

**“Union”**  
Galatians 2:17-21

*<sup>17</sup> 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! <sup>18</sup> For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. <sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (ESV)*

How many of you actually enjoy having a good argument with somebody? Most people don't like to have arguments, but most people seem to like to listen to arguments. Arguments are a very interesting thing because you don't really like to have them, not if there's conflict. But if it's the right kind of argument, it's always interesting to watch or listen to. For example if you're at a baseball game, who doesn't love when the manager runs out and starts kicking dirt on the umpire's shoes and arguing with him? That makes the game, at least for me it does. Or when you hear the neighbors squabbling and your wife comes home and catches you with your ear up against the wall? The arguments that tend to interest us the most, however, are arguments that have to do with us. If you're a kid, for example, you have probably heard your parents argue (my children never have, of course). You heard your parents argue and generally speaking you think, "There's Mom and Dad. They love each other. They'll get through it." But when it becomes of interest to you is when they're arguing about you, or when something that you want is actually at issue, like you asked to borrow the car to go on a long trip and your father thinks it's okay and your mother thinks it's wrong. You listen and try to get a sense for which way the argument is going. An argument is more interesting when it has to do with you.

In the New Testament, Paul's letters at some level are arguments that he's having with the recipients of the letter or someone else. He'll say something and then he'll anticipate an objection and then he'll answer their argument. The reason that we ought to be very intensely listening to all of them is because they all have to do with us. In fact, the passage I read to you this morning is one of those things. I don't get nervous preaching very often, but when Luther and Calvin and these guys say that this is the most important passage in the whole New Testament, it sort of makes you pause for a minute. Yet, it is an extremely important passage because of the argument that Paul anticipates and the argument that Paul answers.

We're going to look at three things this morning. We're going to look at an argument, an obituary, and a bottom line.

Before you can understand the argument that Paul is actually addressing here you have to have some context of the whole Book of Galatians. The purpose of the Book of Galatians is for Paul to really make one big point. The point is that Jesus plus anything equals nothing. Period. Paul had planted this church in Galatia and had preached the gospel to them, and the gospel that he preached was justification by faith alone. In other words, the way you are made right with God is through the work of Jesus and nothing else. Some other teachers had apparently come in to town said, "Trusting in Jesus is good, but you also need to be circumcised. You also need to obey the Old Testament law." Paul is addressing that. They said that you need to add things to the gospel. Paul says, "No, there only is one gospel, and the one gospel is the thing that I preached. And if I or an angel from heaven or anyone else comes to you and says something other than what I preached to you in the beginning, they are to be accursed. In fact, they're to be anathema (which means to be accursed of God and cast out). That's how important the one gospel is." Then people would say, "Paul, who do you think you are? You're not even a real apostle. The real apostles were the twelve guys who walked around with Jesus. You're sort of a Johnny-come-lately." Paul says, "No, in fact I am a real apostle, but all the rest of the apostles affirmed my apostleship. In fact, you know the guy whom you think is the chief apostle, Peter? I had to take him down publically one time. Remember, Peter believed the same thing that Paul believed. But when he went to Antioch he was eating with Gentiles which was in violation of some Jewish dietary law. Then when some Jewish folk came along, Peter backed off, and, functionally, made the point by his action that somehow the law is determinative of our fellowship and our relationship with Jesus, but Paul says, "No way." In fact, Paul reminds Peter of what it means to be justified by faith alone, and what it is he had believed. That's verse 16, which is before our passage. Paul said,

*<sup>16</sup> 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. (ESV)*

So in other words, Paul says, "Is there any question? Will anyone be justified by works of the law, by being circumcised? Absolutely not. We are justified by faith alone." What that means is that you believe that Jesus' work and His death on the cross apply to you personally, and at the cross God poured all of His wrath onto your sin on the person of Jesus, and He declares all of Jesus' righteousness to be yours. In other words you're counted right with God because of the person and work of Jesus. Paul says, "Nothing else in the world can make you right with God other than the person and work of Jesus."

Now is where the argument comes in because Paul anticipates what people are going to say.

<sup>17</sup> *But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? . . . (ESV)*

Paul is simply communicating the concern that maybe the Judaizers would say, “Paul, if your doctrine of justification by faith alone is true, then that’s just going to lead people to sin because what you’re saying, Paul, is that works of the law have no part in our salvation, at least in making us right with God. If you say that to people they’re going to think they can do anything.” If you think that’s an old argument, I still hear it all the time. Martin Lloyd Jones said in the last century that the gospel is so free and grace is so free that if you’re preaching it correctly some people will come to you and complain that you’re making it too free. People will say that it can’t be that easy. People haven’t complained about that lately, so I guess I need to emphasize it more, that it is not by works of the law. People say, “Tommy, if what you say is true, if grace is true, then people are going to walk around and say, ‘It doesn’t matter what I do then. I can do anything I want because I’m already forgiven.’” In other words, it’s not going to change their life, it’s just going to lead people to sin because then they can do anything and not have to worry about consequences because they know that Jesus has covered their sin. That’s the argument, basically. What is Paul’s first response to that argument? “No.” He says, “Heck, no,” but it’s stronger than that. Paul uses flowery language all the time, especially when he wants to make a point, and this is one of those times where he basically says, “Is Christ an agent of sin?” Paul says, “Certainly not!” If you say, “If grace is true then people can do anything they want.” Paul’s going to say, “Then at the end of the day you don’t understand the gospel. You don’t understand the nature of it.” That’s the argument. People would make this argument, “If you preach this, Paul, then now Christ is going to be an agent of sin because people do whatever they want.” Paul, in verse 18, counters with an argument. He says, “No, let me tell you who the true sinner is. Let me tell you what the bigger problem is in church. “The bigger problem in church isn’t people understanding grace and then going off and doing what they want. It really isn’t. The bigger problem in church is what Paul says in verse 18.

<sup>18</sup> *For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. (ESV)*

What he’s saying here is that in Jesus the works of the law have been torn down and that the law is a good thing. He’s going to say that over and over and over as he goes through this book, but as far as being able to save you, the law can’t do that. The law is completely and utterly and powerless to save you, to love you, to hold you, to do anything except condemn you. Paul says, “If I start rebuilding what has been torn down, then I am a transgressor.” The biggest problem that we have is not understanding grace and going out and being lascivious, the biggest problem we have is not really understanding grace and starting to rebuild the wall. We’re going to sing a hymn later, “And Can it Be.” I love the line where it says, “My chains fell off and I rose and followed Him.” What Paul is saying here is that a bigger sin than the potential freedom that people might have is for Jesus to come and break you free from those chains and you say, “You know what, I would rather wear them myself.” The bigger sin is you putting those chains back on. Any time you rely on the works of the law to gain favor with God, you are rebuilding what was torn down. All of us do it. You have to think through these things in your own life. What are the things that I think that if I do them God is going to love me more? Interestingly enough, and the irony in the backward nature of the gospel, you can actually become a bigger sinner by being obedient. If your obedience is based on the fact that you think God is going to save you because of your obedience and not the work of Christ that is actually a bigger sin than not being obedient. That’s pretty wild, is it not? How can that be? Paul changes gears a little bit. He basically says, “If I rebuild what was torn down I make myself a transgressor.”

But then Paul turns a corner and makes the case that the question they ask in the first place isn’t really valid if you understand the gospel. The question, “If grace is true and Jesus has saved me does nothing matter?” Paul answers after he points out that rebuilding this wall is a bigger sin. He answers it by telling us his obituary. Not does he tell us his own obituary, he tells us our obituary as well.

<sup>19</sup> *For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. (ESV)*

To have that be written by a former Pharisee, by someone who would have memorized the law, by someone who was the head of the class in the law, for someone whose life was the law, who lived for the law, whose life was defined by the law to say, “The only way to live for God was to die to the law,” that’s unbelievable. Everything in Paul’s life was about the law, and he said, “I had to die to the law in order to live to God.” What was it necessary for Paul to die to the law in order to live to God? The answer is pretty simple if you think about it. Imagine that you’re at point A and God is at point B and God wants to be in relationship with you, and it’s all about your obedience to the law. Will you ever make it from point A to point B? You never will. When you’re trying to pursue God, and trying to be in a relationship with Him, unless the law is killed you’re always looking over your shoulder wondering if you were good enough, wondering if you’ve made it. And it’s not

only sins of commission, it's also sins of omission. Sins of commission are something you proactively do, something that you know: "I shouldn't lie and I didn't lie. I should be good to go." But then there are all these sins of omission that you don't even know if you did it or not. You don't know whether you've forgotten. So if you don't die to the law your whole life is defined by wondering if in fact you've obeyed the law correctly. Paul says, "The only answer to that is that you've got to die to the law, because once you are dead there's no claim upon you, you're just dead."

Paul says something interesting here. You expect him to say, "Through the gospel I died to the law so that I might live to God." Did you notice what Paul said? He said, "Through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God." Why does he say, "through the law" and not "through the gospel"? Paul is basically saying here that the logical conclusion that the law brings us to is that we have to die to the law, because what the law says among other things is, "Cursed is everyone who doesn't obey everything written in this book of the law." In other words, we are under a curse, and deserving of death because we have not obeyed the law. Paul says, "Because of that I got death. I died to the law through the law so that I might live to God." How does that happen? How do you die to the law? Is that just something Paul decides to do and say, "You know, from now on I'm not going to obey the law. I'm not going to care about the law so I can live to God." Absolutely not, because the law must be fulfilled. That's the thing. The law is a big, important thing even to the apostle Paul. It's not something to be trifled with or cast aside. So how do you deal with the fact that between you and God is this thing called "The Law"? That's where Paul goes next in his obituary. Look at verse 20:

<sup>20</sup> *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. (ESV)*

How does Paul say that he died to the law? Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ." What Paul is talking about here is something that theologians call "union," the mystical union between believers and Jesus. Paul is saying, "Jesus is so identified with me that when Jesus went to the cross it wasn't an objective thing. He went to the cross and died, and I'll trust Him and then my paperwork is good." Paul says that Jesus so identified with him, and Jesus so identified with you and with me, that, "When Jesus was crucified, I have been crucified, that the law's righteous demands were met by the person of Jesus, but I am in such union with Jesus that I myself have been crucified." That's a mysterious doctrine because on one hand we never feel it. We have to accept it by faith and yet it's taught throughout the New Testament. That is our hope of being better people. That is our hope of obedience. The fact that we're united with Jesus is Paul's answer to, "If grace is true, why bother being good?" Paul would say, "If grace is true, how could you not be good?" Paul says, "If grace is true and you are truly united to Jesus, how could you say nothing matters? In fact, if you're truly united to Jesus, everything matters now. Everything." Look at what he says after that.

He says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God." Paul's making a transition here. He's not only saying that we are saved by justification by faith alone, but in the rest of the book he's going to say, "Not only are you saved by faith, but we also live by faith." In other words, we're not saved by faith and then we gut it out. Paul is saying that, "Every minute of every day I have to live by faith. I've been crucified with Jesus." You see the good news of Paul's obituary is that Paul's obituary is also a birth announcement, that to the extent that Paul died to himself, he is crucified with Christ and yet he is also risen with Christ. He and Jesus are so united that how can he or I not be better? If you look through the New Testament you do see images of this. It's hard to get at in some ways, but you see the image of the body, that we are the body and Jesus is the head. We are this building made out of bricks and Jesus is the chief cornerstone. We are the bride and Jesus is the husband. It's even deeper than that.

Have you read the Eragon series "Inheritance"? If you're under fifteen you probably have. Eragon the Dragon Rider. The whole story is about this kid. There's a great war going on. It's sort of like "Lord of the Rings" days, like Middle Earth. There are Dragon Riders who are the ones who save the day all the time. You become a Dragon Rider is by a dragon choosing you. This kid who is apparently nobody is chosen, and when you're chosen by a dragon (in the egg still), a mark appears on the palm of your hand. So you're marked forever. But the interesting thing is that once you become a dragon rider you are united to the dragon. Everything the dragon feels you feel. Everything the dragon thinks you think and vice-versa. That is our hope of growing in Christ. Do you ever feel like you're struggling? Do you ever feel like you're suffering? Do you ever feel like the times are just dreadful and you don't know what to do and you wonder where God is? If you are a Christian, Jesus feels every bit of pain that you feel. If you're a Christian, Jesus knows your despair because you and He are united. It's sort of like a mother and a baby in the womb with an umbilical cord. You cannot get much closer than that except to be united to Jesus, Paul would say, "Are you?"

Paul also says something else interesting here. You almost get the sense that Paul every now and then in his letters gets on these highfalutin' arguments and makes these logical cases, and the deeper he gets into it all of a sudden it hits him. It's sort of like when you're a preacher: one of the benefits is you get to study and things will hit you in your office that no one sees

but all of a sudden you feel closer, you know God better. Paul usually talks in the plural. He says in the last part of verse 20.

<sup>20</sup> . . . *I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (ESV)*

Notice what Paul doesn't say there. He doesn't say, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved the world and gave Himself for the world." He says things like that in other places. He doesn't say, "I live by faith in the Son of God who loved the church and gave Himself for the church." He says that in other places. But in this particular text, Paul says, "I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me." That is the big question of the Christian faith. That's the question you have to answer. Do you believe that? I mean that.

Some of you have been in church twenty or thirty years, I've heard people say this, "I live by faith in the Son of God who loved my parents and died for my parents." "I live by faith in the Son of God who loved my children and gave himself for my children." Nothing bothers me more than when I hear people in my own family answer similarly. People say, "Are you a Christian?" and they'll say, "Oh, my brother is a preacher." You're answering the wrong question. Have you been sitting in church ten, twenty, thirty years but never really thought that Jesus gave Himself for you personally? "The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me." Do you believe that? Some of you maybe have been dragged to church but you've never heard that. I offer it to you now. Do you believe that Jesus loves you and gave Himself for you? Because it changes everything. And it changes you from the inside out. That's the answer to, "Does grace matter?" Yes, it does. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5, "If anyone is in Christ." He doesn't say, "If anyone trusts Christ." He says, "If anyone is in Christ (united to him) there is a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come." That's our hope. Our hope isn't being obedient in order that God might care about us. Our hope isn't trying to keep people in line by making them obey certain laws. Our hope is that Jesus will free the shackles off more and more and more people, and the more He does that the more people are united to Him and the more the world changes.

Then Paul goes from giving his obituary to giving the bottom line. Look at verse 21.

<sup>21</sup> *I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (ESV)*

That's big. In fact, if you want one verse that explains why Jesus plus anything equals nothing is verse 21. In other words, if you believe that somehow works of the law contribute to your salvation, that it is Jesus plus anything, Paul says, "You have done two things. Number one, you have nullified the grace of God because the grace of God by definition is unmerited. The definition of grace is unmerited favor. Paul says, "If there is any merit involved whatsoever, then you have undone the grace of God." Second which is just as big, Paul says, "If it's Jesus plus anything then Jesus died for no purpose." Why would Jesus have to die, if you think about it, if your works mattered? If it was your works that saved you, why send Jesus to the cross? Why didn't God just say, "Gut it out and we'll see who pans out at the end." The reason He didn't say that was because of His grace. You and I don't have what it takes to gut it out. In fact, the more you try to gut it out the more you heap onto your own sin. By adding works, by saying, "Jesus plus circumcision" or "Jesus plus anything," you nullify the grace of God and you nullify the cross. Paul says, "These two things are the only things that matter." Do you believe that? Think about that.