

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-FOUR)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL”

(PART 10)

GALATIANS 2:16

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

“Yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”

In previous Lessons we have stated that in verses **14-21** of **Galatians** chapter **2**, Paul explains the justification for his public rebuke of Peter.

In one of his sermons, **John MacArthur** emphasizes the vital importance of this section of Paul’s letter. He says,

“In this little section...we are introduced to some tremendous Pauline terms. For example, we run into the term **pistis**, or “**faith**,” which becomes such a prominent word in the vocabulary of Paul. Then we run into the word **nomos**, which translates “**law**,” another prominent word. But above and beyond those words, we run into another word that becomes a cardinal word not only in Christianity, but in Paul’s mind, and his heart and his writing. And that is the word “**justification**.” And I believe this, that no one understands Christianity who does not understand justification. Now you may not understand what that term

means, but you have got to understand the concept or you can never understand Christianity...

[Paul] says, 'Peter, I'm rebuking you because you're violating the cardinal doctrine of Christianity. By what you're doing, you're condoning legalism. You're condoning a faith-works system.' And he is saying, in effect, 'Now, Peter, listen. I'm not just asking you a question; I'm going to tell you why I'm posing this question to you.' And the **why**, of course, is based on the doctrine of justification...You ask 'What is the doctrine of justification?' It is the good news that sinful men, sinful women can be brought into the acceptance of God, not because of their works, but simply through faith in Jesus Christ. That's the doctrine of justification."

Last week, we noted that in **Galatians 2:16**, the word "**Justification**" is mentioned for the first time in the letter. We also noted that if, as most Bible scholars believe, **Galatians** was the first letter written by Paul, this would be the first appearance of the word in any of his writings!

We said that **Justification by Faith Alone** is one of the most important doctrines of Scripture and it was therefore very important that we understand this doctrine. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is so important that 3 New Testament books-**Romans, Galatians** and **Hebrews**-are largely devoted to explaining it.

Justification is an **act** of God whereby He **declares** the believing sinner **righteous** in Jesus Christ. Every word of this statement is important. Justification is an **act**, not a **process**. No believer is more justified than another believer, nor is it possible for a believer to ever be more justified than he or she was when he or she was converted. In other words, there is no such thing as **progressive** justification.

In **Romans 5:1** Paul writes, "*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (**English Standard Version**).

Brothers and sisters, our justification is a **fait accompli**. This is a French expression which means, “an action which has already been done and which cannot be changed.” The phrase, “*have been justified*,” is in the **orist tense** in the Greek, which indicates that justification is a **one-time** event. Justification is not something that is going on now; it is something that happened and was completed the moment we were saved. The moment we believed, God declared us righteous, never to change His mind! Paul is careful to emphasize that justification is an assured fact.

Romans 5:1 could literally be translated, “*Therefore since we have been justified **once-and-for-all** by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” If we were justified by **works**, then it would have to be a **gradual** process. But since we are justified by **faith**, it is an **instant** and **immediate** transaction between the believing sinner and God.

Furthermore, because justification is an act of **God**, it is not the result of the character or works of human beings. It is not by doing the works of the Law that a sinner gets a right standing before God, but by putting his or her faith in Jesus Christ.

In **Romans 8:33** Paul writes, “*Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies*” (**New English Translation**).

In justification, God **declares** the believing sinner righteous; He does not **make** him or her righteous. However, the individual who has been justified will increasingly be conformed, by the indwelling Holy Spirit, to the image of Jesus Christ, God’s Son. Before the sinner places his or her trust in Christ for salvation, he or she stands **Guilty** before God, but the moment he or she believes in Christ, he or she is declared “**Not Guilty**” and he or she can **never** be declared guilty again!

Therefore Justification is more than “**forgiveness**,” because a person could be forgiven and then go out and sin and become guilty again. But once a person has been “justified by faith in Christ alone,” he or she can never again be held guilty before God.

Justification is also more than “**pardon**,” because a pardoned criminal still has a criminal record. But when the sinner is “justified by faith in Christ alone,” his or her past sins are remembered against him or her no more. God removes his or her record of sins for all of time and eternity!

In **Romans 4:1-8**, we read the following:

1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

7 “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”
(English Standard Version)

In **Hebrews 10:1-18**, the author writes,

1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?

3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;

6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

7 Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law),

9 then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second.

10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.

14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,”

17 then he adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

(English Standard Version)

Commenting on this passage **C.H. Spurgeon** says,

“We have passed over from death to life. We have escaped from under the dominion of law into the kingdom of grace. We have come from under the curse, and we dwell in the region of blessing. We have believed on Him who justifies the ungodly, and our faith is counted for righteousness. There is now no condemnation to us, for we are in Christ Jesus our Lord, and do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. It was the will of God the Father, but it was carried out by the divine Son when He came into the world... This incarnate God, by offering His own blood, by laying down His own life, by bearing in His own body the curse, and in His own spirit enduring the wrath, was able to effect the purpose of the everlasting Father in the purging of His people, in the setting of His chosen apart, and making them henceforth holy unto the Lord... *“It is finished” (John 19:30)*. Does the divine law require for our acceptance perfect submission to the will of the Lord? He has rendered it. Does it ask complete obedience to its precepts? He

has presented the same. Does the fulfilled will of the Lord call for abject suffering, a sweat of blood, pangs unknown, and death itself? Christ has presented it all, whatever that "all" may be...The Father joins in the verdict of His Son that it is finished; all the will of God for the sanctification of His people is accomplished."

In the act of justification, it is **sinner**s who are declared righteous, not those who are righteous! Earlier, in **Romans 4:5**, we read, "*And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies **the ungodly**, his faith is counted as righteousness*" (**English Standard Version**). God justifies sinners, not righteous persons because there are no righteous persons for Him to justify! Indeed, if they were righteous they would not need to be justified!

The reason that most sinners are not justified is because they will not admit that they are sinners! And, according to **Matthew 9:9-13**, sinners are the only kind of people Jesus Christ can save:

9 As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

10 And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples.

11 And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

12 But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

13 Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

(English Standard Version)

When Peter separated himself from the Gentiles, he was denying the truth of justification by faith, because he was saying in effect, “We Jews are different from-and better than-you Gentiles.” And yet, both Jews and Gentiles are sinners according to **Romans 3:22-24**, and can be justified only by faith in Christ:

22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

(English Standard Version)

The **English Standard Version** translates **Galatians 2:16** as follows:

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

Paul is making the point here that even though Peter and himself were Jews by birth, and therefore not regarded as “sinners,” at least, not in the same sense that the Gentiles were, they both were aware of the fact that sinners, whether Jew or Gentile, could not be justified by the works of the Law, but only by faith in Christ. The word “*know*” is the translation of a Greek word which refers to knowledge gained by perception. It speaks of fullness of knowledge, knowledge that is certain. The word is plural indicating that this truth was something that Paul, Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers know beyond a shadow of a doubt. They had been under the works of the Law all their life and knew that that system did not work. It was impotent to save! Their works had not made them right before God! Our phrase, “Been there and done that,” appropriately summarizes what Paul is saying here.

Spurgeon explains that,

"No mere man can keep the law; no mere man has ever done so. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God (**Romans 3:23**). As an absolutely perfect obedience is demanded by the law, which knows nothing of mercy, we fly from the law to obtain salvation by the grace of God in Christ Jesus."

It is for this reason that Paul clearly contrasts the two ways human beings have sought to be justified. It is either by **law** and **works**, or by **grace** and **faith**. His repetition of the phrase, "*by works of the law*" is to be noted. Three times-at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the verse-he states that it is impossible for a person to be declared righteous or be justified "*by works of the law.*"

It is also noticeable that Paul speaks of the role of faith three times in the verse- "*through faith in Jesus Christ,*" "*we also have believed in Christ Jesus,*" and "*in order to be justified by faith.*"

In verse **16**, the three uses of **faith in Christ Jesus** are used by Paul to counter the three-fold mention of **the works of the Law**.

Commenting on this verse, the American theologian, **Phil A. Newton**, made the following remark:

"Why does Paul go to such great lengths to repeat this truth over and over? I believe it is because of our natural propensity for trusting in ourselves and our own merit for our standing with God. There is a battle raging today throughout the world in the heads and hearts of multitudes of people, who just will not accept the fact that they can do absolutely nothing to justify themselves before God!"