

DYING TO LIVE

Discovering the Meaning of Galatians 2:20

One of the most quoted Scriptures among Christians is also one of the most misunderstood. If you ask most people what this verse means you will more than likely get a blank stare followed by well meaning esoteric rambling. I'm speaking of Galatians 2:20. In this particular verse of Scripture Paul says, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.*" (NKJV)

Properly interpreting and applying this verse can only be found when we understand its context. Most Christians are famous for lifting verses out of their context to make them say what they want them to say. I ashamedly admit that I have done this with Galatians 2:20 for years. I memorized it in college and often quoted it when my spiritual back was against the wall but I had no idea how significantly powerful this passage of Scripture was to the framework of victorious Christian living. It wasn't until I had to teach through the book of Galatians at my church that I studied this rich verse, which I believe is Paul's maxim for living, in its proper context. If we can develop just half the mindset that the great Apostle Paul had, we will be more effective ambassadors for Christ.

The book of Galatians is about fighting for and experiencing true freedom that can only be found through belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Written by the Apostle Paul, Galatians is a letter that is personal (Chaps. 1-2), doctrinal (Chaps. 3-4), and practical (Chaps. 5-6). When Paul wrote this letter to the churches in this region in AD 49, he sought to counter the leaven of legalism that had crept into the community through the Judaizers. The Judaizers were Jewish men who held to the notion that in order for a Gentile to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ he had to be circumcised. The Judaizers were infamous for following Paul around during his missionary journeys so that they could impose the Law of Moses on those who were just imbedded into the grace of Christ (Acts 14). After Paul had established the gospel of Christ amongst the Galatians and had departed, the Judaizers came in, maligned Paul and his apostleship to the people, and began to promote "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6), causing these believers to be fooled (3:1) and thus fall from grace (5:4) into bondage.

Legalism is the mixing of law and grace. Legalism is identity based on performance rather than identity based on relationship. It is the combining of Moses and Christ. Legalists live by the law. Legalists add rules, regulations, and restrictions to the finished work of Jesus. Legalists are people who attempt to keep a list of rules that they think will earn God's favor (or more of it if that were possible) and the approval of people. Whether the rules come from themselves, Moses, their minister, their church, or their momma, legalists feel that keeping the rules keeps them in good standing with God and with others. In their minds, imputed righteousness from Jesus is not enough for the legalist. Legalists look to put others in bondage with their rules by ministering fear on people.

In the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem met on this matter of the core essentials of the gospel. They apparently dethroned the

Judaizers and their doctrine of duty. It was Peter who said, *“Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”* (Acts 15:10-11)

This same Peter made his way to the church in Antioch where he began to experience his newfound freedom in Christ to eat non-kosher food with Gentiles. What joy Peter had that day! Can't you see him eating a ham sandwich for the first time? Oh, the life altering power of the gospel!

Peter was doing fine until the Judaizers came to Antioch and spied out his freedom. Their influence caused Peter and others to back away from the table of grace and cross-cultural community. By doing this Peter was saying through his actions that the Law of Moses was still in effect, thus making the sacrifice of Jesus Christ of non-effect. Peter was attempting to rebuild what the cross of Christ had torn down. But Paul saw the hypocrisy of Peter and called him out on it in front of everyone! Paul was not a timid, people pleaser. Instead he was zealous for the gospel, and if that meant rebuking one who “seemed to be a pillar” (Galatians 2:9), then he was willing to do that.

Paul then begins to explain to the Galatians that for him, life and identity flow out of his relationship to Christ and not the law (2:11-21). The spotlight is now cast upon Galatians 2:20. There are three things that Galatians 2:20 reveals to us:

1. The Execution- I Died with Christ

Paul said that he was crucified with Christ. His life started off with death. When Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road he became born again. That day when Paul came to life spiritually as a new creation in Christ, the old Paul simultaneously died spiritually. What happened to Jesus physically happened to Paul spiritually. Both deaths were literal.

God's wants me so identified with Jesus to the point that what happened to Him God sees as having happened to me (Read Romans 6:3-7). God vicariously transported me back to the crucifixion, back to the burial, back to the resurrection, and then up to heavenly places with Jesus (Read Ephesians 2:4-7). When God sees Christ He sees me, and when God sees me He sees Christ. Christ and I are inseparable.

The gateway to true life is found only through death, whether that death is physical or spiritual (John 12:24). The day Paul met Jesus he died to the ruling power of sin and the Law governing his life. He was under no obligation to keep the law's rules, regulations, restrictions, regiments, or repercussions. This is why Paul told the Roman believers to mentally conclude to the fact that they were dead to sin (Romans 6:11).

In New Orleans when people die there is sometimes a celebration after the burial. The people are rejoicing because another saint has marched into heaven. You should rejoice because the old you died and you have now been declared a saint of God. We should rejoice just like the Lollipop Kids in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy's house fell on the wicked witch and killed her! We should sing, “Ding dong the wicked me is dead!”

2. The Exchange- Christ Lives in and through Me

Paul reasoned: “It’s no longer ‘I’ who live because ‘I’ died. But ‘I’ came back to life through Christ thus making ‘me’ a new ‘me’. It is Christ who now lives in me. So it’s me but it’s not me. It’s Christ in me”. To put it another way, a popular Christian group named Anointed once sang, “It’s not the ‘I’ but the ‘You’ in me.”

Christ exchanged His eternal and abundant life for my dead life. Christ came and exchanged lives with me because He knew that’s the only way I could change eternally and daily. The old Paul was not Paul’s identity anymore because that man died. Christ was now Paul’s identity. Christ was not only *in* Paul’s life. Christ *was* Paul’s life (Colossians 3:3-4).

Christ lived in Paul to live through Paul. If Christ loved us enough to give His life *for us*, then He loves us enough that He might live His life *through us*. Christ works in us to work through us. See Colossians 1:28-29 and Philippians 2:12-13. The Christian life is truly joyful and abundant when we live through Christ and allow Christ to live through us, His power in exchange for our weakness.

For instance, through Him and Him through me, I can walk the way He walked. Through Him and Him through me, I can forgive others their trespasses the way He forgives me of my trespasses. Through Him and Him through me, I can pray the way He prayed. Through Him and Him through me, I can love my enemies the way He loved His enemies. Therefore, it’s not about me trying harder but it’s about me trusting more. It’s not about me doing more. It’s about me depending more.

3. The Experience- I Live by Faith in Christ

Paul once lived by the law but now he lives by faith. The just, who are saved by faith, shall also live by faith (Romans 1:16-17). Picture an old train that runs by coal. The train can’t run without coal being fed into its engine constantly. For Christians, our engine is faith and the coal is the Word of God. When our faith is fed by truth from God we make progress over the hills, bridges, tunnels, and valleys of life.

The object of Paul’s faith was Jesus, the Son of God. “Son of God” is a title denoting the power and position of Jesus Christ. When we believe the power of the One we live for, we should be able to live with courage. When we believe the position of the One we live for we should be able to live with confidence. Once again, the onus is put on the power of God, my position in Him, and not upon my performance.

Christ’s love for Paul produced a sacrifice and that sacrifice was His life. Therefore Paul’s love for Jesus produced a sacrifice for God and that sacrifice was his life. Love and not law constrained and compelled Paul into a life of obedience (II Corinthians 5:14-15).

Final Thought

My life is Christ and not the law. I live for God through a relationship and not through rules. I don’t live out of fear but out of faith in the Son of God. I died to live, and like

Jesus said about Himself, we can say about ourselves, "*I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever more.*" (Revelation 1:18)

Chris Williamson
Senior Pastor, Strong Tower bible Church
December 14, 2007