

Justified Equally... but what does that mean?

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). What does this verse mean? In interpreting a difficult biblical passage, context is necessary to understand the meaning of the Apostle Paul's words.

1. Take a Bible reference book and read the background information on Galatians. Who, what, when, where, and why is Paul writing? What is Paul's intention with his letter to the Galatians?

It is believed that Galatians was written around 48-49 AD from Syrian Antioch to the church in southern Galatia. This would make Galatians as Paul's first epistle and contribution to the New Testament.

Jewish converts to Christianity in Galatia were promoting the heretical doctrine that salvation was by grace through faith *with* obedience to the Mosaic Law. These *Judaizers* also preached that Gentiles had to become Jews, including circumcision, as a requirement in the process of becoming Christians. The Galatians were thinking of rejecting the doctrine of grace.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a passionate response to heresy, and it is in this light that the letter should be read.

2. Read Galatians 3. After understanding the intention of Paul's letter, take a moment to understand his thought process and arguments. One method is to make an outline of Paul's thoughts.

Defending the doctrine of Justification by Faith: Vindication of the doctrine (Galatians 3)

a) By the experience of the Galatians (3:1-5)

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:1-2)

b) By the example of Abraham (3:6-9)

Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. (Gal 3:6)

c) By the effect of the Law (3:10-12)

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." (Gal 3:10)

d) By the work of Christ (3:13-14)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE" (Gal 3:13)

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e) By the permanence of faith (3:15-18)

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. (Gal 3:16-17)

f) By the purpose of the Law (3:19-25)

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. (Gal 3:24)

g) By the Believer's present position (3:26-29)

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:29)

3. Study Gal 3:19-29. What is the immediate context to the verse in question Gal 3:28? One method is to study the syntax structure.

19) Why the Law then?

It was added because of transgressions,

having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator,

until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.

20) Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one.

After Paul establishes the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant and the curse of the Mosaic Covenant, the seeming conflict in covenantal intention prompts his rhetorical question in verse 19, "why the Law then?" The conditional Mosaic Covenant was made because of sin ("because of transgressions"). God had been largely silent during Israel's 430 years of Egyptian bondage; thus, the Law taught the newly freed Hebrews what sin was and provided a temporary provision to cover it "until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made".

The later Mosaic Covenant did not supercede the older Abrahamic Covenant. While making a covenant or legal agreement, each side uses a mediator to represent them in as in the conditional Mosaic Covenant; but the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant was a unilateral covenant, which did not require a mediator ("whereas God is only one"). A covenant with a sinful man could only be temporary in comparison to the unconditional unilateral covenant of God.

With regard to the angelic mediator referred to in the Mosaic Covenant, the Bible is not clear on how the angels were mediators; however, several biblical references confirm their roles.

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Deuteronomy 33:2

2) He said, "The LORD came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.

Acts 7:38, 53

53) you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Hebrews 2:2

2) For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty,

21) Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God?

May it never be!

For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.

22) But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

23) But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.

24) Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

25) But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

After Paul elaborates on the distinctions between the two covenants, he explains the relationship between them. Verse 23 reveals 2 functions of the Mosaic Law. One function was to hold the nation of Israel in protective custody until faith in Christ was revealed; the Law distinguished God's holy ways from the world's unholy ways. The other, in verse 24, was to function as a tutor.

The modern translation for "tutor" is a more benevolent translation of the original Greek. A closer translation might be "education taskmaster", which, during the first century, was a trusted slave who was charged with the moral and behavioral training of his master's son. Archeological findings depict this education taskmaster with a rod in his hand. Thus the taskmaster was given some latitude in his method of training including physical discipline and negative reinforcement. It is in this light that Paul reveals this as one of the functions of the Mosaic Law, which was not lost to the Galatians among whom were beneficiaries of these taskmasters and who could recall the exhilaration when they were determined mature enough to out grow their usefulness. Paul's imagery is apparent: man is mature enough to receive the revelation of grace by faith; there is no need to go back to the Law, which was the method for naïve and unruly children.

The Mosaic Covenant was never intended to be the means for salvation, and it was not contrary to the promises of God given in the Abrahamic Covenant. It continues today as the basis of God's code of moral and spiritual behavior; however, as a covenant by which man atones for his sins to keep God's favor, Paul tells us that this function has ended.

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26) For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

27) For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

29) And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

From his pointed discussion directed towards the Judaizers prior to verse 26, Paul now speaks directly to Galatian Christian Jews and Gentiles and explains what it means to be justified by faith. All those who believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord are forgiven and vindicated from God's judgment. Justification is God's declaration that the person is in good standing, and it is justification that makes one righteous. Two significant points are made.

1. In verse 26, **all** believers by faith alone in Jesus Christ became figuratively "sons of God". The Greek grammar of this verse emphasized the term "all" by considering the whole group of Galatian Christians as part of the universal church body. Paul begins to explain their adoption, the new position that God confers upon a new believer. For the believing Jew, this meant relief from a life of conditional spiritual forgiveness and blessing. For a Gentile, this meant that they had unencumbered access to spiritual forgiveness and blessing from God.

In verse 27, Paul goes further into his explanation of their new position as "sons of God." He explicitly tells the Galatian believers that by "baptizing in Christ," their faith relationship and spiritual union with Jesus (Rom 6:3-4) is the "clothe" of righteousness that grants full acceptance before God.

In verse 28, God's justification is sovereign; it does not matter what one's current status is in society, whether religious, socio-economic, or gender.

For the Jew whose circumcision granted him only membership in the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, faith in Christ granted him salvation and the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant.

For the Gentile who had to become a Jew to have access to the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, faith in Christ granted him salvation and the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant.

For the slave who was spiritually poor and of low self-esteem, faith in Christ granted him salvation and the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant just as much as a free man. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul, when juxtaposing slaves with free men, called a slave "the Lord's freedman and called a free man "Christ's slave" (1 Cor 7:22).

For the first century woman who was viewed more as property than as a person, faith in Christ granted her salvation and the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant just as a man.

2. By becoming a "son of God" through faith alone in Jesus Christ, a significant legal distinction is made where one is considered a *physical* descendant of Abraham and entitled to a portion of the inheritance and blessing set out by the Abrahamic Covenant.

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Paul's message to the Galatians is that faith alone is what makes one righteous before God. As one becomes a "son of God," distinctions that once divided people no longer are significant. To illustrate this, Paul presents three examples:

The first example is about racial and religious differences. Jews considered Gentiles as uncircumcised, not of the seed of Abraham nor of the covenant and unclean. The atonement of Jesus Christ broke down this barrier.

The second example is about socio-economic differences. As a son of God, Christians are to treat each other as brothers which was contrary to social norms of the first century.

The third example is about gender differences. While women were considered inferior in the first century, justification was given without any preference.

While God's justification considers all of mankind of equal personal worth and esteem regardless of their religious, socio-economic, or gender status, it did not mean that people lost their identity. Paul never spoke of God's justification as contradicting the functional differences among mankind.

Considered the "firstborn" and consistent with the Law of Primogeniture, the believing Jew will play a different role in the fulfillment of the Divine Covenants and in the end times (Revelation) than the Christian Gentile.

The functional differences between male and female were established at the time of Creation (Genesis 2). Paul spoke of guidelines for the home (Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, 1 Peter 3) and church recognizing gender functional differences including restrictions in the role of women (1 Corinthians 11, 14 and 1 Timothy 2). Functional differences cannot be confused with ontology. And functional differences cannot be confused with Galatians 3 and Paul's discussion of justification.

References:

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2. Radmacher, ED, Allen, RB, House, HW, eds, The Nelson Study Bible, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson (1997), p.1974.
3. Walvoord, JF, Zuck, RB, eds, The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament, Wheaton, IL: Victor Books (1985), p. 587-588.

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