

***Our Confidence in this Life***  
***Galatians 2:15-21***

Last Sunday we considered Galatians 2:11-14 in which Paul confronted Peter for withdrawing his fellowship from the Gentile Christians. Even though Peter had the freedom to eat whatever he wanted with whomever he wanted, when certain Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem, Peter quit eating with the Gentiles because he feared what his Jewish brothers would think. Paul told Peter that it was wrong for him to send the message to Gentile believers, “If you don’t follow Jewish social customs, you’re not first-class Christians and you’re not worthy of my fellowship.” Our passage today flows out of Paul’s confrontation with Peter. In many translations, this entire passage is in quotation marks, indicating that Paul is continuing to address Peter.

In the rest of Galatians 2, Paul will appeal to their common experience as Jews who have come to faith in Christ as evidence that their confidence before God had nothing to do with keeping the Law and had everything to do with Jesus’ death on the cross. If you’re not a Jewish Christian who’s really, really tempted to return to the Law (the old covenant), you may be scratching your head thinking, “Now *why* are we spending so much time talking about not going back to the Law?” That’s a valid question – one that Brian and I are wrestling with as we teach through Galatians.

One reason we’re spending so much time understanding Paul’s argument in Galatians is because we too are tempted to put our confidence in something other than Jesus’ death and resurrection. Like Jewish Christians in the first century, it’s sometimes tempting to think, “Yes, I believe that Jesus died for my sins and rose again on the third day, but what really matters day to day is what I do.” If you’ve been at Faith very long, you know that we believe that our day-to-day spiritual practices/habits are vital. But if we’re not careful, our confidence in this life can shift from Jesus’ death and resurrection to our good behavior.

As we discussed last week, this is usually a subtle shift. Instead of having a God-centered life in which we “fix our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2), we have a self-centered life in which we fix our eyes on ourselves. Our confidence before God is dependent on things like: how obedient (or sinful) we’ve been lately, how often we’ve read the Bible, how long we’ve prayed, how much ministry we’ve done lately, etc. As important as those things are, they were never meant to be the basis of our confidence before God.

What I’m describing is analogous to first-century Jewish Christians drifting back to keeping the Law. Their confidence before God was no longer Jesus’ death and resurrection; their confidence was in their own expression of obedience to the Law. Thinking through the dynamics of *their* situation can help us in *our own* situation.

***What is our confidence in this life? (Galatians 2:15-21)***

Verse 15 indicates that Paul is making an application that is very specific to him and Peter as Jewish Christians.

15 "We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles;

In various places Paul argues that there was great advantage to being Jewish (see Romans 3:1-2, 9:4-5, 2 Timothy 3:14). Being Jewish, you grow up immersed in the Scriptures and the truth that God is active and alive in this world. Peter and Paul were Jews who experienced such advantages. Paul is using a category used by first-century Jews when he writes that he and Peter were “not sinners from among the Gentiles.” Those outside of ethnic Israel were viewed as “sinners” whereas Jews were considered “righteous” because they were in relationship with the one true living God. In light of this perspective, look at Paul’s statement in verse 16:

16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of 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 the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

Both Paul and Peter agreed that a person isn’t justified by the works of the Law. The works of the law were *never* meant to be a means of justification. In chapter 3 Paul will point out that historically the Law was given to a specific group of people (the Jews) for a specific period of time (from Moses to the coming of Christ). The works of the Law defined what obedience looked like for Jews who were already in relationship with God; the works of the Law were never meant to *make* a person right before God.

Think about a simple analogy. Every family has certain rules/laws/guidelines that define how you’re supposed to behave. These rules vary from family to family. Sometimes these rules are explicitly spelled out in great detail and sometimes everybody just knows them. But let’s say that a family has these rules:

- Make your bed every day before breakfast.
- Take off your shoes when you come into the house.
- No loud music after 10 p.m.
- No talking with food in your mouth.

Those are reasonable rules. Following those rules doesn’t *make* you a member of that family. No, those rules define expectations for those who are already in that family. If little Johnny doesn’t make his bed, tracks mud into the house, plays loud music until midnight and talks with his mouth full of food he’s messing up, but he’s still a member of the family. He will probably be disciplined – not so that he can earn the right to be in the family again, but so that he will learn how he should behave in that family.

In the same way, the Law was never meant to be a way for people to earn the right to be in God’s family. Rather, the Law was God’s way of saying, “This is how you are supposed to behave in My family.” For example, in Israel you couldn’t do any work on the Sabbath (between sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday). Obedient Jews remembered the Sabbath day and kept it holy. But keeping the Sabbath holy never *made* a person righteous.

Paul appeals to Peter’s understanding that nobody was ever justified by the works of the Law when he writes, “*even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law. . .*” Their common experience as Jews was that the works of the Law didn’t justify them; they were justified by faith in Christ. [Faith is not merely

agreeing mentally once that Jesus died for sin. Faith is an abiding confidence that Jesus died for *your* sin.]

In verse 17 Paul addresses the mindset that if you don't follow the Law, you won't have any restraints and you'll end up living a wild, sinful life. If you grew up in a closed community in which "outsiders" were viewed with suspicion, you can appreciate this mindset. If you grew up in Jerusalem and everybody you knew followed the Law, it would be easy to conclude that people who don't follow the Law (even Christians) have nothing to keep them from sinning like barbarians. I think that's the mindset Paul is addressing in verse 17:

17 "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be!

Paul readily allows the possibility that people who are justified through Christ will sin. But when and if followers of Christ sin, does that mean that Christ has promotes sin by not making you follow the Law? "Absolutely not! May it never be!" Later in Galatians Paul will show that people who are truly justified in Christ don't live however they want; rather, they are led by the Spirit to be people who are full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

To the contrary, in verse 18 Paul says that *going back to the Law would be sinful*. Here he moves from "we" to "I":

18 "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

"Rebuilding what [he] once destroyed" is how Paul refers to returning to the Law. By going back to the Law Paul would prove himself to be a lawbreaker. One reason would be because doing so would be abandoning Christ and the Holy Spirit who leads us into obedience.

19 "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.

Paul would never go back to the Law because when he came to believe in Jesus he had "died to the Law." Nothing within him was alive to the possibility of submitting to the Law as a rule for life. Paul kept various aspects of the Law at various times, but it was no longer the guiding rule for his life. The new covenant in Christ's blood had replaced the old covenant of the Law. The two were mutually exclusive. Paul died to the Law so that he might find life in Christ.

Paul says that "through the Law" he died to the Law. People understand this in various ways. I think he's saying the same thing he said in Romans 7:4-6; one function of the Law was to expose sin. When you realized that you couldn't fully keep the requirements of the Law, you were driven to God for mercy (which was granted through animal sacrifices in the Law). Through the Law Paul saw his sinfulness and then came to understand that God had provided life through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Paul continues the imagery of "death" in verse 20 when he writes:

20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

There is a sense in which “what happened to Christ happens to the person who is ‘in Christ.’” Since Christ was crucified, Paul was crucified. The *pre-Christian Paul* who followed the Law and who found his identity in keeping the Law was dead. *That* Paul was no longer alive. Paul’s new identity is wrapped up in the truth that “Christ lives in [him].” Before coming to Christ, what mattered to Paul was keeping the Law; what mattered now is the fact that Christ lives in him and that Christ lives His life through him through the person of the Holy Spirit.

In the second half of verse 20 Paul explains this about the life he now “lives in the flesh” (in his body): “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” The source of his confidence had shifted. Formerly he was confident before God because he faithfully kept the Law. Now his confidence was in Jesus – the Son of God! – who lives in him.

Notice the specific thing about Jesus that stimulated Paul’s faith. Paul wrote, Jesus “loved me and gave Himself up for me.” Do you see how personally Paul interpreted the love of Jesus and the sacrifice of Jesus? There’s a world of difference between the idea that “Jesus loves everybody and died for everybody” and the conviction that “Jesus, God’s very Son, loved *me* and gave Himself up for *me*.”

Paul wraps up his argument with a rather powerful statement in verse 21. The Jews of Paul’s day would have said that grace came through keeping the Law. Therefore, by abandoning the Law, Paul and other Christians were abandoning the grace of God. To that accusation, Paul writes:

21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

It was unfathomable to Paul that the second person of the Trinity would become one of us, live a sinless life, and then die on the cross *for nothing, needlessly*. If you could become righteous by keeping the Law, Jesus’ death would be unnecessary. Paul was saying, “I’m not going to live my life in a way that nullifies the grace of God. Jesus loved me enough to die for me. Therefore I’m going to live by faith in Him.”

We now have Paul’s answer to the question, “What is our confidence in this life?” *Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf is our only confidence in this life*. Just as Paul’s confidence was no longer keeping the Law, our confidence is not wrapped up in our obedience, our spiritual disciplines, or our ministry. Our confidence lies what Jesus accomplished through His death and resurrection.

For some of us here today, this might be a new idea. You might have gotten the idea somewhere (through a church, your parents, or just a vague impression) that God puts you on probation until you prove that you’re worthy of His acceptance. Paul’s point is that if you can earn or deserve God’s acceptance by your behavior, Christ died for nothing. If you’ve come here today thinking

that you have to somehow clean yourself up so that God will accept you, please understand that you can't save yourself. You can't get rid of your sin and make yourself acceptable before God. The sooner you quit trying the better. ***Jesus died on the cross in your place.*** He died as your substitute. He bore your sin so that you can be fully accepted before God. You receive this gift by faith alone. You know that you have this faith when you can say (with Paul), "Jesus loved me and gave Himself up for me." A Christian is a person who has concluded, "My sin was so incurable that the sinless Son of God came to die in my place."

For others of us here, this is a familiar idea. We know that Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf is our only confidence in this life. And yet the sacrifice of Jesus can seem so remote . . . and almost irrelevant to our daily life.

For example, think of an area of obedience that you find difficult. You know what's right, but sometimes (perhaps most of the time) you have a hard doing what's right: loving a disagreeable person, turning away from sexual temptation, forgiving someone who has asked for forgiveness, etc. When dealing with such situations, sometimes we can feel so alone and begin to fix our eyes on ourselves. We think, "If I'm obedient here I'm a good Christian; if I'm disobedient, I'm a bad Christian. God's opinion of me is based on my behavior." Our confidence before God is wrapped up in our own ability to do what's right. But if that were true, Christ died for nothing!

If you're a believer in Jesus, you should be able to say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ. I am dead to the idea that my behavior is the thing that makes me acceptable to God. My confidence comes from the fact that He lives in me. The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in Jesus – who loved me and gave Himself up for me." The whole focus of your life is different now.

When you're wrestling with some area of obedience, living by faith means taking your eyes off of yourself and putting them on Jesus: confident that He will live His life through you (instead of being confident that you're strong enough to do what's right). This week, let's experiment with "living by faith." Identify an area of obedience that you find difficult and ask, "Am I living my life as if Jesus died for nothing? Or am I living by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me?"

We'll be talking about faith quite a bit in the rest of our study through Galatians. But one thing I want to mention today is that faith isn't primarily a feeling. You can walk by faith without feeling especially close to God and without feeling like being obedient. It's great when you're "feeling it." But sometimes faith involves doing what we know God wants us to do even when we don't feel like it. Our confidence isn't in our feelings. Our confidence is in Jesus Christ who lives in us, who loved us and gave Himself up for us.