

“JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE”

We have noted several times in this series on Galatians that this letter can be broken down into three main sections: a biographical section, a doctrinal section, and an ethical section, with each section being approximately two chapters in length. In this passage, we transition from the biographical section to the doctrinal one, as Paul begins to expound the doctrine that is at the heart of this letter: the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And it is a doctrine that is also at the heart of the Christian faith. As Martin Luther famously declared, justification by faith alone is “the article upon which the church stands or falls.” And it is not very hard to see why Luther would say such a thing. The reason why justification is so important is because it is the doctrine that explains how sinful human beings can be made right with God.

Paul’s treatment of justification in these verses makes two main points. First, he explains how the doctrine of justification by faith alone stands opposed to any suggestion that we could ever be justified by works of the law. Second, he defends the doctrine of justification by faith alone against the argument that says that it leads to lawlessness. Thus, this passage presents the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone by showing how it stands opposed to both legalism and antinomianism.

Now, before we delve into this passage, there is one technical matter that we should briefly address. It has to do with where Paul’s words to Peter, which began in verse 14, come to an end. Should we insert the end quotation marks at the end of verse 14, as the ESV has it? Or should they be inserted further down, perhaps even as far as the end of

the chapter, as the NIV has it? The original Greek text did not contain any quotation marks, so we need to look at the context to figure this out. But it is a question to which the context does not provide a definitive answer. Both options are possible. Perhaps it is best to follow James Boice when he suggests that the transition may have been more gradual in Paul's mind as he wrote. After all, his concern was probably not to give a word by word account of what he said to Peter when he confronted him in Antioch. Nevertheless, what he writes in these two paragraphs sums up his argument against Peter.

That argument had to do with how a sinful person can be made right with God. Peter and Paul were Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners," a phrase used by the Jews to describe those who were outside of the system of the Mosaic law. Yet Paul says that even for them, those who were born under the law, the only way to be made right with God was through faith in Jesus Christ. The law could not save them. And notice the emphasis that Paul places upon this. Three times in verse 16 he says that people are not justified by works of the law but only by faith in Christ.

Justification is a term from the law court. To be justified is to be declared righteous. Note this well. Justification does not *make* one righteous. It is a *pronouncement* of righteousness upon legal grounds. It is the opposite of being condemned, or found guilty. When Paul says that a person is justified through faith in Christ, he is saying that God makes a legal declaration in which he judges the person who trusts in Christ to be righteous in his sight.

The reason why justification is by faith alone is because our sinfulness renders us utterly incapable of doing anything that would result in our attaining any righteousness of our own. If we are going to be declared righteous by God, we are going to have to receive a righteousness that comes from outside of us. And that is precisely what is offered to us in the gospel. The life, death and resurrection of Christ serve as the only ground of our justification. In ourselves, we are absolutely unworthy before God. No one can be justified without having a perfect righteousness credited to him. But when we place our faith in Christ, his perfect righteousness is imputed to us, or counted as ours, because by faith we are united to Christ. And faith is not in any sense a work on our part. We are justified *through* faith, not *on account of* our faith. This is an important distinction. Justification could never be on account of our faith, or else it would be based upon a faith that is far from perfect. Faith is merely the means by which we receive what Christ has done for us. Christ is the object of our faith. He is the sole ground of our justification. We are not justified by anything that we do, but only and entirely by the One in whom our faith rests.

Opponents of the doctrine of justification by faith alone as it is expounded in verse 16 often respond with a counter-argument. The Roman Catholic Church used this argument when the Reformers recovered the biblical doctrine of justification, and Paul's first century opponents used the very same argument. It is the argument that says that if people are justified by faith alone and not by any works of their own then they have no incentive to live a righteous life. In other words, the opponents of justification by faith

alone charge that this doctrine promotes antinomianism, or lawlessness. It leaves us with no incentive to live for God. This is the objection that Paul is dealing with in verses 17-21.

Paul anticipates this objection and raises it himself by asking the question, “is Christ then a servant of sin?” And he responds to this objection by first reminding us of the futility of seeking to obtain righteousness through obedience to the law. He writes, “For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.” He is talking about trying to re-establish the law as a way of justification, which is exactly what the Judaizers were doing. If you go back to the law to be made right with God, you will only be proven to be a sinner all over again, because you are not going to be able to fulfill the law. The law is certainly good, because it comes from God, but it does not provide us with the ability to keep it. Instead, the law exposes our depravity and our inability. This is why Christ is our only source of righteousness. As Michael Horton puts it, “The law tells us what God expects of us; the gospel tells us what God has done for us.” [*Christless Christianity*, 125] If we go back to the law, if we try to earn acceptance with God by our own performance, we will never be able to live up to the requirements of God’s law.

But Paul says that believers in Christ have died to the law. We are no longer under its power. He writes, “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.” Christ perfectly fulfilled the law in the life that he lived and in the death that he died. The law no longer has the power to condemn those who have faith in Christ. The gospel provides what the law requires.

Notice, however, the last phrase in verse 19, the phrase “so that I might live to God.” Here is the heart of Paul’s response to the charge of antinomianism. Believers do not die to the law in order that we might live lawless lives. We die to the law so that we might live to God. We have been set free from the law in the sense that the law is no longer the standard that we have to meet in order to be made right with God. We have been set free from our feeble attempts to establish our own righteousness through our works. By his grace, God has made us happy to rely upon the righteousness of Christ alone for our justification. Christ has fulfilled the requirements of the law on our behalf. However, our freedom from the law is not a freedom to sin. In this sense, believers remain under the law as a rule of life. The law directs the Christian in how to live.

Under the covenant of works, the law functions under the principle “Do and Live.” The covenant of works says that if you keep the law perfectly, you will inherit eternal life. But under the covenant of grace, the law functions under a different principle, the principle “Live and Do.” Christians are called to do good works, but the works that we do are not *for* life, but *from* life. Listen to how the English Puritan Walter Marshall expressed this:

“[Believers] must act as those that are not procuring life by their works, but as such who have already received and derived life from Christ, and act from the power and virtue received from him.” [*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 172]

The law does not carry the promise of life for the Christian, as it did in the covenant of works, because we have already received that life in Christ. And because we have been made alive in Christ, we live new lives, lives that are lived for God.

We have been set free from the law as a covenant of works. But we are still under the law as a rule of life. We do not keep the law to earn God's favor, but we still have many incentives for following God's law as a rule of life. God is our creator and our preserver, our covenant God and our Redeemer. We owe everything to him. We express our gratitude to God by obeying him. Also, God's law arises from his perfect nature, and it reveals his holy will. It is good for us to obey God's law because his law is good. It is a source of delight for the believer to be set free to walk in God's ways. In fact, the man or woman who claims to have faith in Christ but who wants no part of God's law is no true Christian. Here again is Walter Marshall:

“[N]one do or can trust on Christ for true salvation, except they trust on him for holiness: neither do they heartily desire true salvation, if they do not desire to be made holy and righteous in their hearts and lives. If ever God and Christ give you salvation, holiness will be one part of it.”[*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 100]

Those who have truly died to the law in Christ want to live for God.

However, it is critical that we remember that the only way anyone can truly live for God is by first undergoing the death to the law that Paul is talking about in this passage. If you have not been crucified with Christ, then you are still under the law as a broken covenant of works. You are still under the power of sin. You have no strength to serve God. You have no holiness. You have no promise of being made holy. But if you belong to Christ, then you have all that you need to live a godly life. It is not a life that is lived in your own strength, but through faith in Christ. As John Owen writes:

“all our supplies of grace are from Jesus Christ... So if we are in a low spiritual state and desire to be revived, we must look to Christ alone. Without Christ, everything else we do is nothing and will produce nothing.” [*The Glory of Christ*, 165-166]

This is what Paul means when he says, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” Not only are we justified by faith, but we are also sanctified by faith. Here is J. Gresham Machen:

“The Christian life is lived by faith and not by sight; the great change has not yet come to full fruition; sin has not yet been fully conquered; the beginning of the Christian life is a new *birth*, not an immediate creation of the full-grown man. But although the new life has not yet come to fruition, the Christian knows that

the fruition will not fail; he is confident that the God who has begun a good work in him will complete it unto the day of Christ; he knows that the Christ who has loved him and given Himself for him will not fail him now, but through the Holy Spirit will build him up unto the perfect man. That is what Paul means by living the Christian life by faith.” [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 146]

I think that this is the thing that we most easily forget when it comes to our sanctification. We forget that sanctification, living for God and growing in his grace, is something that is brought about through faith. It is true that we are not to be passive in our sanctification. There is work for us to do when it comes to living for God. But we do not do this work in our own strength. As John Colquhoun writes,

“In union with the Lord Jesus, the believer has righteousness to justify and strength to sanctify him...so that he has no need to apply to himself for any.” [*Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 145]

For this reason, we need to keep looking to Christ for righteousness and strength for all our days.

As I conclude, I want to call your attention to how Paul speaks so personally in this passage. Verse 15 begins with him speaking in the first person plural, but by the end of the passage he is speaking in the first person singular: *I* died to the law; *I* have been

crucified with Christ; *I* live by faith in the Son of God; Christ loved *me* and died for *me*.

Paul could not speak of this great doctrine without applying it to his own life. He knew that this doctrine is not just an idea. It is the essence of the gospel. And the things that Paul says in these verses are things that every believer in Jesus Christ needs to say, because this is the essence of what it means to be a Christian. This is justifying faith: to believe that the Son of God loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.