

Outline of Galatians 2:15-21

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| I. Paul introduces his belief of justification by faith, not through the law | vv. 2:15–21 |
| A. People are justified only by faith in the faithfulness of Christ | vv. 15–16 |
| B. Faith in Christ and not law does not lead to sinful living | v. 17 |
| 1. Following the law is not having faith in Christ | v. 18 |
| C. The law guides us to Christ and to new life in Christ | v. 19 |
| 1. This new life is a life in Christ through faith | v. 20 |
| D. The law can never offer new life, only Jesus can | v. 21 |

Introduction of Background and Literary Context

The Galatian congregation that Paul has been nurturing has capitulated to a different gospel which focused on righteous living through the law as the means to God's grace. Paul found that throughout the gentile world, the gospel he was preaching was being disrupted by the Judaizers who believed that the only way to Christ was through the Jewish law, which included particular diet restrictions and physical circumcision. This other gospel of the Judaizers required submission to the law of Moses, even for the Gentile believers but for Paul it was only through faith in Christ that a person was justified or rectified into God's covenantal relationship.

Directly prior to the pericope for this study, Paul described how he admonished Peter for hypocritically refusing to eat with the Gentiles because he was concerned about the arrival of Judaizers even though he has previously been eating with the Gentiles (2:11-13). Paul, using his admonition of Peter as a pretext is now writing a persuasive argument which becomes the defining statement that is the foundation of the rest of this letter. He is now identifying himself with Peter by saying they share the Jewish heritage; "We are both Jews by birth . . ." (2:15). Then, as a way to draw the Galatian audience into the dialogue, Paul subtly includes them in the "we" (2:16, 17) before rhetorically switching to the first person singular to draw his persuasive argument to conclusion. speaking of himself in the first person singular (2:18—21).

Using Peter's actions and those of the judaizers and the Galatians who followed suit, Paul takes the opportunity to propose his argument in 2:15—21 that will be built on in the following chapters of this epistle. He begins by connecting with those that oppose him by claiming the recognized truth that a person is justified by Christ's obedience and faithfulness. From there, Paul says that trust should be placed in Christ rather than obedience to the law (v15—16). But then Paul recognizes that the Judaizers want to claim that if the law of God is not followed by those who are trusting in the faithfulness of Christ, not only are they risking being seen as sinners but they also could in turn bring the responsibility of their sin onto Jesus Christ (v.17). But Paul sees it the other way around. The ones insisting on dependence on obedience to the law are the ones that are led to sin (v.18). It is in the faithfulness of Christ that new life is experienced, not in continuing to follow the law (vv. 19,20). Then to finalize his thinking, Paul explains that living by faith in the faithfulness of Christ does not discount God's gift of the law, but the law cannot remove sin and never was intended to be a means for justification. It is only a gift to bring us closer to the only one who can rectify our covenant relationship with God (v. 21).

Textual Analysis

Paul begins his argument in verses 15 and 16 by aligning himself with Peter as well as the Judaizers by stating that a justification for any person is dependent on the faithful obedience of Christ. He pushes this further to argue that their salvation isn't dependent on their following the law, but it rests squarely on faith in the faithfulness of Jesus. Paul is arguing that salvation is not about what one does but about what Jesus did. A person's trust in Christ and Christ's sacrifice is the path to justification and to require obedience to the law negates the work of God through Christ. The NRSV translates πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (v. 16) as "faith *in* Jesus Christ" whereas other translations take the genitive to mean "faith *of* Jesus Christ" which is more appropriate for

the Paul's purpose and position. It is the obedient faith of Jesus Christ in his life and in his death that is the basis of the gospel (Longnecker, 87). Paul in saying, "ἐργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται" (*ergōn nomou ou dikaiōthesetai*) is clearly diverges from his opponents by saying "you will not be justified by works of the law" (v. 16). The Judaizers believe that their justification depends on God's grace but is in response to their obedience to the law. But Paul is claiming, rightly, that justification is not merely a starting point in the gospel but is the whole point. Our justification rests completely on Christ's faithfulness and not on our own (Longnecker, 88).

Having laid the proposition of justification by faith in Christ's faithfulness, even to the cross, but now challenges the understanding by those who believe in following the law for justification in their sinful lawlessness but not requiring adherence to the law. In verse 17 Paul, using conditional phrasing asks "Εἰ....ἄρα" (if....then) and in three parts defends his position. In the first part he capsulates vv.15 and 16 by saying, "But if while seeking to be justified by Christ we ourselves are found to be sinners," he is placing himself and presumably Peter in the same standing as the Gentile believers because they are not bound to the law. In the second condition of the phrase he asks, "then is Christ the servant of sin?" It is understood here that one who does not follow the law is a sinner, so by saying that by binding themselves to Christ instead of the law, not only are they sinning, but it would follow that Christ is leading them to sin which is, of course, absurd (de Boer, 156). Then Paul says in the third phrase, μὴ γέωοιτο ! or "let it not be!" which is his rhetorical way of saying, "that's absurd!" For Paul, the opposite would be true. Those who require obedience to the law are the ones who are promoting sin because if a believer returns to the law to bring about the grace of Christ's justification, they put themselves in a position of once again becoming law-breakers, thus sinners. The primary function of the law, as Paul sees it is to make sin more sinful (v. 18).

Paul has removed the sin-restraining influence as well as the justification influence of the law and is now saying in verse 18 that returning to the influences of the law would in itself be a sinful act because the laws real intent would be nullified (Longenecker, 91). The phrasing in how Paul dismisses this option is powerful: παραβάτην ἑμαυτὸν συνιστάνω (*parabatēn emauton synistanō*). Paul isn't just saying here that he would become a sinner for returning to the law, but more precisely, "I will prove myself to be a sinner." In this phrasing he is not taking a passive position that it would just happen, but that he would be making a clear and active choice to become a sinning witness (de Boer, 158). What is also implied here is that if in Christ there is no more law, that would then mean there is no more transgression of the law (Matera, 95).

In verses 19 and 20 Paul clarifies the central point of his position, that justification, alone, promotes righteous living in Christ. A believer, who is dead, or no longer beholden, to the law and who now rests on the righteousness that they find in Christ slowly becomes the person they are being formed to be in Christ. They begin to live as though Christ is in them and experience the fullness of new life in the kin-dom. In v. 20 Paul continues to explain a believer who no longer us guided by the law now lives a new life in Christ. By faith the believer now possesses righteousness in Christ. Their old ways have died with Christ and new life risen with Christ. The sinful way of the past no longer binds them because of the sacrificial death, and the power of the risen Christ who indwells in them as they begin to live a life of Christ. These verses take on an intentional autobiographical approach as Paul is using the first person. He is witnessing to what has happened in his life in the attempt to persuade the listener to follow or return to his way in Christ.

Five times Paul uses the verb "live" (ζάω) in these two verses alone. Only three other times does Paul use ζάω in his letter to the Galatians (2:14, 3:11, 3:12). He uses live in a metaphorical

sense when he first states in v.19 that he “died through the law,” and in v.20 by being crucified with Christ he “no longer lives.” But it is clear that he was still alive. To “die to something” is to be separated from or no longer beholden to something, metaphorically speaking (de Boer, 159). Paul’s emphases though should be as, “I, myself” being independent of God and Christ. Because Paul was once an obedient follower of the law, so the loss of the law for him may have been a difficult transition. After all, Paul used to persecute those who did not adhere to the law. Now he is dead to the law and the law is dead and useless for Paul. Because the law would have been a constant guide throughout his life, it’s absence would have required a significant adjustment. This only was made easier by having a new purpose for his new life. Now for Paul, the “I, myself” nor the law are what guides his life but rather both are replaced by Christ-self. Rather than living a conflicted life, Paul is claiming that Christ has become the guiding factor in his life. For Paul, “ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός,” *Christ in me* is a claim and witness of new life and purpose (Soards, 101).

At the end of an ancient propositional argument there typically a flat and succinct denial of what a person is being charged. The final verse in this pericope is brief yet no less pointed in denying what Paul is being accused of, and then it briefly explains one last time his position. Verse 21 begins with Paul emphatically stating, “I do not invalidate the grace of God” (Οὐκ ἄθετῶ τὴν χάριν τοῦ Θεοῦ). The verb ἄθετῶ can be translated as to set aside or nullify and is commonly used in a legalistic sense as in v3:15. Here Paul is using the word in connection to God’s grace (χάριν) which Paul experienced in his call to be an apostle for Christ to the Gentiles (1:15). After his denial, Paul then offers another conditional (εἰ....ἄρα) statement: “for if righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” (v21bc). The noun δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosyne) here can be translated as righteousness, uprightness, justice. The verb form, δικαιοό,

translates to the activity of making righteous or to acquit or justify, whereas the noun form, *dikaiosyne*, describes the effect of that activity on the person. The believer becomes righteous, just or upright by God's justness through God's justifying activity in Christ (Matera, 97). Paul obviously does not believe that Christ died for nothing, nor that justification comes “through of the law” (διὰ νόμου), which connects with vv. 16-17, even though the rhetoric here could be confused that way. It seems that Paul is using the phrasing of his opponents to make his claim (Longenecker, 95). Paul is unmistakable in stating that God's grace and the justification of humanity is offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The purpose of Christ's crucifixion was to usher in righteousness in humanity (Soards, 105). The law was designed as a means of judgement whereas the faithfulness of Christ is a means to justification through the grace of God.