

Justified by Faith in Christ Alone
Galatians 2:15-16
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Galatians 2:15-16

[15] We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; [16] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Let's Pray

Introduction

As many of you know, from previous sermons, I really enjoy grilling. However, one lesson that I have learned over time is that you can't skip steps in the process, and you definitely shouldn't try to take shortcuts.

This is especially true when it comes to cooking brisket. For those of you who don't know what that is, it's a fairly large cut of meat that is taken from the lower chest of a cow. It's a very tough piece of meat, but it is also incredibly flavorful.

So in order to get it to a place where it can be eaten, it requires you to cook it or smoke it at very low temperatures, for a very long time (like 12-19 hours), so that the dense fibers and connective tissue can begin to break down and get tender.

And I remember, very vividly, the first time that I ever cooked a brisket. We were going to have my parents over for dinner that night, which meant that I probably needed to get the Brisket on the grill at like 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning.

However, I didn't do that. Instead, I got it on at like 9:00 am. Because in my head, I thought, **"as long as I get it up to the right temperature, it's going to turn out fine like every other piece of meat that I had cooked."**

But as I already told you, brisket doesn't work this way, and everything that I read pretty much told me that it doesn't work that way. And yet, I still decided to do it my way, thinking that I would somehow magically get the same results as if I had cooked it for 12 hours.

In the end, I was left with an expensive, inedible piece of meat that was as hard as a rock. Because, no matter what, it always requires slow cooking at a low temperature to become tender and edible.

Now, if you were here last week, you know that Paul was recounting his confrontation with Peter in Antioch. And the reason that he had to confront Peter is because he was compromising the gospel by his actions.

He knew and believed that salvation was by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and yet he was separating himself from eating and having fellowship with the Gentiles.

This means that by his actions, he was telling both the Jews and the Gentiles in Antioch that they really do need to believe in Jesus and follow the ceremonial law so that they can be a part of God's people. **Which led the Jews, along with Barnabas, to make the same error.**

So Paul, realizing that Peter was wrong and was leading the Jews and Gentiles astray, calls him out and says **“how can you expect the Gentiles to live like Jews when you yourself, who are a Jew, live like a Gentile?”**

His main goal was to show Peter and the rest of the Jews that their actions were promoting a false version of the gospel that couldn't actually save people or make them right with God.

But the conversation doesn't stop there.

Because even though in most Bibles, there is a break between verses 14 and 15, Paul's discourse with Peter at Antioch, continues all the way through to verse 21.

And yet, the reason that most Bibles make a break, and put a new heading, is because Paul is using this conversation to transition into the main point of his letter.

Which is this: We are justified before God by faith in Christ alone and not by works of the law.

That's the main thing that he wants the Galatians to understand throughout this whole book, because they are being led to believe that they need Jesus plus works of the law to be justified (made right) before God and therefore, saved.

Like my failure with the Brisket, they were being led to believe that there was a different way to be justified when in reality there was only one, through Christ alone.

Realizing that this idea is so central to this book and our own understanding of how someone is saved, **we are going to focus on his main thesis statement in verses 15-16 this morning.**

[FCF]: Because even though we might say that we are justified before God by faith in Christ alone, we can easily become like the false teachers, and can begin to rely on things like our human effort and even our Christian heritage as the basis for our right relationship with God.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what Peter was communicating with his actions. And had Paul not confronted him and the other Jews, they might have shifted the basis for justification and salvation to their heritage and their efforts, and would have ended up preaching and believing a “false gospel.”

So my hope and prayer this morning is that these clear and straightforward words from Paul will keep us from making the same mistake.

With that said, let's look at our main point for today's message. It's this:

[Proposition]: Because salvation only comes to those who are justified before God, we need to fully understand how we are made right with him.

We will unpack this point by looking at two ways that we are not made right with God, and then we will end by looking at the right and only way to be made right with God.

But before we get there, I want to define a couple of terms for you that are incredibly important when trying to understand not only this passage, but this book as a whole. The first term is:

Justified or Justify: (Used 3 times in this passage and a total of 8 times throughout this book.)

Here is how J.I. Packer defines it:

To “justify” in the Bible means...to declare...of a man on trial, that he is not liable to any penalty, but is entitled to all the privileges due to those who have kept the law. “Justifying” is the act of a judge pronouncing the opposite sentence to condemnation—that of acquittal and legal immunity.

Therefore, justification means that a person is both declared innocent and in the right, as if they had perfectly obeyed God.

So instead of seeing justification as: **Just as if I never sinned (which can be helpful)**

I think it is more complete to say: **Just as if I had perfectly obeyed. Which is what Christ did for us.**

Faith: (Used 2 times in this passage and 20 times throughout this book.)

This comes from the New Bible Dictionary:

Faith is the attitude whereby a man abandons all reliance on his own efforts to obtain salvation, be they deeds of piety, of ethical goodness or anything else. It is the attitude of complete trust in Christ, of reliance on him alone for all that salvation means.

A wholehearted belief that only Christ and Christ alone can save us.

We abandon all reliance on human efforts to save us. Instead, we completely trust and rely on Christ alone for our salvation, and with it, our justification.

I realize that was a little technical, but I believe these definitions will help us this morning and as we continue through this book. So now, let's get into our points for this morning.

We are not made right with God by our Christian heritage.

Galatians 2:15-16a

[15] We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; [16a] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,

Illustration

How many of you have ever seen the movie “Mighty Ducks?” It’s one of my favorite movies. There is a part where the coach of the Ducks, Coach Bombay is arguing with his former hockey coach, Coach Reilly.

And Coach Reilly says in a heated moment “...*what do you think you’re going to prove. You and that bunch of losers (ducks).*”

To which Coach Bombay replies, “*That’s right coach, they are losers, and we hate losers don’t we? They don’t even deserve to live.*”

Now, obviously, we can listen to that and know that Coach Bombay doesn’t really think that his players are losers who don’t even deserve to live.

Instead, he’s sarcastically using the other coach's words against him in this argument.

Text

As we look at verse 15, that is sort of what Paul is doing in his confrontation with Peter and with the Jews at Antioch. He is highlighting in this verse the very real ways that Jews view themselves in comparison with Gentiles.

So when he says, “***We ourselves are Jews by birth...***” he’s trying to bring to the surface all of the ways that Jews view themselves as superior to everyone else. Think about it:

- They are God’s chosen people (**Deut. 7:6**).
- They were entrusted with the law and were given direct revelation from God in the Prophets (**Rom. 3:2**).
- They see themselves as children of Abraham, which means that they see themselves as the fulfillment of the covenant promise that God made to him. (**Jn 8:33**)

In fact, Paul lists out many of these advantages when talking about the Israelites in Romans 9:4. He says:

[4] They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

With all of these advantages, it was very easy for the Jews to see themselves as far greater and better than those “**Gentile sinners.**”

A phrase that highlights the typical Jewish view of Gentiles as those who are excluded from citizenship in Israel and therefore in God's kingdom.

Paul highlights this perspective in Ephesians 2:11-12 when he says:

[11] Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—[12] remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

And for many Jews, and even some Jewish Christians, this is still how Gentiles, and even Gentile believers, are viewed.

But Paul's goal in phrasing verse 15 this way wasn't so that the Jews would feel bad about their sense of superiority and bigotry.

Rather, he was pointing it out to show that the sense of superiority that they have in their heritage was meaningless.

Because Paul, Peter, Barnabas, and the other Jews at Antioch know that the things that make them distinctly Jews, **which include keeping the law**, can't justify them or make them right with God. **Only faith in Christ can do that for them.**

As Paul writes at the beginning of verse 16:

[16] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,

Application

Now, I know that most of us fully understand that we are not made right with God because we are Christians, call ourselves Christians, or grew up in a Christian family.

And yet, how often have we looked at non-believing families, who maybe don't have their life together the way we do, and we judge them. In essence, we look at them as “Gentile sinners” and feel a sense of superiority over them.

I'm saying it because I've done it.

And when we do that, we are putting our hope for justification before God in our identity as a Christian versus the finished work of Christ, which gives us that identity to begin with.

It's also this same thought process that allows us to feel okay with spewing vehement hate at non-believers and even believers with more progressive or left-leaning ideologies.

Because somehow our identification as Christians gives us license to see them as evil people who are much worse than we are. Which makes our identity as a Christ follower and our justification before God into something we deserved or earned and not something that was freely given to us.

Or have you ever thought about how you might answer this question: How do you know that you're a Christian?

Now, I would expect that for most of us we would say, because we put our faith in Jesus, and what he did for us on the cross.

But what else might we be tempted to put in our answers?

- Church attendance
- Church membership
- Having close Christian friends
- Attending a Bible study

If we subtly begin to point to things like this as the basis for what makes us a Christian, in any way, then we will slowly but surely take justification out of God's hands and will put it within our own grasp.

Because these outward markers of being a part of the Christian community will become what we look to as the basis of our acceptance before God.

This is exactly what Peter did, it's what the false teachers were doing, and it's what the Galatians are beginning to do. And according to Paul, it will only lead us to a place where we have no real hope and are without God in the World.

So we must understand that it is a privilege to be called a Christian and to identify ourselves with Christ. But that identity can never save us or make us right with God.

Which brings us to our second point, which in many ways is very similar to the first.

We are not made right with God by our works.

Galatians 2:16

[16] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Illustration

I know that some of you know this, but I really enjoy playing board games. And one of my favorite games of all time is **Settlers of Catan**, which also happens to be a game that my wife loves as well.

However, despite our mutual love for this game, we both came at learning the game in completely different ways.

For me, I learned the game the **right way**. I read every rule at least 2-3 times before playing so that I would know exactly what I was doing, wouldn't make mistakes, and therefore would win.

For her, on the other hand, she didn't really care about reading the rules. Instead, she just played the game multiple times until she finally came to a good understanding of how it works.

And as much as I thought that my way was the far superior method to mastering the game, it didn't make me a better **Catan** player than my wife. In fact, if I were to guess, we might be even, or she might be slightly better than I am.

Text

Similarly, many Jews prided themselves on being doers of the Mosaic law because they believed that it was the right way to be made them right with God.

If we abstain from these foods, if we don't touch dead things, if we circumcise our men, and if we follow these sacrifices, then we will be good with God, because we are his chosen people.

But even in the Old Testament, before Christ came, we can see that there is a problem with this kind of thinking. Look with me at Hosea 6:6

***[6] For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.***

In this particular section of scripture God, through Hosea, is letting all of Israel know that being his people isn't about doing the works of the law. **It's about knowing God, trusting God, and loving God.**

Therefore, Hosea is making it clear that knowing and following God's laws couldn't save them. **Much like knowing and following the rules couldn't make me the best Catan player.**

So then, realizing that Paul is picking up on this same idea in Galatians 2:16, it would be good for us to take a minute to look at the law and ask the question, **"If the Mosaic Law couldn't make people right with God, then what was its purpose?"**

Now this will be spelled out in more detail as we go through this letter, but I want to highlight three reasons that the law was given.

1. It reveals God's holy character.

Leviticus 19:2

[2] Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Romans 7:12

[12] So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

God is holy, the law is holy, and therefore the Israelites, through following this holy law, are getting a deep understanding of who God is as it reveals his character to them.

2. It reveals the sinfulness of humans.

Romans 7:7

[7] What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

The law shows us what sin is, and because we are lawbreakers, it makes us realize that we are sinners.

3. It shows us our need for a Savior.

Romans 3:20

[20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Because the law shows us God’s complete holiness and our utter sinfulness, it magnifies the fact that no amount of law-keeping (**knowing the rules and following the rules**) can actually make us right with God. Instead, what we need is a **Savior to do that for us**.

And the reason Paul is hammering this truth so hard in this book, and especially in verse 16, is because the Galatians are starting to waver on this truth.

So instead of trusting completely in that Savior Christ for their justification, they were now putting at least part of their hope in their ability to keep the law (rules), which as Paul clearly said, can’t justify anybody.

Which means they were also in danger, just like Peter and the Jews at Antioch, of turning to a gospel that can’t save them.

Application

And if we are not careful, we can make the same mistake without even realizing it. Where we subtly shift from finding our justification in and through Christ to engaging in **self-justification**.

Now I realize that you’ve probably heard the term self-justification before, but I want to give you a definition and description of what it means.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines self-justification as “the act or an instance of making excuses for oneself.” Generally, it involves attempts to make ourselves appear good or approved in the eyes of others.

When we live this way as Christians, there are some very wrong attitudes and behaviors that will begin to emerge in our lives.

1. We will lessen God's standards of right and wrong.
2. We will focus on human behavior versus inner spiritual transformation.
3. We will begin to rationalize sinful behavior.
4. We will begin to measure our justification before God through outward conformity to a set of rules.

When we put all of these together, what this will do is it will turn us into the very Pharisees that Jesus himself condemned.

So my hope is that we will heed Paul's words. Examine yourself and ask God to root out the self-justifying ways that exist within your heart. Because the apostle Paul is very clear in Galatians 2:16 when he says:

"...by works of the law (keeping the rules) no one will be justified (made right with God)."

Which now brings us to our last point, which is the good news that we all need this morning.

We are made right with God by faith in Christ alone.

Galatians 2:16

[16] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Personal Illustration

You know, I spent way too many years trying to justify myself by my identity as a Christian and by my works. I did this because I was unsure of myself, I was unsure about my relationship with Christ, and I wanted so badly for people to validate me so that I could feel like a good Christian.

And I believed that if I did the right things and intellectually believed the right things, then I would be good in God's eyes and in the eyes of others.

But instead of giving me the validation that I desired, it did the opposite. It made me fearful of the opinions of others, it caused me to hide my sin, I was super critical all the time, and it made me a very joyless and lifeless Christian.

Because I was trying to base my justification, approval, and acceptance on the opinions of other people instead of on the finished work of Christ applied to me. Like I said in my opening illustration, **"I was trying to cook Brisket my own way."**

Application

If you are here this morning and are trying to do the same thing, I want you to know that you will never find the justification and acceptance that you are looking for.

In fact, living this way will only lead you to hell, because you have put your faith in a “false gospel.”

But I do have some good news for you. There is a way that you can find real and lasting justification, approval, and acceptance with God **(regardless of what others think of you.)** Through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Which means that you need to abandon trying to rely on your own efforts to fulfill you and make you right with God. Instead, you need to put your complete trust in Christ and rely on him alone for your justification, your salvation, and with it your ultimate fulfilment.

Because he is the one who perfectly obeyed God on your behalf. He is the one who went to the cross and paid the penalty for all of your sins, past, present, and future. He is the one who gives you a new and everlasting life with God. And he is the one, and the only one, who perfectly makes you right in his sight.

So that when God the Father looks at you, he loves you, accepts you, and approves of you because what he sees in you is the perfection of Christ applied to you.

If you are here today and don't know Jesus Christ as your Savior and as the one who makes you right with God, I want to encourage you to believe in him. Lay down all of the ways that you are trying to find fulfilment, approval, and justification out in the world, because it will fail you.

Instead, come to Jesus, and find the eternal life and the approval that you were created for and for which your very soul longs.

However, if you are a believer who has found yourself living like the Galatians (Believing in Jesus while trying to justify yourself).

Then I want to remind you that you are already fully loved and accepted by God through Christ. Which means that you can stop working so hard to make yourself right in the eyes of others and in the sight of God.

Instead, come to Christ, rest in Christ, believe that God accepts you because of Christ, and know that his love for you will never change and will know no end.

Because Jesus didn't come to teach us how to justify ourselves. Instead, he came to make us right with God and to give us a full and everlasting life with him. As he says in John 10:10:

[10] I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (Let's Pray)