

**2:15 We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles;
2:16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.**

Verse 15 is a continuation of Paul's rebuke of Peter (see previous notes); the implication of his action was that if the Jews and Gentiles were to have fellowship, then the Gentiles needed to believe in Christ AND follow the Jewish dietary restrictions. This was adding to the gospel.

"Gentile sinners" is perhaps meant to put into focus the "the sharp distinction between Jew and Gentile, for what made the Gentiles sinners in the estimation of the Jews was not only that they did not observe the law but also that they did not even possess it and consequently lacked the possibility of obtaining righteousness through it" (Fong). Paul argues that though he and Peter are not "sinners" like the Gentiles, they had come to recognize that if they depended on the law to save them they were doomed, for "man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus."

At this point two ideas need to be carefully defined, for understanding them is crucial to understanding the whole Book of Galatians. These two ideas are "justify" and "works of the law."

***To justify someone means to declare that they are righteous.*¹**

The meaning of justification can only be understood in a legal setting. It is part of the process of judgment. When men have a disagreement they go before the judge. The process whereby their dispute is resolved is called "judgment." When the verdict is given in favor of a party, that person is said to be "justified." He is declared (not made) righteous. He has reached the standard of the law and is acquitted of the accusation.

In the same way, the Bible teaches that only those who conform to the will of God will be accepted and be acquitted. Conformity to the law is the standard we must meet; justification is the legal process by which we are declared to be in a right standing with God. The problem becomes immediately apparent when we realize that no man is able to meet the standards of God. The Jews tried to be justified through the merits of the law but failed. Based on our own actions or deeds, we will surely be condemned (Gal. 2:16; 3:11; Ro. 3:10-12; 3:28).

However, obtaining a good standing with God does not depend on good works but is linked to faith (Gal. 3:16; Ro. 4:13; 9:30-31; 10:6; Phil. 3:9). Justification by faith includes the fact that man is accepted in the sight of God on account of His divine mercy and forgiveness apart from his works (Ps.13:5; 33:20-22; Isa. 55:1-6; Mic. 7:18, Hab. 2:4; Ro. 4:1-5 etc.). In other words, a positive verdict is given to the sinner if he has faith in God's mercy and forgiveness that comes through the death of Christ on the cross as a substitute for his sins. The punishment for sin, the fulfillment of the justice of God, was satisfied in Christ. A man therefore is declared righteous. He is declared to be acceptable before God when he places His trust in the sacrifice God provided.

To state it in another way, the grounds for acceptance by God is faith in Christ, therefore, it is through belief in Christ that we are put in a right standing with God (Ro. 3:21-26); that is, we are justified. The man who believes in Christ, who stakes His whole life on the work of the Savior, is not fictitiously regarded as right before God; he actually is right with God, and God treats him as such.

Works of the law refers to all that is commanded in the law.

Paul uses the expression “works of the law” eight times in his letters and in each case it is contrasted to faith. Although the Jews were trying to earn a standing before God through obedience to the law (legalism), the expression “works of the law” does not denote legalism per se; it refers to all of the deeds demanded by the law (Schreiner, 159). Evidence for this is found in Galatians 3:10b where Paul says, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law.” Likewise, in Galatians 5:3, Paul stresses that those under the law must keep the whole law; he tells them that every man who receives circumcision is under obligation to keep the whole Law. Romans 3:20 also says, “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Even though the Book of James addresses the necessity of good works as a believer, James in no way believes that people can be justified by the law. In James 2:10 he writes, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, *he has become guilty of all.*” James is not saying that by breaking one commandment we have broken all the rest as well, rather he is saying that the law is viewed as a single unit consisting of various commands. To break one is to damage the unit.

Thus, the meaning of “works of the law” in Galatians 2:16 are the “works” prescribed in the Jewish law. That is, men are not made righteous by the observance of Jewish rites and ceremonies. But I believe that we can apply “works” in a broader sense as Hodge does when he says, “the works excluded from the ground of our justification are not only ritual or ceremonial works, nor merely works done before regeneration, nor the perfect obedience required by the law given to Adam, but works of all kinds, everything done by us or wrought in us. . . . When the positive ground of justification is stated, it is always declared to be not anything done by us or wrought in us, but what was done for us. It is ever represented as something external to ourselves. We are justified by the blood of Christ (Rom. v. 9); by His obedience (Rom. 5:19); by His righteousness (ver. 18). This is involved in the whole method of salvation. Christ saves us as a priest; but a priest does not save by making those who come to Him good. He does not work in them, but for them” (Systematic Theology Vol. 3, 138, 140).

Paul continues; justification does not come by efforts to obey the law, for all such efforts will fail “for by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified”; rather, justification comes by faith in Christ. This is not new revelation, for King David had pleaded with God centuries before Galatians was written saying, “do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous” (Ps. 143:2).

In Romans 7:12 Paul said, “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” Failure to keep the law does not mean that the law is defective; it means that people are sinners.

2:17 But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!

2:18 For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

Even though Paul and Peter were Jews, they put their faith in Christ (not the law) so that they could be right with God. Though they attempted to keep the law, when the verdict was in they were shown to be sinners (2:27); they occupied the same place as the Gentiles (2:15). They were found to be sinners when they were seeking Christ (2:17). That is, by trusting in Christ they had abandoned the idea that they would stand before God at the judgment based on their own obedience to the law. This placed them in the same position as the Gentiles as being people who were without the law.

Paul presses this idea even further. Peter, by his separatist actions, was in effect saying that those who trusted in the work of Christ apart from the Mosaic Law were sinning for they were not submitting to the Law. By encouraging the Jews to neglect the laws of God and act like Gentile sinners Paul was promoting godless living; this would be making Christ a promoter of sin. Wouldn't it be better to believe in Christ and hold to the authority of the law than to leave the law and become sinners like the Gentiles? Paul emphatically answers, "No!" Verse 18 explains why. In Paul's words, "If I rebuild what I have once destroyed (that is, if I put back into the place the law which I once held as my means of justification and neglected the new age of salvation inaugurated by Christ), I prove myself to be a transgressor (I have left the gospel of Christ)." Abandoning the Law does not make one the sinner; the sinner is the one who puts the law in the place of grace. In other words, Christians who revert back to the law as their fundamental authority in regulating their conduct have abandoned the grace of God in the gospel. Peter was rebuilding the law that the gospel had broken down, for by his actions he was departing from justifying grace.

NOTE 1:

Much of the following is gleaned from Hodge's Systematic Theology volume 3. I have edited it significantly to shorten it and make it more reader-friendly. The original document may be found at www.ccel.org/ccel/hodge/theology3.toc.html under the section entitled "justification" (pages 115-213). Much of the section entitled "Imputation of Righteousness" is from other sources; Hodge's comments are noted.

Justification is a Forensic Act (relating to, used in, or connected with a court of law)

The Greek word δίκαιος (dikaios), and the English word, righteous, have two distinct senses:

1) They sometimes express **moral character**. When we say that God is righteous, we mean that He is right. He is free from any moral imperfection. When we say that a man is righteous, we generally mean that he is upright and honest; that he is and does what he ought to be and do. In this sense the word expresses the relation which a man sustains to the rule of moral conduct.

2) At other times, however, these words express not moral character, but **the relation which a man sustains to justice**. In this sense, a man is just with regard to whom justice is satisfied, or, against whom justice has no demands.

- “Christ, also,” says the Apostle, “hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust;” the innocent for the guilty (I Pet. 3:18)
- Romans 2:18; 5:19. “As by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

In the presence of his judge, he who is righteous stands free from guilt and deserving punishment, either because he has contracted no guilt (as, e.g., Christ), or, because in the way demanded by the Judge (under the Old Testament by expiatory sacrifice) he has expiated the guilt contracted.

If, therefore, we take the word “righteous” in the former of the two senses above mentioned, when it expresses moral character, it would be a contradiction to say that God pronounces the sinner righteous. This would be equivalent to saying that God pronounces the sinner not to be a sinner, the wicked to be good, the unholy to be holy. But if we take the word in the sense in which the Scriptures so often use it, as expressing relation to justice, then when God pronounces the sinner righteous or just, He simply declares that his guilt is expiated, that justice is satisfied, that He has the righteousness which justice demands. This is precisely what Paul says when he says that God “justifies the ungodly.” (Rom. 4:5) God does not pronounce the ungodly to be godly; He declares that he is accepted as righteous on the ground of what Christ has done for him.

Justification is the Opposite of Condemnation.

Condemnation is not the opposite of either pardon [a release from the penalty of an offense] or of reformation [the amendment of conduct]. To condemn is to pronounce guilty; or worthy of punishment. *To justify is to declare not guilty; or that justice does not demand punishment; or that the person concerned cannot justly be condemned* (p. 122, Therefore, when the Apostle says (Rom. 7:1), “There is therefore, now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus,” he declares that they are absolved from guilt; that the penalty of the law cannot justly be inflicted upon them. “Who,” he asks, “will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.” (Ro. 8:33, 34.) Against the elect in Christ no ground of condemnation can be presented. God pronounces them just, and therefore, no one can pronounce them guilty.

Justification not mere Pardon.

Justification is not mere pardon. A prisoner delivered by a ransom is not pardoned. A debtor whose obligations have been cancelled by a friend, becomes entitled to freedom from the claims of his creditor. But pardon does not proceed on the ground of a satisfaction. When a sovereign pardons a criminal, it is not an act of justice. It is only an act of “benevolence guided by wisdom.” It is not a satisfaction of the law.

The Bible teaches that God is just and therefore there can be no remission of the penalty of sin except on the ground of the satisfaction of justice. Justification must be a judicial act, and neither simply pardon nor the infusion of righteousness. The justice of God is something more than benevolence. The

penalty of sin must be satisfied for God to declare a sinner righteous. Thus, justification is a judicial declaration that justice is satisfied.

The Righteousness of Christ is the Ground of Justification.

The imperative question remains, how shall a man be just with God? If our moral excellence be not the ground on which God pronounces us just, what is that ground? The ground of this justification in the case of the believing sinner is the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

By the righteousness of Christ is meant all he became, did, and suffered to satisfy the demands of divine justice, and merit for his people the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life. The righteousness of Christ is commonly represented as including his active and passive obedience. This distinction is, as to the idea, scriptural. The Bible does teach that Christ obeyed the law in all its precepts [this is active obedience], and that he endured its penalty [this is passive obedience], and that this was done in such sense for his people that they are said to have done it. They died in Him (Ro. 6:1-2). They were crucified with Him (II Cor. 5:17). They were delivered from the curse of the law by his being made a curse for them (Gal. 3:13). He was made under the law that He (p. 143) might redeem those who were under the law (Gal. 4:5). We are freed from the law by the body of Christ. He was made sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). He is the end of the law for righteousness to all who believe (Ro. 10:4). It is by his obedience that many are made righteous (Ro. 5:19.) We obeyed in Him, according to the teaching of the Apostle (Rom. 5:12-21), in the same sense in which we sinned in Adam. The active and passive obedience of Christ, however, are only different phases or aspects of the same thing. He obeyed in suffering. His highest acts of obedience were rendered in the garden and upon the cross. Hence, this distinction is not presented in Scripture as though the obedience of Christ answered one purpose, and his sufferings another and a distinct purpose. We are justified by his blood (Ro. 5:9). We are reconciled unto God by his death (Ro. 5:10). We are freed from all the demands of the law by his body (Rom. 7:4), and we are freed from the law by His being made under it and obeying it in our stead (Gal. 4:4, 5). Thus, the same effect is ascribed to the death or sufferings of Christ and to his obedience, because both are forms or parts of his obedience or righteousness by which we are justified. In other words, the obedience of Christ includes all He did in satisfying the demands of the law.

Imputation of Righteousness

The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer for his justification.

In relation to the law, Imputation means "to ascribe or charge (a person) with an act or quality."

- In Philemon 1:18, Paul said to Philemon to charge the debt of Onesimus to his account. In Greek, "to charge to one's account" is the word "impute", and Philemon had no doubt what Paul meant when he told him that.
- 1 Samuel 22:15: Do not let the king impute anything to his servant or to any of the household of my father. . .

- Leviticus 7:18: if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings should ever be eaten on the third day, he who offers it will not be accepted, and it will not be **reckoned** to his benefit. . .
- 2 Corinthians 5:19: God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not **counting** their trespasses against them. . .

God is righteous, and if salvation is to come at all, it must come in such a way that God's righteousness is satisfied. So here is our predicament:

- God demands righteousness and will surely punish all unrighteousness; He cannot do less.
- We have neither produced righteousness nor can we do anything to make up for past sins.
- Therefore, we stand hopelessly condemned before a just God.

Because we have sinned and deserve death as a punishment, we cannot simply be acquitted, or justice would not be served. However, if the righteous acts of another could be credited to us [that is, if we could receive the credit for what someone else did, and they receive the blame for our actions] we could live.

As odd as this seems, this is precisely what Christ did for us. God will not and cannot relax His justice. Nor can He abolish it. His righteousness will not allow that. But He can, if He chooses to do so, provide a substitute. And herein lies the necessity and design of Christ's death. God must punish sin -- every sin. But freely choosing to save, He "spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32), and in Him the punishment of sin for all His people is fully meted out. Our sin has been punished in Christ and on that basis we go free (Linden). This is imputation.

No one can be truthfully pronounced righteous to whom righteousness cannot rightfully be ascribed. The sinner has no righteousness of his own. God, therefore, imputes to him a righteousness which is not his own. Since the righteousness which the law requires cannot be found in the sinner, nor be rendered by him, God has revealed another righteousness (Ro. 3:21); "the righteousness of God," granted to everyone who believes" (Ro. 3:22). Men are not justified for what they are or for what they do, but for what Christ has done for them. God has set Him forth as a propitiation for sin, in order that He might be just and yet the justifier of them that believe (Hodge).

Imputation not only involves our sins being placed on Christ; it also includes Christ's righteousness being credited to us. By this we do not mean that the righteousness of Christ is instilled into the believer or in any way so imparted to us that it changes our moral character. Imputation never changes the inward state of the person. When you impute goodness to a man, you do not make him good; you credit him with goodness. So when righteousness is imputed to the believer, he does not thereby become personally righteous. Rather, he is treated as righteous, in the legal, although not in the moral or subjective sense. So the imputation of the righteousness of Christ does make the sinner righteous; it gives him a right to the full pardon of all his sins and a claim in justice to eternal life (Hodge).

Imputed righteousness means that we are as righteous as Jesus, for it is His righteousness that has been given to us.