



DON'T DISMISS GOD'S GRACE

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Galatians 2:11-21

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

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"The Little Engine That Could" is the story of a little engine that was loaded with toys and goodies for the boys and girls on the other side of the mountain. The train chugged up the hill and broke down. It was deeply disappointed for the children who now wouldn't get the goodies. Along came a sleek passenger train that was much too busy to stop and give any help. A freight engine came along with a lot of weighty matters on its mind. An old rusty train that could hardly move came by, and he said he couldn't help. People thought there was no hope to help the boys and girls get those goodies. Finally, a little blue train came along and said he thought he could help. The first train emptied all its goodies onto the little blue train and it went on its way up the hill. You know the refrain it made as it struggled all the way up the hill until it reached the top, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." And it did! And all the way down it said, "I thought I could, I thought I could."

I don't want take away from the beauty of that classic little work, but along with all the wonderful things it communicates, it also perpetuates the myth that the possible we do immediately, while the impossible takes a little bit longer.

Part of the American dream is that, given enough time and energy, people can get everything that they aspire to done in life. But we soon awaken from that dream. We cannot change certain things in our character. We run into an irresistible force that we cannot deal with. We wonder how to handle the passions and lusts and urges that surge within us. Fear and anger dominate us. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

But the glory of Christianity, the glory of the gospel of the grace of God, is that it changes people. In fact, the gospel is the only thing that can change lives. Trying harder just doesn't work. That is the message that the apostle Paul brings before us in his letter to the Galatians.

The passage to which we come this morning begins by describing a tense scene.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But

when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? (Galatians 2:11-14 NASB)

Here we have two leading apostles going head to head over an issue. These two men of God, both indwelt by the Holy Spirit, both specially called and commissioned by Jesus Christ himself, had been greatly used by God. The book of Acts is actually divided around them. The first half of the book tells the story of Peter, the apostle to the Jews; the second half tells the story of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. And yet, here they are in opposition to each other.

This incident took place during one of Peter's visits to Antioch, a Gentile city. Acts 11 records that when the disciples were scattered out of Jerusalem, because of the persecution (in which Paul played a large part during his pre-conversion days), some believers went to Antioch and began to preach there, with the result that a great many of the Greeks turned to the Lord.

The source of the conflict was these Judaizers, whom we have already met. These legalists came from Jerusalem, claiming to have been sent from James, although James denies that in Acts 15. They wanted to put an end to the freedom that these new Galatian believers were enjoying, so they were making additions to the message of grace. They said that it was all right to believe in Christ, but one had to be circumcised to be saved.

They went even further here, saying that it was improper for circumcised Jewish believers to eat with uncircumcised Gentile believers. Arriving in Antioch, they observed Peter hanging around with Gentiles and dining with them. The things he was eating bothered them too. He was enjoying bbq ribs, blts and shrimp with the Gentile believers. The verb tense in verse 12 implies that this was Peter's habit. He regularly enjoyed table fellowship with Gentiles. They probably shared the Lord's Supper together. All of Peter's old Jewish scruples had been overcome.

Only a short time earlier Peter had a direct revelation from God on this very topic (Acts 10-11). On his rooftop one day, Peter fell into a trance and saw a sheet coming down from heaven containing a smorgasbord of unclean animals. A voice said, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat" (Acts 10:13). When he objected, the voice told him, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean."

The vision was repeated three times for emphasis. Peter concluded from the vision that God shows no partiality. Gentiles are welcomed on an equal basis. So he knew better. But when these Judaizers saw him enjoying this new freedom, they rebuked him. Peter began to withdraw, not out of conviction, but fear. On this particular occasion he was a people pleaser.

If this serious issue was not confronted, Paul saw that there would be a permanent schism in the church. There would have to be separate tables for Jews and Gentiles. And because Peter was a leader and had sinned in public, Paul exposed his sin in public. He had to speak to Peter in front of everyone, because his sin had affected everyone. In this particular case it had even affected Barnabas—steady, mature Barnabas, Paul's right hand man, the troubleshooter who was sent into difficult situations. Others in the church were being swept away by this hypocrisy.

What follows here is a summary of Paul's rebuke to Peter. In these verses Paul begins to explain this marvelous doctrine of justification by faith, the good news that sinful men and women are accepted by God, not because of their goodness and effort, but through trust in Jesus Christ. This is the first time that Paul uses that word justified. It is used five times in this passage, four times as a verb and once as a noun. This word may be the most important term in the letter. It is the heart of Paul's gospel. It is the heart of Christianity, and understanding it is critical to the faith.

John Stott has this to say about the word: "Justification is a legal term, borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of condemnation. To condemn is to declare someone guilty; to justify is to declare him not guilty, innocent or righteous. In the Bible it refers to God's act of unmerited favor by which he puts a sinner right with himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting him and treating him as righteous."¹

While we don't use this word very often, we are familiar with it. We "justify" our checking account each month when we balance it to match the balance from the bank statement. There are two truths that all of us know. The first is that God is holy; the second is that we are not. That has been the problem since the beginning. How can we live with those two facts? There is an old saying that there are two things that no one can look at in the eye and not go crazy—the glory of God and the evil of humanity. That is our human predicament.

There is something wrong between God and man. Instead of harmony there is friction. And the question we ask ourselves in the 21st century is the same one that Bildad the Shuite asked centuries ago in the book of Job, "How then can a man be righteous before God?" (Job 25:4). Paul might phrase it, "How can a condemned sinner be justified?" The apostle answers that question in this paragraph, declaring that justification by faith is the only answer.

People go to enormous ends to justify themselves. Some try to do away with God. They try to get him out of the picture so that they don't have to worry about his holiness. Others try to change their view of God, making him less than holy. That's what the Greeks did. They tried to bring God down to their level, portraying the gods as lusty, passion-filled, corrupted people just like themselves. Like the Wizard of Oz, God looks fearsome on the outside, but inside he is just as flawed as everyone else. Others think of God as a good sport, a Santa Claus. They say that one of these days when we stand before him, he will say, "Well, boys will be boys and girls will be girls," and he will overlook our sin.

But most of us understand, at least in theory, that God is holy. The commonest way we justify ourselves is by trying to make ourselves more holy. Paul shows the weakness of this approach.

"We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." (2:15-16)

Paul is saying to his colleague Peter, "You and I are Jews. We know that no one is justified by the works of the law." The law is the sum total of God's commandments; "works of the law" are the things we do to obey the law. These Judaizers, and many Jews, thought they could be justified in this way. They professed to believe in Jesus, but insisted that everyone follow Moses as well. Many people today take this position, that the only way to be justified is by sheer hard work. Try as hard as you can to do what God commands and refrain from what he forbids, they say. So we clench our teeth and try to do a better job of living the way we know we ought. We try to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind. We try to reverence his name and his day. We try to keep the Ten Commandments. We try to be religious.

Martin Luther once described his own efforts in these words: "I was a devout monk who wanted to force God to justify me because of my works and because of the severity of my life. I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I must say that if ever a monk got into heaven by his monkery, I would have gotten there as well. If I kept it up any longer I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, readings, and other works."² This is the kind of do-it-yourself justification method that most people today are preoccupied with. It is popular because it appeals to our ego.

We find living this way appealing because we like to think that we can do a better job at sanctifying ourselves. But that it is a delusion. As John Stott writes, "It is the biggest lie of the biggest liar the world has ever known, the devil, whom Jesus called 'the father of

lies.”³ It doesn’t work. No one has ever been justified by the works of the law, because of the simple truth that no one, apart from one man, has ever kept the law perfectly. The standard that God demands is perfection. Absolute holiness is the standard, and not one of us can make it. We have all lied, cheated, stolen, and reneged on our promises. We overlook people’s needs, we live selfish lives. And that is why justification is a job for God.

Furthermore, Paul goes on to say that not only do we know that, we have bet our lives on it. He says, “even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ.” Finally, he says, not only do we know this truth intellectually, and have proved it personally, this truth of justification by faith is confirmed in Scripture: “we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.” Most of the translations don’t indicate it, but that last clause is a quotation from Psalm 143:2. Paul says very clearly that we know that no one has ever been justified by self-effort, because the Scriptures say that.

Many believers think that there are two methods of salvation taught in the Bible. They think that in the Old Testament people were saved by keeping the law, but in the New Testament they are saved by faith. But that isn’t so. From the very beginning God has acted out of grace. Faith has always been the requirement. Paul will go on in the next chapter to illustrate this in the life of Abraham, whom the Scriptures say was a “friend of God.” How did Abraham get that intimate relationship with God? Through a lifetime of good works? No! He believed God, Moses writes in Genesis, and God “reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Faith has always been the way. That is the apostle’s point. It is fixed in Scripture, from the very beginning. No one has ever been justified by keeping the law, not Moses, not Abraham, not David. They were all justified by faith.

Now as clear as Paul’s explanation is, it was questioned in his day, as it is in ours. In the following verses he reveals the major argument that his accusers used to criticize this doctrine of justification by faith, and then he answers that objection. This paragraph is hard to understand. You may have a different interpretation than mine. The Scriptures are the authority, so you may want to ponder these verses and come to your own conclusion.

“But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.” (2:17-18)

Paul is speaking to his accusers here. Whenever you talk about grace there will be people who criticize and accuse you of trying to do away with law. People naturally respond to laws and regulations. Knowing the lim-

its gives us a sense of security. Hearing about God’s unconditional love and grace alarms some people. They feel that things will spin out of control. Paul had to answer this charge all the time. So he wants to disarm his critics, raising the issue that they themselves have been raising: “If, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin?”

What he is asking is, if in trying to be justified by grace I become lawless, I lose control, does that mean that Christ is the guilty party? “May it never be!” says Paul. It isn’t Christ’s fault, it’s mine. I am the lawbreaker, because I don’t understand what has actually happened to me. Salvation is so radical that once we are in Christ we can actually say, “I am not the man or woman I was!” A radical change has taken place. Justification is not merely a legal transaction in which our status is changed but our character is left untouched. We are justified, “in Christ”; that is, our justification takes place when we are united to Christ by faith. And someone who is united to Christ is never the same person again. He is changed. It isn’t just his standing before God that has changed. He himself has been radically transformed.

Paul describes it as follows:

“For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. 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 delivered Himself up for me.” (2:19-20)

Now we come to that sticky issue of our having died with Christ. People say, “But I’m not dead. I’m still alive. But something in me must have died. What exactly was that?” Some would say that your sin nature died. Well, I’m a Christian, but I still sin. I still have a lot of the same habits, compulsions and obsessions. Why can’t I deal with those if they are truly dead? Is the law dead to me or am I dead to the law?

I think J.B. Phillips’ paraphrase helps us understand Paul’s thoughts:

For under the Law I “died,” and now I am dead to the Law’s demands so that I may live for God. As far as the Law is concerned I may consider that I died on the cross with Christ. And my present life is not that of the old “I,” but the living Christ within me. The bodily life I now live, I live believing in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me.

I will try to illustrate what Paul is saying. Every April I do our income taxes (software applications make it easy). Throughout the year, Kathy and I save all our bills and receipts, and at the end of the year, she organizes them and puts them in a shoebox. When I am finished with them I take all those receipts and bills and worksheets and put them back into that shoebox. I close it up on the outside, write the year on the lid and put the box in the garage. If the IRS ever audits me I know

where that information is. Now assuming that the IRS doesn't audit me this year, I have taken all of that information about my 2002 returns and put in that box and don't ever plan to open it again.

That is what Paul is saying. Living under the law is a closed chapter. All that effort that you put into trying to do better and trying to live up to the demands of the law is over. That's a closed book. It's a time of your life that you can put away and forget. You don't ever again have to look back on the law as an instrument of gaining acceptance with God. You are a new creation. You have begun a new life. You have a *new purity* that makes you clean in God's sight, even when you roll in the mud. You have a *new identity* before God. You are no longer a slave; you are now his child. You have a *new disposition* at work inside you. He has put a yearning in your hearts for holiness. And you have a *new power*. The Christ who loves you, and delivered himself up for you, is now living inside your body, through the person of the Holy Spirit. He has taken up residence in your heart. And the life you live now is not by self-effort, not by trying harder, but by faith.

I don't claim to understand the process by which God changes us, but I know it is active. And when we fail, there is provision for that. Our sins, past, present and future, are paid for. There is ongoing forgiveness. No, we are definitely not the people we once were.

Paul concludes his argument by saying:

"I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly." (2:21)

If we can save ourselves, why do we need Christ? This is what separates Christianity from every other religion in the world. All other religions in some way or another are based on human achievement. But Christianity is based on divine accomplishment. It is not a religion at all. It is the good news that God's grace has turned away his wrath; that God's son has died our death, and bore our judgment, and there is nothing left for us to do. We can't pay the bill. We can't even leave

the tip. In every other religion, at the very least, they want you to pick up the tip. There is some little thing you can add to grace that negates the whole thing. The only function that faith has is to receive this gift that God's grace offers. This is the truth that Paul wants us to know. It doesn't cost you anything because it cost him everything.

Horatio Bonar said it well in 1861 when he penned this poem:

Not what these hands have done
Can save this guilty soul;
Not what this toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God,
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.
Thy work alone O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.
Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak,
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
I bless the Christ of God;
I rest on love divine;
And with unfaltering lip and heart.
I call this Savior mine.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 60.

2. Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 24.

3. Stott, *Galatians*, 62.

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