



## GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING

### The Truth of the Gospel

Galatians 2:15-16

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<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.

#### Introduction

Peter's hypocrisy in Antioch called for open rebuke because his conduct was out of step with the truth of the gospel (2:11-14). But the situation there in Antioch, as well as the crisis in Galatia, requires that Paul expound the truth of the gospel with clarity, so that no one could possibly miss it. And that is what he does in today's passage.

In fact, these two verses form a single sentence in the original. Thus, what we have here is a one sentence summary of the truth of the gospel; what we have here is the Bible's teaching on justification in a nutshell. It's a one sentence summary, therefore, of the heart and soul of the Christian faith. For these two verses answer the question of how unworthy sinners like you and me find right standing before a holy God.

This is no doubt what the Apostle Paul said to the Apostle Peter in Antioch. But this is what Paul wants the Galatians themselves to hear so he includes it in this letter. Yet the truth of these verses is what we all need to hear—and not often enough! For here's the sum of the whole matter; here's the source of life and joy and peace and an endless string of happy tomorrow's with the living God.

Friend, are you resting in the truth of these verses? Is this where you look for your hope for eternity? Is it to this truth—the truth of the gospel—that you go when you've blown it? Do you approach the trials and tests in your life steadied by the reality in these verses? Does this truth inform how you deal with your own sin? Does this truth shape how you think about other religions? Does this truth color your entire outlook on the world and other people and eternity?

Today, I'd like to expound these verses and thus the truth of the gospel by asking you three simple questions. But these questions are intended to probe the depth to which the truth of the gospel has penetrated your heart. Because that's what we all need to do: ask ourselves how firm a handle we have on the truth of the gospel.

#### **"Jews by Birth, Not Gentile Sinners" (2:15)**

The first question is really quite simple and straightforward; it's not intended to be a trick question, even though people often find it rather tricky to sort out. The question is this: *Are you relying upon who you are or what you've done for your right standing with God?* This is where

the truth of the gospel must first probe. What are you relying upon or trusting in for your standing before God?

Paul had to confront this issue head-on in Antioch because it was the implication of Peter's behavior in Antioch. By withdrawing from eating with Gentiles, Peter was sending the message that what counts is not trust in God's provision in Christ alone, but reliance upon the law and its works to secure favor with God.

Frankly, it was natural for Jews to presume upon God's favor because of who they were or what they'd done. The temptation for Jews has always been to presume upon God's grace because they possess God's law. Thus, Jews have always been able to say what Peter and the others were in effect saying in Antioch: "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners" (2:15).

You may recall that John the Baptist confronted a similar kind of presumption on the banks of the Jordan. As many of the pious Jews of the day were coming to him to be baptized, he no doubt caught them off guard when he said, "You brood of vipers!" Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt. 3:7-9). That's Jewish presumption because of possession of the law.

However, we need to understand that Jewish presumption is only *an expression of human presumption*. The tendency to presume upon the grace of God is not unique to the Jewish faith; it's endemic to fallen humanity. This is how sinful creatures cope with the reality of their sin: they deceive themselves into thinking everything's actually ok with who they are. This kind of human presumption is perhaps best captured in the title of that best-selling self-help book entitled "*I'm Ok-You're Ok*." This is the deceit of fallen humanity: to assume that I'm ok, and thus to presume that God's ok with me just as I am.

But because presumption is a human tendency, it can also be a Christian tendency and therefore show up in some very subtle ways within Christian circles. There is such a thing as Christian presumption; presuming upon the grace of God because you've taken part in some practice of the Christian faith. Perhaps the most obvious is baptism. It is a precious and biblical practice, but it's also been the source of presumption for who knows how many countless thousands, even millions, of people. I can't tell you the number of funerals I've been to where the officiating minister or priest offers hope for the deceased because of the person's baptism as an infant. Yet it's quite clear that the minister or priest can't say much meaningful about the individual's trust in Christ Jesus, so he resorts to the person's sharing in the rite of baptism, as though it were like circumcision. It's as though he's saying, "We ourselves are Christians by birth, by baptism, and not non-Christians sinners."

Now, I know very few evangelical Christians who would place that much stock in baptism. But there's an interesting variation of presumption that's cropped up in our evangelical circles, and it's the tendency to presume upon God's grace and love because of our own inherent lovability. You see, as evangelicals we tend to explain the truth of the gospel with reference to the love of God for the world. That's right and good and biblical but sometimes we do so in a way that can sound as though God were *obligated* to pour out his love upon us because, well, we're so loveable. We say things like this: "God loved you so much and wanted to be in relationship with you so badly, that he gave his own Son for you, so that you could be with him

forever.” Thus, we make it sound as if the inherent lovability of the person is what drives God to save; it’s as though God would be crazy to have not saved us because of how lovable we all are. But do you see how this actually inverts the truth of the gospel and leads to a peculiar form of Christian presumption. We’ve subtly lost sight of the fact that God shows his love for us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).

This is why we do well to remind ourselves often of who we really are in ourselves. Paul had to remind the Corinthian believers of who they were apart from Christ. After having warned them that “neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God,” he quickly hastens to add, “And such were some of you” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). It’s good to remind ourselves of who we are in ourselves and apart from Christ; especially good for those who are, if you will, Christians by birth; it’s particularly good for you to not lose sight of the fact that you are by nature a child of wrath.

Thus, just as the truth of the gospel will poke a hole in our presumption, so too it will let the air out of our own self-righteousness. For self-righteousness feeds itself on having a leg up on others because of your background or experiences or some other distinguishing quality. But the truth of the gospel levels all of that and undermines whatever basis we might think we have for smug self-satisfaction.

In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ had some rather sharp things to say to those who rested upon their own righteousness. The gospel writer Luke tells us that he told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector, “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). Perhaps you know the punch line to that parable: the tax collector went home justified, while the self-righteous Pharisee did not.

### **“The Faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (2:16a)**

Once you’ve come to terms with the first question about presumption, a second question confronts you. And the second question is this: *Are you convinced that Christ’s death is the only reliable basis of your right standing before God.*

You see, despite the fact that Paul himself is a Jew by birth and not a Gentile sinner, he nevertheless has come to recognize that there is only one reliable basis for one’s right standing with God. And it’s not Paul’s Jewish heritage or his observance of the Law; in fact, it has nothing to do with anything Paul himself has done. Instead, it has everything to do with what Jesus Christ has done. This is what Paul says in 2:16a: “yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus,” or the translation which I prefer, “through the faithfulness of Christ Jesus.”

You will notice that I have gone with a variant translation of the second part of that verse. The English Standard Version rightly, in my view, acknowledges in the footnote that this is a viable alternative translation of the original Greek expression. I go with this variation simply because I think what Paul has in mind here is the *basis* of justification, not the *means* of justification. He will speak to the means of justification in the very next clause (“so we also have believed in Christ Jesus. . .”). But right now he wants to contrast two competing bases for our justification: on the one hand, the provision of the law with its works; on the other hand, the provision of Jesus Christ and his death.

You see, through his encounter with the risen Christ, what Paul had come to realize is simply this: that righteousness or justification cannot come through the law (cf. 2:21). Why not? For the same reason the writer to the Hebrews recognized: "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:4). The provisions of the law cannot deal with the problem of sin. There's only one way to effectively deal with the problem of sin in the world and in our own lives: the death of Jesus Christ. "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus." Everything else is at best a Band-Aid, leaving us hemorrhaging all over inside.

### **"We Also Have Believed" (2:16b)**

Now, because there is only one provision that counts, there is only one response that makes sense in light of this provision. And that's the response of faith. This leads, then, to our third question: *Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your right standing before God?*

Notice the logic of Paul's train of thought in this verse. Because he knows the only provision that counts is the faithfulness of God's Son unto death, "so," he says, "we also *have believed* in Christ Jesus," in order to be justified by the provision of Christ and not by the provision of the law. Rather than relying upon the law with its works, Paul has fled to Christ Jesus for salvation from sin and condemnation.

You will notice the way I've framed this third question in terms of *trusting in Christ Jesus*, as opposed to: do you have faith in Jesus Christ? Of course, trust and faith are intended to be synonymous; but the problem is that having faith has become too easily misunderstood as something you do in your head, and not with your whole person. How often I've heard people say that they "believe in Jesus" or "have faith in Jesus," and yet there's very little evidence that they are trusting in him, relying upon him, leaning into him, clinging to him.

But there's another problem with the word faith. It's easy to start thinking that faith is a one-time thing. It's easy to slip into thinking that you come to believe in Christ Jesus for justification, but once you've gotten that over and done with, you then move onto something else. After you believe, you then get on with the rest of the business of the Christian life.

It is incredibly easy to get confused on this point. The Galatians were confused on this precise point. In fact, Paul has to upbraid them for losing sight of the fact that the way they began is the way they continue. Listen to how Paul chastises them:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (3:1-3).

These poor Galatians had done what so many Christians do: they'd gotten off to an excellent start but wound up changing their whole strategy after just a couple of laps. But when this happens, what's easily eclipsed is the precious and profound fact that believing in Christ Jesus is not only how you start out in the Christian life; it's how you continue in the Christian life as well.

Friends, the truth of the gospel is the truth of the gospel, whether you're a non-Christian or a new Christian or a seasoned Christian. The call of the gospel is always and forever the same: *trusting in Christ Jesus alone*. But the temptation is always and forever the same: to try to finish the Christian race in a way that's different than how you began the Christian race. This is why Scripture's advice is consistent:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col. 2:6-7)

In other words, you must not only embrace the truth of the gospel; you must also live in light of the truth of the gospel. Continue to return to the truth of the gospel again and again. Feed upon it each and every day. Don't ever veer off into some other truth, but bask in the glorious truth of what Jesus Christ has done for you.

### **A Shocking Gospel**

This is the gospel in a nutshell, a single sentence summary of the truth of the gospel, the heart and soul of the Christian faith. It's the kind of good news that's so good, it's shocking. Or at least it ought to be. It ought to shock us because it's so foreign to our way of thinking about the world so much of the time. For it's not ultimately about us; it's ultimately all about God's provision in Jesus Christ—his blood and righteousness.

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.

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;  
For who aught to my charge shall lay?  
Fully absolved through these I am  
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

The holy, meek, unspotted Lamb,  
Who from the Father's bosom came,  
Who died for me, e'en me to atone,  
Now for my Lord and God I own.

Lord, I believe Thy precious blood,  
Which, at the mercy seat of God,  
Forever doth for sinners plead,  
For me, e'en for my soul, was shed.

Lord, I believe were sinners more  
Than sands upon the ocean shore,  
Thou hast for all a ransom paid,  
For all a full atonement made.

Were sinners more than the sands upon the ocean shore, even then God's provision in the death of his Son Jesus Christ would be sufficient. Even then a satisfying ransom would be paid; even then a full atonement made.

Amen.

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