

# **Galatians**

## **Justification by Faith Alone!**

*Galatians 2:15-21*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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# Justification by Faith Alone!

## Scripture

Charlie Chaplin was a huge movie star in the silent-picture era.

One of the by-products of his popularity was the look-alike contests that sprung up around the country. Contestants attempted to imitate Chaplin dressed as the “tramp” character he made popular in his films. Even the young up-and-coming actor Bob Hope entered such a contest in Cleveland, Ohio, and won.

Legends have sprung up that Charlie Chaplin himself took part in one contest. Steve Chandler, in his book *100 Ways to Motivate Yourself*, says that Chaplin was on holiday in Monaco when he decided to enter a Chaplin look-alike contest. Others cite the incident as taking place in Switzerland.

Although the event has been embellished through the years, it actually did occur. Chaplin entered a look-alike contest in San Francisco. Amazingly, Chaplin failed even to make the finals!<sup>1</sup>

In a similar way, sometimes we do not recognize the truth about God and what he has revealed to us even when it is staring us in the face.

In today’s text, the apostle Paul teaches how a person comes into a right relationship with God. Let us read Galatians 2:15-21:

**<sup>15</sup> “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ <sup>16</sup> know that a man is not justified by observing 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 observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.**

**<sup>17</sup> “If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! <sup>18</sup> If I rebuild what I de-**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.snopes.com/movies/actors/chaplin2.htm>.

**stroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. <sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:15-21)**

## **Introduction**

Martin Luther, the great reformer in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, called the doctrine of justification by faith alone “the article of a standing or falling Church.”

What Luther meant is that the doctrine of justification is so central to the life and vitality of the Church that by that doctrine the Church would either stand or fall. If the biblical doctrine of justification was taught and believed, the Church would stand. If the doctrine was abandoned, the Church would fall. It is that simple.

J. I. Packer, one of today’s leading theologians has this to say about the doctrine of justification:

For the doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas. It bears the whole world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of God the Savior. The doctrines of election, of effectual calling, regeneration, and repentance, of adoption, of prayer, of the Church, the ministry, and the sacraments, are all to be interpreted and understood in the light of justification by faith, for this is how the Bible views them.<sup>2</sup>

Later on in the series we shall develop the relationship between justification and some of the doctrines of the Bible. Our present task will be to examine the essential nature of justification.

I draw your attention today to the doctrine of justification because it is the first time in the letter to the Galatians we encounter

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<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, “Sola Fide: The Reformed Doctrine of Justification,” *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology*, ed. by R. C. Sproul (Nutley, 1976), 14.

the term “to justify.” The verb “justified” occurs three times in verse 16, once in verse 17, and the noun “justification” (translated as “righteousness”) occurs once in verse 21.

## Review

Let me mention by way of review that there was confusion in the Galatian churches over how a person came into a right relationship with God. That is, there was confusion over how a person was justified before God.

False teachers, known as Judaizers, had infiltrated the church and were teaching a false doctrine. They taught that a person came into a right relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ *plus* obedience to the Mosaic Law. In particular, a person had to believe in Jesus as Savior *plus* be circumcised and follow certain dietary regulations. In other words, a person was justified by observing the law.

Even the apostle Peter fell prey to their bewitching teaching to the point where Paul had to publicly confront and rebuke him regarding his hypocrisy (2:11-21).

## Lesson

The portion of Scripture that is before us today is most likely part of the lecture Paul gave Peter. The question before Paul, Peter, and indeed us is, “How can a condemned sinner be justified?”

Or, as Bildad the Shuhite put it centuries ago, “How then can a man be righteous before God?” (Job 25:4).

Paul’s answer to these crucial questions is before us today.

### I. Paul’s Exposition (2:15-16)

First, let’s look at Paul’s exposition.

Paul says in verses 15-16: **“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by ob-**

**“serving 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 observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”**

Paul’s exposition takes the form of a contrast between the false teachers’ doctrine of justification (which is **by observing the law**) and the apostles’ doctrine of justification (which is **by faith**). Paul denies the former and affirms the latter.

A. *Justification by Observing the Law*

Notice what justification by observing the law means.

**“By observing the law”** is meant those acts done in obedience to the sum total of God’s commandments.

The Jews believed that they could be justified by this means. And so did the false teachers, or Judaizers. The Judaizers professed faith in Jesus Christ, but wanted everyone to obey the Law of Moses as well.

A Judaizer standing up in one of the Galatian churches might have taught something like this: “The only way to be justified is by believing in Jesus Christ and also by sheer hard work. You have to work at it. You have to observe the law. That is, you must do everything the law commands and refrain from everything the law forbids.”

“Supremely,” the Judaizer would go on, “this means that you must keep the Ten Commandments. You must love and serve the living God, and have no other gods or god-substitutes. You must reverence his name and his day, and honor your parents. You must not tell lies. You must be pure in your relationships. You must not desire what others have. In other words, you must obey all of the Ten Commandments.”

But still the Judaizer was not finished. “In addition to the moral law, the Ten Commandments, there is the ceremonial law which you must observe. You must be circumcised and join the Jewish church. You must take your religion seriously. You must

pray and fast and give alms. And if you do all these things, and do not fail in any particular, you will make the grade. God will accept you. You will be justified by observing the law.”

That was the teaching of the Judaizers.

Now this teaching is as old as man and as new as today. It is the religion of the man-on-the-street today. In fact, it is the fundamental principle of every religious and moral system in the world except for biblical Christianity.

Commentator John Stott says, “It is popular because it is flattering. It tells a man that if he will only pull his socks up a bit higher and try a bit harder, he will succeed in winning his own salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

But, of course, it is all a delusion. It is the most widely spread lie perpetrated by the father of lies, the Devil. Nobody ever has—or ever will be—justified **by observing of the law**. Why? Because nobody has ever kept the law perfectly. **Observing the law**, a perfect obedience to its demands, is beyond every one of us. Only Jesus Christ has kept the law perfectly in every way. If we are honest with ourselves, we would all admit that we have failed at every single point to obey perfectly the law of God.

### *B. Justification by Faith*

Paul calls the second alternative justification “**by faith in Jesus Christ.**”

Jesus Christ came into the world to live and to die. In his life his obedience to the law was perfect. In his death he suffered for our disobedience. On earth he lived the only life of sinless obedience to the law which has ever been lived. On the cross he died for our lawbreaking, since the penalty for disobedience to the law was death. All that is required of us to be justified, therefore, is to acknowledge our sin and helplessness, to repent of our years of self-

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 62.

assertion and self-righteousness, and to put our whole trust and confidence in Jesus Christ to save us.

Faith in Jesus Christ is not intellectual conviction only, but personal commitment. The expression in the middle of verse 16 is literally, “we have believed *into* Christ Jesus.” It is an act of commitment, not merely assenting to the fact that Jesus lived and died, but running to him for refuge and calling on him for mercy.

There are then, theoretically, two means of justification. One way is by works of the law. The second is by faith in Jesus Christ.

Three times Paul tells us that God’s way is the second, and not the first. His emphatic triple statement in verse 16 is intended to leave us in no doubt about this matter, and (as Luther often said) to “beat it into our heads.” There is an ascending scale of emphasis—first general, then personal, and finally universal.

1. The first statement is general (2:16a)

The first statement is general.

Paul says in verse 16a that we. . . **“know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.”**

Paul has nobody special in mind here. He is deliberately vague. Just a man, any man, any woman.

Further, he says, “We **know**.” He does not offer a tentative opinion, but a dogmatic assertion. He has spent two chapters defending his authority and his gospel. What he teaches is what God wants him to teach. It is God’s gospel.

2. The second statement is personal (2:16b)

The second statement is personal.

Paul continues in verse 16b, **“So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law.”**

The certainty of Paul’s gospel is more than intellectual. He has proved it personally in his own experience. That is an impor-

tant addition. Paul is teaching a gospel which he himself has put to the test, and it has not been found wanting.

3. The third statement is universal (2:16c)

The third statement is universal.

Paul adds in verse 16c, **“Because by observing the law no one will be justified.”**

The theological principle and personal experience are now confirmed by Scripture. The Greek is even more forceful than the English. The Greek term for **“no one”** refers to *all flesh*, mankind without exception.

No matter what our religious upbringing, educational background, social status, economic class or racial origin, the way of salvation is the same. No one can be justified by observing the law. All flesh must be justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

It would be hard to find a more forceful statement on the doctrine of justification than this. With this threefold statement we should all accept the biblical doctrine of justification and not let our natural self-righteousness keep us from faith in Christ.

## II. Paul’s Argument (2:17-21)

Now, let’s look at Paul’s argument.

Plain and clear as Paul’s exposition is, it was challenged in his day, and it is still being challenged today. So in these next verses he turns from exposition to argument. He tells us both the argument which his critics used to try to overthrow his doctrine, and the argument which he used to overthrow their doctrine and to establish his. We hear them arguing with one another, as it were.

### A. *The Critics’ Arguments against Paul (2:17-20)*

Let’s begin with the critics’ arguments against Paul.

Paul says in verses 17-20: **“If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”**

These verses are not easy to understand, and have been differently interpreted. It seems to me that Paul’s critics argued as follows: “Your doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone, apart from observing the law, is a highly dangerous doctrine. It fatally weakens a man’s sense of moral responsibility. If he can be accepted through trusting in Christ, without any necessity to do good works, you are actually encouraging him to break the law, which is the heresy of *antinomianism*.” This argument is familiar even today.

Paul’s critics said that justification by faith without observing the law actually promotes sin. Paul vehemently denied this. Christ is never the author of sin.

Justification is a legal transaction. God declares a condemned sinner “not guilty” because the penalty for his sin has been paid by a substitute. That substitute is Christ. Our sin was imputed (credited) to Christ, and his perfect righteousness was imputed (credited) to us. The issue of a bad *record* is dealt with at a legal level.

However, we still have a bad *heart*. Not only does God take care of the bad record in a legal sense, but he actually transforms our hearts. A person who is justified by faith in Christ is never the same person again. He is changed. It is not merely his standing before God that has changed; it is he himself. He is radically, permanently changed. To talk of going back to the old life, and even sinning as he pleases, is frankly impossible. He has become a new creation and begun a new life (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

A person who is justified is not free to sin. Once we have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection, our old life is

finished. It is foolish to suggest that we could ever go back to it. We have risen to a new life in Christ. In one sense, we live this new life through faith in Christ. In another sense, it is not we who live at all, but it is Christ who lives it in us. And living in us, he gives us new desires for holiness, for godliness, for God, for heaven, for purity, for righteousness.

It is not that we cannot sin again; we can. But we do not want to sin. The whole tenor of our life has changed. Everything is different now, because we ourselves are different. See how clearly Paul puts it: **Christ lives in me.**

*B. Paul's Argument against His Critics (2:21)*

We have seen how Paul counters his critics' attempt to overthrow his doctrine. Let's see Paul sets about overthrowing theirs. Paul says in verse 21: **"I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness (or, justification) could be gained through (observing) the law, Christ died for nothing!"**

Try to feel the force of Paul's argument. The two foundation planks of Christianity are the grace of God and the death of Christ.

The Christian gospel is the gospel of the grace of God. The Christian faith is the faith of a Christ crucified. So if anybody insists that justification is by works, and that he can earn his salvation by his own efforts, he is undermining the foundation of the Christian religion. He is nullifying the grace of God (because if salvation is by observing the law, it is not by grace) and he is making Christ's death superfluous (because if salvation is our own work, then Christ's work was unnecessary).

Yet there are large numbers of people who, like the Judaizers, are making these very same mistakes. They are seeking to commend themselves to God by their own works. They think it noble to try to earn their way to God and to heaven. But it is not noble. It is dreadfully ignoble. For, in effect, it is to deny both the nature of God and the mission of Christ. It is to refuse to let God be gracious. It is to tell Christ that he need not have bothered to

die. For both the grace of God and the death of Christ become redundant, if we are masters of our own destiny and can save ourselves.

## Conclusion

Four truths seem to stand out from this portion of God's Word.

First, our greatest need is justification, or acceptance with God. In comparison with this, all other human needs pale into insignificance. How can we be put right with God, so that we can spend eternity in his favor and presence and service?

Second, justification is not by observing the law, but through faith in Christ. Luther put it well: "I must listen to the gospel, which teaches me, not what I ought to do (for that is the proper office of the Law), but what Jesus Christ the Son of God has done for me: to wit, that he suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death."<sup>4</sup>

Third, not to trust in Jesus Christ, because of self-trust, is an insult both to the grace of God and to the cross of Christ, for it declares both to be necessary.

And fourth, to trust in Jesus Christ, and thus to become united to him, is to begin an altogether new life. If we are "in Christ," we are more than justified; we find that we have actually died and risen with him. So we are able to say with Paul: **I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (2:20).**

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1535), 101.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)