

Lesson Text: Galatians 2:15-3:5. **Devotional Reading:** Galatians 3:6-14.

Background Scripture: Galatians 2:15-3:5.

Time: probably A.D. 48. from Syrian Antioch

Galatians 2:15-21

¹⁵ *“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles ¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*

¹⁷ *“But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.*

¹⁹ *“For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”*

Galatians 3:1-5

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? ⁴ Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? ⁵ So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Define and explain the doctrine of justification by faith.
2. Compare their own awareness of God's grace to that experienced by the early Christians.
3. Prepare a testimony of God's grace to be used in everyday life.

Introduction

Send Me Back to Jail

Let's suppose you had spent much of your life in prison. At some point the appropriate government official gives you a pardon. You are set free! What would people think if you immediately turned around and walked back into the prison and said, "I don't want to go. I want to stay here." People would think you had lost your mind. And they would probably be right.

A similar kind of decision on the part of the Galatians troubled Paul. These believers had heard Paul's preaching and had learned the glory of God's grace. They had heard the message that liberated Peter and Paul and the rest of the early Christians from a law-oriented means of being right with God. Paul could not understand why anyone would want to go back to a system that was oppressive, frustrating, and did not accomplish what it was intended to do.

Today's lesson shows Paul pleading with the Galatians, both on a logical and an emotional level. It is clear from the apostle's impassioned words that he is greatly concerned that those whom he had worked so hard to bring to Christ remain free in Christ.

Lesson Background

The Bible is a unique book for many reasons, not the least of which is its divine inspiration. Only its divine origin can account for the fact that although the Bible can humble the greatest minds with its unfathomable riches, its basic message is so simple.

On one occasion when a famous theologian was lecturing in the United States, he invited questions after a lecture. One student asked, "What is the greatest truth that ever crossed your mind?" The theologian replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so! (Brown, ed., Day by Day with Billy Graham, World Wide).

No wonder so many people believe that John 3:16 is the most important verse in the entire Bible! That God would love undeserving sinners (Rom. 5:8) and send His Son to die for us is truly amazing.

Although this love is amazing, it is only fully realized when we come to Christ and receive Him as our Savior and Lord (John 1:12).

The Jews were God's chosen people in the Old Testament. The Jews had a long experience with understanding God's law. They thought that they could please God by keeping the law. Gentiles were not given the law, so the Jews viewed them as sinners because they had no way to please God. However, the Jews failed to realize that they could not please God by simply keeping the law. Therefore, the Jews were just as much sinners as the Gentiles.

1. Why did Jews think of Gentiles as sinners but not think this way about themselves? (v.15-16).

The law required total obedience for those under it. One had to keep every single law. If a person sinned one time, then that person had broken the law (James 2:10). When the law is broken, it requires death in order to be satisfied. The law could provide no way for anyone to get back into God's grace. In other words, our best behavior cannot secure salvation. The law demonstrated that we all need a Savior. In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices could take the place of humanity's sin problem, but people had to keep sacrificing animals to keep covering up sin. Jesus came to this earth and lived the sinless life, a life not one of us could have ever lived. He was slain like a lamb on the cross, and he rose on the third day. Therefore, Jesus' blood paid man's sin debt once and for all.

If we are to receive justification from God, then all we have to do is to believe that Jesus' blood covers our sin. That requires faith. It is our faith in Jesus' sacrifice that makes a person right with God.

2. Why is it not possible to be justified by the works of the law? How are we justified (v.16)?

Paul uses the word "justify" three times in Galatians 2:16. Being justified means that we can be declared "not guilty." We have sinned against God, and we can neither defend nor deny our sin. We must accept the fact that we are sinners, and let the blood of Jesus wash away our sins.

Notice that the word innocent was not used in our definition of "justified." Being innocent means that a person has never committed a crime. We are sinners; therefore, we can never be innocent. Being "not guilty" means that there is insufficient evidence to prove our guilt. When we let the blood of Jesus take care of our sins, it washes away the evidence. Thus, we can be declared not guilty, or "justified."

3. What does it mean to be "justified"?

Paul makes this very clear that justification does not allow one to live a sinful life. For that to happen would require Christ to become a "minister of sin." It must be made clear that good works will save no one, but if you are saved, then you should have a desire to do good works. Our works will testify of our love towards Jesus Christ and Christ's love towards the world. Remember that faith without works is dead.

It is important to realize that the world is watching every single Christian. If we profess to be Christians, then there must be something different about us. We can't sin like the world and still witness to it. In fact, when we are caught in sin, we risk damaging our testimony permanently. We are holy vessels unto God, and we must remain clean so that the unsaved may see our light. God does not require us to be perfect, but He does require us to live a life that will allow our light to shine. Remember that we represent Christ at all times.

4. If we are justified by faith, does that give us a license to sin (v. 17)?

Paul is arguing against the salvation by works doctrine. Instead, Paul is preaching about grace. In essence, Paul destroyed the salvation by works doctrine by introducing grace. There is no reason for anyone to go back to such an oppressive system. By going back to that system, one is building up the things which was destroyed by grace; thus, that person is transgressing.

Sadly, many Christians fall into the trap of believing that they still have to be "good enough" to please God. They forget that God is pleased by their faith. We should strive to live godly lives, but we must be secure of our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works. It would be a sin for us to try to keep trying to earn our salvation through our works when Jesus paid it all on the cross.

5. What does Paul mean when he talks about being a transgressor by building again the things which he destroyed (v. 18)?

As Christians, we must be "*crucified with Christ*." Our crucification is spiritual. Water baptism is an excellent example of crucification. When we go into the water, we put our old self into the water, and when we rise out of the water, our new self is born. Our sins are buried with our old self, so they no longer have any power over us.

6. How can we be "crucified with Christ" (v. 20)?

Throughout this lesson, we learned that Jesus Christ died at Calvary for our sins. What if we could please God through the law? If we could please God through the law, then there would be no reason for Jesus to come to earth to die for our sins. If we could be saved with our good works, then Jesus' suffering on the cross would be for nothing. If you haven't seen "The Passion of the Christ," then I highly encourage you to view it at least once. Consider all the suffering that Jesus went through. If there was another way to salvation, Jesus would not have put Himself through all that suffering.

7. How could Christ "die for nothing"? (v. 21)?

The Galatians had learned the gospel, or "good news." They were taught that they were saved by grace through faith. The Judaizers were teaching that all Christians had to obey the Mosaic law in order to receive salvation. The Judaizers were teaching of salvation by works. Since Paul believed that no amount of works can save an individual, he was shocked to hear that the Galatians rejected the gospel of grace so quickly. Paul was implying that it made no sense for anyone to go back to a system that could not provide salvation.

8. Why did it seem to Paul that the Galatians had been "bewitched" (3.1)?

As Christians, we can expect to suffer many things as a result of our faith in Jesus Christ. Paul states that the Galatians suffered because of Christ. Paul was telling the Galatian church that if they could receive salvation through works, then all of the suffering that they did for Christ was in vain.

9. What does Paul mean by suffering in vain (3:4)?

Paul asked the Galatian church whether they received the Holy Spirit by law or by faith? That was a rhetorical question since the answer should be so obvious. The Holy Spirit was promised to all Christians from the Day of Pentecost on (Acts 2:38-39). This promise makes it obvious that no one can earn the Holy Spirit through the law; the Holy Spirit comes as a result of our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

10. How had these converts received the Holy Spirit (3:2, 3:5)?

Conclusion

Paul was a defender and an expounder of the true gospel. The true gospel is that Christ gave Himself for us. Accepting Christ by faith is the only way for a sinner to be declared righteous by a holy God. Attempting to be come righteous enough to be accepted by God is an exercise in futility.

Paul attempted to convince his readers that the gospel of grace could not be substituted or supplemented by legalistic efforts.

Christians today should know that there is nothing they can do to please God in the flesh. Jesus paid it all! We are not saved or sanctified by offering God anything. We are saved, and in the process of being sanctified by accepting what He has offered us in Christ (c.f. 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Prayer

Father God, we thank you for sending your son Jesus Christ to die for our sins. We are thankful that we can receive salvation through your Son's sacrifice instead of trying to fulfill the law. Remind us that we can do nothing to earn our salvation; it is a gift that was very costly to you. We thank you for allowing your son to pay such a high cost on our behalf so that we can escape from the prison of sin. We pray all this in Jesus' holy and righteous name. Amen.

Thought to Remember:

We are not saved because of how good we are. We are saved because of how good God is.