

Second Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Righteousness From Christ

Galatians 2:15-21

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

Galatians 2:15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16yet 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. 17But 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! 18But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. 19For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20and 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. 21I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

DIAGNOSIS: Slavery

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Supplementing “the Grace of God” (Toiling For Righteousness)*

In this passionate and indignant letter Paul chastises the Galatian Christians for allowing “false believers” to “confuse them” by adding to the Gospel so much that it becomes a “different gospel” (1:6-9). Apparently, the Galatian Christians had been persuaded that in order to be “good” (or substitute the word “righteous”) Christians, they also had to be “good” Jews. Specifically, false teachers told them that they had to be circumcised and conform to all the Mosaic laws. But because of this, Paul says, they were no longer “acting consistently with the truth of the gospel!” (2:14). Those “foolish Galatians” are not the only ones ever hoodwinked into believing they had to supplement the Gospel (the righteousness of Christ). The Roman Catholic papists and sophists whom Luther argued against felt certain that love and its works had to accompany faith in order for Christians to be righteous. We modern Christians regularly fall into the same trap ourselves; in fact, some of us even preach it! So convinced are we that “good Christians” have to behave in “good” ways that we stress ourselves out trying to measure up to the goodness standard. Consequently, we feel trapped, manipulated, driven—even enslaved—because we too fail to live “consistently with the truth of the gospel” (2:14).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Subverting “The Grace of God” (Self-Righteousness)

By allowing themselves to believe they had to “measure up” to the standards of the Law, the Galatians had fallen back into understanding righteousness as a matter of personal obligation—something they had to do. But when any of us attempts to supplement the grace of God (that is, the righteousness that Jesus gives us) we betray a deadly truth: we don’t trust in that grace in the first place! Paul sees this as a blatant “building up” of the law once again (2:18) that ends up subverting and “perverting” the gospel (1:7).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Nullifying “The

Grace of God" (No Righteousness)

To fail to trust Jesus' righteousness means we do not have his righteousness. We are left with nothing to justify us except our own self-righteousness. Yet we know, as Paul says, "No one will be justified by the works of the law" (2:16). So, by "cutting ourselves off from Christ" we have "fallen away from grace" (5:4), and "nullified" the grace of God (2:21). Having nullified God's grace we are "cursed." For, as Paul tells us later, "all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law'" (3:10). Luther put it this way: "Anyone who strives to live to the Law, that is, wants to act in such a way that he is justified through the Law, is a sinner and remains a sinner; therefore he is dead and damned" (Luther's Works , vol. 26, p. 159).

PROGNOSIS: Freedom

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Jesus (The Righteous One) Is Righteous For Us*

"The cursed," those who are "dead to God," are not left cursed and dead by God since God can help it! In a most spectacular show of grace God seeks mightily to bring us back to "life" with him, even when the cost to him is tremendous! He sends his Son, Jesus, the Righteous One, to earth and allows Jesus to take the "curse" of the Law upon himself, to suffer its consequences (death), thus lifting death's weight off of us. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (3:13). Because Jesus "loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20) we can "live to God" (2:19).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Jesus Gives Righteousness To Us*

Just as Abraham "believed" and God counted it as righteousness, so God counts our "believing" (our faith, our trusting) in Jesus

as righteousness. “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” (2:16). Whereas previously we assumed that our self-righteousness was the cost we had to pay (to supplement God’s grace), we now realize that there is only one “cost” to us: in faith, we die to our self-righteousness! And as we die, Jesus’ Spirit takes over our hearts. Paul explains, “I have been crucified with Christ; 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” (2:19-20). Again, Luther affirms the wonder of faith: “Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life” (Luther’s Works, vol. 26, p. 130).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Jesus Lives Righteously Through Us*

With Jesus’ righteousness pulsing through us (or you could say, with his Spirit in control) we cannot help but jump into action, spontaneously doing those “good” things we had previously been driven to do! But now, all those “good” things are done joyfully, not because we have to but because we get to . We are free from the tyranny of the Law: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (5:1). And, notice that, as Paul remarks, it is not only good works that spontaneously happen when the Spirit is in control, but miracles also (3:5)! Even preachers are caught up in Christ’s righteousness and give up preaching sermons urging “good” Christian living (using the guilt of the Law to motivate parishioners). Instead, they confidently preach “Christ crucified,” relax, and trust that justified, righteous Christians will do and be “good” because of Christ.