

Working to be Justified

Galatians 2:11-16

Seeking to be Justified

Finally we are getting a break from the non-stop news about the Kardashians, but I don't think the replacement is much better. Every day we are hearing about the alleged collusion with the Russians in the last presidential election. There is little if any hard evidence, but that hasn't stopped our faithful reporters from finding something to report. The Democrats have been gloating over the prospect of bringing down the Trump administration, while Trump has been denying all charges. Then last week we were treated to a bomb-shell announcement that some evidence had turned up – that the *Clinton* campaign had colluded with the Russians. Now it was the White House's turn to gloat, while the Democrats attempted to brush away the new charges.

What is fascinating is the similarity between the two parties. Each party is charging the other with crimes, and each party is working feverishly to clear itself of any wrongdoing. When any suspicious event is brought up, each side explains what it means, why it was no big deal, and why they are innocent of all charges. Each side attempts to justify itself – to clear itself of any wrongdoing and demonstrate that their actions were innocent and virtuous. This is so important – it has been occupying most of the news for several months.

What makes this doubly fascinating is that all this ruckus is going on among people, many of whom deny any absolute standard of righteousness. Christians have a clear moral standard – the Bible, its moral framework succinctly summarized in the Ten Commandments. Our culture at large once adopted this moral standard and taught it in our schools and universities. Well, those days are long gone! What is taught now is the validity of multiple moral standards, and the highest virtue is to chart your own course through life without the burden of someone else telling you what to do. So you would expect people not to care so much about whether others think they did the right thing or not. Now I realize that the prospect of jail time has a tendency to focus the concern of these politicians. Nevertheless, they all act as though righteousness is something to be pursued, and their virtue is something to be defended.

We are all made in God's image. You can deny it, you can act as though it is not true, but you cannot change reality. God made everyone in His image, which means we are like Him. God's acts, attitudes, and opinions are the universal norm, and we are made to conform to them. We can violate God's law, we can pretend it does not exist or does not apply to us, we can twist it to serve our own ends, but no one can escape it. And at some deep level, everyone knows this. Paul tells us in Romans chapter one that everyone without exception knows God, knows His requirements, and knows there is a coming judgment. In the face of this everyone, either consciously or unconsciously, is seeking to justify himself. Everyone twists reality so that he is found innocent of wrongdoing and virtuous in his behavior. Some may deny moral absolutes, but they cannot escape the pressure to conform to some higher standard, however they define it. All of us naturally live in private the way these politicians behave in public. Everyone is seeking to be justified – to be cleared of all wrong and declared virtuous. We crave to be justified before other people, and we hope to be justified before God. The question we all face, is how can we get through this morally perilous life and be justified in the end?

Two Ways of Seeking to be Justified

Our passage tonight presents us with two different ways to be justified. The chief characters in our passage were all Jews. For 13 centuries the Jewish people had been following the Law handed down to them by Moses. It contained instructions for the Jewish calendar and legal system, the plan of the temple, the sacrifices, and regulations for diet, clothing, hygiene, and many other things. One of the chief provisions was the circumcision of all male children. Circumcision was a sign of ownership – that these people belonged

to God – and clearly distinguished the Jews from all other peoples. Circumcision was so important, the Jews were also known by the term, “The Circumcision.” In our passage Paul mentions the circumcision party. This was not a festival to circumcise men and boys. Paul here means “party” in the sense of group – as in the Republican Party. The circumcision party was that group who were circumcised, i.e. the Jews. Paul used this term to highlight how central circumcision was to Jewish identity.

God gave the Law to Moses as the way for the people whom God had chosen to live pleasing to Him. But over time the Jews began to think that the Law made them better than other people. They forgot that God chose them as a nation when they were slaves in Egypt without the Law, and began to think that God chose them to be His people because they kept the Law. They were especially proud of their circumcision, and felt that it made them better than the heathen gentiles around them. Paul will explain later in Galatians the purpose of the Law, but what we need to know tonight is that the Jews had come to think that God accepted them because they were so good – because they kept the Law. Paul explains in detail in his letter to the Romans that in fact no one keeps the Law. Everyone – even the best Jew – failed to keep the Law. Let me read Paul’s conclusion about the virtue of both Jew and gentile:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “...in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”
Romans 3:11-12, 16-18

This was a minority opinion! Not only did the Jewish people of Paul’s day believe that God accepted them because they kept the Law, they were furious with Paul for teaching otherwise.

Paul was once one of them. Paul was the best Jew of his day. And what was the defining aspect of Paul’s life? What was the pinnacle of his Jewish virtue? He viciously persecuted anyone he could find who believed in Jesus. Paul was part of the mob that murdered Stephen, and Paul traveled all over Jerusalem and the surrounding cities hunting down Christians and jailing them. Americans are distraught today over the divisions in our society, but our problems are nothing compared to the hostility between the Jewish establishment and the Jews who followed Jesus. A lot of people hate Donald Trump, but so far I have not heard of anyone who is planning to assassinate him. There has been some violence between the Antifa and conservatives, but it has not yet devolved to the point of mob murder and a sustained program of vigilante justice.

Paul’s attacks on the church came to an abrupt halt when Jesus appeared to Paul and called Paul to follow Him. Paul instantly changed from a persecutor of the church to one of its foremost leaders. He learned from Jesus that no one could do enough good deeds to cancel out the evil deeds he had done. As he wrote to the Romans, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” The Jews who devoted their lives to following the Law, and who trusted in their obedience to save them, hated Paul and they hated his message. Paul had ceased being an enemy of the church and had become an enemy of the Jews.

Peter’s Hypocrisy

It is understandable that if Paul were overthrowing 1300 years of religious tradition that all godly people practiced he would be attacked. But that is not what Paul did. In fact Paul and the other Jewish followers of Jesus continued to keep the Jewish Law – with qualifications. Three points are critical here. First, Jesus made it clear that no one could become righteous by keeping the Law. Righteousness can be attained only through faith in Jesus. Second, the gentiles, who had never had the Jewish Law, were not required to keep it. Third, the Jews were free to follow the Law as a custom, but not for salvation. The

Jewish followers of Jesus were free to follow the Law or not to follow the Law. Their behavior depended on the circumstances. Jesus was central. The point of overwhelming importance was to direct people to believe in Jesus. Peter and Paul might keep the customs of the Law when they were in a community of Jews to avoid making a scene. Their goal was to talk about Jesus, not to argue about the Law. But when they were with gentiles, it would make sense to keep the gentile customs so that they could proclaim Jesus with minimal distraction. This meant violating the customs of the Jewish Law, but remember, righteousness comes by believing in Jesus. The Law neither adds nor subtracts from this. But what you do with the Law might very much add or subtract to one's ministry.

Paul did not travel all over the Mediterranean basin preaching that the Law was bad, or that Jews should stop following the Law. Paul himself followed the Law when he was in Jewish communities. No, Paul's crime was in declaring that the Law was useless in obtaining favor with God. Again, in his letter to the Romans Paul wrote, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." Paul wrote this about everyone – good Jew, bad Jew, good gentile, bad gentile. Everyone who has ever been born, except only for Jesus, was born and lived wicked in God's sight – including those wonderful Jews who devoted their lives to keeping the Law. And for this – a lifetime of toilsome study, personal deprivation, and scrupulous obedience – Paul said they would go to hell. Worse, Paul preached that those wicked gentiles could enter God's Kingdom by doing nothing – nothing at all! – except believe in Jesus. This was not only a vile heresy, it was cultural suicide and a personal attack on the Jewish leaders. Is it any wonder the Jews hated Paul? You would have hated him, too! In 2 Corinthians Paul recounts some of the attacks he received from fellow Jews:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers.... 2 Corinthians 11:24-26

The hatred was so thick you could cut it with a knife. The Jewish establishment considered Paul an enemy just as they had considered Jesus, so they mounted an empire-wide program to counter his teaching. Everywhere Paul went, Jews followed him, and they taught that Paul's message had been incomplete. These itinerant Jewish teachers argued that it was fine to believe in Jesus, but if you wanted to enter the Kingdom of God, you had to keep the Law also – gentiles included. This amounted to a different gospel – a false gospel. Although the Law was good – it came from God, after all – no one could keep it! In the lives of sinful people, the Law became a curse. This is why Paul cursed anyone who taught this destructive "gospel." But the Jewish teachers were clever and persuasive, so they deceived a lot of people. They deceived the church in Galatia, which is why Paul wrote this letter.

Now you can see how Peter got into trouble, and why it was so serious. Paul uses the name "Cephas" here, but it is the apostle Peter he is talking about. As was his habit, Peter followed the customs of the Galatians when he went to visit them. He, a Jew raised in keeping the Law, had learned that Jesus had kept the Law for us, and that believing in Jesus meant the Law had no further claim on him. Peter was completely free to follow the Jewish Law when he was in Jewish communities as a cultural custom, but the Law has no power to save anyone. Peter was also free to follow gentile customs when he was in gentile communities. So when the Jews showed up in Galatia, you would expect Peter to continue following the gentile customs. For him to revert to keeping the Law first of all was very rude. It was an insult to the gentile Galatians. But worse, far worse, Peter's change of habit cast doubt on the gospel. Peter switched to following the law because he was afraid of the circumcision party – the Jews who were demanding that

everyone keep the Law as a condition of salvation. This is *not* the gospel – it is a vicious perversion of the gospel. No doubt Peter did not immediately grasp the deadly significance of what he did, but there was no doubt about his error after Paul confronted him.

Paul's Gospel

Paul states clearly these two means of justification in verse 16. Let us read that verse again.

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. Galatians 2:16

Here Paul declares that no one will be justified by the works of the Law, but only through faith in Jesus. Notice that Paul does not denounce the Law. He only states the limits of the Law. As a guide to moral behavior, surely the Law has some value. How should men think about the women around them? They should flee from making sexual advances and be faithful to one wife. If only Harvey Weinstein had kept this law! But keeping this law will not grant you acceptance by God. When you stand before God, will you be declared innocent, or guilty? Will you be justified or not? Paul claims that no one will be declared innocent by works of the Law. “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” You may have lived an exemplary life. You may never have lied, cheated, murdered, or been sexually impure. Nevertheless, you will not be found innocent. Everyone slips and commits some sin, but even if you never sin in deed, you sin in your thoughts. You hate your teacher, you are envious of your classmate who gets better grades than you, you long to have sex with the pretty girl in the front row. “No one does good, not even one.” “By works of the law no one will be justified.” If you are counting on your good life to please God, you are doomed.

The other path to justification is faith in Jesus. Instead of doing good works all your life, you trust in Jesus to save you. At this point we need to clarify what we mean by faith. In our culture faith is often conceived as a feeling state. People talk about the power of faith, and they measure faith as if they were measuring flour for a loaf of bread. Faith is not a power, it is a vehicle – and although faith can be strong or weak, it is not a measurable substance. The best synonym for faith is trust. Trust is a vehicle for a relationship. When we say you have faith in Jesus, we mean you trust Him. If you have faith in a coach, you trust him to know the game, to understand you, and to possess the ability to help you improve your performance. If you have faith in a builder, you trust him to understand how to build a house and to construct the house you ask him to build for you. If you have faith in Jesus, you trust Him to perform what He promises – to save you from your sins. A critical part of faith is trust in what is said. If you have faith in your coach, you trust what he says about your play and how you need to change. If you have faith in a builder, you trust that he is telling you the truth about how to construct your house. And if you have faith in Jesus, you trust Him to tell you the truth about how to please God and about how to live. Sometimes faith is accompanied by feelings of confidence, and sometimes feelings of peace. But not always. And sometimes those feelings of confidence and peace can be present when someone is untrustworthy. Feelings may accompany faith, but faith is not connected to feelings. The issue is trust. Do you trust the object of your faith? If you say you have faith in Jesus, do you trust what He says? Do you believe that Jesus tells the truth?

So the critical issue is this: what does Jesus say about being justified before God? Jesus says that when we trust in Him, God will give us the credit for Jesus' perfect life. We cannot keep the Law, so if it were up to our efforts, we would be doomed. Jesus did keep the Law – perfectly, flawlessly. His death on the cross was the punishment which we deserved for our sins, and when we believe in Jesus, we get the credit for His perfect life. So what is our position before God? Innocent of all sin and righteous in all our acts. When God looks at our moral character, He sees Jesus. God sees in us perfect love, compassion on the

sick and lonely, generosity toward the poor, patience with the immature, diligence and faithfulness in our work, sexual purity, etc. Now of course in this life we only partially live up to those virtues, We do still fail. But remember, that is exactly why Jesus died. Jesus paid the penalty for your sins this morning and afternoon, the sins you are committing right now, your sins tonight and your sins tomorrow. If you trust in Jesus, those sins are paid for, and your relationship with God is as an innocent child – no your relationship to God is as Jesus, as God's beloved innocent, faithful son. If you believe in Jesus, God does not look at you as a sinful failure. God is bursting with pride and overflowing with love toward you – just as He is toward Jesus. As Paul said in Romans chapter eight, for *you* there is no condemnation. None! For you there is only the love of God, which will never leave you and can never be torn away from you. Do you believe this? Is it true that God loves you this way in spite of your vile sins? Do you really have faith in Jesus, or have you just been saying you do?

The Good News

Perhaps you are wondering why we are spending a good part of the evening talking about a doctrinal dispute between two first century Jews. The reason is that the same issues are present in every generation, and in your life right now. Because today you and everyone around you is doing what those politicians are doing. At least in your own mind, if not out loud, you are seeking to justify yourself by your good works. You feel guilty for showing up late to class with your assignment badly written, but you justify it based on the urgency of other classes. You snap at your roommate in anger because she didn't clean up after dinner last night, but you rationalize that someone has to teach her some manners. You are resentful that Eddie did not follow your wonderful advice, but you excuse your anger based on the greater good for God's Kingdom. And it is not just you. Everyone does this – all the time. No one goes through life thinking he is wrong. All human beings are made in the image of God, so the drive for righteousness is built into us. So we interpret the world in such a way that we look like moral people. The problem is that these are false interpretations. God's judgment is that such rationalizations fail, and we are guilty of real, punishable sins. Apart from Jesus, everyone is a condemned sinner awaiting judgment – and in some deep place in our psyche, everyone knows it. We are a race haunted by guilt and tormented by inevitable doom.

These days a lot of people deny the reality of an afterlife, but if you ask those people who believe in heaven how to get there, the answer is always to be a good person. Even Christians will give some variation of this answer. This is the universal human response to our guilt and doom. We are just like those first century Jews. We think that if we do enough good deeds, God will admit us to heaven. And we partly believe it, because it makes sense to us. We generally treat each other on a sliding scale of morality, but God does not grade on a curve. And just as those first century Jews were outraged that filthy gentiles could enter the Kingdom of God without circumcision and keeping the Law, so today we are outraged that Trump supporters, and police officers, and Black Lives matter activists, and communists and capitalists and ISIS crusaders and every imaginable kook and criminal can be saved by believing in Jesus. Because although we say we believe in Jesus, to a large extent we demand that anyone who would be a Christian should keep the current moral code. Like the first century Jews, those of us who have succeeded in living what looks to us like a moral life feel cheated that all our efforts count for nothing before God.

This scripture before us says that you do not have to justify yourself. In fact you *cannot* justify yourself. But if you believe in Jesus, you are already justified. You cannot do enough good works to be acceptable to God. You cannot explain your actions in a way that is acceptable to God. Every act you do every day of your life is tainted with sin. The good news, the gospel, is that you are already accepted by God when you believe in Jesus. This is not merely a hope for the future. It is a present and permanent reality. When you place your trust in Jesus, God considers His death to be the just punishment for your sin, and His good deeds to be yours. When you stand before God, will you be declared innocent, or guilty? Will you be justified or not? Everyone seeks to be justified – to be cleared of all wrong and declared virtuous – and this

is a reality when you place your trust in Jesus.

Too Good to be True

Does this sound too good to be true? It *is* too good to be true, but it *is* true! The first century Jews thought Paul's gospel of justification through faith in Jesus was so dangerous and offensive, they sought to kill him. But to wretched sinners crushed by the guilt of their sins, this was a miracle of grace. If you are here tonight because you are a good person and think that God is pleased with your good deeds, I warn you that you are in danger of hell. If you are here tonight struggling with sin, Jesus welcomes you. Jesus says, "Come, I have paid for your sins. And if you are fearful that you might commit those same sins again tomorrow, I have paid for those sins, too." Jesus says, "Listen to me! Believe what I am telling you! God will accept you if you trust me – but only if you trust me."

The miracle of grace is that God saves terrible sinners. First He relieves them of the burden of guilt for their sins. Then He creates within them the desire and the power to give up those sins. If you are not a terrible sinner, you face a terrible eternity. But if you *are* a terrible sinner, there is hope for you. This is what Jesus says. Is He telling the truth?

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