

Grace Didn't Die
Christianity is a Relationship, Not a Religion.
Galatians 2:15-21

Introduction: A religion is a system of rules and practices that make a person feel they are living in a way that satisfies God, their god or gods. If you follow the rules and the practices, then you can have confidence that you are appeasing God/the gods, thus increasing your chances of a blessed life, and depending on that religion's perspectives, increasing your assurances of the quality of your life after death.

Religion gives people tangible rails on which to run. It gives them a formula that they are in charge of. Consequently, what you get from it entirely depends on how much you put into it.

People who are good at practicing religion generally feel they have a purpose in life; they experience confidence and peace. In many religions, people who are good at it also find acceptance from others. They have a tribe that they have earned the right to be in, and thus feel confident, secure, and justified in being in it.

However, even if a person is good at religion, if they are also self-aware, then they understand both their ability to fail and the consequences of failing. Failure then necessitates guilt and shame, which must be borne long enough to earn the right to come back, if there can even be a coming back.

A relationship is totally different. A relationship is not without expectations and standards, but isn't based on my performance. The goal of a relationship is not to earn the right to be in it, but rather to prosper in it because you have it. Relationships provide you with all the things religion promises but can't provide because they are based not on what you do but, first and foremost, on the other person's willingness to love you. Therefore, when it comes to a relationship with God, there can be no greater relationship in the universe because it's based on His commitment to love you no matter what!

There's so much we can say on this subject, but the rest of our study of Galatians will give us ample time to flesh it out and apply it. Similarly, Galatians 2:15-21 frames up the central doctrines we are going to be talking about and learning throughout the rest of our time in Galatians, therefore we are not going to try and exhaust everything in it, but use it to frame up what Paul is going to be presenting in the rest of the book.

Proposition: Galatians 2:15-21 introduces us to the four basic principles that the rest of the book will thoroughly flesh out so that we can understand and live in the relationship with God that Jesus Christ has made for us!

The first principle Paul teaches us is that ...

- (1) There is nothing a person can do to change their identity as a sinner separated from God. (2:15-16)**

- A. 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 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.**
- B. 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;**
1. To be a sinner is fundamentally to live in rebellion against God, either consciously or ignorantly; it makes no difference why, but that you are. In verse 15, the context is ignorance. In stating Gentiles are sinners, he is contrasting it with the reality that Jews are born into. Gentiles are born into the identity of being a person who lives in rebellion against God because they have no knowledge of God or what He expects. Jews, however, are born into a different situation. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul spoke of that privilege,
 2. **1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. (Romans 3:1-2)**
 3. The point he makes in Romans 3 is not that the Law, Prophets, or even circumcision, made them just before God; rather, it demonstrated that God was pursuing them, revealing Himself to them, and seeking them. As such, they, above all the peoples of the earth, had every reason to live loving and following Him. They were not born into the ignorance of God like the Gentiles were, but rather, they were born into the knowledge and very real reality of what God had done and was doing to reveal Himself to the world!
 4. However, having this incredible privilege of being the only people on earth God had chosen to call His own, and having the exact instructions from God on how and what He expected them to do, still changed nothing about their eternal relationship with God. It's why Paul wrote,
- C. 16 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.**
1. The problem is that we are all born in a state of not being "justified," which means we don't have a right to get to know God. Man is, by nature, not worthy of a relationship with God. Mankind is by nature rebellious against God, and as such, is incapable of being anything different. We cannot live in submission to God or in true unity with Him. We cannot separate ourselves from our desire to rule ourselves as opposed to being ruled by God, nor can

we separate ourselves from the selfishness that keeps us from truly being one with God and with anybody else, including ourselves!

2. Interestingly, every major world religion recognizes humanity's natural condition as a lack of oneness (love) with whoever they believe the creator(s) of the universe to be, but also with others and even ourselves. In each case, they recommend a system of rules, methods, or traditions that make a just way to restore us to God, others, and ourselves. Some religions even teach reincarnation, which gives you unlimited opportunities at getting things right, just don't mess up too bad, because if you do, you will come back worse off in the next life than you were in this life; you could even come back as something not human – i.e., a cow.
3. The Bible NEVER participates in this effort. It never asserts that there is some system, set of laws, traditions, or meditations by which you and I can perform to overcome our state of chaos and justly, or even unjustly, enter into unity with God, others, or ourselves! Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, as well as the rest of the Bible, makes the following very clear:
 - a. We of ourselves are not justified to be one with God.
 - b. There is no such act that I can perform that makes me worthy of a relationship with God, and even if there was, we are such depraved sinners, that even if there were a thing we could do that could hypothetically deserve God, we would still have within us motives and actions that are not deserving of God, and as such, remain under the judgement of God!
 - c. Sinning is not simply something we do; it's who we are. We are born sinners and thus born not only separated from God, others, and ourselves, but also born incapable of being anything different! It's why the Bible says,
 - d. **"5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm 51:5)**
 - e. **"20 Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." (Ecclesiastes 7:20)**
 - f. **"9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)**
 - g. **"9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, 10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;" (Romans 3:9-10)**

4. Being a sinner is a reality of our identity that we can't change, and it's why Paul stated this principle THREE times in one verse!! Look at it again,
- D. **16 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.**
1. As I stated in my introduction, Paul will explain this in more depth as we progress through the book, especially in chapters 3 and 4. But here, he repeats that there is no work of any law that you or I can do that justifies us becoming one with God, which is of itself eternal life (John 17:3).
 2. This is not a statement that if you could obey the Mosaic Law, then you could be justified, but rather that there is NO WORK within the Mosaic Law, or any other law, that enables a person to be set free from the curse of sin that all mankind has been placed under.
 3. As such, Gentiles are born into an ignorant reality of being sinners, whereas Jews are born into an informed reality of being sinners, but nonetheless, both are sinners who are incapable of being anything other than sinners. Therefore, neither Jew nor Gentile is ever capable of being justified to be one with God and, as such, also incapable of being one with others or themselves.
- E. **“Nothing is more plainly revealed in Scripture than this: that by the works of the law shall no man be justified. Yet men in some shape or other stick to the hope of legal righteousness. They will have it that they must prepare for grace, or assist mercy, or in some degree deserve eternal life. They prefer their own flattering prejudices to the declaration of the heart-searching God. (Charles Spurgeon)”¹**

The second principle Paul teaches us is that ...

- (2) Faith in Christ is the means by which we receive the right to be one with God, but it is not what deserves it! (2:16-19)
- A. **16 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.**

¹ Spurgeon, C. (2013). *Galatians*. (E. Ritzema, Ed.) (Ga 2:15-16). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

- B. We are going to talk about what Jesus has done to justify us as children of God in a second, but here I just want to point out that Paul is not saying faith justifies us; rather, it's Jesus who justifies us.
- C. Faith is how we receive what has been provided! Faith is how we experience it, but faith is not what earns it. Faith, therefore, is not a work that earns, but a commitment to receive.
- D. Now, it's important that I clarify something here. James helps us understand that faith is not simply stating you believe something to be true. Some misinterpret James as saying works are what earn our right to know God and be in unity with Him. However, that's not at all what James is suggesting. James is making it clear that faith is not mere belief in facts, but rather a commitment to God because you believe the Gospel to be true. The work that flows from that commitment is not something that earns the relationship; rather, it is evidence that you have it! If there is no outward demonstration of faith, then it's by definition not faith. In the same way, if there is no outward demonstration of my love for my wife and children, then what I have for them is not by definition love, but something else. James said,
 1. **"14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!" (James 2:14, 19)**
 2. Likewise, Jesus said,
 3. **"15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15)**

Note: It's not a process of earning a relationship with Him, but a reality that if you love Him, you are going to try and do what He told us to do. It's the reality of what love and faith are and aren't. It's a description of what faith does and not what faith earns.
 4. Faith is taking God at His Word and committing to follow Him. The act of obeying and following doesn't earn or regulate our standing with Him; in fact, we generally aren't really good at it, but it does testify if it's real.
- E. This is also why Paul wrote the next couple of verses in our passage. He did not want faith to be confused with a more romanticized or sanitized word for religious works.

The third principle Paul teaches us is that ...

(3) Christ's death ends our identity as sinners—religious or otherwise! (2:17-20a)

- A. 17 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! 18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ.**
- B.** Verse 17 and 18 show that if I live as a sinner with no commitment or effort to follow Jesus, then my identity is still as a sinner; that is, who I am is still a person who doesn't care about loving, knowing or obeying God, and as such, I clearly have not received the grace of having that relationship! I PROVE myself to BE a transgressor and not a child of God.
- C.** HOWEVER, verses 18 and 19 show that it is also true that if I return to the idea of trusting in my ability to obey the Law of Moses or any other religious system as the means of separating myself to know and follow God, then I have proven myself still to be a sinner unwilling to trust in the work of Christ, a person still void of the relationship with God provided by Christ!
- D.** Interestingly, verse 19 links back to what he had just confronted Peter and Barnabas about: the fact that they had removed themselves from table fellowship with Gentile believers, to be affirmed by their Jewish brothers, who refused to accept Gentile believers as brothers. The law alienated those who were not Jewish and made them second-class citizens. But if our justification to be His children, that is, to be one with God and one another, is Christ, then the separation created by The Law no longer matters. Therefore, rebuilding that separation, as Paul called out Peter for doing earlier in chapter two, shows a person to be a transgressor rather than a Child of God! They are literally working against Christ. They are literally working against what He has already done!
- E.** In addition, Paul is saying here that The Law, that intentionally separated them from the Gentiles and expected them to act as such, is also the law that created an opportunity to no longer be under it or held accountable to it so that he could finally live in unity with God, others and himself. The Law was incapable of bringing unity because its purpose was separation, but it did prepare the way for the one who brought unity! The Law is what God used to establish the nation of Israel and bring forth Christ, and as such, the purpose of the Law was fulfilled. When Christ died, the covenant God made with Israel to bring about that death died with Him!
- F.** This is why Paul wrote in verse 20 that when Christ died, he DIED with HIM! First, Paul walks back to what he said in verse 15 to make sure it's well understood that there is no work, including anything in the Mosaic Law, that if a person does it, justifies them receiving the gift of being one with God; of belonging to Him; of having His life! There is no work we can do to make such an incredible purchase, and even if there were such work, we are incapable of

actually doing it! Therefore, when Paul said I DIED WITH CHRIST he is saying, the Jewish sinner named Saul, the person who by his very nature was incapable of knowing God, nor earning the right to know God; the person who was an expert at obeying the Law that could do nothing to change his relational status with God, nor bring unity between him and others or himself; that person DIED with Christ!

This takes us straight to the fourth principle Paul teaches us.

(4) The foundation and practice of a relationship with God is Christ. (2:20-21)

- A. John Bunyan wrote, **“Do this and live, the law commands, but gives me neither feet nor hands. A better word the gospel brings. It bids me fly and gives me wings.” (John Bunyan)**²
- B. **20 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. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.**
- C. We are incapable of entering into a relationship with God because we would first have to pay the price of all that we are and all that we have done that is unworthy of God, and as such, be under His judgment! The judgment of God on us, being sinners, is an eternal separation from Him. We must first suffer this eternally incompletable task to even have the opportunity to do anything worthy of a relationship with Him! We have therefore been left in this state of being sinners ever since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden (eternal life with God). But Christ came and accomplished both acts! He paid our debt and earned our right to have a relationship with God!
- D. Christ’s perfect love and obedience to the Father are what we are incapable of doing; that is, His love and obedience to the Father are worthy of the Father, while ours is anything but! Furthermore, in His death on the cross, He did what we could not do. He suffered the full wrath of God on our sin. Christ took the responsibility of our sin and, as such, took the judgment of experiencing eternal death, but because He is God, He was able to in every way fully suffer the eternal consequence in a mere moment. Christ’s resurrection then proved that God’s judgment was completed! If Christ were still dead, He would still be paying the debt of separation (death), but He isn’t! Christ’s resurrection is the proof that His sacrifice was enough!

² Wuest, K. S. (1997). [*Wuest's word studies from the Greek New Testament: for the English reader*](#) (Vol. 3, pp. 80–81). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- E.** Therefore, in doing this for us, when Christ died and suffered eternal death, we died eternal death with Him! In addition, when Christ rose from the grave, we also rose from the grave! Therefore, Paul says the life I now live, meaning in this life (the flesh), is not one of trusting in my works, or the law, or any other form of religion, but rather totally in what Christ has accomplished in His death and resurrection for me! His death pays the penalty, and His life earns the favor! I'm just as alive as Christ is alive!
- F.** Therefore, the foundation of our relationship with God and the "practice" of our relationship with God is governed and established by what He has done. Our relationship is not based on anything we have done nor our love for God, but on what Christ has done and God's love for us! The foundation is not success in religion but the success of Christ's work on the cross. The foundation is the relationship Christ has brought to me, not my ability to do something that justifies my coming to Him. The foundation is Christ being in me, not me being in Christ!
- G.** Additionally, the practice is no longer a system of rules, customs and traditions that create and enhance the strength of a relationship, but rather that which naturally and organically flows out of believing I am loved (faith); and the confidence that I have the right to this relationship, not by what I have done, but rather by that which was done for me!
- H.** The practice of this relationship is one of believing God loves us, therefore we love Him in return, knowing it's accepted before it's even given. In religion, you always wonder if it's enough. In a relationship with God, wondering if our love is enough is a moot point, because our love has no bearing on His Love for us! Therefore, in a relationship with God, you are motivated to give more and love more, not out of guilt, fear, or law, but out of the joy derived from the confidence of His love!
- I.** Additionally, in religion, the work is the focus, whereas in a relationship, the person is the focus. In religion, the work is holy; in a relationship, the relationship is holy. One says, "I do therefore I matter," while the other says, "I matter therefore I do."
- J.** In a religion, the rules, customs, and traditions are the point; in a relationship, rules, customs, and traditions may exist, but they are not the point nor even the means of the relationship; the person is. For example,
 - 1.** We have rules in our marriage, but they are not the focus.
 - a.** For instance, we have a rule that we will not have any kind of relationship that even resembles that of dating another person. However, I'm not living my life trying not to end up dating another woman. I'm living my life to love and know my wife! The rule is not my

focus; my wife is, and as such, the rule is something I align with by default. In addition, because Keri and our marriage matter so much to me, the rule that honors her and our marriage matters. I don't want to be in a competing relationship with another woman because my wife and our relationship matter more than any other woman or relationship!

- b.** As believers, we have the same kind of relationship with the Father. He is the authority, and as such, He has rules. The Mosaic Law does NOT spell out those rules. Sometimes there are similarities, but you do not discover how God wants you to act in this New Covenant relationship created by Christ by reading and studying the Old Testament, but rather by reading the New Testament. The Old Testament will undoubtedly enrich your faith, but it is not the testimony of the New Covenant, but of the Old Covenant that points us to the New Covenant. It points us to the New, but it is not the New.
 - c.** Therefore, to learn how and what we are to do in the relationship with God given to us through Christ, we need to first read, understand, and be transformed by the Gospel that is brought to light in the New Testament. Then, when we go back and read the Old Testament, what was a shrouded mystery even to the authors of the Old Testament who wrote it, will leap off the pages to you! However, to say that God does not rule us in the New Covenant, and as such, we are in an equal relationship with God where we define morality, ethics, His will, etc., is as absurd as suggesting that the Law given to Moses is still how He intends to rule us. We will discuss this MUCH more as we go through Galatians.
- 2.** We have customs in our marriage, but they are not the focus or our allegiance.
- a.** For instance, I usually work 60 hours between Sunday AM and Thursday PM; therefore, with all three kids having things going on in addition to that, Keri and I don't get a lot of time to talk to each other on those five days. So, a while back, we formed a custom for Friday. I get up and help Keri get the kids all set and dropped off at school. Then, once they are all gone, Keri and I will read through my sermon notes and discuss anything that needs to be tweaked. There are usually grammatical errors to fix; we discuss the doctrine and/or application in it and talk through things that may not be stated correctly. We then head to the gym where she does a workout class, and I do a weightlifting circuit. We then go to the grocery store if needed and go home to eat lunch together. After that, I start on the "honey do" list, and the day goes from there. The point is, Friday AM has become a custom for us.

- b. However, in a relationship, the point of a custom is not the custom, but rather the person you do the custom with! There is no law that we can't change our customs because we have no allegiance to customs but rather to our relationship, and thus to each other. However, in religion, the custom is as holy as the one the religion is supposed to be about, so much so that you can't have the one the religion is about without the custom! However, in a relationship, the relationship is the point, and, as such, the custom changes as needed for the relationship to flourish, and if the custom isn't needed, then it's that simple—it's not needed! The custom is not the focus; the person you are in a relationship with is. For instance, if Keri wakes up sick, it's totally ok that we don't go to the gym because the point is not the gym ... it's one another! However, in religion, we would be headed to the gym!!
- K. So, back to the text, let's read those last two verses together in their entirety.
- L. **20 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. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.**
- M. Paul practiced religious customs with Jews, but then he didn't practice them with Gentiles, why, because the point wasn't the custom! So Paul in no way is saying if you have any customs and traditions then you nullify the purpose of the cross, however, what He is saying is that if you believe The Mosaic Law, or any other custom, rules, or instructions are the means of receiving or maturing you in the grace of God, then Christ's horrific death had no purpose!
- N. Spurgeon put this stark statement of Paul in Galatians 2:21 this way,
- O. **"We cannot be saved by our own merits, for if so, the atonement was unnecessary—a blasphemous idea not to be tolerated for a moment. If a man can be saved by his own works and willings and doings, then Christ's death was an unnecessary piece of torture. Instead of being the most glorious manifestation of divine love, it was a shameful waste, putting upon Christ a terrible burden of suffering that was totally unnecessary."³**
- P. Paul's point was that Christ is the only foundation of our relationship with God. As such, faith in Christ is the practice of a relationship with God and the only means of receiving and experiencing God's Grace!
- Q. We will obviously be digging into the principle way more as we go through the rest of Galatians, so let me take you to an application.

³ Spurgeon, C. (2013). *Galatians*. (E. Ritzema, Ed.) (Ga 2:21). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Challenge: What are the areas of your life that you can't accept God's grace; where you nullify it for yourself?

In past sermons, I have discussed the arrogance of refusing to accept God's grace, and that is certainly insinuated in Galatians in many places, but today we want to focus on something different.

So many people disconnect from Christ and the local church because they feel ashamed of their sin. That's a totally religious, legalistic kind of thinking that causes you to say to yourself that you don't deserve to be in a church because you sinned! I've seen it time and time again, especially with adultery. There's a sexual failure in a marriage. The one who committed adultery feels ashamed to show back up in church because they are ashamed of what they did. Similarly, the spouse that the adultery was committed against doesn't want to come back because they feel ashamed that their spouse did it.

But Christ's death and resurrection should remove all of that, that is, if we believe the Gospel, and are a part of a local church like Venture that believes it!

Now listen, we should feel some shame about our sin. Its sin! It's rebellion against a loving God who sent His Son to die for us; it's choosing death when life has been given to us at such a high price! HOWEVER, the knowledge of the Gospel then removes that shame because it assures us that Christ died because we are sinners so that He could save us from sin, not condemn us to be stuck in it because we proved we needed Him!

So, when the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, shame is a natural and honest feeling for the moment, but only as long as it takes to quickly turn back to The One standing there with open arms, waiting for us to walk with HIM!

You probably know this story, but I can't help but close with it,

2 Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4 they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5 Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7 And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10 Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 8:2-11)

When Jesus said go and sin no more, He was telling her I love you, and that tells you all you need to know about yourself. You are not the sin you committed; you are mine, so without shame go forward and don't look back! If she didn't believe the love and forgiveness He was telling her about, then she would have laid there or walked away and went right back to living as a sinner, however, if she believed His love and forgiveness truly washed away the shame of her sin, then she had no reason to go back to the shame of the adultery, but rather every reason to walk in the gladness of a relationship with God! She had every reason to turn from living in adultery and turn to righteousness and God's love!