

Freed From the Curse

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[0 : 00] Freedom from the curse is our theme tonight because Jesus freed us from the curse of the law that's mentioned in chapter 3 verse 13, which means not only do we get a new future, but we get a new right now.

And we often forget that our eternal future has incredible implications for our moment right now and our next moment and our next day and so on.

Our eternity is tied to our now. So tonight we're going to study just a portion of what we read, Galatians 2 verses 17 to 21, just the last bit of chapter 2.

And it's very dense and it's very challenging. But here's maybe a greater challenge. This is a challenge that I wrestle with is to sit and think, yeah, that's true.

I assent to that doctrine and those legalists out there who don't believe in justification by faith, they really need to, you know, I hope they get their stuff together and can understand what's true.

[1 : 10] We all have a little legalist way deep down in our hearts. Some of us it's not that deep down. But we didn't come to church just to read the word of God and nod. We came to church to be read by the word of God.

So let's agree tonight, all of us, very much me included, to invite God through his word, to challenge us, to challenge our hearts, to inspect us, to heal us.

So in Galatians 2, Paul says that he sees Peter stepping away from fellowship with the Gentiles and not eating with them.

In other words, Peter is taking Jewish law that the risen Christ has shown him is done away with in a sense. It's been fulfilled and he doesn't have to do that anymore. Remember, Christ in a vision to Peter said, don't call unclean what I have called clean.

And yet Peter is acting as though that law is actually still needful to be okay with God for a right standing with God. So Paul sees that and instead of saying, well, Peter, that's kind of racist that you wouldn't eat with the Greeks.

[2 : 23] Or instead of saying, well, Peter, you know, Christ associated with sinners and we shouldn't discriminate like that. Those things might be true, but Paul cuts right to the heart and says, actually, it's not an eating issue.

It's a gospel issue. This is a justification by faith alone issue, Peter. He says you're not in step with the gospel.

So you know what's really at stake here is everything. And it might seem so mundane. So look with me at verses 15 and 16.

We're just going to take it kind of a verse at a time and walk through this little passage. And I said we're starting in 17. I'm sorry, we're starting in verse 15. So 15 and 16, we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.

But 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, again, by works of the law no one will be justified.

[3 : 26] I get the sense from Paul's repetition that this is really important. Justification does not come through works of the law, but by faith in Christ.

So what do we mean by justification? It's a very Christianese word. We'll have all heard it most likely many times. And there's lots of really formal theological definitions, but really it's at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

Justification is being okay with God. So we put our faith in Christ because He justifies us before God.

He changes our status. Christ changes our status before God. Not our works. In the gospel, Christ changes our status from sinner to righteous.

Sam Albury says, it's not primarily a change in you. It's a change of you. In God's eyes, you're a new man. You stand before Him as clean as Jesus Christ Himself if you have put your faith in Christ.

[4 : 33] So justification isn't primarily a change of our behavior, our behavior changes as a result of justification, but justification is a change of our status.

But I don't think any of us consciously think on a daily basis, man, you know, I could really use some justification. We don't think in those terms that word isn't deeply ingrained in our consciousness in such a way that justification is identified as one of our deep desires.

But I suggest that maybe it's our deepest desire or one of our deepest desires after all because what we want, and I think this is pretty ubiquitous, we want our guilt to be dealt with.

And not formally, we want to actually feel a removal of guilt, don't we? We want our guilt to go away. We want our shame to be covered up and not ineffectually like we do when we just hide things, but actually dealt with.

We want our feelings of failure to be done away with. We want to know that we're secure and that we have a really bright future that we can't mess up.

[5 : 47] We want those anxieties about our future, maybe even just our next week future or our next year future. We want those anxieties to be relieved.

Maybe this is, this might just be me. I don't think it is. I want to be deeply known and deeply accepted.

Does that resonate? To be deeply known and accepted. Only in Christ do we have that. The curse of the law, we experience day to day and those feelings of condemnation and shame and guilt and anxiety and despair and just that existential frustration.

But here's what justification does and why this is actually the thing that we all crave. We all crave to be made right with God because the implications of that for the here and now is that in Christ, he actually gets rid of our guilt because on the cross, he takes it on himself and pays for it.

There's no more debt to pay. Through justification, Christ gently covers over our shame. He takes our worst and he gives us his best. What could be better than that?

[7 : 02] And he does it despite our worst betrayals of him and others. Through justification, Christ turns those feelings of failure and condemnation into certainty of acceptance and love and freedom because Jesus knows our frame.

He knows that we are dust and he treats us that way. Isn't that comforting to know that? Jesus didn't come in Matthew and say, you know, to all who are trying and moderately successful, come to me and I will give you rules.

He said, come to me who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Justification lets us feel secure and lets us be certain of a bright future because Christ secured that future for us on the cross.

In Isaiah, I don't remember where it is, but there's a passage that says there's a road to Zion and only the righteous can walk it, but not even a fool can fall off the path. I want to be on that road.

Not even a fool can stray off the path. Or another place, I think in the Psalms, it says, though I stumble, I shall not be cast headlong. We crave that kind of security, don't we?

[8 : 23] That we don't have to worry that everything is going to come crashing down at any minute. We're all convinced that we can be either known or accepted.

What I mean by that is, if you like me and accept me, I assume you don't know the real me. And if you really knew the real me, you wouldn't want me as your friend, let alone standing here behind a pulpit.

We're convinced that we can be either known or accepted, not both. But justification is the unique Christian reality that in Christ we're both truly known and deeply accepted.

While you were still sinners, Christ died for you, not while you were getting your act together. That's at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian is, he came for us when we were at our very worst.

There's an implication, like a good meal, you kind of eat the leftovers for a long time, for days after the meal. The implication of this is like a feast for me.

[9 : 40] That our best efforts aren't the thing that moved Christ most toward us, it's actually our weaknesses and our failings. That Christ has moved toward us by the very thing that we think would push him away.

It's through our sin and failure that we experience the tenderness and mercy of Christ. And that kind of justification that only comes by faith in Christ.

That's it. That's Paul's point here. 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. Paul's saying, do you get the point yet? This makes me think of back in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's sin. And as soon as they do, they're ashamed.

And so they make an effort to cover that shame with big leaves. It's not enough. And God shows up and they feel guilty and shame and they hide.

[10 : 49] Now legalism often is thought of as trying to impress God or adding rules, but that has actually another side of the same coin.

When we think that we can get right with God or feel okay with God by hiding from God, what we're doing is trying to cover up our own shame and we're not relying on Christ.

Jesus gives us freedom from the curse of the law, freedom from the shame, freedom from the guilt, the fear, the anxiety, the freedom that comes from being truly known and deeply accepted, but only comes through faith in Christ.

We just put all of our weight on Him. We rely on Him and we stop relying on ourselves. Now verse 17, 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. In other words, Paul's stating his opponent's critique of Paul's gospel message. Paul says we're justified not by works of the law, but only by faith in Christ. And his opponents say, well, then doesn't that mean that Christ is actually kind of promoting sin?

[11 : 59] If we don't have to do any good works to prove ourselves to God, I mean, isn't that a bit morally subversive? Isn't that too good to be true?

Paul's gospel always seemed too good to be true. I looked, I don't think anyone ever accused Paul of being a legalist, but when Paul preaches the response is generally something like, well then maybe we should sin so that grace should abound.

Free grace. Justification by faith alone. If we don't believe, know and preach a gospel that is close to being too good to be true, it might not be the gospel that we know at all.

If the gospel is a narrow road with a ditch on either side, if you heard that one ditch, one error to fall into is legalism and the other is called antinomianism, literally the anti-law way.

Legalism says, I can earn my way into God's favor. I can cover up my shame and be okay. I can deal with my guilt myself.

[13 : 18] Antinomianism says, I don't need to earn my way into God's favor because I'm doing just fine, thank you very much. I'm not really that bad. But only the gospel, only justification by faith says you really are that bad and you don't need to earn your way into God's favor.

It's the only thing that takes our condition seriously, God's law seriously and God's grace seriously. You can have it all in Christ, but we have to admit that we're that bad and he's that good.

Verse 18, for if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. In other words, if we've been changed and confronted by that gospel, it would be ridiculous to climb back up those flimsy structures that we had built to attain to God.

The structures that we had built of self-righteousness or of hiding from God, the structures that we build in our lives to feel okay, whether they're habits, relationships, what have you, in Christ, he says you don't need any of that, you just need me, you just need Christ, faith in Christ.

In Paul's saying what Peter's doing is actually rebuilding that structure. He's rebuilding a structure to be okay. And he says we don't do that. That's contrary to the whole point.

[14 : 53] His rationale, look at verse 19, for through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. The law is for the living.

Laws don't have anything to do with dead people. The law only has a domain to accuse the living. The law can only hold the living up to a standard.

But if you're dead to it, what does the law have to do with you? Paul says through the law, I died to the law. I have nothing to do with the law anymore. I'm dead to it.

Now rules are good. Rules and laws are necessary. But Paul is emphatic. When it comes to our justification before God, rules and laws have nothing to do with it anymore.

Because through the law, I died to the law. Not to be dead, not to remain dead, but so that I might live to God. Martin Luther says this in his incredible, I almost just wanted to read the Galatians commentary from Luther.

[15:56] It's just a 200-page sermon, essentially on Galatians. It's amazing. He says this about this passage. As the grave in which Christ lay dead was empty after he rose, so when I believe in Christ, I rise with him and die to my grave, that is to the law, which held me captive.

So the law now is empty, and I have escaped out of my prison and grave. Therefore, the law is no right to accuse me or to hold me any longer, for I have risen.

I love that. The law comes. You're like, no, I've died and risen. You can't find me anymore. It's like if you owed a huge sum of money, and then you died, and someone else came to live in your flat, and a debt collector came and knocked on the door and said, we're here to collect the money.

You say, the person you're looking for is dead. I'm sorry, you can't collect. So when the law comes around to accuse you of not measuring up to God's standards, so we can say, the old man you're looking for isn't here anymore.

He's dead to the law, and now he lives to God.

[17:09] Paul goes on, verse 20, I have been crucified with Christ. Wow. 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. Our faith unites us to Christ in his death and his resurrection, so much that we can say what happened to Jesus happened to me.

Christ was crucified. I was crucified with him. Christ was raised. I was raised with him. So now in a very intimate, in a very real way, we can say it's not we who live, but Christ who lives in me, Christ in you.

I'm not sure five more glorious words, five more glorious words have ever been spoken. Christ who lives in me. That should awe us every day.

So how do we live then our next moment, our next day, our next week? How does this affect our practical life? Because it's easy to say, yeah, that's true.

[18:36] God changed my status through Christ on the cross, and before him I'm righteous, which means I can go to heaven when I die. But what does that mean for tomorrow? Look at the second half of verse 20, the life I now live in the flesh, I live how?

By faith. And who? The Son of God. Who did what? Who loved me? Even me.

And gave himself for me. We preach that gospel to our hearts, friends. That's how we live moment by moment, day by day.

That's how we experience real Christianity. That's how justification by faith in Christ affects us and changes us.

Moment by moment we just take the next step of faith because Christ is with me. So much so that I can say Christ lives in me. And he loved me and he gave himself for me.

[19:36] I think clear-minded Christianity, we don't always think this way, but I think that our most clear-minded, we read this, we think of Christ's love for us and we say, for me?

Are you kidding? Christianity should always come with a sense of awe. We should be blown away. It's scandalous. What Christ did for people like us, isn't it? And we preach that gospel to our hearts. You think, okay, heart, who's me?

Who's the me that Christ died for? And then you might run down the list of your past and the things that you wish you hadn't done, the things you wish you hadn't said, the times you didn't measure up.

And then you might think about all the ways that you've not loved the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and all the times you've not loved your neighbor as yourself and you say, me?

[20:40] I don't deserve that. Exactly. Exactly. We see that justification by faith has immense power in how we live our next moment.

If you think of it like that, with that kind of awe. All ends, verse 21, I do not nullify the grace of God for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Well, did Christ die for no purpose? Was it for nothing that he was nailed to that tree and became a curse?

Well we set him aside and say, oh thank you, we're all right. I don't need you here for this bit of my life.

When we look to anything but Christ to feel okay, to deal with the mess of our lives, we are in grave danger of nullifying the grace of God.

[21 : 56] When we look to anything but Christ to deal with our shame, guilt, anxiety, despair, anger, anything but Christ, let's not nullify the grace of God.

Christ did not die for no purpose, Christ died for you, even you.

So we just go on moment by moment preaching to our hearts 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.

And we just tell him, I am a mess, but I'm your mess, Lord. That's a comfort. Let's pray.

Here we thank you for that mercy, we thank you for your kindness, we thank you for your tenderness.

[22 : 59] We don't deserve it, but we love it. Lord we all need our hearts lifted. None of us has too much encouragement in the gospel.

None of us feels too forgiven. None of us feels too loved by you. You lift us up, lift up our drooping heads, strengthen our weary weak knees, straighten our backs, give us that rest that can only be found in Christ.

We crave it Lord. What we deeply crave in all of our mess is just you. We just want to be near you. Amen.