

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 7

Galatians 2:17-19

March 21, 1999

Text Comment

v.17 A confirmation of the point I made last Lord's Day evening. Justification by faith = justification by Christ. Here Paul uses "justification in Christ" as the equivalent of the previous "justification by faith".

These next three verses are difficult to interpret. Most of the commentaries will give you a variety of possible meanings. The most likely of them are these:

1. Paul could be anticipating the "antinomian" objection to the gospel of justification by faith -- as he does, for example, at Romans 3:31 and then, later, at Romans 6:1. That is, if one preaches and believes that sinners are accepted by God and declared "not guilty", not in any respect for what they do, but for what Christ has done for them, does that not inevitably end up promoting sin? Will not someone who knows that his own behavior is not the basis of his acceptance with God, feel free to behave any way he pleases and think that he can sin without impunity?

That is always the theological objection to justification by faith alone. It is the objection you will hear from conservative Roman Catholics today, for example. When I did the morning series on Roman Catholicism some time ago, I read Roman Catholic writers making this charge time and time again. Our doctrine, they charge, promotes loose living. Whereas their doctrine, which requires works for justification, keeps folks on their moral toes.

This is a possible interpretation, it seems to me. It cannot be rejected. We know that Paul raises it for consideration elsewhere when he discusses justification by faith instead of by works. Also, in Romans 3 (v. 31) he mentions the objection in passing, after first summarizing his doctrine of justification, before going on to demonstrate justification by faith more comprehensively in Romans 4-5 and then dealing with the antinomian objection in greater detail in Romans 6. That would be a parallel to this text. Paul has given a short account of justification by faith and not by works in 2:15-16, and now, quickly, he deals with the customary objection -- that this idea of justification promotes sin by seeming to teach that our behavior doesn't matter because it contributes nothing to our standing with God. He then will return to argue for justification by faith in greater detail and, after that, will return to the danger of turning our justification by faith into an excuse for sin. That is precisely what he does in Romans. He briefly anticipates the antinomian objection before dealing with it in greater detail later.

That is a possible interpretation of vv. 17-19, but it makes v. 18 particularly hard to understand. If v. 17 means: people say that to believe in justification by faith encourages sin because it makes your behavior immaterial to your standing with God, what does v. 18 mean? "If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker." The order of thought is not clear.

A second interpretation has Paul saying that the doctrine of justification leaves those Christians who

were Jews by birth in exactly the same situation as the "Gentile sinners." They too are great sinners before God. The way they looked at Gentiles is now seen to be hypocritical, because they were no more able to please God by their works than the Gentiles were. Peter and Paul, in turning away from the law as a means of the justification before God put themselves on exactly the same footing as the Gentiles. Does that mean, therefore, that the effect of Paul's doctrine was that Christ renders more people guilty and needy sinners. But, it is hard to see how anyone would regard Christ as responsible for promoting sin simply because he revealed the truly sinful state of people, especially as, according to Paul's teaching, Christ forces upon people the acknowledgement of their sin only so that he might remove it when they trust in him.

Finally, and most probably, Paul is taken to be saying this. If because we have forsaken all thought of justification by our own works of the law and have turned instead to Christ's righteousness, we are no longer practicing those Jewish regulations that separated us from Gentiles (take note, those are not biblical regulations, only rabbinical!), and, so, in the eyes of the circumcision party we have become sinners, has Christ then led us into sin -- as the judaizers would claim (that is, that would be the force of their objection to Paul's doctrine -- it had the effect of invoking Christ's name in support of sinful practices -- viz. the allowing of Christians not to practice circumcision and food laws, etc.)? By no means. But, if I now rebuild what I once destroyed -- as Peter began to do in Antioch; if I now return to an insistence on Gentiles practicing Jewish ceremonial laws, then I would be a transgressor -- a real sinner against God, not just someone the judaizers claim to be a sinner because I defend Gentile freedom. (Paul is being tactful, putting it hypothetically and in the first person, when he is really talking about what Peter actually did!)

I'm not really sure how to take these statements. If you read as many commentaries as I did on these verses, you would find your head spinning as I did. Everyone's approach is at least a little different from another's and many are quite different and everyone is tentative. But, as is usually the case when we come across a sentence that is difficult to interpret, the suggested explanations all make sense, in part, because they are all taken from the context and amount to the claim that Paul is saying here what he has said somewhere else.

One way or another, the connection of his thought seems to suggest that Paul is taking his stand against any vacillation on this point -- any such vacillation as Peter had been guilty of.

Christ makes no one a sinner; the very thought is blasphemous. But, my failure to hold fast to what he taught me and to practice the salvation as he revealed it to me and through me to the world would be terrible sin indeed.

And now this most important statement in summary: "for through the law, I died to the law, that I might live for God."

Now we said last week that when Paul spoke in v. 16 that a man is not justified by the works of the law, it was his way of denying the legalistic principle. Clearly, here in v. 19, he is saying largely the same thing, because contextually it is all connected. So how should we take the "dying to the law" here?

Well, in context, it seems straightforward to say, as Calvin does, that "To die to the law is to renounce it and to be freed from its dominion so that we have no confidence in it and it does not hold us captive under the yoke of slavery. ...as it gives us all up to destruction, we find no life in it." That is, Paul died to the law as a way of finding his peace with God, his justification. He turned away from justification by works to embrace justification by Christ. That is what he is talking about in the verses before and what he continues to talk about in the verses that follow.

Now, for centuries, the ordinary way that ordinary Bible readers have taken Paul's words here is to connect them to Paul's remarks in Romans 7:7-13 which they take to be autobiographical. A number of modern scholars assure us that we cannot take these verses to mean what they seem to mean, but I am not persuaded. Rather I am reminded of some remarks of James Denney in his correspondence with Alexander Whyte. In one letter he said, "The Calvinists and the Puritans, I am quite sure, and the simplest evangelical preachers, are right in their instinct for what is vital." And in another, "The unintelligent and inexperienced books about Paul are dreadful -- all done by just men who need no repentance and therefore have no glimmerings of what was vital to the apostle. It is always a marvel to me that the street preacher goes straight to the point in Paul, and finds all his answers where the ninety-and-nine just men find all their difficulties." [Barbour, *Whyte*, 507-509]

I confess to you that I get very weary of reading interpretation after interpretation of Paul, in all of these learned commentaries, that I cannot conceive of an original reader of one of Paul's letters ever imagining or even understanding if it were explained to him!

God's people read these verses in Romans 7 and they seem to say something quite straightforward. It will be good for us to turn those verses up.

In Romans 7:6 Paul has said something that sounds very much like what he wrote in Galatians 2:19: "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (lit. "the letter"). That is a summary of his argument from 6:1 and, it is important to remember, that he has been speaking to the Christians generally, that is, as much if not more to Gentile believers as Jewish. That is, the bondage to the law of which he has been speaking, the death to the law, the death to sin, is not something specifically Jewish, but concerns the transformation of a person that occurs when he believes in Christ. It is another way of saying what happens when one becomes a Christian -- Jewish or Gentile.

But that way of stating the difference -- dying to the law (which in Paul's argument = also dying to sin) may give someone the idea that the law is itself a bad thing, something we don't want to have anything to do with. Not at all, Paul says, and he explains why.

Read Romans 7:7-13.

The law, Paul says, was the means of my salvation, because it was the ministry of the law to my conscience that broke the back of my self-righteousness and self-confidence. For a long time Paul lived "apart from the law" which, in this context, must mean that Paul lived without the living voice of the law speaking in his conscience. The law was there, but Paul was deaf to it. He even was a

student of the law, but never really heard its message in his own soul. (This happens so often! It was true of Luther for a time; of many biblical scholars today, who write large books about the interpretation of the Bible and haven't a real clue in their own hearts about its true meaning. A wonderful modern example is Eta Linnemann! A German professor of biblical studies -- the first woman to rise so high -- but who now admits that for years she didn't have a clue about what the Bible was really saying.)

But God sent the law into Paul's heart ("when the commandment came"). And Paul died -- that is, all his hopes of his own righteousness collapsed, he saw himself as he really was, a terrible sinner before a holy God. The particular commandment that God used, apparently, was the tenth: "Thou shalt not covet." Apparently covetousness was the last vice of which Paul suspected himself; but it was the first to be exposed." [*Romans*, 249] And perhaps it is not so hard for us to understand why it should have been the tenth commandment. With the other nine, it is possible to imagine that one is keeping these laws by treating them superficially, as if the sixth commandment was perfectly kept if one didn't actually murder anyone and the seventh if one did not sleep with someone else's wife. We know that superficial view of obedience was widely held in the Judaism of that day (as it is widely held in the Christianity of our own day) because Jesus attacks it with might and main in his preaching. (The sixth commandment governs your attitudes toward your neighbor, your commitment to his welfare, your efforts to bless his life. Hatred and indifference violate the sixth commandment as surely as murder does. Murder is only a title for a large area of duty to our fellow man.) But the tenth explicitly reaches into our inner life, our motives, our attitudes, our thoughts, and lays them bare as sinful, selfish, and unfaithful.

But it isn't just that the law came home to Paul's conscience and he realized that he was not the law-keeper he thought he was but a law-breaker of the first order. It also happened that as the law came home to his conscience it produced rebellion in him. Suddenly he found rebellion everywhere. He found that what the law forbade he found everywhere in his heart. It even seems to be his meaning that, precisely because something was forbidden and he felt the full effect of that prohibition in his conscience, he found a greater attraction to the sin. He felt under an ever greater restriction, the more he realized how much the law forbade. He found himself striving against these restrictions that God had placed upon him -- which he had never felt much before because he had interpreted the law so superficially.

But all of this, in the goodness of the Lord, had a holy purpose. It produced in Paul the knowledge of his sin and guilt and prepared him for his summons to faith in Christ on the Damascus Road. (The occasion of this conviction of sin? No one can say for sure. Acts 26:14: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Did his witness of the death of Stephen have something to do with this?)

Now, however, looking at Paul's statement about dying to the law in this context, it becomes clear that Paul is talking about the law as it was viewed in his life before he had true and living faith. What he believed about the law in those days was that he could keep it (like the rich young ruler "All these I have kept from my youth") and that, by keeping it, he could earn his peace with God. That is the view of first century Judaism by and large, the view Paul was raised in, the view Jesus preached against (as the prophets before him), and the view of the judaizers in Galatia. That was what he died to -- a view of the law that he will tell us was always wrong, always unbiblical, always

the way in which the true gospel was corrupted. He died to the law as a way of justification.

Which is, of course, exactly the point here and in Galatians. He is asserting justification by Christ or by faith over against judaizers who were asserting justification by works of the law, which Paul used to believe but has rejected now that he has come to faith in Christ. The judaizers still believed what Paul used to believe, that you could keep the law sufficiently to contribute to your own justification. They had never felt the force of the law bringing conviction to the soul as Paul had. That is why Paul can call them "false brothers" in Galatians.

That is what Paul is talking about when he speaks of dying to the law -- he means dying to it as a way of justification, of peace with God, and of acceptance by God. He means dying to the law as understood and as used by the self-righteous, which is what he had been until he met Christ.

Now, everyone of us in this room, must have died or must die to the law in just this way. We are not talking about theoretical things here. This is life and death. If you remain alive to the law -- still think of your relationship with God and with heaven in terms of your own works and your own goodness -- you will die the second death. It is only by dying to the law in this sense that you can live to God and live forever. And there are multitudes of people who sit week by week in Christian churches who are still very much alive to the law in just the way that Paul had died to it!

I remember many years ago now, going down to First Presbyterian Church on a Wednesday afternoon, to hear the late Dr. John Gerstner, who was one of their speakers for the Lenten series they did every year in those days in conjunction with First Presbyterian in Seattle. His text that day happened to be Romans 7:9: "Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died."

It was a typical Gerstner address: scintillating, raspy voice, straightforward and unflinching application. And he finished with an illustration that I used myself, now long ago. He told the story, in broad outline only, of course, of the Elizabeth Gouge novel, *Green Dolphin Country*. Gouge, you ladies may know, was a devout Roman Catholic and her novels all explore high spiritual and moral themes.

This particular novel is the story of two sisters, Marguerite and Marianne, and a man both of them love, William. The story begins in England where William loves Marianne. He decides to emigrate to New Zealand and promises to send for his love when all is ready in his new home. But through a series of circumstances, William is drunk when he writes the letter, and sends his summons to the wrong sister. Marguerite is overjoyed, Marianne is left desolate. It is only when Marguerite steps off the ship that William realizes his terrible blunder, but, being a man of honor, there is nothing for him but to keep his mistake to himself and marry the woman he does not love. The years pass. Marianne, her heart broken, enters a monastery and lives her life solitary. Marguerite never learns that she is married to her husband through a grotesque mistake.

Now Gouge must resolve this story and she does it in this way. Years later Gouge has William and Marguerite return to England for a visit. They are reunited with Marianne, after all these years, now an older nun. And in the course of that visit and that reunion William, unable to keep it from her any

longer, tells Marianne what happened those long years ago; that she was his love, always had been, but that his own foolishness had taken her from him. But, that is not all, while William is telling Marianne all of this, Marguerite, unbeknownst to them, is overhearing it all. For the first time she hears of the mis-sent letter and of William's horror when he saw, not Marianne, but Marguerite step off the boat. She knows now that her entire life as his wife was the consequence of a gigantic mistake on his part, that he never loved her and didn't want her; he loved her sister.

A perfect illustration, Gerstner thought, of multitudes of people in Christian churches who imagine all their lives long that their relationship with God is one thing, when, in fact, it is another. They think they are at peace with God, their consciences are at peace. And the reason is not because God is at peace with them, but because they have not yet died to the law, the commandment has not yet come home to them, they still think of themselves much as the rich young man thought of himself -- "All these I have kept from my youth." And it will only be on the judgment day when they will discover that things were not, were never as they had imagined all the while.

You, my brethren and my friends, do not want to be as Marguerite, finding out only when it is far too late that things were not as you supposed. You do not want to hear the Savior of the world say to you, "Depart from me, I never knew you." You don't want to be among those against whom he shuts the door of his wedding banquet hall!

And if you do not, you be sure of this -- among other things, of course -- but especially of this -- that you have died to the law. That you have heard the law's verdict pronounced in your conscience and that you have learned what all must learn, that their only hope of acceptance with God, of acquittal before his bar, lies not in what you do or can do, what you are or can be, but only and ever in what Jesus Christ is and has done. If you wish to live to God and with God, you must die to your own self-righteousness. You must die to any thought of using God's law to save yourself. And you must **really** die to it, until your dependence upon Christ and his righteousness is not simply a doctrine or a religious principle for you, but the living character of your daily life, your very breath. Paul goes on to say that in the next verses, as we will see. And this is a greater thing that people think. We all can easily claim to believe that our justification is by Christ alone, while all the while, at the deeper level, thinking God must be pleased with us because we are so pleased with ourselves. That we are worthy in some sense, because we see ourselves as better than others.

But hear and take to heart what Paul says. There is a death you must be sure you have died -- a death to every thought of self-righteousness, that you might place all your hope in Christ. A death to every thought that you have or can keep the law of God to God's satisfaction. So many never die this death that leads to life and so they must die the second death, which is death forever.

You young people, you young people who have been raised in Christian homes and have been Christians as long as you can remember. You too must die to the law. You won't perhaps have such a dramatic experience of dying to the law in the middle of your life, as Paul did. But the experience is not the important thing, the fact is. That you know full well in your heart that the law of God, his commandments, your obedience, your goodness, has nothing whatever to do with your acceptance with God. That depends, that must depend, that can't possibly depend on anything else but on Jesus Christ and his righteousness, which is given as a free gift to those who trust in Him.

Alexander Whyte once preached a sermon on the Rich Young Ruler. It was one of his most famous and powerful deliverances, especially for its climactic finish. The preacher watched that young man to the end of his life and made the congregation watch him too. And then he leaned over the pulpit so that he could see that unfortunate and self-righteous man wheeling blindly down the black depths of the Inferno, circle after circle, until just as he disappeared on his way down its bottomless abyss, Whyte shouted, "I hear it! It's the mocking laughter of the universe, and it's shouting at him over the edge, 'Ha ha! Kept the commandments!'" [Barbour, 300-301]