

Through the law, Dead to the law

(Gal. 2:16-21)

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction

A. Today we will be considering Gal. 2:16-20 in a message I've titled "Through the law, Dead to the law."

B. Context: In the verses just prior to our text we read of the account of how when certain Jews came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, Peter feared their disfavor and withdrew from eating with the Gentile believers as if they were not as holy or in some way spiritually inferior when compared with the Jewish believers. And due to Peter's influence, it caused other Jews and Barnabas to take part in this hypocrisy and withdraw their fellowship as well. Peter was to be blamed and Paul was right to rebuke him and he did so publicly because of Peter's obvious influence on others.

The scripture teaches us that Peter knew and believed the Gospel but his conduct here was inconsistent with his doctrine, even to the subversion of the truth of justification and eternal life based solely upon Christ and the imputation of His finished work of righteousness, without the deeds of the law (i.e. -- apart from any contribution from, found in, or attributed to the sinner).

And from this example we see it is no small thing for believers to break fellowship with other fellow believers if in fact their hope is one and the same (Christ and Him crucified) and we'll see how important an issue this is as we consider Paul's discourse in today's text, as it is a continuation of his open rebuke of the Apostle Peter.

C. So while our focus today will be on verses 16 to 21, in order to capture it in context let's begin back in verse 14 where we read (Read Gal. 2:14-15).

II. Commentary on Text

A. Vss.16:

1. To understand vs. 16, we need to begin with the thought started there in vs. 15. Paul begins here describing himself, Peter, Barnabas, and the rest of the Jews there at Antioch as "**Jews by nature.**" That is they were Jews by birth; and so from their infancy were brought up in the Jewish religion, and under the law of Moses, and in the observance of it.

2. And they were “*not sinners of the Gentiles.*” In my study, I discovered how this expression, “sinners of the Gentiles” was how the Jews expressed that the heathen Gentiles did not have the law of Moses and therefore lived as if they were under no restraints – lived in all manner of wickedness, “...*having no hope and without God in the world...*” (Eph 2:12)
3. And so he continues in verse 16 saying, but now, we who are Jews by birth, not like the non-Jews, who before had no law or revelation from God, “Knowing í .” (Read rest of vs. 16).
4. Paul’s point is that both Jew and Gentile believers who are justified before God are justified, not by their efforts to keep the law, but only by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to keep the law and to die on the cross for them.
5. Notice he says there, “...even we.” The sense of this is that even though they themselves were Jews by nature, (unlike the Gentile believers), even though they grew up and were under the law of the Moses; still, it was revealed to them also (even we) by God’s Spirit, by the faith of Jesus Christ, that they could not be justified before God by their keeping of the law ó by their meeting any condition or requirement presumed even to contribute to our acceptance before a holy God.
6. It is as though Paul was saying, “Peter, we all grew up as observant Jews. Yet we know very well that we were not considered righteous before God ó **justified ó by the works of the law** that we did. We know that we, even though we grew up as observant Jews, were and are considered righteous before God only by Jesus Christ. The law was our schoolmaster to point us to Christ for all righteousness and eternal life.” (Gal. 3:24-25).
7. And the reason that we know it is by Christ alone has been made evident. For any, like Paul and Peter, who “*have believed in Jesus Christ*” have, by God-given faith, seen the extent of the law and how the law of God demands continual, sinless, obedience from the cradle to the grave. And all have sinnedí so under the Gospel message, God’s sheep agree with God’s word as stated at the end of vs. 16: that by the sinner’s efforts to meet a requirement or condition ó “*by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.*”
8. Now there is a sense in which men are justified by the works of the law: as performed by Christ as their Representative and Substitute on their behalf, but not by any works they (the flesh) perform. Our very best falls miserably short of the perfection required and so cannot justify.

9. And so Paul tells Peter (and the others) that what we know instead is that we are justified “**by the faith of Jesus Christ.**” The faith here refers to objective faith as it relates to Christ, the object of subjective faith and His justifying righteousness.

B. Verse 17 (Read)

1. Now it is true that it can be said of true believers that though we are righteous and holy in Christ we are still sinners within ourselves. But the context here suggests to me that Paul is making reference to òsinnersö in the same sense it was used back in verse 15 ó referring to the òsinners of the Gentilesö as those without the law.
2. Paul seems to be explaining to Peter the folly of having acted as he had out of fear that such an accusation would be cast upon him, being òfoundö at the table with believing Gentiles, who unfortunately were still considered as lacking by some of the Jews. I believe the point he is making here is in reference to the fact that the unbelieving Jews accused followers of Christ of ignoring the Law of Moses and, thus, being “**sinners**” in that sense.
3. Paul is setting forth the implication of this erroneous accusation as held by some, such as the Judaizers, i.e. -- likening true Jewish believers to the heathen Gentiles; all on account of the fact that through God-given repentance, they had forsaken the notion of any merit before a holy God being derived from their works of the law. Paul is saying that, òNow given our profession that we are looking to Christ for all our righteousness, if the accusation was true of us, as followers of Christ, it would mean that Christ would be the minister of sin, not righteousness, for righteousness speaks of satisfaction to the law.
4. And in saying that òGod forbid that any such thing should be said of Christ,ö Paul is showing the absurdity and contradiction of such a view. We’ve seen before how men often set up false dichotomies such as this one by saying, òIf you, Paul, believe there’s nothing to add to what Christ performed, that means you are like those wicked, Godless heathens, without law.ö But Paul will proceed here to show, òNo ó rather it would reflect you don’t understand where my hope is.ö
5. And so Paul is saying it would be to misunderstand what we’re looking to in Christ to accuse us as òsinnersö in the same sense spoken of the heathen Gentiles (I.e. ó as lost and among those who gave no evidence of having been justified whatsoever) & so view us as unjustified persons; notwithstanding the fact that we seek Christ so as to find all our justification in and by him.

6. But you're implying that justification isn't simply or completely by Christ by saying there's something more required, that we must also find some merit in something other than or in addition to the justifying righteousness of the cross.
 7. This is what the Judaizers suggested to the Gentile believers, that resting in Christ and His finished work wasn't enough ó needing to be circumcised or to add at least some works of the law in order to contribute to your justification and acceptance before God. Paul is saying to concede that there was something more to be credited to these Jewish believers that the Gentiles lacked (as was implied by Peter's change of tables), we would then have to conclude that we were mistaken in following Christ and believing that His satisfaction to law and justice was all I needed. So if they erroneously considered us to be lawless because we followed Christ, it would mean that instead of following a minister of righteousness (satisfaction), we would be following a minister of sin. And let us dare not consider such ó God forbid.
 8. Remember they accused even Christ of being a law-breaker, a sinner. In Matt 5 He said, ***"Think not I am come to destroy the law..."***
 9. We are all sinners in ourselves, but the unbelieving Jews would readily call Jesus of Nazareth **"the minister of sin"** and His followers **"sinners"** because He taught (and we believe) that the Old Covenant law has been abolished by way of fulfillment ó by the finished work of Christ on the cross.
 10. Paul states, **"God forbid"** ó In preaching the abolishment of the Law of Moses by Christ, and in preaching our justification before God not based on our efforts to keep the law but based on the finished work of Christ, we are not promoting sin under the law. In fact, as we'll see down in vs. 19, when we preach righteousness in and by Christ and the abolishment of the law by Him, we are honoring the law for it is othrough the law o we're dead to the law o As we read in Rom. 3:31: ***oDo we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.***
 11. Consider what Peter conveyed to his fellow Gentile believers as he broke fellowship with them. (Elaborate how there must be something more than what I've told you. These Jews have some merit you don't possess. E.g. ó a different view of the millennium, that you had better understand about the timing of imputation, perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane).
- C. Verse 18 ó And so in vs. 18, Paul says, no, God forbid, *oFori* (read vs. 18).
1. Literal translation of that is ***"For if what I threw down <cast aside, repented of> these things again I build, a transgressor myself I constitute."***

2. In other words, Paul is saying, "If I were to go back to the law which I have thrown down (repented of), and seek justification by my deeds under the law, THEN I would be a 'transgressor' (a law breaker)." Because as Gal. 5:3 teaches us, if you go back to find some merit in circumcision (and you could put in the place of circumcision, "if you add anything to the simplicity (or singleness) that is in Christ, that is, His righteousness imputed,") then as the end of that verse tells us, you're a debtor to the whole law.
3. And Paul, being convinced of sin and righteousness, knew he couldn't meet that standard of perfection and so he would be making himself a transgressor.
4. How is it a sin or transgression to "build again" a way to God through the Law? Well, it looks at Jesus Christ, hanging on the cross, taking the punishment we deserved, bearing the wrath of God for us, and says to Him, "That's all very nice, but it isn't enough. Your work on the cross won't be good enough before God until I'm circumcised, or until I eat kosher, or I do my part, or I walk an aisle, or unless I buy into or concur with some particular view or interpretation of scripture." And the list never ends. That simple truth isn't enough for us. What an insult to the Son of God!
5. While we should and do strive to grow in grace and knowledge, in spirit and in truth, if God has granted us faith and repentance to trust in Christ and His righteousness alone, then our hope, the vital issue doesn't change. We don't leave the simplicity or singleness of Christ that Paul warned the Corinthians not to be drawn away from. We don't build back that which we've destroyed or cast aside.
6. Am I, are you, looking to Jesus as the author and finisher of the faith? Do you see your sure and certain justification in Christ based solely on His satisfaction to God's law and justice on your behalf or the merit of that made yours by God's judicial imputation of it to you or is that not enough for you?
7. Paul is saying I've repented of thinking that there's more to be added by me or by my works. And that is what he means when he refers to that which I've destroyed. It's those things that were gain to him that he now counts in the loss column (Phil. 3). And for me to go back there, would be to constitute myself a transgressor. The root word, transgressor, refers to one who breaks the law, who goes past or beyond or who transgresses or even one who would add anything to the simplicity that is in Christ and the justification of sinners by Him alone. Paul is saying, "I can't go back there for that would make me a debtor to do the whole law." Knowing "***Be ye therefore perfect...***" (Matt. 5:48).

8. This is the great tragedy of legalism. In trying to be more right with God, they actually end up being less right with God, or further from / opposed to the right, the righteousness we need. This was exactly the situation of the Pharisees that opposed Jesus Christ so much during His years of earthly ministry. Paul knew this thinking well, having been a Pharisee himself
9. Now in kindness, Paul is speaking here in vs. 18 in his own person; yet it is clear in considering the broader context, that he has Peter in mind. For Peter had been taught of the law's abolishment by way of Christ's fulfillment and he had acted accordingly by conversing and eating with the Gentiles, and had declared that law to be a yoke of bondage, which the Gentiles were not obligated to come under; And yet now, by his practice and example, he was rebuilding again so to speak some of those very things he had before destroyed. Again, his conduct or actions being inconsistent with his own hope and doctrine.
10. Seeing that even God's choice servant (the Apostle Peter here) is not above falling into such a transgression, we should ever be on guard lest we start rebuilding again by adding to, subtracting from, or being diverted or distracted away from the simple truth of justification in and by Christ Jesus alone, based solely upon His finished work alone.

D. Verse 19: And so Paul, having said back vs. 17, that if you view me as unjustified, akin to the sinners of the heathen Gentiles, without the law, think again for in verse 19, he makes it clear when he says *í*. (Read vs. 19).

1. I believe that there are 2 aspects as to how we are to consider Paul's assertions that "through the law, he is dead to the law." How did Paul die to the law?
 - (a) First, the law itself "killed" Paul. God the H/S showed him that he never could live up to the law and fulfill its holy standard.
 - (1) For a long time before Paul knew Christ as the Lord his righteousness, he thought God would accept him because of his law-keeping. But he came to the point where he really understood the law and understanding it in the way Christ explained it in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7 and Paul realized that based on his works under the law he could not be declared NOT GUILTY and RIGHTEOUS before God.
 - (2) To "die to the law" is to recognize that God is holy and His law can only condemn us to death based on our best efforts to keep it. It is to renounce it and to be freed from its dominion, so as to have no confidence in our law-keeping and so it no longer holds us captive under the yoke of slavery. If you'd like to study that further, Paul describes in depth how he was slain by the law in Romans 5.

(b) Secondly, Paul was dead to the law, through the law being satisfied. Paul died to the law through Christ who fulfilled (not destroyed) the law. Paul states simply, emphatically and dogmatically the reality of true justification in Christ. "I, through the law, not at the expense of the law, but through the law having been fully satisfied in its precept and penalty by the obedience and death of my Substitute and Surety, the Lord Jesus Christ, based on His righteousness alone, am dead to the law ó dead to its curse.

2. And so the same law that would find him guilty both in Adam and for his own sins, pronounces him righteous in Christ that he might live unto God. Whenever the law accuses him, or whenever his conscience accuses him, he looks to Christ on the cross for his peace and assurance. He now lives unto the praise and glory of God's grace in Christ. Before, he was spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, bringing forth fruit unto death. Now he is made alive by the Spirit of God in Christ and brings forth fruit unto God (Ref. Romans 6 and 7).

E. Verse 20: ***õI am crucified with Christ***: <dead to the law> ***nevertheless I live***; <I am dead, but I live. This is referring to having been given spiritual life that he might õlive unto Godö as we read at the end of vs. 19. > ***yet not I***, <not the same õIö as before, the one walking after the flesh, who went about trying to establish a righteousness of his own, seeking to be saved and / or more fit for heaven by something I do or find within me (a deed of the law)> ***but Christ liveth in me***: <Christ lives in and indwells him by His Spirit and by His Word> ***and the life which I now live in the flesh*** <on this earth and in this body, in the flesh> ***I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.***"

The literal translation of that phrase is õí in faith I live, that of the Son of God, who loved me í ö So we see that true faith is God-given, from God and not of ourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:8-9). It is a product of our oneness in Christ and being a recipient of all He merited for us in His death, even our faith.

F. Verse 21: And so we conclude with verse 21 where Paul writes, (Read vs. 21)í

1. Paul concludes this passage with a general statement concerning a very, very serious implication. It brings together all his thoughts concerning how a sinner is justified before God.
2. And it shows the evil and the deadliness of putting anything in place of or in addition to that which is proclaimed in the simple Gospel wherein the one righteousness by which God justifies the ungodly is revealed. To suggest that justification before God involves anything more, less, or other than that which the simple Gospel message of Christ and Him crucified (meaning His perfect satisfaction to justice) is to õfrustrateö (or set aside) the grace of God.

3. God could not be just to justify sinners in any other way but by the Person and finished work of Christ on Calvary. If righteousness can come by anything done by you, in you, or through you (by a work the law), then Christ did not have to come and die. The literal translation of that reads, "if then Christ for naught died." His death, then, would have been in vain. This is not the case. Christ did not die in vain. His death was the necessary act for God to be both a just God and a Savior (as Romans 3 teaches us).
4. Paul is reminding Peter of something he already knows. For the Jews from Jerusalem to require for themselves or anyone else to live under the Law of Moses to be right with God is to **set aside the grace of God** - the very thing Paul does **not** do. It is a denial of Christ.
5. Paul may have well told Peter that which he wrote to the Galatians in Gal 5:1-3 where we read, "*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. ²Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. ³For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.*"
6. And that would be to count Christ's death as a vain thing. It would be to say that there was no necessity for his dying: that he died without any true reason, or just cause; that he died to bring in a righteousness that either was insufficient or that there is a way of righteousness which might have been brought in without his death.
7. And seeing what a dispersion such notions would cast upon God's wisdom, love, and grace confirms the conclusion that in fact there is no righteousness by the law of works, (that is by any contribution from you and me, the sinner) and that justification is solely by His finished work of righteousness.

G. Summary:

So let's not allow anyone, even if it were the Apostle Peter, to lead us away from the table of like-minded brethren, fellow believers. Let us strive to not "build again" (so to speak) by deviating at all from this simple but marvelous truth of justification by Christ's imputed righteousness and that alone - the satisfaction He alone made to God's law and justice in His finished work on the cross, imputed (or put to the account) of God's sheep.

So for everyone who hears this message, my prayer is that God will bring you also to identify with Paul, and with Peter, and with all believers so as to rejoice in knowing that through the law, (based upon that satisfaction made by Christ, no more, no less) you're dead to the law. Not guilty! Through the law, dead to the law!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself ó the Bible.

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