

Galatians 2:18-21

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/gal/gal-2/galatians-218-21/>

We are dead to the law because we have spiritually died with Christ, and have been given a new life to live, where Christ lives through us. But if we rebuild the law, we create failure for ourselves, because we are seeking to add to the free gift of God's grace. This new life is a life of continued faith in Jesus, not in obeying the law.

This section completes Paul's speech condemning Peter for his hypocrisy in excluding/rejecting the Gentile believers in Antioch. Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles, and implied that they needed to be circumcised and obey the Jewish religious rules. What happens if we sin while *seeking to be justified in Christ*? We sin. We sin because we break rules that Jesus set us free from, but we rebuilt. Perhaps Paul also reminded Peter of the words he spoke at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, where he stated clearly that both Jews and Gentiles are saved the same way: by grace through faith in Jesus.

Paul is recounting this episode for his disciples in Galatia not to embarrass Peter, or to elevate himself above Peter. He is telling them that he has stood up against the false teaching of the competing Jewish "authorities" before, and that even included the most immanent Apostle, Peter.

Since the Jerusalem council issued a letter agreeing with Paul, one might ask why Paul didn't just refer to that letter as a concurring authority. Perhaps it is because Paul wants to orient the Galatians away from any authority of man and to the authority of Jesus Himself. This is consistent with Paul's teaching that the only true head of the Body of Christ is Jesus. It seems likely this would be because the competing Jewish "authorities" are claiming their authority comes from Jerusalem in some manner, as with the "authorities" who led Peter astray in Antioch.

It is encouraging as well as sobering to realize the ways in which Paul is accusing Peter. Paul shows that Peter is seeking to be justified by things that add to faith in Jesus, discarding faith in Jesus as the only agent that can justify us before God. Peter is rebuilding the law from which we have been delivered, to the end that he will once again make himself a transgressor of the law. This is the great Apostle Peter! On the one hand, it is greatly encouraging, because Peter lived a great life testifying of Jesus, even though it is clear he continued to make mistakes. But it is sobering, because it means no matter how spiritual we might become, we can be lured into following men instead of depending upon Jesus.

We are not told Peter's response to Paul. Paul does not finish his speech to Peter by telling us Peter's reaction. Instead, Paul testifies how we ought to live. We ought not to live by seeking to be justified. We are already justified before God. Anyone who has believed on Jesus is justified in the sight of God. John 3:14-16 tells us that we only need the amount of faith the Israelites exercised when they looked at the serpent in the wilderness, hoping to be healed of the poison in their bodies. Similarly, when we realize we have the poison of sin in our bodies, and look at Jesus, who was also lifted up, and trust He will heal us, then we will be healed, which means we are justified in the sight of God. But that is just the beginning of our new life. Being justified in

the sight of God gives us a new birth and makes us a new creation (Gal 6:15). So how should we live, having been justified?

Paul attests to the resurrection power of believing in Jesus. Paul considers himself dead to the law because he has *been crucified with Christ*, meaning his old life is gone, and in a sense, *it is no longer Paul who lives, but Christ lives in him*. Seeking to be justified is silly (because we are already justified) and leads to failure. It makes a lot more sense to walk in the resurrection power of Jesus.

Before believing in Jesus, Paul was a sinner apart from God; after “dying” with Christ, Paul has been given a new life to live, which is the resurrection life of Christ. This is the position of all believers; we were once dead, but now are called to live like Christ, *For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (3:27)*.

Paul expounds on this further, *the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God*. Again, in condemning Peter’s hypocrisy, Paul is explaining that while Peter has reverted to being concerned with obeying the law, the life that Paul lives is by faith in Jesus. This is the theme of Paul’s gospel; in the letter to the Romans, he writes, *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith.”* (Romans 1:17). Our new life in Christ begins by faith, and is continued in faith. The law plays no part in giving us the power to live the resurrection life of Jesus through faith.

Paul lives this new life by faith in Jesus, *who loved and gave Himself up* for Paul. Therefore, Paul does not *nullify the grace of God*, he does not ignore it or reject it. The grace of God is the foundation of our faith. We did not deserve His favor. God grants His grace, or favor, freely upon all who believe, to Jew and Gentile alike. Paul embraces God’s grace, which means, by implication, the competing Jewish “authorities” and law-followers ignore God’s grace. Rather than resting in the love of Jesus, they are *seeking to be justified*.

Paul makes this point with an incredibly clear final remark, *if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly*. If we can be justified before God by obeying the law, there was absolutely no reason for Jesus to die for our sins. But the whole foundation of our faith is Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is the beginning, when we are justified before God and given a new birth. And it is the power to live the resurrection life of Jesus in our daily faith walk.

Biblical Text

¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”