

Text: Galatians 2:15-21

Exegetical Big Idea: Obedience to God's law, whether you are Jew or Gentile, does not bring about justification before God. Only faith in the grace of Jesus given to us at the cross can do that.

Homiletical Big Idea: **You are not saved by your goodness, but by your faith in the goodness of Christ.**

Fallen Condition Focus: The human heart is by default self-righteous, finding ways to be justified before God in ways apart from faith in Christ. Those ways however just serve to condemn us, not save us.

Background:

This text comes right on the heels of Paul calling out Peter's sin. If you remember last time, Peter feared what his fellow Jews would think and say if he was eating with "unclean" gentiles. Peter separated himself from the gentile Christians and fell into legalism. Peter communicated with his actions that to be a part of God's people meant that certain laws had to be obeyed, as well as having faith in Jesus. Paul strongly but lovingly points out Peter's sin in order to restore him.

Here Paul lays out exactly why Peter's sin was a reflection of something bigger. It was a reflection of the human heart that by nature wants to be justified before God by something or some things that we have done. But this will never justify a person before God. This will only reveal our sinfulness and condemn us.

Paul couldn't stand by while Peter was separating himself from the gentiles in fear of his fellow Jews. Peter was in essence communicating to the gentiles that unless the Gentiles took on some Jewishness, they could not be a full part in the people of God. Paul saw this as more than just a small deal. He saw this as putting a giant hole in the truth of the gospel.

If anyone is saved by any other means than by faith alone in Jesus Christ, if anything else is required for a person other than faith in the grace of Jesus, then the gospel of Jesus has lost all meaning.

I think we see Paul continuing that thought today in these next few verses.

Intro:

I remember my days in youth group and the friends I had back then. We were a pretty good group of friends who enjoyed hanging out with each other at youth, but we also hung out outside of youth event. We would often sit as a youth group together on Sunday mornings.

I remember at one church event hangout out with my youth group friends. It was a picnic potluck at the pastor's farm. My family had brought potato salad. And I loved my mom's potato salad. Among the friends group was our friend Emma. Emma's family was vegetarian. So as I'm raving about my mom's potato salad, I encouraged Emma to try some, which she did.

A few minutes later I hear Emma call my name in a rather angry tone. She says "Jason! Is there bacon in this!?"

I sincerely apologized that I didn't even stop to think that my mom put bacon in her potato salad.

I truly was sorry...but also, being a meat eater myself, thought “is it that big of a deal? So what, you ate a tiny piece of meat by accident, is it really that bad?” To Emma, it was. You see, Emma was not a vegetarian because she ate meat just occasionally. She was not a vegetarian because she ate only small amounts of meat. She was a vegetarian but because she *never* ate meat. She didn’t even eat food that touched meat.

As much as I can’t understand the idea of *not* eating meat, I can understand the concept of purity.

Paul is writing to the Galatians to show them the glory of gospel purity. Namely, the purity of the gospel that salvation is solely based on faith in the goodness of Christ. And yet, there were those who were trying to pollute the purity of the gospel with a little bit of meat...or a little bit of works-based salvation.

The gospel is good news only if it is pure. It ceases to be a saving gospel if it contains even the smallest amounts of works-based self-righteousness.

There are so many people in our community and I would say even in our pews that think, “Surely God requires something of me before I can come to him”, or “I know I am saved by the grace of Jesus, and that’s fantastic, but also I need to be a good person on some level of God won’t accept me”.

There are so many people who think the message of the Bible is “do good, and God will accept you”. But that statement couldn’t be further from the truth.

We struggle with the same things the Galatians struggled with back then.

The message of the Bible, and the message that we will clearly see this morning, is that:

You are not saved by your goodness, but by your faith in the goodness of Christ.

Vv. 15-16: Nobody is made right with God, by any other means, than by faith in Jesus.

Paul begins by looking at himself and Peter as examples. Paul says that “we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” in verse 15. Who is this “we” that Paul is talking about? He can’t be talking about the church in general, nor can he be talking about the church in Galatia. He can’t mean that because many of those in Galatia, and the church in general at this point are in fact “Gentile sinners”.

Paul of course is not saying that somehow Gentiles are worse sinners than Jews. He make it clear in these verses, and in so many of his other letters that both Jews and Gentiles alike are all sinners, unable in and of themselves to seek after God and obey him. When Paul says “Gentile sinners”, that’s his way of saying that the Gentiles were not the ones who received the law of God. They didn’t get the Ten Commandments. They never had the temple. They didn’t get the prophets etc.

Paul is making the contrast here that he and Peter were both born Jewish, and had all of that as their background.

Remember, some Jews that have come from Jerusalem are telling the Galatians that they must obey the law of Moses *before* they can become true Christians.

Knowing that, we look at what Paul says next in verse 16. “yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Firstly, what does it mean to be “justified by works of the law”? Well, to be “justified” simply means to be in right relationship with God. The Scriptures are so clear that all of us, every human being, has sinned and disobeyed God and are therefore *not* in good relationship with him! This is a very very bad thing since being separated from God because of our sin leads to death and separation from him for all of eternity. Therefore our deepest need as human beings is to be justified before God. We desperately need that relationship fixed.

The question is: how? Remember the Jews from Jerusalem? They were saying that the answer is to become Jewish by obeying the Mosaic Law (being circumcised, eating the right foods etc.), and then to trust in Jesus.

So does being born an Israelite justify you before God? Does being born an Israelite make you part of God’s people and not some “Gentile sinner”? Do you have to convert to Judaism first to become a Christian?

Paul gives us his answer in verse 16. He says “we know” (speaking in particular of him and Peter) “That a person is *not* justified by works of the law but through faith in in Jesus Christ.” Paul makes it super clear, being an Israelite who obeys God’s laws cannot make you right with God and part of his people!

[It’s like the story of the Jungle Book. The little boy named Mowgli gets lost in the jungle as a baby. The story goes that the animals take pity on him and raise him as one of their own. The boy grows up and learns how to climb trees and eat berries and all that kind of stuff. As the book (or movie) goes, as the boy comes across different animals, he tries to mimic what they do. But of course he doesn’t belong there because no matter how much time he spends there, or how hard he tries, he cannot shed his identity as a human. By the end of the book, Mowgli comes across a little pond and he sees a young girl filling some water jugs. He’s mesmerized, and follows the girl back to her village. There’s a realization that no matter how much he tries to become a leopard, or bear, or elephant, he is not one of them. He’s a human.]

You and I have a sinful identity. Everybody does. Whether you are Jew or Gentile or whatever else, you share in the sinful identity of Adam. Yes, the Israelites received the law of God, and so many other things. But shedding that sinful identity and being made right with God, and being part of his people was never a matter of where you were born, or who you were born into.

Paul makes his point clear here that being born a Jew, and trying to keep God’s law does *not* make you right with him. If that were the case then Peter and Paul would not need to have faith in Christ. But look again at verse 16. “...so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.”

If anyone could be justified (made right with God, having their sinful identity removed) it would have been Paul. Remember his zealous life that he talked about just in chapter 1? Even that couldn’t save him. Now I doubt there are any Jews here today, but we nonetheless have the same mentality sometimes. There are those who sit in the pews right now who are trying so hard to earn their right standing with God. They come to church and serve and say the right words and go to the Bible studies, and they trust that in so doing, God will accept them. I can’t be any clearer, and neither can Paul. He ends verse 16 with “...by works of the law no one will be justified”.

So why does someone still try to earn their justification? Pride. Listen carefully. If you think that you must add anything to your salvation in Jesus, even the slightest little bit, you are rejecting Christ and his gospel. We are called to come to him not by our own work, but by faith in Christ.

If this is you this morning, drop your pride and come to Christ by faith. Stop trying to be justified by works of the law, and be justified by faith.

But there are also so many who sit in the pews every week and we need to lovingly and gently encourage them to trust Jesus for themselves. I'm mainly thinking of our kids. My hope and prayer for our kids is that they don't think that coming to church and going to Sunday school is what makes them Christians. My prayer is that they will learn more and more about the good news of Jesus, and how he saves them by dying on the cross. I want them to know that trusting in him is how they are forgiven, and become part of God's family. My prayer for our kids is that as they grow in church, they will one day choose for themselves to trust Jesus, if not already.

Because we are not Christians because we go to church, or anything else apart from faith in Christ Jesus.

You are not saved by your goodness, but by your faith in the goodness of Christ.

Vv. 17-19: The Christian has been saved to the freedom of obedience.

When we think of being saved from something, that's kind of where the story ends in our minds. Books and movies end when the saving is done, and they all live happily ever after.

But the Christian life is not just about being saved from the grasp of the law of God. We have been saved *to* something. Here's the natural question that someone would have, after hearing the good news of being justified not by obedience, but by faith alone in Jesus Christ. The question is: does grace promote sin? That's a valid question! If our obedience does not save us, then what's the point of obeying God? If trying to obey God's law to earn his favour is not how we actual obtain his favour, then what's the point of obeying the law? If I have been justified by faith in Jesus, and forgiven of all my sin past, present, and future, then why not keep living in sin and doing what I want? Kind of seems like Jesus' grace even promotes this doesn't it?

Paul says exactly this in verse 17. He writes "but if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?"

Paul is saying, that if he and Peter (though we can expand to include all Christians), though they are justified by faith, have sin in them, does that mean Christ doesn't care about it? Or even promotes it?

The language here makes it clear that Paul realizes the reality that he and Peter, and all Christians for that matter, do still sin. Clearly so, because he just called out Peter for his sin, and Peter is most certainly a Christian. It kind of sounds like this faith in the grace of Jesus, backs Jesus into a corner doesn't it. It kind of sounds like I can do whatever I want and Jesus is a slave to my sin because he has to forgive me.

There's a big word for this. Theologians call this antinomianism. It means "against law". It's the idea of exactly what we've been talking about. It's the idea that if I have grace, then I can do whatever I want.

What does Paul have to say about that? Look at the end of verse 17 and into 18. Paul says emphatically "Certainly not! For it I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor."

I struggled with this verse. What is the argument that Paul is making here? I think it's this. Paul "tore down" the legalistic system of trying to obey all of God's law to gain is right standing before God. He argues, that after coming to know the grace of Jesus, if he were to turn back to trying to obey the law to earn favour with God, then he would be "building back up" the sin is legalism.

It is the pride of legalism that promotes sin, not true grace! It is the pride that says "I can and I will meet God's standard all on my own. Jesus dying for me was not good enough. I will add to it to perfect it".

[Ever heard of the expression, digging yourself out of a hole? It's the idea that you find yourself in a hole, and so you start frantically digging to get yourself out of it. But the more you dig the deeper the hole gets, and the faster you dig, but the deeper you get. If you want to get out of the hole, stop digging! Reach up and grab the hand that is reaching down to save you!]

That's what Paul is saying in verse 19. He writes "through the law I died to the law..." Paul stopped digging. The old Paul that lived his whole life to try and earn his salvation and right-standing with God died when he trusted instead of the grace of Jesus. He tried so hard for so many years to find his salvation in the law. But here he writes that he finally gave up. Through the law, he died to the law.

What's the result of dying to the law? The answer is the other half of that verse. "...So that I might live to God". Grace doesn't promote sin, legalism does. Grace makes me want to obey God. When you receive the grace of Jesus and know that your sin is taken away because he died in your place on the cross, that does not make someone want to run that grace over with a truck, but it makes someone want to delight more and more in the person of grace, Jesus Christ.

Here's the irony, grace transforms the law for the Christian. Without the gift of grace of Jesus, the law could only condemn me of my sin. But now, since through the law I died to the law, and Christ fulfilled the law for me, thereby freeing me from the condemnation that the law brings, now the law of God is life and joy to me!

Now I see the commands of God as good and life-giving, why? Because they show me Christ. Why do I want to love my neighbor as myself? Because Christ loved me as he loved himself. Why do I want to be a humble father and husband, and give myself to serve and lift up my wife and kids? Because Christ humbled himself for me to lift me up. Why do I want to be generous with God has given me? Because God has been infinitely generous to be in Christ. Why do I want to observe a Sabbath? Because it reminds me that when I rest, God doesn't.

Not only does the law reflect Christ to me, but Christ empowers me to keep God's commands! Paul's going to talk a lot about the Holy Spirit coming up in Galatians, but here's a preview: When we are saved by grace, the Holy Spirit indwells every Christian, empowering them to live a life of increasing obedience to God. Not because we need to earn God's favour, but because we already have it and desire in our heart of hearts to become more like him who we delight in most, Jesus.

The Christian life is not one of "sin less", but of "delight more in Christ". If you live your Christian life with just the mindset and attitude of trying your best to sin less, you're going to be defeated. That's an empty endeavor. Please don't misunderstand me, I want you to sin less! I want to sin less. But that can't be the motivation. The problem of sin is a problem of delight. We sin because we enjoy it.

The answer then is not to just try hard not to sin. The answer is to replace the pleasure of sin with something that is infinitely more beautiful. And that, is Christ. How do we love and delight in Christ? By following his commands. Jesus said, if you love me, you will follow my commands. The one who delights in Christ does not follow Jesus' commands begrudgingly, wishing he could do what the world does. The one who delights in Christ delights in his commands because the commands of God have become life and joy to him!

So Christian, are you struggling in sin? Of course you are, we all are. Are you discouraged because of the lingering presence of sin in your life? Of course you are, we all are. Then know this: It is not that your sin is too great, but that your delight in Christ is too small. Take the focus off yourself, and put your focus back on Jesus and what he has done for you. Paul writes to the Romans that it is God's kindness that leads to repentance. Let your mind and heart always drift back to the kindness that was shown to you on the cross. The natural response to that kindness, is to die to self-righteousness, and live to God.

Let the weight of his glory in your heart leave no room for the pleasure of sin.

You are not saved by your goodness, but by your faith in the goodness of Christ.

Because for the person who has been truly saved by faith in the goodness of Jesus, there is no going back.

Vv. 19-20: The Christian's union with Christ means there is no going back.

Paul just wrote that through the law he died to the law, so that he might live to God. and Now he doubles down on that goes even further. Not only has he died, but in verse 20 he say "I have been crucified with Christ." Who, or what is "crucified with Christ"? Surely Paul can't mean that he died on the cross, since quite clearly he is alive and well and writing this letter! What does Paul mean?

He's talking of a spiritual reality. Now I want to be clear that a spiritual reality is not allegory. Spiritual reality is not analogy. Spiritual reality is not wishful thinking. Paul is talking about a spiritual reality that is absolutely true. The spiritual reality that Paul is talking about here is just as real as physical reality. Just because you can't put it under a microscope, does not mean it is any less true.

Here is the reality for Paul, and for the Christian: "I have been crucified with Christ". In a real sense, but spiritual sense, you hung on that cross as Christ hung on that cross. Now that is not to say that you played a part in dying for the sins of the world! You absolutely did not, but if you are made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ, you are connected to Jesus in a very real way. We call this the Christian's "union with Christ".

When someone trusts in the grace of Jesus, they become a new creation. They are not a new physical creation (that comes later, in the New Heavens and the New Earth), but they are a new spiritual creation. The old person who had no desire for God, who was a slave to sin, who could not or even want to help themselves, dies.

Paul explains this further to the church in Rome when he writes about baptism. The Christian is united to Christ in his death when they come to Christ and ask for forgiveness for their sins. In baptism, when the person goes under the water, they are associating with Christ's death on the cross. Just as Paul is saying here that he was crucified with Christ. And as the person come up out of the water, they are a new spiritual creation *in* Christ Jesus. They are united with Christ.

Look at how Paul highlights what it means to have union with Christ.

In verse 20 he writes that he has been crucified with Christ. And then he says “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives *in* me”. Did you catch that? Christ lives in Paul! Christ lives in every Christian. Jesus himself told his disciples this before he ascended to his Father’s side. He told them that he would be with them always, even to the very end of the age. But if Christ is in heaven, how can he also be in every single believer? Christ is with, and in, every believer by the person of the Holy Spirit.

We are not left on our own in this world! We are not saved and then pushed out of the nest. God’s presence lives in you if you are a justified by faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and draws us to the loving kindness of the Father. He strengthens us when we lose all strength. He gives us hope when we lose hope. He comfort us in our times of need. He gives us the message of the gospel on our lips when we have opportunity to preach it. And he does so many more things.

Having union with Christ means that God himself lives in you, so that you have the power to live for God. That’s how Paul can say he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him.

But that’s not all! Not only does union with Christ mean that he is in us, but that we are also in him! If you’re anything like me, you tend to think of your relationship to God as him being in you, but it is equally true that you live *in* Christ. Look at what Paul says next “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith *in* the Son of God”. The language here is more than just having faith in an external object. The language here is that faith in Christ puts you *in* Christ. This is so profound.

[I’ve heard someone explain it like this before. Suppose you’re going on a trip. Let’s say your trip is to Europe. Well to get there you’ll need to take a plane. What does relationship with the plane need to be in that situation? Is it enough to be friends with the plane? Is it enough to know *about* the plane? Is it good to be on the plane? What about beside the plane flapping as hard as you can? No. You need to be *in* the plane. Your destination is the plane’s destination. Your traveling velocity is the plane’s traveling velocity. Your fate is the plane’s fate. Why? Because you are *in* the plane.]

How infinitely more glorious is it that by faith in the grace of Jesus you are *in* Jesus! If Jesus is the plane in this example, how much more certain is it that you are going to make it. It is infinitely more possible that you can change the laws of physics and fall through the solid floor of the plane, than for you to “fall out” of Christ.

Christ lives eternally in the presence of the Father, and nothing can change that. If you are in Christ, what do you think is your inheritance!? And absolutely nothing can change that.

Christ in you, and you in Christ. That is the glorious reality of the Christian’s union with Christ, the Christ “who loved me, and gave himself for me”. All of this obtained by faith in in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you.

It is often a lingering question and concern in the mind of a Christian of “losing my salvation”. You know what the best antidote to such a fearful thought? Go back and meditate on the reality of your union with Christ. Salvation is not just *in* you. You, Christian, live *in* salvation! You don’t exist apart from your home in Christ.

I love how Paul ends these thoughts in verse 21. “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” He comes back around to his original argument

and makes his point very clear. If you can be made right with God, by any other way than through faith in Jesus, then he died for no purpose.

If you are sitting here today trying to be justified by any other means than by faith in Jesus, you are nullifying God's grace, and declaring that Christ died for nothing. There's a better way. By faith, be crucified with Christ, so that you may no longer live, but live in Christ and you in him.

May we be a church that does not nullify God's grace, but who live in it.

You are not saved by your goodness, but by your faith in the goodness of Christ.