

Galatians 2:15-21
June 28, 2020

- 1) Historical Importance of This Passage – Martin Luther’s slogan, “sola fide,” proclaimed that justification came by faith alone and that theme was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. The confessional documents of the Protestant church throughout history demonstrate the prominence of the language derived from these verses. In his lectures on Galatians Luther spent 80 pages dealing with the concept of justification by faith. To be justified is to be placed in a right relationship with God and with the community of God’s people. To be justified is like the judge saying to you, “you are innocent,” even though you are guilty through and through. Understanding this portion of Galatians is crucial for understanding our own religious heritage.

- 2) Galatians 2:15-16 – A Choice: Faith in Christ or Works of Law
 - a) Verse 15 – When Paul speaks of “we” he is appealing to Peter, a fellow Jew, and perhaps to all the Jewish Christians in Antioch. The context of these verses is the dispute of how Gentiles are to be incorporated into the Christian family. The reference to “Gentile sinners” is common in both the Old and New Testaments. Paul is speaking as an insider to other insiders addressing the question of how we will deal with those outside of our Jewish Christian community.

 - b) Verse 16 – In the 1st part of verse 16 Paul separates himself and his Gentile mission from those who attack his efforts to reach out to non-Jewish persons. When Paul speaks of “the law,” he is not referring to Judaism but to those within the Christian community who insist on demanding that works of the law such as circumcision or dietary restrictions be required before one can become a Christian. In verses 15 and 16 Paul is saying that he and Simon Peter may disagree on some issues but this one thing we both should hold with certainty: justification comes by faith in Jesus and not by works of law. Paul’s opposition to “works of the law” is based on his conviction that redemption comes by God’s grace through Jesus Christ. Good works will not contribute to one’s salvation. Paul is offended when works of the law are demanded of persons before they enter the family of faith. He argues in verse 21 that if works can bring salvation, then Christ

died for nothing. Personal achievements and pious deeds can be no substitute for faith.

- c) The New Revised Standard Version translates verse 16 by speaking of “faith in Christ,” while the King James Version and many contemporary scholars translate the phrase: “faith of Christ.” The name Christ in the Greek appears in the genitive case and speaks of Christ’s faith. If so, Paul is not contrasting works of the law with a human belief in Jesus Christ. Rather, Paul is using Christ himself as the example of faith as one who was obedient unto death stressing loyalty and faithfulness. The followers of Christ are called to a faith that is best seen in the life and death of Jesus our Lord.
- d) Paul does not offer a lengthy definition or description of faith in the same way he analyzes love in 1st Corinthians 13. For Paul faith draws its meaning from its source, Jesus Christ. If faith has its source in Christ, it should never be seen as a human possession, as something we control or manipulate. Neither can we turn faith into a work that we can fashion and grow on our own. Faith always remains dependent on divine grace. Seeing faith as rooted in grace also frees us from self-righteousness and pride. Faith is trusting in what Christ accomplished for us and not trusting in our own accomplishments. Positively stated, faith is our expression of thanksgiving for God’s gracious goodness towards us. It is a glad recognition that we are no longer spectators observing God’s goodness, but we have now been gripped by the goodness of God and are participants in the drama of salvation.

3) Galatians 2:11-21 – Justification by Faith and Our Social Responsibility

- a) A classical understanding of this passage, beginning with Augustine and amplified by Luther, focuses on the issue of personal guilt and individualized faith. In Augustine’s treatment he removes the passage from its original context of Paul’s missionary activity with Gentiles. Instead, Augustine focuses on the issue of guilt and his own bad conscience. (Having abandoned his family, Augustine had a great deal to feel guilty about, but he only confesses to stealing pears.) Luther follows that same pathway as his theology was shaped by his obsessive search to be relieved of his burden of guilt. For Luther, the central question was how he could as a sinful person

find acceptance in the eyes of God. For Luther, the way of justification was an inward journey without reference to the role other human beings played in the process. The inward spiritual emphasis of Luther has preoccupied Protestant thought through the ages with its focus on the individual experience of faith.

- b) In opposition to this individualized interpretation, remember the original context. The thrust of the entire book is to include Gentiles in the Christian community, and not as second-class citizens, but accepted on the same level as everyone else. To find salvation, acceptance, and justification from God is a communal act and not just a personal transaction. The justifying grace of God that blesses us individually also blesses others and brings us together even from radically different backgrounds. Jonah needed to learn that lesson – God’s grace included the people of Nineveh. The elder son needed to learn that lesson – God’s grace included his prodigal brother. The Pharisee needed to learn that lesson – God’s grace included the publican in prayer. God’s gracious justification includes us all as stated in Galatians 3:28. Paul’s concern was for the Gentiles and for the sake of the pluralistic Christian message preached to a divided world. In our American society with its emphasis on rugged individualism, it is vitally important to proclaim the message that we cannot stand as justified believers before God without holding our brother and sisters by the hand.
- c) Paul’s understanding of justification is too often understood as the 1st step of salvation in which sinners are made righteous or are treated as righteous. The 2nd step of salvation, sanctification, describes the spiritual growth of believers committing themselves to a life of obedience. One is sanctified in order to serve. But Paul does not speak of these as separate and distinct stages of faith. Justification itself places us in relationship with others. Following verse 17 Paul goes on to speak how justification changes the life of believers by freeing them from slavery under the law and freeing them to serve their new Lord. One is called and empowered to live a new life because now “Christ lives in me.” The person of faith responds to justification with active obedience. Charles Coursar put it in these words, “justification is not only a gift but also a demand; it is responded to not by a passive resignation but an active obedience.” Justification for Paul implies social action, and particularly on the issue of racial division.

d) The point Paul is making here is that believers must leave behind their old way of living, like a butterfly leaving its cocoon. Now, like the butterfly, Christians are to begin a whole new way of life. Early Christian baptism tried to emphasize this radical transformation by holding baptism at sunrise, using cold water, dressing in a white robe, and even cutting one's hair and fingernails. The whole idea was to announce that everything begins in a new way from this point on in my life. As a pastor, I would say to the person who was just baptized, "Buried with Christ in baptism, you now arise to walk in a new way of life." Justification is not just a sad turning away from the sins of our past. It is the joyous embrace of a new tomorrow calling us to a life of creativity, service, and devotion

Questions for Reflection

1. In your own words, how would you define justification by faith?
2. In our world today, who are the Gentiles and sinners who are standing on the outside? What can we do to make those folks more welcomed? What can we do to break down walls and to build bridges to those folks? Have you ever been the "Gentile" standing on the outside? Can you remember how that felt? How did you deal with that situation?
3. In our own lives can you identify ways in which we seek to justify ourselves by our works?