

The Christian Life

Galatians 2:17-21

Intro: Our text this morning contains some of the most astonishing and necessary good news in all the Bible. It's astonishing because it reveals that the gospel is far more than we tend to think it is. And it is necessary because, failing to truly understand the depths of the gospel, we inevitably fall back into living our Christian life by law- not by faith.

I grew up in a solid, conservative, Christian Reformed Church. We read the law every Sunday morning. Every. Single. Sunday. Morning. The weekly refrain of my Christian upbringing was "Thou shalt not." Now, the law is good. It is God's law. It is given to reveal sin and warn us of the consequences of sin. It is meant to show us our need for Christ. All of those things are good and necessary. But the refrain of the Christian life cannot be "thou shalt not". The refrain of the Christian life must be "Christ loved me and gave himself for me." The refrain of the Christian life must be all that Jesus has done for me, all that He promises to me and all that I am truly and forever in Him. In other words, the refrain of the Christian life must be grace not guilt and faith not law. That's the point of our text this morning.

Paul is in the midst of an argument with the false teachers we call "Judiazers". These were Jewish men who professed faith in Jesus but were trying to lead the churches to live by law. They were teaching that to be a Christian, you needed to both believe in Jesus and come under the Mosaic law - and they were wildly successful. All the Jewish Christians accepted this teaching and even the Apostle Peter and Barnabas joined them in their error. It's a sober reminder of how quickly we gravitate to law and how slow we are to live in grace and by faith.

Paul combats this deadly error with a personal rebuke of Peter and a powerful summary of core gospel truth.

- By works of the law no one will be justified (16). The law is powerless to produce justification. Justification is a word that refers to being made right with God; being declared righteous before the judgement throne of God.
- The Christian life is to be lived by faith, not by law. The Christian life isn't defined by what we do – but by what God has done for us in Christ.

Imagine a man was trying to sell you a machine that could turn you into a bionic superman with incredible physical capabilities. He assured you that, when the machine

was done with you, you would be able to see like a hawk, run like a deer, be as strong as a bear. All you had to do was step into this box about the size of a phone booth and in 10 minutes you would come out a brand new you. One of the questions you would likely have is – well, what does it actually do?? What will it do to my present body? Does it take my eyes out and replace them?? I'd like to know. And so, the man proceeds to tell you just what the machine does in order to accomplish its miraculous results.

In a similar manner – Paul explains what the God actually does to a person when they come to Christ in faith.

I. A New Freedom

¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

Paul talks about this more extensively in Romans chapter 6 & 7. The point is this. We are all born under the law of God. The law requires us to live in obedience to God and forbids us to live in rebellion. Hence all the “thou shalt not’s”. And more importantly, the law comes with a promise and a penalty. If you keep the law – you will live. If you break the law, even once, you will die. You will go to hell to suffer the just penalty of your rebellion and sin against God. And since we’ve all broken the law we are all under the penalty of the law.

The critical question is: How can we possibly escape that penalty? We’ve all done the crime – how do we avoid the time? The only way out is payment or death. One way to get free is to pay the penalty. If you rob a bank and are sentenced to 20 years in prison – then after 20 years you can walk free. You’ve paid your debt. The law no longer has a claim on you.

- The other way to get free is to die. The law has a claim on you only as long as you are alive. If you die – you are out of the reach of the long arm of the law. It can’t follow you into the grave. If you are dead, the prosecuting attorney has to close the case. There’s nothing he can do.

Paul says that this is exactly what happens to a person when they come to Christ in faith. They have committed a grievous crime against the living God and the law of God is hounding them, hot on their heels. But when they flee to Christ – they escape the penalty of the law. How? Through both payment AND death.

1. The death of Christ on the cross was Christ paying the just penalty for **our** sin. The whole of it! There’s no more debt to be paid. The demand of the law is satisfied.

2. Christ's death become our death so that, in regards the law, we are dead. The law has no claim on us. Can never again accuse us. All the "thou shalt not's" and all the just penalty attached to them have no more hold on me.

Why not? Because of the cross. In verse 20 he says, *"I have been crucified with Christ"*

Paul wants us to understand that something radical happened to him when he came to faith in Christ. He was crucified with Christ. Paul means it, not as an analogy or metaphor, but as a spiritual reality.

- The perfect tense is meant to describe something that really and truly happened to Paul in the past with ongoing impact.
- The passive tense means that this is something that happened to him, something that was done to him. Paul isn't saying "I crucified myself with Christ". No, someone did this to me. Who did? God did! Praise His Name! God, in His saving mercy, gave me to Jesus so that as Jesus died on that cross – I died with Him!

Ryken points out that there were 4 things nailed the cross of Calvary where Jesus died.

- Jesus himself was nailed to the cross. The very Son of God.
- A sign pronouncing him as the King of the Jews was also nailed there.
- The guilt of my crimes and the legal record of all my sin was nailed there. As Paul explains in Colossians 2:14 "This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."
- And YOU were nailed there. "I have been crucified with Christ." (vs 20). The death of Jesus on that cross was not just something that happened to him, it is something that happened to all who believe in him. His death is really and truly our death. The debt to the law has been paid – and we died to the law.

Consequently, the law no longer has a hold or a claim on me. I am no longer "under law but under grace" (Romans 6:15). So when the Judiazers come along and say – you must submit to the law to be saved, Paul says, "I'm sorry, I died to the law as means of righteousness. It has no hold or claim on me."

The stunning nature of this event is captured well by Martin Luther.

Martin Luther, "A Christian is not someone who has no sin or feels no sin; he is someone to whom, because of his faith in Christ, God does not impute his sin."¹

Did you sin this week? Did you scream in anger at your kids or your spouse? Did you lie? Did you sin sexually? Did you steal from your boss by not giving a true day's work? The gospel says that God does not impute that sin. It doesn't stand between you and God. It

doesn't stand in the way of God declaring you to be righteous. The law doesn't have a claim on you.

That sound dangerous to religious people. What about morality? What about obedience and rules?

II. A New Identity

"It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me."

We need to clearly understand what happens to us when we come to Christ in faith. When you come to Christ in faith, you enter into the gospel machine, as it were, and you come out a miraculous new person. You aren't the same old version with a nice wax job. You are in fact a new creation in Christ. The new you is something that has never existed before. And by faith in Christ, which unites you to Christ – you suddenly discover that everything that belongs to Jesus belongs to you.

- His death is your death.
- His righteousness is your righteousness. God see you as righteous and deals with you as though you were righteous, not because you are righteous but because we in Christ.
- His status as the Son of God becomes your status as an adopted child of God.
- His resurrected, eternal life is your new life.
- His destiny is your destiny.
- The Spirit that dwelt in Him now dwells in you to ensure that everything He is and all that He has purchased for you is certainly and eternally yours.

You see, when you become a Christian, you don't become a slightly modified version of old you. When you come to Jesus in faith you are a brand new you – and the essence of that newness is your new union with Christ. And this answers the concern – what about the law, what about morality? If Christ lives in you, you will hunger for obedience. You will long for holiness. There will be a power at work within you that makes you grieve your sin. Though your flesh might enjoy them – your soul will hate them. You see, Christ in you is a power for righteousness and holiness that is vastly greater than the law.

Run John run the law demands
But gives me neither feet nor hands
Far better news the gospel brings
It bids me fly and gives me wings.

How then should we live? How do I live in the reality of my death with Christ and His life in me? How do I exercise my wings? I don't know of a better summary in all of Scripture than this.

²⁰ ...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.

III. A New Life

There are two foundational things to understand if we are to live a Christian life.

A. *Living by Faith*

"The life I live in the flesh I live by faith."

The Christian life is lived "in the flesh" – in all the reality of this broken, sinful world with all the realities of this not-yet-perfected self. We live the Christian life in the reality of weakness and failure and sin. That's why it is critical to live this Christian life by faith.

What does it mean to live by faith? What does it mean in practice?

Paul means it as a contrast to living by law. He'd tried living by law. Remember, he was a Pharisee. He scrupulously tried to do everything the law required and avoid everything the law forbid. His life was a herculean effort to live by law. And it killed him. In Romans 7 Paul says when the law said "thou shalt not covet" he knew he was a dead man. Not only did realize that he was a covetous man – but the law seemed to make him covet even more.

Living by law is exhausting and it will kill your soul. Let me ask you: Do you feel like a spiritual failure this morning? Do you feel like you are trying as hard as you can to live the Christian life – but you just keep messing it up? Your lust and anger and selfishness and impatience and covetousness keeps getting the better of you. It's not that you aren't trying to fight it. You are trying. You are trying so hard. And you can't believe that God could actually love you and embrace you this morning because you feel so stained by your sin. Friend, that's living by the law. Jesus calls you to live by faith.

What's the difference. I think Conrad Mbewe said it so well.

"Living by law is a life of trying, trying, trying.

Living by faith is a life of trusting, trusting, trusting."

It is living each day trusting that Jesus died for me and by faith I have been united to Him so that everything that belongs to Jesus belongs to me. I need to trust that, to believe that. I need to claim that in faith as the truth about me – because God says it's the truth

about me. I need to trust that when Jesus died – I died. I died to the law – it has no claim on me! I need to trust that Christ does indeed live within me, by His precious Holy Spirit. That I truly am a new creation in Jesus. That I am righteous in the sight of God – because of Jesus.

Living by faith is living by trusting. Trusting that though I am a great sinner, Jesus is my precious Savior. It means trusting that I am His. And it means trusting that I am loved.

B. Living by Love

“The life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”

The life I live in the flesh, with all its weakness, with all its failure and sin – is lived by faith in the rescuing, atoning love of Jesus.

The biblical gospel is so personal. “The life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God **who loved me.**” He loved me. Jesus did not die to simply open up space in heaven for sinners if they should choose to enter. Jesus didn’t die for unnamed masses. Jesus died for me. That’s the Christian confession. He died for me! He died for you! Jesus loved you before the foundation of the world as the Father gave you to belong to him. Jesus loved you when he took all your sin and all your guilt. He died for you.

This is the faith of the Christian. “He loved me and gave himself for me.” The evidence and supreme act of His love is the cross. The cross of Christ stands as the greatest display of love in all the world in all the ages of time and eternity. “Greater love has no man than this, that he lays down his life for his friends.” This is what Jesus has done for you. He gave himself for you. He gave himself to rescue you from the penalty of the law. He gave himself to purchase you for himself. He gave himself so that He could dwell within you. He gave himself so that you could eternally dwell with Him. He loved you and gave himself for you.

And this is the life you can now live – a life of faith in the conviction of love. A life of trusting instead of trying. A life of experiencing the reality of Christ in you. A life of knowing that Jesus loved you and loves you and nothing can separate you from that love. How can you know this to be true? The cross of Jesus where He died for you. Trust Him.

¹ Luther, *Galatians*, 26:133