

Lesson 25 "Justification by Faith" Galatians 1:1-2:21

In this year's opening lecture, Carol Martin told us if there was one goal she had for us this year, it would be to fully understand the concept of God's grace. Galatians 1 and 2 is some of the best Scripture in the Bible to help us reach that goal.

It has been said that perhaps nothing in the history of Christendom has been as profoundly influential as Paul's letter to the Galatians. His letter *shouts* to believers in Jesus, "You're free! You're free from the bondage of the law. You're free from trying to earn God's favor. You're free by grace through faith in Christ alone. You're free to live a life of burden-less joy based on grace and not on works." The message of Galatians is the spiritual freedom believers have in Jesus from the bondage of sin and religious legalism.

We learned in Romans and 2 Corinthians that in justification, God pardons sinners of *all* their sins and declares them righteous when they confess their trust in Jesus Christ. (Romans 3:31-26, Romans 5:16, and 2 Corinthians 5:21) The sinner is *justified by faith alone*. We can't be justified because of any good that we have done or will do, but it is based solely on our faith in what Christ has done on our behalf. Nothing else is required to obtain the grace of justification.

Paul was a young man when he wrote Galatians and his passion and zeal permeated every sentence. He defended the purity of the gospel and his authority as one chosen by God to be an Apostle. He took an unwavering stand for the gospel against strong opposition from Jews who believed living under the Mosaic Law would make Christians more religious and more loved by God. They weren't saying Jesus was unnecessary but implying that He wasn't enough. They wanted to blend the salvation from Jesus with the Law of Moses.

The great Bible teacher, J. Vernon McGee said, "Galatians is the strongest declaration and defense of the doctrine of justification by faith in or out of Scripture." Let's begin our journey into Paul's marvelous letter.

The gospel was taking root in non-Jewish, Gentile communities; communities of people dealing with significant influences of the Jewish religion and practices. The most pressing controversy in the early church was the relationship of new believers, particularly Gentiles, to the Jewish laws.

Paul wrote to the Galatians knowing they would be publicly reading his emotionally packed letter. He did not shy away from truths they needed to hear, and he didn't waste time with customary courtesies. The critical nature of his message drove him to write frankly and sharply because the Galatians were deserting the gospel of grace.

There's a story about a man who did *not* like to be interrupted while working on a project. One day he was working in his garage. Knowing his disdain for interruptions, his wife walked into the garage and quietly stood by him for several minutes waiting to speak. Finally, her husband looked up at her – the signal that she had his attention and could talk to him. Very calmly she said, "The house is on fire." We learn early in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches that the house is on fire. A grave problem existed in the churches and an immediate communication from Paul was needed.

In these two chapters we'll see how:
The Purity of the Gospel was Clarified
The Purity of the Gospel was Preserved
The Purity of the Gospel was Proclaimed

THE PURITY OF THE GOSPEL CLARIFIED

Paul was in Antioch when he received word that "some people" as Paul called them, known as Judaizers, were circulating false doctrine in the Galatian churches. Judaizers were Jews - converts from Jewish backgrounds, immersed in Hebrew traditions and practices. They moved among the churches, distorting the gospel, proclaiming it wasn't enough to simply receive God's grace through faith in Christ, but that believers also had to submit to Old Testament Law. They were also known as legalists.

Picture Paul, listening in stunned silence to news that the Galatian churches were turning away from the grace of Christ. I pictured him putting his head in his hands and wondered if his work had been in vain.

The Galatian Christians were beginning to believe they had to live under the Law, which included mandatory circumcision, dietary restrictions, and observance of Jewish religious days. These were the burdens Jesus came to remove and He rebuked the legalists of His day, saying, "You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry." (Luke 11:46) He was referring to the hundreds of laws people were told they had to follow to be right with God. Later in Galatians Paul wrote, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) That yoke is legalism.

Legalism means living by religious rules, regulations and standards of conduct in an attempt to gain God's favor. The Galatians began abandoning the grace of Jesus and became entangled in legalism. In his book, *Grace Awakening*, Charles Swindoll states, "If I had to name the greatest enemies of Christianity, I would list legalism first."

Let's not think this was something that only applied to the Galatian churches. Legalism also exists in some churches today. It is a distortion of God's grace - the

unmerited gift of salvation through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. We ask how can legalistic churches ignore Scripture such as, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace." (Romans 11:6) and, "For if a law had been given that was able to give life, then righteousness would certainly have been based on law." (Galatians 3:21)

Paul left Galatia only a year earlier, so he was "astonished" the churches were so quickly turning away from the gospel he had taught them and by which they were saved. They were confused and turning to a distortion of the gospel - a theology that was a mixture of grace and legalism.

The Galatians *had* believed the truth Paul preached and had received salvation. But Jewish believers could not accept that Gentiles could be right with God without following the Law of Moses. They infiltrated the churches, teaching that salvation required both faith in Christ *and* obedience to the Law. They were promoting their "works theology" - that circumcision, rituals, and other traditions were necessary to be considered part of God's people. These legalists were undermining the very foundation of the gospel.

Paul wrote there is *no* other gospel, *no* other version, *no* exception to the truth that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. To change that message in any way is to distort the gospel of Christ – to pervert it. This "different gospel" as Paul called it (I'll call it an "un-gospel"), actually meant that the finished work of Christ was inadequate to save.

Adding law-keeping to faith nullifies grace. Advocates of the un-gospel fail to remember Old Testament Law condemns them, and that salvation is based on God's promise, not men's performance. No ritual can improve on the finished work of Christ.

Paul knew if people accepted the Judaizers' distorted doctrine they were deserting Christ Himself and would be bound up like slaves to rules they couldn't obey and then freedom and joy in Christ could not exist in their life. If we could attain righteousness through the law or by some deeds, Christ would not have had to die.

Picture the torturous beating Jesus underwent. He was spit upon and screamed at in hatred. He was stripped naked and nailed to splintered boards for all to see, including his mother. He died in agony. That's what I reflected on when I read Galatians 2:21, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing." If anyone claims grace *alone* isn't the enough for salvation or that following rules must be added to grace, then all that Jesus went through was worthless.

Nothing has happened to change the truth of the gospel between Paul's day and ours. There is no "gospel" that says some people can believe one thing about salvation and others can believe something different and both are correct. The world says there

are different roads to heaven. No, there is only one way to God, regardless what celebrities or leaders in this world advocate. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Paul soundly condemned anyone who would degrade the grace of God and change the gospel. He wrote that *anyone*, an angel or even himself, who preached an "un-gospel" will be "under God's curse." Those who tamper with the gospel will face God's judgment.

THE PURITY OF THE GOSPEL PRESERVED

Since Paul was not one of the original Twelve Apostles trained by Jesus while He was on earth, Paul's opponents wanted to discredit his apostleship. If they could discredit Paul, they could discredit the gospel he taught and supplant their own "grace plus legalism un-gospel" into the churches. To preserve the gospel's power which frees believers from slavery to the law, Paul devoted much of Chapters 1 and 2 to authenticate his apostleship. He also related events wherein he stood up to those trying to spread legalism.

Paul clearly defended his authority as an Apostle as he showed his critics that neither his message, nor his commission to preach the gospel, came from mere men. He received no doctrinal or theological training from other men or even from the Apostles. "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." (Galatians 1:11,12) His message was as authoritative as the other Apostles because it came straight from Jesus.

Neither did men or Apostles convert him. He was "called by God's grace" before he was born (Galatians 1:15). Apostles did not send him. He was sent "by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Galatians 1:1) and God called Paul "as an Apostle to the Gentiles." (Galatians 2:8) He did not consult any human being. (Galatians 1:16) Neither the Apostles nor church leaders added anything to Paul's message. (Galatians 2:6)

Paul provided a brief biography of his Judaism background which emphasized how astonishing his conversion was from persecutor to preacher. What Judaism could not accomplish, grace did.

He was also supported as an Apostle by the church leaders. Paul wrote of a visit to the Jerusalem church. There, he and companions, Barnabas and Titus, held a private meeting with "esteemed leaders" (Galatians 2:2) in the church, including Peter, James and John.

Paul presented the message about Jesus which he had been preaching to Gentiles. It was confirmed to be the same message as that of the leaders, namely, one

cannot be saved by keeping the law; salvation is found only through faith in Christ. And the issue of whether Gentile believers must follow the law after trusting in Christ was addressed. The Apostles agreed that it was not needed, and Titus, a Gentile, was not required to be circumcised which the Law of Moses would have required.

"False brethren" as Paul called them, did not agree. They wanted to make Gentiles slaves to the law. But Paul wrote, "We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." (Galatians 2:5)

The Apostles and leaders acknowledged that Paul was also an Apostle in his own right and had been sent by Christ to preach to the Gentiles. James and John expressed their official approval with offering what Paul called, "the right hand of fellowship." (Galatians 2:9) This was a significant action which represented an acceptance and inclusion of Paul into their fellowship.

Paul also related a situation that occurred between he and the Apostle Peter. By relating this event, Paul provided another example of his independence as an Apostle, supporting that he was subordinate only to God, "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 2:10) Sometime after the above-mentioned visit to the Jerusalem church, Paul had a confrontation with Apostle Peter.

Early in his Apostleship, Peter was given a vision by God wherein God showed Peter the gospel would also be brought to those whom Jews considered to be unclean – the Gentiles. From that vision, Peter learned both Jews and Gentiles were given God's grace. And sometime later, when Peter was living in Antioch, he enjoyed the community of both Jew and Gentile believers. He ate with the Gentiles and likely spent time in their homes. But that changed when Judaizers from Jerusalem came to Antioch.

When they arrived, they saw Peter dining with Gentiles, which is prohibited by Jewish law. Because he was afraid of the Judaizers, Peter "separated himself from the Gentiles." (Galatians 2:12) Scholars believe perhaps Peter did so because Jewish Christians were facing bitter opposition from zealous Jews for socializing with Gentiles. So when Peter separated himself from his Gentile brethren, other Jewish believers did the same. Peter had aligned himself with men he *knew* did not embrace the true gospel, and by his actions it appeared he supported *their* doctrine, not the doctrine of grace.

When Paul arrived in Antioch, he must have seen the destructive influence of Peter's hypocrisy and boldly rebuked Peter in public, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (Galatian 2:14) The incident established Paul's independence as an Apostle. Paul's authority for confronting Peter was the gospel.

However, let's not forget that Peter was human. That's not an excuse, but aren't you thankful Scripture lets us see that even God's prophets, kings and followers of Jesus were fallible? All of us have weaknesses and fears we give into instead of doing what we know is right. Thankfully, we have God's Word to strengthen and encourage us, "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong." (1 Corinthians 16:13)

THE PURITY OF THE GOSPEL PROCLAIMED

Galatians 2:16 is thought to be one of the key verses in the Bible, "A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified." Paul declared *no one* can be justified - made righteous before God by following the works of the law. Theologian James Dunn said, "Justification by faith was Paul's answer to the question: How is it that Gentiles can be equally acceptable to God as Jews?"

Some might tune out when they hear a word like *justification* because it sounds theological and "churchy" but it's important to understand that justification by faith means the moment someone believes in Jesus Christ they are justified, made righteous before God. They are saved and set free from the penalty of sin - declared righteous in the divine courtroom. He or she can no longer be condemned. Martin Luther said the doctrine of justification by faith is the article on which the church stands or falls. Here the gospel is clear: we are justified *only* by faith in Jesus Christ.

In the closing of Chapter 2, Paul made some incredible declarations. The basic doctrine of Christianity is illustrated in the marvelous verse, Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

When someone is justified by placing their faith in Christ, they become so closely attached to Christ that they die with Him, in the spiritual sense, and He begins to live in them. And what is Christ's motive for giving Himself for us? He loved us. What a glorious thought!

The conclusion of Paul's case for God's grace is found in Galatians 2:21. It summed up everything Paul lived and taught and proclaimed. "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

To abandon grace, when it is altered or distorted to include legalistic beliefs needed to gain God's approval, is to say Christ's atoning death on the cross is worthless and not sufficient for salvation. Those who insist that salvation can be earned by one's efforts undermines the very foundation of Christianity and nullifies the precious death of Christ on their behalf. And to those who insist there are rituals to follow after salvation

reminds me of what Philip Yancey said, "There is nothing you can do to make God love you more and nothing you can do to make God love you less."

Because Jesus Christ Himself revealed the gospel to Paul, Paul *knew* the pure gospel message is centered in justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. God's Word reveals that same gospel to us. Unlike the Galatian churches, let's not allow an "un-gospel" lead us to desert "the One who called you to live in the grace of Christ." (Galatians 1:6)

We must "contend for the faith" (Jude 1:3) and, "Gently instruct opponents, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth." (2 Timothy 2:25)

Let's be alert and stay grounded in God's word. Participate in Bible studies, talk about our faith with fellow believers, sing worship songs that proclaim God's truths. Remember, Satan doesn't care how he deceives us as long as we don't believe the truth, don't act on the truth, and don't spread the truth to others. "If Satan can keep a person ignorant, he can keep him weak." (Warren Wiersbe)

As believers in Jesus Christ, may God enable each of us to preserve and proclaim the purity of the gospel.