

PAUL: THE SPIRITUAL ABOLITIONIST, PART II
(NOT MAN'S GOSPEL!, PART 22)

TEXT: GALATIANS 2:11-21

August 23, 2009

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION

“I must tell you, as you are under the curse of the law, so you are under the command of the law; Do and Live. Though by the gospel-call, you are not obliged indeed to seek righteousness in yourself, in order to life, but to seek it in Christ; yet by your unbelief, you keep yourself under the command of the law; ‘If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandment;’ keep it perfectly, or else vengeance shall overtake you. It is not your little endeavours that will satisfy the law; though you should read, fast, mourn, and shed tears of blood all your days, it will not avail, or be to any purpose, in satisfying the law’s demands: if you will pay any duty to the law, as a covenant, you are a debtor to fulfill the whole law, Gal. v. 3. The law is a chain that is linked together, and if you take one link off it, the weight of the whole chain will be upon you; and so, if you will do anything in obedience to the law, that you may be thereby saved and justified, you are under bondage to the whole law; and bound to do everything perfectly, that you may be justified. O the miserable bondage that you are under,” (Ralph Erskine, “Law-Death, Gospel Life,” p. 93).

The words of Ralph Erskine echo the heart-cry of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians. Paul is exhorting the Galatian churches to forsake the “Do and Live” bias of their hearts and to trust in Christ alone for their right standing before God.

For example, Paul writes, “a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,” (2:16). “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?...,” (3:1). “³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace,” (5:3-4).

For Paul, when it comes to justification, there is no middle ground. One must ascribe everything to faith or to works.

In order to exhort the Galatians to faith in Christ alone, Paul recalls his confrontation with Peter in Antioch, because what was in dispute in Antioch with Peter and the men from James was also the pressing issue in Galatia.

- I. Paul Confronts Peter’s Contradiction of the Truth of the Gospel (2:11-13).
- II. Paul Clarifies Peter’s Contradiction of the Truth of the Gospel (2:14-21).
 - A. Paul’s Question, v. 14

In our previous study, we saw how Paul began by asking Peter a searching question, which pinpointed the heart of Peter's problem and exposed the irrationality and indefensibility of his conduct.

If Peter, a born and bred Jew, understood that works of the law are worthless for justification and yet forced legalistic requirements on Gentiles, such conduct, intentional or not, is inexcusable (v. 11, "condemned," or "clearly in the wrong").

This then leads Paul to vv. 15-16 where he unfolds in an abbreviated fashion his doctrine of justification.

LESSON:

B. PAUL'S THESIS, VV. 15-16

Vv. 15-16 are some of the most important passages in the Bible. The whole controversy affecting the Galatian churches is exemplified in vv. 15-16.

In 2:15-16, Paul sets forth the central thesis of his letter to the Galatians, namely that a person is declared righteous before God through faith in Christ alone apart from anything he or she does.

In setting forth his thesis, Paul will further demonstrate Peter's hypocrisy by appealing to how he, Peter and the rest of Jewish believers came to be justified.

Paul begins in v. 15 by reminding Peter of the worthlessness of relying upon his religious observances (Judaism) and cultural heritage (φύσει, "by nature," "natural descent," i.e., a born and bred Jew) for justification before God.

The word "sinner" (ἁμαρτωλοί) in this context doesn't speak of a person guilty of sin, as if Paul were saying the Jews were righteous and the Gentiles were sinners. Paul will define who is "righteous" in v. 16.

In v. 15, Paul is speaking from the standpoint of how the Jews viewed Gentiles (e.g., the men from James, Judaizers). To a Jew, Gentiles were "sinners" from the standpoint that they were not only guilty of failing to observe OT laws (e.g., uncircumcised, didn't observe dietary laws, etc...) but that they didn't even possess the Mosaic Law and thus lacked the possibility of obtaining righteousness through it (Fung, *Galatians*, p. 113;).

From a Jewish perspective, Gentiles were outside the pale of the Mosaic Law and thus lacked the necessary means to direct their lives to please God, which made them "sinners."

And so it was fundamental in Jewish thinking that only those who kept the law of God were righteous whereas all others were "sinners."

To understand this mentality, one must go back to the OT. God had given Israel certain dietary laws (cf. Lev. 11) in the wider context of establishing and distinguishing what was clean-unclean, holy-profane (cf. Lev. 11-16).

The rationale for why one animal was considered clean and another unclean has been a topic of continued discussion among scholars. On a popular level, it is common to hear Bible teachers, authors and others refer to the dietary laws as Biblical guidelines for eating (as if the purpose of these laws was a diet book!).

Here are some examples: A “Christian” Weight Loss Plan, The Eden Diet, The Daniel Diet, The Daniel Fast, Eat God’s Way, The Bible Diet: 40 Days to Cleanliness, Hallelujah Acres, 12-lesson course entitled: Biblical Nutrition 101, etc...

One thing is for certain: the Bible is not a diet book! God did not prescribe dietary laws in order to provide a “Christian” diet/nutrition program. *Theology* not diets is the reason for the dietary laws!

When interpreting Scripture, we must do so in a Christ-centered, gospel-centered manner. This means that every passage in the Bible somehow points to and testifies of Christ. Israel’s dietary laws were given to Jews in order to point believers to Christ. How?

The dietary laws were given by God to teach His people of the total opposition of uncleanness and holiness. They served as a constant reminder to the Jews that the unclean and holy must not meet/fellowship. Israel, as God’s chosen people, was holy. In the middle of Israel’s camp stood the tabernacle, which was the location of God’s holy presence (see Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus*, p. 21).

The ultimate expression of this division between unclean and holy was portrayed at the Cross, where God punished His Son, who became sin who in reality was sinless and perfectly holy (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

Ultimately, God gave these laws to drive God’s people away from themselves to trust in God’s promises (Abrahamic Covenant, Gen. 15; Gal. 3). However, the Jews misunderstood the purpose of the law (cf. John 5:39-40). God never gave the law to Israel as the means for their justification. The Law was given to point all men to Christ (cf. John 5:39-40, 46; Lk. 24:27, 44; Acts 3:18, 24; 7:52; 10:43; 13:29; 26:22; 28:23; Rom. 1:2; 3:21; 1 Pet. 1:10)

This is the truth that unlocks the meaning of the whole Bible and without this Christ/gospel-centered view, the Bible remains a closed book! Furthermore, apart from this Christ-centered hermeneutic, what you get are “Christian” diet plans and a whole host of moralizing legalistic principles to guide your life but you don’t get Christ!

In their abhorrence of all connection with idolatry, the Jews missed Christ and later rabbinic tradition added to God’s law a myriad of extra-biblical rules and regulations (“Holiness by separation”). But the gospel says, “Holiness by union with Christ.”

You are holy not because of what you do but because of who you are united to!

The intricate code of legislation the Jews added with the intention of keeping the Jew and Gentile apart explains their separation from Gentiles (i.e., their attempt to be “holy” see Edersheim, *Jesus the Messiah*, p. 62).

The typical Jewish sentiment towards a Gentile is illustrated in the following old Jewish saying, “Eat not with them...for their works are unclean,” (Ryken, *Galatians*, p. 54).

In another rabbinical rule, it states, “The disciples of the learned shall not recline at table in the company of the people of the soil, (the rabble, the disreputable ones,” Hendriksen, *Luke*, p. 304).

Alfred Edersheim, in his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, noting how Gentiles were regarded by Jews writes, “Milk drawn by a heathen, if a Jew had not been present to watch it..., bread and oil prepared by them, were unlawful. Their wine was wholly interdicted (prohibited-J.F.)-the mere touch of a heathen polluted a whole cask; nay, even to put one’s nose to heathen wine was strictly prohibited,” (p. 63)!

Again, “If wine had been dedicated to an idol, to carry, even on a stick, so much as the weight of an olive of it, defiled a man. Other wine, if prepared by a heathen, was prohibited, whether for person use or for trading. Lastly, wine prepared by a Jew, but deposited in custody of a Gentile, was prohibited for personal use, but allowed for traffic,” (Edersheim, p. 63).

The Jews contempt for all that was non-Jewish is clearly illustrated in the Pharisees’ reaction to Jesus and His disciples when they ate with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:27-30; 7:34, 37-39; 15:1-2). The Pharisees thought that such table fellowship would make them “unclean.” Jesus’ dining habits created a firestorm for the Pharisees just as Peter’s dining habits did for the men from James.

From the Jewish legalistic point of view, because the Gentiles had no law(s) to direct their lives, they could not please God, they were “sinners.”

With this background in mind, Paul’s reasoning with Peter is powerful.

Paul says to Peter if the works of the law could justify a group of people it would be the Jews due to their religious and cultural heritage.

By virtue of their birth (nature, φύσει), they possessed every advantage and privilege over all nations (cf. Ps. 147:19-20; Amos 3:2-3; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5). Israel had the gracious privilege of being the recipients and custodians of God’s special revelation (i.e., His commandments, prophecies and promises). Unlike the Gentiles, they possessed knowledge of the law (Rom. 3:1-2).

They had every opportunity to obey the law and achieve righteousness through keeping it (cf. Philip. 3:4-6). Yet, notwithstanding all of these privileges of race and religion, Paul reasons with Peter,

“Peter, You and I were born and raised under the law, unlike the Gentiles. By virtue of our birth, we possess great privileges unlike any other people or nation. Yet, none of our boasted privileges and superiority could justify us. We know that the works of the law are worthless for a person’s justification. The Law hasn’t given us any advantage over Gentiles to make us right in the sight of God. In fact, we ourselves were driven to renounce our trust in the works of the law, because they were worthless to justify us. We know that faith in Christ alone is the only means by which a man has ever been justified. In fact, this is exactly how you and I came to be justified, by grace through faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law. How then can you, a Jew by birth who abandoned the Law and who lives like a Gentile, impose another means of justification on fellow Gentile believers?”

Later at the Jerusalem Council, Peter would communicate this same message to the Judaizers, “¹⁰ ...why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will,” (Acts 15:10-11).

Paul makes it clear that justification doesn’t come by cultural and religious heritage or by attempting to follow a strict standard of requirements to attain righteousness. Jewish heritage, circumcision, dietary laws, rabbinic traditions, etc... may not be an issue for most in 21st century America. However, the principle applies just the same.

You are not a Christian because you were born in a Christian home, raised in a church, born in a “Christian” country or perhaps attended a Christian school or college. There are great advantages of being brought up in a Christian home or attending a Christian church or school. But, this is not how one becomes a Christian.

There is only one way for a person to become a Christian, which Paul states in v. 16, “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...”

In one brief phrase, Paul summarized the principal, defining truth of the gospel and the Christian faith. Becoming a Christian involves coming to the realization that you cannot be saved by virtue of who you are or what you have done.

You are not more favorably predisposed to the justifying grace of God by virtue of your cultural or religious heritage or by anything you do or refrain from doing. Attempting to gain God’s favor through “good works” of any kind is worthless.

Three times, Paul says in v. 16 that no one will be justified by works of the law and three times he says that justification comes by means of faith in Jesus alone. Paul repeats

himself with the greatest diligence in order to impress upon the Galatians (and us!) the truth of the gospel. His clarification of the truth of the gospel, highlights some important truths for us to consider for our lives.

CONCLUSION:

1. PAUL'S CLARIFICATION TEACHES US TO CLEARLY DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL.

Theodore Beza, disciple and successor of John Calvin, wrote, "We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity," (*The Christian Faith*, 4.23).

Peter, through his hypocrisy, had confused the distinction between the law and the gospel. Peter's behavior communicated to Gentile believers that a man is justified by way of the works of the Law plus the Gospel. Paul confronted Peter in order to clarify the gospel and to distinguish between the works of the law and faith in Christ.

Concerning this crucial distinction between the law and gospel, Martin Luther wrote,

"...whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian... The knowledge of this topic, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, is necessary to this highest degree; for it contains a summary of all Christian doctrine. Therefore let everyone learn diligently how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, not only in words but in feeling and in experience..." (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, pp. 115, 117).

Trusting in the "works of the law" (i.e., what we do) distorts and abolishes the gospel. It undermines any hope for assurance of one's right standing with God.

When you sin and your conscience is weighed down with guilt and the law continually convicts, it is in this moment that you must turn to the Good News of the gospel and not what you have done (i.e., the works of the law). Otherwise, you will become crippled in your Christian life because you can never be assured that you have done enough or done the right things to be right with God.

When the Law convicts you and your conscience accuses you and says, "You have nothing good in you. You are guilty and have sinned greatly," what do you do? How do you respond?

You respond thus,

"You are right. I have sinned greatly. I have nothing good in me. Nonetheless, I have been justified by grace through faith in Christ, by virtue of His perfect life, death and resurrection alone. Therefore, there is no more condemnation. I have

been reinstated as God's child. I am a fellow heir with Jesus Christ. Therefore, I confess my sin and failures, I repent and trust in Christ alone for my acceptance before God."

This is the truth of the gospel. This is what every reader of Galatians should know and embrace. Justification is central to the Good News, for without it, sinners are left guilty and condemned under the judgment of God.

2. PAUL'S CLARIFICATION FIXES OUR FOCUS ON CHRIST, WHO IS OUR ONLY SOURCE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS.

This is why we must repeatedly hear the gospel so that our focus is continually fixed on Christ alone. Legalism, however, sets up a false standard for righteousness and shifts our focus away from Christ.

Timothy George notes, "What was so insidious in the separation of Peter and his associates was the fact that they were acting as if their Gentile Christian brothers and sisters were still sinners while they, because of their ritual purity and obedience of the law, stood in a different, more favorable relationship to God," (*Galatians*, p. 181).

This is the evil of legalism: What God has declared "clean" legalism declares "unclean."

The false condition Peter's behavior was forcing upon Gentile Christians is highlighted at the end of v. 14 in the term, "to live like Jews" (i.e., "to Judaize" see also v. 15 "sinners").

By withdrawing and separating from Gentile believers, Peter was shifting the believer's focus to an unjust and false condition for righteousness. He was, in effect, adopting the Jewish sentiment towards Gentiles and declaring unclean what God had declared clean.

Legalism always cuts people off from Christ by laying upon them unnecessary demands from which the gospel has set them free. The men from James had a list of requirements for the Gentile believers to do in order to be accepted by God.

When they arrived in Antioch, they began forcing their demands upon the people (see also the false brothers in Jerusalem, Gal. 2:3 and the Judaziers in Galatia).

This is what legalists do. Legalists raise up false, unwarranted and unnecessary demands for one's right standing with God and then force people to live up to this standard. When others don't live up to the imposed standard, legalists look down on them (e.g., "We are not Gentile sinners!").

William Barclay notes,

"There are two great temptations in the Christian life, and, in a certain sense, the better a man is the more liable he is to them. First, there is the temptation to try to

earn God's favour, and second, the temptation to use some little achievement to compare oneself with our fellow men to our advantage and their disadvantage. But the Christianity which has enough of self left in it to think that by its own efforts it can please God and that by its own achievements it can show itself superior to other men is not true Christianity at all," (*Galatians and Ephesians*, p. 21).

It is characteristic of the fallen nature of men to continuously seek to add something they do to what Christ has done and then think that because they live by these standards they are right with God and more righteous than others. This legal tendency runs deep in the heart of man.

Scotty Smith, pastor of Christ Community Church, stated, "We are by nature allergic to God's grace and addicted to self-deliverance. Such is the measure of the insanity of sin."

In contrast to this legal, performance based approach to life, the gospel tells us what makes an unjust man right with God.

The gospel assures us that God accepts sinners, both Jew and Gentile, on the same terms, namely faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law.

Do you know and believe the gospel this morning? Are you trusting in Christ alone for your acceptance before God?

The gospel announces to us that Christ in His life, death and resurrection has "done" everything that is required for our salvation. Thus, there is nothing else that we must "do" in order to be forgiven and brought into a right standing relationship with God wherein we are free to enjoy fellowship with God and one another.

This is the promise of the gospel: "The one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness," (Rom. 4:5).

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