

Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing, pt. 2

Galatians 2:19-20

Keep the main thing the main thing. I hope that was obvious in the sermon last week. I think that it was, and if you weren't here last week I would encourage you to listen to that sermon on our website, since today's message is really very much wrapped up in that whole description of what I am calling "the main thing." The main thing is justification. How a sinner can be made right with God. How our sins can be forgiven. How we can become acceptable to God, how we can be righteous in his sight. And the answer to all of that is by faith. A Christian is justified by faith alone.

To put it negatively, go back to, v.16 "...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

That's the main thing, and our focus this afternoon is upon a concept that comes right out of that main thing. It is something Paul writes, something he teaches, that is embedded right in the middle of this discourse about justification. And if ever you thought theology and the study of doctrine was impractical and irrelevant with regard to your life, this is a place to correct that dangerously simplistic and false idea. Right in the middle of this main thing, this "main hinge upon which the whole of religion turns," according to Martin Luther, right in the middle of this theological exposition of the doctrine of justification, comes what is arguably the most penetrating description of human life found in the whole Bible.

That description is fascinating, and profound. And here it is. "You are dead." That's how Paul defines and describes the Christian life. "You are dead." In the irony and apparent contradiction of those words, that's the Christian life. "You are dead." What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that you are dead.

Now, let me try to explain. First, notice the language of verse 19. "I died to the law." Actually, in the original Greek, there is no "article" in that phrase. No "the." The plain wording is, "I died to law." I believe that even better expresses the point that Paul is trying to make, which is that...

I. A CHRISTIAN DIES TO LAW.

Notice even more carefully, Paul writes, v.19 "...I through law died to law."

The idea is this. In the context of law, in the environment in which law was the governing principle, namely the Old Covenant, in that context, Paul came to realize that he had to renounce law as the ground upon which he would be justified by God. It is not that he nullified God's definition of righteousness embodied in the law, but that he rejected the whole principle of law as the basis upon which he would be justified in the sight of God.

When the law was alive in Paul's life, that is, when he sought to live before God on the basis of his own law-keeping and works of righteousness, he was actually under the curse of that law. He sought to utilize the law as the ground upon his acceptance before God, and he was "alive to the law" in that sense. What he had to learn, what he had to come to know, is that such an effort was useless. When he was "alive to law" he was trying to earn his own salvation. He was trying to work to achieve for himself his own standing before God, to accomplish himself his own

redemption. And it was an impossible task.

For Paul, we don't have to imagine what that looked like.

Phil. 3:4 "...though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

That was when Paul was alive to law. So he had to die, die to law. And that death is described in the next verse,

Phil. 2:7 "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

So, to die to law is, in Paul's words, to "count all things as rubbish," all of his own law-keeping as the basis for his justification. And that is why circumcision is such an important issue. That's why it became a contradiction of the gospel for Jewish believers to require Gentile believers to be circumcised. That obligation would essentially bring back upon them the whole obligation of the necessity of the works of the law, denying this central article of the Christian faith, justification by faith alone.

The clear point here is that,

A. Law is rejected as a ground of justification.

Let me give you an illustration of what this means. It is the illustration that Paul gives us in Romans 7, the illustration of a marriage.

Rom. 7:1 "Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? 2 For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. 3 So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. 4 Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God."

So if you are bound in marriage, if you are living under the law of marriage, you are released from that bond if you spouse dies. When your spouse dies, you leave the realm of married life, you are free from the law of marriage that restricts you from marrying anyone else. "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another." You are free.

So to die to the law means to be freed from its duties and obligation. You no longer live in the context of those obligations. So with regard to justification, a Christian must die to the law. Then the irony of Paul's words in our text makes sense.

B. Life comes through death.

v.19

"I died so that I might live..." What does that mean? I believe

this, that when you have the freedom of justification by grace alone through faith alone, then and only then are you able to know and experience the motivation which will enable you to live a life devoted to God, a truly holy life. Only with the freedom of justification made sure and certain will you have sufficient motive to live to God! No longer living for yourself, trying to earn your salvation or merit God's favor by what you do. No, when you die to the law, when you abandon and completely reject the law as the basis upon which you are justified, then rather than live as you please in sin in disobedience to the law, you live to God. Through law you die to law so that you might live to God!

The idea is that you can only, truly live to God when you are first freed from the guilt and condemnation of your sin which the law imposes. Only with that freedom can you truly live, live to God and for God.

Go back with me to,

Rom. 7:4 "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. 5 For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. 6 But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter."

As Christians, you die to the law so that you might live to God! With that understanding, the second verse of our text makes sense.

v.20a

This verse means precisely the same thing as verse 19, but

now the theoretical proposition is made personal. In other words, we move from "a Christian dies to the law" to,

II. A CHRISTIAN IS CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST.

Dying to the law means dying with Jesus. And so the idea here is that a Christian is,

A. United to Christ in his death.

"I have been crucified with Christ." And Paul tells us a little of what that then means, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

There is so much included in that idea of being united with Christ in his death. Calvin puts it this way, "Being then crucified with him, we are freed from all the curse and guilt of the law." So when Jesus died, we were joined with him so that the curse we deserved was fully satisfied. When Jesus died to endure the wrath of God which our sins deserved, we died with him so that wrath against us is now gone as well. By our union with Christ, we are freed from the punishment of sin and the condemnation of the law.

I have been crucified with Christ. That also means that you die to sin. Consider Romans 6 for further explanation of what this all means.

Rom. 6:6 "knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin. 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him."

To be crucified with Christ, to be united to Christ in his death, means to die to sin. And that means that you are set free from the power and dominion of sin. As a Christian, you are no longer

enslaved to sin. “The body of sin is brought to nothing.” Sin is no longer your master. The flesh is no longer your master. You become a new creation. The old man was crucified. You have been crucified with Christ. And just as life comes when you die to law, so it is that life comes when you are crucified with Christ. In fact, that is the obvious emphasis in this verse. “I have been crucified with Christ.” Yes, indeed. But that’s not the main point of the verse. Look at what follows, what it means to be united to Christ in his death.

v.20 “...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 gave Himself for me.”

I am crucified with Christ, so that as I now live in the flesh, Christ lives in me. As I have been crucified with Christ, I have been raised with Christ. As I have been united to Christ in his death, so also a Christian is,

B. United to Christ in his life.

In other words, I am alive! I live. I have been raised from the dead. That’s what it means to be a Christian.

2 Cor. 5:17 “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

Back in,

Rom. 6:3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His

resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin. 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. 10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. 11 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The key verse there is verse 8, very much the same thing as what Paul is writing to the Galatians. “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.” And alive with him means dead to sin, dead to the power of sin, crucified with Christ himself.

Do you see how all this fits together?

So give up trying to use the law as a means to be justify. Abandon your own efforts to perform some measure of works righteousness in order to made acceptable to God. Die to law. Die with Christ. And then you will live. Then you will be able to live, to live to God, to “walk in newness of life.” So it’s all about the new life.

III. THE LIFE A CHRISTIAN LIVES.

It is not grounded upon works righteousness or obedience to the law. Rather, freed from that impossible obligation, you are raised with Christ in order to live a new life. So do you remember how Romans 6 begins? The question that is appropriately asked whenever the free grace of the gospel is clearly proclaimed.

Rom. 6:1 “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died

to sin live any longer in it?”

And the conclusion to that passage is clear and direct.

Rom. 6:11 “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

The grace of God frees you from the dominion and slavery of sin. And that same grace enables you live to God a live of godliness and righteousness as defined by God’s law. “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.”

But how? How can that be accomplished? The great danger always remains, that you will try to do it in your own strength and ability. If you do, when you do, you fall right back into that same danger. It’s the danger Paul identifies in the next chapter,

Gal. 3:3 “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?”

It can’t be done. So how are you perfected? How do you live the life of a Christian? First answer, by faith.

A. Living by faith.

v.20 “...the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”

We live by faith. And what does that mean? Just that you live

by trusting that what God said is true. You trust that God’s promises are true. You depend upon God’s strength, not your own. You seek his wisdom, not your own. You do what you believe to be right, according to his word, not according to what you see with your eyes. You live by faith, not by sight.

What is that faith? That you are raised up with Christ and seated with him, now, in the heavenly places. That you are united to Christ. That your citizenship is in heaven. That he who began a good work in you will finish it. That nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. That the Holy Spirit of God dwells in you. That the word of God is living and active. That your sins are forgiven. That God has reserved a place in heaven for you. That sin shall not have dominion over you. That you, together, are the body of Christ. I could go on and on. Believing those things and living your life on that basis of that belief, that’s what it means to live by faith.

It means that you don’t have to have everything planned out for tomorrow, because you walk by faith not by sight. It means that even when you suffer, you know that God is working all things together for good in order to make you more like Jesus. It means that every hair on your head is numbered, that God works all things out according to the counsel of his own will, that there are no accidents, no coincidences, no good fortune or the benefit of luck. God is in control of it all. You and I, as Christians, live by faith.

With one final emphasis from the apostle, one final definition of what that faith is all about. Living by faith means,

B. Living as a recipient of grace.

In other words, a crucial aspect of your faith is the faith to believe God’s promise of salvation. It is the faith to believe that

God loves you, because he has promised to love you in the gospel. And because he has shown his love to you in Jesus.

So, finally, the whole of verse 20.

v.20

What drives this whole point is that a person is justified by works of the law, but rather by the promise of God in the gospel of Jesus. There is only one way to be made right with God, and that is by faith. By believing the promise of the gospel and by depending upon the grace of God that is made known in that gospel.

And the motivating power at work in the life of a Christian, living by faith, is this childlike confidence so clear in the familiar hymn, Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. The motivating power at work in the life of a Christian is this knowledge, this belief, this trust, that Jesus died for me, he gave himself for me. And I, therefore, have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb.

Therefore, I proclaim that gospel to you. I proclaim Jesus to you. That by believing in him you might have eternal life. And to you who already believe that, I proclaim to you that you have been crucified with Jesus, you have died with him. And you have been raised with him in order that you might live in the newness of life.

Rom. 6:12 “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”