

PARDONED NOT PAROLED

GALATIANS 2:15-21

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Galatians 2:15-21

The Christian faith is radically different than every other religion. I don't think that we take much time to really think about it or let it sink in. I think that we often just think that we are like all other religions, except for the fact we believe in Jesus and we think our religion is right.

In my opinion, that reduces us to just another religion. The one unique thing about Christianity is that in all other religions, human beings have to do something that will make them acceptable to God. Christian doctrine says that no one could ever do anything that would make us acceptable to God. In other words, we are all totally unacceptable to God and there is nothing we can do about it. God did it all. He sent Jesus to die so that we could be acceptable to Him. The central doctrine that separates Christianity from any other religion is that we are saved by grace through faith.

We say that, but I don't think we understand it. We're a lot like a man who was being honored as his city's leading citizen. Called on to tell the story of his life, he said, "Friends and neighbors, when I first came here thirty years ago, I walked into your town on a muddy dirt road with only the suit on my back, the shoes on my feet, and all of my earthly possessions wrapped up in a red bandanna tied to a stick, which I carried over my shoulder. Today, I'm the chairman of the board of the bank. I own hotels, apartment buildings, office buildings, three companies with branches all over the world, and I am a member of all the prestigious clubs. Yes, friends, I have done well."

After the banquet, a young boy came up to the man and said, "Sir, could you tell me what you had wrapped in that red bandanna when you walked into this town thirty years ago?"

The man said, "I think, son, it was about \$10 million in cash and another \$5 million in government bonds."

Somewhere along the line we think that we have received salvation or continue to deserve salvation because of our good works.

I know we say this and believe it, but I don't think it really sinks down inside of us. The main idea of this morning's text is **FAITH IN JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO BE MADE RIGHT WITH GOD**. I believe that, but oftentimes I find myself with a different emotional reaction to life.

I. DIFFERENT BUT THE SAME (VS 15)

Even Though We Come From Different Backgrounds and Experiences, We All Need To Admit That We Need God's Grace.

In verse 15 we see that we are all different but the same. In other words **EVEN THOUGH WE COME FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES, WE ALL NEED TO ADMIT THAT WE NEED GOD'S GRACE**. Again I think we would say that, but as we go through this morning's text, I think we can see that we don't really accept that emotionally.

Let's start with the situation, as it existed in the churches throughout Galatia. Remember, this was a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-cultural church. Add to that, the Jewish Christians felt they held a very special status because they were God's chosen people before Jesus came, and now that they have submitted to Jesus, they were in God's new chosen family.

A. GENTILE SINNERS

Let's start by the phrase, "Gentile sinners." Let's quickly review the situation. These blended churches were getting along nicely. Even when the Apostle Peter came from Jerusalem, he enjoyed full fellowship with all the church members. Then some overly zealous Jewish-Christians came from

Jerusalem and because they looked down on Christians who did not submit to the Jewish expression of Christianity, Peter and other Jewish believers separated themselves from all the Gentile believers because they didn't want these Jewish-Christians from Jerusalem to think badly of them. That sent a bad message to the churches.

Paul publicly rebuked Peter and then went on to follow it up with this theological discussion. Gentiles were all the people in the world who were not Jewish. They were considered to be barbarians. To the Jews, Gentiles were unclean morally, culturally, and socially. The word *Gentile* was a negative word to Jews.

But that wasn't enough. They are called Gentile sinners here. It's a double whammy. Sinners were ones who missed the mark. In other words, since they didn't have the laws of God and since they were not the chosen people of God, there is no way they could live lives pleasing to God. In racism or in social, cultural, or national elitism, these Gentiles would be compared to the people others think lesser of. They were looked at as inferior human beings: culturally, socially, and politically. In order for them to be accepted, they would have to conform their behavior and thinking so it matched those who perceived themselves to be superior.

B. JEWS BY BIRTH

And that is exactly what those who were Jews by birth thought. As a nation and as a people the Jews were privileged to have been chosen by God. God gave them the Law of Moses and the other writings. In other words, they had our entire Old Testament. These laws governed their moral, civil, and ceremonial lives. In reality, they did have a head start religiously. Jesus came from the Jewish experience. Jesus was a Jew racially, culturally, socially, and religiously. Jesus was the Promised Jewish Messiah. So when Jews became Christians, they understood Jesus from a Jewish perspective. And they held on to the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws.

C. GOOD PEOPLE

Sometimes it's easy for us to forget about where we came from. We often get confused and think we are good people. We live in a culture that teaches us that all people are by nature good. We are taught that in school, on television, and in culture. People in our country think that we are good and our way of life is right. Everyone who thinks differently is evil. This belief is exactly the opposite of what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that no one is good: not them, not us, not you, not me.

Paul is asking Peter, the Jews of his day, and those of us who think we are good and came from good homes or even Christian homes to examine how we became Christians. Gentiles and all evil people needed to confess their unworthiness and had to ask God to apply the blood of Jesus to their lives. Jews had to admit they were evil and in need of God's application of Jesus' death to their lives. And each one of us, no matter how good we think we are, need to ask God to apply the blood of Jesus to our lives. The starting point is this. Even though we come from different backgrounds and experiences, we all need to admit that we need God's grace.

II. GOD'S WAY VERSUS OUR WAY (VS16-19)

Only The Sacrifice Of Jesus Can Make Us Acceptable To God.

Even as I say that for the second time this morning, I want to say, "Duh, we all know that," but I think if we were to watch our thoughts and feel our emotions, we can see how we get sidetracked. After we have been Christians for a while, we start to subtly think that we are good and doing good things. On the other hand, if we are struggling with some habitual sin, we start to subtly question if

we are really saved or not. Even though we know differently, we tend to feel as if we are saved if we are doing well and fear that we are not saved if we are being defeated by sin. The real conflict comes when we confuse God's way versus our way. The truth is this. Only the sacrifice of Jesus can make us acceptable to God. Again, if we were to honestly evaluate our feelings and thoughts, when we are good, we feel as though we are acceptable to God. If we are bad, we feel as though we are unacceptable to God. Do you see how that focuses on our goodness rather than the goodness of Jesus?

A. SAVED BY FAITH (16)

Verse 16 reminds us that we are saved by faith. Here Paul focuses his argument on the Jews, the chosen of God, and on us when we think we are doing good enough to criticize others. Paul's argument is this. Peter, the other Apostles, and Paul himself received forgiveness and salvation by placing their faith in Jesus. Here we need to pause and discuss some theological terms. Paul said that anyone who is justified could only be justified by placing our faith in Jesus. The word justified comes from the court system. The word *justified* means "not guilty." In a religious sense, the word justified means that we are "right with God." Clever speakers have said that justified means "just-as-if-I-never-sinned," justified. In other words, God looks at me as if I am not guilty. He has not placed us on parole. We have received a full pardon.

Here is why that is important. We have pointed out that there were over 613 laws for the Jews. There would be no possible way to keep them all without breaking any. So no matter how good or how hard someone tried to keep the law, they couldn't possibly be perfect. And in legal terms, if you break any law, you are guilty. Peter and Paul came to realize this. They knew that they could never be perfect and so they came to realize that they needed to depend on Jesus' perfect sacrifice on their behalf. And unlike the temple sacrifices that had to be offered daily and at annual festivals, Jesus' sacrifice was once for all.

So when we come to Christ in faith, our past sins are forgiven, our present sins are forgiven, and our future sins are forgiven. We are right with God not because of our own goodness, no matter how good we can possibly become, but because of the goodness and sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. Whenever we sin, God applies the blood of Jesus to us and we remain clean.

The fact is that from a religious and legal sense, the blood of Jesus is constantly cleansing us. From an emotional and relational perspective, we have been adopted into God's family. We are His children. We will sin and fall down, but we will still be His children.

Another phrase we need to talk about is law. Paul has just said that observing the law couldn't save them. For Jews, this meant living by the laws spelled out in the Old Testament, especially the first five books. But the question is, was Paul referring to the moral law, like "Thou shall not kill," etc. or the social law, like "how to treat the poor, how to conduct business, hand washing, eating only kosher food" etc. or the ceremonial law, like "Circumcision, sacrifices at the temple, and celebrating holy festivals," etc. It seems as if the Jewish Christians were primarily focusing on Circumcision and eating kosher. During Jesus' lifetime, He continually pointed out how hypocritical we are in basing our relationship with God on keeping religious laws.

But regarding the Jewish Law, it would be confusing. Did the early church continue to go worship at the temple? Did they celebrate Passover by taking a sheep to the temple priest to have it sacrificed? Did they participate in the Day of Atonement? If so, how did they interpret it since Jesus is our Passover Lamb and our Sacrifice of Atonement? Just about 20 years after Paul wrote this letter, the temple worship became a moot point. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and it hasn't been rebuilt since. In fact now the Muslim Mosque, The Dome on the Rock is built there today.

If you want to see the compromise reached by the early church, read Acts chapter 15. But Paul's point is this. No matter what kind of religious system you follow, although he was specifically talking about the Jewish Law, you can never keep it perfectly. And the conclusion is always the same. If God is perfect and holy, and if God cannot accept anything or anyone that is not perfect,

no one can be accepted by God because no one is perfect. Paul said in his letter to the Romans, "For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23 / NLT).

King David wrote in the Psalms:

*²The LORD looks down from heaven
on the entire human race;
he looks to see if there is even one with real understanding,
one who seeks for God.
³But no, all have turned away from God;
all have become corrupt.
No one does good,
not even one! (Psalm 14:2-3 / NLT).*

When Paul talks about observing the law, literally the word is works of the law. The final assessment of the Bible is that no one could ever be saved by doing good works. No one could ever be saved by being religious or good. Our society somehow believes that God will weigh the good we have done against the bad we have done. If the good outweighs the bad, then we will get to heaven. People think that if we are pretty good, we'll make it.

The problem is that God doesn't weigh the good against the bad. One bad thing disqualifies from heaven. One bad act breaks our relationship with God. No one is good enough to be accepted by God. And conversely, no one is so bad that God cannot forgive him. The only way we can be saved is to place our faith in what God has already done through Jesus. Jesus was good on our behalf. Jesus kept the law perfectly. When we place our faith in Jesus, God applies Jesus' perfection to us. Paul's point is that no one has an advantage. We all need the forgiveness of Jesus and His blood and perfection applied to our lives.

B. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FAITH (17)

In verse 17 Paul describes the effectiveness of faith. Let's try to follow his argument. I think it can be read in a couple of ways. First of all Paul is saying, "If we add law-keeping to the justification process, then Christ would be promoting sin because we can't keep the law." Did you get that? If justification or salvation depends on the work of Jesus plus our good works, then that equation includes sin because we can't be perfect. The upshot is this. We are justified only by faith in Jesus Christ; plus or minus nothing. Being good, keeping laws, or being religious cannot save us. Only Jesus can save us.

That is especially important for us to understand because our society tends to equate being Christian with being good. Since I'm a pastor, I always hear this. Someone will do something kind, sacrificial, or extremely generous. Then someone else will say, "Now that's what you call a Christian." That is totally false. If that person is really a Christian, then by saying that, you are actually cursing him because she knows that she is saved only by faith in Christ and not anything she could possibly do.

C. THE FUTILITY OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS (18)

In verse 18 we must constantly remind ourselves of the futility of self-righteousness. Here is a danger that we have to be very careful of. Paul understood this clearly. Paul says this. If I come to faith in Christ, receiving forgiveness and salvation only by God's grace, and I view it as only forgiveness for my past sins, and then try to once again be good, that's bound to fail within an hour. Then I find myself again condemned. Now that sounds logical, but let's check our attitudes. I see that we as Christians are extremely judgmental of homosexuals. We are extremely judgmental of people who take drugs or have babies out of wedlock. These are just a few. In more extreme cases, Christians judge people who listen to rock and roll and go to movies. If the homosexual gave

up the homosexual lifestyle and became heterosexual, would he be o.k.? If the unmarried girl gave up taking drugs and became sexually more careful would she be o.k.? If the down and out guy got a job, took a bath and wore nice clothes would he be o.k.? These people may become more acceptable to us, but the point is that they would still be unacceptable to God. The issue is not making people behave according to our standards. The issue is bringing them to faith in God the same way we need to come to faith in God.

Somehow, when we become Christians and when we become successful, and when we have some success in defeating sin in our lives, we slip back into this feeling that we are pleasing God and we deserve His blessings and salvation. The problem with that is that if we want to add our own righteousness to our salvation, then we have to detract all our unrighteousness from our salvation, and then we are left with nothing. The whole point of this section is this. **ONLY THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CAN MAKE US ACCEPTABLE TO GOD.**

III. DYING TO LIVE (VS 20-21)

We Can Only Truly Live When We Die To Our Self-Centeredness.

We have to constantly preach the gospel to ourselves. We are saved by faith and we need to live by faith. Jerry Bridges says in his book The Discipline of Grace (I'm quoting this from memory so it may not be exact), "There is never a day in which you are so good that you don't need God's grace and there is never a day that you are so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. Verses 20-21 remind us that living by faith shows how we must be dying to live. In other words we can only truly live when we die to our self-centeredness.

A. DEATH TO SELF-CENTERED LIVING (20a)

Verse 20 is one of my favorite verses in the Bible because it describes how we are put in a right relationship with God and how we stay in a right relationship with God. The first half of verse 20 describes our death to self-centered living. Paul is speaking as a person raised as a religious Jew. He joined the strictest sect of Judaism and evaluated his life on the basis of his obeying all the rules and regulations set down by the Mosaic Law. In other words, he and his peers were the ones who decided whether or not he was righteous. In other words, based on his commitment to obeying the religious laws, he decided whether he was right with God or not.

The problem was that neither he nor his friends had the authority to make that decision. And further, if God were to apply their own standards to their lives, they would still come up short because we are all law-breakers. So Paul died to that whole system of evaluation. When Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live," he is saying that he has been found guilty by God according to the Law of Moses. And he realized that Jesus' death was for him personally. Jesus paid the penalty for God's judgment under that law.

It doesn't matter what we have been depending on, or how good we think we were or are, God's judgment on us is guilty. The sentence for being guilty of violating even the smallest of God's law is death. We all must identify with the death of Jesus on our behalf. When we place our faith in Jesus, we die to all worldly evaluations of righteousness or goodness. We die to every single notion of our being good. We let go of self-centeredness and self-righteousness. We die to every system of evaluation when it comes to being right with God. We must die totally to thinking we are clever or holy in any way. There may be plenty of people around us who think we are good and they may even tell us so. They may praise us and even give us awards. But the fact is each one of us must die to all human evaluation of our goodness. God has already judged every human being. Whether they are in the same class as Mother Teresa of Calcutta or the same class as mass murderers or child molesters: all have been judged guilty and sentenced to eternal death. When we identify with Christ in His death on the cross, we die with Him. That death sentence has been carried out. Every

time we baptize someone, we are actually symbolizing their death to anything they have been thinking could make them right with God. When we go under the water, we are saying we are judged, convicted, and executed. We are completely dead to sin and any form of self-righteousness. That's why it's pretty hard for me to see authentic Christians who are judgmental. How could I look at my death with Jesus on the cross and judge someone else?

B. LIFE IN CHRIST (20b)

But that is only half the story. The second half of verse 20 illustrates what life in Christ is like. Paul says that even though I am dead, Christ now lives in me. Just as I was identified with Him in death, I am now identified with Him in life. He says that the life we now live in the flesh, we live by faith. King David realized that there should have been no mercy for committing adultery and murdering the woman's husband. He should have been executed under Hebrew Law for both of those crimes. However, God showed him mercy, and David knew he could only be saved by grace through faith. Take some time during your devotions and see how David fully realized that he was saved and lived by God's grace alone. Read Psalm 51 and Psalm 143.

Further, the prophet Habakkuk stated very clearly how we continue to live as God's children. He said, "Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked; but the righteous will live by their faith" (Habakkuk 2:4 / NLT).

At this point we have to stop and define the word faith. The problem for most people, including Christians in the West is that we simply equate faith with simply believing something. In other words, for us, faith is simply affirming something intellectually. But faith describes the action that we take based on what we believe. Let me give you a couple of examples. You may tell me that you know that a particular stock is going to double in the next week. I could say, "I believe you," but that's not faith. That's just intellectual assent. It only becomes faith if I go to the bank, withdraw my savings and go buy that particular stock. You see not only do I believe you; I have faith in you. In the Bible, faith is always descriptive of an action that is based on a belief.

Well what does Paul tell us about faith? He says that he lives, and we are to live by faith in Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God. Now watch this. Love is also based on an action. Jesus demonstrated His love for us by giving His life in the most horrible way for us. Paul does not mean that because he is free from obeying the Mosaic Law, he is free to do what he wants. Freedom in Christ does not mean license to do whatever we want.

You see living by faith means that no longer are we living to earn our salvation or to be accepted by God; we are now living in love with God. Let me give you a good example of what it means to live by faith.

I would like to think that I am a Christian. I am a Christian because I have placed my faith in the love and grace of Jesus Christ. However, now that I study the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, it is God's will that I love my wife. One night, we have a huge fight. We end up going to bed angry. In the morning, I quietly get up, get washed and dressed, then slip out of the house. I get into my car and as I'm about to start my car, God's words come to me, "And you husbands must love your wives with the same love Christ showed the church. He gave up his life for her" (Ephesians 5:25 / NLT).

Now the battle for faith begins. I believe that intellectually. That would be a very good way to live, but you know, she's wrong. How will she learn unless I let her suffer and realize she was wrong? But faith says, not only do I believe God's word, I have to now obey God's word. It only becomes faith when I take the keys out of the ignition, get out of the car, go back into the house, wake her up, apologize and make things right. That's what it means to live by faith.

I do it not because if I don't I will lose my salvation. I do it because I love Jesus Who loved me and gave Himself for me. I don't necessarily think that the question is, "What would Jesus do?" I think we should ask, "Since Jesus gave Himself for me, and since He is here with me right now, what does He want me to do?" Here is what we have to remember. We were saved by grace through

faith. Christ made up for all our wrongs and deficiencies. Now we live the best we can, always being aware that Christ still has to make up for all our deficiencies.

C. THE LOGIC OF IT ALL (21)

Paul follows up that thought by describing the logic of it all in verse 21. Paul is saying that we can never live apart from the grace of God in Jesus. I need Jesus to forgive me of all my past sins. I need Jesus to forgive me of all my present sins. And I need Jesus to forgive me of all my future sins. There was never nor will there ever be a time in which I can live without God's grace. If it were possible for anyone to be right with God without grace, then it would be unnecessary for Jesus to die. In fact, if it were possible for us to be good enough to earn our salvation, then God the Father was cruel to make Jesus die for nothing. But the fact is none of us can be good enough and God is a loving God. "When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners" (Romans 5:6 / NLT). We can only truly live when we die to our self-centeredness and start to live for Christ.

I can't even begin to do justice to the concepts of salvation, justification, grace, and faith. But I do know this. Faith in Jesus is the only way to be made right with God.

Again, let me remind us that faith is not just saying that we believe something. Faith is the actions that we take based on what we believe. In his commentary on Galatians, Scot McKnight challenges us to question if we truly have faith in Jesus. He says:

"Jesus is indeed Savior; but in order for Him to become the savior for a given person, that person must surrender himself or herself in trust and obedience for true faith to be expressed. ...

It can come about only through a total revolution of our thinking about what God expects of us for acceptance and for Christian living. We delude ourselves if we think because we have made some decision we are done with it and forever secure in God's eyes. We delude ourselves if we think we can live immoral lives, shack up with partners who are not our spouses, defraud others of their money, take no action to alleviate social ills in our world, and live in constant tension with our children and family members – we delude ourselves, I say, if we think we can live like this and pretend that we are at peace with God and enjoy His Son's justifying work. Those who have been justified, live justly; those who have been made holy in Christ, live holy lives; those who have experienced God's love, love others; those who have experienced God's forgiveness, forgive others; those who have been called from the world, no longer live in the world and call others to be "out with them"; those who have died to the flesh, live in the Spirit."

We have been crucified with Christ and we no longer live, but Christ lives in us. The life we now live here in this life, we live by faith in Jesus Who loved us and gave His life for us.