



05. Galatians 2:15-16

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¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;

¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus the Messiah.

And we have come to believe in the Messiah Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of the Messiah and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

Libraries have been written on these two verses, and understandably, since here we have Paul's earliest statement of what he has called 'the gospel we proclaimed to you' (1:8), 'the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles' (2:2), 'the truth of the gospel' (2:5,14). Against the background of the disturbing news that has come to him from Galatia, Paul expresses here the essence of what he 'received through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (1:12), the central insight that God gave to Paul when 'he was pleased to reveal his Son in/to me' (1:16).

1. What is meant by being justified

2. Obeying the Law does not justify

no one will be justified by the works of the law.

a person is justified through the faith of Jesus the Messiah.

3. What is faith

4. Having faith in Jesus

we have come to believe in the Messiah Jesus

5. Having the faith of Jesus

We are justified by the faith of the Messiah

1. Let us begin by looking at the word 'justified':

'justified through the faith of Jesus the Messiah';

'justified by the faith of the Messiah';

'no one will be justified by the works of the law'.

We do something to justify a text.

God does something to us to set us in a right relationship with God.

The verb 'justify' (δικαιωω, 2:16,17), and the noun 'justification' (δικαιοσύνη, 2:21) are related to the word **δικη** which refers to divine order – the will of God as revealed in nature, in history, and in divinely revealed law.

The Judaeen missionaries are insisting that the way to get into a right relationship with God, the way to enjoy the communion with God which is offered to us by Jesus, necessarily involves observing every detail of the law in which God has expressed God's will.

Paul's gospel is that the imperfect understanding of God's will expressed in the Torah has given way to the understanding of Jesus. God has given us divine communion through something that God has done through the self-giving, life-giving, love-giving of Jesus his Son. It is a new covenant.

A complication arises in regard to the verb 'to justify' from its use in court where it can mean 'to declare just'. A human judge can be mistaken. A human judge can declare a person to be just when in fact the person is not. From the point of view of the law, such a declaration puts a person beyond punishment, but the person remains unchanged. He/She has been declared just without having been made so.

Paul, however, is referring to God, the just judge. If a sinner is declared by God to be just, to be in a right relationship with God, this must mean that God has done something to set the person right. Paul could not be clearer on this point, nor on the fact that what God has done has everything to do with Jesus.

2. no one will be justified by the works of the law. (ἔργα νόμου)

This is traditional Jewish teaching. Jews did not obey the law because they believed their obedience achieved justification. They obeyed the law because they recognised in the law a precious gift to them from God.

‘I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word’ (Psalm 119:15-16).

The Judaeans missionaries are insisting that it is necessary to do what the law prescribes, and in this way to carry out our part in the covenant with God. Put simply they are insisting on observing the law.

3. a person is justified through the **faith** of Jesus the Messiah.

When we examine the meaning of belief in the Hebrew Scriptures, our first observation is that while belief is impossible without trust, biblical usage is against identifying belief with trust.

The Greek verb πίστευω (and the related noun πίστις, or adjective πίστος) never translate Hebrew words which express trust. They only ever translate words from the Hebrew root 'mn.

The Hebrew noun 'mnh is often translated '**faithfulness**'. It denotes the quality one has when one acts according to one's nature or commitments. The related adjective is descriptive of a person who is faithful, reliable, secure, sure, and so **trustworthy** (which is not the same as trusting).

Faith (πίστις) and 'believing' (πίστευω) speak of listening to God, heeding God's inspiration, and acting accordingly.

Faith is essentially practical. It is fundamentally about action.

As Jesus himself says: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

To speak of 'faith' is to speak of the truth about God's self-revelation, reaching its climax in God's self-revelation in Jesus. It is to speak of the decisions we make, and the lifestyle to which we are committed as a consequence of taking this revelation seriously.

God has this quality (faithful, trustworthy) in its fullness because God always acts according to who God is. To speak of God in this way is to say that God is the real God, not a false one, and that God always acts according to the truth. Because of this, we can find our security in God, we can rely upon God, we can place our trust in God.

‘The word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness’ (Psalm 33:4).

‘I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord’ (Hosea 2:20).

When we speak of human beings having this quality, we are saying that they are trustworthy because what they do and say is in accordance with the truth. If we seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1,3), and deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2 Chronicles 31:12), then we share in the faithfulness of God, and others in turn can rely upon us (Jeremiah 15:18).

Abraham is described as having a faithful heart (Nehemiah 9:8), and Moses is spoken of as being trustworthy because of the intimacy of God's communication with him (Numbers 12:7). We hear of a faithful priest (1 Samuel 2:35) and a trustworthy prophet (1 Samuel 3:20). The city is spoken of as being faithful (Isaiah 1:21,26), witnesses as being reliable (Isaiah 8:2), and a supply of water as being sure (Isaiah 33:16).

To 'believe' means to act in accordance with who we are and with our obligations. It means to behave faithfully, with the result that others can rely upon us. Since we are creatures who are totally dependent upon God, for us to behave in a way that is truly in accordance with our nature means to live in dependence upon God. This includes placing our trust in God's faithfulness.

The verb 'believe' then has two essential components.

- It means to place our trust in God's faithfulness
- and to give evidence of this by behaving faithfully ourselves so that others can rely upon us.

Since God is love, God can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith.

To believe in God is to accept the salvation which God offers and to experience a summons, like Moses, to be God's instrument in liberating the oppressed.

The Mosaic Law requires of God's people to be faithful to the covenant by acting with justice for the poor.

In the New Testament - and it is to this point that we must return - Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father which he offers us. To do so we will need to trust God. We will also need to live faithfully the life God offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

To believe is, as the English word so aptly expresses, to 'be' - 'lieve', to 'be' in 'love'. It is to choose to be in God's love, receiving with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts.

To have faith is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion.

To believe is

- to listen to God's word as revealed in Jesus (Galatians 1:12).
- to heed what God says 'when God was pleased to reveal his Son in me' (Galatians 1:16), trusting that God is faithful and so accepting his word as true with our hearts, our minds, our soul and our strength.
- to live in communion with Jesus (Galatians 2:20), sharing his life of love and so sharing his faith – the faithfulness (fullness of faith) of God which Jesus incarnates and reveals.
- to act in accord with God's will as revealed by Jesus, especially by living a life of love (Galatians 5:14).

4. We have come to believe in the Messiah Jesus.

5. a person is justified through the faith of Jesus the Messiah
'πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ'.

It is often translated 'faith **in** Jesus Christ'. However, it is surely clear already from what Paul has written, that being in a right relationship with God, that is to say, sharing in the intimacy of Jesus' own communion, does not depend primarily on what we do. Paul is not saying that instead of doing one thing (observing the law), we should do something else (believe in Jesus).

πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is a simple genitive in Greek. Of itself it simply places one reality in relationship with another; in this case, 'faith' and 'Jesus Christ'.

Paul is quite capable of using prepositions to define the relationship more precisely. Since he does not do so here, we should assume that he wants us to reflect on the different ways in which these two realities are related.

πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

If we think in terms of something which we are supposed to do, we will think of the faith which we should have in relation to Jesus. Paul will go on to make it abundantly clear that he wants us to think in this way. However, this is not his central focus.

He wants us to think first of what God revealed in revealing Jesus, his Son. He wants our minds and hearts to go straight to the faith of Jesus, to **Jesus' faith**: his trust in God, his obedience, his fidelity, shown especially when **'he gave himself'** (1:4) in obedience to his Father and out of love for us.

The faith which we are to have in God is a gift which Jesus gives us in giving us a share in his life. It is a faith which we receive from God, before it is a faith which we offer God as a response.

Paul is reminding the Galatian Christians that they were brought by God into a love-union with God, not on the basis of being circumcised and becoming observant Jews, but on the basis of their union with Jesus. This is true of the Gentiles in the community – so they should not start looking to the law for their security. It is also true for the Jews. Their continued fidelity to the observance of the law as Jews is one thing. To base their security of salvation on this observance or to join with those who are attempting to frighten the Gentile members of the community into looking for their security in this way, is to pervert the gospel.

It is not observance of the law which sets us in a right relationship with God, it is our sharing in the faith of Jesus ('πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ').

As Jews, the Judaeen missionaries know that it is not observance of the Torah that puts them in the right relationship with God.

Communion with God is a gift from God. As Christian Jews they know that it is the gift of Jesus that has brought them to enjoy communion with God who has embraced them and whom they have embraced.

Having established this foundation, Paul goes on to define what it is that we must do, for we must do something. God is love. God's offer of life is precisely that: it is an offer. It is offered in love; it is not imposed. We are free to accept the gift or to reject it. We accept in by 'believing in', that is to say, directing our faith towards Jesus, and welcoming his gift to us of his faith.

We are to place our trust in him; we are to open our hearts to his Spirit; we are to listen to his words; we are to obey his inspiration; we are to do his will. Like Paul we are to be ‘a slave of Christ’ (1:10).

What matters is our response to Jesus’ self-giving to us. Moreover, our response is made possible only through his self-giving. It is only through the gift of Jesus’ Spirit that we can direct our faith towards him. But we must do this, and not allow ourselves to be distracted or side-tracked into thinking that it is our observance of the law that is the reason for our enjoying God’s love.

Peter uses almost the same words in his speech at the Jerusalem Assembly when he says that God 'cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith and made no distinction between them and us' (Acts 15:9). He goes on to say: 'we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (Acts 15:11). How much did Peter's words and Paul's words here flow out of the conversations which they had consequent upon the confrontation that took place between them in Antioch? Perhaps they both learned from it.

We are Christians because Jesus gives us a share of his intimate communion with God. He gives us his Spirit, his love, his hope, his fidelity. Especially relevant to the text we are examining - he gives us his faith. And it this gift that justifies us.

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