

**Galatians 2: 21 – 3: 4; “Having Begun in the Spirit”, Message # 13 in the series –  
“Christ Has Made Us Free”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on  
September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

The wording here in this last verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter is really quite interesting. It says, “I do not set aside the grace of God...” Anyone who knows anything about the saving grace of Christ knows that that the reality of Christ’s grace cannot ultimately be set aside by ourselves if we have truly come to know Christ. Christ has conquered in our sinful hearts, and He by His precious and powerful grace will triumph there, so that we will persevere in our faith and be brought to heaven and all the blessings of eternal life. God is faithful, and so once He has begun a good work in the life of the one trusting in Jesus, that work will be brought to completion. (Philippians 1: 6) The grace of God cannot ultimately be set aside by the true Christian. But I want you to see that Paul is not talking here, about God’s perfect work of what He does in conveying grace to the heart of the true believer. Here in this verse; he is speaking of the way a person receives salvation, and how they grow in respect to that salvation. He is speaking about the way that these Galatians viewed Christ’s death.

If Christ’s death was sufficient for them, to save them, then why were they toying with this false doctrine of works-righteousness? Had Christ then, died in vain in relation to them? Were they really true Christians? Were they really experiencing all the blessings of grace which Christ died to purchase? These were good questions which Paul was asking them, and so I believe it will be good if we also can ask them of ourselves. Let us ask ourselves these 3 questions in the language of the text so that we will come to understand whether we are a true Christian and whether we are growing in respect to our salvation? The answer to all of these questions will be more than evident as we think about these things together.

**1<sup>st</sup> of all – Do I believe that righteousness comes through the law? (verse 21)**

Paul says here – “I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.” You see, Paul was afraid that the Galatian Christians were being deceived by the false Judaizers. He wanted them to ask themselves if they really believed that righteousness comes through the law. By “righteousness coming through the law” Paul means: Do I believe that I can be justified before God by my own works; by my own obedience in trying to keep God’s holy law? Do I believe that I can be declared righteous in the sight of God, either now or in the Day of Judgment, by keeping the ceremonial or moral things which God commanded in the Old Testament Scriptures, or even the New Testament Scriptures?

The Judaizers were telling the Christians of the churches of Galatia that they must add circumcision and obedience to the moral law; to their faith in Christ, in order to be saved. They were probably also adding the traditions of the Scribes and Pharisees to this as well. But Paul well knew that this would undermine the whole gospel. He knew that it would undermine the whole basis upon which any person could be saved, if people listened to it. Turn with me over to Romans Chapter 10, verses 1-5. “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.” “For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.” “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” “For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, ‘The man who does those things shall live by them.’”

Now Paul is here speaking to believers in the church of Rome about why the Jews could not be saved by the works of the law. Many of them were zealous for God, but their zeal was not based on correct knowledge. They knew that God had given them His holy law. They knew that God expected them to keep that law. They wrongly believed that their own zeal for what they

were doing for God would be accepted by God, and that they were therefore righteous in His sight by their own evaluation of themselves. Actually they were justifying themselves in the sight of the holy God, rather than receiving His evaluation of them. How can we apply this to our own day? The obvious answer is this. Whatever zeal that people have for their own religious works to be accepted in the sight of the holy God, will never avail to justify them in the sight of God. You cannot justify yourself in the sight of God; God must justify you. Zeal is good, but not if it is not according to the true knowledge of God's word, the Bible.

You may be ignorant of the fact that God expects perfection of you if you are going to be justified in His sight. So, even if you are claiming to be a Christian because you go to church and have been baptized and do many good things for other people, you need to understand that, in God's sight, you still fall far short of His glory; the perfection of obedience to His law, which He requires. God cannot justify anyone on the basis of an imperfect obedience to His holy law." Here it says that they were ignorant of God's righteousness and they had not submitted to His righteousness. They were ignorant of God's righteousness in that they did not understand the extent or the quality of obedience required by God in their keeping of it, and they were ignorant of the fact they fell far short of it.

Many of them were not willing to submit to the righteousness of God because they were denying the fact that they needed it. They thought that they were keeping His law when they were not. They would not submit to God's righteousness by believing in Jesus Christ. God's righteousness is Jesus Christ. If they would have submitted to believing in Him, then God would accept have accepted them. Turn with me over to James 2, verse 10 – "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." "For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery, also said, 'Do not murder.'" "Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." "So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty."

What does it mean when it says that Christians will be judged by the law of liberty? It means that since they had been set free from the guilt and condemnation which their sins would have brought to them, through their faith in Christ and His finished work, they should use their freedom to go about to do God's will. They should walk uprightly before God out of their love to Him for what He has done for them. That is, He had saved them through the righteousness and death of His Son, Jesus Christ. Living righteously is the right response to what Christ has done for you. You trust in Christ because Christ has perfectly fulfilled God's law on your behalf, and His righteousness has been imputed to you. His righteousness is charged to your legal account so that all that your whole life is covered by it. He has made atonement for your sins. Your sins are covered by His blood. They are removed, and they are not remembered by God.

But I want you to see that all of your acts of righteousness after you are converted to Christ, are also covered by this same atonement. "All of our righteousnesses are like filthy rags", it says in Isaiah 64: 6. This does not mean that your acts of righteousness are unimportant, or that God does not expect you to pursue perfection in your works. It simply means that none of the best of your works after conversion is absolutely perfect. It means that you are only complete in Christ. That is, after you are converted to Christ, God sees all of your works in Christ, and therefore they are acceptable to Him. Anything wrong or lacking in them has been addressed by Christ's righteousness and His sufferings being applied to them. "They are dipped in the blood of Christ" as John Calvin used to say.

John 3: 21 says – "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." That is; that all of your works dear Christian are seen by God in Christ. So, you can now see why an unbelieving self-justifying person would "set aside the grace of God". It is because they believe that something more is needed to save them than Christ and His finished work of righteousness and His sufferings for them the sinner. They

think that something more is needed; something of what they would do religiously or morally, they think is needed, to obtain God's approval of them and all of their works. Paul is saying that if this was the case, then Christ died needlessly. Why should Christ have had to suffer and die if you have anything within yourself of strength or righteousness to add to what He did, in His righteous obedience and His sufferings for your sins? The righteousness of the law demands that you be sinless, but you are not sinless, even as a Christian. The righteousness of the law demands perfect obedience, but you are not absolutely perfectly obedient. The righteousness of the law rests everything upon your works and your performance, but the righteousness of faith places everything on Christ.

If I am a true Christian I do not set aside the grace of God because I know that in my case Christ has not died in vain for me, for I see my need of Him at every point. Christ died in vain only in the case those who believe the lie that they do not need everything that He has to give to them if they will trust in Him. But, the truth is that we need grace to save us, grace to justify us, grace to sanctify us, and grace then, finally, to be glorified. Christ did not die in vain, for in Him all of God's eternal purposes will be realized in the salvation of every one of His elect people. His grace will convince them of how very much they need Christ. Righteousness does not come through the law, but only through what Christ has done for us.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> – Did I receive the Spirit by the works of the law or the hearing of faith?**

(chapter 3, verses 1 and 2)

“O foolish Galatians!” “Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?” “This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” Paul is assuming that these Galatians were true Christians because he is assuming that they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit when they believed the gospel. He calls their believing the gospel, “the hearing of faith”. He means that they had been given ears to hear by the Holy Spirit when they heard the gospel concerning what Jesus Christ had done for sinners like them. They believed because of the Holy Spirit's quickening them to life. And after they had believed the gospel they had also had the blessed experience of knowing that the Holy Spirit Himself had been given to them, to bring them real assurance of their faith. There was nothing of the works of the law which they had performed to obtain this blessing of salvation.

Turn with me over to Ephesians 1, verse 13. “In Christ you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.” This sealing of the Holy Spirit takes place after a person first exercises faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They trust in Christ's finished work on their behalf, and the Father sends the Spirit into their hearts to live and dwell and abide with them forever. They could rightly ask themselves – Was there anything good that I did to deserve this? Which of the works of the law, being done by me, allowed me to have this blessing? No, Paul knew that it was all because of Christ, and His work, and God's grace and mercy to them.

This receiving of the Spirit is an experiential reality in the life of the Christian which gives them the assurance of their salvation. It did not come, and it does not continue because of something that the believer has done to earn it. It comes on the basis of Christ's death and His resurrection, and the believer's participation in those realities, by faith. It does not come to us based upon our works of righteousness. The Spirit comes to us in order that we might learn righteousness from Him, and so, it is because of His working that we make progress in holiness. Romans 8: 13-16 – “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live.” “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” “For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received

the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Here is found real assurance for the believer. And here is found the real basis for our pursuing righteousness and holiness in our living to God.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> – Having begun in the Spirit, am I being made perfect in the flesh?**

(chapter 3, verses 3 and 4)

“Are you so foolish?” “Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” “Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” Having received the Holy Spirit, and having made a beginning by His help and power in living the Christian life of discipleship, how could they ever think that they would be made perfect by the flesh? That is, how could they make progress in holiness and righteousness by their own efforts at keeping the commandments of God in their own strength? To Paul it was as if they had been bewitched. When he had preached to them, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among them as having been crucified for their sins, and raised for their justification. They had believed this and apparently had received the Holy Spirit.

And now, having begun so well, were they to abandon that good foundation which had been laid, to pursue sanctification on their own, apart from Christ’s foundation work, and the Spirit’s powerful working? Were they to put their own works in place of Christ’s in order to be justified? And were they then to put their own fleshly efforts at keeping the commandments of God, in the place of the working of the Holy Spirit in order to become more righteous and holy? No, this was real foolishness in Paul’s mind, and he would tell them so. It appears that the people in the Galatian churches had not really understood how God does His work in salvation and sanctification.

How tremendously important it is, then, that we remember that in order to be saved we must believe in Christ’s work being applied to us in relation to the Spirit’s working in us, in order to make progress in righteousness and holiness. Many times we are tempted to think that our walk with the Lord is not really one of faith in relation to keeping God’s commandments; trusting in Him for righteousness and strength as we go about to do His will. But turn to John 6: 27. Jesus says to those of this mindset: “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.” (That is, that He is the Perfect One). “Then they said to Him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’” “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.’” That’s it. That is the work that God would have you to do – He would have you to believe in Christ both for salvation and for progress in sanctification.

How tremendously important this is; that we are trusting that God’s Spirit is working in our hearts as we go about to make progress in righteousness and holiness. A couple of verses from Philippians 2, verses 12 and 13. “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” So let us understand in closing, that it is always foolish for a Christian to think that having begun by grace that they will be perfected by their own fleshly efforts at living the Christian life. True Discipleship is much more than self-determination. It is more than resolution to do what is right. It is good to make holy resolutions. But those resolutions will also be made with prayer to God that Christ by His Spirit will give you the strength to overcome temptations and to pursue a greater obedience to God’s commandments. Having begun by faith in Christ, you will continue to learn and grow by faith in Christ in relation to God’s word. It is God’s Spirit who will lead you into all the truth of how you are to live and what God would have you to do for Him. God would have you keep His commandments. But He would not have you keep them in the flesh. He would have you keep them out of love to Him for His having given you grace in Christ.

