

# Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Notes by Doug Hamilton

## Justification by Works or by Faith?

Galatians 2:15-16 “We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

- We must remember that Paul is reflecting on the confrontation of Peter from the previous passage. Peter pulled back from the table of the gentile Christians when Jewish brethren came up from Jerusalem, thus starting a controversy. This was completely contrary against the law of Christ, for He brought down the separation between Jew and gentile.
- It is here that Paul introduces a concept, justification by the works of the Law or justification by faith in Christ Jesus. Contextually the word *justification* means to be vindicated or cleared from the charges of sin. Simply understood *justification* means “*just as if I never sinned*”. That is the position that all people must be in on when standing before God on that great Day of Judgment.
- The “nature” of the Jew was to live by a code of ethics as spelled out in the Law, for they had centuries of practice. In contrast to that would be the gentile which did not have the same. The reality was that nobody, either Jew or Gentile, could be justified by a set of rules, for nobody could keep the entire Law.
  - Romans 3:20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.
  - James 2:10-11 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all. <sup>11</sup> For He who said, “DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,” also said, “DO NOT COMMIT MURDER.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.
- This was a struggle for the first century church, wavering between justification by faith and works. Peter lapsed into it and had to be confronted by Paul. We are not above the same.

### Problem #1) Justification by works nullifies the grace of God.

Galatians 2:17-21 “But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! <sup>18</sup> “For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. <sup>19</sup> “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. <sup>20</sup> “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. <sup>21</sup> “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”

- Paul was reminding the Galatians that the Law pointed out the need for Christ. With coming to Jesus was the need to recognize our vile state of sin and the need for justification from the sins. To come to Christ for justification from our sins and then re-erect the structure of the Law makes no sense, for it nullifies what Jesus did on the cross.
- When Paul came to Jesus, he died to the Law once and for all. God's grace must be at the center of our Christian lives or it is nullified altogether. *Romans 7:4 Therefore, my brethren,*

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*you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.*

- Problem #1 of the Galatians reverting to the works of the Law was that they would no longer be in the grace of God.

### Problem #2) Justification by works eliminates faith.

Galatians 3:1-9 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed *as crucified*?<sup>2</sup> This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?<sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?<sup>4</sup> Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?<sup>5</sup> So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?<sup>6</sup> Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.<sup>8</sup> The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.”<sup>9</sup> So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

- It says in the MSG “you crazy Galatians” and in the NAB “stupid Galatians”. They captured the emotion of the word quite well, for they were being absolutely foolish, thinking that they could now be justified by the works of the Law.
- Did they enter the covenant of Christ through the works of the Law? Of course not, but through the hearing and responding to the gospel. It says concerning the region of Galatia that Paul “*continued to preach the gospel*” (Acts 14:7). Paul was clear with them from the beginning of the letter that they ended up in Christ through faith in the gospel, not the works of the Law!
- Were the Holy Spirit inspired miraculous works that they witnessed done through the Law or through faith? Of course we know that answer is the latter, for it was through faith.
- The basis of Christianity is faith in Christ, not works of the Law, for they run counterculture. Both cannot be the basis of a person, only one.
- He quoted *Genesis 15:5-6* *And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”*<sup>6</sup> *Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.* The point being that Abraham received the promise centuries before the Law was given and pursued it by faith. In that way we are the children of Abraham. This was the same argument that Paul made in *Romans 4:5* “*But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...*”
- When we view our works as a means of justification, we go contrary to the faith in Christ. They cannot exist together for it eliminates faith.

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- Example: When someone says that they are going to heaven because they believe in Christ and are not that bad of a person, an oxymoron exists. We are either *that bad* and Christ had to die for us or we are *not that bad* and need not Christ.

### Problem #3) Justification by works generates unrealistic standards.

Galatians 3:10-14 For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."<sup>11</sup> Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."<sup>12</sup> However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM."<sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"—<sup>14</sup> in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

- It is while under the Law that one sees their weaknesses of sin. The Law was never meant to justify, but to condemn. Gal 3:19 says the Law "...was added because of transgressions..." and "...has shut up everyone under sin..." (Galatians 3:22). It was the Law that acted as a "...tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith." (Galatians 3:24). Christ was the only One that kept the whole Law.
  - Matthew 5:18 "...not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished."
  - Hebrews 4:15 says Jesus was "...tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin."
  - 2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
- When the Galatians fashioned themselves to be "works-justified" rather than "faith-justified", the result was a standard that left them cursed and empty. At best they would be frustrated knowing that they could not do it, making them a "loser". Talk about a self-esteem builder!

### Problem #4) Justification by works removes God's promise.

Galatians 3:15-18 Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is *only* a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it.<sup>16</sup> Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.<sup>17</sup> What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.<sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

- Abraham received the Law 430 years prior to the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. He pursued a seven-fold promise as he ventured in faith toward the land of Canaan. *Genesis 12:1-3 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; <sup>2</sup> And I will make you a*

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*great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; <sup>3</sup> And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*

- He was in pursuit of the entire package of promises and they would come through Christ. He pursued them by faith and not that of the works of the Law.
  - Romans 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.
  - Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.
- God's promises for us are ultimately in the future, with the greatest of them being eternal life with Him. It is with that in mind that the faith of Abraham serves us well. The Jews, whom followed the Law, were considered the children of Abraham. It was never the Law that was going to justify them, but the Messiah that was to come from the Jewish people.
- The promises that were coming were not based on works of the Law, but on faith in Christ. They were not for those whom based their justification on themselves, but on Christ. When a person seeks to be justified by the Law, they are removing God's promises from their lives.

### Is possible for Christians of today to go down a similar path of justification by works??

- Absolutely! Our struggle might not be with "the Law" of Moses, but with the life of a Christian. Using the following scripture from James, let us examine a common mistake of the Christian.

James 2:21-24 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; <sup>23</sup> and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. <sup>24</sup> You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

- When Paul quoted Gen 15:5-6, it was in contrast to the works of the Law of Moses. Some were teaching that Christians could be justified by the works of the Law. James uses the same scripture to prove another point, that a Christian's faith is worthless if they do not back it up with works of faith.
- There are two primary ways one can tell what is in their heart, 1) by what they teach and 2) by the fruit that they bear. The latter is a more common indicator. Paul would touch on this later in Galatians 5:22, confirming that you will know them by their fruit (Mt 7:16). James argues that the one that is cleansed by the blood of Jesus has an obligation to walk in that faith by which they were justified.
- Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.
- We walk in the light because Jesus has put us in the light. Our walk is that of faith and obedience, not that which merits salvation.

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### The Application

- If you are walking the walk that God has called us to walk, keep walking in humility and meekness. Do not think for a moment you are special because of something you have done, but what Christ has done.
- There are countless souls that have walked away from Christ while walking for Christ. They slowly begin to transfer a faithful walk for Jesus into that of self-righteousness. In the end the risk going to their grave believing that they will gain heaven in the future through their system of rule-keeping, a "justification of works". Yes, the walk of Christ is necessary and expected of God, but it must never be confused with "justification by faith".

### Justification by Works or by Faith?

We enter the covenant through faith and live in the covenant with works of faith. We must flee the hidden concept of "Justification by Works" and embrace the walk of "Justification by Faith"