



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Galatians 2: 15-21

Spring 2021

"Justification"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Seth, and good morning to all of you. Let's turn to Galatians, chapter 2. We're going to end the chapter with verses 15 through 21, and now we're getting into doctrine. A little bit of history, with Peter and Paul, but we get into some very important doctrine at this point.

Beginning at verse 15,

¹⁵ "We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; ¹⁶ nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. *(Now you may notice here, and this is a point that will be stressed throughout this lesson, we're not justified by the works of the Law. So Paul begins that verse, verse 16 with that, and he ends the verse with it. He restates it to make the point—because the point needs to be made. Well, verse 17),* ¹⁷ But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! ¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I have *once* destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ; and 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 up for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness *comes* through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

Galatians 2: 15-21

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time studying it together.

(Message) Job stated, what has been called "the basic religious question" when he asked, "How can a man be just before God?" (Job 9:2). He recognized that mankind has a problem—and it's universal. We have all broken God's law. We have all sinned and we all stand before God guilty and condemned—sentenced to God's wrath. So how does a man get right with God? How can we be justified? That's Job's question.

It's the main issue of the Book of Galatians. And the first time Paul mentions it in the book—it's here at the end of the second chapter. In fact, if the Book of Galatians is the first book that the apostle Paul wrote, then this is the first time he mentions being "justified" in any of his writings. He put a lot of emphasis on it. The word 'justified' and 'justify' occurs three times in verse 16, and once in verse 17, so Paul considered this subject of justification an important one—and it certainly is.

Martin Luther brought that out. He called it "the truth of the Gospel" and "the principle article of all Christian doctrine". So we need to understand it. In fact, Luther felt so strongly about it that he said it needed to be beaten into people's heads continually. And the reason for that is because people tend to neglect it and to drift away from it—and often fail to appreciate its theological importance for the Gospel—but also its practical significance for our daily life.

Now you've heard me say this before, you've heard Dr. Johnson say it before me, and that is "doctrine is practical". We tend to think of it as theoretical and for theologians and the academy. But all theology is practical. And this doctrine, particularly, is. An understanding of the doctrine of 'justification by faith alone' is the doctrinal basis for stability in the Christian life. So it's a very important truth.

But what is it? What is the meaning of justification? Well, it's a forensic term, which means it's a legal term, taken from the law court. Justification is the opposite of condemnation. When a man stands before a judge and the judge condemns him—he declares him guilty and worthy of punishment. He doesn't make him guilty. He condemns him because he is already guilty and proven to be.

The same is true of justification. It is a legal declaration in which the judge pronounces a person not guilty—declares that person innocent—righteous before the law. He doesn't make the person innocent, (an important point to underscore), he simply pronounces him to be what he or she already is—not guilty.

Now we see that very clearly in Deuteronomy 25, verse 1. This is an important verse for understanding the meaning of justification. And there Moses gave instruction to the judges of Israel on how they were to deal with people who were put on trial. Then what he tells them is they were not to show favoritism. They were to deal evenhandedly.

He said, "If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked..." Then he explains that they were to administer punishment fairly to the guilty person. But the point is, the judge doesn't make anyone righteous or make anyone guilty, he simply pronounces them to be what they are. If they're guilty, he declares them guilty. If they're innocent, he declares them innocent. Justification is the legal pronouncement that a judge makes. No guilt, so no punishment.

That's the pronouncement that God makes to the sinner who believes in Jesus Christ. God, who is the judge of all the earth, pronounces the believer innocent—righteous. Now that's the good news of the Gospel. We become right with God and completely accepted by Him through faith alone, not by the deeds we do.

Yet the fact is, we're not innocent. We are guilty. In fact, in Romans chapter 4, verse 5, Paul states that God "justifies the ungodly". Well now how can that be? How can God, a just God, declare guilty people to be innocent and still be a just God? That would seem to be a problem.

But He solves the problem through a substitute, His Son, who came into this world to take the place of the guilty in judgment. And though innocent, though sinless, (and in fact He had to be sinless in order to be a substitute), He suffered our punishment in our place.

So God pardons our sins because Christ was punished for them. He accepts us as righteous, as Law keepers, because of Christ's righteousness which He counts for us—He counts it to be ours. He imputes it to us. And we have all of that through faith—and through faith alone.

The Westminster Confession of Faith gave a good definition of justification. It gave many good definitions, but this is their definition of justification: It "is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." (Question 33).

In Charles Wesley's words, "We're clothed in righteousness divine." That's a great picture of justification. It's as though a clean cloak has been placed over us. And that's how God sees us. And that's how man can be just before God, it's by faith. That's what a man must do to be saved, believe in Christ—our Savior and substitute.

That's the basic argument of this passage. And Paul makes the point because the Galatian churches were in danger of losing sight of it. The doctrine was under attack. It always is. It had been sabotaged in Antioch when Peter, through his own weakness, acted in hypocrisy. He withdrew from the Gentiles, and he began keeping the Law. By doing that, he sent the message that Gentile believers were inferior to Jewish believers and that they needed to obey the Law of Moses in order to be fully accepted by God. That's not true. That's not the Gospel. And Peter knew that. That's why Paul called his action "hypocrisy". And because it was a threat to the Gospel, Paul opposed Peter 'to his face', he said. And he did so publicly, "in the presence of all". (vs14).

Now having rebuked Peter for his actions, Paul goes on in verses 15 and 16 to remind him that everything we have is by grace, not by Law keeping. "We *are* Jews by nature," he writes, "and not sinners from among the Gentiles." Peter, of course, knew

that he was a Jew. Paul wasn't simply stating the obvious. He was reminding Peter of their privileges and their advantages over the Gentiles, who were "sinners", he said.

What made them sinners in the estimation of the Jews was the fact that they did not have the Law of Moses, and they didn't live by the Law of Moses—they didn't keep it. This was probably the way orthodox Jews referred to Gentiles and Paul was likely borrowing that term, "sinners", from their vocabulary here.

So the Gentiles were "sinners". They didn't have the advantages of the Jews who had the Law and the prophets. "Nevertheless", Paul says in verse 16, real as that advantage was, and great as it was, it didn't save them. Having the Law did not save anyone. Peter knew that, and Paul reminded him of it; "...nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus," (vs16). 'Even we, Peter, you and I, who were brought up on the Law and lived under it and respected it, even we didn't seek our justification through it but through believing in Christ alone. So why then, are you now trying to impose the Law on those people, on these Gentiles?' That's Paul's point here. Peter knew that the Law couldn't save. It could tell the Jew what to do—but it couldn't make him do it. The Law cannot keep a person from sinning and it certainly cannot remove his or her sin and guilt.

So behind this statement is the acknowledgment that Jews are sinners with the Law, just as Gentiles are sinners without the Law. We're all made of the same stuff, we're all in the same boat, we are all equally needy. The Law of Moses didn't change that. It is inadequate for establishing a right relationship between God and man. We need a Savior for that, and Christ is that Savior.

Again, Peter knew that. But Paul reminds him of it, "...we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh shall be justified. (vs16). So he reinforces that point—he repeats it, "We are not justified by the works of the Law."

Now one reason he repeats that, I think in this verse and makes a great emphasis on the fact that the law cannot save us, is because that is a very hard fact for people to accept. It goes completely contrary to natural religion—completely contrary to the way people normally think. The way you and I normally think, which is we must earn what we get. And, of course, there's some truth in that. We're to work to make a living. We're to earn things in this life by diligent work. But when it comes to this, we can't do that.

Now there's a story in the Talmud about a first century rabbi named Rabbi Eliezer whose students asked him to teach them the path of life that leads to the future world. And so he did that. He told them all the things that they needed to do, all of the rules and regulations they needed to follow, the care they needed to give to their colleagues and children—a whole list of things that they needed to do. And then he said, "In that way they would win the future world." That's Judaism. It's not just Jewish theology, it's the religion of the world, natural religion. It's what John Stott called "The religion of the man in the street today."

And you get a picture from that: Someone standing with a microphone, or a clipboard, and interviewing people as they walked by on the street, asking, "Do you believe in heaven?" —"Yes..." "Well, how do you get there?" — "Well, try the best I can, live a good life." That's the religion of the man in the street. We 'win' heaven. We earn it. But Paul says, 'A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.' And he stresses faith as the only means of justification—of being declared right with God.

Faith involves understanding who Christ is and what He's done, (I think I emphasized that last week.) The object of faith is essential for faith to be a genuine faith. And so a person understands who Christ is and what He's done. And accepting that as true: that this is the Son of God whom I'm trusting in, who became a man and died in my place. That's faith—trusting in Him and what He did. It's not meritorious.

Faith is not, in itself, something that earns favor with God. Faith, I think, is well described as an outstretched open hand that's empty and it simply receives a gift. That's

faith. It receives the promise of the Gospel in Christ. It doesn't achieve a righteousness of its own. It receives the righteousness of Christ.

Paul then confirms this, his claim about salvation being through faith alone, by giving a loose translation or quotation of Psalm 143, verse 2, which states that by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. It's the principle of the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. The Law is sufficient to condemn a person but insufficient to save him or her. The fault is not in the Law. The Law is holy and good. The fault is in the flesh, it's in the person who's fallen and weak and unable to perform, who cannot do the Law. So because we cannot save ourselves, we must be saved. And the Savior is Christ whose salvation we receive through the empty hand of faith as a free gift—just as Peter and Paul did. Now that is grace.

But free grace, to the natural man, provokes strong objections. Men don't like grace. You would think we would love grace. But men don't like grace. And one of the main objections they give to that is, 'grace promotes sin. If we're saved without the Law then we will become lawless.'

Paul states the objection in verse 17, and then he denies it. He says, "If", (it is asked), "while seeking to be justified in Christ," (that is, 'by seeking to be justified by faith apart from Law keeping'), "we ourselves have also been found sinners," (that is, 'we become like the Gentiles, without the Law'), "is Christ then a minister of sin?" 'If we're saved without the Law, is Christ promoting sin? Doesn't that make Him a lawless person, a promoter of lawlessness? And doesn't that prove that the gospel you're preaching, Paul, 'of faith alone in Christ alone', is false? It leads to antinomianism; it leads to lawlessness.'

Well, that's what the Judaizers said. That's what the objection was. And Paul answers that. He accepts the first two premises of the argument—that first we do seek justification in Christ, and secondly we seek it apart from the Law. —That is the only way that a person can be justified. But he rejects in the strongest language the conclusion that Christ is then a promoter of sin. "May it never be!" he says. Absolutely not! God

forbid! —That's the idea of, "May it never be!" Salvation is all of grace. But grace never leads to sin. And in verse 20, Paul will explain why that is. In fact, just the opposite.— Grace promotes life and obedience.

But first he explains what does promote sin—and that is, making the Law the basis of one's personal relationship with God. Verse 18, "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor." Now that's what Peter did in Antioch when he separated from the Gentile Christians because they didn't observe the Law of Moses. Paul describes that as 'rebuilding what was once destroyed'. This 'dividing wall' of the Law between the Jew and the Gentile has it been brought down. Yet Peter's building it back up again.

By doing that, advocating Law keeping as necessary for justification, a person was saying that acceptance with God is based on works, and not based on grace. And that goes against the real intent of the Law—the real purpose of the Law. It was never given to make a person righteous. It was only given and always given to show that we are not righteous. It was given as a revelation of the righteousness of God, the purity of God, the perfection of God. And then that standard of perfection is held up to the Israelite, and to the Gentile for that matter, to show how far short we fall from it—that we're not righteous.

Now that's how Paul explains the Law's purpose in the next verse from his own experience. If ever a man could have been justified by the works of the Law, it was Paul—the zealous Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. But just the opposite proved true for him. "For through the Law," he writes, "I died to the Law so that I might live to God."(vs19). Paul was devoted to the Law and keeping it—but it didn't give him the life that he thought it would give him. It didn't give him the life that he thought he would receive or obtain by keeping it. The Law, in fact, killed him. He talks about this in Romans, chapter 7, as well.

But that was the purpose of the Law. The purpose of the Law is to kill—not to give life. It is God's standard of perfection, as I said. It was given to show how far short we fall from that perfection, and how lost we all are—to show what Isaiah said, that all

"our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags". (Isa 64:6). The best that we can offer God, (we see in the light of the Law and the light of His revelation), is worthless. The Law, then, was given to show us our spots, not to remove them. It was given kill the self-righteous person by exposing his sin, his failure, and ending his confidence in himself and in his human works.

But that was a good work that the Law did, a necessary work. Because once Paul died to that self-righteousness, once he died to himself, he could then be saved by the Savior and truly live to God.

He then explains, in verse 20 and 21, how salvation happened, and how it became possible for him in his life to live his life unto God. It's through union with Christ in His death. "I have been crucified with Christ;" he said, "and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (vs20a). He can live to God by dying and becoming a new man. And that's what happened to Paul. That's the key to having acceptance with God, to being just before God and living for Him, it's being crucified with Christ.

But what does that mean, being crucified with Christ? Obviously, Paul wasn't speaking literally. So in what sense could it be said that he was crucified with Him? In the sense that when Christ died, he died as Paul's representative—which He did for all of His people. Christ acted as our substitute at Calvary and won eternal blessings for us.

Now this idea of representation is not unfamiliar to us. Our government is based on it. We have representatives in Washington, in Congress. They stand as our substitutes. Ideally, they speak for us, they cast votes in our place—they act in our place. That's how 'government by the people' functions, by representatives. And representation, this principle of representation, is found all through the Bible.

Israel's religion was based on it. The High Priest represented the people before God. And he visibly did that by carrying the names of the 12 tribes of Israel on his shoulders. Then on his breastplate, this beautiful breastplate that the High Priest would wear with these stones, these jewels—they all represented the 12 tribes of Israel. He

had the nation on his shoulders. He had the nation on his heart. He represented the 12 tribes. That's representation.

The sacrifices slain on the altar represented the sinner. They were substitutes for the sinner. The goat, slain on the day of atonement, represented Israel. And the scapegoat that carried the sins away after the priest had laid his hands upon it and confessed the sins of Israel, and they were taken off into the wilderness, that represented the nation as well.

Now none of those things were really sufficient representatives in the Old Testament. Paul, or rather the author of Hebrews says, that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin—but they could serve as a continual reminder of this great truth of what we need—we need a substitute. So they were only temporary pictures of the ultimate priest, and ultimate sacrifice who would represent God's people—and that is God's Son, the LORD Jesus Christ. When He died on the cross, He did so as our representative. He willingly acted for us so that His sacrifice was, in effect, our sacrifice. His death was our death. His resurrection, our resurrection.

Mr. Spurgeon put it this way, "Whatever Christ did, if you belong to those who are in Him, He did for you, beloved. When Christ was nailed to the cross, all His elect were nailed there. When He was put into the grave, the whole of His people lay slumbering there with Him. When He rose, they rose and received the foretaste of their own future resurrection."

As our representative, Christ acted for us. His actions were our actions. We were, as it were, in Him, dying and rising in Him. So Paul could say, "I have been crucified with Christ..." 'I was there in Him when He was on the cross, suffering my own death vicariously. I was paying for my sins through my substitute.' As a result, Paul says, "It is no longer I who live." The man that I was, that rebel, died that day. And that happened for all of those Christ represented on the cross—for all God's elect.

Redemption, salvation was accomplished at Calvary. But it was held in reserve for us, so to speak, until we were born into this world, and then, born again—and we appropriated that great blessing and that great gift through faith. That is when

redemption is applied, and is something that we actually have. That is when our new relationship with God begins in fact. We are put in Christ, and Christ lived in us, "...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (vs20).

Now Paul was most likely in making that statement, drawing upon our LORD's teaching in the Gospel of John, in John chapter 15, where He describes this relationship of His people with Himself through the analogy of the vine and the branches. And He says to them that 'He's like the vine, and His disciples are like the branches.' Just as a branch in the vine receives its life from the vine, and as a result puts forth fruit, so too, we receive our spiritual life from Christ because we are in Him. And as a result of that, we bear fruit, meaning we live obedient, productive lives.

Our connection with Christ, through the grace of God, the sovereign grace of God, that connection transforms us and gives us new thoughts; new desires; new abilities. It's a supernatural life that He gives us. That's what Paul had. That's what grace produces. Not indolence, not sin—but obedience and joy. And so, he says, "...the *life* which I now live in the flesh", (meaning in this body in this present life), "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." (vs20b).

That's a very different life from the one Paul previously lived, in which he was striving to be justified by the works of the Law—striving to gain God's approval every day. Now it's different. Now he walks by faith in Christ who is our model and who is our guide.

So in one sense it is Paul who is living, believing, and doing. But in another it's not Paul at all. It is Christ living through him so he can do what the Law could not enable him to do, but live the righteousness that the Law reveals and speaks of. So justification by faith apart from Law does not lead to lawlessness. The faith that justifies joins us to Christ and forgiveness so He can live in us and empower us to live a holy life.

Calvin put it this way, "It is faith alone that justifies, but the faith that justifies is not alone." It's always accompanied by works—not perfection—but works. It is a life lived in obedience to Christ. Again, not perfectly, but there's obedience in that life. It is not obedience given out of a desire to gain acceptance. The believer has acceptance

with God from the moment of faith. That is why an understanding of justification by grace through faith is so practical in our daily life, it gives assurance. We don't need to strive for God's acceptance. What the doctrine of justification teaches is that we have that forgiveness and acceptance at the moment of faith—and forever. It can never be taken. Nothing can 'snatch us from His hand', as Jesus Himself says in John chapter 10, verse 28.

And so the believer's motive for obedience is not uncertainty and fear, 'I have to do this or that to gain God's acceptance, or keep God's acceptance, or maintain this blessing I have. I don't want to lose it.' We don't live out of fear—that's not the motive. Fear that I'm not secure, fear that I haven't done enough. Our motive is appreciation. Our motive is gratitude. It is thankfulness. We act for Christ out of love for Him. The purest motives are that. We act in obedience because we love the LORD because of what He did for us.

Paul describes himself as living by faith in the One who loved me and gave Himself up for me. The fact that Christ loved him, this persecutor of the church, this man who was so pleased with himself for his obedience to the Law—he loved Christ who died for him. —He was amazed by that. It filled Paul with wonder. You get a sense of that here. 'He loved me. Even me!' And I think as Paul thought of the cross, he thought of it in a very personal way, as we can when we realize that God the Father gave to Him, His elect, and Christ willingly came to die for His people, and He came for you, personally. And Paul was amazed that He came for him. And it gave him joy and it gave him the desire to live for the LORD. "Even me."

The knowledge of that moved Paul, as I say, to trust Christ and follow Him gladly, and to suffer for Him gladly because of what He had suffered for Paul. Scottish theologian James Denney wrote that, "The whole of the Christian life is a response to the love exhibited in the death of the Son of God for men."

Paul concludes the chapter by answering a final objection. The Judaizers claimed that he was, 'Annulling God's grace by setting aside the Law of Moses for faith in Christ.

The Law was God's gift to Israel.' And the Jewish point of view was that, 'Righteousness came through the Law. So by denying the need of the Law,' they said, 'you're denying grace. You're denying this great gift that God has given us, and making it void.'

Paul rejects the charge, and refutes it with what I would call irrefutable logic. —At least to us it's irrefutable, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly." (vs21). In other words, if obedience to the Law could give a person good standing with God, if the Law is a way of salvation, then there was no need for Christ to come and die. His death was unnecessary. In fact, if we could save ourselves by Law keeping, then God never would have sent, and never would have offered up His Son, His only begotten Son, as a sacrifice for us. In fact, that would have been a cruel response to the agony of Gethsemane.

But the fact that He did send Him into this world is proof that Christ's death was necessary. There was no other way of salvation. And that's the logic that Paul is using. And as I say, it's irrefutable. The fact that God sacrificed His only begotten Son demonstrates that there is no other way but salvation through the cross of Christ.

Even so, people pursue a course of legalism, of salvation by Law in order to earn their way to heaven. It seems, I think to many people, to be a very noble path to work hard for God's approval and salvation. In fact, it is a grave insult to God because it makes a mockery of Christ's death and it rejects the greatest gift ever offered—one that cost God the infinite price of His only beloved Son.

So "How can man be just before God?" That is the basic question of religion, or the basic religious question. And there is no more important question to ask than that one. The answer is through faith in Christ who loved us and gave Himself up for us.

If you've not believed, if you have not looked to Christ, God's Son, and God's great gift to a lost race of men, then we invite you to come to Him, to believe in Him, to trust in Him and rest in Him—and then live for Him. May God help you to do that, help all of us to do that, and to rejoice in what He's done for us—to live for Him out of the

goodness of His grace to us, out of joy and thanksgiving for all that He has done. Let's give thanks for Him and what He's done.

Father, we do thank You for the gift of life in Your Son, and what You did for us through Him. The Law could not save us. The Law wasn't given to save us. The Law was given to show us that we needed a Savior. And He's that Savior, pictured in the Law, pictured in the priest, pictured in the prophets, pictured in the sacrifices on the altar. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb 9:22). But it had to be His blood that was shed, the blood of the God-man. And we thank You that you sent Him to die for us. May we now live for Him.

Bless us now, LORD, as we observe this Supper that You've given us, to remind us of who Your Son is and what He's done. We thank You for Him, and pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(End of Audio)