

## “Justification”

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*Galatians 2:15–21 (ESV)*

<sup>15</sup> *We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; <sup>16</sup> yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*

<sup>17</sup> *But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! <sup>18</sup> For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. <sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.<sup>1</sup>*

As we continue to study the book of Galatians, we’re going to continue to talk about the gospel. The gospel is the good news that we can be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. It’s good news because our greatest problem is what separates us from God: our sin. And our greatest need is to have that sin forgiven. Of course, a lot of people don’t think our greatest problem is rebellion against a holy God, and a lot of people don’t think our greatest need is to have someone die in our place to pay for our rebellion.

I think that’s because most people don’t look at the world through a Christian, or biblical worldview. A worldview is simply a way of making sense of the world around us. It’s sort of like a pair of glasses that we put on, a set of lenses through which we look at the world. Often, a worldview can be thought of in terms of the big questions of life and how we answer those questions. Those questions include: What is the meaning of life? What is true? What is right and wrong? Where is history going? and, What happens after you die? How you answer those questions says a lot about you view the world.

Many people today subscribe to a worldview that can be termed “moralistic therapeutic deism.” This phrase was coined by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, who produced a study on the religious beliefs of American teenagers. It’s moral because it’s about being good. It’s therapeutic because it’s about making us feel good. And it’s deism because it

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

believes in some vague, distant god. Smith and Denton summarized these beliefs with the following statements:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>2</sup>

The God of that view places no demands on his creation. There is no demand to be holy or righteous or even good, except good people go to heaven. In this view, the purpose of life is to be happy and feel good, whereas the purpose of life, in the Christian worldview, is to glorify God. (I should add that there's nothing wrong with being happy; however, we should find our ultimate happiness and fulfillment in God.) In this view of the world, God's not really involved with most of life, until we're in a bind, and then we call on him. And, of course, good people go to heaven. I imagine that people who hold this view of the world think that most of us are good.

Now, if you're here today and you're not a Christian, those statements I just read may seem true. I think a number of people who claim to be Christians would agree with some of those statements. There's a Christian version of moral therapeutic deism: God wants us all to be happy. He doesn't want to bother us too much. Jesus is there to give us a little help when we need him. In other words, life is really about us, and God's not at the center of everything.

Let me suggest this: That kind of view of the world is one that we would make up. Why do I say that? Because it really doesn't demand much of us, and it flatters us. We exist for our own happiness and we're not really too bad. But Christianity has a different message, one that comes straight from God. It says we exist for God, and we're far worse than we imagine. But even though we're so bad, God sent his Son to rescue us.

However, the real Christian view of the world is very different. It can be summed up in Galatians 1:3-5:

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religions and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-63.

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup> to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Jesus gave himself for us to deliver us from this present evil age. That statement suggests that things aren't so great here. It suggests that we need rescuing, and we can't rescue ourselves. These verses also suggest that everything runs according to the will of God. These verses suggest that the purpose of life is to glorify God.

The view of the world that the apostle Paul teaches is very different from moral therapeutic deism. In this book of Galatians, a letter he wrote to Christians almost two thousand years ago, Paul tells us the gospel, the good news that Jesus, the Son of God, became a man to die for sins so that all who believe in him can be reconciled to God. The purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God, and the only way to eternity with him is through Jesus.

Before we start to look at these six verses today, I want to explain an important concept in the Bible. The reason that God created humans is to have us relate to him rightly. We are supposed to love him, trust him, obey him, and represent him to the world. It's really about a relationship. And at the heart of that relationship is a phrase that appears a few times in the Bible: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."<sup>3</sup> That phrase is part of the language of a covenant, which is a binding pact made between two parties. It combines law and love.<sup>4</sup> A covenant has law, because there are rules or conditions involved. It has love, because the heart of the covenant is a relationship. When God makes a covenant, he demands perfect obedience from his covenant partner. The penalty for the one who breaks the covenant is death.

Throughout the Old Testament, there were a number of covenants made with various people. Many theologians believe that God made a covenant with Adam, the first man. Yet Adam disobeyed God. When Adam and Eve, his wife, disobeyed God, sin came into the world. And we are all represented by Adam. We're like him. We sin. We don't trust God's word. We do what we want. God made a covenant with Noah, but Noah wasn't perfect. He couldn't undo what Adam did. The same is true for Abraham and David. They were not perfect covenant partners. And neither was the nation of Israel. God gave them his law at Mount Sinai, after he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Yet they broke that law, time and again.

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<sup>3</sup> This phrase appears in various forms in Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:20; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3.

<sup>4</sup> This way of neatly summarizing covenants comes from Tim Keller.

God needs a perfect covenant partner, one who will obey him perfectly and represent him to the world. That's an important idea that helps us understand what Paul is saying here in Galatians. It shows us why the law that was given to Israel cannot make anyone right with God. It didn't work for Israel. It didn't work for Paul. It wouldn't work for us. The true covenant partner of God is Jesus. He obeyed the law perfectly, yet here's the irony: though he was and is perfect, he was put to death, which was the penalty for breaking the covenant. It's the penalty that all of us deserve because we rebel against God.

So with that in mind, let's look closely at what Paul says in Galatians 2:15-16. Let's first look at verses 15 and 16:

<sup>15</sup> We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; <sup>16</sup> yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

As I've explained over the last few weeks, Paul was a Jewish man who came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one who fulfilled all the hopes of Israel. Paul then went to preach this message throughout the Roman Empire. One of the issues for the early church was how Gentiles could come into the people of God. In the Old Testament, Gentiles could become part of Israel, but they had to obey the law given to Israel. After Jesus died and rose from the grave, and the message about him spread, people, some Jewish Christians thought that Gentiles had to believe in Jesus and obey the law of Israel, or at least parts of it, such as circumcision and eating only certain foods.

Paul, however, had a different message, one that came straight from Jesus. He says that the law cannot save anyone and Gentiles didn't need to obey it in order to become Christians. Last week, we see that he told that message to the apostles in Jerusalem, including Peter, and the apostles agreed that this was the gospel. Even though Peter knew this was true, he became afraid of how others would look at him, and he acted like a hypocrite: he was afraid to eat with Gentiles when some other Jews were around. These verses, verses 15-21, may be the continuation of Paul's words to Peter that began in verse 14. A number of translations (NASB, NIV, NKJV, NLT) indicate that. Other translations (ESV, HCSB, NRSV) don't agree. We don't know because quotation marks weren't used in the original Greek. Whether these words were said verbatim to Peter or not, this was the message that Paul shared with Peter.

He says that even Jews are not justified by works of the law. He says they are not like Gentile “sinners”—I don’t think Paul believe Gentiles were more sinful than Jews. He was probably using the term, “sinners,” that some other Jews used of Gentiles. But Jews are no better: they too have sinned.

Paul uses the word “justified” three times in verse 16. What does “justify” mean? “Justify” is a legal term. It means to be declared innocent. Normally, a person who would be declared innocent, or not guilty, in a courtroom is actually not guilty. But Christianity says that all of are actually guilty of breaking the law of God. We all have done things that God doesn’t want us to do. Paul makes that very clear in Romans 3, where he says that “both Jews and Greeks,” or Gentiles, “are under sin” (Rom. 3:9). Paul says that the law was given “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:19-20). Then, quite famously, he says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The law reveals that we don’t measure up to God’s standards. That’s why Paul says three times in Galatians 2:16 that no one will be justified by the works of the law. He wants to hammer that point home.

Imagine this: at the end of your life, you appear before God in a majestic courtroom. God is sitting on the bench as the judge, and you are being charged for crimes against him. God knows everything. He’s omniscient. He’s not like a human judge who may only have partial evidence. He’s not like a Supreme Court justice who will be swayed by his or her biases. God is impartial and he has all the evidence before him. Do you think your life will measure up to God’s standards? You know you’ve done wrong things. God knows them all. But God also knows your thoughts. He knows the reason why you’ve done anything. Do you know that you can do something right for wrong reasons? Well, God knows that, too. And God will judge us all. How will you measure up?

Clearly, all of us wouldn’t measure up. So how can God say that we are justified, or not guilty? That question is the riddle of the Old Testament. In order for people to relate rightly to God, they need to be innocent. But we’re all sinners. Is there any hope? The way that God had planned for us to be justified is through Jesus. Jesus perfectly obeyed the law. He satisfied the demands of God. That’s not something that we ourselves can do. We don’t naturally obey God. Jesus alone measures up to God’s standards. If we’re going to be declared innocent, we need a perfect record, but we don’t have one. Yet Jesus does. And since we’re not actually innocent, we

also need our crimes punished. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid the penalty for the sins of his people. Everyone who comes to Jesus in faith has their crimes paid for completely. And everyone who comes to Jesus in faith also has Jesus' perfect, innocent record credited to their account. The theological term is "imputation"—our sins were imputed, or assigned/ascribed/attributed to Jesus, and his innocence is imputed to us. That's what is called "the great exchange." That's how God can be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus," as Paul writes in Romans 3:26. God is a perfect judge. He knows all the crimes committed against him. He knows all the evidence. And since he's a perfect judge, he can't just sweep away the crimes or overlook them. Imagine your child was murdered and all evidence pointed to one guilty person, the murderer. If a judge saw all that evidence and then let that man go free, you would think that judge is an awful judge. He didn't do his job. He wasn't just.

But God will punish all crimes against him. Many people will be punished for their crimes. They will experience God's wrath. But others will not experience that punishment because Jesus took it for them when he died on the cross. His resurrection from the grave showed that he paid the penalty in full and walked out a free man. So everyone who is united to Jesus by faith has their sins—all of them—already paid for. And they also are credited with Jesus' perfect righteousness. Think of it this way: it's as if you were given an invoice for a debt that you could never pay, and Jesus comes along and pays the debt for you and then gives you access to all of his wealth.

Now let's look at verses 17 and 18:

<sup>17</sup> But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! <sup>18</sup> For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

The "we" in verse 17 refers to Jews, as we saw in verse 15. Paul is saying that Jewish Christians who seek to be justified in Jesus are found to be sinners. That is, the very fact that they go to Jesus to be made right with God shows that they are guilty. They are no better than Gentiles. So they forsook the law. They realized that being justified in Jesus meant that they didn't have to follow the law. Paul seems to be answering a charge that was leveled against them: does this mean that faith in Jesus leads them to sin? In other words, since they no longer had to obey the Mosaic law, given to Israel at Mount Sinai, were they free to sin? Doesn't all of this mean that Jesus is a "servant of sin"?

Paul says, “Certainly not!” If Paul were to rebuild what he tore down—the law—all that it could do would be to show that he broke the law. Going back to the law at this point in time would be to deny what Jesus did for him. He would be going against the will of God.<sup>5</sup> The point of the law was to reveal how sinful we are and to point us to Jesus. That’s what Paul says in Romans 3:20: “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” In Romans 7:7, he says, “if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” We tend to think we’re good people until we realize what God’s law demands. Paul also goes on to say that the power of sin is such that when we hear, “Don’t do this,” we want to do it (Rom. 7:8-11). The law was never intended to save us.<sup>6</sup>

The law only reveals that we are sinners. That’s what Paul is saying in verse 19: “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.” Tim Keller puts it this way: “Paul is saying: *I would not have known what sin was except through the law. And I would not have known how unable I am to keep the law except through the law.*”<sup>7</sup> That’s a bit of a painful process. No one likes to be told they are sinful. No one likes to be told, “You’re not good enough.” But the gospel tells us that. Of course, the gospel also tells us that God loves us so much that he would send his Son to die for us. We need to hear both sides of this message. Another theologian once said, “Without the consciousness of sin, the whole of the gospel will seem to be an idle tale.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 170: “If Paul rebuilds the OT law, which is abolished now that Christ has come and a new era in redemptive history has arrived, then he has violated God’s will and is to be deemed a transgressor.” “Reinstituting the law transgresses God’s will because it denies that righteousness is in Christ and returns to the old era of salvation history. Therefore, to reach back to the law for righteousness constitutes sin since it denies righteousness is in Christ. The old age was dominated by sin and the law, but the new age in Christ is marked by righteousness and life.”

<sup>6</sup> We even see that hinted at in the Old Testament when the law is given. When the law is presented the second time to Israel, right before they enter the Promised Land, God says through Moses, “And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you” (Deut. 4:1; see also 5:22-23; 8:1). That suggests that if the people do the law, they will live. Yet it is assumed later on in the same book that the people will break the law and thus suffer the curses of the covenant (Deut. 28:15ff.). It is only when “God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring” that they will love him and obey him and live. This is a picture of regeneration, being made into new people who have the Holy Spirit. Yet even after that promise, the people are told to choose to obey the law so that they can live (Deut. 30:11-20). The message is this: You must do the law in order to live; but you can’t do the law; therefore, you will be punished. But one day, God will enable you to love him and serve him the way you should. On this side of the cross, we see that Jesus pays for our sin and God gives us the Holy Spirit to enable us to love him and serve him.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), 60. The italics are the author’s.

<sup>8</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, New ed. (originally published in 1923; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 57.

But in verse 19, Paul also says that his knowledge of sin through the law enabled him to live to God. That word “live” appears five times in verses 19 and 20. I think that implies two things: One, it implies that the law couldn’t give life. It could only bring death. Two, it implies that before Paul had faith in Jesus, he wasn’t living for God. All his keeping of the law was selfish. It was for himself, not for God.

But what had to come first before Paul could live to God? He had to die to the law. It couldn’t exercise authority over his life. He had to realize that his only hope was in faith in Jesus, not in obedience to the law.<sup>9</sup> And he had to die to himself. That’s what he means in verse 20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Paul’s old self had to die in order for him to live, and his new life was not his own: it was Jesus living in him.

Paul believed that his life was so united to Jesus’ life that Jesus’ death was counted as his death, and Jesus’ life was counted as his life. And this answers the question of whether Jesus is a servant of sin, which Paul mentions in verse 17. Paul says that believers in Jesus have died with him in his death, and have risen to new life with him in his resurrection. We see that in Romans 6:1-11:

<sup>1</sup> What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?  
<sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?  
<sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.  
<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

If you are a Christian, you are not supposed to continue sinning. The old you died and the new you rose to life, just as Jesus died and rose from the grave. This shows that our lives are

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<sup>9</sup> See Romans 7:4: “Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.”

supposed to change. It also shows that our new lives are not our own—we have been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Our lives now belong to Jesus. Paul says that Jesus was now living in him. His life was supposed to reflect Jesus. Paul usually says that we are “in Christ” and the Holy Spirit is in us. So Jesus lives in us by means of the Holy Spirit. Later in Galatians, Paul will show how the Holy Spirit is supposed to guide our lives so that we don’t keep on sinning. Instead of a set of laws, we’ve been given the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Think about that for a moment. Earlier, I talked about “moral therapeutic deism,” which says that life is all about being happy. Many Christians try to create their own version of that worldview. We go to Jesus when we are in trouble, but we don’t live our whole lives for him. We may approach Jesus and say, “Lord, you know I’ve been working hard, but I’ve come up a few dollars short this month. Could you help me out.” And then if we get that prayer answered, we go on our way and forget about Jesus again. But that’s not right. Jesus isn’t some genie in a bottle we go to when we have wishes. He isn’t even a genie in a bottle when we have genuine needs. He is Lord. He is supposed to be our master. All of our lives should be lived for him.

Christianity is also different because it demands transformation. It says we must change, and the only way we can change is if God comes to make his home inside of us and transform us. That’s how much we need to be changed.

Does this mean that Paul lost his personality when he became a Christian? Was he no longer recognizable? I don’t think so. Paul goes on to say in verse 20: “And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who lived me and gave himself for me.” Paul continued to live “in the flesh.” That means he still struggled with sin. He still lived in a body that would die. But he had faith that God was transforming him from the inside out. One theologian, a man named John Gresham Machen, said some people object to this idea that Christians become new people because it doesn’t look like it. They still struggle with sin. They’re clearly imperfect. How can they be new creations? Machen then goes on to answer that objection:

“‘The life which I now live in the flesh’—there is the admission. Paul admits that the Christian does live a life in the flesh, subject to the same old earthly

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<sup>10</sup> See 2 Corinthians 3. Of course, there are many commands in the New Testament, and these should be obeyed. But we don’t “get in” to the New Covenant or “stay in” by obeying these commands. We get in through faith and repentance, which are both gifts of God. When we are transformed by God into a faithful and repentant person, we start to obey as a result.

conditions and with a continued battle against sin. ‘But,’ says Paul (and here the objection is answered), ‘the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith which is in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.’ The Christian life lived by faith and not by sight; the great change has not yet come to full fruition; sin has not yet been fully conquered; the beginning of the Christian life is a new *birth*, not an immediate creation of the full-grown man.’<sup>11</sup>

Paul also says that Jesus loved him and gave himself for him. That shows how personal Christianity is. It’s not built on a set of laws. It’s built on a relationship of love. Jesus loves his people. He gave his very life for them. You can’t say that about laws. You can’t say that about the president or other politicians. You can’t say that about companies. Most people want your votes, or your money, or your approval. Jesus doesn’t need any of that. He wants you, and he gave himself in order to get you.

Paul ends this part of his letter with verse 21: “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” If one could be righteous—or “in the right”—by obeying the law, then Jesus died for no purpose. If people could be saved from sin, death, and hell by obeying the law, then Jesus didn’t need to come. But Jesus had to come because righteousness can’t come through the law. Paul also says he’s not nullifying the grace of God. If you trust in your own moral record, instead of Jesus’ righteousness, for your salvation, you are nullifying the grace of God. If you say you trust in Jesus but then you keep on sinning and living for yourself, you are nullifying the grace of God. If you realize that you cannot save yourself and that you need Jesus, and that you must give your life over to him so that he can live in and through you, you are receiving and affirming the grace of God.

So, how do we respond to this message? Here’s how I put in the simplest way possible: Agree with God. Agree that God made the universe for himself and that you exist for God; your life is supposed to revolve around him, not the other way around. Agree with God that you have not obeyed him. You have done things that are wrong. At best, you’ve ignored him. You’ve acted as if you—or something or someone else—is the center of reality. Agree with God that you cannot be right with him through your own efforts. Agree with God that Jesus’ righteousness and his death on the cross are the only way to be made right with him. Agree with God that we must die to ourselves and live to Christ. Or, to put it another way, we must stop living our lives, and Jesus must start living our lives. Agree with God that you need to follow Jesus and let the Holy

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<sup>11</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 122-23.

Spirit guide you. Agree with Jesus when he says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

This message that Paul teaches challenges all of us. It challenges the most prominent worldview: that God exists to make us happy, that we should just be “nice” to each other and leave each other alone, and that all good people go to heaven. Paul would say: You exist for God. The purpose of life is to glorify God, not to seek your own personal happiness. The greatest happiness is found in glorifying God. We should love each other, which means pointing each other to Jesus, not letting us follow our own hearts. No one is good but God, and he gave us a way to go to heaven: repentance of sins and faith in Jesus.

Will we receive the grace of God by agreeing with this message, or will we nullify the grace of God by rejecting it?