

A Retrospect
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So one kind reader of my message “A Holy Happiness” for 12 September, 2021, asked, “Why ever did you stop at verse 20?” A good question. And my answer was I did not wish to detract from the monumental conclusion of verse 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.** This great conclusion drives home the point that the truth **that God so loved the world**, and abstract and general truth(!), needs the personal qualification: ***He loved me and He gave Himself for me.*** Without this conclusion, this application of the truth, we miss out on its splendor. Yes, every believer must know and believe that **God is love** and that this *love of God* is custom-made for each and every believer individually! It is not one size fits all; rather it is an “all” that fits each—for it is the unique and immortal existence of ourselves as personalities—persons created by a personal, a perpetually personal God who must be taken home to each of our hearts. How significant and loved we must be to God for this salvation to be secured for us!

How marvelous, how wonderful
And my song will ever be
How marvelous, how wonderful
Is my Saviour's love for me

How marvelous, how wonderful
And my song will ever be
How marvelous, how wonderful
Is my Saviour's love for me

Forever I will sing Your praise
Jesus, Risen King
Oh my God I stand amazed that You loved me

When with ransomed in glory
His face I at last shall see
It will be my joy through the ages
To sing of His love for me

Yes, and Amen. So, that was the reason I stopped at verse 20. Then this same reader, “Added, well then, next week you will get to verse 21: **I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ will have died for no purpose?** So, there it is, only my purpose was not so much to move forward, and to reach backwards and gather up the verse related to the controversy covered in verses 11-16. I was in a quandary as to how I should approach this section and, in my mind, it still makes sense to speak first to the matter, to the conclusion of the matter: **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. That is what is at stake in the controversy with Peter! That is what Paul is refusing to nullify!

Table fellowship is very precious—we celebrate that this morning again! The unity and union we have with each other *and with our living Lord*, yes, at this table; that is very sacred, too. But the crisis was generated by the thought that new Christians, Gentile believers, had to be refurbished as “Jews” in order to be full, genuine and true Christians—to really be *brothers and sisters* in the Lord—that expectation was a bridge too far, and probably was not even in the intentions of those who advocated it. For they, too, believed, that salvation was **through faith in Christ alone**. They did not imagine that their penchant for putting an old patch on a new wineskin would bring about disastrous outcomes. Yes, even to the ruination of the wineskin and loss of its contents! Jesus did not say, “You must become a Jew and then believe in Me in order to be saved”—or, “Believe in Me and then become a Jew so as to become a Christian.” That detracts from the sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross! That implies there was something deficient in that work, the atonement, and we need to supplement the perfect sacrifice of Christ with our “religious” input *so as to make it all good*. Paul saw the implications which were carried in their good intentions, confronted Peter with those implications (“You are nullifying the grace of God! So, cease and desist!”). Paul saw that the requirements were a way of smuggling works back in through the back door. I will remind you of what Jesus said, very simply: **“repent and believe.”**

I want to offer a pastoral report: I remember poignantly receiving the phone call. “Please come now, my husband is dying.” That is a distressing call to receive and to respond to. I recall getting into my car and heading for that home. It was a call to spiritual warfare and that became clear as I prayed my way there. “This sickness is not unto death.” That’s what I heard as I talked with God on the “red phone.” “What must I do, Lord?” “Tell Robert (not his real name) to repent.” Now, try to remember that as a pastor, called to someone’s death bed, my training and my thought patterns run to comfort, and not to spiritual rebuke. “Really, Lord, you want me to go in and call Robert to repentance?” And this was the reply, “Or, if you choose, ask Robert if he wants to live or die.” *Then I knew for certain that this was the Lord’s errand—he had his business to transact with Robert. I was just the messenger.* So, I arrived and I could smell death as I approached the house. I entered and there Robert was lying on the bed and, for all I could tell, he was sinking down into the pit. I realized that I had very little time left with Robert. So, I strengthened myself and spoke, “Robert, I have a word from the Lord for you: repent.” Robert’s descent seemed to stop abruptly. There was a moment of silence and then I heard what can best be described as a snarl from the pit. It was surly and ugly and frightening. “Of what should I repent?”

This was a clearly a challenge from the enemy as I have ever heard. And, you know what; I had no idea of what to say! So, alarmed, I cried out to the Lord—a very wise thing to do anytime, but especially at a time like this one! “Lord,” I said, “I have been

faithful to call Robert to repentance. I have nothing more to say.” And the Lord answered me, “Tell Robert to repent of drunkenness, foul language and adultery.” I had no idea. I had no experience of Robert that gave me any direction as to what his dating sins might be; but there they were. So, I spoke out the three charges just as they were given to me. Then, something supernatural happened, a wind materialized in the room. It seemed to be coming from the bed and it seemed to be lifting Robert up, back into the room. His wife and I were stunned, completely taken off guard. And Robert, when he had arrived in the room spoke. He said, “Reverend, now I know that God has sent you *because no one else knew* . . . and, from my heart, I do repent.” Right then, the scent of death evaporated. The air was freshened miraculously and Robert was restored to his wife, hale and healthy. And he asked for something to eat—for the first time in three days. Strange as that may sound, it was not so complicated. It was very, very simple: repent and live. How Scriptural!

It does not take too many instances of ministry like that to help you, as a minister, get on board with Paul’s **I do not nullify the grace of God.**

14 But when I saw that they were not [a]straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?[b]

15 “We *are* Jews by nature and not sinners from the Gentiles; 16 nevertheless, knowing that a person is not justified by works of [c]the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of [d]the Law; since by works of [e]the Law no [f]flesh will be justified.

Footnotes

- a. Galatians 2:14 Or *progressing toward*; lit *walking straightly*
- b. Galatians 2:14 Some close the direct quotation here, others extend it through v 21
- c. Galatians 2:16 Or *law*
- d. Galatians 2:16 Or *law*
- e. Galatians 2:16 Or *law*
- f. Galatians 2:16 Or *mortal man*

The text is fairly straightforward here—so we can side step the debate introduced by the “new Paul” advocates *that this is about church membership, or, alternately, out who’s in and who’s outside of the kingdom!* **The truth of the gospel** has a bearing on the question of how “Jewish” a Gentile convert had to be *to be Christian*¹. And, the better argument,

¹ Two considerations: 1. the scope of the “works of the law” (Is it merely ceremonial, or broader?) 2. the question arises of how one is justified. (Is it by faith through grace or through works?)

the repudiation of justification by works is as near as verse 16: **we (Jews by birth) know that a person is not justified by works of the law.** This takes in the whole of the law, we think, and not just the dietary, fellowship and ceremonial observances (feasts, Sabbaths and Holy Days) of the Jewish traditions. This religious way of pleasing God, i.e. obtaining divine favor, namely of attaining “reconciliation with God” is framed as a merit-based, do-it-yourself religion (and not grace-based) is fused in Paul’s thinking with “keeping of the law.” Forgiveness of sins was granted on the basis of **believing in Christ** alone! The gospel. Furthermore, it seems clear that **becoming like Him was irreducible to such terms as “to become a Jew.”** *Becoming like Him was much more compelling then, as it is remains today.*

Verse 12 begins **before certain men came from James.** This makes the identity of those who were causing the disturbance clear. We are not told that they were “authorized” by James (the brother of Jesus, not the son of Zebedee!) or were simply sympathetic to James’ traditionalist inclinations (even John kept to the Jewish Passover throughout his life!) is never made clear to us. Explicitly. **Fearing the party of the circumcision** is a fairly large hint of their leanings. So, this advocacy of Jewishness played well with the Jewish Christians but not so well with the Gentile, or Greeks. Peter, caught in the middle, might plead his scruples on the matter rather than fear, or peer pressure. But the error needed to be strenuously exposed and opposed because it was causing division in the church (table fellowship was broken). I think that it is a misreading of the situation to downplay the element of sympathy for those favoring religious continuity *besides it is fairly clear that this is a “matter indifferent”*—meaning not crucial to one’s salvation! Two key factors: as yet, there were only the Jewish scriptures to go on and there was no history of separate and distinctive worship practices. Early church probably felt very like the synagogue practices from which it was derived: the reading and expounding of scripture, the leadership structure and the separation between men and women/children.

Verse 13. The charge of hypocrisy came in because, while preaching salvation through faith in Christ, they were actually re-establishing the law! They were making a spiritual change fleshly! Translating something that God had done freely into something men could manage and control (the law?). And this maneuver undercuts the entire sufficiency of Christ’s work of atonement while it shifts the focus of authority from the divine to the human—and that, friends, is the basic pathway of secular humanism. Again, this might not have been apparent from the outset (it rarely is!)—Jewish Christians of that day experienced very little disruption as they continued to worship in the temple as well as in church groups simultaneously. Those in the Gentile churches could not duplicate that situation largely due to their distance from the temple and its sacrificial services!

Here is an interesting parallel. When Moses liberated the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt; they were rescued from a socio-economic ethnic and political oppression.

The Israelites in Egypt were disenfranchised slaves legally. What they transitioned into, under Moses, was an ethnic religious, moral and legal servitude to God as God's Chosen People and as a new nation. They were freed to serve God. While this servitude is a lesser tyranny, it is still a "tyranny" of sorts with God in the place of a human master and in place of a more dominant society². They were not freed to self-realization, or to libertine practices. They were liberated to become "serviceable to God," to become a nation of priests (with privileges, prerogatives and responsibilities /duties) so that **all nations would be blessed** through Abraham's descendants.

Verses 17 and 18 point to a dynamics often, I think, overlooked. It is over looked because **For through the law I died to the law** is a much more striking point! Verses 17 and 18 are the first part of the equation here and they deal with the concern of the men from James that Christian liberty inevitably will lead to immorality, dissolute living and lawlessness. *This is an extremely depressing, but, realistic view of human nature.* The Judaizers seemed to believe that without regulation, and fear of punishment, social order would descend into chaos. We are surrounded by folks who think the same way because they are unconverted, earthly and have no conception of things spiritual. Such people would bring us into bondage again.

Paul refutes the suggestion that because we become Christians we are promoting sin, godlessness and immorality. New creatures in Christ are no longer controlled by their natural/sin disposition! Freedom is not freedom to sin. **If I rebuild what I have torn down** (the dividing wall of hostility in the ordinances and ceremonies), **I prove myself a transgressor.** (v. 18) But putting himself back under the law, Paul would re-enter the condemnation of the law *for the law came to convict us of sin as sinners, and not by the*

² Maybe society got its bad rap ("We are born good and society corrupts us"-Rousseau. Or "We are born free and everywhere we are in chains, fashioned of laws, norms, tradition, religion and morality."-Marx,) here because oppression occurs when one society subjugates another and the "oppression" of the past is an act of imposition. Perhaps it is not something native, or inherent to social order per se. (In such a case the ruling class/aristocracy (Egyptian "superiority" to the Hebrews) would be a social myth with prejudice aimed at maintaining power, wealth and privilege—a structural, "systemic" advantage.) The Romantic analysis of society seems deficient in this regard—as if there were a pure, "original condition" from which "oppression" emerges without "oppressors." BUT there is no such "primal society" from which all this oppression might have flowed (or originated); *there was a parentless, unsocialized pair of created beings—social convention/oppression had not been invented yet.* Blaming socialization, or faulty education for our ills (instead of sin?) runs into difficulties when one envisions our past on an abstract level. Thereby the premise of original goodness, or our innocence, falters and, along with it, the notion of the social construction of reality runs into a dead end—it collapses. The progressive scheme is logically impossible and therefore philosophically and historically flawed—fatally flawed. "Survival of the fittest," plucked as it were from the rubble, appears to be "aristocratic" to its core (or its plutocratic core—more to the point); it is a rationalization of "conflict and the status quo" as interdependent and mutually authenticating. And that *rationalization* is most certainly about power and control. Of course, the "elite" among us finds this social doctrine comforting and "essential." And their social preservation is a most likely source of oppression, thievery and corruption.

way of salvation! And we come to this conclusion: sometimes things only become clear when we review them in retrospect—as we have done.

Amen.