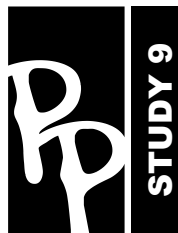


DEAD TO THE LAW

ALIVE IN CHRIST



Galatians 2:15-21

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Two suggestions of what could be preached on from these verses:
 - A. I do not set aside the grace of God
 - B. I am crucified with Christ
- 📁 Focus Point: Further notes on justification
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

It is not clear at what verse the record of Paul's public rebuke of Peter actually ends. In verse 14 Paul uses the word "you". Some therefore suggest that only verse 14 was addressed to Peter. In verse 15 the pronoun changes to "we". However, in verse 18 the pronoun changes to "I" from the "we" of verse 17. Others therefore suggest that Paul's rebuke to Peter is recorded in verses 14 – 17.

Chapter 3 begins "You foolish Galatians". This perhaps suggests that Paul's argument with Peter goes from verses 14 – 21 of chapter 2. Whether addressed to Peter or to the Galatians, this whole section (verses 14 – 21) does expose and answer Peter's error.

What these verses mean

Verse 15

"We who are Jews by birth

Paul is now introducing the subject of the law. ¹ (See page 2 for footnote) He does so by emphasising a distinction between *Jews by birth* and *Gentile sinners*. He is addressing the Jewish believers - they are Jews both by birth and upbringing. To them it was second nature to

revere and observe the law of Moses. It was part of their heritage and culture.

and not 'Gentile sinners'

The Jews often regarded Gentiles as ceremonially unclean and forsaken of God, not having his laws given through Moses. This word *sinners* was used by the Jews as a name for Gentiles. Compare Matthew 26:45 with Luke 18:32. Paul is using the phrase *Gentile sinners* in this ironic way; i.e. "As for us, we are Jews by nature and so think ourselves better than Gentiles". The word *sinner* used here therefore means a transgressor of the law of Moses and is not used in its primary sense that all men are sinners (Rom.3:23). The use of the two terms *Jews by birth* and *Gentile sinners* is directing our attention to the law of Moses, which the Jews obeyed and the Gentiles did not.

Verse 16

know that a man is not justified by observing the law,

i.e. "Even though we Jews had every religious benefit – God's laws, the tabernacle, prophets, etc. – even we found we could not live as perfect people and so earn our salvation from God by the merit of our works." Paul is challenging Peter! Gentiles cannot be taught that *they* must earn salvation by faultless obedience to laws, for even the greatly favoured Jews failed to do so.

but by faith in Jesus Christ.

There is only one way that a person can be justified and that is by trusting in Christ's atoning work for their sin on the cross. It applies to both Jew and Gentile; there is no difference.

So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ

"To be justified" means that God takes away from us the guilt and penalty of our sin (by giving it to Christ to atone for) and gives to us the perfection of Christ's life. "By faith" does not mean that God justifies

¹ The word Law can be used in different ways. In the New Testament the word can mean:

1. Old Testament Scripture (1 Co.14:21)
2. The Law of Moses given on Mount Sinai (3:17)
3. Civil Law, e.g. marriage (Rom.7:2)
4. Conscience (Rom.2:14)
5. An internal principle or power, such as the law of sin (Rom.7:23)
6. The Law of Christ (6:2)

The law in Galatians usually signifies the Law of Moses. This body of law was given to Israel at Mount Sinai and includes the Ten Commandments. (Ex. chapters 19-31 and 34:1-28) The law is presented in Scripture as a Covenant between God and Israel. (Ex.24:4,7)

Free in Christ, Edgar H. Andrews

us as a reward for our belief, but means that faith is the way by which Christ's perfect righteousness becomes ours.

and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no-one will be justified.

Paul is quoting here from Psalm 143:2 in order to confirm his own previous statement (verse 15). There is a progression in his arguments:

No man or woman has ever been justified by human efforts
(verse 15)

Even we Jews could not be so justified
(verse 15)

Scripture has always taught that self-justification is
impossible to anyone
(verse 16)

Verse 17

If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners,

People who look to Christ for their justification (i.e. through faith) are turning their back upon the law (i.e. through works). They therefore find themselves behaving like Gentiles rather than Jews in that they are not putting themselves under the law of Moses. In traditional Jewish eyes they are classified as sinners because they do not put their effort into keeping the law of Moses. The consequence of justification by faith is that followers of Christ are found to be sinners. They are like Gentiles who ignore the law.

does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!

Shall we blame Christ, then, for causing us to give up keeping the law as a way of earning merit? Is it Christ who made us sinners like the Gentiles? Certainly not! To reject the law may make followers of Christ to be sinners in the eyes of the Jews but in God's sight they are doing the right thing. Christ is not promoting sin but righteousness. This righteousness can only be gained by abandoning the law (because it is impossible for a person to keep it in its completeness) and relying upon faith.

Verse 18

If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a law-breaker.

It is not a sin to cease from keeping the law because God has given us full salvation in Christ. But if we return to law-keeping and reject the salvation through Christ alone, we make ourselves sinners in God's

eyes. Paul is showing Peter how serious was his error of turning back to Old Testament ceremonies after Christ had fulfilled them all; i.e. "We must not rebuild what has been destroyed." The Greek word used here for law-breaker is different from that used in verses 15 and 17. **This** word literally means "one who steps aside from" or "misses the meaning of". The law is fulfilled by Christ. It was a temporary Old Testament dispensation.² So, to go back to it after Christ is to miss the significance of it.

Verse 19

For through the law I died to the law

The climax to Paul's argument is reached in verse 19. The following verses, 20 and 21, will further expand what he is to say now. Paul is describing the Christian's relationship to the law of Moses. He makes it very clear by using the description of death. There is nothing so final as death. When a person dies, his relationship to his surroundings is finished. There is no relationship, the person is gone. In this way Paul is describing the Christian's relationship to the law. The law represents a way that is impossible for a human being to achieve salvation because it demands total obedience, in every detail and at all times. By trusting in Christ for salvation, that person finds that the way of the law is no longer valid. He is dead to it.

so that I might live for God.

Paul writes about this same subject in his letter to the Romans.³ There he is using the illustration of a woman whose first husband dies and then she remarries. The first husband is dead. While he was alive the law required them to be together; she was not free to marry someone else. Now the husband is dead, that law does not bind the woman and she is free. That is the picture for the believer (woman) in that the law (first husband) is dead and the Christian is no longer subject to that law. Instead a new relationship has been formed through the marriage of the believer to Christ. The old relationship was dependent upon the physical (outward behaviour to the law) whilst the new is spiritual (trusting by faith). Our old relationship is dissolved so that we can live spiritually; in other words, live for God. Paul develops the whole

² Dispensation. The original Greek connected verb means to manage, regulate, administer, and plan the affairs of the household. In this sense it is the plan of salvation being accomplished by God in this world and the law of Moses had a significant part in it which people had to administer until the next phase of the plan came into being.

³ Romans chapter 7:1-6

subject of how this spiritual relationship with God works out in a practical way in chapter 5, where he talks about the fruit of the Spirit.

Verse 20

I have been crucified with Christ

Paul develops further what this new spiritual relationship (marriage) means. A marriage relationship is a union of two people where their love, experiences and possessions are shared. The Christian believer died with Christ on the cross. Christ took the place of that guilty person, but it was the person's sin that had to be punished. Something belonging to that person was the cause for Jesus Christ to be crucified, so that person was intimately involved in Christ's death and then his resurrection.

and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

The Christian believer's relationship with Christ is not just based on Jesus taking the place of the person on the cross to have that person's sins punished. If that were the only thing that happened then it would leave the person unchanged. The believer's union in Christ means that person is not only legally righteous but an inward change has taken place. The Christian is associated with Christ in death (crucified with him) and it follows that he is associated with Christ in his resurrection (see also Romans 6:4-5). The old sinful nature died with Christ, a cleansing process took place (Titus 3:6), to make way for Christ to live in the believer by the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:9). Now after his conversion it is the Spirit of the risen Christ that motivates and guides Paul's actions. He cannot return to being motivated by the need to keep laws as a way of life.

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

By body Paul means *this natural life*. His new life as a believer is not limited to the ideas and facts of this natural life, but is directed by the ideas and desires of the spiritual life which is derived from Christ by faith. The Holy Spirit then lives within the believer enabling that person to use the faith which has been given to him as a gift, to have the ability to recognise spiritual realities. The life of faith is one that is lived looking to Jesus Christ in all matters, being dependent upon the inner strength of the Holy Spirit. This is so different from trying to please God by keeping the law.

Verse 21

I do not set aside the grace of God,

Paul now summarises. To seek righteousness through the law is to set aside the grace of God. Peter, by returning to law-keeping as necessary

to salvation (verse 12) was, in effect, saying that God's grace was not itself enough to save. Compare Galatians 5:4.

for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

If it is possible for people to keep God's law perfectly and so gain acceptance with God, then there was no need for Christ to have died to redeem them, for they would have redeemed themselves!



Summary

Paul in this section of the letter introduces the law. The law was important for the Jewish person as it represented a covenant between God and Israel. In the law, God made provision for the forgiveness and reconciliation of those who sinned. The law was a temporary arrangement, which was in place until Christ came to the earth. The law was there to show that a holy God must be obeyed and how man could not keep it. Jesus Christ came to earth so that what the law required, punishment of sin by death, could be fully met. Christ died but rose from the dead, showing that his sacrifice was accepted by God and his law was satisfied. The law is not the way to salvation, because it is impossible for man to keep it, but it did show how a substitute could atone for sin through the shedding of blood. Christ did this when he was crucified and the only way to be reconciled with God is through associating with Jesus Christ and being united with him in his death and resurrection. The Jews no longer could rely on the law and so these teachers, who had come amongst the Galatian believers were totally wrong. Peter's example too was wrong, because he slipped back into the old way, even though he did not intend to or may not have fully realised he was doing so.



Two suggestions of what you could be preached on from these verses

A. I do not set aside the grace of God. (Galatians 2:21)

Introduction

To "set aside" means to displace, to reckon of no value. Because it is the grace of so great a Person as God, to regard it as of no value is a great

sin indeed. “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (Heb. 2:3).

Main points that could be developed

When the grace of God is carelessly neglected, it is despised. Often people hear and ignore the message of God’s grace . God can say concerning such people: “They will not so much as think about my message to them.” If what we hear of God’s Word does not become part of our personal meditation, then we are receiving the grace of God in vain.

When people do not see their absolute need of God’s grace, it is despised. The natural man always has this dream, that he can be right with God by some other way than God’s grace to him. He will not accept God’s grace as being indispensable to him. Compare Luke 18: 10 – 14.

When people do not accept that God’s grace must supply **all** their needs, then it is despised. It is not that God graciously gives new life and then leaves the believer to get himself to heaven. Salvation is God’s gracious gift; so it is our justification, our adoption, our preservation, our glorification. Indeed, even in heaven we shall be still learning how much we depend on God’s grace (Eph.2:7). We never get beyond the need for it!

Conclusion

The good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ’s coming to this earth to save his people from their sin is God’s gracious act to human beings. This is his grace, his love which we do not deserve. If we hear this gospel and do not believe it, then it will have been in vain for us to hear it.

B. I am crucified with Christ. (Galatians 2:20)

Introduction

The theological meaning of this is that the believer is united to Christ, in God’s sight, so that all the merits of Christ belong to the believer and Christ takes all the demerits of the believer and atones for him.

Main points that could be developed

In practical terms, to be crucified means:

The believer is compelled to face one direction only

There can be no going back to former ways

There can be no further personal plans to behave as we like.

Conclusion.

People who are united to Christ are changed, their values have changed. They no longer look to themselves but to Christ; he is everything to

them now. To the believing Christian, Jesus’ death on the cross is the way that their own sins were dealt with and punished by God. They had nothing to do with their own salvation; it was Jesus who sacrificed his own life. The death of Jesus is what matters and the cross becomes the symbol that stands for Christ’s work of atonement for the sinner. Hence, Paul can do nothing except boast in the cross of Jesus Christ (6:14).



Focus Point:

Further notes on justification

There is an important word that occurs for the first time in Galatians, in the verse studied in this paper. It is an important word because it describes what is the centre of the gospel message, the central theme of Galatians and the heart of true Christianity. No-one understands Christianity who does not understand this word! It is the word “justified” (verses 16,17).

Martin Luther said: “Justification is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually . . . if the article of justification be once lost, then is all true Christianity lost.”

There are two things we know for certain. The first is that God is righteous; the second is that we are not! These two facts comprise our human predicament (2 Corinthians 6:14 “Do not be yoked together” and “What fellowship can light have with darkness?”). How then can sinners be justified and be in harmony with God?

There are two answers given to this question. One is: “The way to be justified in God’s sight is by sheer hard work. You must do everything God commands and refrain from everything he forbids.” Supremely, for the Jews, this meant faultless observance of the Ten Commandments.

Such thinking is seriously mistaken. No-one has ever been justified by works, for the simple reason that no-one has ever kept any laws faultlessly. Yet millions in the world are still today deceived, in every religion, trying by their own efforts to live by perfect law-keeping! Paul says it is impossible to keep any laws perfectly (verse 16).

The second answer to the question of how to be justified is: “By faith in Jesus Christ” (verse 16). That means committing oneself to depend

entirely on the life and death of Jesus Christ as the only reason for God to forgive us. No-one except Jesus Christ has done faultlessly everything that God required of him. No-one so perfect as Jesus Christ has ever given his life as a sacrifice for sinners. When we cease from trying to justify ourselves and call on Christ to receive us mercifully, then God graciously declares us to be justified (Rom. 3:24).

This truth of justification freely by God's grace through faith was criticised in Paul's day. Critics said: "If God justifies sinners so easily, what is the point of being good? Can we not live as we like?" Paul's answer to that is: "Absolutely not!" (verse 17).

Justification takes place by our being united to Christ by faith. Believers who are united to Christ will never be the same again. Now they have the life of Christ in them by the Holy Spirit (verse 20). They cannot now live carelessly and sinfully.

It is **not** a noble thing to try and win our own way to God. To attempt to do that is to refuse to let God be gracious to us. It is to say that Christ need not have died. Can there be a greater sin than to insult God in these ways, by declaring to him that what he has done is unnecessary (verse 21)?



Over to you

As we conclude chapter 2 in Galatians, consider on what basis you had thought yourself a Christian. Was there any tendency to observe a set of rules rather than to trust in Jesus Christ and nothing else?

In what way do people in your congregation/church think themselves Christians? Do they look to what they have done themselves or what Jesus achieved when he died on the cross and then rose from the dead?

In considering the above two points, write down a short outline of the way you would explain the gospel to a person in your congregation.