

HOW TO BE RIGHT WITH GOD
GALATIANS 2:15-21

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Jay Austin and Lauren Geoghegan liked to travel. (PROJECTOR ON--- BIKING COUPLE) They were both college graduates, and they both had jobs in Washington, DC. For a while Lauren worked for Congressman Adam Schiff. In 2013 Jay rode his scooter across the country. He nicknamed the scooter "Rousseau," after the Swiss philosopher who was convinced that people were by nature good.

Jay and Lauren were the same age, and at age 29 they decided to ride bikes around the world. During their travels Jay kept up a blog. In April of 2018 Jay wrote, **"Badness exists, some, but even that's quite rare. By and large, humans are kind. Generous and wonderful and kind. No greater revelation has come from our journey than this."** He also wrote another day that evil is **"a make-believe concept."**

Five years ago this week Jay and Austin were traveling through Tajikistan in south central Asia with five other bikers. A car came up behind them and swerved into them. The occupants jumped out and began stabbing the survivors. The assailants jumped back into the car and sped off. Jay and Lauren were killed. ISIS claimed credit for the attack. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We are entering another election season, and political issues and candidates are getting a lot of attention. There is a general recognition about the issues which need to be addressed: the economy, crime, immigration, drugs, education, abortion (or reproductive rights, according to one's perspective), national debt, government corruption, and foreign threats posed by Russia and China. How to deal with these challenges is what stirs up the heated debate.

In these debates there seldom seems to be a deeper dive into the root issues. What kind of a world is it in which we live? Who are we human beings? What is the nature of our problems?

Andrew Carnegie (PROJECTOR ON--- ANDREW CARNEGIE) was a steel tycoon in the latter part of the 1800s. In his memoirs he wrote, **"...I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear. Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth of evolution. 'All is well since all grows better,' became my motto, my true source of comfort. Man was not created with an instinct for his own degradation, but from the lower he has risen to the higher forms. Nor is there any conceivable end to his march to perfection."** (*The New Yorker*, 11/22/1982) The notion of evolution still holds sway in our world, especially in the realm of science.

Given that people are good and are basically headed in the right direction, Carnegie was convinced that problems in the world stemmed from a lack of education. So he set out to donate many of his millions to the establishment of public libraries. He is believed to have funded 1,689 libraries across the country. All of us can appreciate the value of that generosity.

If Carnegie was right in his analysis of the human condition, then there was one country in Europe in the early 1900s that stood out as the closest place on earth to paradise. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Stanford University Professor Steven Zipperstein points out that this was the world's best educated country. It had the world's finest elementary school system. It had the highest literacy rate of any place in the world. It had the best universities. In the earlier part of the 1900s more books were published there than in any other country in the world. Zipperstein writes, **"Its technical skill, its industry, its relentless business savvy worked it off as among modernity's singular success."** (*New York Times Book Review*, November 24, 2002)

Who would not have been blessed to live in this country anytime in the first half of the 1900s? The country is Germany, which became the nexus of evil in WWII and the years preceding it.

The Bible tells us that we live in a world which has been created by the Triune Godhead. It tells us that we humans have been created by this God in His image, and thus have great value and worth. The Bible tells us that we have great potential for learning and creating and developing meaningful relationships. But the Bible also tells us that we humans have been infected by sin. This sin has introduced a corruption into all of our being. It leaves us with a selfish bent. It separates us from our Creator. Our desperate need is to get right with Him. How are we to do that?

That is a key concern in the little New Testament Book of Galatians which we have been studying. We have seen that the Apostle Paul had been based in the Syrian city of Antioch. (PROJECTOR ON--- ANTIOCH MAP) A church had been planted there by refugees from persecution in Jerusalem. Gentiles had become part of the Antioch church along with Christian Jews. It was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas had been sent out on a missionary trip that had brought them to southern Asia Minor and the Roman province of Galatia. Churches were started there.

But upon Paul's return to Antioch Jewish influencers confused the gospel for the Galatian Christians. This prompted Paul to write this letter to explain that the gospel message is simply to believe in Jesus. The Judaizers were wrong in saying the Jesus followers also had to follow the Jewish religious system.

Peter somewhat later showed up in Antioch. At first he was hanging out with the Gentile Christians. But when men from the Jerusalem church showed up, Paul and Barnabas stopped hanging around with the Gentile Christians. Last week in vv.11-14 of #2 we

saw Paul criticize Peter for that. Such behavior confuses the message of the gospel and disrupts unity in the church.

I.

So we take up the story today in v. 15 of Galatians #2. If we are going to be of any help to our fellow human beings we must begin by RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM. (I. RECOGNIZING THE PROBLEM) Paul writes in v. 15, **“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners...”** In the context Paul is addressing Peter and the Christian Jews who have withdrawn from hanging out with the Gentile Christians.

What Paul seems to be doing in this verse is quoting the popular and traditional attitude of Jews toward Gentiles. “We Jews are a cut above the Gentiles. Those Gentiles worship multiple gods. They have immoral lifestyles. They eat unclean food. We are better than those dirty rotten sinners.” This is the attitude that has been carried over to some extent by Jews who have become followers of Jesus in the time of the first century.

In the next verse Paul will make it clear that Jews have just as great a need to be made right with God as Gentiles. The Jewish state of sinfulness was made clear in other writings of Paul. For example, in Romans #3 v. 9 (ROMANS 3;9) he wrote, **“What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...”**

The New Testament reveals that this sin situation is somewhat complicated. Sin involves a legal aspect. God is in one sense a Judge. Before Him we are all legally guilty. Then also we have this sin nature. There is this bent within us to do wrong things, to do selfish things. Then there is this aspect of sin which involves specific actions, or inactions. The Bible explains that there are deeds of commission and omission. There are sins in thoughts, words, and deeds. (PROJECTOR OFF)

One aspect of sin is revealed here in v. 15 of our passage. It is the attitude, sometimes subtle, sometimes not, that our sin is never as bad as the sins of other people. “I may have done such-and-such, but I am not as bad as so-and-so over there.” We see that in our prison ministry. Murderers are often respected behind bars. But someone guilty of child molesting is seen as a really terrible person. And then there is no one worse than a snitch.

But the starting point to having a right view of humanity is recognizing that we all have a sin problem. A Barna survey taken three years ago found that 69% of Americans agree with the statement “People are basically good.” The Bible says that we have great value and worth, but we humans are basically bad. We are sinners who fall short of a holy God.

We have a pretty weak view of sin in our society. So often among the cultural elites sin is limited to having intolerance toward whatever the dominant cultural viewpoint is. This

includes failure to fully embrace the danger of climate change or opposition to any kind of sexual freedom. Otherwise crimes are just mistakes, or cases of bad judgment.

Years ago Charles Colson visited a maximum security prison outside of Oslo, Norway. He was greeted by the warden, who was a psychiatrist. He discovered that there were a number of other psychiatrists who worked at the prison. Colson asked the warden how many of the inmates there were mental cases. She responded that all of them were.

It was evident that the underlying view of humanity among the Norwegians was that people are basically good. So anyone who commits such horrible crimes that land them in prison must have a fundamental problem of mental health. During that visit Colson preached the gospel to many of the prisoners. They seemed to be oblivious to his message. As he was leaving the meeting, a young correctional officer spoke to him and identified herself as a Christian. She expressed her frustration with the Norwegian prison system where there seemed to be no sense of personal responsibility. There was therefore no reason for prisoners to seek personal transformation.

A few days after returning to the States, Charles Colson got the tragic news that this young Christian officer had been assigned to escort an inmate to see a movie as part of his therapy. On the way back to his cell he murdered her.

Much of the success of our country can be traced back to the understanding of so many of our founding fathers that we humans have a sin problem. So power of political leaders needs to be held in check. Thus our founding fathers set up a system of government whereby a legislative branch and an executive branch and a judicial branch are designed to hold each other accountable. No one branch was intended to have too much power. No power specifically assigned to the federal government was to be reserved, according to our Constitution, to the states and the people. A chief reason behind this way of establishing civil government was the recognition that people are sinners. They will do bad things if their power is not kept in check.

II.

Being right with God requires first that we recognize that we have a problem. All of us humans are sinners. Verse 16 in our passage explores FINDING THE ANSWER IN GOOD WORKS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. FINDING THE ANSWER IN GOOD WORKS) Paul writes in v. 16 of Galatians #2, **"...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."**

The answer of Judaism traditionally to the problem of sin was to follow the Law of Moses. Orthodox Judaism determined that there were 635 commandments to be observed in the Law of Moses. 365 of them are positive, and 248 of them are negative. These were the Apostle Paul's guiding rules for the earlier part of his life.

The general response of most religions in dealing with the problem of sin is to do good works. This is true even in many strands of Christianity. We have to be baptized, or we have to observe the sacraments, or we have to give up certain sins, or we have to donate a certain percentage of our income, or we have to knock on so many doors.

In our verse the context is dealing with good deeds according to the Hebrew Scriptures. For many years scholars were a bit puzzled in that they did not find the specific term “works of the Law” in early Jewish writings. But then among the Dead Sea Scrolls they discovered this one document which they labeled 4QMMT. The archaeologists think that it comes from the first or second century before Christ.

The term “works of the Law” appears in the Dead Sea document several times. In one paragraph the text says, **“We have sent you some of the works of the law which we have discerned will be for your good...”** Later in the same paragraph the writer says, **“And it will be credited to you as righteousness since you will have done what is righteous and good in His eyes...”** This Jewish group, probably living near the Dead Sea, had this belief that they could be right with God by doing good works.

Paul says in v. 16 in our passage that following the law cannot make us right with God. In the next chapter Paul describes what the Law of Moses was intended to accomplish. I prefer the NASV translation of Galatians 3 v. 24, which says, **“Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.”** In other words, the Law of Moses was designed to show the Jewish people their sinfulness so that they would look for a Savior.

Three times in v. 16 of our passage Paul asserts that the works of the law cannot make anyone right with God. In the very last line of the verse Paul quotes from Psalm 143 v. 2. (PSALM 143:2) The Psalmist says there to God: **“...for no one living is righteous before you.”** So there was this recognition in the Old Testament that we humans are sinners. This sin creates a barrier between us and God which our good works are unable to overcome. Thus Paul concludes in the last line of our v. 16, quoting Psalm 143 v. 2, **“...by works of the law no one will be justified.”**

III.

In vv. 16-19 we encounter the answer to our dilemma. These verses describe FINDING THE ANSWER IN JUSTIFICATION IN CHRIST. (III. FINDING THE ANSWER IN...) The key term is “justified.” Just as “works of the law” appears three times in v. 16, so also “justified” appears three times. This is the verb form of the Greek word for “righteous.”

In English the word “justify” is used to describe the validation of our position in any controversy. It is used to make excuses or provide reasons for some shortcoming on our part. In the New Testament “justify” means “to declare righteous.” It does not mean “to make righteous.” The theological truth is that we Christians are still sinners, But somehow through what Jesus does we are declared righteous.

The problem involving sin was recognized early in Old Testament times. Job asked (JOB 9:2), “...**But how can a man be in the right before God?**” Verse 16 in our passage describes the answer. We are justified, declared righteous, through faith in Jesus Christ.

There is a creedal statement that goes back almost 400 years to early Presbyterians. This Westminster Confession of Faith (WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH) explains what this justification means. The statement reads like this: “**Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight... (PART 2) He accepts us as righteous in His sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.**” This other theological term “imputed” means “applied.” The righteousness of Jesus is applied to us. How is it that we receive this righteousness of Christ? It is received by faith alone. That’s it. Nothing else. We should not start adding anything to it. We are declared righteous simply by believing in Jesus.

Now that requires and assumes that we recognize that we have a problem. We must recognize that we are sinners who are separated from a holy God. We must also have the Jesus of the Bible as the object of our faith. This Jesus of the Bible is the Son of God who became a human being and who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Righteousness is applied to us--- it is imputed--- when we believe in this Jesus. We are declared righteous. Our sins are forgiven. We are given our ticket to heaven. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Jewish Christians in Paul’s day had come to believe that justification comes from faith in Jesus. So Paul is asking how these Judaizers can add Jewish law requirements to the gospel. This justification not only wipes out bad things, but it also applies positive righteousness to us. For sin is not just doing bad things. It is also failure to do all of the good things that we should do, like loving our neighbor as ourself and loving God with all of our being. So justification is not just giving a status as if we have never sinned, but also justification gives us a status as if we had done everything right. It is a legal declaration putting us on great terms with the Judge of heaven.

Look then at v. 17 in our passage: “**But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!**” “If we Jewish Christians pursue justification by faith in Christ and then are found to be sinners by not keeping the Old Testament rules by associating with Gentiles, is Jesus a promoter of sin?” No, Paul says, this is ridiculous. Jewish dietary rules and restrictions on contact with Gentiles are no longer required. We have to drop them.

Verse 18: “**For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.**” Jesus by His death tore down the Jewish-Gentile barrier. To reapply Mosaic rules in regard to defilement and diet would be a violation of God’s standard of righteousness in this new arrangement which has resulted from the death of Jesus. The ultimate purpose of the Old Testament law was to point people toward the Messiah, toward Jesus. He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament law. If Paul is still speaking to Peter, he is

indicating that he is a transgressor because he has separated from the Gentile Christians. He is rebuilding the Old Testament law requirements which Jesus has torn down.

Verse 19: **“...For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.”** Paul explains that in becoming a follower of Jesus he is no longer bound to these Old Testament restrictions about eating unclean foods and hanging out with Gentiles and observing feasts and following certain Jewish traditions.

In the first part of Romans #7 Paul elaborates upon this idea of dying to the law. (ROMANS 7:1) In this other New Testament letter Paul writes, beginning in v. 1 of #7: **“Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? (ROMANS 7:2) For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. (ROMANS 7:3) Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. (ROMANS 7:4) Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.”**

Thus the apostle explains that Jesus has freed the Jews, Paul and Peter and the others, from their responsibility to the Old Testament law. The Christian obligation is now to a Person, not to a law.

IV.

In vv. 20 and 21 Paul talks about LIVING IN LIGHT OF JUSTIFICATION. (IV. LIVING IN LIGHT OF JUSTIFICATION) He writes in v. 20, **“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. 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.”** By virtue of our faith in Jesus, we are identified with Him in His death. What He accomplished in dying on the cross has been applied to us who believe in Jesus.

We find another explanation of this in Paul's letter to the Colossians. (COLOSSIANS 2:13) In Colossians #2 vv. 13 & 14 Paul writes, **“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, (COLOSSIANS 2:14) by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”** What Jesus accomplished in paying the debt of our sins has been applied to our account. The sin separating us from God has been taken away. It was nailed to the cross. One of the results is that we have no more obligation to follow the Old Testament law. Instead our focus is to be on Jesus.

Paul in our verse says that Christ has come to live in him. That truth which Paul claims applies to all Christians. According to Romans #8 vv. 10 & 11 (ROMANS 8:10-11), **“But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life**

because of righteousness. (ROMANS 8:11) If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."

By virtue of our faith in Christ we have spiritual life. We have new motivations and new desires. Our personality is not eradicated. But we are transformed in a good way by the power of God. Just as we are saved by faith, we are to live by faith.

Verse 21: **"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."** This is a kind of parting shot at the Judaizers, those Jews who wanted to make the Gentiles live like religious Jews. Paul says that if righteousness comes through following the Old Testament law, then there would be no reason for Jesus to die. Why should the Son of God had to experience such a horrible death if righteousness could be obtained in some other way.

The point for us to understand is that Jesus provided a means for us to be right with God. Our only responsibility is to embrace Him, to believe in Him.

We live in a sinful world. All of us are sinners. We violate God's standards in thought, word, and deed. One place in which this is especially evident is our modern standards about human sexuality. The popular idea is that everything is OK as long as no one gets hurt. But this is wrong. And the reality is that people do get hurt when we make up our own standards in regard to male female relationships. Our Creator knows best how we should handle human sexuality. He has told us about it in His Word.

Percy Bythe Shelley was a famous English poet and writer in England in the early 1800s. He adopted a lifestyle with other leading literary figures of the day that is more characteristic of our time in the US. They lacked the conveniences that we have in our day with birth control methods and medical abortions. But Percy and his literary friends slept around with various people. When he was 19, he married a sixteen-year-old girl named Harriet, whom he had known from boarding school. Soon after that he developed a relationship with a twenty-eight-year-old school teacher. He invited her to join their household.

A couple of years later, Percy became infatuated with another sixteen-year-old girl named Mary. He dumped Harriet, who was now pregnant. He married Mary and ran off to Europe with her. Harriet committed suicide. Percy soon encouraged Mary to have relationships with other people. In the midst of all of this Mary began writing a novel. She had writing skills of her own. She entitled the novel *Frankenstein*. In it she describes a doctor who wants to play God, who wants to create life on his own terms--- just as the Shelleys had created their own system of ethics. But instead of creating a wonderful new species, Frankenstein created a murderous monster.

So it is that we have created monsters in our day. We have set up our own moral standards. We have changed the definition of marriage. We have created surrogate mothers and sperm donors. We are telling children today that they can choose their own

gender at a young age. The results are going to be terrible. But we all have our own sins. The good news is that there is forgiveness available in the midst of an often messy world. We can be justified, we can be declared righteous before a holy God no matter what messiness we have experienced in life. All of us are sinners before a holy God. But all of us can be declared righteous if we will simply put our faith in Jesus.