

Galatians 2:15-21

"What Makes Me Righteous"

We left off last week on quite the cliffhanger! Paul, confronting Peter on something of paramount importance; the truth of the gospel... Oh it wasn't what Peter *said* that got Paul all riled up, it was in what he *showed* that sent the mixed signal. Remember it wasn't in his *content*; it was in his *conduct* that the problem laid. It's like he articulated one thing, but then demonstrated something completely different.

& Because of the nature of the situation, Paul just couldn't let that slide. Why? Because when it comes to something as critical as what's needed to be saved, there can't be any confusion in that, am I right? If it's not clear, than the ramifications can be eternal... So the last thing I want to do is confuse the issue; somehow devalue the work of the cross of Christ by even inadvertently implying that what He's *done* wasn't quite enough, but there's a few things you need to *do* as well to sorta "seal the deal".

So to refresh our memory let's back up to Vs 11 & get a running start at today's text.

Vs 11-14

Hopefully as we were reading, your memory was being rekindled as to the situation. This wasn't some "minor infraction" for which Paul needed to correct Peter in a private & personal way. What was at stake here was "the truth of the gospel"! & Because Peter was guilty of *persuading* them all, Paul found it necessary to *correct him before them all*.

Understand that for you & me to read this (cultures, continents & millenniums removed) it can seem sort of trivial. It's like, "C'mon Paul, so he ate w/the Gentile's one day but then decided to eat w/the Jews the next, what's the big deal?" But we need to realize that it wasn't a simple matter of eating w/people today other than you did yesterday. It was a matter of "what makes me righteous", adhering to the *Law of Moses* or simple *faith in Christ*.

You see, to the Jewish mindset, if you weren't honoring the Law of Moses you weren't saved! & Part of honoring the law of Moses was subjecting yourself to certain dietary standards, only eating w/Jewish company, because to eat certain *things* & to eat w/certain *people* (namely Gentiles) you would be rendered unclean before God, right? So a good, God fearing Jew just wouldn't do those things. He'd keep his distance from Gentile foods, Gentile folks. Now if the Gentile decided to *become* a Jew (i.e. be circumcised & come under the Law of Moses) than things could be different. But if he was uncircumcised & ate unclean foods, he was unsaved.

But Peter & Paul both knew that the cross of J.C. had broken down these kinds of barriers, had brought clarification & validation to the fact that God *never* intended for righteousness to be performance based... Listen, righteousness has never been about *my performance for God*, it's always been about believing *His promise to me*. (Going all the way back to Abraham, who hundreds of years before the law *believed* God & it was accounted to him for righteousness [Gen 15:6]).

But as the centuries went on, & the law was given there began to be some confusion as to what constitutes righteousness in the sight of God. & Rather than it being limited to believing in the promise of God it began to center around my performance *for* God, (what I do, what I don't do). But Jesus came along & set the record straight. He made the matter clear when He said, "*For God so loved the world* (not just the Jews) *that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"¹ You see, the Law of Moses was given to *Israel*, but if salvation was God's gift to the *world*, to *whoever* (Jew or Gentile) would believe in Him, than it couldn't be tied to the Law. Salvation wasn't about man & *his* goodness (because man isn't good). It's about God & *His* goodness, *His* grace, & simple faith in Him.

Peter knew this, he even preached this, but *here* he failed to practice this & Paul called him out. You see, before these certain men came from James (from Jerusalem) Peter was enjoying pork ribs, bacon for breakfast, "unclean" foods & the fellowship of "unclean" people according to the Law. *But when these men showed up, he succumbed to the pressure of wanting to please them & so he w/drew from the Gentiles & ate only w/the Jews, began to keep a kosher table.* So Paul was all, "Peter, correct me if wrong but I'm sensing a double standard here... yesterday we were all eating pork chops for dinner, enjoying God's grace & freedom from the Law of Moses, but when these guys show up you separate yourself & act like the Law of Moses is necessary for these Gentiles to observe... So what you're saying is that it's ok for you to live like a *Gentile* (that is, free *from* the law of Moses), but the Gentiles need to live like *Jews* (that is, they need to honor & come *under* the law of Moses). So the law doesn't apply to *you*, but it applies to *them*, is that what you're saying here?"

It's like, all eyes on Peter 😊. The men from James jaws hit the floor, & Peter isn't saying a word... Paul continues on. Having made his observation (the discrepancy in Peter's preaching/practice) he gives a fundamental explanation of the doctrine of justification. Check it out.

¹ The New King James Version. (1982). [Jn 3:16]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

² The New King James Version. (1982). [Ro 6:5-11]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Vs15-16

Do yourself a favor & underline, highlight, circle, somehow draw attention to this Vs in your bible... Paul says, "Listen, if *we* being born Jewish, having all the advantages being raised w/the Law of Moses, *discard* the Law of Moses to find justification in Christ, than why would we *impose* the Law of Moses upon anyone else?" In other words, if the Law was insufficient to save/justify *us*, than why would we subject anyone else to it as though it was necessary to save/justify *them*?

Ok, what does it mean to be "justified" before God? There's basically a 2-fold application here. To the negative to be "justified" means you're seen as *not* guilty. But it doesn't stop there; it's not only the absence of guilt, there's also (positively) the addition of righteousness.

Sounds pretty good, right? Justification in the sight of God is a much-desired element. I can have guilt taken *from* me & righteousness added *to* me. The question is, "How can this happen?" That's the point Paul is driving at here in Vs 16.

He says, "I'll tell you how it *doesn't happen*, it *doesn't happen* by works or law." The words "of the" aren't there in the Greek, they've been added by translators for clarification, but in reality Paul is simply saying that works; that law (or legal standards) don't save anyone. **Of course the context here is that of the Law of Moses, but the truth is that what Paul is talking about encompasses any legal standard (religious effort) that man might impose upon himself. The law was the question then, today not so much. Most people don't know much about the 10 commandments, much less the entire Law of Moses...**

But human nature remains the same right? They were trying to be justified in the sight of God by a set of "do's & don'ts", that's the bottom line. It's the performance trap that we ourselves are so easily ensnared by. We try to earn approval in the sight of God based upon what we do or don't do in order to *please* Him. **We can get caught in the trap of thinking that coming to church wins His approval, "I quit smoking, that's going to earn me points w/God." "I give financially, I witness regularly, I dress nicely, read my bible daily..." on & on it goes. But listen, there's no work that we *can* do, or can *stop doing* that will earn us justification, or some kind of validation in the sight of God, "For by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."**

We can *know* this (Paul is saying) by the simple fact that Jesus came & died on the cross for the sin of the world.

(Now I'm getting ahead of myself but to let the cat out of the bag) if we could gain a righteous standing by upholding a certain *standard* than Christ wouldn't have come to this earth & died on the cross.

So to get back to the primary point Paul is making he says, "Peter we *grew up* Jewish, we were blessed to have the law instilled in us since the time of our birth. Yet even we realized it was insufficient to save us, that's why we placed our faith in J.C. Because we recognize that justification will never come through *our* works, but through the *finished* work of the cross, we believe in the sufficiency of the work of J.C. on our behalf. That's how we're justified before God. Our guilt is erased & perfect righteousness is added to us when we believe in Jesus Personally (not intellectually/academically, but from the heart)." Justification before God comes simply/exclusively through faith in J.C. (You might write it down & look it up later, Titus 3:4-7). To the Corinthians Paul said it like this, "*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*"²

So, if a Jew had to *forsake* the Law in order to be justified by faith, Paul's question is, "Why then bring the Gentiles *under* the Law?" The nation of Israel had the law some 1500 yrs, how many Israelites did it justify? None, zero, not one, why then force Gentiles under a legal standard that hadn't saved so much as one Jew from the dawn of time? If we find justification by faith, why throw that away to try & earn justification by works? Something that can't be done...

Of course the question arises & Paul anticipates the question. "If failing to keep the law is sin, than certainly to abandon the law is sin, is Christ therefore a promoter/encourager of sin!?" Look at Vs 17.

Vs 17-18

I'll admit that this seems sort of difficult to follow, allow me to give you the basic gist. When I seek to be justified by Christ; I have to admit that I'm a sinner just like everyone else. The law can't save me, my own self imposed, self righteous standards don't help me, to confess my need for Christ is to acknowledge that my consciousness of sin has been awakened. So if Jesus only saves the sinner, doesn't that encourage me to sin that I might be saved? God forbid, Paul says, get that though out of your head!

To the contrary, when I abandon the Law (or legalism, self imposed righteous standards) to find my justification in Christ, but then decide that I need to revisit those standards, it's *then* that I make *myself* a transgressor.

² The New King James Version. (1982). [2 Co 5:21] Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

“What do you mean?” Remember the context, this was about what they were *eating* & who they were eating *with*. If in seeking to be justified by Christ we find ourselves eating pork (something forbidden in the law) does that make Jesus a minister of sin?

Paul says, “No, you’re missing the point. The point is that Jesus died to set us free from the law of sin & death. So the sin isn’t in finding freedom in Jesus, it’s in returning to the bondage of the law & legalism.” “How so?” Primarily by insulting the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ. To return to law after experiencing saving grace is to look at Jesus hanging on the cross, taking the punishment that we deserve (being made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him) & saying, “I appreciate what you did, but it wasn’t enough. Your work upon the cross won’t satisfy God in & of itself on my behalf, I need to ‘seal the deal’ through circumcision, eating a kosher diet, being baptized, going to church, giving financially, studying diligently, witnessing regularly...” **Fill in the blank.** **What an insult to the Son of God, what an offense to the Father who gave His only begotten Son for us. It’s the great irony/tragedy of legalism. In trying to be made more right w/God through what we do, we actually end up distancing ourselves from Him, sinning before Him. Trying to get an “atta boy”, some kind of merit apart from Christ... We make ourselves transgressors.**

Now the law has a purpose (we’ll get to that more in Ch 3), but in Christ our relationship to the law comes to an end. As a matter of fact, so final is our relationship to the law in Christ that Paul describes it as a death, a complete a total separation.

Vs 19

Let me tell ya something, when Paul said this it was like a showstopper moment for *those Jews at that meal*. I’m not sure that he could’ve said something much more devastating to folks that held the law in what we might call idolatrous esteem. “What do you mean you died to the law!?” “How did you die to the law?” Paul says, “Through the law.” Did you see that? What does that mean? “*Through the law died to the law...*”

Let me ask you something; is the law for you or against you? Here we are, we’re taking a quiz & here’s the question. Is the law A.) For you, or B.) Against you? Circle the correct response. But that all depends doesn’t it? It depends on if you’re innocent or guilty. If you’re innocent the law is very much *for* you, it vindicates you, exonerates you before the judge. However if you’re guilty, the law is very much against you isn’t it?

& Paul here is proclaiming that far from excusing him, the Law of Moses actually accused him, it didn’t commend him, it condemned him, it didn’t make him a *saint*, it revealed that he was a *sinner*...

How so? In that the law of God was never aimed at reigning in who we are outwardly, but at revealing who we are inwardly, the law isn't carnal, it's spiritual. You see, when Paul heard, "you shall not commit murder" he thought, "No problem, I've never personally murdered anyone." But when he learned that murder wasn't a simple matter of outward activity, but it was inward animosity, hostility & hatred... that changed everything.

To say, "Don't commit adultery", no problem, I've never been unfaithful to my spouse in all my life. But when Jesus made it clear that unfaithfulness went beyond physical activity & rooted in a lustful mentality ... you got me. You see what's happening here? I'm learning that the law isn't my justification before God, it's my *condemnation* before God.

& It's not that the law is bad, the law is perfect, holy & just; it's that *I'm bad*, there's a problem w/the condition of my heart before God, it's called sin & the law reveals that to me & drives me to see my need for a Savior, enter J.C. So the law didn't bring me life, it killed me, condemned me, gave me the sentence of death.

"Well you look pretty alive to me, when was that death sentence carried out?" It was carried out in Christ who loved me & gave Himself for me, taking the penalty upon Himself that was *due* me.

Vs 20

Again, underline it, highlight it, circle it, this Vs is pivotal pertaining to who you are as a Christian. Now I'm going to be honest w/you, this is one of the great mysteries of the believer's life. To realize that somehow & in someway our lives were wrapped up in Christ when He died for us upon the cross. So that when He died, I died w/Him & when He rose, I rose w/Him, no longer to be sold under the law of slavery to sin & death but to walk in the newness of resurrection life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

To the Corinthians Paul said it like this, "*For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.*"³ In Christ we're no longer connected to a legal standard, but to a Loving, Living Savior. You see the secret to the Christian life isn't found in *trying*, it's found in *dying*, dying to self that Christ might lead His life through me. Me decreasing, getting out of the way that Christ might increase & have His way in me.

³ The New King James Version. (1982). [2 Co 5:14-15]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

He is the vine, we are the branches, it's His life coursing through us that gives us life, causes us to be fruitful, apart from Him we can do nothing. It's not I who live, but Christ who lives in me. It's not a *self-centered* life we now live but a *Christ-centered* life, & this doesn't happen through keeping a set of legal standards, but by faith.

Listen, saving faith can't be reduced to a one-time decision or something you said in the past. It's a living, dynamic reality that permeates every aspect of the believer's life. I love how overwhelmingly personal Vs 20 is, "...who loved *me* & gave Himself for *me*." Don't minimize the work of the cross by simply seeing it as some sort of magnanimous act for the masses, it was a personal act of infinite, immeasurable love for *you*...

Did the law ever love you? Did the law give itself for you? No. The law accused you, condemned you, killed you. But J.C. loved you, & gave Himself for you, don't insult the Spirit of grace by returning to a standard of self righteousness. Charles Spurgeon said, "Take these blessed words of the apostle, and put them in your mouth, and let them lie there as wafers made with honey, till they melt into your very soul: 'Who loved me, and gave himself for me.'"

Vs 21

Or to understand that another way? If you could do anything to get yourself to heaven, than Jesus died for nothing. You can have law, or you can have grace, but you can't have both. If righteousness could come through the law than Christ died in vain.

There Jesus was, in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying, "Father, if there be any other way for sinful man to enter into a saving relationship w/You other than through the cross, than let's go that route." But Jesus went to the cross. God affirming, there is no other way. If we could be good enough for God, than Jesus wouldn't have gone to the cross. The truth is, we're sinners in need of a Savior. & Salvation/justification (righteousness) comes not through a work of our own, but through faith in J.C. Who has loved you & given Himself for you...

Prayer Points:

Lord Jesus we humble ourselves *before* You & offer our lives *to* You once again today. Forgive us for being so easily persuaded into the performance trap of legalism. We confess that nothing we do (or don't do) can make us right before God, but only faith in You (Jesus) & what You've done for us upon the cross. Teach us what it means to lead a crucified life, that we might be dead to self but alive to God in You to the glory of Your name.

Perhaps it's making sense to you today for the 1st time. God doesn't want you to *do* anything, the work's already *done*. It's yours to believe on the Lord J.C. & be saved, not academically, or intellectually, but from the heart. Jesus shed His blood, paid the penalty for your sin upon the cross so that by faith in Him you might be justified before God. Free from guilt, given the righteousness of Christ through faith.