

Justified by faith in Christ alone, to live to God (Galatians 2:17–21)

As the Apostle Paul moves from defending his apostleship in chapters 1–2, he introduces in this letter the truth of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, which sets the foundation for the doctrinal section in chapters 3–4. False brethren had crept into the churches and were teaching that Jesus Christ and His death were not sufficient, but that works of the law had to be added. Faith alone, they argue, might lead to sinfulness. But Paul argues that salvation by faith alone includes the indwelling of Christ in the believer and a new life lived for God.

1. *Trusting in Christ alone does not encourage sinfulness* (2:17–18).

In verse 17 Paul appears to be paraphrasing an objection which the false brethren in Galatia were raising. “Your doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone turns Jews into sinners, just like the Gentiles who don’t keep the ritual dietary laws, and makes Christ into one who encourages sin.” Paul responds in no uncertain terms: “Certainly not.” Christ in no way is made a minister of sin when a Jew forsakes the law to be justified by faith alone.

a. *The objection of the false brethren* (3:17a): When Jews trusted in Christ alone to be justified, they no longer relied on keeping the law, placed no priority on keeping the outward rituals like dietary rules, and ended up looking just like Gentile sinners (cf. v. 15). Would that not mean, they argued, that Christ was a minister or servant of sin?

b. *The response* (3:17b–18): Paul adamantly denies that, “certainly not!” Paul by his teaching had removed the need for Jews to keep the dietary restrictions and argued against the possibility of keeping the law to be right with God. To re-institute those practices, i.e., re-building what he tore down, would itself reveal him to be a transgressor. (His revealed transgression could be his earlier disregard of the dietary law, or his disobedience to Christ’s declaration of all foods being clean. But more likely it is explained by reason of the law itself and God uniting the believer in Christ as presented in the next verses.)

2. *Trusting in Christ alone enables righteous behavior* (3:19–20).

Re-establishing the law would go against the law itself as the claims demonstrate which Paul makes concerning the true believer in Christ.

a. *The true believer in Christ can live righteously because he/she has died to the law.* Christ fulfilled the requirements of the law for the believer, leading a sinless life and paying (for others) the penalty of sin, that is, death. Death as well removes the binding nature of the law (Romans 7:1). The believer is united with Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:6). United in His death, the believer has died to the law with the continuing effect that the payment was made in full and there is freedom from the law.

b. *The true believer in Christ, because the believer is dead to the law, lives to God.* Cf. Romans 6:11. Without Christ a person cannot not sin, but lives in rebellion against God. But the true believer is indwelt by Christ and by His Spirit can live to God. The believer will want to do what God wants, will grieve at failure to do so, and will be heavenly minded (cf. Colossians 3:1–2).

c. *The true believer in Christ lives this present life by faith in the Son of God.* The believer rests in the full sufficiency of Christ for salvation from start to finish and His goodness in all circumstances.

d. *The true believer in Christ lives righteously in response to the love of the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself up for us.* For the believer the love of God is personal and was demonstrated in the voluntary suffering on behalf of the believer.

Setting aside the law as a way of salvation, but trusting alone in Christ, will not result in sinning, but in a life being lived for God, because Christ now lives within that believer.

3. *Trusting in Christ alone maintains grace* (2:21).

a. Paul does not set aside or nullify the grace of God by returning to the law. At no point, either in coming to Christ or afterwards, can the believer add merit to the means of salvation without setting aside the grace of God.

b. This must be true, because if the law could provide righteousness, there was no need for Christ to die.

God justifies a person by grace through faith. The true believer is united with Christ and is so changed that it does not lead naturally to sin, even though believers will sin. The true believer will not set aside grace by returning to the law to merit salvation, but will persevere in faith alone to live to God.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- What fundamental character qualities of the true believer are found in this passage?
- What do you find most encouraging by what Paul says here? Why?
- How are you helped to continue believing, solely trusting in Christ alone?