

Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

Galatians 2:15-21

One of the simplest pieces of advice for anyone is public speaking is this maxim from Dale Carnegie: “Tell people what you are going to say. Say it. Then tell them what you’ve said.” Surely the clarity and simplicity of such a presentation will be of great encouragement to those who must listen in vain when trying to figure out what a preacher is trying to say. Simplicity and clarity are crucial.

Another simple lesson for public speaking, including preaching, could be expressed this way, “Keep the main thing the main thing.” That’s easy to understand, isn’t it? No rabbit trails. No doctrinaire, attentional-drawing intellectual lectures worthy of a doctoral dissertation defense. No merely intellectual showcasing nor a show of eloquence that only serves the purpose of elevating the sense of the speaker’s ability to sound important and appear to be profound. No, keep the main thing the main thing.

Never is that advice better applied than when Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” In that context, Paul continues in,

1 Cor. 2:3 “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

So Paul didn’t try to be eloquent. He certainly didn’t try to show off his own intellect or his own personal insights. There was one thing that mattered, and that was Jesus Christ and him crucified. He didn’t rely upon any natural eloquence, nor upon the

power of his own wisdom or rhetoric. Rather, in the simplicity of what he had to say, he relied upon the power of the Holy Spirit to make it effective. We have that same spirit in our text this morning, particularly verse 16, which services as an accurate focal point for this whole letter to the churches of Galatia. The main thing is justification.

I. THE MAIN THING: JUSTIFICATION.

v.16

And yes, as I’ve mentioned in previous weeks, Paul says the same thing three times in that verse to emphasize his point. The first point is that a person is not justified by works of the law. The second point is that you are justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. And the third point is that by works of the law no one will be justified.

Do you get the point? Those aren’t three separate points, but just one point. I will utterly fail this afternoon in preaching on this text if I don’t make that main point abundantly clear.

Let me begin with a right declaration and definition of what justification is. It is a theological word, which is to say, a word we define in the study of theology. It is a word that gets its own catechism question and a full chapter in the Westminster Confession of Faith. But this is NOT a theological lecture, and if you turn off your mind at the very hearing of this theological word or at the mere mention of theology, then shame on you, because this word is surely one of the most important words that you will ever hear and one of the most important doctrines for you to fully and and rightly grasp as you study the Scripture.

Justification is one of the most important doctrines for you to grasp in order to rightly understand your relationship to God and

for you to be able to rightly live out your life as a Christian. It is, perhaps, the most important doctrine of them all. So what is it? What is justification? Surely there is no better answer than our Shorter Catechism, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

Justification is how a sinner is made right with God. First, by forgiveness of sins. And then by receiving the righteousness of Jesus himself credited to you, or imputed. And you receive that forgiveness, you receive that imputed righteousness, by faith. And, I should add, by faith alone.

So how does Paul put it? First, and with emphasis, negatively. He puts it negatively because we all need this vital correction to a persistent and dangerous error. Negatively stated, justification is...

A. Not by the works of the law.

Again, the repetition of verse 16 is so obvious.

Why this stress on the negative? Why such an emphasis? That’s an easy question to answer. It is because we are easily tempted to think and believe, that somehow, we do have to do something in order to achieve justification. We have to do something to earn justification. You have to do something as the basis upon which God will forgive you your sins. You feel it in your heart. You often hear it if you are taught wrongly. You think it in your own system of fairness and propriety. And maybe, in your pride, you really want to contribute something yourself. You have to do something. Some measure of obedience to the law. Some degree of performance according to the works of the law. And until you meet that obligation, you remain in your guilt. You feel guilty. You feel enslaved by the sense of obligation or duty to

be good, or at least better. After all, how could God love you if you aren’t good?

Beloved, for some people, that is the most troubling and discouraging question of life. How could God love you if you aren’t good enough? Some people, even sincere and godly Christians, find themselves mired in that pit seemingly unable to escape the spiritual and psychological trap that the question imposes upon you.

But the question is actually all wrong, because “we know that a man is not justified by the works of the law.” “By works of the law no flesh will be justified.” You can’t be good enough, if that’s the path by which you attempt to be made acceptable to God. It is a trap because however good you might be, the question can always be asked, “Is it good enough?” If you rely upon the works of the law, the question can always be asked, “Have you done enough works of the law?” Have you obeyed enough? And never can you reach a definitive answer of “yes” to those questions. Never can you perform enough or obey sufficiently well to be able to say with confidence, “Yes, by the works of my obedience to the law, I am justified before God.”

The people who would dare to claim such confidence were the Pharisees, and they would receive Jesus’ harshest criticisms, for, of course, it was by their own hypocrisy that considered only the outward appearance and failed miserably in the necessary searching of their own hearts. Jesus would call them “white washed tombs,” full of dead men’s bones.

So if you think that justification is by the works of the law, then there are only two inevitable consequences. One, you will become a Pharisee, and in your hypocrisy you will think that you have succeeded. Or two, you will despair in the guilt of your

failure, knowingly unable to do anything about the problem of your sin.

That's why circumcision was such a crucial issue for Paul and the Galatians, because that was the focal point of this dangerous tendency to substitute the performance of the works of the law for the only ground upon which you can, in fact, be justified by God—namely,

B. Through faith in Christ.

v.16a

v.16b "...even have believed in Christ Jesus..."

Beloved, that's the answer to this most vexing of all human dilemmas. How can you be right with God? How can you be accepted by God? How can you become acceptable to God? How can you gain the confidence that you are loved by God? And adopted as children by God? How can you gain all of those things? Ultimately, how can you gain salvation? How can you gain entrance into heaven? How can you gain the security of a restored relationship with God that is fully reconciled?

Not by what you do! Do you understand that? Not by the works of the law! Not by the performance of your own obedience. Is that clear enough? "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law."

Instead, you believe. You believe what God says, what God promises. That's the definition of faith. So a person is justified by faith in Christ. Period. By faith alone. Faith is the alone instrument of justification. It is the only means by which we are justified. It is the only ground upon which you are made right with God.

You believe, in order to be justified. You believe in order to be forgiven your sins. You believe, in order to be made righteous in God's sight. Justification is by faith alone.

Now, having said that, Paul mentions...

II. TWO PITFALLS.

The first, beginning in verse 15, is what ties all of this to the Galatian issue of those Jewish Christians who were requiring Gentile Christians to be circumcised in conformity with the Jewish ceremonial laws. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with his people in the Old Testament, like baptism is now. It is the outward sign of God's work of salvation, in the Old Testament. And it is now longer necessary, now that Jesus has come. But it was being used wrongly as an external act which new Christian's had to perform. It became a good work that new Christians had to perform in order to be saved. And it represented all of the Old Covenant regulations, regulations whose only purpose was to point you to Jesus. So if you didn't perform this outward symbol, you weren't considered a true Christian. That's the problem.

The pitfall is the substance of Paul's rebuke to Peter that we studied last time, if you remember. Peter had engaged in full fellowship with Gentile believers, even eating with them, but when some Jewish Christian leaders from Jerusalem came he separated himself from the Gentiles because they weren't circumcised. He shunned them, as if they weren't true believers. As Paul puts it, Peter stood condemned, verse 11. And he stood condemned because of his,

A. Hypocritical inconsistency.

That's the first pitfall. Peter was afraid of the circumcision party, so he played the hypocrite. He knew better, as Paul puts it v.15-16a

The explanation is this, I believe. We are Jews, Paul says. We know the Jewish laws. We have observed the Jewish ceremonial laws as a people and as a nation. We know the significant of that rite, and now, in Christ, we know that what matters before God is circumcision of the heart. We know that God looks at the heart, not the outward appearance. We know all those things. We have not been kept in the darkness in the past as the Gentiles were, those identified simply as “sinners.” We have all the privileges of knowing God’s word and God’s will, and we now know that a person is not justified by works of the law.”

We know that, and yet we impose those works of the law upon Gentile converts! How inconsistent. How hypocritical! Do you see Paul’s point. We know that the works of the law are not needed to be justified, and yet we require the Gentiles to submit to the law of circumcision!

The hypocrisy is in imposing upon others an outward regulation when you, yourself, have freedom. The hypocrisy is in imposing a slavery upon others while enjoying freedom yourself.

Let me make an application of that to ourselves today, one that goes beyond circumcision but is the same basic idea as this hypocritical inconsistency. We, too, know the freedom that we have in Christ. We understand that we are justified by faith and not by performance of obedience to the works of the law. And yet we impose obligations on others. We imposed expectations upon others and separate from them if they don’t conform. Maybe it is in the area of educating our children, and many a church has been harmed and many relationships among Christians strained because people impose a standard of homeschooling upon others as if that were required to be a Christian. Or we impose a standard of certain political views. Or parenting style. Or a system of dating and courtship. Or the requirement for

abstinence from alcohol. Or a certain style of clothing. Or style of music. Or a theory of youth ministry. Or holiday celebrations.

My point is, there are all sorts of ways that we impose a slavery upon other Christians who are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not by the performance of some external, extra-biblical duty.

Or, perhaps even more dangerously, we assume someone who commits some particular sin must not be a Christian, as if those sins you commit don’t disqualify you as well. We put some sins into this category, that those who commit them must not be a believer, forgetting all along that a Christian is justified by faith in Jesus Christ and not by the works of the law.

So beware the hypocrisy of thinking some particular sins might disqualify someone else from being a Christian. That’s the first pitfall. Then the second. What is described in verses 17-18 is,

B. A false conclusion.

I believe the meaning of verse 17 is explained by verse 18. So this is the situation. If we abolish circumcision because we know we are justified by faith, that’s good. That is what we have “tore down” or destroyed, according to verse 18. That’s good. We understand that. We no longer are required to be circumcised, because we have believed in Christ. That’s good.

But, according to verse 18, “if I build again those things which I destroyed,” if I reestablish the requirement for circumcision, then I am now at fault. I am now a transgressor, a sinner, in the hypocritical inconsistency I just described a few minutes ago. If I am free from that external obligation, if I am free from the need to perform some measure of obedience to the works of the law in order to be justified, then I am at fault if I require anyone else to to

submit to that slavery. In that case, I too, am found to be a sinner, verse 16. I am at fault. So if I claim the freedom of justification by faith in Christ for myself then impose the slavery of the works of the law upon others in Christ's name, I make Christ out to be a servant of sin, my sin! God forbid.

So a false doctrine of justification makes Christ out to be the author of sin! That's the false conclusion that must be rejected. Everything about this obligation placed upon Gentile Christians was wrong. As we saw so clearly last time in,

v.14b "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

Paul moves on from that verse to a something of a new topic in verses 19 and 20, and we'll look at that more closely next week, the idea of "dying to the law" and being "crucified with Christ." That comes right out of this exposition of the doctrine of justification, and it is hugely important with regard to the experiences of living your life as a Christian. So we'll look at those two verses next week, but I did want to include verse 21 in our focus this morning.

v.21

One final point to be made about the horrible dangers and implications of a wrong doctrine of justification. And I believe it can be explained under the simple heading of,

III. JUSTIFICATION AND JESUS.

Notice, first, the expression "set aside the grace of God" in verse 21. That is strong language. The idea is this, if you add works to grace, you set aside grace, you nullify it. If you combine any performance of your own obedience with the blessings of grace, you cancel the blessings of grace.

So 90% grace is really no grace at all. If I am going to give you 90% grace and require 10% obedience, then those same questions come right back. Even if it is only 10% of works, the question becomes, have you done good enough for the ten percent? If I give you 99% grace and require 1% works, you still have the plague of having to answer the question, did you do your 1% good enough?

So, if there is any combination to be had, it's not a gift. If you have to work for any part of it, it is still a work, and grace is nullified. If you have to contribute anything at all, then it's not grace at all. So Paul says, "I do not set aside the grace of God."

To put that positively, we see,

A. The necessity of God's grace.

I can't set aside the grace of God. I won't nullify the grace of God. For Paul, grace is absolutely necessary. It is for you and me, too. It is absolutely necessary to be able to deal with your own guilt, isn't it? The guilt of your sin is removed by grace. Grace is absolutely necessary. There is no hope without it. Your standing before God requires grace. It is absolutely necessary. If you think you have to measure up, if you think you have to do something to earn his love or deserve his love, then, ultimately, all is lost! Grace is absolutely necessary, and that grace is ours in Jesus, by faith in Jesus.

If you are going to have sufficient motivation to serve God, sufficient ground to learn how to love God, then grace is absolutely necessary, for without grace, your love and service would be the offering of a slave and not a beloved child. If you have to earn something with your works of obedience, then it is not fully an offering of love. If you have to earn anything then you nullify grace.

So the conclusion of this whole matter about justification is to be sure, to be always entirely and completely sure, that you do not nullify grace. Then, in that context, look at how verse 21 ends.

v.21b "...for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

Let me try to unpack that just a little. The word "righteousness" is the same as the word for "justification," and they have the same idea. For in justification, if you recall, we receive the righteousness of Jesus. We are made righteous, we are accepted as righteous in his sight, by Jesus' own righteousness imputed to us and received by faith. That's what I've been trying to say all afternoon.

So, Paul's point is this, if I could make myself righteous by what I do, then Jesus didn't need to die! If I could accomplish my own righteousness which was satisfactory to God, if I could earn my own standing before God with my own works of the law, then Jesus died for nothing!

Let me put that positively. Jesus died for a purpose. There was a reason. There was something he set out to accomplish, and he accomplished it! Perfectly. And what was that? Well, justification. He was raised for our justification. He accomplished our justification. He earned our justification.

And with the very same idea, he accomplished our righteousness. In other words,

B. The righteousness of Christ is ours.

Jesus didn't die in vain. He didn't die merely as a martyr to encourage or stimulate us. He didn't die just to give us a good example to follow. He did what we could not do. He

accomplished a perfect righteousness, and he gives that righteousness to you. He gave it to me.

And how do you get it? How do you receive that gift? By faith. By faith alone. You accept the gift as a gift of grace. You know there is nothing you can do to earn it or deserve it, so you believe. You believe the promise, in order to be justified by faith.

With all of that, let me end with three specific and personal applications. First, assurance of salvation. Where does any sense of assurance come from? Not from your own imperfect and sinfully-flawed performance, that's for sure. But real assurance of salvation, real certainty and confidence of saving faith comes from this doctrine of justification. Because it is a work of God's grace, because it is a gift, it is yours to keep. You don't lose it. You don't forfeit it on account of your sins because you never earned it by your obedience in the first place. The doctrine of justification is the ground and foundation of a true and full assurance of salvation.

Second application, what I might call self-image. Or even psychological well-being. Perhaps I could simply call it freedom from guilt. Or the consciousness of being loved by God. The emotion, the experience of knowing that you are loved. Of believing that you are loved. Of being able to receive and enjoy that love. Beloved, and I use that word carefully and intentionally, beloved, your soul needs to know and believe that you are justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. So that the next time you sin, you will be able to know that your status before God hasn't changed a bit. Your sin doesn't change your status, because you are justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law. You can know and believe that you are beloved by God because of this promise of justification. God justifies you, and it is a gift of his grace to you. It is yours by faith, not by works of the

law. And that is to be your self-image. That is the foundation of your psychological health and well-being. The knowledge, and certainty, that you are right before God because of this doctrine of justification.

Then the third application of all of this, and I alluded to it just a minute ago. This doctrine provides the right motivation for your own love and obedience to God. If you understand all this well, the question that Paul was asked in Romans 6 makes sense, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Of course not. “By no means!” God forbid!

No, you are called to live a life of obedience and godliness. You are called to obey God’s law, but not because your justification hangs in the balance. No, but rather because it doesn’t! Christian maturity means that you learn to obey the law because you know that you are justified by faith, and are thankful. You obey the law as a response to God’s grace, as a response of love and thanksgiving, loving him knowing that he has first loved you.

Justification really is the main thing! And so, I call you to believe in Jesus Christ, in order that you might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.