

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
February 5, 2012

Justified By Faith in Christ

Galatians 2:15-21

Key verses: “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” (Galatians 2:19-20).

Imagine, you have been confined to a wheelchair for years, unable to walk at all. Then one day, somehow, your mobility is restored. You stand tentatively, taking one baby step, then another. Then you fling open the door to your house and you run!

Imagine, you have spent years in a prison cell for a crime you did not commit. Then one day, new evidence comes to light and you are released. You walk through the prison doors and breathe the amazing fresh air of freedom!

There is nothing more wonderful than to be set free. And there is nothing more amazing than to experience in one’s life the freedom that Jesus longs to give us all. The Book of Galatians is a call to freedom in Christ. Galatians has been called the Magna Charta of the New Testament. It’s all about getting free and staying free.

Paul wrote Galatians to defend Christian freedom from the influence of the Judaizers, a group that insisted the way to get right with God was to obey the Law of Moses. Paul responded to this challenge by writing:

“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (vv. 15-16).

In these verses, three words are keys to understanding Paul’s argument:

1. *justified* – to be made right or set right in our relationship with God
2. *law* – refers here to the mistaken belief that obedience to the law of Moses is the way to be made right (justified) with God
3. *faith* – not just mental assent to an idea or belief, but an active entrustment of oneself to the Lord Jesus Christ

Paul argues that Christian freedom is at stake whenever we try to justify ourselves with God by keeping the works of the law. No, we are justified by grace through faith in Christ, that is, by entrusting ourselves to Christ and trusting Christ alone for our salvation!

This word of freedom is not just for the first-century believers in Galatia. In every generation of believers, it is our nature to fall into a system or mindset that seeks to gain

God's acceptance by our own good works. Every generation needs to hear Paul's call to freedom through faith in Christ alone.

Next Paul confronts an objection to justification by faith which the Judaizers were sure to raise. Their objection was that Paul's view of justification and Christian freedom would be a license to sin. Paul responds: *"But if, in our efforts 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"* (vv. 17-19a).

No, says Paul, the freedom that God offers us through Christ should never be used as a license to live sinfully! The purpose of our freedom is this—"that I might live to God." So, when I entrust myself to Christ, I am given a right relationship with God. My sins are forgiven and I now have a new purpose for living—"that I might live to God." My motivation for living right is not so that my good works can earn my salvation. Rather, because I have received a new life through grace by faith, my new desire is to live a life that pleases God.

Sounds good but, even following conversion to Christ, we soon find that our desire to please God is not enough. If we are not careful, we will fall back into a life of works-righteousness, trying to please God by our own good works. Every Christian who has tried to "live to God" knows the frustration of discovering one's inability to do so.

At that point we might say: "Yes, Paul, I understand that I have been justified by grace through faith in Christ, and not by my own good works. But now that I have been justified, where do I find the power to live a life that is pleasing to God?" Here is Paul's glorious answer, taken from his own experience of learning to live in Christian freedom and grace:

"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" (vv. 19b-20).

With these words, Paul points us to an experience of grace subsequent to our conversion when we—like Paul—discover that Jesus has saved us not only from sin's penalty but also from sin's power. The power to live a life that pleases God does not come from us. It comes as we die to our old lives—lives that had *self* on the throne—and yield our lives fully to the Spirit of Christ that has come to live within our hearts. It is the discovery of this new Spirit-filled life that brings us into a new experience of true freedom!

Maxie Dunnam, a United Methodist pastor and educator, shared about his relationship with his friend Sam, a Benedictine monk:

"The way we live out our lives is vastly different, but I feel a real kinship, a oneness of spirit, with Brother Sam. One of the most meaningful memories, to which I return often in my mind, is an evening he and I spent alone sharing our Christian journeys. The vivid highlight of that evening was his sharing with me the details of the service when he made his solemn vows of life commitment to the Benedictine community and the monastic life.

“He prostrated himself before the altar of the chapel in the very spot where his coffin will be when he dies. Covered in a funeral pall, the death bell that tolls at the earthly parting of a brother sounded the solemn gongs of death. Then there was silence—the silence of death. The silence of the gathered community was broken by the singing of the Colossian word, ‘For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God’ (Col. 3:3). After that powerful word, there was more silence as Brother Sam reflected upon his solemn vow. Then the community broke into singing Psalm 118 which is part of the Easter liturgy in the Benedictine community: ‘I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.’”

This great liturgy of death and resurrection, a symbolic re-enactment of Paul’s experience, is the essence of the Christian affirmation: ‘I have been crucified with Christ. I am now alive in Him.’” (from *The Communicator’s Commentary*, Vol. 8)

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