

The Principle of the Gospel in Galatians 2:15-20

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## INTRODUCTION

### Historical Background

While there is some disagreement among scholars in this matter, the probability is that Galatians was written from a city in Macedonia about A. D. 56.

False teachers known as Judaizers had crept into these Galatian churches and were seeking to undermine the faith of the recently converted Gentiles by insisting that they could not enter into the fulness of salvation unless in addition to their belief in Christ they submitted to the rite of circumcision and other requirements of the Jewish law. Paul, who was in a much better position to judge the spiritual state of these Judaizers than we are, is thoroughly convinced that they were false teachers and wolves in sheep's clothing (Gal. 2:4; Phil 3:2-3).

The objective of the Judaizers was twofold: (1) they sought to undermine confidence in Paul as a divinely commissioned apostle on a level with the Twelve; and (2) they wanted to subvert his teaching that men were saved by faith alone. Paul wrote Galatians, therefore, (a) to defend his apostolic authority and (b) to establish the doctrine of justification by faith upon a secure basis of Scripture and reason. To Paul the issue was as vivid as it was absolutely vital--the very cross of Christ was imperilled by this plausible legalism of the Judaizers, for "if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (2:21).

### Contextual Background

The book runs in three clear movements of two chapters each. The first two chapters are a narrative (pertaining to Paul himself). The next two chapters are a discussion (pertaining to the Gospel). The remaining two chapters are an exhortation (pertaining to the Galatian believers). In other words, the first two chapters are a personal explanation, the middle two are a doctrinal exposition, and the last two are the practical application.

The first main section of the book is 1:11-2:21. In it we find Paul defending his apostleship on two fronts. (1) He shows that he has received his gospel and the commission to proclaim it directly from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Then (2) he shows that he had been granted the fullest endorsement of his ministry by the apostolic council at Jerusalem, which was held to settle the issue of the status of the Gentile converts (2:1-21). So complete had been the apostles' and Paul's mutual agreement and understanding of the gospel, that when Peter on a later occasion at Antioch had lapsed into Judaistic behavior, Paul had been able to rebuke him and that very basis of that common understanding, and on the basis of his apostolic authority, which he earlier defended and now demonstrated. Paul uses this circumstantial difference between Peter and himself as a touch-stone to set forth a clear principle of the gospel.

THE STATEMENT 2:15-16

The Jews and Their Privileges

V. 15: We though Jews by nature and not sinners of Gentile origin.

It is somewhat uncertain as to whether vv. 15-21 are a continuation of Paul's rebuke of Peter in the hearing of the church at Antioch or whether they constitute an enlargement for the benefit of the Galatians of what he said to Peter. It has also been surmised that Paul is here mentally addressing Peter, if not quoting from what he said to him. The correct view is probably that Paul summarizes for the benefit of the Galatians that which he had told Peter because (1) the passage no doubt is merely a summary at best, of what was said and done at Antioch, and (2) v. 14 would not be enough to convince the Galatians that he had really come to grips with Peter on the matter at issue.

Paul's argument in this verse is an appeal to the course which both Peter and he had followed to come to be justified, whereby they confessed the worthlessness of their heritage and works of the law. The term ἀμαρτωλοὶ is here not used in its strict sense denoting persons guilty of sin, but rather, Paul writes of the Jew's attitude toward the Gentiles. The Jews regarded all Gentiles as sinners (Matt. 26:45; Lk. 18:32). The word was almost a synonym

in the religious phraseology of the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

With some irony, Paul says that both he and Peter had not been like these "sinful Gentiles," but they were Jews, possessing the privileges of the Jewish religion, the knowledge of the law (Rom. 3:1-2), and the special favor of God.

#### The Jewish Christians and Their Faith

V. 16: Yet knowing that a man is not justified by works of law, but only through faith in Christ Jesus, even we believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of law, because by works of law 'shall no flesh be justified.'

#### The Insufficiency of the Law

The usage of δέ is somewhat problematical, as it appears at the beginning of the verse. Some manuscripts and therefore men omit the δέ and connect the verse with the preceding, regarding its ἡμεῖς as taken up by the following καὶ ἡμεῖς, the nominative to ἐπιστεύσαμεν: "We by nature Jews, knowing that a man is not justified by works of the law, even we believed in Christ." But the previous verse can be

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, Classic Commentary Library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 115.

be taken as a complete statement: "We are Jews by nature; but, knowing as we do that a man is not justified by works of law, even we believed." This view has in its favor (1) the overwhelming evidence for de; (2) the natural meaning of the adversative, and (3) the meaning of the passage, for Paul indicates a transition from a trust in Judaism, so natural to a born Jew, to faith in Christ. All Jewish Christians, therefore, had initially agreed that it was utterly impossible to commend themselves to God by law-keeping. At the end of v. 16 this position is reinforced by a reference to Ps. 143:2. Paul was not teaching something new. Justification by faith had been promised in the Old Testament.

#### The Importance of Faith

In this verse, the works of the law are seen in contrast to faith. The two ways of getting right with God are set forth here: (1) by keeping the law and (2) by faith in Christ Jesus (objective genitive). Paul demonstrated that the Judaizers who kept the law were at complete variance, not only with the apostolic teaching but with their own Scriptures.

THE EXAMINATION 2:17-18

The Life of Faith

V. 17: But if through seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves also were found to be sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin?

Found to Be Sinners

This verse contains two problems related to the justification by faith. What does it mean that they (presumably Paul and Peter) were found to be sinners? Two main views are possible: (1) While leaving the law, they therefore sinned against it by breaking it, and were constituted sinners. This would then be the illogical argument of the Judaizers against Paul and all other Jewish believers who trusted in Christ rather than in the law. Or it could have the meaning of (2) "we no less than the Gentiles have been proved to be sinners." The latter position is to be favored because (a) of the αυτοι, referring to a definite group, i. e., Peter and Paul. (b) The και in connection with αυτοι and αμαρτωλοι links this with the sinners in v. 15, where αμαρτωλοι is to be understood with reference to our position in the eyes of God. (c) Paul would have little reason to switch to an objection by the Judaizers which is irrelevant to the argument. Rather, like the Gentiles, Jews who thought they were not sinners, when brought to Christ, found that they were.



Christ a Minister to Sin

There are two ways to interpret this difficult expression. (1) Paul either takes up the objection of the Judaizers which goes thus: "To forsake the law in order to be justified, is to commit sin; and to make this change under the authority of Christ, is to make Christ the minister of sin--a supposition not to be entertained, therefore it is wrong to appeal to Him for freedom from the law." The other view is that this is Paul's own argument (2): "It cannot be a sinful thing to abandon the law, for such abandonment is necessary to justification; and if it were a sinful thing to pass over from the law to faith, it would thus make Christ the minister of sin--but such a conclusion is utterly blasphemous. That interpretation (2) is preferable can be readily seen. (a) The phrase is introduced by ἀρα, which is a question, as seen from other uses (Lk. 18:8; Acts 8:30). That this question is based on Paul's own argument can be deduced from the use of μη̄ γένοιτο, which is used almost exclusively by Paul of a false deduction from his own previous statements. He admits thus that they became sinner, by seeking to be justified in Christ, but denies that therefore, as his opponents charge, Christ has become one who ministers to sin. (b) This interpretation also agrees with the indicative use of εὐρέθημεν, (c) the subtle irony of ἀμαρτωλοὶ, and paves the way of the words "I died through the law."

The Life By the Law

V. 18: For if the things that I broke down, these I build up again, I show myself a transgressor.

The meaning of the verse is plain enough. But the question is, What does it refer to? And again there are two possibilities. It may either be that the Judaizers, with their reintroduction of law-keeping as an essential of salvation, are painfully rebuilding the very structure of human merit, which for Paul ended when he received Christ. Or it may have direct reference to Peter, who had ignored and lived contrary to the law for a time, so that the return to that same law would reveal him as a deliberate transgressor. Paul tactfully applies this statement to himself. It is simplest to connect γὰρ with μὴ γένοιτο:

God forbid; for in the renunciation of the law, and in the consequent finding of ourselves sinners in order to justification, there is no sin; but sin lies in returning to the law again as the means or ground of acceptance, for such return is an assertion of its perpetual authority.<sup>1</sup>

Peter's conduct had been a confession that he had transgressed in overthrowing the law. Abrogation and re-enactment cannot both be right. When Peter lived like a Gentile, he tore down the ceremonial law; when he lived like a Jew, he tore down salvation by grace.

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<sup>1</sup>John Eadie, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, Classic Commentary Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n. d.), p. 178.

## THE CONCLUSION 2:19ff

### Paul and the Law

V. 19: For I through law died to law that I might live to God.

Whereas Paul spoke unemphatically of himself in the previous verse, because what he said referred actually to Peter and would have been true of any person who had trusted in Christ, Paul now employs ἐγώ and thus becomes very emphatic, speaking of his own experience in this and the following verses.

The question arises how it was possible for Paul to die through the law to the law. How did the law free him from himself? Various answers have been advanced. (1) Some say it refers to the lack of power in the law to give man life, but that faith is able to liberate man from death and give him a new principle of life. Also this statement is true, of course, it does not contain the whole truth. (2) Some ascribe to the law the peculiar function of a παλαίωμος, which operates till the sinner is brought to Christ. But the abandonment of the law forced upon the sinners by its terror does not amount to the profound change described in the phrase τῷ νόμῳ ἀπέθανον. (3) Some refer it to the economical purpose of the law, whose sacrifices and rituals foreshadowed Christ. It was therefore an act of

obedience to the law, when Christ came, to take Him as master instead of the law. But against this is the use of νόμος, always referring to the written law. And the words διὰ νόμου νόμῳ ἀπέθανον certainly speak of a moral and spiritual change wrought in the believer. Also, the appeal of the passage is to the heart and conscience rather than to reason and intellect.

Lightfoot explains the problem thus:

- (1) Prior to the law--sinful, but ignorant of sin;
- (2) Under the law--sinful, and conscious of sin, yearning after better things; (3) Free from the law--free and justified in Christ.

The meaning of διὰ νόμου can be seen when the meaning of νόμῳ ἀπέθανον is examined. Such a dative is found with this verb in Rom. 6:2,10; 7:4; 14:7. To die to the law is to die to the demands of the law and thus to be no longer under its penalty. Rom. 6 makes it clear that believers died to the law in the death of Christ. In Christ we died positionally to the sin for which He died.

#### Paul and Christ

V. 20; I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh, I live in faith, faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

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<sup>1</sup>Lightfoot, p. 118.

In the last verse the main emphasis was the release from the obligations and the demands of the law, here it is the death to the curse of the law.

What is this death with Christ? (1) It is not a mystical experience of Paul, as some assert. (2) Neither is it a daily dying to the law, a constant self-crucifixion. (3) Also, the view that this is merely a change of looking at things--a "reorientation of thought"--on part of the Apostle, based on Christ's death to the law, completely misses the point. These views are ably refuted by a proper exegesis of the text. The latter view (3) seems to confuse positional with practical sanctification. One further view, which has the word usage in its favor but misses the complete argument of the passage is that (4) συνεσταύρωμαι refers to a death to sin, the annihilation of old sins.

It should be noted, first of all, that συνεσταύρωμαι is perfect, indicating that the action has been begun in the past and its results continue in the present, thus the translation must be "I have been crucified with Christ." Not the crucifixion goes on and on but the results of it. Secondly, Paul has elsewhere indicated that the believer is free from law by virtue of the death of Christ (3:13; Col 2:14; Eph. 3:15-16). In Col. 2:20 this is expressed as a dying with Christ. The death spoken of here is not the spiritual fellowship which the believer has with the death of Christ, but

as the context and the inclusive verb point out, the death brings to an end the reign of the law. Positionally, our crucifixion with Christ occurred the moment we accepted Him as Saviour, but the effects of our acceptance of His finished work for us on the cross will continue throughout all eternity.

Identification with Christ involves not only identification in His death but also in His burial, resurrection, ascension, and glorification, for Christ did not stay dead. Through the union with Christ we satisfied the law, yielded to it the obedience which it claimed, suffered its curse, died to it, and are released from it--from its accusations and its penalty, and from its claim to obey it as the means of winning eternal life.

Release from the law is not lawlessness. This is emphasized by Paul in the remainder of the verse "and live no longer I, but liveth in me Christ." The first δέ is continuative, the second sub-adversative, introducing the positive correlative to the preceding negative statement. Christ now dwells in Paul, controls him, gives him power, and transforms him.

The ἄνω marks the time subsequent to Paul's identification with Christ. The τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ θεοῦ describes the object of his faith. Paul appropriates the love of Jesus, realizing that in a very real sense Christ died for him. His life is merged with that of Christ.

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