

“JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE”

You may know that tomorrow, October 31st, is typically identified as the date on which the Protestant Reformation began. On that date in the year 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of a church in the city of Wittenberg in order to confront the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings about how a person’s sins can be forgiven. I do not always take the opportunity that this time of year presents in order to preach a Reformation-themed sermon, but for several reasons I thought it might be a good idea to do so this year. The text that I have just read from Paul’s letter to the Galatians sets forth what is sometimes referred to as the material cause of the Reformation: the doctrine of justification by faith alone. It is a doctrine of immense significance to the Christian faith, so it is certainly worth our while to spend time considering it today.

Paul wrote his letter to the churches in Galatia in order to confront the false teachings of the Judaizers, a group that was telling Gentile converts to Christianity that they needed to be circumcised and follow other Jewish ceremonial laws in order to find full acceptance with God. As a result, the Galatian churches were in danger of turning away from the gospel by adding works to faith as the ground of salvation. Paul responded to the teachings of the

Judaizers by telling the Galatians that the grace of God in Jesus Christ sets us free from bondage to the law and enables us to live a new life in the power of the Spirit. Because of this, the letter to the Galatians contains the Bible's most detailed refutation of legalism, the attempt to secure salvation based upon our works.

Galatians can be broken into three main sections: a biographical section, a doctrinal section, and an ethical section, with each section being approximately two chapters in length. The passage that we are studying today marks the transition from the biographical section to the doctrinal section, as Paul begins to expound the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the doctrine which Luther described as "the article upon which the church stands or falls." In Paul's treatment of justification in these verses, he 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 objection that it leads to lawlessness. Thus, this passage sets forth the Bible's doctrine of justification by faith alone by showing how it stands opposed to both legalism and antinomianism.

Justification by Faith Alone Confronts Legalism

Our text follows after a section in which Paul talks about how he had to confront Peter when Peter caved in to the pressures of the Judaizers while in the city of Antioch. This suggests that the “We” in verse 15 is referring to Peter, Paul, and others like them. They were Jews by birth and not “Gentile sinners,” a phrase that was 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 is through faith in Jesus Christ. The law cannot save anyone. And Paul is careful to emphasize this point. 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. It is crucial for us to understand this. Justification does not *make* a person 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 Jesus Christ to be righteous in his sight.

The reason why justification has to be by faith alone is because our sinfulness renders us utterly incapable of doing anything that would result in our attaining a righteous standing before God. The only way we can be declared righteous by God is if we are credited with a righteousness that comes from outside of us. And that is precisely what the gospel is all about. It tells us that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ serve as the only ground of our justification. Left to ourselves, we have no righteousness to bring before God. But when we place our faith in Christ, his perfect righteousness is imputed to us. It is credited to our account. Jesus Christ's righteousness is counted as ours because we are united to him by faith.

It needs to be emphasized that our faith in Christ is not in any sense a work on our part. We are justified *through* faith, not *on account of* our faith. This is another 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. It is only the hand by which we receive Christ. Strictly speaking, it is not our faith that saves us but the object of our faith. Jesus 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 often respond with a counter-argument. It is the argument that the Roman Catholic Church used when the Reformers recovered the biblical doctrine of justification, as well as the argument that Paul's first century opponents used against his teaching on justification. This argument says that if people are justified by faith alone and not at all by their works then they have no incentive to live a holy 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.

In verse 17, Paul anticipates this objection by asking the question, "is Christ then a servant of sin?" And he responds to this objection by 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." What he means by this is that if you try to re-establish the law as a way of justification -- the very thing the Judaizers were doing -- if you do that, if you go back to the law to be made right with God, then you will only be proven to be a sinner all over again, because you are never going to be able to perfectly fulfill the law. And that is what God requires. As Paul says later in chapter 5 of this

letter, "I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law."

The law is good. We are not denying that. Paul certainly did not deny that. The law comes from God. It reveals his holy character and his holy will. The problem, however, is that the law does not provide us with the ability to keep it. As a result, the law can only expose our depravity and our inability. This is why Jesus 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 based upon our performance, we will never be accepted because we will never be able to live up to the righteous requirements of God's law.

Justification by Faith Alone Confronts Antinomianism

But Paul does not leave it at that. He does not give in and admit that the gospel that he preaches does in fact encourage loose living. He answers the question, "is Christ then a servant of sin?" by saying "Certainly not!" Christians have died to the law. We are no longer under its power. We have been set free. This is what Paul means when he says, "For through the law I died to the law, so

that I might live to God.” Christ perfectly fulfilled the law in the life he lived and in the death he died. The law no longer has the power to condemn those who have faith in Christ. The gospel provides what the law requires.

This brings us to 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. We do not die to the law through faith in Christ in order that we might live lawless lives. We die to the law so that we might live to God. There is a sense in which the Christian has been set free from the law. 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 obtain righteousness through our works. By his grace, God has enabled us to rely upon the righteousness of Christ alone for our justification. Jesus has fulfilled the requirements of the law on our behalf. In this sense, we are no longer under the law.

At the same time, our freedom from the law is not a freedom to sin. Believers remain subject to the law in the sense that it is a rule of life for us. It shows us how we ought to live. Under the covenant of works, the covenant that God set up with Adam and all of his descendants, 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 covenant that

God has established between himself and all who trust in Christ alone for their salvation, 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 an attempt to procure eternal life from God. They are done by the power of the eternal life that we receive in Christ as a gift. We do not do our good works *for* life, but *from* life. Because we have been made alive in Christ, we live new lives, lives that are lived for God.

We do not keep the law in order 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. The man or woman who claims to have faith in Christ but wants nothing to do with God’s law is not a true Christian. Listen to these words from the Puritan 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]

The man who has truly died to the law through faith in Christ will want to live for God. His greatest sorrow in life is the fact that he is not as obedient as he could be.

Christians are called to do good works. To use Paul’s words, we are called to “live to God.” The Bible makes this point again and again. At the same time, it also makes it clear that the only way anyone can 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 curse of the law. Your works would have to be 100% pure to be acceptable to God. But if you belong to Christ, the good works that you do through faith in Christ really are pleasing to God, even though they are far from perfect. As John Calvin puts it, “our works, performed by the odor of Christ’s grace, emit a sweet fragrance in God’s presence, while otherwise they would have a fetid smell.” 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, 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 the Christian life. 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 cannot do this work in our own strength. We have to keep looking to Christ for righteousness and strength for as long as we live.

Isn't it interesting that Paul speaks so personally in this passage that deals with the doctrine of justification? He says: *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 the doctrine of justification by faith alone is not just an idea. He understood that it is the essence of the gospel. It is the essence of what it means to be a Christian. To have justifying faith is to forsake all confidence in yourself and to realize that you need a righteousness that comes from outside of yourself. To have justifying faith is to believe that you can only find acceptance with God because the Son of God loved you and gave himself for you. To have justifying faith is to rest in Christ alone for your salvation. And when you have justifying faith, your entire life is transformed by it. You no longer live, but Christ lives in you. Jesus did *not* die for no purpose. He died that you might have *life*. But there is no life in trying to earn God's favor by keeping the law. Neither is there life in running headlong into sin. Jesus died to set you free from

both legalism and antinomianism. He died to save you from both the *guilt* and the *power* of sin. Hallelujah! What a Savior!