

GALATIANS

Lesson 6

How Can a Person Get Right with God? Galatians 2:15-21

INTRODUCTION

The most pressing and urgent question facing mankind is, “How can a person be right before God?” or “How can a condemned sinner be righteous in the sight of a holy God?” This question and the objections to this question will be answered for us by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:15-21.

The Apostle Paul was writing the Book of Galatians to refute the false teaching of the Judaizers who taught that a person could not be saved without keeping the Mosaic Law. They were convinced that a person could only be right before God by toil and hard work at keeping the law. In their legalistic approach to salvation, they felt a person must do everything the law commands and refrain from everything the law forbids. They sincerely felt that if a person did all the works of the law to the best of his ability, he would be accepted by God. They taught that justification was by the works of the law. In essence, they were saying that men get right before God by their own righteousness. If a person has enough good works, God will surely save him; therefore all men ought to seek to do good works to be accepted by God.

The basic religion of all men everywhere outside of Christ is salvation by works. This is the fundamental principle of every religious and moral system in the world except Biblical Christianity. Men in all sincerity are seeking to work their way to heaven, but the Apostle Paul tells us that they are sincerely wrong because salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone not by law or works.

JUSTIFICATION IS BY FAITH AND NOT BY WORKS 2:15-16

“We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners”

Jews, who had all the privileges and promises of a covenant people, still had to be justified by grace through faith. The Jews had wrongly thought themselves spiritually and morally superior to Gentiles because of their privileges, so much so that Gentiles were called “godless,” “dogs” and “sinners.” They had arrogant pretensions to superior holiness, and they were sure they were saved because they kept the law and Gentiles did not.

What most Jews did not understand is that salvation had always been by grace through faith in Jehovah God with the promise of the coming Messiah. They honestly felt they were saved because they kept the law the best they could. The Judaizers failed to grasp that when Christ came, grace was fully revealed and now more clearly than ever both Jews and Gentiles had to be justified by grace through faith in Christ alone.

There are multitudes of people who say, “I’m a good person. I try the best I can to do right. I treat people fairly and honestly. I work hard and am a good citizen. Surely God will accept me if I’m trying hard to please Him?” People who say these things, do not understand what salvation is all about.

“Know that a man is not justified by observing the law”

A person cannot get right with God by doing good works, for good works cannot save a man (Rom. 3:10-12: **“As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.’”**) Our best human works are a garbage heap to a holy God. Our most brilliant endeavors are odious to the nostrils of righteous Jehovah.

The big lie in the world is that a man may be justified by the works of the law. The “big lie” is propagated by the “biggest liar” in this world, the devil himself. No one has ever been justified by the works of the law perfectly. No human being will ever keep the law of God perfectly or live perfectly in this life. Perfection is required by the law if one is to be accepted before God.

As we look into our hearts, we know we have broken God’s laws thousands of times, and we should realize that the law condemns us and does not save us.

“But by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in (into) Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ.”

Here is a clear statement that a person is justified by faith in Christ alone. Each individual must exercise faith in Christ if he is to be Justified. Justification means “to declare righteous.” It is a legal term and means just the opposite of “to condemn.” To condemn is to declare someone guilty; to justify is to declare a person not guilty or innocent or righteous.”

Justification is a key word. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which He puts a sinner right with Himself, not only pardoning and acquitting him, but accepting him as perfectly righteous.

When and where does a sinful person get a righteousness to be declared righteous before God? The moment a person trusts Christ, he is spiritually put into union with Christ and he receives positionally the righteousness of Christ. Christ kept the law perfectly and He lived the perfect life. Only Christ has a righteousness that is acceptable to God the Father. Those who have Christ are spiritually in union with Christ and share His righteousness which gives them a right standing before God (2 Cor.5: 21 **“God made him (Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**)

God’s holiness and justice must judge sin with wrath. And to live in the presence of God, one must have a righteousness that God will accept, and the only righteousness He will accept is perfect righteousness. When God looks down on the Christian, He does not see the Christian’s sin but He sees the righteousness of His Son in the believer. He will not judge the Christian because he has judged Christ for the Christian. He accepts the Christian because of Christ’s righteousness, and He declares every true believer in Christ righteous in His sight.

Paul’s gospel of grace stated that a man could only be saved or made right before God by faith in Christ alone apart from any human works. Christ died to deliver lawbreakers; He bled to save sinners; He suffered undefinable agony to rescue hell-bound people. Therefore, all that is required to be justified before God is to acknowledge our sin and helplessness, to repent (change our attitude) about our self-asserting and self-righteousness and to put our whole trust and confidence in Jesus Christ to save us.

It says men are to believe “into Christ.” This tells a little about what faith really is. It is not intellectual assent or an emotional religious experience, but it is a personal commitment to or julio Christ. Faith is casting away all confidence in self-effort to save ourselves and casting ourselves wholly on Christ to save us. Faith is turning loose of self and abandoning ourselves to Christ as our only hope of salvation.

Notice carefully there must be a right object of faith before one can be justified before God. The object of one’s faith must be Jesus Christ. A general belief in God will not justify anyone. Ninety-five percent of all Americans believe in God but they are not justified. Neither holding on to some religious experience will make one right before God. Even a confidence in your own faith in Christ will not justify you. You can only be justified by Christ and that through faith in Him.

A once famous Bible scholar named Lenski said, “All the believing in the world secures nothing but damnation from the Judge, but the tiniest believing in Christ secures salvation.”

“And not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

Three times for emphasis Paul repeats that salvation is not by works of any law. A trust in good works will not save a man in eternity but works will be the basis of his condemnation. Whatever a person’s religious upbringing, education, social status or racial origin, the way of salvation is the same. None can be justified by works. All men must be justified through faith in Christ.

Concerning justification through faith, Martin Luther said these words:

“This is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principle article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consists. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually.”

THE MAJOR OBJECTION TO JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH 2:17

“If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin?”

As soon as a person teaches that justification is by grace through faith in Christ apart from any human works, the objections begin to fly. Anyone knows that after a person is justified, he still sins at times, so does this make Christ the minister of sin? If a person can be saved apart from the law, is he being discouraged from doing good works? If a man is saved by faith in Christ alone, is Christ then discouraging the keeping of the moral law which God commanded to be kept? Even more severe, if men are justified by grace through faith alone apart from works, they are eternally secure in Christ, so now may they live as they please? Does justification make a person antinomian (against law) and a libertine (one without restraints)?

“Absolutely not!”

Paul emotionally replies by saying, “*Mai genoito*”—God forbid—Absolutely not! The thought of a Christian habitually sinning after salvation was repugnant to the Apostle Paul. Justification by faith in Christ never causes a person to become a libertine in his living. Nor does it make him one who is against moral law.

THE FIRST REFUTATION AGAINST THE CHARGE OF ANTINOMIANISM 2:18

“If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker”

While this verse is very hard to interpret, I think it is speaking about man’s responsibility for sin. Paul seems to be saying if after justification a man still sins, it is the Christian’s fault not Christ’s fault. A Christian can only blame himself for his sin, for a justified sinner is always responsible for his own sin after conversion.

So many Christians try to blame something or someone else for their sin: “The sin in me did it,” or “The flesh made me do it,” or “The devil made me do it,” or “The demons made me do it.” No, my friends, we do our own sin by our own choice and we are always responsible for it.

THE SECOND REFUTATION AGAINST THE CHARGE OF ANTINOMIANISM 2:19

“For through the law I died to the law”

The second argument against antinomianism is that Paul died to the legalistic aspects of the law and was now really free to live for God. It was through the law that Paul finally saw himself a sinner before

a holy God and his own inability to reach God through good works. The law forced him to seek salvation in Christ.

When Paul received Christ, he was put into spiritual union with Christ and shared the very death of Christ for sin. The Lord Jesus lived under the law, fully obeyed the law, assumed the guilt and penalty of the law and by dying under the law satisfied its requirements. By union with Christ, Paul was delivered from all legalistic claims or control over him. The Christian through spiritual union with Christ has passed out of divine law so far as the legalistic aspect is concerned.

The only way to get out from under the laws of the land is to die to the law. A bank robber may be hunted by the law for some crime he has committed. As long as he is alive the law has control over him. If, however, while robbing a bank, he is shot and killed, the law is still in force but he is dead. Therefore, the law has no control over him. He is free from the law in the sense that he died to the law.

By spiritual union with Christ, the Christian died to the law. Notice the law did not die. The law still exists. It is still in effect to point out damning guilt, judge sinful hearts and condemn all breakers of the law. The law is still in full force for the non-Christian. However, the Christian in Christ has died to the law. The law is still there but the Christian sustains a different relationship to the law as a saved man. The legalistic aspects are gone. Law cannot judge or condemn the Christian because the Christian is in Christ. The law can point out sin and be a moral guide to the Christian but it cannot condemn.

The law has no right to tell me that I must be justified by it. The law has the right to tell me that I should love God and my neighbor, that I should live in chastity, temperance, patience, etc. The law has no right to tell me how I may be delivered from sin, death and hell. It is the Gospel's business to tell me that. I must listen to the Gospel. It tells me, not what I must do, but what Jesus Christ, the Son of God has done for me. (Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*).

“So that I might live for God.”

Deliverance from the legalistic aspects of the law through sharing Christ's death, gave Paul the ability to really live for God. Legalism in every form kills the spirit of Christ because it comes between a man's soul and God. Freedom from legalism is the beginning of true freedom in Christ. When a man is free from legalism, he is not free to live for himself but he is free only to live for Christ. Freedom from law gives the Christian liberty to live for Christ.

THE THIRD REFUTATION AGAINST ANTINOMIANISM 2:20

“I have been crucified with Christ.”

Paul actually died with Christ because of spiritual union with Christ. When Christ died on the cross, every person who would ever believe in Christ was in His body that horrible day. Because of this, the Christian shares the death of Christ and also resurrection life because of spiritual union with Christ. The charge that justification by faith encourages a person to sin was ridiculous. Those who thought that the gospel of grace invited men to sin did not understand justification at all. Justification is the result of union with Christ and union with Christ not only gives us a position before God but also affects our character. We are justified in Christ. Our justification takes place when we are united to Christ by faith. One who is united to Christ is never the same person again. He is changed by a supernatural work of God. Not only is a person's standing changed but also his character is changed. To talk of going back to the old life on a permanent basis and sinning habitually as one pleases is impossible if one has truly been justified through union with Christ.

“And I no longer live.”

The “I” or ego of Paul had been put to death. The “I” of Paul's unsaved life had been crucified with Christ. The self-life had the sword put to it.

“But Christ lives in me.”

Because of spiritual union with Christ, Paul’s old, unsaved “I” was put to death through co-crucifixion. Now Christ is living in Paul because Paul shares the resurrected life of Jesus Christ through spiritual union. The secret to living a holy life while having freedom from law is that the believer is joined with Christ in resurrected life.

While Christ was living in Paul, it did not destroy his personality. Paul and Christ’s personality remained ever distinct. Paul retained his self-consciousness, his ability to think and act and his personal responsibility was never eliminated. There are some Christians who are very mystical and believe Christ’s personality molds into the personalities of all Christians. Therefore, it is Christ who thinks and acts for the Christian. They say that Christ actually takes over the personalities of Christians and lives life for them. Not so, Christ spiritually lives in the Christian and by faith in Christ, Christ’s life flows out through the Christian, but Christ never acts or thinks for the Christian.

Once we have been united to Christ in His death, our old life is finished. It is foolishness to suggest that we could ever go back to it. Besides, we have risen to a new life in Christ so that Christ lives in us. He gives us new desired for holiness, God and heaven. It is not that the Christian cannot sin after trusting in Christ because he does at times, but he does not long to sin and is miserable when he does sin. Everything is different for the Christian because he shares Christ’s death and resurrection as a spiritual creation of God (2 Cor. 5:17. **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, He is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”**)

The Christian is no longer bound by legalistic law but is bound to Jesus Christ who gives him the desire to keep the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21 **“To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law, but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.”**)

“The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God”

The Christian life is lived by faith in the living and resurrected Christ. Faith is the key that unlocks the great spiritual secrets for those who are obedient. Those who exercise more faith are going to experience more spiritual realities that flow from union with Christ.

“Who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Salvation for Paul was individual, particular and personal. He realized that Christ loved him and died for him, not because he deserved it but because Christ did it in grace.

Paul never got over the fact that Christ died for him in love when multiple millions had no understanding of Christ at all.

THE FINAL ARGUMENT AGAINST LEGALISM 2:21

“I do not set aside the grace of God.”

Paul knew that justification was by grace through faith in Christ. Salvation is all of grace and is appropriated through faith in Christ. Any system of works simply sets aside the real gospel, making it no gospel at all.

“For if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Christianity is based on God’s grace and Christ’s death for sin and sinners. Christ has already accomplished salvation in His death and all any man can do is lay hold of this death for sinners through

faith. If anyone insists that justification is by works and that he can earn his salvation by his own efforts, he is undermining true Christianity. He is setting aside the grace of God and making Christ's death unnecessary.

CONCLUSION

The Bible tells us that God is holy and righteous and man is sinful and rebellious. Man is in a predicament, for how can a sinful man get right before a holy God? Man knows that sin separates him from God, for his conscience and experience tells him something is wrong spiritually. There is no peace and only friction. Men are alienated from God's fellowship. They are under His judgment and banished from His presence.

How can a sinful man be right with God? He must trust Christ, for only Christ can give a man or woman a righteousness that will be accepted by God. Only God can declare a sinner righteous and He will do just that for all who have trusted in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.