



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Galatians 2: 15-21

Galatians

“Justification”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Galatians chapter 2 and we're going to look at the remainder of the chapter, which we've been in, and that would include verses 15 through 21. Paul is continuing from the previous paragraph in which he is recounting to the Galatians a confrontation he had with Peter. Peter had come down from Jerusalem to the city of Antioch to visit the church there where God is doing amazing work, saving gentiles. And they were not living like Jews. They were gentiles, saved as gentiles, apart from the law. But when some Jewish leaders from Jerusalem came down, some men who represented the legalizing part of the church whom Paul called false brethren, Peter withdrew from the gentile Christians, and Paul confronts him on that.

He continues his argument. He called that hypocrisy and he says in verse 15, "We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; 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." He really emphasizes that three times. In that one verse, he says one way or another, we're not justified by keeping the law. He's reminding Peter of that because Peter knew that.

But he continues in verse 17: "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! For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the Law I died to the law so that I might live to God. 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. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly." May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for this time together and this opportunity to read the Scriptures as we have done and to exercise this great privilege that we have of prayer of coming into the throne of grace as we do at this moment, and we can do that individually. We can do it corporately as a church. We can do that because Christ has opened up heaven for us. He has by Your grace, clothed us with His righteousness. We stand in the righteousness of Christ and that gives us acceptance with You.

And we have received that righteousness through faith alone, not through anything that we've done. It's all a gift and we thank You for that. And as we consider that great truth and that great position of privilege that we occupy, we pray that You instruct us and that You would give us clarity on the things that Paul says in this text and that you would give us an appreciation for Your grace and help us to rejoice in it. Help us to sense the profundity of this great doctrine of justification. So we look to You to bless us, Lord, and teach us.

We pray for ourselves spiritually in this hour, but we pray that You would not only bless us spiritually, but materially in the days and the weeks to come. We pray for those who are sick, we pray that You give them healing and encouragement in the midst of their infirmity. We pray for those who are weighed down by the cares of life, stress at work or within the home. We pray that You would enable them to look to You and to rest in You and to remember the great promises that we have. If individuals are unemployed, we pray that You would give opportunities of employment, give wisdom and diligence in the search for work and open doors of opportunity for them. We pray for our nation. We pray that You would bless it, bless our leaders with great wisdom, Father. We live in difficult days. We pray for our military personnel abroad. We pray particularly for friends and family members who are engaged in war, and we pray that You give them protection and bless Your people abroad. We pray that they would have a good and a clear witness for Jesus Christ among our people and among those of a foreign nation. Make them lights in the

midst of a dark place. Prepare our hearts for a time of study together, and we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] Martin Luther said there are three things that make a theologian: study, prayer, and affliction. Maybe that's why Job was a theologian. He asked what has been called the basic religious question: How can a man be just before God? Job recognized that mankind has a problem. It's universal. We have all broken God's law. We have sinned, and as a consequence, we stand before God guilty and condemned. So how does a man get right with God? How do we escape His judgment and wrath to come? That is really the question that the Philippian jailer asked in Acts chapter 16:30. He was on the brink of suicide when he asked, "What must I do to be saved?" That is the most important question that a person can ask. That question and Job's question – how can a man be just before God? – is what Paul answers in our text Galatians 2:15-21, where he takes up the subject of justification. This is the central issue of the book of Galatians and the first time Paul mentions it in the book.

In fact, if Galatians is the first book that Paul wrote, as it probably is, then this is the first time that he mentions it in any of his writings, puts a lot of emphasis on it. The word "justify" occurs three times in verse 16 and one time in verse 17. So Paul considered this subject of justification an important one. Again, Martin Luther called it the truth of the gospel and the principal article of all Christian doctrine. It is about salvation. So we need to understand it. In fact, Luther felt so strongly about it that he said it needed to be beaten into the heads of people continually, and the reason for that is because people tend to neglect it and drift away from it and often fail to appreciate the theological importance of this doctrine for the gospel and its practical significance for daily life.

An understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the doctrinal basis for stability in the Christian life. So it is a very important truth. But what is it? What is the meaning of justification? Theological definitions aren't usually the stuff of scintillating sermons, but they are sometimes necessary for substantive sermons, and we need a definition here. So what is justification? It is a forensic or legal term taken from the law of courts. It means very simply to declare righteous, not to make righteous, to declare righteous. And the distinction is very important. It is the opposite of condemnation. When a man stands before a judge and the judge

condemns him, he declares him to be guilty and worthy of punishment. He doesn't make him guilty.

He condemns him because he is already guilty. The same is true of justification. It is a legal declaration in which a judge pronounces a person not guilty, pronounces him innocent, pronounces him righteous, right before the law. It doesn't make the person innocent. He simply pronounces him to be what he already is, not guilty. Now, we have examples of that in the Bible. I think the clearest example of this is taken from the law itself. It's taken from Deuteronomy, chapter 25:1 where Moses gives instruction to judges on how they were to deal with the people who were put on trial. 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." And then he goes on to explain that they are to administer punishment fairly to the guilty person.

But the point is the judge doesn't make anyone righteous or make a person guilty. He simply pronounces him to be what they are. Justification is the legal pronouncement that a judge makes and it is the pronouncement that God makes in salvation. It is the pronouncement that God makes to the sinner who believes in Christ. God, who is the judge of all the earth, pronounces the believer innocent, pronounces him or her righteous. That's the good news of the gospel. We become right with God and completely accepted by Him through faith alone, not through the deeds that we do. And yet, the fact is we are not innocent. We are guilty. Now, we can understand a judge condemning a guilty man, but in justification, God is justifying guilty people. "He justifies the ungodly," Paul says in Romans 4:5. So how can that be? We would consider a judge who releases the guilty to be corrupt.

How can a just God declare guilty people innocent and still be just? That was the divine dilemma God faced in regard to salvation, to be just and yet be the justifier of the sinner to save the lost without compromising or losing His Holiness. He solved the problem through His Son, who willingly came into this world, became a man, took to Himself human nature in order to be our substitute in judgment by dying in our place as the spotless lamb of God. Christ lived a law-keeping life. He lived a perfect life. He lived a sinless life. And then He offered Himself up as the sacrifice for sinners so that He satisfies through His offering, through His death, through His sacrifice, satisfies the law's demands for all who believe in Him.

At the moment of faith, God counts Christ's punishment to be the believer's punishment, and He counts Christ's obedience to the law, His life of perfection to be the believer's obedience. He imputes all of that to the believer, puts it through our account, through faith. That is justification. And God can do that for us because of what Christ did for us. He is both our punishment and our righteousness. He is our substitute. Westminster Confession of Faith puts it this way, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight, not gratuitously, not freely in the sense of just giving us a wave of a hand, giving us forgiveness. No, He accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone."

He pardons our sins because Christ was punished for them. He accepts us as righteousness, as law keepers, because Christ's righteousness counts for our righteousness. And we have all of that through faith. That is how a man can be just before God, by faith. And that is what a man must do to be saved – believe in Christ, our substitute. That is the basic argument of this passage. And Paul makes the point because the Galatian churches were in danger of losing sight of that fundamental doctrine of Christianity. The doctrine was under attack, this doctrine of justification by faith. It was under attack in the Galatian churches, but it's always under attack.

Everywhere and in every age, it had been undermined in Antioch when Peter, through his own weakness, acted in hypocrisy and compromised the gospel. He had associated with the gentile Christians there in Antioch freely. He had enjoyed Christian fellowship with them, enjoyed Christian liberty by eating with them often until men from Jerusalem came to town. These men were the legalizers in the church and they were promoting the law. And when they came, out of fear of those men, Peter withdrew from the gentiles and began keeping the law. By doing that, he sent the message that gentile believers were inferior to Jewish believers and they needed to obey the law of Moses in order to be fully accepted by God. In other words, we make ourselves acceptable by the things that we do.

We produce a righteousness that's acceptable to God by law keeping. And that's not true. It's not the gospel and Peter knew that. That is why Paul called his action hypocrisy. And because it was a threat to the gospel, because it was a threat to the message of salvation, Paul opposed Peter. He said to his face, and he did so, he said, in the presence of all. Now, having rebuked Peter for his actions, Paul goes on

in verses 15 and 16 to remind him that everything we have, we have by grace and not law keeping. Verse 15: "We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles." Now, Peter, of course, knew that he was a Jew. Paul wasn't simply stating the obvious. What he was saying, in reminding Peter that he was a Jew and that Paul himself was a Jew, was reminding him of their privileges, the privileges that they, as Jews, had over the gentiles, the advantages that they had over what he calls the sinners.

Now, what made gentiles sinners in the estimation of the Jews was the fact that they did not have the law of Moses. It was given to Israel. It wasn't given to the nations. They didn't have the Ten Commandments. They didn't have all of the rules and regulations that regulated the food that they ate and the clothes that they wore and the way they structured their week and the calendar of the year and all of that. They didn't have the sacrifices and the offerings. The gentiles lived in darkness. They lived without the law, so they are called sinners. This is probably the way orthodox Jews refer to gentiles, and Paul was borrowing from their vocabulary here. They were sinners. Gentiles didn't have the advantages of the Jews who had the law and had the prophets, had the oracles of God.

Nevertheless, Paul says in verse 16 real as that advantage was and great as those advantages were, they didn't save the Jews, and Peter knew that. And Paul reminds 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. Even we, Peter, you and I, who were brought up on the law and lived under it and respected it, even we, who held the law in the highest regard, 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 these people who don't have the law and weren't saved by the law and can't be saved by law?"

Now, that's the point that he's making here. Peter knew that the law could not 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 the law certainly cannot remove his sins from it. So behind this statement is the acknowledgement that Jews are sinners with the law, just as gentiles are sinners without it. We are all made of the same stuff. There are great distinctions among us ethnically. We are from different nations. There are male and female. We're different in that way. We're different socially. We're different in

many, many ways. But essentially, we're all the same. We're all made of the same stuff and we're in the same predicament. We are all equally needy.

The law of Moses didn't change that. It is inadequate for changing that. It is completely inadequate for establishing a right relationship between God and man. We need a Savior for that and Christ is that Savior. And Peter knew that. Paul reminds him of it even though he knew it. He says, "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." So Paul really emphasizes his point because I noted in the reading of the text, three times in that verse, he states in one way or another that we're not justified, we're not saved by keeping the law. Now, he emphasizes that because that is a hard truth for people to accept. It goes completely contrary to natural religion, to the way that people normally think, which is we must earn what we get.

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. In other words, how do we get to heaven? Or to use Job's question, "How can a man be just before God?" And so he answers their question. He told them all of the things that they needed to do – the rules and the regulations that are set forth in the law. They needed to obey them. They needed to care for the needy. They needed to give help to their colleagues and their children and a whole list of things, a list of good things, but things that they must do. And then he said that in this way, you will win the future world. That's Judaism. It's not just Jewish theology. It's the religion of the world.

It's what John Stott called the religion of the man in the street today. If you were to talk to anybody casually, anybody you happen to meet, generally speaking, that would be true. That's the religion of the man in the street. If you ask him, "How do we get to heaven, or how can a man be just before God?" They'll think for a moment, perhaps, and then they would say, "By living a good life." Maybe if they were somewhat enlightened, they'd say, "By keeping the Ten Commandments, by keeping the law of God." These are the things that we must do. We must win the future world. We must earn it. But Paul says a man is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Christ Jesus. And Paul stresses faith as the only means of justification. That's the stress of this book.

Now, very simply, faith is trust. And saving faith is a personal commitment to Christ on the basis of an acceptance of the message about Him. It is personally trusting Him in Christ, but Christ isn't personally here. He isn't with us in the flesh. And so we know Him and we trust in Him by trusting in the message about Him, trusting in the gospel. So faith, saving faith is believing in Christ by believing in the gospel, or as faith has been illustrated, it is an outstretched hand that is open and empty. It receives the righteousness of Christ. It doesn't achieve a righteousness of its own. Paul clenches his claim about salvation being through faith alone by giving a loose quotation of Scripture at the end of the verse, which demonstrates that this idea of justification by faith alone is not some new doctrine that Paul thought up that perhaps he came to while he was in the deserts of Arabia, meditating, thinking about this experience that he had on the Damascus Road.

Everything that Paul teaches about salvation, about justification, is drawn from the Old Testament. He's already proved that, but here, again, he makes that point by giving a loose quotation from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. It's Psalms 143 in verse 2, which states that "by the works of the Law, no flesh will be justified." That's the teaching of the Old Testament. The law is sufficient to condemn a person but not to save him. Why is that? Well, it's not because the law is at fault. It's not the law is holy and good. The fault is in the flesh. We are fallen creatures. We are weak and we are unable to perform the laws and the obligations that God has set upon us.

So because we cannot save ourselves, we must be saved. We need a Savior. And the Savior is Christ, whose salvation we received through the empty hand of faith as a free gift, just as Peter did, just as Paul did. That is grace. But free grace to the natural man, to the unbelieving person, is like a red rag to a bull. It is certain to provoke strong objections and in verses 17 through 19, Paul answers the objection that was most often raised to him on this subject of grace, which is grace promotes sin. If we are saved without the law, if you take the law away, Paul, then we'll be lawless, and we'll behave like lawless people.

He states the objection in verse 17 and then denies it, if it is asked while seeking to be justified in Christ, that is by faith apart from law keeping; we ourselves have also been found sinners, that is, we can come like the gentiles who don't have the law, is Christ then a minister of sin? That's what people were saying, "He's a minister of sin." And doesn't that make Christ a promoter of lawlessness? Doesn't that prove

that the gospel of faith and Christ alone is false because if you take away the gospel, which salvation in Christ alone does, then we'll just become sinners and that can't be true. Well, Paul accepts the first two premises of the argument, that we do seek justification in Christ. We seek it in him alone. And in seeking justification in Christ, we seek it apart from the law, not by the law. That's the only way we 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. Salvation is all of grace, but grace does not lead to sin. And Christ is no minister of sin; just the opposite is true. And in verse 20, he will explain why it is that grace in Christ does not promote sin and, in fact, promotes life and obedience. But first, he explains what does promote sin, and that is making the law the basis of a person's relationship with God, verse 18: "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor." 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 here as rebuilding what was once destroyed. It is going back to the law which has never been the basis of being right with God and no longer has a claim on the believer. We're free from the law. Paul will develop that much more clearly in chapter 3, but it's the assumption here which Peter, to whom he's addressing, understood. No longer has a claim on the believer. By doing that, by going back to the law and advocating law keeping as necessary for justification, a person is saying that acceptance with God is based on works and not grace. That goes against the real intent of the law, which was never to make us righteous; it cannot make us righteous.

The law was given in order to show us that we are not righteous. That's how Paul explains the law's purpose. He explains this from his own experience, and that's significant because if ever a man could have been justified by the works of the law, it was Paul, the zealous Pharisee. He speaks of that in something of a biographical passage in Philippians chapter 3. He speaks of his life as a Pharisee and how, in terms of the law, his keeping of the law, he found himself blameless. He looked at his life. He could not find any fault in his life. He had obeyed it externally, at least completely. But the reality was what was going on inside of him was just the opposite. He says here, "For through the law, I died to the law so that I might live to God."

Paul had devoted his life to law keeping. But as he explains in Romans Chapter 7 while he looked at everything on the outside, he hadn't worshipped to a false God. He hadn't made idols. He hadn't committed theft. He never murdered. He honored his parents. He did all of that, but when he got to that tenth commandment about not coveting, he said he stirred up coveting. We can keep things outwardly, but it's not just an outward conformity to the law that God demands. It's an inner conformity, too. We must be perfect in soul as well as body, and Paul realized that he was not. He said, "I died to the law so that I might live to God." The law that he kept, that he was so devoted to, that he had thought would give him the life that he sought, a righteousness with God and eternal life, he found it did not do it. In fact, the law killed him.

But this was its purpose. Purpose of the law is to kill. It's not to give life. It is God's standard of perfection. It is given for the purpose of showing us how far short of perfection we fall, and in showing us that, show us how lost we really are. It kills the self-righteousness. People who think that by their deeds, they have woven for themselves a white robe of righteousness learn what they really have in light of the law. They have wrapped themselves up in rags because in the words of Isaiah: "All our righteousness is as filthy rags." The best that we can do falls far short of what God demands and what the law requires. But again, that is why the law was given, to show us our spots, not to remove it. No one can fulfill the law. It is impossible.

The law was given to show us that fact. It was given, as I said, to kill the self-righteous person by exposing his sin. And in exposing his sin and in exposing the reality of his condition, destroying all hope of salvation by human effort and by works of the law. But that was a good work that the law did, a necessary work because once Paul died to try to save himself, he could then be saved and truly live to God. He then explains in verses 20 and 21 how salvation happened and how it became possible for him to live a life unto God. It is through Christ and communion with him, or more precisely, union with him and, first of all, communion or union in death. He died with Christ. He says, "I have been crucified with him, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." He lives to God by dying and becoming a new man. That's the only way and that's what happened to Paul.

And that's the key to having acceptance with God, to being just before God and living for him, being crucified with Christ. Well, if that's the key, what does that

mean? What does this mean being crucified with Christ? Obviously, Paul wasn't speaking literally. He wasn't physically present with Jesus on the cross of Calvary. 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. What we cannot win, he won for us.

Now, this idea of representation is not unfamiliar to us. Our government is based upon it. We send people to Washington to be our representatives, some in the House of Representatives; others in the Senate. But they all represent their particular district and state. They represent their people. They stand as our substitutes, and as our substitutes, they cast for us votes, or they speak for us. They act in our place, so when your congressman votes, you're voting through him. When he speaks, he's speaking for you on your behalf. That's how government by the people functions, by representatives. And that principle representation is found all through the Bible. Israel's religion was founded upon it.

The high priest represented the people before God. He carried the names of the tribes on his breastplate and on his shoulders. Twelve tribes were listed on the breastplate over his heart to show his affection for them. He bore them on the shoulder plates that he had – six tribes on one; six on the other. The priestly garments were a testimony to the fact that he was their representative. He brought them before God. He acted on their behalf. He represented the people of Israel. The sacrifices slain on the altar represented the sinner. It was a substitute for the sinner. His representative on that altar of sacrifice and the offerings of the great day of atonement were substitutes representing the people of Israel. None of those things, however, were sufficient substitutes.

None of them were sufficient representatives. They were only temporary pictures of the ultimate priest and the final sacrifice who would represent God's people, and that is Jesus Christ. And when he offered Himself up as a sacrifice, He did so as our representative, as our substitute. He acted for us so that His sacrifice was our sacrifice. His death was our death and His resurrection was 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 Jesus 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 in him. When he rose, they rose and received the foretaste of their own future resurrection."

Now, that's true because he is our representative, and as our representative, Christ acted for us. His actions were our actions. We were, as it were, living in him dying in him, 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, I suffered it," Paul says, "vicariously through him." As a result, "it is no longer I who live." "The man that I was," he's saying, "with all of my sin and my guilt, with all of my self-righteousness as that arrogant Pharisee, all of that died that day." His sins, that is, Paul's sins were laid upon Christ and paid for in the Lord's death. And that is a permanent condition. Paul indicates that in the grammar that he uses here in this verse. He uses the perfect tense which is a past tense. It speaks to the past action that has results that continue into the present.

So when he says, "I have been crucified," the idea is the man who is crucified in the past is still crucified and dead today and always will be. The old man is dead forever. The remnants of him lives on in us. The sin is in our members of that old man, but the old man is dead and dead forever. A new creation has been raised out of that death on the cross, the new person that Christ has made us to be, and what Paul is saying, what Christ made me to be, the new creature that I am because of his work. Now, in one sense, this new man is the same man who died. It's Paul. It's Paul who was Saul of Tarsus, but with this difference. The unbelieving man, the rebel that he was, died. He ceased to be that person and became a child of God. That happened at the cross for God's elect.

Redemption, salvation was accomplished at Calvary, but we appropriate it in time through faith. That's when the redemption that was accomplished at Calvary is applied and we have it personally. That is when the empty hand receives the gift of Christ's righteousness and when our new relationship with God begins and Christ lives in us, at the moment of faith. And then as Paul says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." This is really what the Lord describes in John 15 with the analogy of the vine and the branches. He is like a vine and his disciples, his followers, are like branches that are in the vine, just as a branch receives its life from the vine that it is in, and as a result of that, puts forth fruit.

So, too, we receive our spiritual life from Christ, and as a result, we bear fruit. We inevitably bear fruit because the life of Christ is in us and it produces that. It produces faith. It produces a disposition with a desire for righteousness and it produces obedience in our lives. It produces productive lives in us, the life of Christ. Our connection with Christ transforms us and gives us new thoughts and desires and abilities. We have as Christians a supernatural life, supernatural ability. That's what Paul had. And so he says, "The life which I now live in the flesh, that is, in this body, in this present life, even this life that I have with sin in it, nevertheless, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me." That's a very different life from the one Paul lived previously, his life of faith in the Son of God, because in his previous life, he was striving for justification by works of the law, striving to obtain a righteousness with God and an acceptance with him.

Now, he walks by faith. He lives daily by trusting in Christ, who is our model and our guide. So in one sense, it is Paul who is living and believing and doing, obeying, but in another sense, it's not Paul at all. It is Christ living through him and enabling him to do what the law could never empower him to do. So justification by faith apart from the law does not lead to lawlessness, just the opposite. It unites us to Christ who empowers us, empowers the believer to live by faith and to live a holy life. It is the only way to a lawful life. Calvin put it this way: "It is faith alone that justifies, but faith that justifies is not alone." No, it's not alone. It always is accompanied by work, if it's living faith, if it's genuine faith, because we have a life that's lived in obedience to Christ, and we've lived that obedience to Christ because we are united to him.

This is not obedience that we then produce out of a desire to gain God's acceptance. We don't need to do that because the believer has that acceptance at the moment of faith. And that's why an understanding of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, and Christ alone is so important for our daily life. It is a very practical thing to understand this because it gives assurance. We don't need to strive for God's acceptance. We don't need to worry that we will lose his love for us or his acceptance of us or the salvation that we have because we don't measure up. We have that at the moment of faith. At the moment of faith, we're justified. You cannot be considered more righteous than you are at the moment you believe. You cannot be

more accepted than you are at the moment you believe and when you have that acceptance, when you have that righteousness, you have it forever.

So the believer's motive for obedience is not uncertainty and fear. It's not apprehension or anxiety. It is gratitude. We act for Christ out of love for him. 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. He died for him, Paul a persecutor of the church, one who hated Christ and was never seeking Him. The fact that He loved him and died for him, that filled Paul with wonder: "He loved me, even me." The knowledge of that moved Paul to trust Christ and follow him gladly. The 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." That's what moved Paul to be an obedient Christian, a law abiding Christian.

Paul concludes the chapter by answering a final objection. The Judaizers, these legalizers claimed that he was annulling the grace of God by setting aside the law for faith in Christ. He wondered, "Now, how could that be?" That seems just the opposite. Grace and law are opposed to one another, but what they felt and with some justification is that the law was God's gift to Israel and it certainly was. It was a great blessing that he gave to Israel, but because it was a gift to Israel, the Jewish point of view was righteousness came through the law. That's why God gave it. His gift to us was the law so that through it, we could be saved. So by not recognizing the need for the law, Paul was making grace, that is, God's gift of the law, void. Paul rejects the charge and refutes it with irrefutable logic. "I do not nullify the grace of God" – that is, by setting the law aside – "for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly."

In other words, if obedience to the law can give a person a good standing with God, we can do this ourselves by the good things that we do, 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 offered up his Son to such a cruel death, never would have offered up His only begotten Son to be a sacrifice for us, to do for us so we can do for ourselves. But the fact that He did send His Son into this world is proof that Christ's death was necessary. It was the only way of salvation.

The logic, as I said, is irrefutable. Even so, people still pursue a course of legalism in order to earn their way into heaven, in order to win heaven. That seems,

to many people, to be a noble path – to work hard for God's approval. In fact, it's not a noble path at all. 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 begotten Son. So how can a man be just before God? That is the basic religious question. There's no more important question to ask than that one. The answer is through faith in Christ by opening one's empty hand and receiving it as a gift, trusting in Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us. If you've not done that, then look to Christ, God's Son and God's great gift to a lost race. Believe in Him.

There's a hymn that speaks of Christ's death and the righteousness that we receive for our justification. It's a hymn by Nikolaus von Zinzendorf. In the first line, he says, "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness/My beauty are, my glorious dress/Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed/With joy shall I lift up my head." That really gets to the point of this text, I think. We're clothed in Christ's righteousness, and so though we live in a world that's aflame, a world under judgment and turmoil, we can do so with confidence and joy because we're acceptable to God through Christ. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your gift, gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ, which we receive freely by faith alone as through outstretched and open empty hand. We do thank You for Your gift. We could not earn it. Because of what Your Son has done through faith, we're clothed in His righteousness and acceptable to You. We thank You for that gift, and it's in His name, we pray. Amen.