

March 4, 2007

“A Stark Choice” Galatians 2:15-16

FCF: The flattery of believing we can make ourselves right with God.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) We must put our hope in Christ alone (for justification)
(magnet) Because we are not justified by what we do
(magnet) Because we are justified only by what He has done.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” Meaning that, in giving it, we have so very little to gain and so very much to lose. Think about it. We stand to impress those not worth impressing and offending those worth keeping around. *“Flattery will get you nowhere”* – not only in giving it but in receiving it as well. That’s the other side to the expression. Believing your own press, thinking more highly of yourself than you have reason to – it can be addictive, ensnaring, hazardous to your health. And to your very soul as well.

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 2:15-16

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION > a message to us all

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Stark choices lie before us. Such is Paul’s message. Something akin to what a pilot faces while flying through adverse weather conditions. Those with experience know they must rely on their instruments in order to be sure of their position, their velocity, their altitude, and even their bearings. The temptation is to trust your instincts. The temptation is to apply what you know from on the ground to your navigation – what you can see and feel and sense. But that can get you killed. And so in such conditions, a pilot has a stark choice before them – instinct or instruments. What’s it going to be?

We see this in our text. Paul is facing detractors in the province of Galatia – opponents to his message undermining his ministry by undercutting his authority. Paul then makes the case that, despite his opponents’ claims, he has been called by Christ and his message is worth hearing. Indeed, so sure is his standing as an apostle, he was compelled to even go so far as to publicly confront another apostle, Peter, in his error. We talked about that last week in looking at Galatians 2:11-14. Now, here in verses 15 and 16, we see something of a summary of Paul’s appeal to Peter. *“Peter, you should know better. We ourselves have given up on trying to work our way into earning God’s favor. It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That’s our only hope. And we need to live accordingly.”* That’s the crux of what we see here in Paul’s words.

It’s a summary of this letter – “justification” – mentioned here for the first time, three times in two verses. “Justification” – a legal term, the opposite of condemnation, is to declare not guilty, innocent, righteous. And what the apostle is saying is that there is a stark choice between the two options before us as to how we can be justified, how we can be made right with God, and be sure of our standing before Him. We can trust in what we have done. Or we can trust in what Christ has done. Those are the two options before us and they are the only two before us. And, given the fact they each lead to entirely different outcomes, Paul makes it clear we must put our hope in Christ and Christ alone.

I. JUSTIFIED – EITHER BY WHAT WE DO

Option one – pursuing justification by what we do. What does Paul say to this? (READ Galatians 2:15-16). Let’s think carefully about what Paul is saying here.

A) *Works of the Law – What They Are*

These “works of the law” – what are they? What is Paul referring to?

1. Ceremonial law

Partly, he's referring to the Old Testament ceremonial laws. Specifically, as mentioned here in Galatians, the rite of circumcision and the Jewish customs of table fellowship.

2. Moral law

But Paul has more in mind than just the ceremonial law. He's thinking here of the moral law as well – especially as summed up in the Ten Commandments – a concise and yet thorough expression both of the LORD's own heart and His intentions for His people.

B) *Works of the Law – Why They Fail*

And what Paul says here regarding obedience to that law – whether the moral or the ceremonial – could not be more clear (**READ Galatians 2:16c**).

1. Flattering

Now we, of course, would like to flatter ourselves otherwise. We'd like to believe we can obey the law. And, even more, we'd like to believe we have obeyed the law.

2. Delusional

But all that flattery, Paul says, is delusional. We say, "*We can do it.*" And God says, "*No, you can't.*" It's impossible to be justified by works of the law because none of us can keep the law. Oh, perhaps to some degree outwardly but never perfectly inwardly.

Illustration:

Nike has had a great ad campaign – "*Just do it.*" "*There's the finish line. You can see it. You're almost there. Dig down deep. Just do it.*" Now that works in arenas where it's appropriate. But not everywhere. There are some arenas where you just can't do it. The blind can't see. The deaf can't hear. The mute can't speak. The lame can't walk. The dead can't live. And we can't justify ourselves. We can't just do it. We've rebelled, turned our backs, insisted on doing things our own way, bought into the lie. And here's the deal. God is just and we are not. And we can't force or finagle a pardon. We can't undo what's been done, make ourselves into something we're not, press a way forward to gain God's acceptance. We can't make ourselves right with Him.

It's flattering to believe we can. But it doesn't take away from the fact we can't.

Application:

We can't. His standards are too much and we are able to do so very little. The 1st and 2nd greatest commands – to love God and to love our neighbor. We haven't done those things – not in any real consistent ways. Examine your thoughts, your words, your actions. Consider the things you've done and the things you've left undone just recently.

Not that there's anything wrong with God's commands but that there's something wrong with us. Something broken, bent, and twisted inside. Something those commands are meant to show us and to lead us towards. Something that shows how desperate we are and makes so clear that we just can't do it. And that, by His grace, we don't have to.

II. JUSTIFIED – OR BY WHAT HE HAS DONE

We can't be justified, made right with God by what we do. We can't. But we don't have to. And that's because of what He's already done (**READ Galatians 2:16a-b**).

A) *Through Faith*

We are justified "through faith" – laying hold of what Christ has already done.

1. What it does not mean

But let's be clear as to what Paul is saying here. This is not faith in general. President Eisenhower was not on the same page with Paul in saying America (**READ quote**) "*is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don't care what it is.*" This is not just "faith" in anything or faith in addition to something else. Nor is it intellectual conviction.

2. What it does mean

It is faith alone, a personal commitment. It is acknowledging our helplessness and sin, repenting of our righteousness, putting our trust and confidence in Christ. Through faith.

B) *Through Faith in Jesus Christ*

It is through faith in Jesus Christ – shorthand for relying on what Jesus has done.

1. His life of perfect obedience to the law

His perfect obedience to the law on our behalf. He obeyed and lived in our place.

2. His death for our disobedience

And then His death for our disobedience. He was punished and died in our place.

It is the reality of “imputation” to which the Bible speaks (**READ 2 Corinthians 5:20-21**). Our sin and shameful record transferred to Christ. His suffering in our place, securing our pardon. His obedience to God’s commands, securing our standing.

Illustration:

Here’s the picture. Imagine you need a vast sum of money for something important. But you do not have a vast sum. In fact, you are deeply in debt. But along comes a friend who has labored to build a savings account in the bank. He feels sorry for you and pays your bills. Now you are no longer in debt. But you still have a problem. Even with the payment of the debt, you still need this vast sum and you have nothing. So now your friend goes the next step. He has your name added to his bank account so that now you can draw on that money in his name. This is something of what Jesus has done for us. Our debt has been cancelled. And His righteousness has been credited to us.

Application:

(**READ Galatians 2:16a**) Understand it’s not that we’ve been “made righteous.” Oh, He is determined to change us, to make us more like Himself. But that is a gradual process. What Paul is speaking of here is the fact that through faith in Christ, we are “declared righteous.” It is a new standing with God, a real standing with God. Which forces me to press here. Christian, this is how He sees you. This is how He sees you. Is that how you see you? As pardoned and accepted by God through faith alone in Christ alone? This is how He sees you. Is that how you see you? Do you have that assurance?

CONCLUSION:

Here’s another picture of this, the vision of Zechariah, an Old Testament prophet (**READ Zechariah 3:1-5**). This is a picture of what God does for His people when He justifies them. This Joshua was the high priest of Israel. He represented the people of God. And in this vision, the priest is dressed in filthy rags (**READ Isaiah 64:6**). The idea is that this is God’s people in their sin. Yet the angel of the LORD comes (who is to be understood as the Son of God before He became man) and removes these filthy clothes, taking away the sins of the priest. But that’s not all. Joshua is not left naked. He is then dressed in clean, royal robes. The idea being this: Jesus not only takes away the sin of His people; He gives them His very own righteousness as well. It’s an amazing image.

It’s also an invitation. It’s time to let down your guard. It’s time to take a long hard look at your rags, your works, to see them as the filthy things they are and let Jesus clothe you. It’s time to trust Him, to give up on those works, to give yourself to Him that He might give you what He has worked for you. There is a stark choice before us. And a moment upon us as well – to believe the gospel. To believe the gospel, this good news.

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