

Observing the Train of Thought of Galatians 2:15-21 in Detail

Translation: We who are Jews by nature and not sinners from the Gentiles, since we know that a person is not justified by works of Law except through faith of Jesus Christ, even we have directed our faith toward Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by works of Law, for no flesh will be justified by works of Law.

But what if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found [to be] sinners? Is Christ then a minister of sin?

Absolutely not! For if I should again rebuild what I destroyed, I establish myself as a transgressor. For I, through the Law, died to the Law so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I myself no longer live. But Christ lives in me. And what I live now in the flesh, I live in faith, [the faith] of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not reject the grace of God. For if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died for no reason.

Immediate Context

Paul has been recounting the story of his calling to the Gentiles and his subsequent interaction with the Jerusalem church since 1:11. With 2:15-21 we come to the climax of this section. In 2:15 Paul glides seamlessly from what he told Peter at Antioch in 2:14 to present to the Galatians his theological justification for his position toward the Gentiles.

2:15 We who are Jews by nature and not sinners from the Gentiles,

Since Paul has just been talking about his conversation with Peter at Antioch, presumably the “we” includes Peter, Barnabas, James, and other Jewish believers in Jesus. They were all born as Jews, “Jews by nature.” They *contrast* with Gentile “sinners.”

Questions: What does Paul mean by the word *sinners*? How does he think “Jews by nature” differ from “sinners from the Gentiles”? Why does he start this way? Is he being completely literal here?

2:16a ... since we know that a person is not justified by works of Law except through faith of Jesus Christ,

This is apparently still common ground between Paul, Peter, and James. They all agree that “faith of Jesus Christ” was essential for a Jew to be “justified.” Justification by “faith of Jesus” *contrasts* with the idea of justification by “works of Law.” Since Paul was talking about matters of Jewish and Gentile Christian eating together in the immediate context, presumably such matters are part of what he has in mind by “works of Law.”

Questions: What does it mean to be justified? What are “works of Law”? What is “faith of Jesus Christ”? Is “except” the best translation here or would “but” be better? What would the difference in meaning be? Why does Paul contrast “works of Law” with “faith of Jesus”? Why are “works of Law” inadequate on their own to justify? Why is “faith of Jesus” necessary?

2:16b ... even we have directed faith toward Christ Jesus,

So Paul, Peter, and James apparently desire to be justified and have directed their faith toward Messiah Jesus. Their sense that justification comes through Jesus in some way has *caused* them to direct their faith toward Jesus.

Questions: What does it mean to direct your faith toward Christ Jesus? What is the meaning of the word “Christ” here—simply a name for Jesus or is Paul explicitly thinking of Jesus as Messiah? Does the change of “Jesus Christ” to “Christ Jesus” here have any particular significance? How did they go about directing their faith toward Christ Jesus?

2:16c ... so that we might be justified by faith of Christ and not by works of Law,

Paul apparently makes a *general* statement of what he has been saying thus far in the verse. “Faith of Christ” and “works of Law” *contrast* with each other as paths of justification and both he and those with whom he is in conflict have both acted accordingly.

Questions: Are the meanings of these terms and phrases any different than they have been throughout the verse? Why does he make this general statement? Is he being redundant?

2:16d ... for no flesh will be justified by works of Law.

Paul now *explains* the claim he has made again. To do so, he quotes Psalm 143:2, modifying it slightly.

Questions: How does Paul understand Psalm 143:2 to explain or substantiate what he has just said? Why does Paul modify Psalm 143:2 in the way he does? Why will “no flesh” be justified by “works of Law”?

2:17 But what if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were also found [to be] sinners? Is Christ then a minister of sin?

Paul now begins a second paragraph that appears to *contrast* with the first. 2:15 begins by contrasting “Jews by nature” with “Gentile sinners.” But in 2:17, we see that Jewish believers are also sinners in some way.

The context of being found sinners is while seeking to be justified in Christ. Being justified “in Christ” seems to relate directly to being justified “by faith of Christ” and “through the faith of Jesus” in some way.

Some apparently might think that the *logical conclusion* of such a situation is that Christ is a minister of sin. Paul anticipates this response and so asks the question himself.

Questions: What is the precise relationship between this paragraph and the previous one? Is it a developing train of thought that intrinsically critiques that of 2:15? What is the timing of justification here? When will it take place? When are those seeking thus “found to be sinners”? What is a sinner in this context? What does Paul mean by the phrase “in Christ”? What is the relationship between the phrases “in Christ,” “by faith of Christ,” and “through faith of Jesus”? Why would someone suggest that Christ is a

minister of sin because Christians seeking to be justified are found sinners? Who exactly does Paul have in mind saying such a thing? Peter? James? Those from James or others? What would it mean to say that Christ is a “minister of sin”?

2:18-19 Absolutely not! For if I should again rebuild what I destroyed, I establish myself as a transgressor. For I, through the Law, died to the Law so that I might live to God.

Paul’s *answer* in response to the hypothetical *question* is an emphatic no. He then *substantiates* his negative answer. The person who sees these claims to imply that Christ is a minister of sin is someone who rebuilds something destroyed. It is the person who does not rely on the “faith of Christ” establishes him or herself as a transgressor.

Paul then *explains* what he means by rebuilding what he destroyed by the 2:19. He has “died” to the Law, which presumably is what he “destroyed” in some way. To “rebuild” reliance on “works of Law” for justification thus simply establishes him as a transgressor. The *purpose* of dying to the Law is so that he can live to God.

Questions: Why is Paul so emphatic? What has he destroyed and what is he talking about rebuilding? How does this statement substantiate his claim that seekers of justification being found to be sinners do not make Christ a minister of sin? How does the statement about dying to the Law clarify what he means in 2:18? How does dying to the Law enable a person to live to God? How does the transgressor of 2:18 compare or contrast with the “sinner” of 2:17?

2:20a I have been crucified with Christ, and I myself no longer live. But Christ lives in me.

Paul apparently now *explains* further what it means to die to the Law and to destroy seeking to be justified by works of Law. He apparently died to the Law when he was crucified with Christ. The *logical consequence* is that he no longer lives, *contrasting* with what was the case before. In *contrast* to the prior situation, now Christ lives in him.

Questions: What does it mean to be crucified with Christ? How does this take place? What does Paul mean when he says that he no longer lives? How does Christ living in him contrast with him living? How does Christ live in him? If he wants to live to God in 2:19, how is he no longer living in 2:20? Why did he need to die?

2:20b And what I live now in the flesh, I live in faith, [the faith] of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The sense in which Paul now lives, even though dead, would seem to be “in the faith of the Son of God.” If there is a reference to Jesus’ faith, presumably that faith was demonstrated in that Jesus loved Paul and gave himself for him.

Questions: How does Paul’s living in the flesh relate to the fact that he no longer lives, that Christ lives in him? What does Paul mean by living “in the flesh”? Does faith here refer to Paul’s faith, Jesus’ faith, or both as a double entendre? What does the title, “Son of God” mean? What is the connection between Jesus loving Paul and giving himself for Paul and the faith expression just previous?

2:21 I do not reject the grace of God. For if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died for no reason.

Justification “through faith of Jesus” is apparently justification on the basis of God’s grace, while the idea of justification by “works of Law” apparently would not be. “To be justified” (*dikaioo*) is connected here with getting “righteousness” (*dikaiosyne*). Paul seems to deny that it can happen or be obtained through the Law. It would negate the death of Christ as a basis for justification and thus *contrast* with it. The mention of the death of Christ presumably connects to the “faith of Jesus” previously mentioned. The *purpose* of Christ’s death was thus apparently meant to result in righteousness.

Questions: What is grace, particularly as God is concerned? How does this statement about righteousness relate to the earlier statements about justification? How does the mention of Christ’s death relate to the earlier mention of the faith of Christ? Why would the Law as the path to righteousness negate Christ’s death as such a path?