

We are justified by faith in Jesus not good works

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[0:00] So, if you have your Bibles open, perhaps you can turn back with me to that section that! but especially chapter 2, verses 11 to 16. So, we're thinking about the reality that at the! the heart of the good news of the gospel is Paul brings it to the Galatians, that we are justified by faith in Christ Jesus and not our good works. In a sense, we're actually asking the big question, how can I be declared right and acceptable by God? And I imagine, given that we're all in church this evening, we will at least to some degree have thought about that question. And it's a vital question for someone like John Calvin coming to this issue. He said, this is the hinge upon which true religion turns. This truth of how we are justified is a truth that matters. To put it in its legal context, because it's a courtroom word, how can you and I hear God's verdict of justified as opposed to condemned on our lives? This is a question with eternal significance.

And it's a question that Paul brings to Peter and then brings to the wider church and brings to us in the context of this letter. So, we've been thinking about the good news that we must never forget. We've thought this morning that this is good news that came from God. It's not man-made. And now we come to the heart of the matter. Chapter 2, verse 16. A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. Which really introduces for us that sense that there are two basic answers that are given to the question, how can I be right with God? How can I receive a positive verdict on my life? One set of people, and this includes every religion other than Christianity, but many world views would say, well, I will justify myself. And we can do that without religion, my level of morality, a particular performance, a particular form of goodness will affect my justification. God will accept me because I do this, that, and the next thing. We can also do it with our religion also. I think that God will accept me because of my spiritual disciplines, because I think enough, feel enough, do enough. By this view, and this was the view of the false teachers, it is possible for us to earn salvation, to earn favor with God. And as we thought about this morning, this is what Paul opposes.

Because the only answer that counts, the only answer that brings freedom and that brings life, is to understand that we are justified only by faith in the Lord Jesus. The only performance we want to trust in, the only person we want to rely on for our acceptance is not ourselves and our merit, our record, it's that of the Lord Jesus. And the good news that we find in the book of Galatians is that while the default setting of the human heart is that tendency to aim to or to imagine we can justify ourselves, Paul will say to us very clearly, well, that will never do, that will never work, but there is still good news from God in the gospel of grace that says Jesus is our justification.

That we don't have to say, I feel I am good enough, we can know Jesus is good enough and I am in him. That faith brings us into life with God, right standing with God when we are in Christ. And everybody must choose, you know, how we are going to operate, imagining that we just are justified.

[4:23] You know, who will we choose to trust in? Will it be ourselves day by day or will we day by day be trusting in the Lord Jesus for our justification? And Paul writes this letter to urge his initial readers, but to urge us also to place all of our hope in Jesus. Not some of our hope in Jesus and some of our hope in ourselves, but all of our hope in him. To rest on him alone for salvation, to turn away from the temptation to try and justify ourselves. To rescue us from the lie of legalism that

says by a certain ability in law keeping, we can earn approval from our God. So we're going to look at two things. We're going to look at the truth that we find in verses 15 and 16, and then we're going to look at the threat as we think about what happens with Peter and the legalists. So let's think first of all about the truth that we are justified by faith in Jesus and not good work. So if you were here this morning, you'll remember Paul is telling an extended piece of autobiography. And as we come to verse 11, we understand that here we come to a point of high drama. Because here we have two apostles on different sides of an argument.

There is a clash, and we're going to come back to it. But to just remind us, when Peter came to Antioch, Paul opposed Peter to his face because Peter stood condemned. And so we get this extended treatment of what was going on and how that was to be resolved. But in the middle of it, we come to the great truth that we're going to think about first. This one-sentence summary of the gospel that Paul gives to us that we are not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. And it's a wonderful answer because it says to us there is only one way that a person is declared to be right with God, regardless of who we are. And it's a really clear answer. And he wants us to hear it and not get him wrong. And so he says the same thing three times. Repetition for emphasis. Did you notice?

It's like he tries to think of every possible way. A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we too have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith and not by the works of the law. Because by the works of the law, no one will be justified. Only by faith in Christ Jesus, not by our work, our effort, our earning. That's how we're justified. Interestingly as well, this word is a covenant word. And he's going to come to that and we'll get there.

So to think about it slightly different, how can we know blessing from God and not curse from a holy God? We're all in covenant relationship. And whether our faith is in Jesus or not depends whether we are experiencing blessing or not. And again, the way into a life of blessing from God is through faith in Jesus. It's not through our efforts to try and keep God's law, to try and be a good person, or to go to church and read and pray. Again, Jesus, when he was teaching, the people in his day wanted to make that really clear to people who were relying on the law.

[8:05] He told the parable once of the two men who went to the temple to pray. There was the Pharisee and there was the tax collector. And the Pharisee stood up in front of everyone, wanted everyone's attention, and his prayer was all about himself. It's as if he was saying to God, God, look at me.

Look at my record. You should be so pleased to have me in your team. But then there's the tax collector who wouldn't even look up to heaven and beat his breast saying, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Remember the shocking sting in the tail of that parable?

It was the tax collector who went home justified and not the religious Pharisee. It's the prayer that says, God, have mercy on me, a sinner, that justifies us. Not God, look at my record.

And Paul wants his listeners to understand that because this is clearly something that came as new news to the religious Jews of Jesus. They it shouldn't have, but it did. It seemed like they weren't used to the language of grace and faith, that certain schools of teaching were saying to them, you need to earn God's approval by your good works. And so they come to Galatia and they want to apply that message to these new Christians. Yes, trust in Jesus, but also become like us.

Add the laws of Moses, add the right kind of diet, add the right holy days. And Paul urgently needs to build the case for God's gospel. The good news that we are justified only through faith in Jesus, not by adding our works. And what he does, because remember it's a courtroom word, is he draws on a couple of witnesses. In chapter three, we see a couple of witnesses being called. And the first of those, which would have been a surprise to the Jews, is Abraham. We meet Abraham there in chapter six, chapter three, verse six. So also Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

[10:17] If you've got time, you can read the rest of Galatians three and you discover that it's all about how Abraham is justified by faith, how he is declared in right relationship with God through faith, how he

claims the promises of God through faith and not by law keeping. In fact, it couldn't be law keeping because the law didn't come for another 430 years. But the basic idea is that Abraham is the father of faith, but not just for the Jews. See, a Jewish person would be perfectly happy with Abraham as the father of their faith. What Paul does is he reminds them that God spoke the gospel when he gave the promise to Abraham, gave the promise to Abraham, all nations will be blessed through you.

Verse nine, so those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. Abraham is the father of our faith as Gentile Christians if we have faith in Jesus.

The way into covenant blessing is through following Abraham, which involves living not by law, but living by faith. And we know where faith terminates. It terminates on the Lord Jesus.

So that's one witness that he calls, and that would have surprised them. The second witness, more an allusion, is Adam. Chapter three, verse 10, we didn't read it, but we'll read it now. Galatians three, verse 10, all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse as it is written.

And cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.

Clearly, no one who relies on the law is justified before God because the righteous will live by faith.

[12:05] The law is not based on faith. On the contrary, it says the person who does these things will live by them. And so all this language of curse takes us back to Adam, takes us back to the garden, takes us back to that moment of rebellion and disobedience and the law being broken.

And the reality is, Paul brings it, that since Adam, none of us can keep the law perfectly. That all of us are born with a sin nature that leads us into all kinds of sin.

And so again, the way into covenant blessing, the way into a restored relationship, is never going to be our good works. Because we cannot claim 100% obedience, 100% love, 100% of the time.

Ever since Adam, that's been the reality. The good news of the gospel, though, is that there is a true and second Adam. And what does that Adam do? Verse 13 of Galatians 3, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole or hung on a tree. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. So we hear it again and again and again. It's by faith. It's through Jesus.

And here in particular, it's through Jesus the Redeemer. The one who came to set us free from the curse of the law that has been broken by us. And how does he free us from that? By becoming a curse for us. By taking on himself all of our penalty. The laws that we have broken, he goes to the cross.

[14:03] And pays the price in full. He takes the curse. He experiences the anger, the forsakenness of God, so that by faith we can know blessing. The battle was Jesus's. The blessing becomes ours.

And this becomes good news for us when we learn to mind the gap. You know, that familiar message you hear on a train journey, mind the gap between the platform and the train. And when we think about the gap between us and God, naturally I think all of us, we know there is a gap. We know that we're not on the same level as God. But we have a tendency to think that the gap is perhaps not that wide.

That often our perspective becomes faulty. And when that happens, we tend to have a lower view of God's holiness than is proper.

We don't consider God in his glorious perfection. We don't reckon with his holy hatred of sin. We don't consider the truth that he sees and knows everything about us. That while we look on the surface, God looks at the heart. And also, we can so very easily tend towards a higher view of our own goodness than is right and proper. So instead of comparing ourselves with God's perfect standard, we'll compare ourselves with other people and say, well, I'm basically doing okay. I'm not as bad as that person over there. We can very quickly excuse and minimize our failures and our failings.

It was circumstances or it's my temperament. We can persuade ourselves that we are better than we are.

[16:00] So that we can think, well, maybe it's just going to be a few New Year's resolutions. Maybe it'll just take a little bit more moral and

religious effort. Maybe if I could just be a bit of a better neighbor, then God will accept me. Because really the gap's not that wide.

That's not what Paul says. That's not what the gospel says. That's not what God says. Not what his word says. But the gospel does say to us, we need to mind the gap. To recognize that there is a gap between us and God, but it's not platform to train door. It's the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. And as we understand the gap between a perfectly holy God and us as sinners, then we begin to see and to appreciate the gospel. That the only way to bridge the gap is faith in Jesus Christ, the one and only perfect mediator. The one who kept the law perfectly for us. The one who paid the penalty for our breaking of the law. That united to him is the only way to be brought into blessing, into life with God. He is the only way to receive a positive verdict and to be welcomed home to our God.

In the 19th century, there was a famous tightrope walker by the name of Charles Blondin. He did lots of stunts, got a lot of publicity and probably his most famous was when he sent a rope across the Niagara Falls. He was an incredibly accomplished guy by all accounts. He could walk it. He could cook an omelette. Famously he cooked an omelette while walking across that tightrope. I'm not sure how he did that. And he would push a wheelbarrow over it from time to time and he would ask for volunteers. Who's going to get in? Who's willing to get in the wheelbarrow? Who wants to be transported from Canada to America for free? And he was very skilled and everyone saw him and he never failed, but interesting, nobody ever got in. There was always, you would think, a huge risk of failure.

[18:09] The gospel, by contrast, offers us complete security. We have the certainty in Christ. We have one who takes us from spiritual death to spiritual life. We have one who brings us from darkness into God's wonderful light. We have one who will bring us from earth to heaven into the new creation.

And the message of the gospel is get into Christ and he will bring us to God. To place our faith in the cross of Christ and we will be saved.

It's this wonderful, liberating truth that we are justified by faith in what Jesus has done, not by our good works, that had such a dramatic impact on Martin Luther. This idea of being justified by faith is so central to the Reformation when it happened. Martin Luther, before experiencing, discovering this wonderful truth, was an incredibly committed monk. Somebody who was deeply troubled by a sense of sin felt himself under God's judgment and so his response was to live an incredibly disciplined life. So much fasting, it's so many hours spent in prayer, it's so many hours spent in the confessional that he was kind of wearying the other monks and priests and a life dedicated to good works. But the result of all that was that he continued to remain miserable and he lacked peace. And he was fearful and even resentful of a God, the judge, who demands righteousness. Because he knew having tried his best, he couldn't match up to God's perfect righteousness. But one day, as he was reading in Romans chapter 1, he discovered the joy of justification by faith. And the light went on and he understood that this righteousness wasn't something that had to be earned, it was a gift of God through faith in Jesus, the righteous one. And Martin Luther's testimony, having discovered that, was this. He said, Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through open gates.

[20:43] Gone was the fear, gone was the resentment, gone was the insecurity, gone was the spiritual depression, gone was the desperate attempts to earn God's favor, and instead the joy of living as a child of God.

I wonder today, maybe there's somebody here and you're aware of guilt. Maybe you feel a lack of peace in your own heart and soul. Maybe you recognize that instinct of trying to prove yourself to God.

The answer to that is the gospel. As one hymn writer said, it's to lay our deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet. Rest in Him, in Him alone, gloriously complete. That's the truth. But now we need to see the threat. Why does Paul introduce this great truth? And we need to see the threat of legalism and hypocrisy. But we're going to shift for just a moment to a galaxy far, far away. Apologies, it was Christmas time and I couldn't think of any better analogies. But thinking about the story, if you know it, of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker, their story sees a shift from master and apprentice, friendship, you know, together on the same side, to a movement to become enemies. Anakin turns

to the dark side and galactic conflict. These two Jedis, once friends, separated on other sides of a great conflict. In chapter 2 of Galatians, verse 11 to 13, we recognize that this is a huge moment in the church.

Here are two apostles that have shifted. Remember back in verse 9, when they're in Jerusalem, Peter and Paul shake hands, the right hand of fellowship, the grace of God is recognized.

But in verse 11, Paul is opposing Peter to his face, saying he stands condemned. And what we need to do if we put ourselves in the story is we need to recognize how significant this is.

[23:30] Will the church of the Lord Jesus be torn apart by this conflict? Will there be a church for Jewish people and a church for Gentile people? Will the gospel be a power strong enough to bridge that great social, cultural, religious divide or not? Will the true message of the gospel survive? Because if this church is pulled apart, then some parts of the church are believing that it's not Jesus alone that justifies. We need to add certain things, namely the law of Moses. So this moment matters.

So what's the problem? Let's look at the problem. In verse 12, it becomes obvious that there are some legalists who've arrived. Before certain men came from James, this is what was going on. Peter was quite happily eating with the Gentiles. To eat with someone was a sign of fellowship and hospitality. Clearly, Peter believes that these are brothers and sisters in Christ, full members of God's kingdom.

But when those legalists arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

And the impact of that, as this leader of the church separates himself, stops eating, stops sharing fellowship, saying, I'll stay on this side of the room and the Gentile Christians can stay over there, what happens is that others are being led astray as well. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy so that by their hypocrisy, even Barnabas, even Barnabas, the son of encouragement, he also is led astray.

And so the issue that Paul faces head on is the issue of Peter's hypocrisy. Now remember the word hypocrisy is a word that's drawn from the theater. It has that idea of putting on a mask to play a part.

[25:40] And Paul uses that language to emphasize that Peter is masking his belief in the gospel to play a different part. He knows that these Gentile Christians really are his brothers and sisters. They really are justified by faith in Jesus, but his belief and his behavior don't line up because now out of fear he's refusing to have fellowship.

His gospel belief, we can read Galatians 3, 28, is this, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you're all one in Christ Jesus.

Peter believes that, but in his hypocrisy, his behavior is saying, your faith in Jesus by itself, that's not enough. You got to add some moral performance. You got to add some of the Mosaic law in order to really be part of our team. And it's jarring. As Paul says, it's not in line with the truth of the gospel. He's guilty of hypocrisy. He's playing a part that he knows is not true.

Picture an actor at a theater. And the audience is full. They've come to watch Sleeping Beauty. And one of the key figures comes onto stage and starts reading from Romeo and Juliet.

Playing a part, but they've got the wrong script. Peter is doing that. And Paul opposes him and condemns him for doing that. Because the script the Christian life should follow is the script of the gospel. And the gospel says, we're justified by faith in Jesus, full stop. But when he acts a different part and says, it's Jesus plus, then Paul opposes him for the sake of the gospel to get him back on the path of the gospel.

[27:58] Because Paul understands this moment could be deadly to the good news of God's grace. As he said in chapter 5, verse 4, you who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ. You've fallen away from grace. This becomes a salvation issue if they believe this lie. If we add self to the story of how we are put right with God, we will destroy the message of God's grace. If we add my performance to that of Jesus, if I think I need to be good enough to earn God's favor, to earn my place at God's table, we're going to find ourselves strapped into just a horrible roller coaster of pride and despair, up and down forever, denying what would give us peace and security.

If we have a good day when we feel that we've ticked the religious boxes, and maybe we'll feel secure and we'll have a sense of pride. But then when the bad days come, and they do, then we're back to guilt and despair. We're like Luther, the miserable monk. And so we always need to beware of a Jesus plus mindset when it comes to how am I put right with God? How do I come to enjoy the blessing of life with God?

And so the confrontation between Paul and Peter stands as a warning for the church in all times, in all places. It's a warning for those who are considering Christianity, and also a warning for us as we present Christianity, that we never give the impression that somebody needs to clean up their act first. If we find ourselves hearing a presentation of the gospel of Christ, and we say, I don't think I'm good enough yet, then it's a sign that we haven't understood God's grace.

The Bible is really clear that you and I, we can't, we just can't clean up our act enough to match God's standards. We will never be good enough. And we praise God that Christianity was never intended to act that way. It's not tick the right boxes, perform enough religious acts in order to earn it.

Rather, we're invited to believe by faith Jesus is good enough, and I trust in Him and in Him alone. But it's also a warning for us as Christians, because we can so easily drift back into that kind of mindset.

[30:54] What makes us feel good about ourselves? What makes us think that our performance is earning God's favor? If Peter could be tempted to hypocrisy, if Barnabas could be tempted to hypocrisy, if the rest of the Jews in that moment could be tempted, then so can we.

And in those areas where we are tempted towards pride, whether that's our hard work, our good theology, our spiritual disciplines, those will become our points of weakness. And so we need to guard our hearts, and we need to guard our hearts with the truth of the gospel. And so Paul takes us to the heart of that good news that we must never forget. And that's why I wanted to start the year here in the book of Galatians, because I think it's always so important for us to return to the heart of the gospel, and to stick there, and to never leave. And to help, just as we close, to suggest three practices or three things here that I hope we might be able to make use of, make use of at least one of them wherever we are in our journey of faith. And the first is a picture to display.

We were talking about this this afternoon, having just moved house. I don't know where people stand in what are the things that you most like to avoid when you move house. For me, putting up pictures is definitely at the top. Tried with some failures to start that process. But here is a picture that I want to hang before us that I hope will be helpful. Very simple. There are two lines, and they are growing wider apart. Because I think those two lines that grow wider apart can help us to think about what Christian maturity looks like. I imagine for many of us, we have that experience that the more that we go on in the Christian life, the more we become aware of God's holiness and of our own sin. So many of the saints of church history, so many of the lives of God's people in the Bible, you get that sense, don't you? That that's what they recognize, that the more they go on in the Christian life, the more they see the gap between the holiness of God and our own sinful hearts. But as we are aware of that gap, and even of a growing gap, we thought about what does the gospel add? The gospel adds the vital ingredient of the cross of

Christ, which stands for us as the great bridge between us and our God. But here's the thing that I want us to think about, that as we go on in the Christian life, we don't leave the gospel message of the cross behind.

Rather, we need for the cross to become bigger in our experience. As we go on, and as we understand how holy God is, and how sinful we are, we need to always be experiencing how great the gospel is, that Jesus is the perfect mediator who bridges the gap, who does and can bring us home to God. So we need to settle our hearts and minds on the gospel, because that's the hope for us when we fail. Because actually, the more mature we are when we sin, it could be so easy for us to feel crushed if the gospel wasn't large in our lived experience. This is our confidence when our faith is tested. This is our security when we face suffering and death, that it's because I'm united to Jesus that I am justified. We need to believe it, and we need to live it. So there's a picture to display before our mind's eye. There is also a prayer to offer.

[35:00] And again, this is so simple and foundational. Let me encourage you to think about making the Lord's prayer a daily portable prayer. A prayer for every day and on the go. Why? Because in just a few short

sentences that many of us have probably already memorized, it reminds us of God's glory and His holiness, and it leads us every day to pray, forgive us our sins. This week I came across a short essay from C.S.

Lewis entitled, Forgiveness. And in that, he essentially is saying we find it really easy to make excuses for our own sin. You know, I couldn't help it. I'm not really to blame. My circumstances were hard. And we find it really easy to justify ourselves. But when we do that, we don't really come to God looking for forgiveness. We're looking for Him to take our excuse and say, well, that's okay, you couldn't help it. But you know what the gospel does for us? It gives us the freedom to be honest, to look steadily and honestly at our sin in its horror, its ugliness, and its shame, and to own it, and to confess it, knowing there is forgiveness because Jesus paid the price.

Jesus has redeemed us from the curse. There's a prayer that we can offer. And then there is this wonderful promise to claim. Let me encourage us to think about memorizing this little bit of scripture, even just verse 16, to preach it to ourselves every day, that we would know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. That we would remind ourselves every day, Jesus has done everything for my salvation, that we would claim it by faith, and then in that strength, we would then seek to live for His praise and glory. Let's pray together.