

The Justice We Deserve

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[0 : 0 0] We're looking at this thing from... Let's put this around here. We're looking at this... I've got to play skipping this. Thank you very much.

Thanks, Liz. The passage that Chris just read for us has to do with one essential problem. And it's, I think, the most difficult problem the Christian faith has to encounter and that perhaps your faith has to encounter.

And Paul, in writing to the Galatians and describing what happened to him in Antioch, tells you about this problem. The essential problem is the good and loving man.

That's what screws up Christianity all the time is that there's so many really nice people around. And because there's really nice people around, they don't understand what the Christian faith is about.

And they get all messed up on it. And the good person here is supremely good because he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. He is Peter the fisherman, the great fisherman.

[1 : 1 8] He's the man that messed up the message. And you have the story of how he did it. The way it worked was that he went to Antioch. Antioch was the first place where a large Gentile segment joined what had originally been largely a Jewish Christian church.

And the Jewish Christian church, when the Jews became Christians, they went along with, they maintained some of their dietary laws and they maintained some of their ceremonial laws and they maintained a lot of things which were convenient to them and were part of their culture.

just as we have a lot of cultural accretions to our faith, so the Jews had a lot to theirs. But then in came this large segment of Gentiles who weren't brought up this way.

And so you had a beginning of a little contest going on into the church as to who really belonged and who didn't belong. And when you read in the story, when Cephas came, that is Peter, came to Antioch, Paul says, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.

Now that's what I mean. Here is a good, a gracious, a loving, a caring man who was an apostle of Jesus Christ and he stands condemned.

[2 : 4 5] That's hard to believe really, isn't it? That, I mean, in a sense, the primary Christian leader is here portrayed to you as a man condemned.

Very interesting. Well, let's see why he was condemned. The reason he was condemned was that he arrived at Antioch and all these new Gentile Christians were having their supper parties and their various church suppers and things they did and Peter joined with them and he ate with them and he did all the things which, strictly speaking, a good Jew wouldn't do.

And he carried on like this for a while, enjoying himself. And then up from Jerusalem came the circumcision party. The straight, true blue, grade A Jews who had become Christians and who carried with them all the paraphernalia of Jewish culture.

And they came up and they created a certain tension in the Antioch community. And Peter, being a loving and caring man, didn't know which way to turn.

Because here he had been living it up with the Gentile Christians and rejoicing in their faith with them. And then along came this segment of straight A Orthodox Christians from the Jewish church in Jerusalem.

[4 : 13] And what was he to do? So suddenly he reverted to form and he picked up the dietary laws and separated himself at eating and separated himself from the Gentiles in various ways and behaved like a straight A bona fide gold stock Jew who was a Christian.

And the result of that was that he was, Paul says, acting insincerely. You know what happens when you get invited to one of the sort of socially prominent homes to a cocktail party where all the best people are.

And you hate it deep down. But hating it deep down, you nevertheless put on the clothes that will knock their eye out. And you wear all the jewelry that you can find.

And you develop all the manners you can. And you rehearse little conversational bits that you can drop into the conversation. And you generally go along with it.

At the same time that you hate it, you're still going along with it. And you're moaning and complaining about it. It's like the lock horns in the weekend paper. You know what?

[5 : 30] And it's this kind of totally artificial behavior. And this is what Peter was doing with these people who, the sort of elite who had come up from Jerusalem.

And he was acting with insincerity. And what really hurt Paul about this was that Barnabas got taken in by this. Now Barnabas was one of the leading converts to the Christian faith.

He's a man who is spoken very highly of all through the New Testament. But he was taken in by this little charade and went along with it.

And so Paul says to them, you know, that he said, when I saw that they were not straightforward, I decided to be straightforward.

And that you see some of the stubborn determination of Paul in relationship to this situation in the church in Antioch. Well, all of them had been taken in and Paul decided to be straightforward with them.

[6 : 39] And this is the story of how he did it, how he confronted them. And he said to them, if you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile, and that's what you've been doing for the past several weeks, you've been moving in with them, if you, like a Jew, live like a Gentile, and you have the freedom to do that, then why, he said, do you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?

Now, you may find that this is a slightly introverted argument, but you behaved as the Gentiles did, and now you want the Gentiles to behave like you do, to pick up the customs and traditions and the ceremonies and the law of the Jews.

And essentially, you know, that what he was getting at was that the Jews demanded that he conform, that these Gentile Christians conform to their law.

And he said, you can't do that. Now, make it, you've got to understand that one of the central issues here is circumcision.

And the Jews wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised in order to be fully a part of this Christian church. And Paul said, if you Jews want to be circumcised, that's your business.

[8 : 05] You can do anything you like. When you start telling the Gentiles they have to be, then you are denying the essential content of the Christian faith. Now, this is devastating, really, in its implications.

What happened to that building next door is really what happens to this kind of ecclesiastical religious behavior among us. It just is collapsed by the impact of the gospel.

He says to them, you know that a man is not justified by works of the law. Now, the way this works out, I think, in the development of this particular story is this.

It's like this. The key word is justification, you know, and justification is what life is all about.

And primarily, justification has to do with a relationship between you and God. That you have, God has created you, you are created in his image, you are brought back to the place where you are justified in your relationship to him.

[9 : 24] And so justification becomes the name of the game. Now, we live in a world where not very many people believe in God. But they are still compelled to justify themselves.

And so we pick up all sorts of paraphernalia in order to justify ourselves. And we justify ourselves by our social status. We justify ourselves by our schooling, by our intelligence, by our wealth, by our moral rectitude.

We justify ourselves by our innate superiority. We justify ourselves by being nice persons. And so we build a sort of model of ourselves which in relationship to other people justifies us.

You know, this is, in a sense, this is the good guy syndrome. The guy who has all the advantages, the guy who makes it, and thereby justifies his existence. And that's how he feeds his ego is by the process of justification.

And he can look around at a room like this and see all the people that he's infinitely superior to and he feels satisfied. In a sense, he polishes up the old statue and he feels better for it.

[10 : 41] Now, that's basically how we justify ourselves in relationship to other people. And we do it in all sorts of subtle ways. Well, then you might move from there to another kind of justification.

And this justification is profoundly religious. And now, you start obeying the law. You observe Sunday. You honor your parents.

You're very careful about speaking the truth. You are a model of moral rectitude. You do all those things and so you create another sort of picture of yourself in which you can be somewhat disdainful of this very worldly person over here who justifies himself only by the material goods which he's acquired and the social standing which he has.

This is justification before God. So, the observance of the law becomes very important. Every detail of the ceremonial law, every condition of the moral law, all of this has to be observed.

And in the observation of this, you are justifying yourself before God. And the way that it works is that by being good, God pays attention to you.

[11 : 59] And once you've got God's attention, then you go on being good to get more attention. And finally, you're so good that you put yourself in the position where God owes you something.

And then you keep building your balance. And on and on you go. And this is the way we live our lives.

This is the way we egg each other on. We observe the dietary laws. We observe the ceremonial laws. We do all the things which gain us this accreditation with God.

And that's how it works. But Paul says to them, but the thing you don't understand is that while this may be true, it still leaves you somewhere in profound trouble.

and if you look in the passage you'll see that by the works of the law shall no one be justified. It just you can't pull it off.

[13 : 08] All you can do is succeed in deceiving yourself. You may manage to deceive people around you, but then in this effort you manage to deceive yourself and the reality of the law is lost on you because you don't know the law.

You don't, you have, you become a hypocrite, you become a Pharisee, you become totally absorbed with yourself and with your own accomplishments. And you don't see the devastating impact on your life of the law.

Because if you were to consider the law and its demands, and Paul says you've got to consider all its demands because if this is the basis of your justification, then you've got to meet all the demands of the law.

Well, Paul says of Peter, that's what you're pretending to be by observing these dietary laws, by submitting to the circumcision party, by moving away from the gentle Christians, you're giving them the message that in order to be justified before God, they've got to play this game too.

And you know, Paul says to Peter, that that game doesn't lead anywhere. That's not the basis on which justification. And so what the gospel does is to provide a third alternative.

[14 : 44] And it's the third alternative that Paul is most deeply concerned with here. The third alternative is we are justified in Christ.

In other words, what you have on this is the person of Christ. There is. And when anybody says to you, what's life all about?

You don't say, well, it's this. What I've achieved. You don't even say that it's this. Because here I'm a failure too.

The only thing I can tell you about what life is all about has to do with Jesus Christ on the cross. Now, that means that the Christian is somebody who stands down here and sees himself in terms of Jesus Christ.

Sees himself in Christ. He doesn't have to keep this show going any longer. He doesn't have to keep this show going any longer because now he was living by faith in Jesus Christ.

[16 : 01] then you see the religious community comes to him and says, okay, I understand what you're getting at. Now he can do whatever the hell he likes.

Because he doesn't have to worry about being morally upright. He doesn't have to worry about what other people think. So he can just go bust him off and do whatever he likes and nobody's going to say boo to him.

Well, that's, you see, the nub of the problem that Paul deals with here. He says, we ourselves were found to be sinners.

Is Christ then an agent of sin? So what Christ is made to do is Christ is made to make it possible so that we can go on being sinners. We don't have to try and meet this model of moral and spiritual perfection.

we don't have to play the game of trying to match our fellow man. We just live in relationship to Jesus Christ and if we sin, too bad because he can look after that.

[17 : 10] And that is where Christianity breaks down very badly. It collapses completely. And that's why many, many people will tell you that they're not Christians because of this problem right here.

Christians sin. And most of the Christians they know they could tell you what sins they sin. They could tell you where they fail. But you see, what Paul does about heaven, and he answers the question here, he says, if I through the law died to the law that I might live to God, or have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God.

He says, this is my life now. I don't have any life apart from Jesus Christ. I don't have a life of my own. I have been crucified with Christ.

The only meaning my life can possibly have is hidden with God in Christ. He's right. Now, what this means, the way you added up is that you in a sense say to the world, you want to know who I am?

I am a sinner who maybe has failed in this area, who certainly has failed in this area, and who is utterly dependent upon God's forgiveness through Christ's death on the cross.

[18 : 44] You say I am a sinner? I know I'm a sinner. You may be able to see from the outside that I'm a sinner, but I know from deep in my own heart that I am a sinner.

I know that I rebel against the law of God. I know that I don't love my fellow man. I know that I am a hypocrite. I know that I am a failure. I know all those things about myself.

You're not telling me something I don't know. I know that the only possibility for my justification is that God should do for me what I can't do for myself, and I would like to praise God because he has.

That's what he did in Christ. That's what it's all about, and that's the way I'm to live. And Paul says, if I go back to playing this game, which you, Peter, have done, or if I go back to playing this game, which there's a lot of pressure on us to play it, then what I am saying is that Christ died in vain.

There was no point in it. You see, that's what the passage ends with. If justification were through this process, then it says in the last line, Christ died to no purpose.

[20 : 08] But Christ died for a very particular purpose, and that particular purpose was that I should be forgiven. Christian. So when somebody is publicly identifies himself as a Christian, and publicly does something which reveals that he's a sinner, we say, well, that dismisses me of any responsibility to Christianity, because they're all sinners.

Yes, that's exactly right. They're all sinners. And that they are utterly dependent upon justification through Christ's death on the cross.

And Paul says, I'm not going to go back and rebuild this kind of life. I'm not going to go back and rebuild this kind of life. I am going to live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and, what else does it say?

Gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God. I live utterly in dependence upon God's grace. I will never rebuild myself into a situation where I am not utterly dependent upon God's grace.

Every breath I breathe, every time my heart beats, every day I live, I am utterly dependent upon the grace of God. That is the relationship I have to God.

[21 : 34] It's not this and it's not this. It's one of complete and utter dependence upon God. The God by whom I am justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

That's what it's all about. Now, the advantage of all this is, I mean, I've got to come back to this sort of slightly pragmatic consideration which comes at the end of this.

You see, you are now radically free. free. You're free from this, which is usually called the rat race. You're free from this, which is generally termed religion.

You are free because you are living in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and who gave himself for me, and you are not nullifying the grace of God.

You're living in complete and total and continuing dependence upon the grace of God to forgive you, to infill you with his Holy Spirit, to accomplish his purpose in you.

[22 : 37] You become, instead of somebody who's working to achieve a relationship with God, you are someone in whom God is working to achieve his purpose in the world.

That's what it means to be a Christian. And there isn't a sinner on the street anywhere that you can't go and stand beside. Because you're in exactly the same position as a permanent condition of your life that he's in or she's in.

You are utterly dependent upon what God has done in Christ for your justification. And that's what this passage is about.

It's not a matter of building a great castle of my own self sufficiency. it's a matter of being utterly dependent upon Jesus Christ.

And Paul says to Peter, Peter, what you've done is you've gone from this relationship back to this relationship. And thereby you have eliminated the necessity of the death of Christ on the cross.

[23 : 47] Christ on the cross. And once you do that, then there is no way that you're ever going to be justified. Because you are only justified through Christ on the cross.

And Paul says, look, you ask me how this works, I'll tell you how it works. And he puts it here very eloquently. He says, I through the law died to the law.

I knew this wasn't going to work, he says. I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been, and when he says I died to the law, I died in Christ.

He is the evidence of my condemnation. I died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.

It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. You can't taunt a dead man. You know, you can't say you should do better, you should try harder, you should do this.

[24 : 50] You're through with that. You are crucified with Christ, and the life you now live, you live by faith in the Son of God.

And the Son of God has loved you and given himself for you, and his grace is a grace is available to you. Now, shall you continue in sin since you've got that relationship?

Well, Paul's answer to that is that that's just not who I am anymore. Supposing I do sin flagrantly, Paul says, well, that only demonstrates that you are living in contradiction to the whole basis of your life, which is in Christ.

And so the difference between one of these people who sins, he's devastated because somehow he's let down on the law.

He's failed. But this person, when he sins, he knows that he is contradicting his own essential nature, which is that he is crucified with Christ and he only lives in Christ.

[26 : 00] and so he's denied who he is. Now, that's where I have to quit. But Paul is dealing with this topic and he will deal with it again next week when we come back to the next passage from Galatians.

Let me say a prayer. Our Father, we are just by reason of our human nature very concerned to appear charitable and outgoing and loving in relationship to people, to be moral and upright in relationship to you.

But most of all, what we want in our hearts is to know that you and your relationship to us have given your son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, and that our only justification is not by our human achievements, by our working the works of the law, but by the reality of the Son of God who has loved us and given himself for us, that we might live by his grace.

Teach us that at the heart of our being. We ask in his name. Amen.