

## Reformation – Sola Fide Galatians 2:15-21

The Protestant reformation cannot be separated from the life and experience of Martin Luther. Luther was trained to be a lawyer, but when he was 21, he was caught in a violent lightning storm. A bolt of lightning struck the ground near him, and as Luther tells it, he cried out, "Save me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk." The storm subsided and Luther held to his promise; abandoning a law practice and entering the monastery. The decision to become a monk was difficult and greatly disappointed his father. Luther became a monk with a view of saving his own soul. He was driven by fear of hell and God's wrath. So Luther was meticulous in prayer, fasting, and self-affliction. He took his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience with utmost seriousness. Luther is said to have spent hours upon hours confessing to his abbot the slightest and most mundane sins. Luther was racked by guilt and condemnation, keenly aware of his own imperfection and sin. But in all this activity Luther found no peace. Luther's abbot finally told him to give himself to the study of the Bible. So Luther enrolled in the University at Wittenberg, and earning a doctorate in theology, he became a professor of theology. It was while lecturing at Wittenberg on Romans that Luther had a monumental breakthrough. He was reading and studying Romans 1:16-17 which says, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" So far so good, but when Luther came to verse 17, his heart sunk. "*For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*"

From Luther's own testimony he says, "... I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand ... God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. ... At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."

The formal principal that the reformers built their theology from was Sola Scriptura, the Scripture alone as the final authority in faith and life. But it was Sola Fide, faith alone that fueled their passion and willingness to lay down their lives to see reform come to the Catholic Church and people freed by the true gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Sola Fide* is the real center, the heart and soul of the Reformation. The desire of the reformers was not to break away from the Catholic Church and start churches in their own images and for their own tastes. The desire of the reformers was to see reform; to see change and improvement, and the Church come back to the life giving roots of the gospel found only in Jesus Christ. And nowhere was this more hotly and profoundly contested than in the area of Justification by faith alone. What is justification? In the broadest terms possible, **justification is simply how someone is made right or just before God.**

For centuries leading up to the Reformation, and even today the Roman Catholic Church teaches that justification, being made right or just before God, is a mixture of faith supported by works. Theologically this is called **infused righteousness**. In Catholic teaching this would be **trusting in Jesus as savior and adding to Jesus' work my doing of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church** (Baptism, the Eucharist or communion, confirmation, penance, last rites, marriage, and holy orders).

In Catholic teaching, there was a **conflation, a blending or fusing together of justification and sanctification**. Therefore, in Catholic teaching someone is **made righteous, justified before God, by cooperating with God's grace** through their own works.

In contrast to this, as Luther and the other reformers rediscovered the doctrine of *Sola Fide* they came to understand that the Bible's teaching was not infused righteousness but **imputed righteousness; Jesus' life and death plus nothing else**. Romans 3:28 states, "*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*" Imputed righteousness is **righteousness, or justification, which is solely the work and merit of Christ**. In other words, imputed righteousness states that when Jesus died on the cross my sin was imputed, put on, Him, so that He is dying in my place and paying the penalty for my sin. Hand in hand with this, Jesus' righteousness His positive sinless life and perfect sacrificial death is put on me so that when God looks at me he does not see my sin, but sees what Jesus has done and declares that I am justified before Him and in right relationship with him. Romans 5:1 speaks of one of the many benefits of our being justified before God by faith alone saying, "*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" **We are made righteous, justified, through faith alone**. Romans 3:23 affirms this truth saying, "*... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*"

Between these two understandings of justification, a question arises we have to ask. Is faith alone sufficient to gain right standing before God? You see for many of us we've been taught to think and believe that to be a Christian is to behave a certain way. For example, becoming a Christian in the late 80's I was taught that God liked a certain kind of music and to please God you needed to listen to that music; because if you listen to the other stuff you're going to do cocaine and murder your parents. For many of us we have been taught a Christianity that focuses heavily on moralism, and sprinkles gospel in from time to time, so that we can give our behavior a Christianized twist. Now some of that is true. **Because a heart transformed by the gospel will be changed, needs to be changed. But that truth can be perverted in our minds and hearts as we start to think and live as though we must do these things in order to be a Christian**. Change of heart is authentic Christian faith, but its change of heart because I know the gospel, and not change of heart because I am doing things to gain God's favor. What we need to do is understand where our relationship with God started, what God has done, how God is working, what God's building on to anchor us to the Rock, and what is sinking sand. This is what Luther discovered as God opened his mind and heart to see that God's righteousness is not God seeing Himself as better than human beings and punishing them because of it, but rather that the righteousness of God was a gift from God to save us, that the righteousness of God was about God's work in Christ on my behalf, and not about my work to justify myself.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, the issue of *Sola Fide* is front and center. Like the Packer quote at the top of your notes, Paul understood that the whole of the gospel rested on *Sola Fide*, get *Sola Fide* right and the rest of the gospel comes into sharp focus. We're going to look at Galatians 2:15-21, and I have three purposes looking at this text: to understand what the bible teaches about being justified by faith alone, why we need to be justified by faith alone, and what it means to be justified by faith alone.

What does the Bible teach about being justified by faith alone and nothing else? There are several passages we could look at, the first half of the letter to the Romans deals with this issue in tremendous depth, but we are going to look here in Galatians, where Paul gives us a shorter treatment but no less important. Verse 15, "*We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 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.*" The first thing we need to understand about justification by faith alone is that **having a moral advantage does nothing to justify us**. That's what Paul means in saying we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. He's simply pointing out, we Jews have the Law of God, we have the Prophets, we have God's covenants, we have all this moral advantage, we know what God says, what God wants – and yet none of that moral advantage justifies us before God. In other words, Paul's saying

listen, get over your background → we all need Jesus. And why is this, Paul says, **because no one is justified by works of the Law**, verse 16, and why is that? What we need to understand is that the Law's purpose is **only to accuse, expose, and reveal what's wrong, but the Law cannot fix!** Let me see if I can illustrate this; about 7 years ago, I finally messed up my shoulder to the point that I needed to go speak with an orthopedist. I go in for the appointment, he asks me to move the arm around, he does some squeezing and the like, and orders up an MRI. I go and get my MRI, go back to talk with the surgeon, and when I walk in he says, "I don't know how you move your arm." This is wrong, this is torn, your rotator cuff is completely detached, we need to do surgery now. Here's the point, without the MRI, wouldn't have known the extent of the problem, Paul says the Law was given to show us how sinful sin is – but like an MRI the Law reveals what's wrong but can do nothing to fix it. My MRI didn't fix it, I needed the skill of my surgeon to do that.

In verses 17 and 18 Paul moves to help us understand why we need to be justified by faith alone. Verse 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! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.*" The first thing we need to understand is that **Jesus is not a sin detector but a Savior from sin**. Jesus is not like the MRI – accuser, exposor, revealer of sin – on the contrary, Jesus is actually able to deal with the problem. **And Jesus does this not by bringing a new Law**. This is what Paul means when he says if I rebuild what I tore down I prove myself to be a transgressor. Jesus does not tear down the Law of Moses only to build up a new Law of Christ. No, **the Law of Moses is fulfilled in Christ**, and we do not have an accuser any more pointing out all of the ways we fail, but rather a Savior who has taken our sin upon Himself and given us as a gift of grace His perfect fulfillment of God's Law.

Paul illustrates this in verse 19, "*For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.*" **Being made alive to God does not happen through our action, but by God's action alone**. You see moral advantages don't equate to life in God. If I were to ask most of you what life to God means, you'll point out moral advantages, moral increases. Life to God means I do this or this or this or that. But that's leaning on my moral advantages. This isn't to say moral advantages are bad things, we don't dismiss the pursuit of righteousness, but what we have to trust is the Holy Spirit gifting faith to someone to believe in God's grace in the Lord Jesus Christ. We need transformation of heart that comes by faith not by cleaning ourselves up, being made alive to God by faith – trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And now we're ready to understand what it means to be justified by faith alone. Verse 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. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the Law, then Christ died for no purpose.*" Here's is how *Sola Fide*, grace alone works. I, Malcolm Light, have been crucified with Christ. **Dying in Christ means all my sin is crucified with Christ**; all of my past sin, all of my present sin, all of my future sin – ALL of my sin has been crucified with Christ. And this is where we tend to get a little wonky, because we have no problem with my past sin, but my present sin we think that we have to do something in order for that sin to be covered. But the Bible says, I have been crucified with Christ, my whole life, past, present, and future has died with Christ, and the life I now live, the life you all see in front of you **now is lived in confident faith, confident trust in Jesus Christ and His saving, justifying work on the cross**. And when I live as a Christian in the confidence that my right standing before God only comes because I put my faith in the saving work of Jesus then I do not nullify, or invalidate, or squash the grace of God. Which begs the question; how can I nullify the grace of God? **I nullify the grace of God when I say the cross is not enough!** When I say, that my sin is greater than the power and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that's the accusation you make against the King of Glory when you believe that your background your present reality, that the struggles you have are so much bigger than God's power to forgive that you have to help Him. How weak and pathetic is God if His solution for helping you requires you to help Him? We nullify the grace of God when we think God needs our help in our salvation. He doesn't, praise God He has done all the work, He has taken all the steps, He has made it possible to simply come by faith alone and receive forgiveness of sin, and right standing before God.

Why is *Sola Fide* important? What difference does *Sola Fide* make? Three quick applications. One, *Sola Fide* **guards against self-righteousness**. Because God has done all the work, there is no room for my work, my boasting, my looking to anything other than God for salvation and right standing before Him. All other ground is sinking sand.

Two, *Sola Fide* **assures us that we possess eternal life now**. Friends, while we await the completion of our salvation in going to be with our Savior at our deaths, if he tarries that long, the reality is we are already walking in the realities of our salvation now, eternity does not start then it is a present reality, and we are to live in response to God's great work of salvation and justification by faith alone now.

Finally, *Sola Fide* **comforts us that in Christ we can never be condemned again – Jesus has taken it all!** The justification, the salvation that God grants to us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is a complete salvation and does not and cannot accept our help. If it is not through faith alone, then it is a deficient salvation, it is not saving faith, it is not the Biblical gospel. Faith alone is the sufficient means by which we are to be saved. If you know Christ rejoice, be glad, live in the freedom of your salvation and seek holy lives that reflect the freedom of your salvation. If you do not know Christ, friend, today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to surrender yourself to Christ and set aside your pursuit of earning God's favor, and simply receive what has been done for you in the Lord Jesus Christ by faith alone.