

## Message #7

## Galatians 2:15-21

Albert Einstein was once asked—“What is the key to learning and to intelligence?” He said, “Never stop questioning.”

There was recently an article written about the most important questions that every person should ask himself to feel good and secure: 1) How can I make the best use of this situation? 2) What boundaries do I need to establish so I feel safe? 3) What can I do each day to see that I feel like I’m making a difference?

Now we will admit those are some good questions to ask. But there is one question to ask that is the most important question of all and that is this: “How can a sinful person like myself be forever right with the Holy God so that I will end up going to heaven?” There is no question more important than that one. The answer to that question will give a security that will last forever.

Galatians 2:15-21 are some of the most important verses in the entire Bible. These were the verses that helped to liberate Martin Luther from religious bondage and fear. It was the answer to this very question, “how can sinful man be right with God forever” that is answered in this very text. This text is one that can set any person free.

The answer to how can a sinner be right forever with a Holy God is that **“the just shall live by faith in Jesus Christ.”** This question and this answer are so important that three N.T. books go to work on explaining this—Galatians, Romans and Hebrews.

**Romans explains the meaning of “the just.”**

**Galatians explains the meaning of “shall live.”**

**Hebrews explains the meaning of “by faith.”**

The primary point of these powerful verses is this:

**THE ONLY WAY TO BE MADE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MIND OF A HOLY GOD IS BY PLACING YOUR FAITH TOTALLY AND ONLY IN JESUS CHRIST, WHO IS THE PURE GRACE OF GOD; BECAUSE NO ONE WILL EVER BE RIGHT WITH GOD BY KEEPING THE LAW.**

The only means of being saved is faith alone in Christ alone. You cannot be saved from your sins by relying on yourself. You cannot be saved from your sins by relying on your abilities. You cannot be saved from your sins by relying on your achievements. You cannot be saved from your sins by relying on your church, religious laws or religious rules and traditions. There is only one way of salvation and that is to totally and completely rely upon Jesus Christ to save you from your sins and that is how you have a security that you are forever saved.

Now in these most important verses, Paul develops **five important theological themes:**

**THEOLOGICAL THEME #1** – Paul and others were self-righteous religious law-keepers by nature. **2:15**

The Apostle Paul and Barnabas and Peter, James and John were all Jews. They were born Jewish and they were Jewish in their religious beliefs and they were proud of their religious beliefs. Now Jews believed that they were automatically right with God because they were born Jewish. In fact, that is the very argument Jews used against Jesus Christ; we don't need to believe on you because "we are Abraham's descendants" (John 8:33).

The Jewish religion is a religion of O.T. laws. It is a religion of lots of laws. There are not just 10 commandments, but there are laws governing worship, social life, civic life and all religious life. If that isn't enough, they even invented more laws and more religious traditions.

The Gentiles were considered to be a bunch of unclean sinners by Jews because they did not keep or try to keep any of their religious laws. Those Jews sure knew they could spot the sin in the Gentiles, but they could not see the sin beam in their own eye.

Paul's point here is that we were by nature the most religious people on the face of the earth. We were Jewish and we had a remarkable history with God and we also were devoted to keeping the O.T. Law and other laws besides that. **But Paul came to know that none of this made us right with God.**

Paul had been an avid law-keeper, but he came to realize that would never make him right with a Holy God because he could never measure up to God's standards. To be right with God by keeping the Law requires you keep all of it and if you miss any commandment one time you have not met God's standard of righteousness. That is exactly what James said in James 2:10—"for whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."

Now do not overlook what is said here in **Galatians 2:15**—**by nature you love your works and you love your religion and you love yourself and by nature you don't see yourself as an evil sinner like the heathens.**

By your nature you will have a tendency to want to justify yourself by keeping some O.T. laws or religious rules. You will try to convince yourself that you are just as good, perhaps even a bit better than the average person. That is what your nature will tell you. Your nature will tell you that you can be right with God by your works and by keeping the law. But don't forget this—**your nature is a lost sin nature. If you believe in yourself or your works or your law-keeping to take you to heaven, your nature and your pride are taking you straight to hell.**

There are many religious people who don't see themselves as God sees them. They are very religious and self-righteous and they are devoted to their church and the rules and the laws. They will point out that they aren't sinners like the bad sinners they know. It is the same old argument we are the religious Jews, not the sinful Gentiles.

I love the illustration told by Donald Grey Barnhouse. He said if you put us all in a swimming pool and said swim to the other side, depending on who the great swimmers are, some would get there first and beat the others. But if you took all of us out into the middle of the ocean and said swim to shore, we would all drown, I don't care how good you think you are. We are all drowning in sin and we cannot save ourselves by our works or keeping the Law. That is Paul's point.

**THEOLOGICAL THEME #2** – Any man is justified by faith and not by keeping the Law.  
**2:16**

In Psalm 143:2, King David said, “Do not enter into judgment with Thy servant for in Thy sight no man living is righteous.” Do you understand this point? No man living is righteous in the sight of God by what he is or by what he does. This is one of the most important points for you to grasp and **Galatians 2:16 is one of the most important verses in the entire New Testament.** J. Vernon McGee said, “The legalist has trouble with this verse. This verse will upset every legal system there is today.”

There are three critical observations we want to make about this verse:

**Observation #1** - It is the expectation of God that we “know” we are forever saved. **2:16a**

That participle “knowing” is perfect tense which means God expects us to know this data from some point in time and from that point know it at the present and the future. In other words, this is something we need to know and should know from a point in the past, we should know this at the present and know this in the future.

God wants His people knowing they are right with Him. He does not want them hoping they are, but knowing they are. Now here is the point. You will not have this security or knowledge by relying on yourself or your works or your law-keeping. The only way you will know this is by totally and completely relying on Jesus Christ to give you a righteousness you do not have.

**Observation #2** - No man is justified by the works of the Law. **2:16b**

The word “justified” is a judicial term. It is a legal term used in a court of law. The word speaks of a judicial declaration, not a moral infusion. Let me illustrate what I mean by this.

When O. J. Simpson was declared by the court not guilty after he killed his wife and Ron Goldman, it was a judicial declaration made by the court. It did not mean he was innocent and it did not mean that he became a good man. It meant he was judicially acquitted.

This is the same concept in the Bible. When a person is justified, it means that God has made a judicial decision to declare that a person is righteous, thus acquitting him of all guilt and condemnation. When God makes this decision, it guarantees this sinner has everlasting life.

**Justification in the Bible always begins with God alone acting in pure grace.**

God justifies people despite their sin, their guilt and their rebellion against Him. God does justify people who have committed all kinds of sins. God will justify people who have been sexually immoral; who have been homosexuals, thieves, covetous idolaters, cheaters, drunks, stealers, revilers (I Cor. 6:9-11).

Now the most important question we may ask here is what must we do in order to have God justify us? Look carefully at what is said here. **Paul says you need to always know that no man will ever be declared righteous by God through his attempts to keep the O.T. Law. The Greek word for man is anthropos (anthropology) generic meaning no human.**

Don't miss this. No human, regardless of gender, color of skin, social status, religious background, education, church membership or religious ordinances will ever be declared righteous by a Holy God by our attempts at keeping the O.T. Law.

We are all sinners. We may be God-fearing and we may be law-keeping people. We may have backgrounds that are very religious or blatantly heathen. The fact is we are all sinners. **No one, no matter who it is, will ever be justified by God by their attempts to keep the O.T. Law.**

The Biblical scholar Jerome, who lived around the year A.D. 400, said we should tell people that the group who will not obtain righteousness is the group who thinks they can obtain it by their works.

**Observation #3** - Every man who is declared righteous by God is justified by faith in Jesus Christ. **2:16c**

Every human needs to know this. God expects us to know this. There is only one way that God will ever declare a sinner righteous from His Holy court. It is not by a person's works or by a person's keeping the O.T. Law; it is by faith in Jesus Christ.

No flesh will ever be justified by their works or their attempts to keep the O.T. Law. It will not ever happen. The moment, the point of time when you by faith believe that Jesus Christ is the only one who can save me from my sins, that is the exact moment your court case is settled and you are out from your sin dilemma.

The verb "believed" is aorist tense, meaning at the exact one point of time you finally believe you cannot save yourself and place all of the weight of your faith onto Jesus Christ, you are forever saved.

Listen carefully—if you think you can save yourself, you are still in your sins and you have not been declared righteous by God.

**THEOLOGICAL THEME #3** – If we are seeking to be justified by faith alone in Christ and not the O.T. Law, see ourselves and the Law for what it is. **2:17-19**

These verses are tricky, but here is the meaning. Paul knew some very religious person who kept the Law would say if we continually seek (present tense participle) our justification in Jesus Christ and not by keeping the O.T. Law, then we are classified as sinners because we are not interested in keeping the O.T. Law, so doesn't that make Jesus Christ the minister of sin because we used to try to keep the O.T. Law (**2:17**). **Paul's dogmatic answer is "May it never be."**

**He explains it in verses 18-19 with that conjunction "for."** If a person seeks to be justified by faith in Christ and puts himself back under the O.T. Law, all he will do is prove himself to be a transgressor over and over again.

When Paul says in **verse 19** that "I died," he is obviously talking about what happened to him spiritually and not physically. Paul says the Law showed me I was dead in my relationship with God. It did not show that I was alive to God. In fact, the Law showed me I don't have the righteousness I need to have a relationship with God.

The Law shows we are guilty. The Law shows we need a far greater righteousness than what we have. So we cannot ever be made righteous in God's sight by keeping the Law. When you look at even the 10 commandments honestly, you will have to admit you have not kept them. None of us has.

- 1) No other gods before God.
- 5) Honor father and mother.
- 7) Do not commit adultery.
- 8) Do not steal.
- 9) Do not bear false witness.
- 10) Do not covet

No one can stand up and say I have kept them perfectly. If one did he would be a liar. This is why we cannot seek to be justified by the Law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

**THEOLOGICAL THEME #4** – Our righteousness before God is solely found in our judicial identification with Jesus Christ. **2:20**

Here is one of the most famous verses in all of the Bible; but as Dr. J. Vernon McGee said, most who quote this verse do not know anymore about what it actually means than a goat grazing on a hillside.

**The death of Jesus Christ on that cross was not only a legal act in the mind of God, it was a substitutionary act.** The prepositional phrase at the end of this verse "for me" (hyper emoji) emphatically states that Jesus Christ was on that cross in our place and in our stead.

In other words, in the mind of God this is how He sees one who trusts only in His Son for salvation. He sees the sin of that person nailed to that cross. The moment you believed on Jesus Christ, Christ came into your life and now God sees Christ living in you. Jesus Christ went to that cross to nail the condemnatory law to it (Col. 2:14). Therefore, to go back under the O.T. Law after Christ is in your life is to slap Jesus Christ in the face.

We are saved by faith and that is how we live, by faith, not by trying to keep the O.T. Law in our flesh. Listen carefully here. Many religious people want to crucify themselves to be right with God. You cannot crucify yourself. It is impossible. People can commit suicide in a variety of ways; but they cannot crucify themselves. Jesus Christ was crucified for us and the moment you believe on Him for your justification is the exact moment God justifies you and Jesus Christ is in you forever. What He did on that cross is appropriated to you forever.

Now look at the end of the verse. Jesus Christ loved you and Jesus Christ gave Himself for you. God cannot just love you into heaven. Jesus Christ will take you there if you believe in Him. Don't try to take yourself there by keeping the Law, you will never make it. He is the only way of life.

**THEOLOGICAL THEME #5** – One who believes he can be right with God by keeping the Law nullifies the grace of God. **2:21**

If righteousness that can make you right with God could be earned by keeping the Law, there are two results:

**Result #1** - It nullifies the grace of God.

The word “nullify” means to do away with something; to disregard something; to reject something. If a person believes he may be righteous with a Holy God by keeping the Law, it completely does away with grace.

**Result #2** - Jesus Christ died needlessly.

To actually believe that your O.T. law-keeping makes you right with God is to blaspheme the precious work of Jesus Christ. It makes His work useless.

The Law says you do. Christ says, “I did it all.” The Law says you must finish your salvation. Christ says, “It is finished.”

The most destructive danger of legalism is that it theologically cancels out the cross work of Jesus Christ.

The most important question you will ever ask is what must I do to be saved? The answer is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.