3-2-25

Galatians 2:11-21 (2)

Paul is writing this letter to the Galatian churches because someone has joined with them and begun teaching them a false Gospel. These people are explaining that salvation requires believing on Christ, but also that one must obey all the Law of Moses. Unfortunately, the Galatian Christians are believing this teaching in spite of all that Paul taught them when he was there. Furthermore, these people are attacking Paul personally by saying that he is a less than competent teacher.

So, Paul is now trying to fight against the false teaching of the ones we call Judaizers, and at the same time he has to defend his own competence and his presentation of the Gospel. He is in a tough position and we really don’t know the outcome. But we can learn from this letter. Perhaps one of the biggest lessons is how easily we can be deceived.

These Galatian Christians were not stupid people. At one time they had been pagan worshipers of false gods and lived deeply in sin. But they also had families and businesses and were exposed to Greek and Roman culture. They were taught the Gospel by Paul; whose specific calling by God was to present the Gospel to the Gentiles. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit for just this purpose. And yet they were deceived by these Judaizers.

Consider the seven churches addressed in the book of Revelation and that most of them had been deceived in some way: either by false teachers, following rules as opposed to grace, or just getting lazy. It is easy to be deceived and it happens to very intelligent and even dedicated Christians. We are warned in the Bible that deception will be strong in the last days. Just look at all the churches falling away now from standing on the Bible and proclaiming the true Gospel.

So we must be on our guard in the Holy Spirit; while at the same time not making the mistake that was made by the Ephesian church in the book of Revelation: they left their first love. They searched diligently for any aberration in their members’ Gospel; but it was at the expense of grace and mercy and love. It was at the expense of holding Jesus out to a dark and dying world.

Paul has made it clear that his Gospel was the same as that of the Jerusalem apostles; in fact, they had extended to him the right hand of fellowship. They had accepted him and his ministry as anointed by God and true. But now he recounts an occurrence in which he had to oppose the apostle Peter right in front of everybody in the church of Syrian Antioch.

Peter allowed himself to be influenced by some who continued to follow the Mosaic Law to the extent that he stopped eating with the Gentile Christians. This would have been an old habit to avoid ritual uncleanness; obviously, something no longer necessary under the new covenant in Christ’s blood. Paul immediately realized the effect this would have on the Gentile Christians: Peter’s actions told them that they had to follow the Law of Moses in addition to faith in Jesus.

Peter was proclaiming the same false Gospel in his actions that the Judaizers were in their words. I’m sure he didn’t mean to. I’m sure that Peter’s commitment to the true Gospel was still steadfast and his verbal presentation would be accurate. But he messed up in his actions. Because of Peter’s standing in the Christian church, something had to be done immediately and publicly. While the Bible doesn’t tell us his reaction, what else could he have done but to see his error, confess it, and seek forgiveness from God and from the Gentiles. And also continue to eat with them.

We ended up last week considering verse 14 where Paul asked Peter how he could live like the Gentiles and then expect them to live like the Jews. In other words, Peter had been living under the new covenant in Christ, not concerned with following the Mosaic Law in order to earn salvation. Now, by his actions, he was telling the Gentiles that they really had to follow the law that had been given to the Jews.

In verse 15 Paul says “*we are Jews by nature*”. He and Peter had been born into the nation of Israel; they were direct descendants of Abraham. Their people had received the Law handed down by God to Moses. They were God’s special people who He chose for Himself and He blessed them by giving them the Law. He entrusted to them the first of the special revelation of God. Because of this law that they had been exposed to all their lives, there were certain moral standards that they tended to abide by. I’m not saying they always did, but that would have been their tendency.

Paul then says that they are “*not sinners from among the Gentiles*”. That sounds harsh in our ears, especially considering that there were Gentiles sitting there hearing this. But they would have understood: The Gentiles of the world had no moral guidance like the law of Moses. That does not excuse the wrong they did; God put a conscience in everyone. Without the moral restraint of God, they would have lived entirely carnally; satisfying every craving of the flesh; and they worshiped idols to whom they offered all sorts of horrible sacrifices.

So Paul makes the distinction that as Jews they had the law which gave them a moral code to follow; but then in verse 16 he says that even the Jews couldn’t be justified by following the Law. Basically, in verse 16, Paul gives the Gospel. He reminds Peter, that even as Jews, who had been given the precious gift of the Law, they could not be saved by the Law.

Justification is a very important concept in the Bible, in our Christian life, and especially regarding our eternal life. In order to have eternal life with Christ, we must be justified. To be justified in a court of law, the judge must sound his gavel and declare the words “Not guilty”. At that point, there is no going back to whatever you were in court for; you have been declared “not guilty”; you are justified. Now in this earthly life, you may do something else and get brought back into court; but it won’t be for the same crime as before.

Paul makes the point that no one can be justified by the law. And that makes sense. If you break a law, it doesn’t matter how many other ones you obey, you are still guilty of breaking that law. All of us break the law of God, so there is no way we can be declared “not guilty”; there is no way we can be justified by the law.

Of course, Peter and Paul both knew that the only way to be justified was through faith in Christ. This is the Christian doctrine of justification. As soon as we become believers in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, God sounds His gavel and declares us “Not Guilty”. It is a one and done event. Unlike an earthly court, this declaration covers all our transgressions: past, present, and future. Don’t confuse justification with sanctification. Justification is a one-time permanent event graciously brought about by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Sanctification is a lifelong process of becoming more and more like our Saviour.

The Judaizers had a problem with this idea and there are some groups today that disagree with this. Their thought was that teaching justification as a one-time event covering all sin would lead people to think that once accepting Christ, they could do whatever they wanted to do. They could freely sin without consequence.

This was part of the thinking behind the Judaizers trying to enforce the law of Moses. They would have also used this to attack Paul, accusing him of promoting lawlessness. It is obvious to us that Paul would never promote lawlessness. In his letter to the Thessalonians he refers to the antichrist as “the man of lawlessness”.

The point missed by people who think like this is that to be saved, we must believe on Jesus. That encompasses a couple things. First, that we take Him for our Saviour. We believe that He paid the price for our sins and the punishment He endured was sufficient. He saved us from the punishment we deserve. Secondly, to believe who He truly is involves accepting Him also as our Lord. If He is our Lord, then we will obey Him. And He is very clear that sin is unacceptable.

Additionally, Jesus said that if we love Him we will follow His commands. The Bible is clear that Jesus is one Person of the Trinity; He is God. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. So, we love God, therefore we love Jesus, and so we will follow His commands. Again, Jesus makes it very clear that sin is unacceptable.

A true acceptance of Jesus as Saviour does not promote lawlessness. If fact, it should promote a deeper and even a natural desire to do works of goodness and mercy. And in this we see what Paul is talking about in verse 17. Christians do seek their justification in Jesus, that is the only place we can get it. Yes, we still sin, but that is just the continual war between the flesh and the reborn spirit. We are not encouraged to sin by being justified by faith in Christ. Jesus is not a minister of sin. Jesus, absolutely, does not promote lawlessness.

Paul has been using “we”. This would include himself and Peter and those Jews who had engaged in the hypocrisy of separating from the Gentiles. Notice that in verse 18 he starts using “I”. While he is still referring to Peter’s actions, he is using himself as the example. Perhaps he is trying to settle things down a little and relieve the tension. This would have been a very difficult confrontation: it needed to take place, but at the same time these were Christians and Christians must be careful with how they deal with disagreements. We speak the truth in love. Further, this could have actually caused division and split the church in Antioch.

In turning to Jesus for salvation, they would have been turning away from the law as a means of redemption. In a sense, destroying the previous relationship they had with the law. They realized that the Law was not a means to redemption; it was never meant to be. It pointed to Christ who is the means of redemption. So in turning to Jesus, the previous relationship with the law was broken.

What a mess it would be to try to turn back to that previous relationship with the law. That’s what the Judaizers wanted everyone to do; that’s what Peter actually started doing. In turning back to the law, a person becomes a transgressor; it is a sin. If he has to turn back to the law, it shows he should have never left it in the first place. If he turns back to it when he doesn’t need to; that’s wrong also. Either way, it’s a sin.

Paul uses the term “died to the law”; which is a figure of speech he uses to show that something no longer has any jurisdiction over him. If you’re dead, it can’t affect you; nor can you do it. For example in Romans 6:10 Paul says to “*consider yourselves to be dead to sin*”. If you’re dead, you can’t sin. So Paul considers all who have turned to Christ to be dead to the law. And it is in Christ’s fulfillment of the law that He can save us; so it is through the law that we are dead to the law.

Paul states that he has been crucified with Christ; and each of us should view ourselves through that lens. If we have been crucified, we have died. Now, we are promised resurrection one day, but we haven’t received that yet. Jesus has. Jesus has been resurrected and He is alive. Since He is alive and we are not, then we must live through Him. This is our sanctification process.

Part of our goal as Christians is to live our lives more with Jesus on our minds. We work toward a point where we do nothing without considering Him first. We read and study the Scriptures to continually absorb as much as we can. We practice listening to the Holy Spirit give us leading according to those Scriptures. This is what we work toward. We will not reach this until we stand before our Lord face to face; but we still strive to embrace Christ is every aspect of our lives. It will even be to our earthly benefit to do so.

And why would we not want to do this? Jesus suffered the wrath of God in our place. He made the path to the Father were none existed before. It was to no benefit of His own. In doing this He showed His love for us; it’s a love we are not capable of. We can’t even comprehend it. What a God we serve.

This section is completed in a very pointed manner. If we stop and think about it, trying to earn our way into heaven is trying to nullify the grace of God. If we believe we must do works to attain righteousness, then we are saying that we don’t need God or His help. Our path to heaven is made possible through God’s grace; through favor we don’t deserve. And if we can make our own way in, then Jesus died for no reason. Bypassing the grace of God and following the law is to push God aside and attempt to establish our own righteousness. To say that we must believe in Christ along with following the law is saying that Jesus’ work on the cross was insufficient. Keep that in mind as Paul begins chapter 3 with “*You foolish Galatians*”.

Prayer

First we come before You Lord, asking You to keep us from being deceived. Satan, the world, and our own flesh all come against Your children to lead them astray. We know that without the Holy Spirit, without Your guidance, we will lose our way. Be our strong tower, be our foundational rock, keep us on that only path that leads to eternal life.

How foolish it is of us to try to earn our salvation; and yet that is exactly what we are drawn to, that is what our flesh calls us to do: we try to justify ourselves by praying more or reading Your word more or spending more time in Christian fellowship or even doing works of service. Keep forefront in our minds that we need to do all these things but out of love and obedience to Jesus; His work of salvation is sufficient.

And so we praise You and worship You because You are God and Saviour and You are worthy just because of who You are. You are holy God; You are just and merciful, You are righteous and kind, You dispense with the wicked and lift up the downtrodden. Let our prayers join with the praises of the angels and may they be sweet incense before You.

These things we lift up to You in Jesus’ name

Amen