

# I DO NOT NULLIFY THE GRACE OF GOD

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*Galatians 2:15-21*

## Introduction:

Last week we looked at verses 11-14 of this passage. In that section Paul confronted Peter because of his hypocrisy. (Briefly review the situation that led to this rebuke.) In his rebuke, Paul told Peter that his conduct was essentially telling the Gentile believers that they needed to become like Jews by keeping the regulations of the Law in order to be completely and fully accepted by God and become a part of the church. His behavior was out of step with the truth of the gospel.

Today we are going on to the rest of this passage of Paul's letter to the Galatians. But before we do so I think it would do us well to review just a bit.

Paul and Barnabas had been sent out as missionaries by the church in Antioch to take the gospel into the world of the Gentiles. They travelled through the west central part of what is today Turkey, a region known as the province of Galatia. They spent some time sharing the gospel, winning souls to Christ and planting churches in the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Only a few months or perhaps a year later, Paul received word that there had been an infiltration of these churches in Galatia by men from Jerusalem, who claimed to represent the church and apostles there, but were confusing the believers with the idea that they needed to be circumcised according to the OT Law, and keep the feasts and rules of the Law in order to truly be accepted by God. In other words they needed to become Jews.

Paul was horrified that they had been so deceived as to be so quickly removed from the truth of the gospel—that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and nothing else—and he fired off this letter to try to warn these new believers of what was happening to them and to set them straight about salvation and righteousness and acceptance by God. Unlike many of Paul's other letters, he spent no time on his opening greeting, but plunged immediately into his reason for writing.

I would like to quickly review the key themes we have covered so far.

- 1:6-10 – Turning to a different gospel. Paul makes it clear that there is no other gospel. There is only one true gospel - the good news of God's grace that is given freely to those who believe. If anyone, whether an apostle or even an angel comes proclaiming a different gospel, he is to be rejected and will ultimately face God's judgment and curse.
- 1:11-24 – This is not Man's Gospel. In this passage Paul was defending the gospel he preached, making it clear that it did not come from men, nor was he taught it by man, nor did it come from his own mind or imagination. His message came by direct revelation from the living Christ.
- 2:1-10 – Preserving the Truth of the Gospel. Paul's defense of his gospel message before the apostles in Jerusalem. His visit to Jerusalem resulted in a confirmation of the unity of the message being taught by himself and by the apostles there. He stood firm against the Judaizers, those false teachers who were insisting on the inclusion of Judaic practices for the Gentiles coming into the church. He refused to yield to them "...so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." (2:5)
- 2:11-14 – Living in Step with the Gospel. Here we saw Paul's confrontation of Peter when his conduct moved out of step with the truth of the gospel.

Today, we move on to the rest this passage and this chapter. The key verse or phrase of this passage is found in v. 21, where Paul sums up his whole argument with these words... read v. 21. So how does he come to that point? Let's go through these verses. We begin by seeing...

## A Mutual Faith and Doctrine

In verses 15 and 16, Paul continues his confrontation with Peter. Most of our translations separate these verses from the quotation in v. 14, but it is quite reasonable to assume that these verses actually continue Paul's statement to Peter – read them.

There are a couple of important things to note in these verses. First, what Paul is really doing in these verses is pointing out how unified he

and Peter really are in their doctrinal thinking, and therefore, how inconsistent Peter is to suggest by his behavior that it is necessary to keep the dietary laws in order to enjoy full fellowship with Christ. He says... read v. 16 again. What he is really saying is, "Peter, you and I both *know*, we agree, justification does not come when we work for God but when we trust Christ to justify us freely. So stop acting as though Gentiles have to do works for God in order to get right with God."

The second thing we need to note is Paul's use of the word "sinners" in v. 15. This word is used in a very limited way. He is not saying Gentiles are sinners while Jews are not. Obviously we are all sinners in the broader sense, but that is not what Paul is referring to. Rather, he is referring to the fact that the Gentiles do not even attempt to follow the OT laws and therefore clearly do not live up to them. They were not given the law, and consequently had no interest in even trying to please God or meet his requirements. They are "sinners" because they are outside the requirements of the law that he and Peter knew and understood.

So we see that Paul and Peter share a common doctrinal position—they "know" that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Not only that but they have a common faith experience. They have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith...

So Paul's argument concludes on this note. Peter, we know that no one is justified or declared righteous in God's sight by keeping the Law with its rules and regulations. We have quit trying to satisfy God that way and have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith. So why are you, by your conduct, suggesting that these Gentiles, who never had the Law in the first place, now need to subject themselves to its requirements, when no one can be saved in that manner anyway?

## Is Christ the Servant of Sin?

In v. 17 Paul asks a probing question. Read it? The RSV says, Is Christ then an agent of sin? Here we come again to Paul's use of that word "sinners." I think it is clear that he is using it in the same limited way as he did in v. 15.

The ESV Study Bible gives this note: Paul has just discussed how Gentiles are known among Jews as "sinners" (v. 15). When Jewish Christians associate with them, they are liable to the charge from traditionalist Jews of becoming "sinners" themselves. Paul firmly dismisses any such charge.

Another source explains this verse this way:

When a Jew trusts Christ for justification, he is free from the Jewish ceremonial regulations and may, if he chooses, neglect the dietary laws in order to eat with Gentile brothers and sisters. But people who live like that are called "sinners" by the Judaizers. So Paul accepts the term in that limited sense. Yes, we are found to be "sinners" in this sense.

But he denies emphatically that this makes Christ an agent of sin. Why? Because it is *not* sin to be a "sinner" in this sense. It is not sin to free yourself from the ceremonial Jewish laws in order to walk in love toward Gentile Christians. It is not sin to stop depending on works. Christ is not the agent of sin. He is the agent of freedom.

Paul goes on to say... read v. 18. What was it that Paul had torn down? In seeking to be justified in Christ, Paul had torn down the law as a means of justification. But keep in mind that the law of Moses never taught justification by works. What Paul tore down was not the law as Moses preached, but as many Pharisees used it. He tore down the legalistic misuse of the law. And he says (v. 18), "If I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor."

You transgress the law of God when you try to erect the law as a ladder to heaven on which you will demonstrate your moral fitness for salvation. So the connection between verses 17 and 18 is this: When Christ leads us to trust him for justification instead of trusting our own legal efforts, he is not an agent of sin, for what really makes a person a true transgressor of the law is not the neglect of its ceremonial statutes, but the attempt to use the law of God as a means of climbing our way into heaven. The greatest transgression against God is to presume that you can climb your way up a ladder of morality into his favor.

Verse 19 gives additional support for verse 18 (note the "for"). Paul says, "For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God." If

you must die to the law in order to live to God, then clearly it is a transgression to try to build the law again. The only way to gain the righteousness that God requires is to recognize your own inability and receive the gift of grace that God offers through Jesus Christ. Just as Paul did, so we must give up on legalism, give up our own efforts and die—die to self, die to the law and die to our own efforts to please God.

Well, that brings us to verse 20 and...

## Life After Death to the Law

This verse gives us a picture of the Christian life in a nutshell. Read v. 20. What we have here is really a whole series of paradoxes.

- Dead, yet alive.
- I live, yet it is not my life,
- The life I live is really Christ's life

**"I have been crucified with Christ..."** Paul's former "self," the person Paul was before he trusted Christ, with all of his sinful goals and proud, self-exalting desires, came to a decisive end—he "died." **"It is no longer I who live..."** does not mean that Paul has no personality of his own (all his writings show that he does) but that his own personal interests and goals no longer direct his life; rather, **"...Christ who lives in me..."** now directs and empowers all that he does. How then does he, as a "crucified man," gain any strength to go on living? **"...the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..."** Paul seems to be saying that, as he trusts Christ moment by moment, Christ then works in and through Paul to give spiritual effectiveness to all that he does.

**"...who loved me and gave himself for me..."** The fact that on the cross Jesus bore believers' sins as their personal, individual substitute ("he ... for me") shows that the crucifixion was not an impersonal, mechanical transaction, but a personal expression of Christ's love for people as individuals. (ESV Study Bible)

I would like to turn to the book of Romans for just a moment. I wish we had more time to go through this but there are a couple of passages I would just like to read in Romans where Paul expounds on this idea of dying to self, to sin and to the Law. Read Romans 6:2-6 – what it really means to be crucified with Christ, dead to sin and the Law yet alive to

God. Then turn to Romans 12. Having died to self and sin, we are now alive in Christ. Yet Paul calls us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice—read vv. 1-2.

## Conclusion:

Back to Galatians 2 – we wrap up with v. 21, the key to this whole passage – read it. When you look to the law and its requirements as a means of salvation and justification, you nullify the grace of God and you invalidate the cross of Christ. If you can be made right with God by keeping the rules in the Law then Christ's death was meaningless. Paul says, "I will take my stand beneath the cross of Jesus. I do not nullify the grace of God."

This brings us to some very important questions as we close:

- What are you depending on for your salvation? Are you trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross as your means of justification?
- Or are you trying to erect a ladder of good works to gain access to heaven?

There are those who, when asked about their relationship with God, will say, "I think I will be okay..." Are you one of those? I would like to say two things in response to that statement:

- First, when you stand before God in judgment, he is not going to ask your opinion. Whether you think you are okay is really not the issue. The issue is whether you have made your peace with God on his terms, not yours.
- Second, I want you to be able to view eternity with assurance. You need to know, not think that everything is okay. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13 ESV)

If you do not have that assurance, you can before you leave here today...