

Don't Nullify God's Grace – 4-04-10

Everything that we have been looking at so far in Galatians has been leading up to verse to 2:21.

Galatians 2:21

I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

What the agitators had been doing to the believers in Galatia, what Peter did to the gentiles in Antioch had the effect of nullifying the grace of God. Law cannot be added to grace. Where ever law is added to grace the effect is to nullify grace. And if grace is nullified, if somehow righteousness comes through law then Christ died for nothing!

We often think of righteousness being right standing with God. It is that, but scripture makes clear that righteousness is more than right standing. It's doing rightly on the behalf of others. Right standing with God must lead to right doing. After all, the kingdom is righteousness peace and joy in the Holy Spirit! (Rom 14:17)

No proper protestant Christian would dare say that our right standing with God comes by us following the law, by doing a set of rules. Yet how many would say that once we do have right standing through faith, then right *doing* comes by following rules. (Don't eat. Don't drink. Don't smoke. Do come to church. Do tithe, etc., etc., etc.)

Paul, on the other hand, says in all of his writings but especially in this letter, no! Right standing comes by grace, not by law. Right doing comes also by grace, and not by law. Now to see that we must have a proper understanding of grace which as we've discussed previously is much more than just God's unmerited favor. Grace is rather God's empowering presence. As we'll see beginning in chapter three and through the rest of the letter, God's grace, His empowering presence comes to us in the person of God, the Holy Spirit. Everything that God has done for us in His Son Jesus is carried out in our lives by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit therefore replaces law as the authority in our lives under our new covenant relationship with God.

Galatians 2:21

I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

Let's not miss what Paul is saying here. We are not made right with God by doing law. We're never made right by doing law. We don't remain right with Him by doing law. The doing of law inevitably means that we have abandoned faith in Christ. In fact, observance of law excludes righteousness by grace.

Now having seen where he's headed, let's see how Paul gets there.

Galatians 2:11-21

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"

We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing! (TNIV)

By compelling gentiles to live like Jews (circumcision and observing the food laws) Peter and the agitators were saying that the old distinctions between Jew and gentile in Christ still remained. What did those old distinctions have at the heart of them? Gentiles (even those in Christ) were still sinners. To Paul, whatever else God had done in Christ Jesus, He had abolished the distinction between Jew and gentile. Those distinctions don't count at all any more.

Christ's death and resurrection have abolished those distinctions because Jews and gentiles alike are sinners. And therefore Jews and gentiles alike are given a right standing with God on the basis of grace alone. The result of grace's outworking then is that neither Jew nor gentile need to any longer do law observance. One doesn't need to be circumcised nor does one need to eat kosher. They can if they want to but no one is compelled to nor can they compel another. In Christ Jesus, law is no longer the authority of our lives. The Holy Spirit is!

So let's follow then Paul's logic to its conclusion. If a gentile has to be circumcised even though they have believed in Christ, what are they if still if they have not been circumcised? They are still sinners. If they still have to keep the law, the issue of sin hasn't been taken care of by Christ's death and resurrection. Despite Christ, the old rules are still in effect.

Galatians 2:17

But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!

By urging gentiles to believe in Christ for salvation, if gentiles are still sinners even after they have believed but have not observed law, then we make Christ a servant of sin. How so?

First, the Jewish presupposition was that to be uncircumcised meant to be a sinner. After all, if one did not have the law (as the gentiles did not), then it would be impossible to keep. Therefore to the Jew, lawless gentiles equaled sinner gentiles.

Paul's gospel though, the one approved by Jerusalem and Peter, did not require gentiles to be circumcised. So to be in Christ by faith did not require circumcision or observance of the food laws. Paul's argument was that if we are preaching a gospel that let's sinners into Christ (since according to the agitators that's what they still were) would be the equivalent of making Christ a servant of sin.

If that's true, then Christ is a promoter of sin. Paul says absolutely not! That's a lie. Christ promotes righteousness.

If we say that old rules, the old distinctions that have been abolished in Christ are still actually in effect, then the very thing we have been preaching to the gentiles has made Christ a servant of sin, a promoter of sin among the gentiles.

Reestablishing the distinction between Jew and gentile would be to be to rebuild the very thing that Christ and the gospel had destroyed.

Galatians 2:18

If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

God has destroyed the wall that once separated the Jew and the gentile.

Ephesians 2:14-15

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace,

NKJV

God's purpose in Christ is to create one new humanity, Jew and gentile together as the people of God without the barrier that once separated them. Paul's point to Peter was that if I rebuild what Christ has torn down, the wall of separation which is the law, then I become a lawbreaker.

The Jewish believers had rebuilt the very thing that Christ had torn down. By saying the gentiles weren't really fully members of God's family without certain requirements of the law, they were in fact putting back up the barrier between brothers that Christ gave his life to destroy.

Of course, we Christians never do that today, right? Some examples:

Lust is bad for a Christian. Dancing promotes lust. Therefore Christians shouldn't dance. If you dance you must not be a true Christian. Up goes a dividing wall.

Christians have the Holy Spirit. People with the Holy Spirit speak in tongues. Therefore if you don't speak in tongues, you're not a Christian. Up goes a wall of separation.

Next, what Paul says by way of personal testimony gets us to verse 21 where we said we were heading to begin with. Remember that Paul was himself a Jewish believer in Christ. So it's important for him to state his own position toward the law.

Galatians 2:19-20

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.

(My death that the law brought about meant the end of my relationship to law.)

What did Paul as a Jewish believer have to do in relation to the law in order to live for Christ? He had to die to it! We cannot simultaneously be alive to God and to law. It's not possible. Why? Living by the authority of law leads to death. Living by the authority of the Holy Spirit leads to life. They cannot be mixed and matched.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

We tend to limit our thinking about Christ's death and resurrection to the right standing we have through faith with God because of it. And we do have a right standing with God through faith because of Christ's death and resurrection. But to Paul as part of his personal testimony it's about more than just a right standing. It's about the life of God that he now possesses. And it's about living that life through faith in Christ who loved me and gave himself for me.

The problem with living by law is that the law effects death in our lives. It's not that the law is bad. It's just ineffective in bringing about an experience of Christ's life in me.