

THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE KILLS AND MAKES ALIVE Galatians 2:17-21

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

When do you most often feel like a failure as a Christian? What do you do when you feel like a failure? How would Galatians 2:16 help you when you feel like a failure as a Christian?

In Galatians 2:16 Paul tells Peter and the churches in Galatia that no one is made right with God by any act of obedience to any law but rather through faith in Christ. This is incredibly good news for those who know that they can never obey the law perfectly, that they will never live a perfect Christian life because it tells us that our acceptance with God is not dependent upon what we do but upon what Christ has done for us. However, if we are right with God by what Christ has done and not because of anything we have done or will do, then what motive is there for doing right? This is the question that Paul is asking in v. 17.

A. What is it that every law-abiding Jew, like Paul, Peter, Barnabas, etc. must admit in order to be justified by God through Christ?

They must admit they are sinners. They must acknowledge that all of their law-keeping is like "filthy rags" before God. They have done nothing to please God or to attract his attention. Every Jew who places their faith in Christ is saying that regardless of all the laws they have "kept", they are no different from the Gentiles who do not have the law. They are no different than the Gentile "sinners."

B. Why is a law-keeping Jew's having to admit he is a sinner a reason to ask if Christ promotes sin?

He treats those who are trying to keep the law the same as though who do not care about the law. He is not impressed with "law keeping"

and does not prefer those who seek to keep the law any different from those who completely disregard the law. He isn't more likely to save someone who is sexually moral than he is to save someone who commits adultery. He isn't more likely to save someone who always tells the truth than he is to save a habitual liar. So isn't he promoting sin? Doesn't the gospel teach men to totally disregard the law and doing right? All you have to do to qualify for justification by Christ is be a sinner.

C. Why does Paul pose this question to Peter and to the churches of Galatia? (See Romans 3:8 & 6:1)

When the gospel of God's grace through Christ is clearly taught, then the charge that the gospel permits people to lead lives full of sin is made. Paul raised the question with Peter because he knew that was exactly what the "men from James" were saying. He also knows that this is one of the main charges being made by the false teachers in Galatia. This is the sort of charge that the opponents of the gospel have made throughout the history of the church. The charge is made that the gospel promotes sin because it says that God only justifies the wicked. What reason can there be to seek to live a righteous life if I'm righteous without doing anything but by trusting in Christ to do everything for me?

What Paul is doing in this passage, after declaring that justification is based not upon human performance of any law but rather upon faith in Christ, is showing why it is that Jesus, by freely justifying sinners, is not a promoter of sin. He is showing why it is that Christians live a new and different life, even though they are not made right with God on the basis of living a new life.

STUDY

1. What is it that every believing Jewish person has destroyed and that they might be tempted to rebuild?

Every Jew who believes in Christ has destroyed the law as the means of being made right with God. Paul renounced any righteousness that might be gained from keeping the law. Every law-abiding Jew must

acknowledge that their law keeping did nothing to bring them to God, to change God's opinion about them. Just like in Isaiah 64, every Jew, every religious person must acknowledge that all of the "good deeds" that I have done are filthy rags, unclean and unacceptable before God. My circumcision, my keeping the Sabbath regulations, my tithing, my giving alms to the poor, my memorizing of the OT Scriptures, my not committing murder, my obeying my parents, my going to temple and offering of sacrifices, my keeping of vows made to God, all of these things are polluted and unclean and do not make me any different from Gentile sinners who do not have the law. This reliance upon keeping of the law is what every Jew, every person who is justified by faith in Christ must destroy.

2. What would it mean to "rebuild" reliance upon "works of the law?" How was Peter's withdrawal from eating with the Gentiles an evidence of rebuilding reliance upon the law?

What the "men from James", Peter, Barnabas, the other Jews at Antioch and the false teachers in Galatia are all doing is rebuilding their reliance on the law. Each of these is acting as if God's acceptance of them is based upon their keeping of the law. Peter's not eating with Gentiles is the same thing as saying that obedience to the law is necessary to be accepted by God.

3. What is the only thing that happens when you depend upon the law to be justified, according to the end of v. 18?

He says that when we live as though our keeping of the law is necessary to be loved by God we don't actually change God's opinion of us; we only prove that we are lawbreakers. Why is that? Because the only thing the law can do to a sinner is show him or her sin. That is the function of the law. The law was not given to make you righteous but to show that you are a sinner (Romans 3:19-20). Everyone who seeks to be made right with God based upon obedience to any law is misusing the law. The law cannot make you righteous, it can only show you your sin; prove that you are a lawbreaker.

4. In v. 19 Paul says it was the law itself that killed his reliance upon the law. How does reliance on the law to be made right with God kill

reliance on the law? (NOTE: Think about Paul's conversion and how his devotion to the law led him to treat Christ and Christians.)

Saul, the Pharisee was absolutely convinced that law-keeping was the means to be made right with God. He was so convinced of this that he made it his life's ambition to destroy the followers of Christ. His devotion to the law led him to hate, torture, arrest and murder Christians. While he was doing this, he was convinced that he was right, that he was defending God's honor and preserving the purity of God's law. The OT Scriptures, the law, as far as he was concerned, confirmed his view and endorsed what he was doing.

However, when the Lord Jesus Christ revealed himself as the Messiah, the Son of God, the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures in that burst of light on the road to Damascus he vividly saw what he had been blind to. He saw that his devotion to the law drove him to break the law in horrendous, blasphemous ways. While he prided himself in keeping the law he was breaking the law by murder and hatred. While he prided himself in believing truth he was fighting against the One who was the Truth. While he saw himself as fighting against an imposter, he found that he was the imposter and that he was combating the Messiah. He saw, when Jesus was revealed to him, that all of his "obedience to the law" was offensive to God because it was based upon self-reliance, not Christ reliance. By the work of the Holy Spirit, Paul realized that to rely on the law was to oppose Jesus Christ, the author and subject of the law. By the enlightening work of God's Spirit he realized that the law could only condemn him and so, by the law, he died to the law as the means of being made right with God.

5. Have you died to the law? What might be some characteristics of a person who had not died to the law, even though they might claim to have done so?

Only Jesus is able to make us alive to God because the law only proves I'm a lawbreaker.

6. What does Paul say is true of every Christian that is also true of Christ at the end of v. 19?

Through my faith in Christ, everything that happens to him, happens to me. I am in Christ and Christ is in me. I am united to him by faith. The emphasis here is upon our death with Christ. Every person who is united to Christ by faith was in some sense killed when Christ was killed on the cross and continues to be dead.

7. What does it mean to say “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live? In what sense are Christians dead with Christ? (See Romans 6:1-14 & 7:1-6.)

First, as this context makes so plain, we were killed in regards to the law. We died to the law as an instrument of attaining righteousness before God. Christ and his sufferings are what the entire law points towards. So when Christ dies he fulfills all of the OT commands regarding the sacrifice of animals, the ordinances surrounding the priesthood and the temple worship. His death is the culmination or climax of all the laws regulating how sinners might approach God through all the ceremonies, cleanliness laws and sacrifices of the OT. However, we died to the law as the means of being made right with God, not only in its religious rituals but also in its moral obligations. Christ obeyed the law for us. He fulfilled the law in our place. When we died with Christ we died to the obligation to obey the law as the ground of our justification. Christ’s death was acceptable to God as the payment of our sin because he kept the moral law. Therefore, when we die with Christ we die to the obligation to keep the moral law, the 10 Commandments, in order to be made right with God. Second, we have died to the power of the law to condemn us. Because we are united to Christ by faith and have thus been crucified with him, we cannot die again. The law demands that we die for breaking it. Every breaking of God’s law demands the death penalty. Christ died for us and we died with Christ therefore we cannot be killed again. There is no double jeopardy in God’s court. You cannot be punished for the same sins twice. You and your sins were punished in the death of Christ; therefore we cannot be punished for these same sins again. Third, we have died to sin by being crucified with Christ. We don’t have the time to work out the entire relationship between sin and the law. Paul spends almost two chapters doing that in Romans. See Romans 6:6-7 & 11-12. We remain dead to sin’s power because we were crucified with Christ. Sin is no longer our master because dead

slaves do not obey their masters any longer. We do not have to obey sin’s commands. The “I” that seeks to obey the law in order to be made right with God; the “I” that is condemned by the law for breaking it; the “I” that is a slave to sin’s commands—this is the “I” that is now dead.

8. The two phrases, “Christ lives in me” and “I live by faith in the Son of God” are two ways of describing the present experience (“The life I now live in the flesh”) of the Christian. What does it mean to say I live by faith in the Son of God?

Being a Christian is no different than being a non-Christian except for the object of your faith, what you trust in. Everyone lives by faith all the time. Every act of every human being is done according to what you believe you must have to be happy. The reason you look at pornography is because you believe looking at pornography will make you happy. The reason you yell at your kids is because you believe obedient children are necessary for your happiness and you are going to make them pay for not making you happy. The Christian trusts in Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. So then, faith in Christ is believing that we are going to heaven because of what Christ did, not because of what we do and believing that going to heaven is the best thing that could ever happen to a person. Therefore, we love to love others, to renounce anger and bitterness and resentment. We delight to reject lust and the fruits of it: pornography and homosexuality and premarital sexual contact and adultery. We love to tell the truth. We are generous with our time and money and self-controlled in our eating and drinking and spending. We don’t complain and argue but are grateful to God and depend upon him to provide for us all that we need. We are not proud, but humble. We live by faith in Christ. We believe we are going to heaven and so we live like we are going to heaven. We are taken up with all that God has given us in Christ and will give us in Christ. Christ himself is our life. We trust that every good thing comes to us by, with and through Jesus Christ and so we live upon him.

9. What are some ways you are experiencing being dead with Christ and Christ living in you?

Only Jesus is able to make us alive to God because all who trust Christ are dead and therefore alive.

10. According to the last clause of v. 20, why does Paul trust Christ and why does his faith in Christ make such a profound difference?

“Christ loved me,” Paul says “and he gave himself for me.” I hope you hear the wonder in Paul’s voice. “I was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man” but Christ loved me and gave himself for me. Even when I was an enemy of God, a sinner, acting as though I were righteous by my own law-keeping while violently disobeying that law, even then Christ loved me and his love for me, moved him to hand himself over to the torturers for me. Christ did not give himself for Paul or for any Christian because he saw some worthwhile thing in Paul or us. Christ did not die for us because we are valuable or because we are worth loving. It is a lie when modern therapeutic preachers say that the proof of our value is that God gave his Son for us. Christ loving me and giving himself for me does not show how great I am, it shows how great he is. He loves a sinner like me and he suffers and dies for a sinner like me. He dies because he chooses to love us in spite of who are, not because of who we are.

11. Can you say, “Christ loved me and gave himself for me?” Why or why not? How does knowing this impact your life?

12. Paul immediately says, “I do not set aside the grace of God...” What are some ways that people can set aside the grace of God?

There are two ways that you can set aside the grace of God. First, you can say that the reason God loves you is because of something you have done or decided. You nullify the unmerited, free and sovereign grace of God when you say that Christ loved you and gave himself for you because of who you are or what you have done or decided. Second, you set aside the grace of God when you live in and love the pleasures of sin even while you claim to be forgiven by Christ. It is only the gospel of Jesus Christ that does not nullify God’s grace because it teaches that we are accepted and given eternal life not because of us but because of Christ. It teaches that all who are united by faith to Christ now live a new life by their faith in Christ.

13. What is the “righteousness” that Paul is speaking of in v. 21?

The “righteousness” that Paul is speaking of here is primarily that perfect righteousness that you must have to be accepted by God. Only perfectly righteous people can live with God. But also it refers to the fact that only people who have been made righteous by God can then begin to live a life of righteousness.

14. Why is it true that if “righteousness comes by the law, then Christ died for nothing?”

There can only be one way of being made righteous. Either you are made righteous by your own efforts, by your own obedience to the law or you are made righteous by the work of Christ, by his life and death. If you are made righteous by the law, that is, by obeying the law, then Christ died for nothing. If, however, you are made righteous by the death of Christ, then the law, that is obedience to the law, has nothing to do with your righteousness. Either the law has no power or Christ has no power. There is no value in the death of Christ if it is possible for men to do something to attain right standing with God or for men to live righteously without him.

15. What are some ways you tend to “set aside the grace of God?”

16. Upon what are you basing your hope for eternal life? How do you know?

Only Jesus is able to make us alive to God because the grace of God is only released in the crucified Christ.