

# **LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for June 14: Receiving the gospel**

June 2, 2009

Paul's teaching on law and grace has foundational impact on the doctrines that make Baptists Baptist. Paul's discovery, direct from God, brought a revolution in spiritual thought and a totally new spiritual paradigm. Paul was not fighting legalism but rather sought the true meaning of salvation or entry into the kingdom of God. His Damascus-road experience with the risen Christ brought new birth to Paul and a new life which he had not found in the impossible adherence to the Jewish law. What he found in grace and forgiveness, was never fulfilled through his obedience to a legal system of rituals and sacrifices. Law has a role to play but cannot be an effective means to salvation, given the sinful nature of man.

Paul's testimony and personal defense begins in Galatians 1:10 continues to 2:21, and encompasses part of this lesson. Some highlights will help understand the text. In Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were given the right hand of affirmation by Peter, James and John (2:9) to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (see Acts 15:1-35). The example of Titus helped prove anyone could be saved, even an uncircumcised Greek.

Paul's disagreement with Peter continued at a meeting they had at Antioch, a cosmopolitan city (2:11). Antioch was the cradle of international Christianity and the missionary expansion of the church. From Antioch, Paul launched all three of his missionary journeys. Peter was out of his environment in Antioch.

In his testimony of this meeting, Paul accuses Peter of timidity and

hypocrisy. Peter ate with the Gentiles and then separated himself from them when those “belonging to the circumcision group” came around (2:11-13). Paul “opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong” (2:11). Peter wavered from his Gentile-type life in order to save face with the Jewish fundamentalists. Paul uses this argument with Peter: If the Jew cannot be saved by the law, then why require the Gentiles to follow the Jewish custom of seeking righteousness through the law (2:14).

In Acts 10 and 11, Peter was called to the home of Cornelius, who was a centurion in the Italian Regiment, a Gentile God-fearer. Before Peter went, he had a vision of unclean animals and received the command to eat. Peter replied, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. God spoke to him saying, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:14-15). In the visit, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles just as it had on the Jews. Peter completed his lesson by saying: “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (11:18). That experience is followed in Acts 12 with the expansion of the church in Antioch. Peter was confronted with and confessed that truth. In spite of all of Peter’s experiences, we find him later, at Antioch, timid and afraid before his friends. Paul would have none of that (2:5).

Contrasting Paul and Peter at this point is a study of psychology, personality and faith. Peter, here, was weak and hypocritical. His boldness at Pentecost had faded and Peter’s old fears as displayed at the crucifixion crept back into his life. His message had merged with his Jewish spiritual culture.

The big fisherman is an example of many in the Christian walk today. Peter’s wishy-washy behavior is observed and his hypocrisy betrayed the lordship of Christ. Hypocrisy was as dangerous to this new faith then as well as it is to the church today.

Paul, who boldly attacked his Christian adversaries and held the coat of

Stephen when he was martyred, was true to his personality traits on the other side of conversion. Paul was forthright and courageous regardless. Christianity benefited from his staunch personality and commitment to his beliefs. There are many, like Peter, who need the likes of Paul to keep them pointed down the straight and narrow.

Out of ancient Scripture comes a great lesson for us today. Truth is not relative to what man thinks or is told or to the strengths and weaknesses of human devotion. Salvation truth cannot be changed, cannot be intermingled with private or public alternate interpretation by denominations, preachers or theologians. It is what it is.

Different religions or faiths can differ on many things but must not differ on the meaning of salvation. Though sin is universal, there is no place for universalism, salvation by works, salvation by church, salvation by baptism or by anything except faith in the redeeming Christ, the perfect Lamb of God.

Some reading this lesson will turn their heads, disavow the truth and look for other means of achieving salvation and eternal life. Please listen carefully to the truth of the message which Paul teaches and writes.

### **Believe (Galatians 2:15-16)**

Justified by faith or justified by law/works? That is the question! Justification is another word for salvation and one can understand why Paul would use it in this context. The Jews were adept in understanding the requirements of the law. Their entire conscious life was bathed in justification before Jehovah by works or through obeying the law. God has a subsidiary moral purpose for the law which is to reveal sin (Galatians 3:19-20, Romans 5:20). What the human spirit learns is that law not only reveals sin or infractions but also causes it.

Human nature's tendency to sin is so strong, it hinders every man from

doing the will of God by keeping the law and being reconciled to a rightful relationship to God.

The word “justification,” used as a legal metaphor, describes the human problem of sin and the divine answer to the solution of sin. The New Testament word means “to treat rightly” or to “regard as right, righteous or just.” God is holy and righteous and demands righteousness from people. God respects man’s effort to achieve righteousness by keeping the law.

However great the effort, as it was with Paul, right relationship with God cannot be achieved by human effort alone. What Paul experienced and God revealed was this: By God’s favor or grace, in forgiveness, the guilty person is declared innocent and the sin is removed. Salvation is a gift of God created in the human heart by redemption through Christ who paid the penalty for sin in death by crucifixion. Justification only could be achieved through the death of the right sacrifice, Christ the perfect Lamb of God.

Justification refers to man’s deliverance from the bondage and penalty of sin and death. That penalty is removed by faith in the Son of God who paid the penalty for every person who asks with his heart, mind, soul and spirit. When the sinful person stands before God and asks in faith (belief) for forgiveness, God declares him righteous, innocent of the charges and justified in the court of God. God’s justification is not based on merit but upon grace given through forgiveness when the guilty party is repentant.

Paul, with a tinge of sarcasm, tells Peter, “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (vv. 15-16).

Faith is not mere rational affirmation or intellectual assent but an active trust in God’s plan and an active giving of oneself to Christ with all of one’s heart, mind, soul, spirit and body.

Grace is God’s initiative and faith or belief is man’s initiative to make

salvation possible. “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

### **Behave (Galatians 2:17-21)**

Justification and transformation are two sides of the same coin. Christ, not only is Savior, but also Lord. Justification, a once for all experience, accomplishes regeneration and transformation, rebirth or new life in Christ, through the indwelling Holy Spirit. As in marriage, the two—justification and regeneration—merge into one. Spiritual regeneration is moral, social, mental, emotional and behavioral. Without regeneration, justification does not take place.

Though justified and regenerated, a person is not totally sinless nor in any way perfect. The sin nature is changed and dominated by the in-dwelling Holy Spirit. We are not to conclude, since sin still is present, that Christ promotes sin in the Christian life (v. 17, “absolutely not”). Paul alludes again to Peter, the weak hypocrite, for going back toward a Jewish legalism, a works religion, by “rebuilding what he had destroyed” (v. 18). If Paul were to do likewise, he would be, again, a breaker of Jewish law.

Paul explains that because of the law, he realized he was spiritually dead. The law had done its work and revealed to him the error of his ways. Paul rejected the law as a means of justification while appreciating its moral and ethical values and appreciated the law’s help in pointing him to God. Knowing he was spiritually dead, he was justified by faith, regenerated and spiritually alive in Christ (vv. 19-20). Paul’s self was not like the old life but a new life of faith, controlled and guided from within by Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s life had been changed radically from hateful, murderous revengeful and evil thoughts and behavior so his life “in the body” he would live “by

faith in the Son of God” who loved him. God’s grace accomplished this change in behavior and could never be set aside. Paul’s changed life is credited to the grace of God not the works religion bought and taught by Judaism and the Pharisees.

### **Bewitched (Galatians 3:1-5)**

To go back to a works religion would mean Christ died for nothing (v. 21). Having presented his argument, his case for faith alone, Paul was bewildered and called the Galatians “foolish” and bewitched,” and challenged them with this question: “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing?” (v. 2).

“Foolish” means not to perceive or lack of comprehension. The Galatians had been bewitched and deceived by false teachers after receiving the Holy Spirit, the primary evidence of conversion to Christ (vv. 2-5; see also 2 Corinthians 5:5). The allure of a works religion was insidious to Peter and to the Galatians and did not go away without great spiritual effort.

The temptation to rely on good works is persistent and appealing. The temptation is as strong today and tempts many not grounded in the doctrine of soul freedom and faith to move away from churches who emphasize faith alone to those who preach and practice good works and a social gospel. This can and does occur without personal awareness. Laziness about doctrine and biblical teaching allows an easy slide back to cultural and natural tendencies to think works and not grace.

Conversely, the temptation to do nothing is also rampant. Since I am saved by faith alone, then good works can be nil or minimal. One can love the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith but practice apathy and depend on others to do the Christian ministry. The rule of thumb is that 15-20 percent do most or all of the ministry while 80 percent get a free ride. Many Baptists want a Savior but not a Lord.

Scriptures teach we are not to be judges but fruit inspectors. A fruitful life of service is a reasonably good indicator of genuine salvation. A Christian must not be bewitched or fooled into thinking salvation is by works or salvation is without works. Neither extreme is acceptable. Regeneration's intrinsic value is an active life of service and ministry.

### **Blessed (Galatians 3:6-9)**

The lesson Paul teaches is more than contextual to these ancient times and Jewish culture. There are two ways in which people seek salvation and eternal life. First, salvation by works or good deeds, and second, salvation by grace through faith in that no one, except Christ, has been capable or able to prove himself righteous enough by thought or deed to earn salvation.

Paul continues his argument by turning to his impeccable knowledge of the Old Testament. Those who continue to support a works salvation argued from the point of view of Moses, the law-giver. Paul uses Abraham who precedes Moses, saying that Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." As in the case of Lazarus, heaven was to be in the bosom of Abraham (see Luke 16:19-31). Paul clearly shows Abraham experienced and practiced a faith religion, not one of works. The rich man Luke described practiced neither faith nor works. His only interest was himself.

Connecting the dots, Paul has given the theological foundation that the church, those who believe in Christ, are the children of Abraham (v. 7) and not the unbelieving nation of Israel. No biological relationship can preempt a free relationship by faith. God has not changed. Abraham understood, long before Christ and Paul, that faith in the promises of God was the key to life now and life eternal. Law has its role to reveal sin, but only grace that forgives through faith is sufficient for justification before God. The basic concept of salvation merges both the Old and New Testament (v. 8,

“Scripture foresaw”) into one continuous testimony of God’s grace. Like Abraham, those (anyone) who “have faith are blessed” (v. 9).

## **Conclusion**

Truth is not relative, as many would suggest, when it comes to one’s faith. The doctrine of salvation is important, and great care should be taken to find a church that is true to Scripture. The tendency today is to drift toward the church one likes with less regard to what is taught or believed. One religion is not just as good or as effective as the other in teaching how to be saved.

Paul was greatly concerned about the Galatians drifting back to merge a salvation of faith with a salvation of works. How horribly sad to go into all the world and preaching a Gospel of works and give individuals a false sense of eternal hope. Paul wanted all people to recognize this truth, to place their faith in Jesus Christ, and to publicly confessing their faith, and then by sharing their faith with others.

When a person repents of sin, places their faith in Christ and receives forgiveness of sin, the person is justified, or declared righteous by God, not because of deserved merit but because of God’s grace. While we were sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).