

Life under Law or Life with Christ

Galatians 2:15-3:5

Introduction

Paul began by introducing the troubling issue facing the churches in Galatia. False teachers, possibly from Jerusalem, were in opposition to Paul's gospel because it did not place emphasis on Jewish identity markers like circumcision and did not place enough emphasis on the observance of Torah in general. For Paul, anything that diminished the all sufficiency of Jesus as the path to relationship with God is a perverted gospel. Part of the issue Paul was facing was the opponent's attack on Paul's authority claiming he received his message from human sources. Paul responded by showing that he had not received the gospel and his accompanying authority from any human or the leaders in Jerusalem. Paul's message and authority came directly from God. In contrast to the opponent's charges, Paul had received a stamp of approval from the pillars in Jerusalem (James, Peter, and John).

Paul illustrated the troubling aspect of his opponent's message by recounting the impact it had on Peter. The opponents so pressured Peter that he related to Gentile converts differently when the opponents were present. Paul had confronted Peter for not living the gospel he preached. "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews" (2:14). Peter did not normally practice a strict Jewish lifestyle. He only did so when Paul's opponents pressured him to do so.

In the following sections, Paul specifically addressed the perverted gospel his opponents preached. Paul began in 1:15-21 with a summary of his position, in contrast to that of his opponents. What is said here is developed in more detail in 3:1-4:11. It is not Torah but "Christ who lives in me" that provides a relationship with God.

Crucified with Christ: 2:15-21

These verses are a brief statement of all that Paul will say in the rest of this letter. He began by stating his shared heritage with his opponents. He was a Jew by birth and not a pagan Gentile sinner. We should probably see some irony in "Gentile sinner."

This was the view of Paul's opponents toward Gentiles and even Gentile Christians who did not practice Jewish ritual. Paul challenged his opponents to acknowledge their own understanding that works of law did not justify them. Our English translations apparently do not accurately communicate verses 16-17. Richard Hayes gives this translation (pg. 237),

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet, knowing that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ, *even we have trusted in Christ Jesus.*

By putting their faith in Jesus ("even we have"), Paul's Jewish Christian opponents had demonstrated their understanding that justification does not come through Torah. Otherwise, they would have remained in Judaism.

There are three words or phrases that receive a great deal of scholarly conversation and are crucial to understanding verses 16-17. These words or phrases are (1) the understanding of the word group "justify," (2) Paul's understanding of "law" and "works of law," and (3) the phrase "faith in" or "faith/faithfulness of" Christ.

The word translated "just," "justified," "justification," or its equivalent is very important in Pauline theology. Its importance in this text can be seen in that it is used four times in these verses. The question is, "Does it speak of the imputation of an ethical life, or does it speak of a status of covenant relationship with God that is not determined by his/her ethical reality?" Although this word group is used in the NT to speak of a person's day-to-day conduct or righteous living, here Paul used the word in the context of covenant relationship made possible by the faithful action of God in Christ. As Hayes states (pg. 246), "Those who are rectified (justified) are claimed by God's grace as belonging to the people of God; thus 'righteousness' is virtually equivalent to covenant membership."

Comments of Onesti and Brauch in their article "*Righteousness, Righteousness of God*" in Dictionary of Paul and His Letters (pg. 828) are helpful in this discussion. "The concept of righteousness in the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the relational aspect of God and humanity in the context of a covenant." Later they state,

While the OT uses righteousness terminology in numerous contexts involving all areas of life, the touchstone of righteousness is Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh. It is based on the standard of God's covenant faithfulness. Righteousness is not primarily an ethical quality;

rather it characterizes the character or action of God who deals rightly within a covenant relationship and who established how others are to act within that relationship.

Being reckoned righteous is not about being declared something that is not true (morally righteous). “It declares (affirms) the restoration of the divine-human relationship through what Christ did by his death (Onesti and Brauch, pg. 836).” Onesti and Brauch later state,

The righteousness of God is God’s redemptive saving act. God’s saving action has always been at work, as evidenced in the OT, but has now been clearly revealed in the Christ event. For those who believe in Christ, the reality and power of sin have been put aside. God’s new created order, which is the removal of the alienation of sin, has been brought into being. To be reckoned or declared righteous is neither a juridical act nor an ontological transformation (being given the essence of God), but a state of being restored to right relationship with God because the alienating reality of sin has been set aside.

This understanding is supported by Marshall’s statement (pg. 47), “For this reason, righteousness language frequently appears in covenant making contexts, for ‘covenant’ was Israel’s term for a **committed relationship**.” Notice the words “relational,” “covenant,” and “faithfulness” in Marshall’s statement. These are some of the aspects of these words in their original context that we often miss. Hayes uses the words “rectify” or “vindicate.” God, in his faithful act in Christ rectified (set everything right that has gone wrong) the human situation.

The OT uses this word group in the prophets and Psalms to speak of the eschatological act of God in overthrowing Israel’s enemies and rescuing Israel. An example is Isaiah 50:7-8. The word in the NRSV is “vindicates.” As with the eschatological usage in the OT wherein God is the source of redemption, Paul used the passive voice when speaking of a person’s justification. The point being that righteousness is accomplished by the power of God alone. The words in 16a and 17 are in the passive voice. The recipient is not the active agent. This is the reason a person cannot be justified by law. It is the work of God.

Another important phrase is “works of the law.” Judaism was not a works righteousness religion and most Jews did not see it that way. The problem was not the Mosaic Law. Passages like Psalm 119: 25, 18, 72, 77, 97, 105 show a very positive

view of Torah. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). Paul said the law is holy, just, good, and spiritual (Rom. 7:12-14), and it was something he delighted in, in his inmost self (Rom. 7:22). Paul still circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3), worshipped in synagogues (Acts 13:14), and acknowledged the right for Jews to continue to observe Jewish holy days and foods laws (Rom 14:5-6). Jews always understood their covenant relationship with God came as a result of God's gracious election. The problem was the way some Jews had interpreted Torah, an interpretation continued by Christian Jews. Keeping Torah, especially identity markers (circumcision, Sabbath, food laws, etc.), were viewed as "badges of ethnic identity" (Hayes, pg. 239). Jews believed these identity markers gave them a superior and privileged status with God that separated them from all others, including Gentile Christians that did not practice those identity markers. Among Jewish Christians those identity markers continued to be seen as essential if there was to be community with Gentile Christians. They were also seen as essential to one's continuing relationship with God. It was a matter of honoring God. This view was highly developed during the second temple period (first and second century B.C.E.¹) when Judaism was being threatened by Greek forces and Jewish sympathizers. Many Jews wanted Judaism to move toward a Hellenistic (Greek) view of the world. Many other Jews shed their blood to maintain their distinct Jewish heritage. The identity markers even came to divide Judaism. In the days of the early church, Jewish Christians were on the verge of splitting Christianity with the same things that had already divided Judaism. Such a use of their Jewish heritage diminished the glory of the cross as the all-sufficient means of salvation and attacked God's purpose of reconciling the world not only to himself, but also to each other.

Another important and somewhat controversial expression concerns the phrase that modern translations most often translate "faith in Christ" (1:16 twice and 1:20). It can also be translated "faith/faithfulness of Christ." Verse 16a literally reads, "through (or because of) faith/faithful Jesus." The King James Version reads, "by the faith of Christ." Verse 16c literally reads, "righteousness out of faith/faithful Jesus." So, it was

¹ B.C.E. Before Common Era = B.C. Before Christ

an old understanding of the text. A comparison between Romans 3:3 and Romans 4:16 is possibly helpful. Romans 3:3 literally reads, “faith/faithfulness the God.” Romans 4:6 reads, “the out of faith/faithful Abraham. Translations recognize it is the faithfulness of God and of Abraham that is being discussed. This text could rightly be translated the same way in regards to Jesus’ faith/faithfulness.

Another indication that “faithfulness of Jesus” is the correct translation can be seen contextually when looking closely at verse 16. At the beginning and toward the end of the verse is this statement being translated “faithfulness of Jesus” (“faith in” in most translations). In between those two statements is the phrase, “we have come to trust in Jesus.” If all three statements were about our faith, it would be somewhat repetitive.

Jesus was the substitute for Israel’s lack of faithfulness. He followed the will of God all the way to the cross trusting in the Father’s promise of resurrection. The immediate context seems to support “faithfulness of Christ.” In verse 21, Paul makes a contrast between works and the death of Jesus, which is his faithfulness. “If justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” The parallel translation of verse 17 would then be “a person is not justified by works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus.” As Hayes states (pg. 240), “When all humanity had fallen away into unfaithfulness, he alone was faithful to God.” As the middle of verse 16 states, we are called to trust in the faithfulness of Jesus for our justification. The text would then read,

... we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. And we have come to trust in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faithfulness of Christ, and not by doing the works of the law....

The meaning of verses 17 and 18 is debated. It seems these two verses are much like the diatribe conversation (imaginary conversation between Paul and his opponents) that is found in much of the first half of Romans. First, Paul’s opponents charge that Paul’s understanding of justification through the faithfulness of Jesus rather than through the observance of Jewish identity markers has resulted in Jews violating Torah (“found to be sinners”) when they eat with Gentiles who do not follow Jewish food laws. This goes back to Paul’s confrontation with Peter in Antioch over his eating with

Gentiles when representatives from Jerusalem were not present. It had no doubt become a problem in Galatia. Paul then responded that the logical conclusion would be that Jesus was a table-waiter of sin (encouraging sin). The connection here to the eating issue may be found in the word translated “servant” that was often used of the servant’s role of waiting at the master’s table. Paul’s response is that such a conclusion regarding the gospel is absurd (“absolutely not”).

The gospel is designed to tear down walls of separation that Jews had created through the practice of their identity markers. See Ephesians 2:14-16. To do anything to rebuild those walls (demanding the observance of Jewish identity markers for table fellowship with Gentiles) would be the true transgression of God’s law.

One of the great statements in all of scripture is found in verses 19-21, although 19a (“through the law I died to the law.”) is admittedly difficult. As Hayes states, it would have been easier to understand if Paul had stated that through the *cross* he died to the law. A possible solution is that through the revelation Paul received concerning Jesus, Paul came to understand Torah itself pointed toward the gospel he was preaching and came to understand that the identity markers that built walls between people was against God’s purposes of reconciliation. That revelation led Paul to “die to the law.” Unlike the martyrs of the first and second century B.C.E. who died “for the sake of Torah” (4 Macc. 6:30), Paul died to the law.

Verse 20 is a great statement about a disciple’s relationship with Christ. Paul first said, “it is Christ who lives *in me*.” Paul later added the other side of the same coin. Christ not only lived in Paul, Paul lived *in Christ*. Paul’s focus here is the two statements “in me” and “in Christ.” This is another text where our modern translations incorrectly read as if Paul was talking about a disciple’s faith. The text literally reads, “And the life I now live in the flesh I live in the faith of the Son of God.” The concept of this complete intimate union with Christ is found in Romans 6 when Paul spoke of being baptized into Christ and being united with Christ. This is also seen in Galatians 3:26-27 where Paul spoke of “in Christ” and being clothed with Christ. Life is found when one finds his or herself enveloped by the faithful Son of God. Life is found in intimate relationship (Christ living in me and me living in Christ) with the faithful Son of God.

Paul so embraced every aspect of the life of Jesus that he could say, "I have been crucified with Christ." Christ had died to tear down all barriers that sin had built between God and humanity and between people. In Christ, Paul found a new life where all those boundaries had been torn down. He found life in that he could live in an unrestricted relationship with God and with others, even Gentiles. Paul had been crucified with Christ. "Having died to his old identity, and to the law that shaped that identity, Paul lived in the mysterious power of the risen Christ. This means that all his values and practices are reshaped in accordance with the identity of the crucified one (Hayes, pg. 244). Christianity is more than having our sins forgiven. It is a life where one gives up being in charge in order to be transformed by the life of Christ. It is a life based on the faithfulness of Jesus as demonstrated by his selfless love and sacrifice for others. In this context, it is a life that builds community rather than building walls.

People in Paul's day and throughout Christian history have worried that preaching grace leads to libertinism. Paul would have choked over such a notion. Paul understood the gospel as a calling to a higher standard of holy living than any law could ever generate. Christians are freed from the law which cannot justify, but they are also enslaved by their own choice to become servants of the God who loved them with an extraordinary love the world could never imagine (Rom. 6:16-18). The more someone embraces the crucified life, the more they are drawn to desire Jesus' life to become their own. See 2 Corinthians 5:14,15.

Law may keep people in line on some level, but it does not bring as deep of a devotion to God as is found when someone embraces the cross the way Paul talks about in 2:19-20.

Paul's opponents were claiming that Paul nullified the grace of God by ignoring Torah. To the contrary, Paul claimed that justification that comes through law keeping nullifies the cross of Christ. His opponents are the ones who are nullifying the grace of God by trying to add law to the gospel.

How Did You Receive the Spirit?: 3:1-5

Paul turned to the Galatians' own experience with the gospel. His words again are very bold. The Galatians had been unable to exercise spiritual discernment (they

were foolish). The word “bewitched” was a word used of someone who cast a spell with “an evil eye.” The Galatians had initially embraced the gospel Paul had preached, but they later allowed “their eyes to be glazed over as if by magic (Hayes, pg. 250).” Although they had allowed their eyes to be glazed over by the false brethren, Paul had clearly had presented the crucified Jesus to them.

He followed this opening blast with a rhetorical question. How did they receive the Spirit? They would have had to respond that they had received the Spirit of God and had continued to experience the presence of the Spirit before the false brethren came demanding circumcision and food laws. The Galatians had received the Spirit when they placed their trust in the crucified Christ. The only conclusion the Galatians then should have been able to draw was that they had no need for those works of the law to be a member of God’s family.

Conclusion

There was a real struggle in the early church. How would Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles relate to one another? Would it be according to the traditions of separatism? Would there have to be two separate churches? What role did Jesus play in salvation and in the relationship between Jew and Gentile?

For Paul, salvation is the work of God alone. It became a reality through the faithful life of Jesus who gave up his own will for the will of God and died a cruel death. In response, God raised him from the dead. The gospel offers the world the opportunity to embrace, as their own, the crucified Christ. Not only does this provide salvation apart from any works righteousness, it gives people a new identity of life based on the self-sacrificing life of Jesus. All walls between people and God have been torn down. All walls between people regardless of any differences created by this world have been torn down. Nothing needs to be added to the gospel. Jesus did pay it all. We are free to live lives of love and sacrifice for the world to the glory of God. Any other response to the gospel nullifies the cross.

Points to Be Made

1. Justification/righteousness primarily carries the thought of covenant relationship.

2. Our covenant relationship with God is based on the faithfulness of Jesus rather than on any works of law. We are called to put our trust in Jesus.
3. “Works of law” here primarily deals with Jewish identity markers (food laws, circumcision, etc.) that some Jewish Christians were promoting. These “laws” were putting up walls between Jewish and Gentile Christians.
4. The gospel is about tearing down barriers.
5. The life of a disciple of Christ (one who has been crucified with Christ) throws off all divisive identity markers and seeks for Christ to completely take up residence within them. Any contrary response to the gospel nullifies the cross.