

Introduction

One of the primary theological divisions of the reformation period was whether salvation (a covenant relationship with God) is by faith alone or by a combination of faith and works. The Roman Catholic Church emphasized the cooperation of faith and works. They did not deny the necessity of faith, but argued that works for necessary for initial salvation and for true righteousness.

The reformers, at the risk of death, argued that you are saved and made righteous by **faith in Jesus alone, without works**. Heinrich Bullinger wrote, "We are justified by faith alone, not because faith is a virtue of itself sufficient for our justification, but because it receives Christ our righteousness" (*Second Helvetic Confession*). The reformers argued that **faith alone, not faith plus works** was the only true form of faith in Jesus.

This is the same point made in [Galatians 2:15-21](#). This Scripture discusses how we come to know God and how we live for God. It makes the point that **Redemption is by faith alone or not by faith at all**.

Faith versus works

Jews and Gentiles

Verse 15 brings up the issue of birth. **Does a person's birth contribute to his relationship with God?** [Galatians 2:15](#) "15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;"

There are two groups of people mentioned here - Jews and Gentiles. **Context:** This is the same distinction that created controversy in Antioch, described in [Galatians 2:11-14](#). This is the same distinction that created controversy in Jerusalem in [Galatians 2:1-10](#). This is the same distinction that created controversy in the churches of Galatia.

Jews by birth refers to those who were born as descendents of Jacob. God made a covenant with Abraham and His descendent, which is discussed in greater detail in [Galatians 3:15-18](#). Jacob, later named Israel, was Abraham's grandson, through whom the people of Israel began. **Gentiles** means "nations," referring to all nations besides Israel.

Does birth determine someone's relationship with God? That is the point brought out in verse 15. There are two ways this issue is taught wrongly today. First, some consider that **Jewish birth** gives a person a relationship with God (e.g., classic dispensational).

Second, some consider that **Christian birth** gives a person a relationship with God (e.g., covenantal).

What does Scripture teach about the connection between birth and a relationship with God? [John 1:12-13](#) “12 But to all who did receive him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were **born**, not of **blood** nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of **God**.” The children of God are those who are born of God, not flesh and blood birth. [John 3:3](#) “3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born again** he cannot see the kingdom of God.”” **New birth**, being filled with the Holy Spirit ([John 3:6](#)), brings us into a relationship with God.

Works of the law

Verse 16 brings up a different question. **Does a person's works contribute to his relationship with God?** [Galatians 2:16](#) “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.”

Notice this verse says three times that a person is not justified by works of the law. **What are works of the law?** In a narrow sense, **law** refers to the **Mosaic covenant**, the covenant that God made with Israel through Moses. In a broader sense, **law** refers to Scripture, which would extend to multiple covenants in the Old Testament. **Works of the law** refer to obedience to those covenants, specifically the Mosaic covenant. **For example**, do not eat pork or catfish, rest on the Sabbath, offer sacrifices for sin, etc.

What does it mean to be justified? Justification is often misunderstood, largely because of the debates between the Catholic church and Martin Luther, both of which failed to truly understand the word. **Justify** means to show to be in the right. In the context of a claim to be righteous, to be justified means to be shown to be righteous. That is Paul's context here (see [Gal 2:21](#); cf. [Rom 4](#)). In the context of a claim to have faith, to be justified means to be shown to have faith (e.g., [James 2:14ff.](#)).

Notice the three things God says here about justification by works. **First**, “a person is **not** justified by works of the law.” **Second**, believing in Jesus is justification by faith, not by works of the law. **Third**, **no one** will be justified by works of the law. The point here is that no one is justified before God as being righteous because of his obedience to the Mosaic covenant.

Faith in Jesus

How then can a person who does not truly obey God's law be justified as righteous? Aren't those two things contradictory? [Galatians 2:16](#) “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.” **Notice** that this verse does **not** support the idea that a person is righteous because of a combination of faith and works. Every statement is - We are justified by faith in Jesus alone, **not** by works.

So, what role does obedience (works) have in our salvation? Works are not absent, but the point here is that our works do not contribute to our righteousness. Works are present in two ways. First, **I am righteous because of Jesus’s obedience, not mine.** [Romans 5:18-19](#) “18 Therefore, as one trespass [Adam’s sin] led to **condemnation** for all men, so one act of righteousness [Jesus’s obedience] leads to **justification** and **life** for all men. 19 For as by the one man’s [Adam’s] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s [Jesus’s] obedience the many will be made **righteous.**” Faith in Jesus unites us with Him and God imputes Christ’s righteousness to us.

The second way that works are present in salvation is that works always **follow** genuine faith. The order is important. [James 2:14ff.](#) makes this point . If you claim to have faith, but you don’t have works, then you clearly did not really have faith. [Ephesians 2:8-10](#) “8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” This passage mentions works twice. You are **saved** without the contribution of works. You are a new creation in Christ, which produces good works. Christ in you (the Holy Spirit indwelling you) produces your good works.

Summary

Verses 15-16 bring up two questions regarding our relationship with God. *Does a person’s **birth** contribute to his relationship with God? Does a person’s **works** contribute to his relationship with God?* The answer to both questions is **no**. We know God through **new birth**, not birth. We know God through **faith in Jesus**, not works.

Life in Christ

The Question

Verse 17 brings up a difficult question. ***If faith in Jesus contrasts with the Mosaic covenant, then does Christian faith promote sin?*** [Galatians 2:17](#) “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!”

In this context, what does it mean that “we too were found to be sinners?” Look at [Galatians 2:14–15](#) “14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, **though a Jew, live like a Gentile** and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and **not Gentile sinners;**” Paul’s rebuke of Peter is that, although he was born a Jew, he lives like a Gentile. That is, he set aside faithfulness to the Mosaic covenant (like the Gentiles) because of his faith in Jesus.

So verse 17 asks the question, ***if a person sets aside the Mosaic covenant because of his faith in Jesus, then does Christian faith promote sin?*** Many people ask this same question today from a different perspective. Some churches teach that you are saved by works, which verse 16 directly rejects. Against those who claim that salvation is by faith in Jesus alone (e.g., Bethlehem), those churches claim that removing works for salvation is an open license to sin. ***So, what is Scripture’s response to that accusation?***

Rebuilding the old covenant

Verse 18 shows the result of those who have faith in Jesus returning to the Mosaic covenant. [Galatians 2:18](#) “18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.”

What does it mean to “rebuild what I tore down?” Remember the **context** of this letter is that there are teachers in the churches of Galatia insisting on obedience to the Mosaic law and to circumcision for covenant faithfulness. This letter rejects that those things are necessary for a relationship with God. The old covenant has been torn down by the new covenant. [Hebrews 8:13](#) “13 In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete ...” So, verse 18 is describing a return to the old covenant after faith in Jesus.

What is the outcome of returning to the old covenant? The suggestion of the false teachers in Galatia (also in Antioch and Jerusalem, [Gal 2:1-14](#)) was that such a return to the Mosaic covenant was necessary in order to have a covenant relationship with God. Verse 18 says that it only proves that we are sinners. [Romans 3:20](#) “20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” [Romans 7:7](#) “... if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin...” The law was not given to save; the law was given to condemn. The law demonstrates that we are law-breakers.

Dead to the law

So what is your relationship to the Mosaic covenant (law)? [Galatians 2:19–20](#) “19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ...” Those who know Jesus **died to the law.**

This is described in much greater detail in [Romans 6-7](#). (*This paragraph, [Gal 2:15-21](#), is described in greater detail in [Romans 3-8](#)). Those who have faith in Jesus are united with Him in death and life. [Romans 6:5](#) “5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” [Romans 6:8](#) “8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.”

I died in Christ that I might be free from my own sin. [Romans 6:6-7](#) “6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin.”

[Romans 7](#) gives the illustration of marriage. Marriage is for life, but when a husband dies, his wife is not bound to her husband. She is free to remarry without sin ([Rom 7:1-3](#)). In the same way, when Jesus died, those who are in Him are set free from the law. [Romans 7:4](#) “4 Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead...” [Romans 7:6](#) “6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, ...” **Those who know Jesus have died to the law**; we are not bound to it.

As a point of clarification, the part of Scripture that describes the Mosaic covenant is not worthless. The law was given to reveal our sin; therefore, it is useful still for revealing God’s will. It is **still** beneficial to not murder. However, we are not **bound** to the **letter** of the law, such as eating pork or working on Saturdays.

Life in Christ

Verse 19 says that in Christ, we died to the law **so that we might live to God**. We come to know God through faith in Jesus, not personal obedience. We **remain** in a covenant relationship with God through faith in Jesus, not obedience. [Galatians 2:20](#) “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.”

This verse says two things about Christian life. First, **Christ lives in me**. This idea is developed slightly in [Gal 3](#) and more fully in [Gal 5](#). The night of Jesus’s arrest, He told His disciples that it was to their advantage for Him to go away (ascend to heaven) because the Holy Spirit would come to them ([John 16:7](#)). When He described the coming of the Holy Spirit, he said “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” ([John 14:16](#)). The point is that when we have faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit dwells in us and makes us alive. The Holy Spirit in us is Christ living in us. [*The connection between the Holy Spirit and Christ living in me (in verse 20) is made clear in [Gal 3:1-5](#)]

Second, verse 20 says “the life I now live in the flesh I love by faith in the Son of God.” That is, we not only **begin** our relationship with God through faith, we **continue** our relationship with God through faith (cf. [Gal 3:2-3](#)). It is wrong to assume that we **begin** in faith, but **continue** in works. Our obedience is merely the fruit of the Holy Spirit, not our own works.

Grace through Christ

This passage brings up one last question, *is it okay to return to the law (Mosaic covenant)?* In other words, *is there any harm in saying that we are saved by both faith and works? Is it possible to say we are saved by faith, but are righteous by our obedience?* [Galatians 2:21](#) “21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” If we attempt to be righteous by our obedience, either before or after professing faith in Jesus, then we **reject** the gospel.

If we rely on obedience, then we reject God’s grace. Anyone who says we are saved by grace, through faith **and** works does not understand grace. [Romans 11:6](#) “6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” [Romans 4:4](#) “4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.” If we rely on works (obedience), then we reject God’s grace (cf. [Gal 5:4](#)).

Also, if we rely on obedience, then we reject Christ. [Galatians 2:21](#) “... if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” This is not totally separate from the previous statement. Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection are the means by which God is gracious to us. If my redemption (my relationship with God) depends **at all** on my obedience, then I have **no hope**. My hope of redemption, eternal life, and a covenant relationship with God rest **only** in Christ.

Summary

Verses 17-21 discuss the relationship between Christ and the law (Mosaic covenant). ***Does faith in Jesus encourage sin? Can we pursue righteousness by both faith in Jesus and devotion to the law?*** These verses show that we must choose between pursuing righteousness by our own works or by God’s grace through Christ. We must reject one or the other as the means of righteousness.

Conclusion

A. W. Tozer said, “Faith is the gaze of the soul upon a loving God.” That is the same way faith is described in [Heb 12:1-2](#). We can see that illustrated in Peter’s success and failure at walking on water. Knowing God, enduring in God, and living for God are by faith alone - keeping your eyes on Christ, not on yourself or your surroundings.

*What do you rely on for your relationship with God? Do you trust in Christ **and** your own effort **or** in Christ alone? Do you trust in God's grace **or** your merit? **Redemption is by faith alone or not by faith at all.** Do you have faith in Christ alone?*

Closing Scripture: [Romans 4:3-5](#) “3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham **believed** God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to the one who **works**, his wages are not counted as a **gift** but as his **due**. 5 And to the one who **does not work** but **believes** in him who justifies the **ungodly**, his **faith** is counted as **righteousness**,”