

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part seven - Teaching #2141

Sunday, November 7th, 2021 - 10 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHY OUR BEST RELIGIOUS EFFORTS CAN NEVER PRODUCE A FREE OR HOLY LIFE

Galatians 2:15-21 - “We are Jews by birth and not “Gentile sinners,” [16] and yet because we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we ourselves have believed in Christ Jesus. This was so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified. [17] But if we ourselves are also found to be “sinners” while seeking to be justified by Christ, is Christ then a promoter of sin? Absolutely not! [18] If I rebuild those things that I tore down, I show myself to be a lawbreaker. [19] For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live for God. [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. [21] I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.”

It's very important to remember the context of these verses. Paul is continuing his argument with Peter about the behavior of Peter and Barnabas at Antioch (2:11-13). Peter, after experiencing the revelation of God in a vision, that he must not call unclean what God was now pronouncing clean, was free to eat and fellowship with Gentile believers in the church at Antioch.

That is, he did so **until** certain Jewish teachers came from Jerusalem. When Peter saw them come to Antioch, he withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile believers and reverted back to the dietary and separation regulations of Old Testament, ethnic Judaism.

Paul confronted him publicly about this. Peter's actions carried such weight in the New Testament church that Paul said by separating himself from the Gentiles Peter was "**compelling the Gentiles to live like the Jews**" (2:14).

This is why Paul's rebuke to Peter seems so harsh. And this is why Paul's rebuke of Peter was so **public**. The rebuke **had** to be public because Peter's **offense** was public. Peter wasn't just making a **private, personal** decision about his religious practices. His actions were so visible and so forthright that he was **swaying the church away from the gospel by his actions as a church leader**. Peter was an **apostle**. And Paul was trying desperately to **undo** the effects of Peter's actions.

Our text today is a continuation of Paul's argument with Peter about this very important subject. These verses are very complex and cannot be easily skimmed over. They don't just pull neatly apart for easy sermon construction. The overall thrust of Paul's argument is to show Peter, and also us, that Peter's actions are totally inconsistent with any meaningful embrace of the Cross of Jesus Christ. Paul is going to show that ***either*** justification comes by ***faith in Christ alone***, or it comes through the ***works of the regulations of the Jewish Old Covenant***, but it can't come through ***both***.

In other words, to jump for a moment to the very ***end*** of Paul's argument, whenever ***anything*** is added to faith in Jesus Christ as a requirement for a righteous standing before God, you don't just ***add*** something to Christianity. You ***destroy*** Christianity: **Galatians 2:21 - "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing." - IPAD TEXT**

Let's work through some of the key points of this text:

- 1) **FIRST, THIS IS A WONDERFUL TEXT TO SHOW THE PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE OF SOUND THEOLOGY IN SAFE CHRISTIAN LIVING**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 2:15-16 - “We are Jews by birth and not “Gentile sinners,” [16] and yet because we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we ourselves have believed in Christ Jesus. This was so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because *by the works of the law no human being will be justified.*”

Please notice what Paul is doing with Peter here. What is the proper response to someone making the kind of mistake Peter is making? There are many things Paul *could* have said to Peter: ***“Peter, you really need to pray and seek God about this. The Holy Spirit will show you the truth about this issue.”*** Or, ***“Peter, you’re not being very loving to these new Gentile Christians. You should really try to be more compassionate!”***

But Paul doesn’t start with either of those responses. In verses 15 and 16 Paul starts by showing Peter the things they *both* (Peter and Paul) ***know to be true theologically.*** Notice the emphasis on their ***common, shared perspective in these two verses:***

Paul says two things about both himself and Peter. He says they were both **“Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners....”** (15). And then he says they both knew **“that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ”** (16). Paul learned this on the Damascus road and Peter learned it in the vision of the sheet lowered from heaven.

But we need to look carefully at that first point from verse 15. What does Paul mean when he says, **“We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners?”** Does he mean that both he and Peter were sinless? Is he claiming moral perfection for both himself and Peter? That can't be it. For, in other places, Paul describes himself as the **“chief of sinners”** (1 Timothy 1:15).

When he says he and Peter aren't **“Gentile sinners”** he means he and Peter have lived their whole lives **keeping the Jewish laws of purity and separation**. They haven't lived like the Gentiles. In other words, he's trying to show that both he and Peter share this common Jewish stock and background. They have lived with purity before these regulations of ethnic Judaism.

The reason I'm pointing out this distinct meaning of the word **“sinner”** in **verse 15** is it will become very important when we come to interpret **verse 17**. But we'll get to that in a minute.

Let's get back to the importance of **sound theology** for safe and sound lives. Paul is linking himself up with Peter in **verses 15 and 16**. He realizes that **Peter knows better than he is living right at this moment**. He knows that **fear** is turning Peter into a hypocrite just for this moment.

But the important starting point for this study is **seeing how Paul deals with Peter's error**. He **calls Peter back to what he knows**.

This is so important. And it applies to **all** of us. We will all, in our Christian walk, either be driven by what we **know** or by what we **feel**. These are our **two internal engines**. And it's crucial to remember there are really no other options. What Peter was **feeling** in Antioch was pressure and fear. And, like all of us, his **feelings** had more immediate power over his actions than his **understanding**.

We all have the tendency to **give more weight** to our feelings than our understanding. Our feelings are more **immediate**, more **tangible**, and far more **compelling** than is our knowledge. We almost automatically think of our feelings as our **real self**.

When we meet someone we haven't seen for a while and want to know what the state of their life is right at that moment we say, "**How are you feeling?**", not, "**What are you thinking?**" And the assumption behind that question is that **feelings** reveal the real state of affairs in that person more than their ideas and thoughts.

But feelings are blind guides. We need **truth**, and in the Christian life, **Scriptural truth**, to assess and measure and keep our blind feelings in check.

So that, it seems to me, is the most basic starting point. We tend to think theology is important only for pastors and seminary students. But this is miles from the truth. Remember, ***sound theology is the Holy Spirit's way of keeping your life out of a mess.***

2) **A LIVING FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST MUST OVERRIDE AND REPLACE ANY OTHER COMMITMENT TO ANY OTHER PLAN FOR SELF-IMPROVEMENT BEFORE GOD**

Now we come to some truly fascinating, and potentially confusing words in the text:

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 2:17-18 - “But if we ourselves are also found to be “sinners” while seeking to be justified by Christ, is Christ then a promoter of sin? Absolutely not! [18] If I rebuild those things that I tore down, I show myself to be a lawbreaker.”

Again, it’s important to understand the sense in which Paul uses the term “*sinner*” in **verse 17**. He’s using it in the same sense as he used it in **verse 15** - “*We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.*” In both verse 15 and 17 the “*sin*” Paul is speaking of is the sin of eating with the Gentiles. It is *sin* only from the Jewish perspective.

These are tricky verses. Follow Paul’s logic here. If it truly **were** a sin to eat with the Gentiles, then Jesus **would** be a minister of sin, because it was through faith in Christ’s free gift of righteousness that Paul and Peter had come to see that “**by the works of the Law** (circumcision, and dietary regulations) **no flesh will be justified**” (**2:16b**). It was because of their faith in the finished work of Christ on the Cross that Peter and Paul had both embraced their Gentile brothers and sisters.

So, yes, if it **were** really a sin to eat with the Gentile believers then Christ **would** be a minister of sin. But it’s **not** a sin to eat with Gentile believers, so Christ is **not** a minister of sin.

You can see how Paul is still dealing with the false teaching of the Judaisers here. These Judaisers are the same sectarian crowd who were prepared to write Jesus off because He **“ate with publicans and sinners”** (Matthew 9:10-11). This is exactly the same thinking that Paul encountered in these Galatian churches. Faith in Jesus Christ was breaking down the Jewish regulations of purity and separation from **“Gentile sinners.”**

So Paul is still defending a pure gospel of faith in Jesus Christ, plus nothing else for salvation. And here’s the point of this lesson for us today. We minister the gospel in a world full of religious systems and beliefs. **How shall we proclaim it?** What shall we say to people who hear of Jesus Christ **after** they’ve already given their devotion to religious systems that leave Jesus Christ out of the picture?

Paul is very clear here. The commitment to Jesus Christ, God the Son, as our only Savior and Lord must **override** and **replace** any reliance on **earning merit** before God through any other system. Be it penance, sacrifice, prayers, regulations, diets, books, angelic revelations, dreams or visions, or anything else, a person is justified before God through his or her own faith in Jesus Christ, plus nothing else. The gospel cannot be properly honored if it is **blended** with any other religious system.

So, **no**, Christ is **not** a minister of sin. Christ is a minister of **freedom** from religious systems that rely on **humanly accomplished righteousness** for acceptance with God.

3) **THE REAL SIN IS NOT EATING WITH GENTILES. THE REAL SIN IS CHOOSING ANOTHER ROAD TO RIGHTEOUSNESS RATHER THAN TRUSTING IN THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 2:18-19 - "If I rebuild those things that I tore down, I show myself to be a lawbreaker. [19] For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live for God."

The real sin isn't eating with Gentiles, or eating pork, or refusing circumcision. The real sin for these Judaisers was **rebuilding a religious system that has finally been completed and demolished through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ**. In fact, Paul says he finally came to see that the whole **purpose** of the law was to establish his guilt and futility and drive him to putting his trust in Christ alone for deliverance and grace - **"For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God"** (19).

Now many troubling questions finally find their answer right here. When you finally understand what Paul is saying in these two verses you discover something truly revolutionary. ***This is why all other religions, even when practiced very sincerely and faithfully, can never be pleasing to God.*** Religion without Jesus is truly ***sinful. It is self-reliant man's way of distancing himself from God's final revelation in Christ Jesus.***

Have you ever seen that stunning truth revealed in the Scriptures? It's a ***sin*** to reject God's final Word in Jesus Christ in favor of some other religious system. Rejecting Jesus Christ, even for other religions, is the ***greatest sin of all.*** This is the reason why ***all*** outside of Christ, even very sincerely religious people, must come to repentance.

So, the ***real "ministers of sin" (17)*** aren't those who proclaim freedom and salvation in Christ alone, but those who ***offer a system of religious works as a foundation for a relationship with God.***

Also, even for people ***inside*** the Christian church, no act of a church's program, no amount of listening to sermons, and no church background or Christian upbringing can cleanse the heart of sin and make it right with God. Only Jesus Christ, personally embraced and followed, can justify the sinner.

4) **SO HOW DOES ONE KNOW IF HE OR SHE IS PERSONALLY COMMITTED TO JESUS CHRIST IN A CONVERTING WAY?**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 2:20-21 - "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. [21] I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing."

You can see why Paul wraps up his argument with these words. It would be easy, especially for these meticulous Judaisers, but also for any thinking person today, to begin to think there is a flaw in all that Paul is saying. If we are saved through faith in Christ, plus nothing else - if justification is *not* according to works of righteousness that we do - *what happens to holiness in Christianity?* Why will people who are freely justified by *grace plus nothing* care about being righteous in their actions?

Paul answers these objections, not by denying justification by faith alone, but by ***boldly defining what genuine faith in Christ is all about.***

- a) ***Conversion only comes after an experience of personal crucifixion analogous to Christ's own execution***

IPAD TEXT- Galatians 2:20a - “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

Paul’s order is highly significant. Personal **conversion** is only as genuine as personal **crucifixion**. The degree of new spiritual life will accord to the finality of personal crucifixion.

This is Paul’s answer to those who would carry on in a lifestyle of personal self-fulfillment while claiming divine grace. Exactly what part of the self-life is still alive? The will? It was supposed to be dead on the cross. The emotions - Anger? Bitterness? Revenge? But how can these emotions be stirred if they are dead? They no longer are to have a life of their own for free expression. Ambition? Greed? Pride? What kind of independent future plans and desires does a dead person have?

I wonder how many of us still languish in the starting gate of what could be a profound Christian walk simply because whatever life we placed on the cross, winced at the prospect of its painful end, jumped to the ground, and quickly walked off.

In Jesus' day there was a Roman guard. We read about this unnamed man in the gospels. It was his sole assignment to go back to the cross after the time of crucifixion and break the legs, or pierce the side of the victims to ***make sure they were really dead.***

So in our case. There is no true conversion until the self stays on the cross. This isn't poetry. Self must come to an end in death.

- b) ***My new life in Christ Jesus is maintained solely by faith in Christ Jesus and a deep, sustained contemplation of His love for me.***

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 2:20b - "...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."

Paul will go on living even while the self must die. But a life of ***self-crucifixion*** is impossible to sustain in our own strength. Where does the divine fuel for such commitment come from? Paul says Christ now lives ***in*** him. His conversion was no mere ***paper*** transaction.

And two things motivate him in all he does:

First, he lived a life of faith. He looked to Jesus continually. Paul, even though trained as a devout Jew, wouldn't put his trust in the law, or the temple, or his circumcision, or his training as a Pharisee. He constantly looked to Jesus Christ as the one who could truly save.

Second, he focused especially on the great love of Christ for him - Galatians 2:20 - "...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." - IPAD TEXT

Paul breathed this in like oxygen for his soul. In another place he says the love of Christ "***constrained him***" in his life and ministry. In another place the New Testament says we must all work to "***keep ourselves in the love of God.***"

Holiness is meant to spring from ***grateful devotion*** not ***dull obligation***. Paul kept his mind trained on the Cross of Christ. This reminded him of his two fold calling to ***crucify his old life and passions*** and ***rejoice in the liberating love of the Risen Savior.***