

Commentary on Galatians 2:15-21

International Bible Lessons

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The **[International Bible Lesson](#)** (*Uniform Sunday School Series*) for **Sunday, February 5, 2012**, is from **Galatians 2:15-21**. Five **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse by verse **[International Bible Lesson Commentary](#)** below. The **Study Hints for Thinking Further**, which are also available on the **[Bible Lesson Forum](#)**, will aid teachers in class preparation and in conducting class discussion. For additional **International Bible Lesson Commentaries**, see the complete and comprehensive **[International Bible Lessons Commentary Index](#)**. The weekly **[International Bible Lesson](#)** is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught at **<http://InternationalBibleLessons.org>** and in **[The Oklahoman](#)** newspaper.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Galatians 2:15-21

(Galatians 2:15) We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;

Chapters 1 and 2 of Galatians are biographical. Paul wrote this letter to those who had become Christians during his first missionary journey, and his letter to the Galatians is one of the earliest (if not the earliest) of his letters in the Bible. Jewish “Christians” (perhaps better described as Pharisaic type “Christians” in this letter) had come into some of the churches he had founded in Galatia, and they convinced many of Paul’s converts that in order to be saved they needed to not only believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but also do the works of Moses’ law (such as, be circumcised, eat special foods, avoid certain foods, practice certain ritual washings, and celebrate the feast days). Paul argued in his letter to the Galatians that the teachings of these Pharisaic type “Christians” was not the gospel of Jesus Christ; their teaching would make the gospel ineffective in their lives; their teaching would rob them of their freedom and lead them back into slavery. Traditionally, Jews and Gentiles looked down with prejudice upon one another; calling each other dogs and barbarians respectively. The Jews called those who did not do the works of the law “Gentile sinners.” In his letter, Paul argued from the Jewish point of view to make his points, and not because he was still prejudiced against Gentiles (as were those with a Pharisaic worldview). Rather, Paul will argue that Jews and Gentiles who were Christians should be able to sit together and eat together without prejudice against one another.

(Galatians 2:16) yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in

Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

A human being can be justified by the works of the law **only if** he has always perfectly said and done what is right according to the standards God has set and revealed in His law; standards that are consistent with our human nature and intended relationships as people created in the image of God. However, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the only human being who has achieved this type of justification. The standards God has set are the moral law of God; summed up as loving God and others.

Consider this example: in human governments, if someone kills or murders someone, the defense attorney may try to argue that the person who killed someone was justified in their killing them in order to protect themselves. The defense attorney may try to justify the actions of his client as being right actions under the circumstances so his client will be declared right (justified) and not be punished by the legal system. A true murderer can only be justified in the eyes of God and inherit eternal life when he admits his sin, repents of his sin, and trusts in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

In the Bible, every person but Jesus Christ is recognized as having sinned; therefore, they cannot ever be justified by doing the works of the law. They are convicted as sinners from a legal point of view, and no future obedience can erase the fact that they have sinned or justify their past sinful actions. However, God has promised in the Bible that a person can be justified by faith in Jesus Christ; not by works of the law apart from faith in Jesus Christ, and not by faith in Jesus Christ plus works of the law. We cannot be justified or declared right by our works in any way. However, when a person is justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone, good works that bless others will flow from their heart of love for God and others; in addition, the Holy Spirit will guide and empower them to take practical actions that will help others and lead some to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

(Galatians 2:17) But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

Faith in Jesus Christ is active, not passive. Paul used the word “effort,” as in “our effort to be justified in Christ.” Faith in Jesus Christ leads us to make an effort to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior the best we can in our everyday lives as He leads and empowers us. Our efforts do not “save” us, but because we are saved we make efforts to glorify and honor God in Jesus Christ out of a heart filled with His love. Also, our efforts will not focus on the ceremonies that the law of Moses prescribed so we can be justified or get right with God. If we Christians sin from time to time (sin should be the exception in the way we usually live) in our efforts to do all that Jesus wants, that does not mean that Jesus has failed, that His teachings have failed, that Jesus is or was serving sin and led us into temptation and sin. Jesus did not fail; rather, we failed Jesus. Therefore, the only

way to be justified is by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Jesus is the only One who can justify us as we trust in Him.

(Galatians 2:18) But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.

Paul wrote that those who say they believe in Jesus Christ (as the One who justifies them, leads them, empowers them to do right, and saves them), if they then turn back to doing the works of the law in order to be justified or saved, (by refusing to eat with Gentiles at meals, by eating special “kosher” foods, by celebrating special days to be right with God), then they are transgressors or sinners. Though the Galatians said they believed in Jesus Christ in order to be justified or saved, they were turning back to practices (works of the law) that they had turned from; therefore, they demonstrated or proved that they had returned to a life of sin. Paul insisted that in order to be justified and right with God, people must trust in Christ alone for salvation and not also trust in thing they do.

(Galatians 2:19) For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ;

The law shows what God requires and that all people have failed to do what God requires; therefore, people need a savior from sin and the eternal consequences of disobedience. Jesus Christ came to be our Savior, to sacrifice His life so God could be just and uphold the integrity of His kingdom when forgiving us for our sins. The law can show us where we sin, but the law cannot forgive us, only God in Christ can forgive us. The law cannot empower us to do right, only God in Christ can empower us. Therefore, we turn to God in Christ and live for God in Christ and follow God in Christ, the Son of God. The Jewish religious leaders crucified Jesus because He told the truth and called people to follow Him. Paul adopted the teaching and way of Jesus Christ after Christ met him; therefore, the religious leaders rejected Paul as he had once rejected Christ and Christians. Paul was persecuted, as was Jesus and the other Apostles. Paul considered himself to have suffered and been crucified with Christ. He now lives for God because He loves God for saving him, rather than live for the law which condemns him as a sinner. He can only be justified through faith in Jesus Christ, and this was the same for the Galatians, and for any who would be justified today.

(Galatians 2:20) and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Previously, Paul had focused on himself and his performance; he lived for himself; he tried to save himself by performing the works of the law. When he became a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul quit living for himself and began to live for Jesus Christ, Who now lived in him. Paul considered himself crucified with Christ and raised to new life with Christ. Paul turned from focusing on his performance according to the works of the law; instead, he now focused his

attention on Jesus Christ who now lived in him, empowered him, and guided him. Even as Paul lived in the flesh; that is, in a human body, he lived by faith in Jesus, the Son of God. Paul trusted Christ to lead him rightly, because Christ, Who is the Son of God, knew God's perfect will, loved Paul, and gave himself for Paul when He died on the cross. Christ also humbled himself to live in Paul and help Paul live right before God.

(Galatians 2:21) I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Only God through His Son, Jesus Christ, can forgive us for our sins as a free gift of grace (we can never merit or earn God's favor by any works that we do). The law can never declare us right, for we have sinned in the past. As a free gift to believers, God has chosen to call us right and make us right through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation by faith in Jesus Christ does not excuse us from trying to live a moral and upright life. God chose to show us the importance of living a morally upright life when He sent Jesus Christ to perfectly obey the moral law of God—the law of love (love for God and others). Christ died a sacrificial death for us so God could justly forgive us and help us live right the only way possible (by raising Christ from the dead so He could live out His life in us). If there had been any other way for God to justify and save us than through the death and resurrection of God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ would not have died as a sacrifice for us. Christ rose from the dead to live in us and make us new. Through Christ in us, we can now love as God intends and live morally upright. We should never make God's free gift of grace in our lives ineffective by turning from faith Christ to performing works of the law in a human effort to be right in the eyes of God.

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why should a sinner want to be justified? How can a sinner be justified?
2. What are "the works of the law"?
3. What do believers do after they are justified?
4. Who did Paul "live to" and what did he "live by" (see Galatians 2:19-20)?
5. Where does Jesus Christ live?

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