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The Crucified Life
Galatians 2:15-21

Have you ever had that experience where you were determined that you were not going to do something that you knew you shouldn't do, but you did it anyway? Maybe you were trying to watch what you were eating, but it was almost like the food you weren't supposed to eat was quietly calling out to you, "Eat me! Eat me!"

Or maybe you were trying to establish something positive in your life, like exercising more regularly, only to find it more and more difficult to get up early enough to do it.

We experience the same kind of thing in our spiritual lives, too, don't we? We know we should spend time in daily devotions, reading the Bible and praying, and we say we're going to do it. But for one reason or another, we never seem to get around to it. Or that besetting sin that we seem to fall into over and over again—we resolve that we're not going to yield to it again, only to fall time and time again.

In this struggle it becomes painfully obvious to us, if we'll realize it, that while we may be able to accomplish or achieve some things out of our own moral reserves and resources, we can never become or do all that God intends by our own strength and efforts.

The works of law

This is an ages-old struggle. As humans, we think that somehow we have to *do something* to earn our way with God. Ideas may vary as to what that something is, but the basic premise is still the same. We want to think that God loves us and accepts us because of something *we* do.

In this text we're looking at this morning, Paul called this attitude the "works of law" (2:16).¹ He emphasized that "we know that a person is not justified by works of law but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ . . ." Our being set right with God or *justified* is based on Christ's faithfulness in his life and death, *not* our observance of the law. Jesus was absolutely faithful to the Father in everything, always doing the Father's will, refusing to be the Messiah in any other way than how the Father sent him to do it, and remaining faithful to him and his will even to the point of death on the cross. Jesus was absolutely faithful to his Father. The Father vindicated him by raising him from the dead so that he was absolutely victorious over sin and death. So because he was faithful, those who put their faith in him rather than trying to achieve a right relationship with God through their own power and accomplishment are set right with God. They are *justified*.

Now friends, that's a mouthful! But it's crucial to understanding what Paul was talking

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are my own translation.

about here.

You see, the Galatian Christians had fallen under the influence of some teachers who were telling them that as Gentiles who had become Christians, they needed to be observing the Jewish law, including circumcision as a sign of the covenant.

Paul was very frustrated, maybe even furious about this. It wasn't the first time he had encountered this problem. This was the issue that was supposed to have been settled at the Jerusalem Conference we read about in Acts 15. When Paul and Barnabas had begun preaching to the Gentiles and many had believed, some of the Jewish Christians—remember that at first in the earliest days, all the Christians were Jews—some of these Jewish Christians (who were also Pharisees) were saying that for Gentiles to be saved, they first had to become Jews. Peter had refuted that idea at the conference, and reminded them how God had sent him to preach the gospel to a Roman centurion named Cornelius and all his household. Peter concluded his comments by saying:

“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:10-11, NIV).

After Peter spoke, Barnabas and Paul told how God had worked among the Gentiles. James, the Lord's brother, who was presiding over the conference, spoke up and reminded them how the Scriptures agreed with what was happening, and recommended that the Gentile believers not be required to become Jews, but that they should abstain from eating food sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, and from eating meat of strangled animals and blood (Acts 15:19-20).

And the entire assembly agreed with this decision.

Paul and Peter

But then things changed. Some of the Judaizers, as they are often called, continued to insist that Gentile converts to Christianity first had to become Jewish converts and then live according to the law of Moses.

What was even worse was what Paul tells us about in an earlier section of Galatians 2. Peter (or Cephas) had come to Antioch, and was eating with the Gentile believers. This kind of table fellowship demonstrated full acceptance. But then some men came from Jerusalem; it's not completely clear, but it appears that they were official representatives of James. When they came, Peter stopped eating with the Gentile believers. Paul says it was because he was afraid of the circumcision party. When the other Jewish Christians saw what Peter did, many of them, even Barnabas, joined in this hypocrisy.

When Paul saw this blatant inconsistency with the gospel, he confronted Peter publicly. He said to Peter, “If you are a Jew and are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force Gentiles to live like Jews?” Paul was in essence reminding Peter of what he had said at the Jerusalem Conference!

Our text is either part of what Paul said to Peter or his further reflection on what he said. Since the Greek did not use quotation marks as English does, it's hard to tell. But either way, Paul's comments here are vitally connected to his conversation with Peter.

Paul was stressing that Jews and Gentiles are all sinners who cannot save themselves by works of law. We are all justified through the faithfulness of Christ as we put our trust in him.

Just a brief word here about the term “the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” in verse 16 and “the

faithfulness of the Son of God” in verse 20 . . . The Greek phrase can be translated in two ways. Most translations make “Jesus Christ” and “the Son of God” the object of faith—“faith in” Jesus Christ or the Son of God. A few, like the *King James Version* and the *NET Bible* translate it as “the faith of” or “the faithfulness of” Jesus Christ and the Son of God. Given the overall context of what Paul is saying here, along with the fact that he uses another construction in verse 16 to state explicitly that “we have put our faith in Christ Jesus,” and that the same word can mean either *faith* or *faithfulness* (depending on the context), I think that “the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” and “the faithfulness of the Son of God” is the better translation here.

That difference is significant for what it means to live *the crucified life* that Paul calls for in verses 19 and 20.

The crucified life

Paul tells us:

For I through the law died to the law, so that I might live to God.
I have been crucified with Christ; so I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.
And what I now live in the flesh I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God
who loved me and gave himself for me (2:19-20).

Do you see what he’s saying? Paul is saying something like this: “I can’t set myself right with God by keeping the law. Since I can’t, I have died to the law through the law so that I can be alive to God. The way that has happened is that I have been crucified with Christ—I have given myself up to him completely so that I have died to myself as well. It’s no longer I who live—Christ is living out his life of faithfulness to God in me and through my life in this world. He loved me and gave himself for me, so I have given myself up to him for him to live out his faithfulness through me.”

You see, here’s what it all boils down to: *To live the crucified life is to die to ourselves so that Christ lives out his life through us.* When Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ,” the tense of the verb in the Greek indicates that it’s something that has happened in the past but it has an ongoing effect in the present and future.

It’s the same thing Jesus was talking about in John 15 with the image of the vine and branches. You remember what he said in John 15:5, don’t you?

“I myself am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me
and I in him bears much fruit, because without me you are able to do nothing.”

My faith and faithfulness are not enough. They will fail. But *Christ’s* faithfulness—it will *never* fail! So as we yield ourselves to Christ, being crucified—put to death—with him, he lives his life out through us, he exercises his faith and faithfulness in us, we live in him and he lives through us in a vital union that produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit—fruit that Paul describes in Galatians 5:22-23 as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

This fruit is in contrast to “the works of the flesh” or the “sinful nature” (NIV), things like “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (5:19-21, NIV). Paul notes in 5:24 that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”—in other words, “I have been crucified with Christ”

So what will this crucified life look like in our everyday life?

Suppose there's someone in your life that you're having trouble getting along with . . . maybe a neighbor, or a co-worker, maybe even a church member or a family member. Even though you don't like the person or how the person acts or what he or she does, you keep resolving that you're going to try to get along with him.

But no matter how hard you try, it just doesn't work. The person keeps rubbing you the wrong way. Your anger and resentment begin to grow more and more. It gets worse instead of better. No matter how hard you try, you fail. Your moral resources and reserves, as good as they may be compared to other folks, still just aren't enough.

But then you hear or read what Paul says here. And you consciously commit yourself to Jesus, to be crucified with him to the law and the world and the flesh and yourself, to give yourself up completely to him so he can live his life out through you. And you remember that Jesus teaches us to pray for those who mistreat us, to return good for evil, and to love our enemies—not to have warm fuzzy feelings for them, but to act in loving ways toward them. And you remember that Jesus, as he was dying on the cross, prayed for those who had crucified him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, NIV).

So you begin to pray, “Lord, I can't do this on my own. Live your life out in and through me toward this person. Love him (or her) through me . . . Use me as your instrument to love this person and to show him your love.”

And then amazingly, whether that person responds in a positive way or not, your attitude toward him or her begins to change. It becomes more loving and compassionate as the mind and character of Christ grows in you. You see, as you live the crucified life, the Holy Spirit is producing his fruit in you. Genuine love brings joy and peace to your heart. You develop patience and kindness toward the person, displaying goodness, faithfulness to Christ, gentleness toward others, and self-control in this difficult situation.

In other words, as you live the crucified life, Christ lives out his life through you and develops his character in you.

But for that to happen, we must give ourselves up to Christ, dying to the law, to the world, and to ourselves. Because it's only when we die that we can truly live!

Steve Green has reminded us in his song:

Embrace the cross where Jesus suffered
Though it will cost all you claim as yours;
Your sacrifice will seem small beside the treasure,
Eternity can't measure what Jesus holds in store.

Embrace the love the cross requires;
Cling to the one whose heart knew every pain.
Receive from Jesus fountains of compassion;
Only He can fashion your heart to move as His.

Oh, wondrous cross our desires rest in you.
Lord Jesus make us bolder
To face with courage the shame and disgrace
You bore upon Your shoulder.

Embrace the life that comes from dying,

Come trace the steps the Savior walked for you.
An empty tomb concludes Golgotha's sorrow;
Endure then till tomorrow your cross of suffering.
Embrace the cross, embrace the cross, the cross of Jesus.²

†MEG

² John Elliott, "Embrace the Cross." Artist Steve Green. © 1989, BMG Songs, Inc. (<http://www.higherpraise.com/lyrics/love/love200190.htm>.)