

The Gospel in Galatians

Justification by Faith Alone

Lesson #4 for July 22, 2017

Scriptures: Galatians 2:15-21; Ephesians 2:12; Philippians 3:9; Romans 3:8,10-20; Genesis 15:5-6.

1. This lesson covers Galatians 2:15-21 in which Paul briefly summarized the plan of salvation by faith alone.
2. After discussing some of his personal experiences, (Galatians 2:1-10) Paul recounted the time when he rebuked Peter to his face and in public at Antioch. (Galatians 2:11-14) What was the issue? Peter had been exercising his freedom in Christ, setting aside his prejudices as a Jew and eating with Gentiles. But, when some conservative Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles and returned to behavior according to his Jewish prejudices. That led several of the other Jewish Christians in Antioch including Barnabas to follow his example. Paul recognized that a crisis was developing and that it must be met head-on. So, he rebuked Peter to his face and in public. Was that a good idea? What do you think happened at the next meal? What was Paul trying to accomplish? Paul was asserting, once again, that we are saved by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that a lot of ceremonial issues make no difference at all. Did Peter respond? The book of Galatians was not written until about 5 years later. What did the Gentile believers think when Paul called them *Gentile sinners*? Did Peter act from peer pressure? Or, bigotry?
3. It is not clear whether Galatians 2:15-21 is a summary of what Paul said to Peter and to the others, or whether it was Paul's conclusion later when writing the book of Galatians. In either case, he was making it clear that Jews and Gentiles were/are saved by faith alone.
4. In this brief summary, Paul discussed some key concepts in his writings: Justification, righteousness, works of law, belief, faith, and the faith of Jesus. In this lesson, we will attempt to dig into the meaning of these expressions.
5. Paul started his argument using traditional Jewish thinking. There were two groups with whom he was dealing: Those who were "Jews by birth," and those who were "Gentile sinners." It was his hope to grab the attention of the Jewish Christians and carry them with him through his argument. The Jews considered themselves to be the elect of God, that is, God's chosen people. They had been entrusted with His law. (Romans 3:1-3) God had offered them a covenant relationship with Himself. (Exodus 19-24) By contrast, Gentiles were considered by Jews to be sinners. Most Gentiles did not even know about God's law; and even if they did, they did not believe it applied to them. (Ephesians 2:12; Romans 2:14) Non-Jews could become "Jews" by following all the Jewish rules.
6. In Galatians 2:16, Paul went to the next step and clearly stated that the spiritual privileges that had been offered to the Jews did not make them any more acceptable to God because no one could be put right with God by "doing what the law requires."
7. There are two very important ideas in Galatians 2:16-17. The Greek word *dikaioo* often translated *justified* is found four times in these two verses. The Greek word *dikaioo* was sometimes used as legal language. It can mean *to declare someone right*. If a judge is doing his job properly, when he declares someone right, they truly are right. This word can also be translated as *put right* or *set right*. The most literal translation into English would be *rightify*—if we had such a word in English. A similar Greek word is *petroo* which is translated *petrified*. When we say something is petrified, does it mean that it has been declared stone? Or, that it really has become stone?

8. So, how did we get from the Greek word *dikaioo* to the English word *justify*? When translated into Latin, the Greek word *dikaioo* becomes *iustitia*. Since during much of Christian history the language of Christianity had been Latin when English translators were producing an English New Testament, they took the Latin and made it *justify*. Unfortunately, in modern legal parlance, *justice* has come to have a very different meaning. So, we need to make an effort to go back and determine what the original biblical concept was. So, the issue is: Does *justify* mean simply *to be declared right*? Or, does it mean *to be put right* or *set right*? *Salvation* means to be healed! Is a person actually changed? The Protestant reformers were so concerned about dealing with their past sins that it was the focus of their lives. They had been taught that God punishes sinners! So, they thought that the most important thing that needed to be done was to get God to declare them forgiven so He would not have to punish them in eternal hell fire.
9. Paul made it very clear that we can never be declared righteous, set right, or put right by observing the law. Why is that? **We could be put right with God if we could keep the law. (Leviticus 18:5; Romans 2:13)** However, we cannot. The only way our lives will be changed is by “beholding.” That is certainly not by “works of the law.” It is not by any legal maneuvering either. Remember that the word sometimes translated *justify* literally means *to be made righteous*. When God declares a sinner justified or put right or set right, is that legal fiction? Or, are those sinners actually set right in some real sense? What happens when one is justified, or set right?
10. Peter Abelard (1079-April 21, 1142) in his book, *Cur Deus Homo? (Why Did God Become Man?)*, raised the question which evangelical Christians have still not resolved. He wrote:

For what justice is there in giving up the most just [righteous] man of all to death on behalf of the sinner? What man would not be judged worthy of condemnation if he condemned the innocent in order to free the guilty?... **For if he could not save sinners except by condemning the just, where is his omnipotence? But if he could, but would not, how are we to defend his wisdom and justice?** [Content in brackets and bold type are added.]

11. What are we saying about God if we suggest that He can only save sinners by condemning Jesus? If God has the ability to save sinners, why does He not just do it? Why did Jesus have to die before God could save us? Does God refuse to save sinners until Someone dies? If so, why? Christ’s death is a demonstration of what will happen to sinners in the end.
12. A second major question is: What did Paul mean when he said *law*? Some would like to limit *law* to the Ten Commandments. Some would only include the ceremonial law. Clearly, that is not what Paul intended. Some would like to include all of the requirements spelled out by Moses under the moral law and the ceremonial law. This also is probably not adequate. We need to remember that to his Jewish audience, the *law* meant *Torah*—the usual name for the five books of Moses which we also know as the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Although the phrase “the works of the law” does not occur in the Old Testament and is not found in the New Testament outside of Paul, stunning confirmation of its meaning emerged in 1947 with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of writings copied by a group of Jews, called Essenes, who lived at the time of Jesus. Although written in Hebrew, one of the scrolls contains this exact phrase. The scroll’s title is *Miqsat Ma’as Ha-Torah*, which can be translated, “Important Works of the Law.” The scroll describes a number of issues concerning the biblical laws regarding the prevention of desecration of holy things, including several laws that marked the Jews out as separate from

the Gentiles. At the end the author writes that if these “works of the law” are followed, “you will be reckoned righteous” before God. Unlike Paul, the author does not offer his reader righteousness on the basis of faith but on the basis of behavior.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Monday, July 17.

13. A third essential component in understanding this section in Galatians is an understanding of the word *faith*. What is faith? First of all, we need to recognize that the Greek word *pistis* has been translated variously as *faith*, *belief*, *trust*, or even *confidence*. Paul told the jailer in Philippi that the only thing required for salvation was faith. (Acts 16:31) But, what is that elusive thing called faith? Many turn to Hebrews 11:1 for a definition of *faith*.
14. The best definition of *faith* that I know was developed gradually and with a lot of study of the subject by A. Graham Maxwell, my personal mentor. Summarizing much of what the Bible and Ellen White have said on the subject, he concluded as he stated many times:

Faith is just a word we use to describe a relationship with God as with a Person well-known. The better we know Him, the better the relationship may be. [We cannot say, “will be” because we remember the story of Lucifer!]

Faith implies an attitude toward God of love, trust, and deepest admiration. It means having enough confidence in God based on the more-than-adequate evidence revealed to be willing to believe what He says as soon as we are sure He is the One saying it, to accept what He offers as soon as we are sure He is the One offering it, and to do what He wishes as soon as we are sure He is the One wishing it, without reservation, for the rest of eternity. Anyone who has such faith would be perfectly safe to save. This is why faith is the only requirement for heaven.

Faith also means that, like Abraham, [Genesis 18:22-33] Job, [Job 42:7-8] and Moses, [Exodus 32:5-14; Numbers 14:11-25] God’s friends, we know God well enough to reverently ask Him, “Why?” [Sentence in brackets was also stated parenthetically many times by Dr. Maxwell. Bible texts in brackets are added.]

15. Being justified or put right or set right in God’s eyes is more than just a way of dealing with our past sins. What would be the purpose of setting someone right or putting him right if he just continued doing the evil things he had been doing? It is by beholding that we become changed. (2 Corinthians 3:18; *Great Controversy* 555.1) How much faith do we need? (Matthew 17:20)

It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence. Man will never rise higher than his standard of purity or goodness or truth. If self is his loftiest ideal, he will never attain to anything more exalted. Rather, he will constantly sink lower and lower. The grace of God alone has power to exalt man. Left to himself, his course must inevitably be downward.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy** 555.1. [Bold type is added.]

16. So, how do we actually “behold God”? By reading His Word. (Romans 10:17) It is through His inspired Word that we get to know Him, to appreciate Him, to love Him, and to worship Him. Could we lose our faith? Getting to know God is a lifelong experience.
17. God’s warning in Genesis 2:17 that “sin leads to death” was answered by the life and especially the death of Jesus. The truth of that was demonstrated by the death of Jesus. The life and death of Jesus give us a choice. We can choose to become more like Him—and thus,

live lives as close as possible to His life—or we will die as He died—the second death—the result of sin or final separation from God. Compare Matthew 27:46.

18. Paul's Judaizing opponents were trying to convince the Galatians that they would not be saved by faith alone, but rather, by faith plus a certain amount of works. Obviously, Paul was adamantly opposed to that approach. As a former Pharisee of the Pharisees, he certainly should have known!
19. Faith is not just a legal claim by which we are granted the legal status of Jesus, our Savior. Faith is a relationship with God as with a Person well-known as stated above in Item #14. By beholding the life of Jesus and loving what we see, we become changed—bit-by-bit, step-by-step—into His image. In other words, faith has as its primary goal not the eradication of our previous sinful records—which is impossible anyway—but the living of a new life in relationship to Jesus Christ. (Ecclesiastes 12:14; Revelation 20:12-13) Relationships take time. But, what about the thief on the cross? God saw a real change in him and on that basis found him savable.
20. Read Romans 3:9-26; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; and Philippians 3:9. In these passages we learn that God puts people right with Himself through faith in Jesus Christ. So, how does God deal with our sins? (Romans 8:3; Galatians 1:4) Through our trust in Him and His righteousness which has been demonstrated so magnificently through His life and His death, we can have our sins “dealt with.” Our lives can be transformed by an ongoing personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Are we learning day by day how to live Christ-like lives? Is that possible? By whose power is it possible?
21. Just as children become like their parents by their association together, so we can become like our heavenly Parents by a closer association with Them. It is a law of the human mind. (See *Great Controversy* 555.1 above in Item #15.) The Holy Spirit actually works with us to transform our lives.
22. One of the great examples of faith in the Bible is Abram/Abraham. Abraham lived about 2000 years before Christ. He is the first character in the Bible whose life is spelled out in detail. There were many ups and downs. But, over his years, Abraham developed a very close, personal relationship with Jesus who was the God of the Old Testament. (See 1 Corinthians 10:1-4; Luke 24:44.)
Luke 24:44: Then he said to them, “These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Luke 24:44). New York: American Bible Society.
23. Finally, in a terrible test when Abraham was 120 years old, God asked him to take the promised son, Isaac, on a three-day journey to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there as an “offering” to God. Why did God ask him to do such a thing? No doubt, the Devil had been making fun of God all over the universe because God had claimed Abraham as His friend. Every time Abraham fell, the Devil mocked. No doubt, he asked: “What do you think of this friend of God?” (Compare the story of Job as recorded in Job 1 and 2.)
24. So, when he finally reached Mount Moriah and informed his son of God's orders, Isaac—demonstrating his trust in God—agreed to be bound by his aged father and placed on the altar. Abraham raised the knife, preparing to kill his son when God stopped him. There were no other human beings present. That was a demonstration primarily to the universe that Abraham could be trusted. And that trust demonstrated his faith or trust in God. (*Patriarchs and Prophets* 154.3-155.2)

The sacrifice required of Abraham was not alone for his own good, nor solely

for the benefit of succeeding generations; but it was also for the instruction of the sinless intelligences of heaven and of other worlds. **The field of the controversy between Christ and Satan—the field on which the plan of redemption is wrought out—is the lesson book of the universe. [1 Corinthians 4:9] Because Abraham had [155] shown a lack of faith in God’s promises, Satan had accused him before the angels and before God of having failed to comply with the conditions of the covenant, and as unworthy of its blessings. God desired to prove the loyalty of His servant before all heaven, to demonstrate that nothing less than perfect obedience can be accepted, and to open more fully before them the plan of salvation.**

Heavenly beings were witnesses of the scene as the faith of Abraham and the submission of Isaac were tested. The trial was far more severe than that which had been brought upon Adam. Compliance with the prohibition laid upon our first parents involved no suffering, but the command to Abraham demanded the most agonizing sacrifice. **All heaven beheld with wonder and admiration Abraham’s unfaltering obedience. All heaven applauded his fidelity. Satan’s accusations were shown to be false.** God declared to His servant, “Now I know that thou fearest God [notwithstanding Satan’s charges], seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me.” [Genesis 22:12] God’s covenant, confirmed to Abraham by an oath before the intelligences of other worlds, testified that obedience will be rewarded.

It had been difficult even for the angels to grasp the mystery of redemption—to comprehend that the Commander of heaven, the Son of God, must die for guilty man. When the command was given to Abraham to offer up his son, the interest of all heavenly beings was enlisted. With intense earnestness they watched each step in the fulfillment of this command. When to Isaac’s question, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham made answer, “God will provide Himself a lamb;” and when the father’s hand was stayed as he was about to slay his son, and the ram which God had provided was offered in the place of Isaac—then light was shed upon the mystery of redemption, and even the angels understood more clearly the wonderful provision that God had made for man’s salvation. 1 Peter 1:12.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 154.3-155.2. [Bold type and texts in brackets are added; other content in brackets is in the original source.] Does James 2:14 suggest that our actions demonstrate our faith?

25. No wonder Abraham was called a friend of God.
26. Do we become friends of God by being declared that way? Or, do we become friends of God by being transformed by our faith relationship with Jesus Christ?
27. Read Genesis 15:5-6; John 3:14-16; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; and Galatians 5:6. Abraham demonstrated his trust in God. God says that all who fully trust Him—as Abraham did—will receive eternal life. How does that work? Do we somehow magically benefit from what Christ did? Or, is it that we benefit because we have come to understand why He died and what that means for our salvation? Does understanding Jesus make us want to love Him more? Abraham, Job, and Moses were God’s friends. What did they do to qualify?
28. Circumcision or lack of circumcision, being a Jew or being a Gentile, being a slave or being free, being a male or being a female are not the issues; these things make no difference. (Galatians 3:28)

29. Genuine faith is a response to God. It is not something that we do—not a feeling or an attitude—apart from God’s reaching out to us.
30. So, what does faith actually do for us? Read John 8:32,36; Acts 10:43; Romans 1:5,8; 6:17; Hebrews 11:6; and James 2:19. Faith sets us free—free to follow the example of Jesus—not following a set of rules no matter how few, or how many, but being transformed by following the example of our best Friend, Jesus Christ. Our sins no longer matter. We are led to believe and obey; thus, we are changed. Our faith is not like the faith of demons which does not change them.
31. It is essential—if you come to think about it carefully—that we come to have as complete and correct a picture of God, His character, and His government as is possible. If we are going to be changed by our picture of God, we need to have a good picture. No wonder Satan has done everything possible down through the generations to distort the picture of God. He wants us to believe that God is arbitrary, exacting, vengeful, unforgiving, and severe. He calls God a tyrant.
32. We believe that Christ was sinless throughout His entire life. Does that mean that He kept the law perfectly? If so, does His record of perfect obedience get transferred to our account? How does that work? Why is Christ’s obedience effective for salvation while ours is not? Is it because our obedience is so patchy? Is the “transfer of Christ’s righteousness” more than just a legal exchange?
33. If we believe that God simply declares us righteous by justifying us—and if this process happens over and over and over again, with little or no change in us—some people would suggest that this is an encouragement for people to sin. (Romans 3:8; 6:1) After all, if God takes care of everything without a person having to make any change in his/her life, then it does not matter how one lives!
34. Although we may be justified by our faith in Christ, it certainly does not mean we will never sin. But, does that mean that Christ is promoting us in sin? Paul’s response was: “God forbid!” “May it not be.” In the eyes of the law, I may be a sinner subject to death; but, in the eyes of God, by faith in Christ, I can claim a new life in Jesus. As I behold Him in my Bible study, meditation, and prayer, I am gradually transformed to become more like Him; Christ now lives in me.
35. This is no heavenly make-believe. People who have faith are really changed. It is a radical change. Our old sinful ways are gone. (Romans 6:5-14) Everything is new. (2 Corinthians 5:17) Thus, our faith in Christ is not just a death to our old ways. It is a resurrection to living a new life—a radically different life—a life gradually molded more and more like that of Jesus.
36. Why would anyone ever reject such a free gift? So, why are we so often tempted to sin? Do we ever eat more than we should? Do we ever misrepresent God to our children? When speaking to our bosses, do we ever distort the truth?
37. Those Christian Jews had become Christians because they recognized a need for something more than what they had gotten from observing the law. In turning to Christ, they were suggesting that He could provide what they needed for salvation. So, if they then turned back to keeping the law as a means to salvation, in effect, they were saying that Christ had not provided the salvation for which they were looking. As 21st century Christians, don’t we know better?

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