**JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN CHRIST**

February 23, 2014

Galatians 2:1-21

Key Verse 2:16b “So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

Once upon a time, there was an exploration team walking through a dangerous jungle. Suddenly, the leader of the group found himself sinking in a giant pit of quicksand. His colleagues immediately tossed him a rope, but he was too proud to take hold of it. “I can handle this,” he said. But the more he struggled on his own, the further down he sank. When he reached in to pull out his legs, his arms were stuck! In a matter of minutes, he was swallowed up, never to be seen again. What a fool! Why didn’t he accept help when he had the chance? Today’s passage reminds us that we are powerless to save ourselves from sin and death. The only escape rope we have is to put our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. May the Holy Spirit give us spiritual wisdom to understand who we are before God through today’s passage.

In chapter 1, we learned that the Galatian church was thrown into confusion by the teachings of Judaizers, who claimed that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. Using examples from his personal experiences, Paul encouraged the Galatians to hold on to the true gospel, whose origin is God. Paul continues in chapter 2 by discussing how the bad influence of the circumcision group was overcome in the church at Antioch.

Look at verses 1-4. “Fourteen years later, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.” The influence of the circumcision group was very strong. Claiming to carry the authority of the apostles, they came to Antioch and threw the Gentile believers there into confusion about the gospel. Paul harshly labels them as “false believers” whose true motive was not to please God but to enslave Christians under the yoke of Jewish legalism. They were envious of the freedom that Christians enjoyed in Christ, which opposed their self-righteous value system. This brought them into sharp dispute with Paul, who wasn’t willing to compromise with them at all. Was Paul being too critical? Couldn’t he have just let Gentiles be circumcised to make everyone happy? No! The very heart of the gospel was at stake! Verse 5 says, “We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.” Paul was always humble enough to submit himself to small cultural differences in order to win people over to Christ (1 Cor 9:20-22). For example, he circumcised Timothy to preach the gospel to the Jews. But requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised was different because it would tear out the heart of the gospel message: that all are saved only by faith in Christ. To prove his point, Paul brought with him Titus, a Greek, as a shining example of how Gentiles were being changed into sincere believers, filled with the Holy Spirit. When Titus shared his life testimony before them, they could only praise God for what he was doing.

During his meeting in Jerusalem, Paul shared his version of the gospel with the apostles in private. The apostles responded with a loud “Amen!” They added nothing to his message because it was neither lacking nor inaccurate (6). On the contrary, they saw that the same God that was working so powerfully among them to minister to the Jews was working powerfully through Paul among the Gentiles (7-8). Titus was direct evidence of this. Look at verse 9. “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.” What a beautiful display of Christian fellowship! What humility, openness and cooperation! Their beautiful co-working reminds me of 1 Corinthians 12 when Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ, with Jesus as the head. Though each part of the body is unique and serves a special role, together they are united as one body, without favoritism. With such an attitude, the early church was able to maximize its fruitfulness by dividing the labor among its workers. Though their strategies and their mission fields were very different, there saw one God, one Christ, one Spirit and one gospel uniting the Church. This was a monumental victory for the early Christian church made possible only by the ministering of the Holy Spirit.

After this historic meeting between Paul and the apostles, the early church began to treat Jews and Gentiles as equals. This transition wasn’t comfortable for many, but was supported by leaders like Peter. Peter was one of the first missionaries sent to the Gentiles when God led him to preach the gospel to Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10). Following this event, Peter became one of the most vocal advocates for Gentile believers. When he visited Paul’s church in Antioch, he overcame his deeply-ingrained prejudices to sit with Gentile believers and eat freely with them. It was a beautiful picture of the kingdom of God, just as Jesus had prayed for.

But Peter’s good intentions were quickly tested by an unexpected event. Paul says in verses 11-13, “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.” What happened? In a moment of weakness, Peter was controlled by fear. He was more concerned about pleasing those from the circumcision group, who claimed to have authority from James, rather than pleasing God. His actions were incredibly hypocritical. He lived his life as though he was set free from the law and he proclaimed salvation through faith in Christ, yet here he was, distinguishing Jew from Gentile. It didn’t take long for the younger Jewish believers, like Barnabas, to follow their hero, Peter. Suddenly the Gentile believers felt like second-class members of the church and a chasm was developing in the church.

Paul couldn’t just let this slide, for Peter’s actions were not “in line with the truth of the gospel” (14). A public rebuke was necessary, even if it was difficult. Paul says in verses 15-16, “We who are Jews by birth and not Gentiles sinners know that a man is not justified by observing 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 observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.” The words “be justified” mean to be declared “not guilty” as in a court of law. It is the opposite of condemnation. The quest for justification or righteousness is the main question of all major religions. All other religions besides Christianity say that this can be obtained by one’s good deeds or moral integrity. But look at verse 16 again. Paul uses the terms “faith in Christ” and “observing the law” three times each to clarify that justification is obtained not by human works or effort, but only by faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Seeing that our salvation does not lie within ourselves, our only response is to cry out for help. What we failed to do in that we could not keep God’s righteous laws, Christ did for us by coming to the earth as a man and perfectly fulfilling the Father’s will. He fully paid the price for all of our sins, past, present and future on the Cross with his own blood. I like to think of it this way: the blood of Jesus is both necessary and sufficient to justify sinners. Necessary because no one could be justified if Jesus had not laid down his life for us. And sufficient because we do not need to add anything to Jesus’ sacrifice; it alone is mighty to save.

So does Jesus’ sacrifice justify us automatically, without any response on our part? No! The key is faith. While the voice of unbelief says, “I can handle this on my own,” the voice of faith says “Lord, help me!” We have nothing to offer God that he doesn’t already have. Our greatest achievements in life mean nothing to him. But he is greatly pleased by our faith, when we simply acknowledge him for who he is, believe in him, love him and obey him with all our heart, soul and strength. So, faith includes not only our minds, but also our hearts and our wills. The very moment that we put our faith in Christ, God forgives every kind of sin, remembering them no more, and credits Jesus’ righteousness to us. So even though we are still guilty sinners, God takes away the penalty that we deserve because of what Jesus did for us on the cross and sees us as righteous in his sight. In God’s eyes, there are only two kinds of people: those who are justified through their faith in Christ and those that stand condemned due to their unbelief.

Surprisingly, even many Christians suffer under the weight of self-reliance and self-condemnation rather than enjoying the peace we have in God’s grace. They think that salvation by faith means that they have to have perfect faith. Because of this, when their doubts, sins and short-comings are exposed before God, they feel miserable, not knowing whether they are really saved or not. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Our salvation was 100% the work of God through Jesus Christ. Even our faith is the gift of God. Thank you, Father, for saving me all by your one-sided grace. May my boasting be only in all that you do and all that you are.

Paul knew that some would misunderstand the freedom we have in Christ and would even accuse Paul of promoting sin. Of course, this is not true at all. As Paul’s life exemplifies, faith in Jesus actually transforms us into new creations that live radically changed lives that truly honor God. Look at verses 19-20. “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” At one time, Paul was a murderous Jew named Saul. In his religious zeal, he persecuted the Christian church. Though he was advancing quickly among his peers, this lifestyle ultimately left him empty inside. But when Christ met him and called him to a new life of faith in the gospel, the self-righteous and self-centered Saul died and humble, loving, God-exalting Paul was born. The world and everything he had built his life upon suddenly became rubbish. He realized he had been living in sin apart from Christ. He completely died to the idea that he could find salvation in the law and in himself. So he left his old life in the dust to embrace eternal life in Jesus.

Not only did Paul die to his old self, he crucified himself. As we know, crucifixion is unbearably painful and horrific. We don’t even like to think about it. But Paul saw his old self, Saul, as being nailed onto the cross right beside Jesus. Crucifying our old way of life means self-denial to repent of our sinful ideas and habits, even those that we don’t want to let go of. It isn’t pretty or fun. It doesn’t happen automatically but takes willingness and commitment. It involves real suffering and shame, even as Jesus endured. But what is the outcome? Paul says, “...but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” That same simple faith in Christ that justifies us is the same faith which envelops our new lives as Christians. As we commit ourselves to following Jesus in all things, the love of Christ drastically changes us from the inside so that we can share a living, dynamic relationship with God. Our repentance works to put Jesus on the throne of our heart, and he becomes the driving force behind all our decisions. Actually, Jesus himself begins to live in and through us, and we become like miniature versions of Jesus. We become deeply united with his heart to glorify God and grow to imitate his sacrificial love for sinners.

Paul ends this chapter with a strong statement, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (21). Mixing salvation by works in with the gospel only distorts God’s grace and makes a mockery of Jesus’ cross. We must not rip out the very heart of the gospel message. Let us instead crucify our old selves and live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.