

Crucified with Christ

Littlebourne - 12th May 2024 - Galatians 2:17-21

Last week, we heard about how Paul opposed Peter's hypocrisy, when he visited Jerusalem, as Peter was holding gentile Christians to Jewish law, despite not following much of the Jewish law himself. We have a quote of what Paul said to Peter starting in verse 14:

14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Some versions end the quote there, others continue the quote through verses 15 and 16. It's not clear where Paul stops talking to Peter and returns to addressing the recipients of the letter - punctuation wasn't invented yet. (Earliest greek punctuation dates to the 2nd century, not widespread until at the 6th.)

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 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.

Verses 15 and 16 tell us that justification - that is, to be counted righteous - is not by the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. The word for justified is δικαιοῶ (dikaioō) - to justify, vindicate, declare righteous, to put someone in a proper relationship with another, to make or render right or just.

Paul tells us that by works of the law, no one will be justified. This is the heart of the problem that Paul is addressing with the Galatians - he's going to expand on this as we go through, but this is the key to the letter - that justification is not through the law, not through anything we do, not through our efforts, but by faith in Christ. Christ alone is our way to righteousness.

But now, we meet the first potential objection to this that Paul wants to address, as he explains things. Paul gives us this objection in the form of a rhetorical question in verse 17.

v17-18

17 But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! 18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

The apparent objection is something like this: "If in our following Jesus, in finding our righteousness in Christ, rather than in the law - particularly those laws that make the Jews special and set apart - then surely we're giving up righteousness we could have had by the law. Is then Christ, by whom we ignore these aspects of the law, actually making us more sinful?"

The Judaisers at the time, the Galatian agitators and the 'men from James' that came to Jerusalem and lead even Peter and Barnabus astray, these people think that in giving up the laws, that there is an increase in sin. Surely Christ did not mean this to be the case?

Paul says 'certainly not!' In verse 18, he says that they really have it backwards - that the real lawless ones are they, who are really rebuilding the barrier between man and God.

The law is what reveals to us our sinfulness - it's a good thing, but the perverse result of sin is that the law becomes our means of misplaced self-reliance and self-confidence. It's all too easy to focus on the laws we keep, rather than the laws we break. I'm sure it was quite easy for the Jews to say that circumcision was important and that they were following God in that - but for gentile converts it would have been more painful so to speak.

But we shouldn't forget that the first and highest law is to love the Lord your God and have no other Gods before Him. True following of the law is to trust in Christ - to rest on Christ for justification and not ourselves - in short, to really treat God as God, and not elevate ourselves to such a position in thinking we can fulfill righteousness where only God can.

So the Judaisers have it backwards. The laws about food and ceremony point to something greater - they point to something, the object is Christ - but they are also a barrier when we treat them as being an object in themselves. When Christ came, these things were rightly put aside, because, to use Paul's words, when the perfect comes the partial passes away. We remember and look back to the laws of the Old Covenant, and we learn from them, but to follow them is to put our trust in law rather than in Christ.

The law

The Reformers, in the 16th century came up with the three divisions of the law and three uses of the law. I've talked here before about the three divisions, or categories of the law - moral, civil and ceremonial, but we can briefly recap that:

1. The moral law is those laws that govern basic morality, for example the ten commandments. Laws that govern morality in a way that never changes. These are laws that hold for all times and all places - it's never right to steal or to commit adultery or to worship other gods.
2. The civil or judicial law is things like how Old Testament Israel were to govern themselves - how to try criminals, how to punish wrongdoing, and other specifics that pertained to their nation. For example, they had a law about putting a parapet around the roof of your house (Deuteronomy 22:8). That law doesn't apply to us today - we don't have flat roofs, and those of us that do, don't tend to go up there. But the principle at work is found in the moral law - if you build a house, don't make it unsafe. So the balcony up there has a barrier to stop people falling off, which takes that same moral principle, some amount of 'health and safety' is in accordance with God's law (though the Old Testament doesn't mention things like paperwork or hi-vis...). The principles behind the civil law are found in the unchanging moral law, and we can learn from these civil laws, but aren't bound to them in their specifics.
3. The third category is the ceremonial law - this is things like purification rituals, like the dietary requirements that were given to Israel, like the temple sacrifices. Again, we can learn a lot from these laws about the underlying moral law - but these laws we don't follow because we have Christ. Christ is the fulfilment of the ceremonial laws, the laws about righteousness and Israel being set apart as a people. We don't need to offer temple sacrifices, because we have the true and final once for all sacrifice of Christ. We don't need to cleanse ourselves ritually, because we have been cleansed inwardly already. We don't have to set ourselves

apart with our diet or with circumcision, because we are set apart by better things now - we have Christ living within us, as Paul will shortly point out. These are predominantly the laws that are being talked about when it comes to Jews and Gentiles being different, and these are the issue for the Galatians.

The other set of threes from the reformers are the three uses of the law:

1. The law acts as a mirror. In it we see the reflection of the perfect God in the perfect rules that it gives us, and we see our own sinfulness in the light of those rules. It convicts. The law makes us guilty and ideally thus points us to Christ.
2. The second purpose of the law is to restrain evil. The law, in and of itself, cannot change a human heart. But it can serve to protect from injustice and evil in the world. It on the one hand causes guilt to deter offences, and on the other hand empowers the earthly authorities to punish wrongdoing.
3. Then the third purpose is to reveal what is pleasing to God. For the Christian, to follow God's law should be a delight - because this is what pleases God and helps us to enjoy Him. Jesus said "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

What's this got to do with Galatians? I think what Paul is saying is not that the law must be thrown away wholesale - rather that rebuilding the ceremonial aspects that Christ has fulfilled is the opposite of the moral law - those that rebuild the ceremonial things, the attempts to find righteousness in diet or circumcision or the host of things that Jews did to make themselves different from gentiles - to find righteousness there is to reject the righteousness of Christ, it's to transgress the moral law, by trusting in ourselves for salvation rather than Christ, not putting God first. So "in rebuilding what was torn down, they prove themselves transgressors."

v19-

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul explains further that it's necessary to die to the demands of the law, the demands that reveal our sin, and reveal our guilt. This is so that we might live to God.

The first two uses of the law - to show us our sin and God's righteousness, and to restrain evil by provoking guilt - these are the aspects of the law that are done away with through our freedom in Christ. No longer must we live guilty.

Paul says it of himself, but it applies to us too - we have been crucified with Christ. We have died to sin, and now our life comes from Christ. In the death of Christ on the cross, sin was dealt with.

v21

21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

If it were possible to do it ourselves, to follow the law, then Christ would not have needed to die. If the law were capable of making us righteous, then Christ's death was not required. But the problem we have is not one we can fix by following the rules - it's a problem far deeper than this.

Once in Adam, now in Christ

Paul elsewhere in the New Testament teaches us that we are by nature 'in Adam'. We're in Adam in two important ways - first by representation. He was the head of all the human race, he represented us all - our covenant head. The decisions he took, his sin, was an action that he did not just on behalf of himself, but as the responsible party for all humanity. Second, we are 'in Adam' by participation - we share in Adam's nature. We too sin just as he did. So we're caught up in Adam's sin and guilt by inheritance - original sin - and in how that sin is reproduced in our lives too.

So the answer is that we need to fix both these problems. We need to be put into another family, with another head - Christ, and we need to really participate in Christ. We need to die to Adam, and his fated line, and be born into Christ, made alive with Him.

We are in Christ by representation - He has come to be the second Adam, the last Adam, the new head of humanity that didn't sin or stumble. He roots us in righteousness, He sets us on a sure foundation. He has died the death we deserve, lived the life we should have lived and joins Himself to us now. So He's our representative.

But the second aspect as well is dealt with - participation. We are brought into participation with Christ. Paul says that it's no longer him that is living, but Christ in him. The life we live, we live in Christ. Our participation with Adam was natural, genetic, we're descended from Adam. But the participation with Christ is spiritual - it's through the indwelling Holy Spirit that unites us with Christ.

Whilst Adam has the most physical, natural descendents of all people - the whole world, it's interesting that the last Adam, Christ, has no 'natural' descendents at all. Nobody is genetically descended from Christ. The kind of participation we share with Adam is done away with - now our participation with Christ is via God Himself, through the Holy Spirit. And what a deeper participation that will be through eternity - what a connection.

Living in Christ

So like Paul, I hope we can all say:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

To sum it up - we have been crucified with Christ, we are united to Him in His death, and too have died to sin. Sin no longer is the head, but Christ is.

Then, Christ lives in us. We might not feel like we have died to sin, and lives may not reflect this reality yet. But Christ is living in us and cannot help but take effect. Christ, through the Holy Spirit is really dwelling in you, as staggering as it seems.

And we 'live by faith in the Son of God'. We live *by* Christ. We still live - being dead to sin does not mean that we lose ourselves, or become automatons, but that we find real life in Christ. He fuels our living and we really live and become more like Christ, more like life and goodness itself.

But our life in Christ starts at the end of this sentence - He loved us and gave Himself for us. This is the foundation on which all Christian living rests.