



Part 5 – Justified by Faith (2)

Galatians 2:20-21

We are justified in no other way than by faith, or, which comes to the same thing...that we are justified by faith alone. - John Calvin

“We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16). The Bible uses the terms *justified* and *justification* in a legal sense referring to one’s standing before the bar of God’s justice. Justification is that work of grace whereby God declares a sinner righteous by grace through faith

alone on the basis of Christ’s finished work. And yet saved sinners are aware that they still do and desire that which is sinful. How, then, can a sinner, saved though he may be, nevertheless be justified before God who is holy? That is the precise dilemma which the doctrine of justification by faith alone answers.

1. The Scandal of Justification by Faith

Vv. 11-14

- It is hard to believe that God would or even could save sinners by grace alone through faith alone. Even if we allow that grace and faith to play a prominent role in being justified before God, the human heart is forever trying to find ways to author its own salvation.

2. The Promise of Justification by Faith

Vv. 15-19

- The righteousness which justifies sinners is not their own but is the “free gift” of God (Rom. 5:17). God “counts” believers righteous in Christ. Believers are justified solely on the basis of God’s own gift of righteousness imputed to them in Christ (Rom. 3:28; 4:3-6, 8-11, 22-24; 9:8; Gal. 3:6).

3. The Source of Justification by Faith

Vv. 20-21

- Jesus Christ – his finished work and our union with him – is the source of justification by faith alone. When by grace through faith alone we are united to Christ, God justifies us. He declares the believer to be the very righteousness of Christ. Thus union with Christ – being united to him in his death and life – we are declared *just* by God.
- Union with Christ is a chief theme and one of the most blessed doctrines in the New Testament. Jesus referred to this doctrine in his illustration of the vine and its branches. He spoke of our need to “abide” in him. In his High Priestly prayer our Lord declared that he is in his people and his people are in him just as he is in the Father (John 17:20-26). The Apostle Paul makes as many as 200 references to the Christian’s union with Christ.
- The doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ is especially appropriate for Paul’s correction to the errors in the churches of Galatia. Being justified by grace through faith alone is not a license to sin nor does it diminish the importance of the believer’s practical holiness. The doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ tears down any notion that faith and works are at odds in the believer’s life. It exposes as false, the conflict between our being righteous by faith alone apart from works of the law on the one hand, and the ethical godliness of the Christian life on the other.

“Union with Christ is a central New Testament description of Christian identity, the life of salvation in Christ. It entails the giving of a new identity such that in Christ, forgiveness and new life are received through the Spirit. Union with Christ involves abiding in Christ the Vine. It means that through the Spirit, sinners are adopted into the household of God as co-heirs with Christ. It means that God’s Spirit is poured out to make the life and teaching of Jesus real to us. It implicates our worship, our vocation in the world, and our witness as the church.”¹

¹ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) p. 1

A) Being united with Christ, we are dead to sin.

"I have been crucified with Christ..."

- The verb translated "I have been crucified," is in the perfect tense which means it is to be understood as a continuing state: "I am in the state of being crucified with Christ."² This reflects a vital theological conviction that the believer's spiritual state is one of close identification with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. This does not mean that Christ's crucifixion is an ongoing act of atonement. Nor does this mean that our union with Christ in his crucifixion contributes in any way to his atoning work. Rather, the ongoing status of being crucified with Christ means that there is a lasting impact from having been crucified with Christ. Specifically, being crucified with Christ means that we have died both to the law's power to condemn us and the power of sin to control us.
- Jesus alone atoned for the sins of his people on the cross. This was a once for all act which Christ accomplished alone without any augmentation from us. In other words, believers are not "crucified with Christ" as co-redeemers. Rather, via their union with Christ, believers have died in the death of Christ to the power of sin and the condemnation of the law. Through union with Christ, "God attaches us to the events of Christ's life so that they become part of our lives. His story – the story of the cross and empty tomb – becomes our story...We are united to Christ in his crucifixion. As far as God is concerned, we were really and truly nailed to the cross with Christ. It was on the cross that the law carried out its death penalty against us."³

B) Being united with Christ, Christ lives in us.

"...It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me..."

- In verse 20 Paul uses the present tense verb "live" four times. His union with Christ has caused him, paradoxically, to no longer live but rather for Christ to live in him. Being united to Christ, the believer no longer lays claim to his own life: "I no longer live." That is, believers reject the selfishness encouraged upon them by the world. They are no longer dominated by a commitment to temporal pleasures and sinful pre-occupations. Rather, Christ has come to reside in the believer by the Holy Spirit. It is a real life; a real presence. And this reality marks a substantive change in the way the believer lives.
- "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him" (1 John 3:6). Being united to Christ raises within the believer the life of Christ. This new life is characterized by new desires and pleasures. The lure and pleasure of sin begins to fade as Christ lives in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 5 Paul will describe the "fruit" that will grow in the lives of believers as the presence of Christ is mediated to them by the Holy Spirit.

C) Being united with Christ, we live by faith.

"And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..."

- Union with Christ does not mean we have ceased to live in any meaningful sense. We continue on living "in the flesh," that is, in this fallen state. And this is not an illusory existence. Paul is no Gnostic. The life we live in this fallen flesh matters. Right now counts. And until that day that we see our Savior we live by faith. The believer no longer lives by works of the law by which he seeks to be justified. Neither does the believer live under the rule of sinful license. Rather believers live by faith in Jesus, the only means by which they are made right with God.

"...who loved me and gave himself for me."

- Jesus did not die for a vaguely defined population. Nor did Jesus die to secure a potential salvation for potential Christians. Jesus died for every one of his people by name. He died for every one of his sheep specifically. That is why Paul can say that Jesus "loved me and gave himself for me." God loved the world (Jn. 3:16) to be sure. But he also loved each one of his people specifically as he laid down his life for them. God's love is not abstract. It is not an idea. God's love is real, focused, and demonstrated through Jesus in his death for us. If it were possible to add to the efficacy of Christ's love for us and his sacrifice on our behalf, then his death was in vain (vs. 21).

² Douglas Moo, *Galatians* (BECNT) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) p. 170

³ Philip Ryken, *Galatians* (REC) (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005) pp. 74-75