Paul is saying the faithfulness of Christ is what justifies us.

Now that's certainly true, but I don't think it's what Paul is saying here. I think the clear sense of the Greek text is clearly and emphatically explained by the expression that comes in the middle of the verse: **"we . . . have believed in Jesus Christ."** He's talking about faith *in* Christ, and that is how this verse is translated in most of the modern versions.

Paul is teaching that faith is the sole instrument by which we lay hold of justifying righteousness. No legal requirements are made. No ceremonial observances are involved. No rituals and no external protocols are any part of our justification. "**We . . . have believed in Christ,**" he says, and like the thief on the cross, we are instantly justified, before we are baptized, without any requirement of circumcision, without having to walk an aisle, sign a card, recite a prayer, or any of the other things people tend to make requirements in order to be saved.

Faith alone. *Sola fide*. That is the principle Paul defends here. And as my former cultist friend in Chicago came to understand, there is no way to explain away the plain sense of verse 16. That is why this is the key section of the whole epistle.

So Paul corrects their misconceptions about the law; He reminds them that the principle of faith rules out works of any kind. Now, finally,

3. HE CORRECTS THEIR ERROR WITH REGARD TO JUSTIFICATION

Now we come back to the issue of justification. Those of you who have been in GraceLife for any length of time ought to be well familiar with this doctrine. It is probably my very favorite of all the truths in Scripture, and it is the very heart of the gospel. Its proper focus is always Christ. What I mean by that is this: a proper understanding of justification always points us to Christ and teaches us to fix our faith, our hope, our love, and all our desires on Him. It's primary lesson is that salvation is found in Christ alone. He has already provided for us everything we need to please God. Salvation is free and full of grace. We can't do anything to earn it, nor should we even think in those terms. Verse 21: "**I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.**" That's why this is my favorite doctrine.

You say, is all that in this text? It certainly is. It's wrapped up in the meaning of the verb *justified*, which comes from a Greek word borrowed directly from the law courts.

It speaks of a declaration of righteousness. A verdict. A divine decree. Justification is not a *process* we go through. It isn't something I have to do—or even *could* do for myself. It is a verdict that God pronounces on all who believe, the instant they believe. You don't feel it happen. It doesn't happen inside you, or even in your vicinity. It takes place in the throne-room of God, when God pronounces you righteous and accepts you for Christ's sake, because of what Christ has done for you, not because of anything you have done for him.

All of that is the very truth Paul labors to make crystal-clear in this passage. And on any normal reading of the passage, it is crystal-clear.

But I want to mention that there is a movement in New Testament scholarship that has gained quite a bit of traction in the past decade, led by a few scholars are telling us we need to reinterpret all of Galatians, and all of Paul's epistles in a totally novel sense, and in a whole new light. You may have heard of this movement, usually known as the "New Perspective on Paul." I have done a couple of critiques of the movement at various conferences here and in England, and if you're interested in pursuing it further, you can download recordings of those seminars at the GraceLife website Will Moneymaker maintains.

But here's a short word of caution to be on guard with regard to the New Perspective on Paul. If you hang around for any length of time in the realm of evangelical academia, you are probably going to encounter well-meaning people who think this novel approach to Paul is exciting, and wonderful, and full of new insight. Don't be fooled by that. In fact, a word of caution: I think the New Perspective on Paul poses some of the very dangers Paul was writing against here in Galatians. And at the top of my list of

complaints is this: the New Perspective undermines a clear and proper understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith.

According to the New Perspective, the real dispute between Paul and the Judaizers had nothing to do with how individuals are justified in the sight of God. They say Paul's main complaint with the Judaizers was that they were cultural exclusivists. They were Jewish supremacists. Their error, according to this point of view, is that they opposed diversity in the church. The problem wasn't so much that they confused the way of salvation. In other words, the problem in the Judaizers' teaching wasn't really a soteriological error, but a misunderstanding in their ecclesiology. It wasn't so much a *doctrinal* fallacy as a *cultural* one.

According to the New Perspective, when Paul speaks of justification, he isn't talking about individual justification before God at all. He's simply talking about who deserves a place at the table when Christians are having fellowship with one another.

You can probably see why this interpretation trips people up. The idea of table fellowship does seem to fit the context of Galatians 2. That's what Paul rebuked Peter for: refusing to eat with the Gentiles.

But if that's *all* this means, and Paul's complaint with Peter was merely that he was acting like a racial or cultural bigot, you have to do a lot of violence to the text. Paul's complaint here was clearly and emphatically a problem with the false doctrine the Judaizers were spreading, not just bad manners in the way they treated Gentiles. They were clouding the way of salvation; they were not simply committing a breach of social protocol. When Paul wrote this epistle, he was clearly concerned mainly about the clarity and purity of the gospel message; he was not merely trying to sort out the eating arrangements in the church. And the evidence that he is speaking of individual salvation is seen, I think, in the pronouns he uses. He is talking about his personal and individual union with Christ in verse 20, and from verses 18-21, spanning four verses, he uses the singular personal pronouns

(*I, me, and myself*) at least fifteen times. He is clearly talking about something very personal and individual when he describes justification here.

Well, we're running out of time, so let me sum up this point about justification: Faith is the sole instrument by which we lay hold of justification. Christ is the object of our faith (v. 16), and the One who has set aside the demands of the law for us. Of course, he did that by fulfilling the law on our behalf, and Paul will demonstrate that as we move ahead in Galatians. But that is the reason Galatians 4:4 says He was "**born under the law.**" He fulfilled the whole law perfectly, and he did that for us. Then He even bore the penalty of our sin (v. 20: "**[he] loved me, and gave himself for me**"). He did that in order to release us from any and every claim the law might have over us. And that kind of legal substitution is possible because of our spiritual union with Christ (v. 20). We are in Him, and He now lives in us. His death counts as ours. Our life is hid in Him. And we stand before God fully justified because of Christ.

All of that, Paul says, is jeopardized by those who teach that circumcision is necessary for salvation. They put the sinner's work in the formula where Christ's work belongs.

And that is why the heresy of the Judaizers was so dangerous. It tore the very heart out of the truth of the gospel.

Can I share an honest concern with you? I think there are many similar threats to the gospel today, and the New Perspective on Paul is just one of them. Like the Judaizers' heresy, it is subtle. It is being spread by men whom many in the church think are good and godly teachers. But to whatever degree it obscures the perfect freedom of divine grace and takes the focus off what Christ has done for our salvation, it is to that degree a dangerous and potentially damnable doctrine.

The sad thing is that too many in the church today are ignorant of *sound* doctrine, not discerning enough or cautious enough to believe that such a benign-sounding doctrine could pose such

serious dangers. Look: even the apostle Peter fell into that trap, at least temporarily.

It's a good reminder for all of us to be on guard, and to study to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen who divide the word of God rightly and therefore do not need to be ashamed.

Now, some of you might be saying, I'll never be a skilled theologian. I don't have any way of knowing, much less understanding, what is going on in academic circles. And there's some truth in that. But the problem is that academic ideas do not remain merely academic for long. Bad doctrine moves into the church, and appears in the Christian books you read, or on websites you visit. And even if you'll never be any kind of expert, you can remain diligent, and be like the Bereans, and get to know the gospel better than you know it now. That's the pattern of New Testament Christianity, and it is what we should strive to be. We should say with the apostle Paul (v. 21), **"I do not nullify the grace of God."**

Let's pray:

Father, we confess our tendency to wander from sound doctrine, to succumb to the lure of fleshly lust, the deception of our own covetous eyes, and the arrogance of boastful pride. We are too unsteady and too easily moved off the very foundations of our faith. Give us a clear understanding of how we our justified—so that we might glorify Christ, exemplify His grace, and be fit messengers of his gospel here in this fallen world. Free us from our earthbound obsessions, cleanse us from our secret faults, and may the knowledge that we are justified motivate us to follow Christ more faithfully. We pray in His name.