

Reading: Galatians 2:17-21

But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is 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. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Preaching notes:

Although a short section of scripture with just 5 verses, they represent a hugely significant contribution to our understanding of what our faith in Jesus Christ is for and why we cannot ever rely on anything other than Jesus for our salvation. This letter, to the churches of Galatia, is all about the apostle Paul giving a well-reasoned argument why it can only be a full reliance and trust in Jesus from which salvation can be received. Often it is in defence of a cherished truth that is being destabilised by others, that a coherent, well-reasoned argument emerges.

The Gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ is a transformational body of writing, it cry's out transformation! His coming, His ministry among us, His death and resurrection and the coming of God's Holy Spirit are all transformational events that cannot be ignored, understated or misunderstood. Paul is explaining in clear terms that salvation is from faith in Jesus alone. Justification is a legal term and its meaning is best explained by saying that it is the exact opposite to condemnation, therefore to state, "I am justified in Christ" means, "I am found innocent of sin because of my faith in Jesus". Hence we have what Martin Luther, the great 16th Century Protestant reformer stated as "the most principal and special article of Christian doctrine (set of beliefs) for it is this which maketh true Christians indeed". I have heard it explained to me and I offer it to you that "justification" can be thought of as "just-as-if-I-had-never-sinned" and perhaps that is helpful, as are the terms: "innocent" or "not guilty". However, we have sinned, we are guilty, we are undeserving of salvation, even the best of us are unworthy. This is the very reason why a nominal and outward expression of belief, without a complete inner change is not sufficient. The death that Christ died 2,000 years ago, was for me and for you, so that we can be justified in Him, to be found not "in Him", is to miss the mark. It is not by adhering to a set of rules (the law) or "going through the motions" and hoping that God does not notice that your heart is not changed. "I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" results in a completely changed life, it's not just the old you but slightly nicer and busy on Sunday mornings.

Chuck Swindell explains "when Christ died on the cross (literally), we also died (figurately) to the old way of living". The argument of the Judaizers then and now (the modern version being self-righteousness) was: "that's a licence to sin, thinking that God will always forgive, means you keep breaking the rules". Christ achieves in us what the law never could, an inner change that removes the desire to sin replacing it with a desire for holiness, for peace

and for love of the other above yourself. We need do nothing other than “be born again” (John 3:3) and accept and affirm that it is God’s grace, in Christ Jesus, offered to each of us that achieves the new life.

Amen