JUSTIFIED BY FAITH IN CHRIST

Galatians 1:1-2:21
Key Verse 2:16b

“So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

The story of Jesus of Nazareth, his death and resurrection from the dead, is called the gospel. Gospel means – good news. In Luke 2:10 and 11, the angels announced to the shepherds who were living out in the fields near Bethlehem, “Do not be afraid. We bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord.” In the world, something can be good news for one person, but bad news for someone else. But what can be good news of great joy for all the people?

One person who did not think that the gospel was good news for him was a young Pharisee named Saul. Saul was a very able man. He came to Jerusalem to study under the number one teacher of that time, Gemaliel. He worked hard, grasping even the most difficult concepts of Judaism and the law. More than that, he was zealous to teach the law and traditions of his fathers. So Saul advanced beyond many Jews his own age, and was recognized by the Jewish elders as a rising leader. Saul was present, probably seated near the Jewish elders, when an insignificant man named Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin to defend his words and actions as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. He was nobody compared to the chief priests and the highly trained young parisee, Saul. But Stephen looked like an angel of God. And when Stephen spoke, it was like a knife in Saul’s heart. Acts 7:52b,53 says, “Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.” Saul had Stephen killed in order to shut him up. But as Stephen was dying, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (Acts 7:59,60) Saul led a vigorous campaign to crush the church of God and so defend his fathers and their traditions and his own righteousness before God. But something wasn’t right. In order to prove his righteousness, Saul was led into an ever increasing spiral of violence and destruction. Finally, when God’s time was right, the Risen Christ appeared to Saul while he was on the road to Damascus in search of Christians there. The Risen Christ asked Saul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. (Acts 9:4-6) Saul fell from his horse and was blinded. He had to be led into city, where he waited three days, fasting and praying. The Risen Christ sent Ananias to him, who came to heal Saul and anoint him with the Holy Spirit. From that time on, Saul became Paul, which means “little one.” Paul continued to be the most able and hard-working man of his generation. But Paul never forgot that it was by grace alone that he could serve the Risen Jesus as an apostle to the Gentiles. The pharisee Saul was angry that the gospel of Jesus implied that all his best efforts to be righteous before God were useless. But the apostle Paul knew that the gospel of Jesus was good news of great joy for all people, because by faith in Jesus, even the weakest and least person could be justified by God.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he defends this basic principle of the gospel. Some wicked and proud men were proclaiming circumcision as necessary to salvation. In reality, they were promoting Jewish culture and customs above the cross of Christ. They looked very holy, but Paul says that they would be eternally condemned for their bad influence. Today, we don’t want to think too much about wicked men. But we must learn from St. Paul the value of the grace that is ours by faith in Christ Jesus. May God bless you to treasure this wonderful grace of Jesus, and to reject the myth of cultural and self-righteousness.

First, the gospel of God. Verses 1 through 5 of chapter 1 constitute Paul’s greeting to the Galatian churches. In his greeting, Paul reminds the Galatians of the basic gospel story. Look at verse 1. “Paul, an apostle—sent not from men or by man, but from Christ Jesus and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.” Through this verse we learn that the gospel of God is not about men, but is first of all about God, and his divine power as God. Christ Jesus came into this world as a good shepherd for the lost sheep from God’s flock. Wicked
men opposed him and finally killed him by nailing him to the cross. But God did not abandon his Son to the grave. God raised Jesus Christ from the tomb on the third day, and gave him immortality and the crown of the kingdom of God as his reward. The gospel is good news to wretched mankind, because it is the demonstration of God’s power to overcome the power of death and the grave. Life on earth is sorrow itself, because death swallows up everything, and finally ourselves. But God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, the firstfruits of those have fallen asleep (1 Co. 15:21). Because of Christ Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, we can ask, “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Co 15:55) The gospel of God is the gospel of eternal life for all who believe.

The gospel of God is the ransom sacrifice of Christ Jesus for the sin of the world. Look at verses 3-5. “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” When Christ Jesus died on the cross, he did not die for his own sins. He died as a sinless man. So what hope do we who are sinners have to share in his resurrection? Our hope is in the mercy of God, who planned to send his own Son as a ransom sacrifice for the sin of the world. Christ Jesus died as a sinless man in order to give himself in our place. In this way, God redeemed us from the power of sin. God rescued us from the evil of the world, so that we could live as the holy children of God. In short, the gospel of God is what God did for sinners through his Son Jesus Christ. God cleared the way for sinful mankind to be cleansed from all sin and to live forever in his kingdom as his adopted children. God did it by offering up his one and only Son as the ransom sacrifice for our sins, and then raising him from the dead as the sign of love and promise of life to all who believe in him.

Paul preached this gospel to the Galatians, and they believed and experienced new life and the power of God. But in his absence, some people had come and led the Galatian believers astray. They portrayed the gospel Paul taught them as incomplete. They pretended to be holier than Paul. They insisted that faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus was not enough; that they needed to be circumcised and live according to the law of Moses. The Galatians were impressed. These guys seemed neater and healthier than Paul, who was always a little ragged from exhaustion, and had come to them sick and beaten up (4:13). They liked the idea of a faith that promised them more honor and recognition now, rather than later in God’s kingdom. The news of their flirtation with this “other gospel” shocked and angered St. Paul. He was shocked at the Galatians, who could so quickly forget the cross of Jesus for the sake of a little more worldly wealth and honor. He was angered at those men who would lead God’s sheep astray for their own selfish reasons. But what should he do? He really wanted to go and beat up those false teachers. But he decided not to please men, not even himself. Look at verse 10. “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” The false teachers were perverting the gospel of Christ by attacking Paul. But Paul did not engage in dog-eat-dog fighting with them. Instead, Paul wanted to show the Galatians the truthfulness of the gospel he had taught them, and his faithfulness as a defender of that gospel.

Second, Paul, an apostle sent by Christ Jesus. (1:1; 1:11-2:14) Look again at verse 1a. “Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father...” In these first two chapters, Paul affirms his status as an apostle sent by Christ Jesus in three ways.

Firstly, Paul received the gospel by revelation from Christ Jesus. The men who had come to lead the Galatians astray were most likely from Jerusalem. They claimed a superior authority to that of Paul, because of their ties to the first church of God in Christ Jesus. But Paul disputes that claim. To do so, Paul tells the Galatians the history of his life in Christ. Paul was never associated with the ministry of Jesus before his death and until his conversion. (13-14). When God called Paul and set him aside for gospel work among the Gentiles, Paul did not first seek out the apostles in Jerusalem. He spent time in Arabia in the desert, and then again in Damascus. Only three years after his conversion did he go up to Jerusalem to spend time with Peter, and then only for fifteen days. According to Acts, he was welcomed there by the help of
Barnabas, but had to leave quickly because of Jewish opposition. He went north again to Tarsus, his home town, in Cilicia, and spent another 14 years there, actively serving the church of God. The Judean churches hardly knew Paul. But they recognized that Paul had the Spirit of God, and they praised God who had changed him from a persecutor and a violent man into an apostle of Christ Jesus. Paul's point is simple. The gospel he received and which he preached did not come from Jerusalem or the leaders there. It came from God, who had set him apart from birth for the sake of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

Secondly, Paul's authority to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. After 14 years in Tarsus and Antioch, Paul and Barnabas together went to Jerusalem to set before the leaders there the gospel he preached among the Gentiles. It was in response to a conflict that arose when some men from Jerusalem came and insisted that the Gentile believers at Antioch should be circumcised, or they would not be saved. Paul was led by a vision to go to Jerusalem and resolve this matter. He was fully prepared to be rebuked and corrected, if necessary (2:2). But the Jerusalem church did not seek to impose Jewish culture on the Gentile believers or churches. Even Titus, who was with Paul, was not compelled to be circumcised. And no one, not even James, Peter or John, added anything to Paul's message. Rather, they recognized each other as equals in God, each with their own special mission – Peter to the Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles. Look at verses 2:8 and 9. “For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.” The work of God that Paul was doing testified that God had chosen him as the apostle to the Gentiles. He had a special privilege and authority to preach the gospel to them.

Thirdly, Paul's faith to please God, not men. Although the Jerusalem council resulted in a letter to the Gentile churches freeing them from any responsibility to become Jewish through circumcision or adherence to the law of Moses, the relationship between the Jewish and Gentile believers was far from clear. It was a delicate matter, involving the Jewish laws of cleanliness, which did not permit Jews to eat with Gentiles or to share their utensils. Peter came to visit Antioch. While he was there, he enjoyed all kinds of delicious ethnic foods: Pulgogi, ham sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly, corn meal, etc. It was a beautiful fellowship between a Jew and Gentiles, made holy by the blood of Jesus. But then, certain men from Jerusalem came. They were not happy that Peter was losing his Jewishness, and they frowned whenever they saw him with the Gentiles, and talked together in Aramaic, looking at him suspiciously. Peter did not know what he was doing. But he began to draw back from his Gentile friends, and ate only with the Jewish delegation. Peter, who succumbed to the peer pressure, then led his fellow Jews astray, until even Barnabas became shaky. Peter had great authority as a servant of God and as the top disciple of Jesus while he was on earth. All the Jews absolutely respected him and could not say a word to him one way or the other. But Paul saw that Peter was clearly in the wrong (2:11). Based on what? Based on the truth of the gospel. The Gentiles were saved by faith in Jesus, just as Peter and the Jews had been. They were not inferior in God's eyes, but were worth even his Son's own life. But when the Gentiles saw how the Jews separated themselves from them, they must have felt very sorry and dirty, and somehow not worthy of God's calling. Paul clearly respected Peter, and loved him as a fellow worker in service to Christ Jesus. But Paul rebuked Peter to his face in front of everyone. He said, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (2:14b) In this way, Paul proved that he was a servant of God, and not of men. As a servant of the truth, he could even rebuke Peter, Jesus' top disciple, and Peter had to accept it, because Paul was right. Paul was a fearless defender of the gospel, the good news of great joy that is truly for all people of all nations.

From Paul we can learn something about being a servant of the gospel. It is very difficult not to please others. There is a huge peer pressure on foreign students to stick together on campus. One Korean girl who wanted to spend time with Americans in order to learn from them was constantly talked about by other Koreans, who thought she was acting proudly, not spending time with them. One African boy was
pressured by the African American church and ridiculed by other African students for spending time in Bible study in a “white” church. And American students find it very difficult to be faithful to Bible study instead of participating in the Generation X culture. We all want to please those who are close to us, by family or even by culture. But a servant of God is not a slave of culture, or even family. A servant of God must be a servant of the truth. A servant of God must have courage in the face of human disapproval to stand for something as shameful and painful as the cross of Jesus. Christians spend far too much time worrying about making friends with the world. May God help us to learn from St. Paul the spirit to defend the gospel of God from worldly compromise, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with God’s precious sheep (2:5).

Third, justified by faith in Christ (2:15-16). Cultural faith, or cultural Christianity, is essentially one form of legalism. Cultural faith says that if you meet the standards of our culture, including eating the right foods, observing the right holidays, speaking the right language, singing in the right way, etc., you are ok and you are “right” – justified before God. One leader of a respected campus evangelical organization came to our church and accused us of being a cult because we do not practice American culture. The Russian government recently passed a sweeping religion law outlawing any churches that were not native “Russian”. Cultural faith is a powerful deception, and politically popular. But cultural faith is not gospel faith. Look at verses 2:15 and 16. “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.” Paul and Peter were terrific Jews. They observed the laws of Moses and were zealous for their religious traditions. From their culture’s point of view, they were a-ok. But what about before God? Peter, who promised that he would die rather than deny Jesus, denied him three times before a little girl on the night Jesus was arrested. Paul, in order to advance in the eyes of the elders, became a murderer and persecuted the Lord Jesus. Their cultural faith did not save them or justify them in the eyes of God. But when they believed in Jesus as the Son of God, and died with him to their sinful nature, they were accepted by God and made his holy servants to fulfill God’s promise through Abraham, “through your descendants all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). Let’s read verse 16b again, together. May God bless you never to put your trust in your culture or in human standards. May God bless you to overcome the barriers of culture and legalism by faith in what Christ Jesus has done.

Fourth, the grace of God. The Jews were not happy to think that faith in Jesus could save them and Gentile sinners, equally. What good was the law? What good was their suffering to uphold the law? According to Paul, the law was very good, for it led God’s people to Jesus. Look at verse 19. “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.” The law of God reveals the righteousness of God. Through the law, all men might weigh themselves against the standard of God’s righteousness. But because the law is perfect, it could only condemn imperfect men. There was a tragic story in the paper today about Catholic priests, who have taken a vow of celibacy. Hundreds of priests in the US have already died of AIDS related illnesses, at a rate five times greater than the general population. The church tried to cover it up, but in the end, all they could say was, “Man is imperfect.” So what can be the solution? Look at verse 20. “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Through the law, all men cannot but despair because of sin in us, which condemns us before the holy God. But Christ Jesus came to die for us, so that we might live in him. He did so purely out of his love. He did so that we might be pure, and live forever as the children of God. Paul was now a great man, a servant of the gospel and a recognized apostle sent by God. But he testified to Peter and to the Galatians: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” (21)

There are many things of value which we strive for in this world, such as money and friends. But there is one thing we have received which is of the greatest value. May God be with us to hold on to God’s grace. May God be with us to live by and preach the only gospel that saves sinners and gives man eternal life.