



o6. Galatians 2:17 – 3:5

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Galatians 2:17

¹⁷But if, in our effort to be justified in the Messiah,
we ourselves have been found to be sinners,
is the Messiah then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

Paul has been accused of being a sinner in Galatia for not insisting on the Gentile converts observing the law. Paul's defence is that since he did what he did in obedience to Jesus' commission, and since Jesus cannot be 'a servant of sin', what he did could not be sinful.

Since the subject is table fellowship, we are surely meant to reflect on Jesus' eating with sinners, and especially on the last supper where Jesus spoke of himself as 'one who serves' (Luke 22:27).

Galatians 2:18

¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.

It really would have been sinful for Paul to acquiesce in the behaviour of Peter and Barnabas. Because of the commission given him by God, he had been **tearing down** the wall that had separated Jew from Gentile. It was not that he had been advocating disobedience to the law. It was, rather, that a higher obedience coming from God through God's new initiative in Jesus demanded that whatever in the law supported separation between Jew and Gentile had to be torn down in order to allow the emergence of a community of love in which Jew and Gentile, with their differences, could share communion in the shared faith. To build that wall of separation again, out of fear for what some people in Jerusalem might think – that would indeed make Paul a **transgressor**!

Galatians 2:19

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

The kind of insistence on observance of the law that Paul knew so well from his own life as a Pharisee, and that had driven him to persecute the church is the kind of observance that the Judaeans missionaries are insisting upon. It was precisely this kind of zeal that brought about the crucifying of Jesus. And that act has shown up such meticulous law-observance for what it really is. Paul had been living for the law, with the best of motives. In approving the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1) and in the zeal with which he tried to stamp out the church, he had been continuing the work of those who crucified Jesus. Now that he has come to know Jesus, something has died in him; and that something is his fixation on the law as the final guide to obedience.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.

The law-observance of those who crucified Jesus is what caused Paul to die to the law. Jesus was the obedient one on Calvary; not those who in God's name insisted on him being crucified. It is through the communion in love which flows from the heart of the risen Jesus into the heart of Paul that Paul now knows what it is like to 'live to God'. Furthermore, the law commands that we listen to the Messiah (see Deuteronomy 18:14). Through the law, then, Paul has seen that he must die to whatever in the law stands in the way of this listening.

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with the Messiah. It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me.

Letting go his former life was a kind of crucifixion for Paul. The accusations being levelled at him from Galatia are part of the suffering which he continues to experience. But he is not alone. The old self that was finding energy and glory in taking a leading role in the persecution of Jesus' disciples is dead. Paul now lives a new life in communion with the one who was crucified, and who made of his death a gift of love, to Paul and to whoever opens his/her heart to welcome the gift. It is the new life of the risen Jesus that Paul now lives. He will not go back.

Paul writes elsewhere: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10).

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with the Messiah. It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

This is the life that he has proclaimed in Galatia, and he cannot stand by while others destroy it in God's name. The Galatians want to be free; they want to avoid being condemned by God for their failure to live a life of grace. They are being told that the way to be sure of not being condemned is to sign up to and be faithful to the law. Paul is pleading with them not to allow the gospel to be perverted in this way

As Paul will write in a later letter: 'There is no condemnation for those who are in the Messiah Jesus' (Romans 8:1). It is the Risen Jesus who is the 'life-giving Spirit' (1 Corinthians 15:45). They must look to him and cling to him in love, and allow his Spirit to purify them, in love. Truly, 'the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus the Messiah, has abounded for the multitude' (Romans 5:15).

Galatians 2:21

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then the Messiah died for nothing.

It is not Paul who has been ‘nullifying the grace of God’. It is his accusers who are perverting the gospel by cramming Jesus into the confines of the law, instead of marvelling at the freedom to love which he is offering them. Furthermore, it is only by exercising this freedom that the purpose of the law can be achieved.

It is Jesus’ faithful love that has brought us into communion with God and freed us from our sins. In four brief statements Paul summarises what our response to this grace should be. He will expand on these statements in the rest of the letter.

1. If we want to live in communion with God, we must die to the law as the ultimate guide to obedience. We either continue our futile striving for perfection achieved through our own efforts to obey the law, or we allow Jesus to embrace us in love and share with us his faith.

Thanks to Jesus, Paul came to a deeper understanding of the law. He saw that the law points beyond itself and finds its fulfilment in Jesus' self-offering in love.

2. We must allow ourselves to be crucified with Jesus, in the sense of allowing everything that is not love to be nailed to the cross. As we embrace the crucified Jesus, we will experience a sharing in his communion with God.

3. We must live, not from ourselves, but from the life of Jesus who lives in us.

4. We must live in this present world ('in the flesh') a life of faith which unites us to Jesus.

Paul denies that in preaching the gospel as he does he is disregarding God's grace; and he reasserts the fact that Jesus died to draw us out of sin and into God's love – something the law could not do. In fact it is only in this way that the purpose of the law can be achieved.

Paul takes us to the very heart of his faith when he states: ‘**It is no longer I who live. The Messiah lives in me**’. It is this experience of union with the risen Jesus that underlies everything he says in this letter. It is central to Paul’s conversion experience (1:16), and is at the centre of the gospel which he has preached to the Galatians.

It is possible to look at Jesus from the outside; to admire him, and to try to imitate him. The Christian experience, however, is something else. We are called not to be like Jesus but to let Jesus live in us. We are called not to love like Jesus, but to let Jesus love in and through us. We are called not to pray like Jesus, but to make space for the Spirit of Jesus to pray in us. We are invited into a right relationship with God by the risen Jesus who shares his Spirit with us and so draws us into the intimate communion with God which is his life. It is for us to believe, that is to say, to make room for him by letting go our own ego and welcoming his love.

We sometimes strive to imitate Jesus in such a way that the gospel itself becomes a yoke burdening our shoulders like another law; or we see Jesus' example as a star beckoning to us from the horizon. We find that we cannot carry the yoke, nor can we reach the star. Paul tells the Galatians that the Risen Jesus lives in him; that is why he can 'live to God'. God's action is always a gift. We cannot earn it, nor can we do anything that will stop God offering it. We can, however, refuse to receive the gift; we can reject it; we can allow ourselves to be so distracted that we forget it. Then, when we strive by our own efforts to do God's will, to keep God's law, even to imitate his Son, we find that we cannot, of ourselves, do any of these things. We are setting up inevitable failure for ourselves.

We are being offered the Spirit of the Risen Jesus. It is Paul's gospel that we are to open our hearts to receive it. This is what it means to believe.

Galatians 3:1

1. Paul appeals to the Galatians' own experience, shaping his argument in the form of questions because he wants them to remember and reflect.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus the Messiah was publicly exhibited as crucified!

Paul begins by reminding them of how he spoke to them of Jesus crucified. In the opening address of this letter he spoke of 'the Lord Jesus the Messiah who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (1:4), and he has just spoken with deep feeling of 'the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (2:20).

How can they take their eyes off Jesus and his love and seek security in observance of the law?

Galatians 3:2-5

The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit [eg Acts 13:52 'filled with joy and the Holy Spirit'] by doing the works of the law, or by what you heard of faith? [of the faith of Jesus]

Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing? – if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by what you heard of faith?

He then asks them to remember how they experienced the Spirit in their lives, and the ‘miracles’ of forgiveness, healing and love. Speaking of the disciples in Galatian Antioch, Luke tells us that ‘they were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 13:52). This did not happen because they observed the law. It happened ‘from what was heard of faith’ (ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως). As in the previous passage, this is best understood as a reference to Jesus’ faith. What impressed them was what they heard, namely, the gospel proclaimed to them by Paul – which told them of the trust, the obedience, the fidelity and the self-giving love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross. They started there. Are they now going to put their faith in a piece of flesh cut from them in circumcision?

There is a lot of human experience and many beautiful memories contained in Paul's three references here to their experience of the Spirit. We might recall Luke's reference to the 'signs and wonders' that occurred in Iconium (Acts 14:3), and to the healing of the lame man in Lystra (Acts 14:10). There were, no doubt, many other memories of physical, psychological and spiritual healing, of a powerful release of liberating and creative energy, of dramatic changes in people's lives, as well as memories of selfless love and communion. None of them were related to observance of the law.

Paul is in no way denigrating the law. The problem was that it did not have in itself the power to alter people's hearts so that they might observe it. Only the gift of Jesus' Spirit could achieve that. The Galatians must keep focusing on Jesus and not allow themselves to be distracted by those who would want them to focus on the law.