

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	16		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 2:15-21		
Date:	July 23, 2017 (a.m.)		

SOLA FIDE

“True theology,” declared the Puritan giant John Owen, “is, in a sense, gospel theology.”¹ This is the same emphasis that the Protestant Reformation sought to capture by the language *Sola Fide* (salvation is through faith *only* and is not something we work for); *Sola Gratia* (salvation is by God’s free grace *only* and is not something we earn or merit); *Solo Christo* (salvation is by *only* Christ, the God-man, and there is no need or room for *any* other mediatorial agent, e.g., priest, saints, the Virgin Mary); *Sola Scriptura* (the Scriptures and *only* the Scriptures possess divine authority; and unbiblical doctrines like purgatory, indulgences, and the papacy, which are the products of tradition, have no divine authorization); *Soli Deo Gloria* (all praise for salvation is ascribed to God *only* without *any* credit given to us). Where Rome had taught (and *still* teaches) a piecemeal salvation, to be *gained* by stages through working a sacramental treadmill, the Reformers, in the words of J. I. Packer, “proclaimed a unitary salvation, to be received in its entirety here and now by self-abandoning faith in God’s promise, and in the God and the Christ of the promise, as set forth in the pages of the Bible.”²

In the passage before us, we meet for the first time in this epistle the word *to justify* (it appears three times in verse 16 and again in verse 17). The noun form (righteousness) occurs in verse 21.

SUMMARY: Paul has narrated his confrontation with the Apostle Peter in order to show why he had to withstand Peter to his face in public. The nature of the grace of the gospel was at stake. Chapter 2:15-21 is to be seen as a continuation of Paul’s confrontation with Peter. The argument is an appeal to Peter directly.

I. THE DECLARATION: JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ONLY. “The Christian faith,” writes Donald Guthrie, “is an intelligent faith, and there are certain fundamental facets which must be known by all believers. The content of knowledge here is Paul’s theme not only through most of this epistle, but also in the Epistle to the Romans.”³

A. *The Proposition* (2:15-16b). The word *to justify* ΔΙΚΑΙΩΩ does not mean “to make righteous,” but “to declare righteous.” Peter Stuhlmacher provides this helpful summary: “When the verb ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥΝ ‘to justify,’ is used in the active voice, it designates God’s act of justification (cf. Gal. 3:8; Rom. 3:26, 30; 4:5; 8:30, 33). The passive ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥΣΘΑΙ, ‘to be justified,’ usually means in Paul the acceptance that is extended to or withheld from humans in the judgment (cf. Gal. 2:16-17; 3:11, 24; Rom. 2:13; 3:20, 24, 28). However, the passive ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥΣΘΑΙ also occurs once for the acknowledgement that sinners must pay the just God in the final judgment (cf. Rom. 3:5 with Ps. 51:4). The expression ‘to reckon as righteousness’ (ΛΟΓΙΖΕΣΘΑΙ ΕΙΣ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗΝ) describes the acknowledgement of righteous deeds in the final judgment by God (cf. Gal. 3:6; Rom. 4:3-5 with Gen. 15:6), while the noun ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ in Romans 4:25 and 5:18 stands for the process and result of the

justification carried out by God. In typical Jewish manner, Paul talks about the righteousness of God ‘synthetically.’ He uses it to designate God’s own creative and saving activity (e.g., Rom. 3:5, 25-26) as well as the grace gift of righteousness in which believers share (e.g., Rom. 3:22; 2 Cor. 5:21).⁴ To make righteous in the sense that the Roman Catholic Church teaches (infused not imputed) is contrary to the meaning that Paul insists upon. Romans 3:4 speaks of God being justified, which cannot mean “made righteous,” but “declared righteous.” God, we are told, justifies the “unrighteous,” or “ungodly.” On what grounds? Upon the basis of the merits of Christ’s death. The sinner’s debts to God have been fully discharged by Christ’s satisfaction on the cross. He *assumes* liability for the sins of His people. Their sins are *reckoned* or imputed to Him, and His righteousness is reckoned or imputed to them. Justification is the opposite of condemnation and is a legal term taken from the law courts. To be condemned is to be declared guilty (cf. Deut. 25:1; Proverbs 17:15). To be justified is to be declared righteous (Romans 2:13; 3:4). Note the language of Romans 8:33: *Who is he that shall condemn? It is God that justifies.* “Justification and condemnation are opposites; every one is under condemnation that is not justified; and every justified man is freed from condemnation.”⁵

- B. ***The Proof*** (2:16c). Paul’s proof is found in Scripture (Psalm 143:2). The *final* clause of verse 16 is the *causal* clause and confirms Paul’s point.

II. THE INTERROGATION: DOES THIS MAKE CHRIST THE MINISTER OF SIN?

- A. ***The Problem*** (2:17a-c). If Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith only is true, then in the eyes of his Jewish opponents, he has put himself effectively on a level with those lawless and sinful Gentiles.
- B. ***The Rebuttal*** (2:17d-18). *Absolutely not!* (literally, may it not come to be) is Paul’s quick response. A person, he argues, does not sin by seeking justification in Christ. Remember, this line of reasoning is taking place with *Peter*. Paul is saying to Peter that, if by your example in refusing to eat with Gentile Christians you give them the impression that the Law is necessary for salvation (which when you trusted Christ you rejected), then you confess that it was wrong to set aside the Law and that Christ, who led you to set aside the Law, was actually your helper in the matter! The point Paul is making is this: I do not commit sin by seeking justification in Christ. Just the opposite is true. If I actually build up again those statutes of the Law, the very ones which have been done away with by Christ’s death, then by doing so, I show myself to be a transgressor. That is what Peter was doing by his vacillating conduct in the Church in Antioch.

III. THE EXPOSITION: JUSTIFICATION AND PAUL’S OWN EXPERIENCE. In verse 19, the argument is continued. Paul draws upon his own experience to rebut the accusation that justification by faith in Christ alone cannot be a ministering of sin.

- A. ***The Mosaic Law and Life*** (2:19). To go back to the Law (as Peter was apparently doing) is to be *alive* to the Law. Paul, on the other hand, declares that he is done with the Law and is therefore dead to it. The Law has not died, but Paul has died to it in the death of his substitute. No master can give orders to a dead slave!
- B. ***The Law, the Cross, and Life*** (2:20). The thought of *participation* with Christ, his representative, is now accented. The language points *back* to the redemptive act of Christ. He bore the penalty of God’s Law in our place. His death becomes Paul’s death, and His life becomes Paul’s life. Paul is reaffirming here what he had stated in

1:4. In the voluntary, penal, and substitutionary atoning sacrifice by Jesus Christ, believers are united with the Son of God. He died our death, and we share in His death and life.

- C. *The Mosaic Law and Grace* (2:21). If the possibility of salvation could be attained by law, then the cross is rendered needless. Listen to Luther: “Either Christ died in vain, or else the Law justifieth not. But Christ died not in vain, therefore the Law justifieth not.”⁶

CONCLUSION: Paul’s primary emphasis is this: nothing but the grace of God in the cross of Christ can save the sinner, but because we are born merit-mongers, there is nothing more unpleasing to sinners than this grace! We still must beware of this gospel-denying tendency today. If we say that salvation comes by character, or by our love for God, or by making Christ the Lord and Master of our life, or that salvation comes by making a complete surrender – these are, as Machen saw so clearly, “just differing forms of the one central error which seeks salvation in human merit, and they all alike come under the condemnation of Paul’s tremendous polemic in the Epistle to the Galatians.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria Publication, 1994), p. 593.

²J. I. Packer, “The Reformed Doctrine of Justification” in *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology. A Festschrift for John H. Gerstner*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976), p. 12.

³D. Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 87. “Justification does not proceed from faith any more than works, but it is appropriated by faith.”

⁴P. Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to The New Perspective* (IVP 2001) p. 20.

⁵*The Works of Robert Trail*, IV (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 162.

⁶Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (rpt. James Clark, 1972), p. 183.

⁷*Machen’s Notes on Galatians*, ed. J. Skilton (Presbyterians & Reformed, 1973), p. 156.