The fundamental need in the human heart is to be right with God. There is nothing else that is even a close second. If I know that God and I are OK, then I can handle anything the world, the flesh, or the devil throws at me. Furthermore, if God and I are OK, I have a foundation from which to make sure my wife and I are OK, and my children and I are OK, to see to it that work and finances and lifestyle are all what they ought to be. Most importantly, if God and I are OK, I know that eternity will be OK—that I will spend it with Him.

“How to Be Right with God” is the subject of our text today, Galatians 2:15-21. The last several weeks the focus of Galatians has been largely historical—Paul telling us his faith story and then his account of a smack down of a fellow-apostle—but today’s passage is purely theological, which means we have to be prepared to think carefully and dig deeply.

We have already noted that Galatians was written to a group of churches which Paul established in the province of Galatia on his first missionary journey. He had taught his converts very clearly that salvation is by grace through faith, but after he left the area some false teachers moved in and began to propagate the view that salvation is by grace through faith plus keeping the Law of Moses.

These false teachers, often called Judaizers (because of their passion for Jewish law) knew that in order to successfully communicate a different message than the founding pastor had preached, they first had to undermine his credentials and authority. In the process of doing this, they strongly insinuated that the Twelve Apostles in Jerusalem agreed with them, and they particularly held Peter up as their patron saint.

When Paul got wind of the teaching of these heretics, he wrote this strong letter denouncing anyone who preached any other Gospel than the one he had preached, which is that salvation is a free gift of God's grace. Then he went to considerable lengths to prove that he got his Gospel by direct revelation, that when he eventually did have a pow wow in Jerusalem, the leaders of the Church there confirmed his message and gave him the right hand of fellowship. Furthermore, when Paul and Peter had a major conflict over legalism, Peter was the one who had to back down and admit he was wrong.

That brings us to verse 15 of chapter 2 and Paul's theological explanation of why Peter was so wrong. But let’s broaden the issue: why is it wrong to give anyone the impression that there is anything they can do to get right with God? Here’s Paul’s answer in Galatians 2:15-21:

"We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man 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.

"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am 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 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!"

Instead of trying to produce some sort of detailed analytical outline of this passage, I thought I would try to boil it down to five principles that hopefully will help us get to the heart of the issue:

1. A person’s greatest need is to be right with God (the theological term for this is “justification”).
2. One cannot become right with God by obeying rules, doing good works, or observing religious rituals.
3. One does become right with God by believing in Jesus Christ and only by faith in Him.
4. To believe in Jesus is to begin a radically new life.
5. Failure to trust in Jesus is an insult both to the grace of God and to the Cross of Christ, for it declares both to be unnecessary.

1. A person’s greatest need is to be right with God (the theological term is “justification”).

Verse 15 contains the first appearance in Galatians of the most important word in Paul’s theology, the word “justify” or “justification,” and since Galatians was probably the first of at least a dozen New Testament letters he wrote, this may be the very first time he uses the word. It is extremely important that we understand this word, for no man will ever see God who has not been justified. A one-word synonym would be “acquitted.” But let me also offer a formal definition: “Justification is an act of God whereby He declares, on the basis of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that the sinner who puts his faith in Jesus is ‘not guilty’ and is even ‘righteous.’” Almost every word in this definition is important, and that’s why I wrote it out in the outline.

First, justification is an act, not a process (sanctification is the related process, but we won’t get to that until later in Galatians). Because justification is not a process, one Christian cannot be more justified than another Christian, just as one expectant woman cannot be more pregnant than another or one spouse more married than another. You either are or aren’t justified in God's sight; you’re either right with Him or you’re not.

Second, justification is an act of God, not of man. That’s why I used the sermon title I did: “How to Be Right With God,” not the more common, “How to Get Right with God,” for “get” implies action on our part, and justification is not something we do; it is God’s work.
It shouldn’t be too hard to see why no man can justify or acquit himself. After all, no defendant in court can declare himself “not guilty.” Oh, he can say it, certainly, but it doesn't make it so. Only a judge or jury can actually acquit a defendant. You know something, every time in Scripture when a man tried to justify himself, he actually ended up condemning himself. For example in Luke 10:29 Jesus was speaking to a certain lawyer who asked what he could do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus told him to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself,” we read that he, “wishing to justify (acquit, declare himself innocent) himself, said to Jesus, ‘and who is my neighbor?’” Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan, which condemned the man.

Then in Luke 16 Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees who were money-lovers and scoffers. He said to them, (verse 15), “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.”

Third, in justification God declares the believing person righteous; He does not make him righteous. That may at first sound strange, but just consider the following analogy. When any defendant stands before a court of law, he can expect to hear one of two declarations: either “guilty” or “not guilty,” that is, he will either be condemned or acquitted. However, neither declaration necessarily establishes the actual guilt or innocence of the defendant.

There have been many times in judicial history when a clever lawyer obtained an acquittal for a defendant whom everyone, including the jury, knew was guilty. And unfortunately there have been many innocent people convicted of crimes they never committed. Legal declarations of guilt or innocence are exactly that—legal declarations. They are not necessarily moral evaluations.

Nevertheless, a legal declaration of “not guilty” does carry tremendous weight, for once a person has been acquitted of a crime, he cannot be tried for that crime again—no matter what new evidence may emerge.

Think with me now about the profound parallel between the legal status of a defendant acquitted in a court of law and the legal status of a redeemed sinner before God's bar of justice. In effect God says to the redeemed sinner,

\[ I \text{ do not dispute the evidence the prosecutor (Satan) has brought against you. Your guilt is obvious and the case against you is watertight, to be sure. I do not excuse your behavior and I can find no extenuating circumstances that might lessen your guilt. I do, however, exercise my prerogative as the judge and declare you, "Not guilty," and because of the law of double jeopardy you can never be tried for these crimes again. You may go now--you are free. } \]
Now I said a few moments ago that in justification God declares the believing sinner righteous; He does not make him righteous. But we must not fail to see that God’s ultimate goal is indeed to make us righteous. Justification should lead to a changed life, but it is not an automatic or immediate result of being right with God.

Fourth, the basis for God's declaration is the perfect sacrifice of Christ. In other words, God doesn't just arbitrarily declare us “not guilty.” Nor does He simply ignore our sin; that would violate His own holiness. On the contrary, He declares us “not guilty” because someone else has paid for the sin. Jesus, who had no sin of His own, took our sin upon himself and was judged guilty of it. And since punishment was exacted from Him for the crimes we committed, God is able to maintain His holiness and still declare us “not guilty.”

Fifth, in justification God does not acquit all sinners—only those who put their faith in Jesus. That’s what’s wrong with the notion that we are all children of God and that God is the Father of us all (we hear this a lot from religious liberals). Yes, in a creation sense He is, but not in terms of spiritual relationship. Some people are children of the Devil, according to Scripture. They refuse to accept the legal assistance provided by Jesus Christ and instead try to defend themselves. It has been said that a man who serves as his own attorney has a fool for a client. That is especially true of one who stands before God and tries to plead his own case, refusing to let Jesus plead his case.

Finally, justification does more than declare the defendant “not guilty;” it goes so far as to declare him innocent or “righteous.” O. J. Simpson received a verdict of “not guilty”, but it would be hard to find any intelligent person who would call him innocent. But when God declares us “not guilty” he goes a step further and declares us actually innocent, not because we are suddenly sinless, but because He now views us as dressed in the righteousness of Christ. Earlier in our service we sang these words:

> When He shall come with trumpet sound,  
> O may I then in Him be found,  
> Dressed in His righteousness alone,  
> Faultless to stand before the throne.

That’s an amazing concept--that when God looks at His children He purposes to view them, not as they are in themselves but as they are in Christ.

Now we have spent a lot of time discussing the meaning of justification, but I do not apologize, because our greatest need is for justification, to be right with God.

2. One cannot become right with God by obeying rules, doing good works, or observing religious rituals.

In other words, though becoming right with God is our greatest need, there is nothing we can do to achieve it. As we saw last Sunday, Paul asserts this truth three times in verse 16 alone: “a man is not justified by observing the law,” then a little later, “not by observing the law,”
and then at the end, “by observing the law no one will be justified.” And if that still were not enough, we hear it again in 3:11: “Clearly no one is justified before God by the law.”

It should be obvious, then, that those who insist on Sabbath-observance, dietary restrictions, circumcision, fasting, or any other aspect of the Mosaic Law as a means of getting right with God are violating this cardinal principle: the Law cannot save. And that is just as true today as it was in Paul’s day.

Now trying to keep the actual Mosaic Law as a means of salvation is not a huge temptation for most of us. Yet the principle here in verse 16 is still important, because many professing Christians have simply replaced the Mosaic Law with other religious rules and regulations and rituals that they consider just as necessary in order to be accepted by God. I believe Paul would gather together all our modern-day works—whether it be tithing, church membership, baptism, good deeds, teetotalism, you name it—and lump them with the Law of Moses, and say, “No one is justified before God by works of any kind.”

Well, if one cannot get right with God by obeying rules, doing good works, or observing religious rituals, how is it accomplished?

3. One becomes right with God by believing in Jesus Christ and only by faith in Him.

While verse 16 repeats three times that a person is not justified by observing the Law, it also states three times that one is justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Let me paraphrase the middle of verse 16: “Even we Jews, the most religious people in the world, have to put our faith in Jesus Christ in order to be right with God.” Friends, faith in Christ is the one necessary and sufficient condition for salvation. In other words, one cannot be justified without faith in Christ, and there is nothing else one must have besides faith in Christ. The same hymn writer was right on target when he wrote,

\[
My\ hope\ is\ built\ on\ nothing\ less\ (and\ nothing\ more!)
\]
\[
Than\ Jesus'\ blood\ and\ righteousness.
\]
\[
I\ dare\ not\ trust\ the\ sweetest\ frame
\]
\[
But\ wholly\ lean\ on\ Jesus'\ name.
\]

\[
On\ Christ\ the\ solid\ rock\ I\ stand
\]
\[
All\ other\ ground\ is\ sinking\ sand.
\]

Justification is by faith in Christ and only by faith in Christ.

4. To believe in Jesus is to begin a radically new life.

It seems clear from verse 17 that Paul’s critics were arguing against his view of justification in the following way:
Paul, your doctrine of justification through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from the works of the law, is a highly dangerous doctrine. It fatally weakens a man's sense of moral responsibility. If he can be accepted by God just through trusting in Christ, without any necessity to do good works, you are actually encouraging him to sin. If God justifies bad people, what is the point of being good? We can do as we like and live as we please. Doesn't such a view turn Christ into a promoter of sin?

Paul's response to his critics is to deny their suggestion with hot indignation: “God forbid,” he says in verse 17 & 18. “Absolutely not! On the contrary, if I as a convert go back to my old life and commit the same sins I used to commit, all it proves is that I am a lawbreaker. It is my fault, not Christ's. I have only myself to blame.”

I find Paul's comments here refreshing. He doesn't deny that he, as a saved person, still sins. He doesn't make excuses for his failures. He doesn't rationalize them. But neither is he nonchalant about sin. On the contrary, he speaks of a radical change in moral character that should and will result from justification. So radical is it that Paul describes it in terms of a death and a resurrection. Twice in verses 19 and 20 he speaks of dying to the Law and rising to new life through union with Christ.

What does he mean when he says “through the Law I died to the Law?” I believe very simply that Paul is asserting that the Law itself convinced him that he could never keep it sufficiently to please God. If ever any man could have pleased God by keeping the Law, that man was Paul. Listen to him give his testimony in Philippians 3:4-11:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

(By the way, this reminds me of Martin Luther, who exclaimed, “If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, I would have got there too; all my brothers will testify to that. For if it had gone on much longer, I would simply have martyred myself to death with vigils, prayers, reading and other work.”)

But Paul goes on in Philippians 3,

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

The Law itself convinced Paul that law-keeping was hopeless as a way of salvation, for he had tried it and it brought him no closer to God. So he gathered together all his degrees, his awards, his good deeds, his religious achievements, and his ego symbols and called it all a pile of manure. So long as he thought he could save himself by these things, he wouldn’t trust God
to save him and thus no personal relationship with God was possible. But once he abandoned these as a means of salvation (i.e. once he died to the Law) he was able to cast himself upon the grace of God and receive the spiritual life God offers.

But not only did Paul die to the Law; he also died with Christ. In verse 20 he says in effect, “When I abandoned the law and received God's grace, I not only trusted in the fact that Christ died for my sins—I was actually spiritually crucified with Him. The person I was before Christ saved me was nailed to the cross and the person I am now is not just Paul but Paul plus Christ, for Christ lives in me!”

Friends, we desperately need to grasp this truth: we are not what we used to be. Stop and think for a moment what changes in your life and mine would take place if we fully grasped the truth of our co-crucifixion with Christ and the truth that Christ lives in us. Think of that nagging habit which constantly gets the best of us. Think of the bitterness we have in our hearts toward that person who hurt us a long time ago. Think of the selfishness which keeps us from reaching out to those around us who are in need. Think of the self-hatred which causes us to put ourselves down and keeps us from loving others as Christ would have us do. Think of the materialism that causes us to grasp that paycheck, that dream home, that career as if all of life depended on it. All this would change if we fully grasped that our old nature was crucified when Christ was crucified and that Jesus Christ actually resides within us now.

In the last part of verse 20 Paul goes on to say that the life he now lives in the flesh—the same life you and I live day by day—he lives by faith in the Son of God. Trust and confidence in Christ was a moment-by-moment part of Paul's life. Let me tell you something—that's impossible unless one sees the Son of God as Paul saw Him—the one who “loved me and delivered Himself up for me.”

If Jesus only loved us but couldn't help us, we'd be hopeless. On the other hand, if He could help us but didn't love us, we’d also be hopeless. But He both loves us and delivered Himself up for us. Therefore, we can live our lives with utter confidence and trust in Him.

It should now be clear why a Christian who is “justified” is not free to sin. Once we have been united to Christ in His death, our old life is finished; it is ridiculous to suggest that we should ever go back to it. Besides, we have risen to a new life. “The old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). In one sense, we live this new life through faith in Christ. In another sense, it is not we who live it at all, but Christ who lives it in us. And, living in us, He gives us new desires for holiness, for God, for heaven. It is not that we cannot sin again; but we do not want to. The whole tenor of our life has changed.

5. Failure to trust in Jesus is an insult both to the grace of God and to the Cross of Christ, for it declares both to be unnecessary.

Verse 21 is a powerful conclusion to all Paul has said so far in the book of Galatians—in both
his personal history and his profound theology. Paul says, “I do not set aside the grace of God. The Judaizers nullify it. Even Peter did so on one occasion. But that's one mistake you will never find me making. And here's why: if one could get right with God through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”

Do we really think that God would have ever allowed His Son to go to the awful, excruciating death He suffered on the Cross had there been any other way? Do we really think Christ would have willingly accepted the humiliation, the condemnation, the separation from his Father which the cross entailed for Him had there been any other way?

Now there have been some difficult and complex ideas in this passage, so allow me to read it again, this time borrowing from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, with some minor revisions of my own. I read the first part of this last week.

We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over “non-Jewish pagans.” We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know that? We tried it—and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! But our experience convinced us that no human being can please God by self-improvement, so we turned in faith to Jesus so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah rather than by trying to be good.

Have some of you noticed that we are not yet perfect? (No great surprise, right?) And are you ready to make the accusation that since people like me, who go through Christ in order to get things right with God, aren’t perfectly virtuous, Christ must therefore be an accessory to sin? The accusation is perfectly ridiculous! If I as a convert go back to my old life and commit the same sins I used to commit, all it proves is that I am a lawbreaker. It is my fault and not Christ’s. I have only myself to blame.

I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn’t work. So I quit being a good man so that I could be God’s man. Christ’s life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not really “mine,” but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.

Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God’s grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule keeping, then Christ died for no reason.

Friends, if anyone could earn salvation by a supreme effort of the will or by a superhuman adherence to God's laws or by a rigid observance of religious rites and rituals, God would work overtime to help him achieve those standards and thus spare His own Son. The fact of the matter is, however, that the Cross was necessary because grace is the only way. We were utterly helpless, so God did it all, and the only thing he asks of us is to believe and receive. Have you done that?
Would you like to do it this morning?