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Galatians

"But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! Galatians 2:17

The words in this verse are difficult and various scholars have proposed several suggestions as to what Paul's intent is. The key to which interpretation is correct is dependent on whether he is still referencing his conversation with Peter, or is he now directing a theological commentary to the Galatians.

There appears to be no reason to assume the latter. It is not until verse 3:1 that he actually addresses the Galatians by name. Therefore, it is probable that he is still recalling his rebuke to Peter. And so what he is saying is based on Peter's withdrawing himself from the Gentiles when the other Jews from James showed up. Previously, he had sought to be justified by Christ. He believed in his Lord and he received the Holy Spirit.

In this capacity, he lived in freedom from the law which was fulfilled by Christ. He had fellowshiped with the household of Cornelius and he had fellowshiped with the Gentiles in Antioch as well. However, in this freedom which was brought about by his relationship with Christ, did he and the other Jews with him (who also fellowshiped with the Gentiles) find themselves to be sinners?

In other words, if Christ's work is what allowed the Jews to unite with the Gentiles, but it was actually sinful in relation to the law (which presupposes that

the law would still be in effect), then it would mean that they were sinning against the law by fellowshiping with the Gentiles (which was because of the work of Christ) and it would then make Christ "a minister of sin."

The repercussions of this would be obvious - the entire Christian message would be one of sin and all people would have to abandon it and return to an entire obedience to the Law of Moses. If this were the case, then Christ would have died for absolutely no reason at all and there would actually be no "New Covenant" in His blood.

Charles Ellicott explains this dilemma quite well -

"Is therefore Christ the minister of sin?—Our English version is probably right in making this a question. It is put ironically, and as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of the Judaising position. The Judaisers maintained the necessity of a strict fulfilment of the Mosaic law. They, however, still called themselves Christians; and here St. Paul had a hold upon them. 'You call yourselves Christians,' he says, 'and yet you insist upon the Mosaic law. You say that a man cannot be justified without it: it follows that we, who have exchanged the service of the Law for the service of Christ, are not justified. In other words, our relation to Christ has made us, not better, but worse—a thought which no Christian can entertain.'"

The rhetorical question of Paul stands, "...*is* Christ therefore a minister of sin?" The answer from Peter's lips must be, "Certainly not." If otherwise, then it would mean that Christ's death, and the introduction of this new faith, was opposed to holiness. The horror of this is too much to contemplate. If there is no justification through faith in Christ, then there is no justification for any person ever. The law can save no one. If Christ's death only adds to the condemnation of the law, what a pitiful death it would have been indeed.

Life application: Christ's death must be (and it is) the end of the law for righteousness for all who believe.

For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.
Galatians 2:18

Here we come upon a logical conclusion of the words of the previous verse. Paul had just asked, "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, *is* Christ therefore a minister of sin?" By allowing Jews and Gentiles to eat together under the new faith which is found in Christ (which Peter clearly did, both in the household of Cornelius and in Antioch), then Christ would be a minister of sin if the law were still in force. This is because it was a practice forbidden within Judaism. However, Paul says this was certainly not the case.

Now to explain this to the dulled ears of Peter, he begins with "For." If Christ were a minister of sin, then the following proposition that he will relate to him would be a certainty. "If I build again those things which I destroyed" is speaking of things mandated under the law. They are those things which are now destroyed through Christ's finished work. To the Christian, they have been nailed to His cross.

However, if we reinsert those same precepts from under the law as binding, a significant issue arises. He says that if this is the case, then "I make myself a transgressor." If we have left the law which is actually still binding, then we have transgressed the law. If this is so, then we are guilty before the law. If we are guilty before the law because of faith in Christ, then Christ would, in fact, be a minister of sin. Charles Ellicott beautifully explains the dilemma for those in Christ "IF" the law were still binding -

"But Christ is not a minister of sin. The thought is not to be tolerated. For, on the contrary, the sin is seen, not in leaving the Law for Christ, but in going back from Christ to the Law. The sin is seen doubly: for on one theory—the theory that the Law is valid—it was wrong to give it up; while on the other theory, that Christianity has taken its place, it is still more wrong to restore the fabric that has once been broken down."

Either way, there is sin involved unless Christ is the fulfillment of the law and if our hope is in Him and not in the law. As He is the fulfillment of it, then we have actually not given it up at all. Rather, our hope is in the law, but only so far as in Christ's fulfillment of it. As He has done so, then we have the responsibility to trust that fact and to never reinsert the precepts of the law as a means of obtaining justification before God.

The law remains God's standard for all people, but there is a distinction between believers and unbelievers. For those not in Christ, it will be the standard by which they are judged - apart from Christ's work. For those in Christ, the law will be the standard by which they are judged, inclusive of His work. None shall stand justified apart from Him; all will be justified who are in Him.

In this verse, Paul speaks in the first person. However, it should be taken as a general proposition for all people. His words were certainly speaking to Peter and the Jews who had departed from the truth, but they apply to anyone else who would do so as well. Having said that, in the next verse (19), the first person continues to be used, but it is Paul speaking of himself. This is evident by his choice of the emphatic word for "I" which will begin that verse.

Life application: Trust in Christ alone for your salvation. Anything else is a self-condemning act.

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. Galatians 2:19

"For" is given as Paul's continued thought on verse 17. He gave a hypothetical for the consideration of Peter and the other Jews who were falling back on the observance of the law in verse 18. Now he gives a true life example of what should be the reality of the situation for a true Christian. In his words, "I" is emphatic. In other words, after the hypothetical, he speaks of himself in the matter.

"I through the law died to the law." There is much debate over the meaning of these words. Some scholars suppose that he is speaking of the new faith in Christ, and so in essence, "By the new law (or faith), I have died to the other." In other words, "My adherence to Christianity has caused me to cast away my adherence to the law." Other scholars see this as a consideration of the true nature of the Law of Moses. In contemplating its true nature and design, he had become dead to it. He had cast away any hope of being justified by it, knowing that by the law, no man could be justified in God's sight.

However, the next verse actually explains what Paul is thinking about. One cannot arbitrarily cast away a law which is in effect. The covenant was made; the conditions were set; and there was no chance of bargaining one's way out of that law. As a Jew, he was obligated to it; every precept of it. However, within the writings under the law, there was the promise of a Redeemer who would come. This is now what Paul is referring to. Christ fulfilled the law and died in fulfillment of it. Thus, all who call on Christ for their justification have "died to the law." This is so that such a person "might live to God."

Further, within the law itself, there is a provision which removes one from the law through the penalty of death. He will allude to this in the next verse and he will expand on it in Galatians 3:10-13. This act then is what Paul is speaking of.

Paul, and any other who is represented in the same case, has died to the law through the death of Christ. In that death, the law is annulled. It no longer has power over him. Instead, Christ has dominion over that soul from that point on. For this reason, through Christ, we might live to God. Paul's words of the coming verse explain this exactly.

Life application: Sometimes folks try so hard to analyze the meaning of a single verse that they simply fail to look at the surrounding context. Context is king when interpreting what a verse is trying to tell us. We need to know who is being spoken to, under what dispensation it is being spoken, and what the words around the verse(s) that we are looking at are directed to. Keep things in context and make all

evaluations of this precious word with careful, thoughtful, and proper consideration.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Galatians 2:20

Paul just said, "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God." What the law could never accomplish, that of bestowing righteousness upon a sinful person, was accomplished through union with Christ who died under that same law. He writes in the same general manner to those in Rome as well -

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, ⁶knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin." Romans 6:3-6

From showing what the law could not do in the previous verse, he now shows what Christ's death can do for us. Paul saying, "I have been crucified with Christ" does not mean that he has somehow imitated Christ's death in a spiritual way such as, "I have crucified my flesh just as Christ was crucified on the cross." Rather, this is referring to what happens to us in God's eyes when we receive Jesus. It is an ethical bond because of our faith in Jesus' death. Christ was crucified on a real cross, and He really died. When we accept that He died on that cross and rose again, we too are counted as crucified with Christ."

Why is this important? It is because what happened to Paul also happens to us. For Paul "...owing to his connection with the crucified, he was like him, legally

impure, and was thus an outcast from the Jewish church. He became dead to the law by the law's own act" (Vincent's Word Studies). In verse 3:10 Paul will say -

"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed *is* everyone who hangs on a tree')."

There, he reached back to the words of the law itself to explain what occurs in the life of one who receives Jesus. According to Deuteronomy 21:23, anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. Therefore, in our acceptance of Jesus in fulfillment of the law, we become dead to the law through the death of Christ.

Of course, the argument might then be that if Christ's crucifixion was just, then by my act of uniting with Him, I would become accursed of the law just as Christ was. Thus, He and I are both transgressors. But this is not so. Christ was not justly crucified for His own sins. He had none. Instead, He died for the sins of another. Paul explains this in 2 Corinthians 5:21 -

"For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Death could not hold Him because He had no sin of His own. Therefore, when a believer dies with Him they can say, "...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Christ was raised by the power of God and therefore we are raised by that same power. The life of Christ is what God sees in us. Our earthly bodies count as nothing in the greater scope of things. Therefore, Paul says, "...and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

In our current walk, a walk which remains in the flesh, we "live by faith in the Son of God." We received Him, we died with Him, and we have a sure and grounded hope that we are His. As He arose, so shall we. And this is because He loved us and gave Himself for us.

In short: His perfect life died in fulfillment of the law. Having been hung on a tree in His death, He became a curse so that we could die to that law through faith in Him. When we place our faith in Him, the law is annulled in us. It no longer has power over us. Therefore, because we are dead to the law, but still alive in the flesh, we must be (and we are) living by faith in the Son of God.

Life application: You who want to be under the law, don't you know what the law says? If you are under the law, you cannot be under Christ. Being under Christ means that you are accursed to the law. If you are still seeking justification through deeds of the law, then you cannot be under Christ. Thus you are self-condemned. You are rejecting the only way of ever being justified before God. Cling to Christ and Christ alone. Reject any and all who would reinsert the law as a necessary requirement for standing justified before God.

"I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain." Galatians 2:21

There are several exceedingly important truths which are seen in this verse, and which must be taken to heart. Paul says "I do not set aside the grace of God." Grace is getting what one does not deserve. The giving of Jesus Christ is the ultimate act of grace. No one on earth "deserves" what God has done through Him. All have sinned and all deserve death, condemnation, and hell. But God sent Christ to redeem us from that sorrowful end.

Paul exclaims here that he does not "set aside" this gift which is from God; the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word here is *atheteó* and it means "to make of no effect," "to set aside," or "to break faith with." In the epistle to the Hebrews when speaking of the Law of Moses the author uses the word *athetésis*, which is derived from *atheteó*. He uses this word to make a specific point concerning the law -

"For on the one hand there is an **annulling** of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, ¹⁹ for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, *there is the* bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God." Hebrews 7:18

This word, *athetésis*, speaks of annulment, nullification, or abrogation. Paul understood that one cannot be under grace and under the law at the same time. The two are contradictory ideas and either one or the other can be held to. If one chooses to be justified before God based on the law, then it is impossible to be justified before God based on the grace found in Christ. Likewise, the reciprocal is true. If one finds his righteousness in Christ who fulfilled the law, then one cannot find their righteousness in the law, except as it has been granted through the work of Christ.

If one claims to receive the grace of Christ and then attempts to obtain righteousness through the law (such as giving up on pork, which is according to the law), then they proclaim that Christ's fulfillment of the law, and His death which occurred for that fulfillment, was both pointless and unnecessary. This is found in Paul's next words which say, "...for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain."

For those who believe in God, and who want to be pleasing to God, their deeds are done in an attempt to be righteous before Him. A provision within the law allows for the law to grant this -

"You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I *am* the LORD." Leviticus 18:5

However, there is the truth, which is borne out in the rest of the Old Testament, which is that no person can perfectly keep the law. This is clearly and precisely explained in the book of Romans. In Romans 3, Paul says this concerning the law -

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin." Romans 3:19, 20

His words are clear that "by deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight." As this is a truth found in God's word, then the only way to be justified in His sight is through the grace of Christ. The same testament which proclaims one also proclaims the other. One cannot dismiss Romans without dismissing any other portion of the New Testament, including the record of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Because of this, if one fails to accept this premise and instead goes about seeking righteousness through deeds of the law, then for them "Christ died for nothing." There can be no grace for the one who seeks justification before God based on their deeds under the law. There can only be the expectation of judgment based on their deeds. And in this, there can only be condemnation and an eternal swim in the Lake of Fire.

Life application: One may attempt to be justified by their good deeds, done under the law, or they may be justified by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. There is no other option given for man to stand sinless and in righteousness before God. Choose wisely.