

## **Galatians 2:15-21**

### **Made righteous by faith in the Righteous One**

This passage is sometimes read as a continuation of the story of Paul's confrontation with Peter in Antioch, which serves primarily as a bridge to what follows. As we will see, it is in fact far more. These verses present the central message and affirmations of Paul's letter, which he then develops in the more detailed arguments that follow.

Paul begins this passage in 2:15-16 by establishing what he and the Jewish-Christian teachers in Galatia agreed on, or at least should have agreed on. He argues that, according to their shared belief in Christ, the sole basis of our justification is not the observance of God's Law, but rather our faith in the faithful work of Jesus Christ.

In 2:17-20 he goes on to present the key differences between their respective understandings of the Gospel. He defends the true Gospel of God's grace against the charge that Christian freedom encourages people to sin, that it leads to libertinism (licentiousness). He also defends the Gospel against legalism, which makes observance of the Law the basis not only for salvation but also for everyday Christian life. In contrast to these distortions of the Gospel, Paul argues that the Christian life is in fact characterized by "Christ living in me". A concise summary of his defense of the Gospel comes in 2:21. The Gospel Paul preaches does not nullify God's grace. Rather, it focuses on the person and work of "Christ crucified" as the basis for both our righteous standing before God (justification) and our personal growth in righteousness (sanctification).

## **[Galacjan 2:15-21. Usprawiedliwieni przez wiarę w Sprawiedliwego**

Ten fragment można czytać jako kontynuacja historii konfrontacji Pawła z Piotrem w Antiochii, która służy przede wszystkim jako pomost do tego, co następuje. Jak zobaczymy, w rzeczywistości jest tu znacznie więcej. Wersety te przedstawiają główne przesłanie i stwierdzenia zawarte w liście Pawła, które następnie on rozwija w bardziej szczegółowych argumentach.

Paweł rozpoczyna w 2:15-16 od ustalenia tego, co on ma wspólnie z nauczycielami żydowsko-chrześcijańskimi w Galacji, a przynajmniej co powinni mieć wspólne. Twierdzi, że zgodnie z ich wspólną wiarą w Chrystusa, jedyną podstawą usprawiedliwienia nie jest przestrzeganie Prawa Bożego, ale wiara w wierne dzieło jednego sprawiedliwego, Jezusa Chrystusa. Natomiast w 2:17-20 przechodzi do przedstawienia kluczowych różnic między ich rozumieniem Ewangelii a prawdziwą Ewangelią Jezusa. Broni prawdziwej Ewangelii łaski bożej przed ich zarzutem, że wolność chrześcijańska zachęca ludzi do grzechu, że prowadzi do libertynizmu (do rozwiązłości). Broni także Ewangelię przed ich pełzającym czy nawet otwartym legalizmem, według którego przestrzeganie Prawa jest podstawą bądź zbawienia, bądź codziennego życia chrześcijańskiego. W przeciwieństwie do tych wypaczeń Ewangelii, Paweł argumentuje, że w rzeczywistości życie chrześcijańskie płynie z żywej więzi z Jezusem, który charakteryzuje się tym, że „Chrystus żyje we mnie”.

Zwięzłe podsumowanie jego obrony Ewangelii znajduje się w 2:21. Ewangelia, który Paweł głosi, nie unieważnia łaski Bożej. Skupia się raczej na osobie i dziele „Chrystusa ukrzyżowanego” jako podstawa zarówno naszej sprawiedliwości przed Bogiem (usprawiedliwienie), jak i naszego osobistego wzrostu w sprawiedliwości (uświęcenie).]

## Galatians 2:15-21

### Introduction:

The story of Mark and his friends: the “wedding cake” analogy; a 6-month Bible study of Galatians.

My story: a 16-year-old survivor of a dangerous car accident. Reading Galatians 2:15-21, I realized that God has a purpose for my life!

### The rhetorical structure of Galatians:

This passage can be read as a continuation of the story of Paul’s confrontation with Peter in Antioch, which serves primarily as a bridge to the arguments that follow in the rest of the letter. As we will see, in reality there is much more here to be found. These verses present a concise, pithy summary of the central message of the Letter to the Galatians, which Paul then develops in the rest of the Letter in more developed arguments.

[Ten fragment można czytać jako kontynuacja historii konfrontacji Pawła z Piotrem w Antiochii, która służy przede wszystkim jako pomost do tego, co następuje. Jak zobaczymy, w rzeczywistości jest tu znacznie więcej. Wersety te przedstawiają zwięzłe, treściwe podsumowanie głównego przesłania Listu do Galacjan, które w dalszej części Listu Paweł rozwija w bardziej szczegółowych argumentach.]

The Letter to the Galatians follows the form of an apologetic treatise, which was widely used by philosophers and public speakers in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day. Anyone who lived in a good-sized city could regularly hear speeches and arguments made in this manner at the public forum. These apologetic treatises had three main sections:

***Salutatio*** (powitanie): [Gal. 1:1-5]

**(1) *Narratio*** (Introductions, narration; wstęp, narracja): An introduction of the facts and context relative to the defense of one's position to be presented and defended in the apology. [Gal. 1:6-2:14]

**(2) *Propositio*** (main statement; propozycja, teza): A concise statement of the main argument(s), which will be developed in more detail in the *probatio*. [Gal. 2:15-21]

**(3) *Probatio*** (dyskusja; discussion): The elaboration of the arguments and proofs presented in defense of one's position. [Gal. 3:1 – 4:11 (arguments) and 4:12-6:10 (exhortations)]

It is important to note that in the *propositio*, the speaker begins by (1) stating points of agreement with his audience (Gal, 2:15-16), (2) going on to argue points of difference (2:17-20), and (3) ending with a concise statement of his position (2:21 - "I do not set aside the grace of God").

Paul begins this passage in 2:15-16 by establishing what he and the Jewish-Christian teachers in Galatia agreed on, or at least should have agreed on. He argues that, according to their shared belief in Christ, the sole basis of our justification is not the observance of God's Law, but rather our faith in the faithful work of Jesus Christ.

[Paweł rozpoczyna w 2:15-16 od ustalenia tego, co on ma wspólnie z nauczycielami żydowsko-chrześcijańskimi w Galacji, a przynajmniej co powinni mieć wspólne. Twierdzi, że zgodnie z ich wspólną wiarą w Chrystusa, jedyną podstawą usprawiedliwienia nie jest przestrzeganie Prawa Bożego, ale wiara w wierne dzieło jednego sprawiedliwego, Jezusa Chrystusa.]

In 2:17-20 Paul goes on to present the key differences between their respective understandings of the Gospel. He defends the true Gospel of God's grace against the charge made by the Jewish-Christian teachers that

Christian freedom encourages people to sin, that it leads to libertinism (licentiousness). He also defends the Gospel against their creeping or even outright legalism, which makes observance of the Law the basis not only for salvation but also for everyday Christian life. In contrast to these distortions of the Gospel, Paul argues that the Christian life is in fact characterized by “Christ living in me”. A concise summary of his defense of the Gospel comes in 2:21. The Gospel Paul preaches does not nullify God’s grace. Rather, it focuses on the person and work of “Christ crucified” as the basis for both our righteous standing before God (justification) and our personal growth in righteousness (sanctification).

[W 2:17-20 Paweł przechodzi do przedstawienia kluczowych różnic między ich rozumieniem Ewangelii a prawdziwą Ewangelią Jezusa. Broni prawdziwej Ewangelii łaski bożej przed zarzutem żydowsko-chrześcijańskimi nauczycielami, że wolność chrześcijańska zachęca ludzi do grzechu, że prowadzi do libertynizmu (do rozwiązłości). Broni także Ewangelię przed ich pełzającym czy nawet otwartym legalizmem, według którego przestrzeganie Prawa jest podstawą bądź zbawienia, bądź codziennego życia chrześcijańskiego. W przeciwieństwie do tych wypaczeń Ewangelii, Paweł argumentuje, że w rzeczywistości życie chrześcijańskie płynie z żywej więzi z Jezusem, który charakteryzuje się tym, że „Chrystus żyje we mnie”.]

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before God (justification) and our personal growth in righteousness (sanctification).

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Let's look more closely now at Paul's defense of the Gospel in these verses.

### **2:15-16 Points of agreement with Jewish-Christian teachers in Galatia**

Paul's opening statement in 2:15 seems meant to offend his readers. Most of them were indeed, as Jews often derisively called them, “sinful Gentiles”. However this is this not an example of ethnic or religious hate-speech! When Paul says he and Peter (and by extension the Jewish-Christian teachers in Galatia) are “Jews by birth”, he emphasizes what he has in common with them. I picture him here with his arm around Peter, saying “Heh, we are both Jewish!” After his sharp rebuke of Peter in the preceding verses, Paul makes a new beginning here. He builds a common connection with Peter and other Jewish Christians by referring to their common heritage and tradition. Furthermore, as the “Apostle to the Gentiles”, he knows full well that his words will be heard by Gentile believers in Galatia and beyond. With a wink in his eye and more than a touch of irony he refers to them as ‘sinful Gentiles’, using a term they had heard often, perhaps even from the lips of some Jewish believers. He then proceeds in the coming verses to hammer home the point that when it comes to their need for salvation in Christ, sinful Gentiles are no better and no worse than sinful Jews. Both so-called

“righteous” Jews and so-called “sinful” Gentiles are saved solely on the basis of Christ’s death on the cross.

Paul moves directly to the heart of the matter in verse 16. Earlier in Galatians 2:1-10 he emphasized that he received the Gospel directly from God. But instead of appealing here to direct revelation, he argues from the mutual understanding of the Gospel shared by all Jewish believers. He declares that all they must do is to remember their own tradition, knowledge, and experience, as Jews who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He argues that in doing so, they will recognize that their attempts to add good works as the basis for either salvation or sanctification are futile and are in fact contrary to Scripture (OT!) and to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul uses several key terms here, and their range of meaning is important in our understanding of his argument. The first is the verb ‘to justify’, which is used four times in verses 2:16-17. This is first of all a legal term, which means that one is declared to be just or righteous. However, in both the Old and New Testaments, this term includes a relational aspect. The declaration that the accused person is “not guilty” has the effect of restoring them to a right relationship with their accuser. This is the main difference between Hebrew and Roman concepts of justice. The reason behind this is as simple as it is profound: for the Jews God, who is the ultimate judge, is not merely the impassive enforcer of an impartial code of Law, but rather the personal God of the Covenant.

To make things more interesting, in verse 2:21 Paul uses the noun “justification”, which is derived from the verb “to justify’. This noun affirms the legal and relational aspects of the verb, but it adds an ethical or behavioral

aspect. That is, it also refers to becoming progressively more righteous, both in our nature and in our actions.

We began in verses 2:15-20 in a Hebrew court of law: The accused is declared to be “not guilty”, and to be restored to a right relationship with God and with God’s covenant people. This is what Protestants refer to as “justification”. In verse 2:21 however, the noun “justification’ takes on an additional meaning; it includes the process of personal growth in righteousness, which Protestants refer to as “sanctification’.

As we will see in Galatians 2:17-21, Paul has a very good reason for reminding the Galatian Christians of the relationship between justification and sanctification. The Jewish-Christian teachers in Galatia were guilty of adding observance of the Law to faith in Christ, not only in regards to justification, but also to sanctification. They began to add keeping the Law to grace as another basis, not only for salvation but also for the Christian life. Paul’s response is direct and to the point. He says that we are declared to be righteous and in right relationship with God not because we fulfill God’s Law, but because Christ did, and we are now “in Christ’.

In verses 16 through 17, Paul uses the verb “to justify’, to indicate that God has declared us to be righteous (or justified) on the basis of Christ’s death for us on the cross. In verse 21 he uses the noun to remind his listeners that this change in legal standing and personal relationship leads to a change in our everyday lives. This change does not result from following a set of rules, but from a changed heart. To be in right relationship with Christ means that we will become more like Christ in our character and conduct.



The next important word is faith. In particular, Paul uses the phrase “the faith of Christ” several times in this passage. In our Bibles, including the Poznan translation we are using today, this phrase is usually translated as “faith in Christ”. The resulting meaning is of course true: as Paul and the leaders of the reformation declared, we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. But more and more Biblical scholars today argue that there is a better translation here, which fits Paul’s main argument like a glove. These scholars believe that this phrase should be translated as “the faith of Christ”, or even “the faithfulness of Christ”. Both translations are equally possible and equally true. Why do these biblical scholars favor the second translation?

Grammatically, this can mean one of two things: (1) our faith in Christ; (2) the faith of Christ, that is Christ’s faith or faithfulness. The second meaning sounds strange to those of us who are used to reading these verses in standard English or Polish translations. But in Greek, this is quite normal. In fact, this is the same construction that is used in other familiar phrases:

- The grace of God (God’s grace)
- The love of Christ (Christ’s love.)
- The faith of Christ (Christ’s faith)

I believe that Paul is making a distinction here between the faith (faithfulness) of Christ, which led him to the cross, and our faith in Christ, specifically our faith in Christ’s faithful work on the cross. Paul’s argument is clear: we are not saved by our works, that is by observing the Law. But neither are we saved by our faith. The only basis for our salvation is the righteousness of Christ, and his faithful work to redeem us by his death on the cross.

This does not mean that our faith is not important. Our response to his faithfulness is to place our faith in him. Indeed, as Paul makes clear, our faith is only possible because of Christ's faithfulness. Our faith is the natural response to his faithfulness, it is our response to the grace he offers to all who believe in him.

Verses 2:16-17 would then read like this:

“We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but by the faith [or faithfulness] of Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by Christ's faith [i.e. his faithful work on the cross] and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul then is making not one, but two important points regarding the relationship between faith and salvation. First, as he argues throughout this passage, the basis of salvation is the faithfulness of Christ, who died on the cross to reconcile us to God. Secondly, the result of Christ's faithfulness is our faith in Christ and his faithful work. Together these two meanings of faith sum up the Reformation formula: we are saved by grace through faith – that is by God's grace in Christ and our faith in Christ's gracious work on our behalf.

Paul is calling on the Jewish-Christian teachers to return to the Gospel they had received and believed, to return to faith in Jesus Christ that is based solely on God's grace, not upon how well they keep the Law.

2:17-21 Points of contention with the Jewish Christian teachers in Galatia

As argued above, the points of contention between Paul and the Jewish-Christian teachers are found in 2:17-20. Paul is defending the Gospel of Christ against two distortions: antinomism and legalism. Negatively, Paul argues against: (1) antinomism, that is the charge that Christian freedom encourages people to sin (libertinism - or as we say in Poland, “hulanki I swawole”.); (2) legalism, that is any and all attempts to make law the basis of Christian life. On the positive side, Paul argues that the Christian life is characterized not by observance of the Law, but by “Christ living in me”.

Word is going around among the Galatian Christians that Paul has shown himself to be a sinner, a lawbreaker who in fact promotes sin and whose Gospel makes Christ himself the servant of sin. According to some, Paul is making two mistakes: (1) He excludes obedience (the works of the Law) from the process of salvation; (2) He spends quality time with Gentile believers without requiring them to observe the Law. The charges against Paul are summarized in verse 21: through his teaching and his actions Paul is in fact denying the grace of God (2:21). This would not sound as strange to Jewish Christians then as it does to us today. Like David in the Psalms, they loved God’s Law, and considered it to be not only true but also gracious, for God’s Law showed them how to live a godly, and God-pleasing life. To deny the benefits of the Law and its positive use in our daily life would indeed seem to them like a denial of the good and gracious gift of God’s Law.

The Teachers rightly considered the Law to be the expression of God’s grace. In verses 2:17-18 Paul agrees with them, but he adds that the problem comes in their understanding of the *purpose* of the Law. He bases his response to their charge on two things: (1) his own testimony (2:18-20); (2)

his declaration that faith in Christ is faith in Christ's faithful death for us on the cross (2:21).

Peter and Paul, along with many of the Jewish-Christian believers in Antioch and Galatia had all put their faith in Christ. Now many were falling back to reliance on the Law as a means of salvation and of Christian growth. Furthermore, by requiring new believers to follow the Jewish Law, including circumcision and observing the Sabbath, they expected the Gentiles to follow their own well-known, and beloved patterns of spirituality. They meant well, but the results proved to be fatal.

In 2:17 Paul agrees with the main charge brought against him, that he and his followers were sinners. However, this is not because they focused on God's grace instead of on keeping the law. God's grace, which is actively at work in our lives, results in Christian freedom; not in freedom to sin, but in freedom to love God and to grow in Christ-likeness. When we do fail to live in that freedom, God's grace is there to pick us up and put us back on our feet, so we can continue to follow Christ on the path of discipleship.

The real problem, as Paul makes clear in 2:18, is not Christian freedom, but Christian legalism. It was not Paul who had twisted the Gospel of Christ but rather the legalizers, who required Gentile believers to follow Jewish religious customs, and who measured one's status or position in Christ on the basis of their success or failure in keeping the Law. They are the ones who are restoring the Law as a way to earn God's favor, and thus have become the enemies of the Gospel of Christ. As Paul reminds them 2:19, they too had died to the Law in order to live for God.

This brings Paul to 2:20, the most amazing verse in Galatians.

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.

Paul declares that we can never be saved or sanctified by obeying an external code of Law. The only way we can be restored to a right relationship with God, is for Christ to live in us. We have a new heart that loves God above all else. We have new desires, that want to please God above all else. And we have the Holy Spirit guiding and empowering our lives, producing Christlikeness in us, and enabling us to love with Christ's love, to serve as Christ served, to recognize and fulfill God's will for us in our everyday lives.

We are saved through faith, and we live through faith. As Paul exclaims, "the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me." To believe differently would be, as Paul argues in 2:21, to make Christ's death meaningless, of no value either. Life, Paul says, whether live here in the flesh, or eternal life, comes through being in Christ, not through observing the Law.

### **Conclusion:**

In 2:15-16 Paul argued that the Law adds nothing to Christ's death as the basis for salvation. in 2:17-20 he argued that being a Christian is not a matter of Law-Keeping, but rather life "lived in Christ". His summary comes in 2:21. Paul's Gospel does not nullify God's grace, but focuses on the person and work of "Christ crucified" as the sole basis for our justification (righteousness) and for our sanctification (becoming more like Christ in our daily life and character).

The story of Mark: Two years later: "I don't want to do those things anymore."  
When did that change? "When I fell in love with Jesus."

My story: God has some purpose for my life! / Note Mom's prayer for me!  
Police officer: "You have been given another chance. Use it well!"