

The Book of Galatians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Justified by Faith, Not Works of the Law

Galatians 2:11-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the doctrinal summit of the early chapters of Galatians, and arguably of the whole letter. In confronting Peter's hypocrisy at Antioch, Paul articulates the central truth that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. The lesson must present justification clearly: to be justified is to be declared righteous and accepted before God, and this verdict rests on the finished work of Christ received by faith, never on our law-keeping or merit. Paul's closing words, that he is crucified with Christ and lives by faith in the Son who loved him, show that this justification flows out of living union with Jesus.

The teacher must guard two flanks at once. On one side stands legalism, the error Paul directly attacks, which makes acceptance depend on the works of the law and so empties grace and makes Christ's death pointless. On the other side stands the opposite distortion, a faith only that treats saving faith as bare mental agreement and strips away the obedient response God commands. Paul's phrase faith in Jesus Christ does not describe a passive opinion; it describes the trust that unites us to a crucified and risen Lord, a trust that believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized into him. We are justified by grace through this living, obedient faith, and not by works of law done to earn and to boast.

So aim the lesson at both clarity and wonder. Students should leave able to say plainly why no one is justified by law-keeping, and equally able to say what saving faith actually looks like. But more than that, they should leave moved, gripped by a Savior who loved them and gave himself for them, ready to stop justifying themselves and start living by faith in him.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul "opposed Cephas to his face, because he stood condemned," since his conduct "was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (2:11-14). What exactly did Peter do, and why was his withdrawal from the Gentile believers a betrayal of the gospel rather than merely an awkward social lapse?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scene is tense and public. Peter had been eating freely with Gentile believers in Antioch, living out the truth that in Christ the old wall between Jew and Gentile is gone. But when men came from the circumcision party, Peter "drew back and separated himself, fearing" them. His

withdrawal was not a private preference; it was a public act with a public message, and the message contradicted the gospel.

Paul names the problem precisely: Peter's "conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel." The image is of walking out of line, feet going one direction while the truth goes another. Peter's theology was correct, but his feet were preaching error, telling the Gentiles by his actions that they were second-class until they took on the law.

Explain why this was a betrayal and not a mere social slip. If table fellowship depends on keeping the law, then acceptance with God depends on keeping the law, and the gospel of grace has been quietly overturned at the dinner table. Peter's feet were drawing a doctrinal conclusion, and it was the wrong one. That is why Paul treats it as a gospel emergency.

Help students see that conduct teaches. What we do, especially in front of others, preaches a sermon about what we really believe. A church can confess grace with its lips and deny it with its cliques, its favoritism, and its quiet walls. The truth of the gospel must reach all the way down to our feet.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ, with the dividing wall removed (Ephesians 2:14–16)
- Conduct as a witness that can either confirm or contradict the gospel
- Hypocrisy as belief betrayed by behavior
- The seriousness of actions that imply acceptance depends on law-keeping

Discussion Prompts

- How did Peter's withdrawal preach a false gospel without a word?
- Where can a church confess grace yet deny it by its conduct?
- What does it mean for our feet to keep in step with the truth?

Question 2

Student Question:

Peter acted against what he knew to be true because he feared the circumcision party (2:12). Where does the fear of what others will think cause you to act against your own convictions, and what does that fear reveal about where you are looking for approval?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Peter's failure into a mirror for us. The great apostle, who had once stood before the Sanhedrin without flinching, here caved to the fear of a group of visitors. Fear of others' opinions is no respecter of persons; it can topple the strongest of us when we are not watching.

Help students trace how the fear of man works. It rarely announces itself. It shows up as a withdrawn hand, an unspoken truth, a quiet conformity to the crowd in the room. Like Peter, we can know exactly what is right and still drift with the social current because we cannot bear the disapproval of certain people.

Press gently toward the heart issue. The fear of man always points to an approval we are seeking somewhere other than God. We act against our convictions because, in that moment, someone's opinion weighs more than the Lord's. Naming whose approval we crave is the first step toward freedom.

Point to the cure that the passage itself supplies. Peter needed to remember the gospel he already knew, that his acceptance rested on Christ, not on the circumcision party. When God's approval in Christ becomes the approval that governs us, the grip of the crowd begins to loosen.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of man as a recurring threat even to mature believers
- Approval-seeking as the root beneath compromised convictions
- God's approval in Christ as the cure for the fear of people
- Integrity as alignment between conviction and conduct

Discussion Prompts

- Whose disapproval are you most afraid of right now?
- How does the fear of man usually show up quietly in your life?
- What truth would you need to remember to stand firm like Peter failed to?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul states the heart of the matter: "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (2:16). What does it mean to be justified before God, and why can the works of the law never accomplish it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now Paul states the truth the whole letter defends: "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ." To be justified is to be declared righteous, accepted, in the right before God, the verdict every guilty sinner needs and none can earn. It is a courtroom word, and the question is how a guilty person can ever hear the judge say righteous.

Explain why the works of the law can never deliver that verdict. The law can tell us what is right and expose where we have failed, but it cannot make us righteous, because we have already broken it, and a broken law condemns rather than acquits (Romans 3:19-20). Trying to be

justified by law-keeping is like trying to pass a test we have already failed by studying harder for the next question. The record still stands against us.

Show where the verdict comes from instead. Justification rests on the finished work of Christ, his perfect obedience and his death in our place, received through faith. The judge declares us righteous not because we have become flawless but because Christ's righteousness is reckoned to us and our guilt was carried by him. This is grace, and it is the only hope a guilty person has.

Anticipate the question this raises. If justification is by faith and not by works of the law, what about the obedience God commands? Hold that question for now, but plant the seed: the faith that justifies is not a bare opinion but a living trust that lays hold of Christ. Paul will make that clear by the end of the passage, when he speaks of being crucified with Christ and living by faith in him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification as God's verdict of righteous, grounded in Christ's work
- The inability of the works of the law to justify a guilty sinner (Romans 3:19–20)
- Christ's righteousness received by faith, not earned by performance
- Faith as living trust that lays hold of Christ, not bare opinion

Discussion Prompts

- What does it actually mean to be justified before God?
- Why can keeping the law never make a guilty person righteous?
- On what does the verdict of righteous finally rest?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul refuses to “rebuild what I tore down” (2:18), the old system of trying to be right with God by law-keeping. In what ways are you still tempted to rebuild a system of earning, trying to justify yourself by your performance, your record, or your religious effort?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says that to go back to law as a way of justification would be to “rebuild what I tore down,” and that doing so would prove him a transgressor. The grace of the gospel had demolished the old project of self-justification, and Paul refuses to lay its foundations again. This question asks where we are quietly hauling the bricks back.

Help students recognize the modern forms of that old project. We rebuild it whenever we make our standing with God depend on our performance, our consistency, our religious activity, or our feeling that we have been good enough lately. The materials change, but the structure is the same: a tower of works by which we hope to earn what only grace can give.

Name the symptoms so students can spot the rebuilding in themselves. A conscience that feels accepted on good days and rejected on bad ones, a faith that rides the roller coaster of recent behavior, a quiet sense that God's love must be kept current with effort, all of these are signs that the old structure is going back up.

Call them back to grace. The cure is not to try harder at the tower but to abandon the construction project altogether and rest on the finished work of Christ. We do not maintain our acceptance by performance; we receive it by faith and live from it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-justification as a structure the gospel tears down
- Performance-based acceptance as a return to the old system
- Assurance grounded in Christ's work rather than recent behavior
- Resting in grace as the alternative to rebuilding the tower of works

Discussion Prompts

- What materials do you tend to use when rebuilding self-justification?
- How can you tell when your assurance is riding on your performance?
- What would it look like to abandon the construction project entirely?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says, "through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (2:19). What does it mean to have died to the law as a way of justification, and how does that death actually set us free to truly live to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a startling statement: "through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God." The law itself, by exposing his sin and pronouncing its sentence, drove him to the end of himself, to a kind of death. The law could condemn him, but it could never make him alive, so he died to it as a way of salvation in order to live to God by another way entirely.

Help students understand what dying to the law means and does not mean. It does not mean that God's moral will no longer matters or that we are now free to sin; Paul will spend chapters five and six on holy living. It means we have stopped relating to God on the basis of law-keeping as the ground of acceptance. The law is no longer our judge and jailer; in Christ that relationship has ended.

Show how this death brings freedom. As long as we relate to God through law as a system of earning, we live under constant accusation, because the law always finds us guilty. To die to that

arrangement is to step out from under the accusation and into a new relationship of grace, where we live to God as forgiven children rather than condemned debtors.

Connect it to the believer's experience. Many Christians have never truly let the old arrangement die; they still feel that God relates to them mainly as a lawgiver tallying their failures. Paul invites them into a freer and truer life, where the law has done its work of driving them to Christ, and now they live to God by faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Dying to the law as ending law-keeping as the basis of acceptance
- The law's proper work of exposing sin and driving us to Christ (Galatians 3:24)
- Freedom from condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1)
- Living to God as forgiven children rather than condemned debtors

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean, and not mean, to die to the law?
- How does living under law as a system keep us under accusation?
- How would your walk with God change if that old arrangement truly died?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul declares, "I have been crucified with Christ" (2:20). What part of your old self, the self that wants to run its own life or earn its own standing, is Jesus calling you to take to the cross with him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

"I have been crucified with Christ." With these words Paul moves from courtroom language to the language of union and death. The believer is not merely pardoned at a distance; we are joined to Christ so completely that his death becomes ours. The old self, the self that wanted to rule its own life and earn its own standing, was nailed to the cross with him.

This is a self-examining question, so help students get specific. Crucifixion is not gentle; it is the putting to death of something that does not want to die. Ask what in them still resists the cross: the craving for control, the demand to be admired, the self-reliance that keeps trying to save itself, the cherished sin held back from God. The cross is where these go.

Connect this dying to baptism, where Scripture says we were united with Christ in his death and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3–6). The crucifixion of the old self is not only a private feeling but a reality the believer entered in being joined to Christ, and it is worked out daily as we reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.

Hold out the hope on the far side of the cross. Crucifixion with Christ is never the end of the story; resurrection follows. What dies is the old, grasping, self-justifying self. What rises is a life animated by Christ himself. We do not lose ourselves in this death; we finally find the self God intended.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Union with Christ in his death, the old self crucified with him
- The connection between crucifixion with Christ and baptism into his death (Romans 6:3–6)
- Daily mortification of sin as living out our union with Christ
- Resurrection life as the outcome of dying with Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What part of the old self still resists going to the cross?
- How does baptism into Christ's death shape the way you see your old self?
- What new life have you seen rise where the old self has died?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul continues, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (2:20). What is this union with Christ that Paul describes, and how should the truth that Christ lives in the believer reshape our identity and our everyday choices?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul completes the thought: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." This is the wonder of the gospel, union with the living Christ. He is not only our example to follow or our judge to satisfy; by his Spirit he dwells in his people, so that our lives become the arena where his life is expressed. Christianity is not merely the imitation of Christ but the indwelling of Christ.

Help students grasp how this reshapes identity. The deepest truth about a believer is no longer their failures, their resume, or their reputation, but Christ in them. We are people in whom the Son of God has taken up residence, and that changes who we understand ourselves to be at the root.

Show how it reshapes daily life. If Christ lives in me, then ordinary moments become occasions for his life to show, in patience under pressure, in love toward difficult people, in honesty when lying would be easier. We do not summon this from our own resources; we draw on the life of Christ within, walking by his Spirit.

Guard against two errors. This indwelling does not erase our personality or make us passive puppets; Paul still says the life he lives, he lives by faith. Nor is it a license to claim sinless

perfection. It is the real, transforming presence of Christ in a believer who still walks by faith, day by day, trusting the One who lives in him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Union with Christ, who lives in the believer by his Spirit
- Christian identity rooted in Christ within rather than in achievement or reputation
- Daily life as the arena where Christ's life is expressed through us
- Indwelling that transforms without erasing the person or guaranteeing sinlessness

Discussion Prompts

- How does Christ living in you change how you see your identity?
- Where could the life of Christ show in your ordinary moments this week?
- What is the difference between imitating Christ and Christ living in you?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul grounds his whole life in the love of Christ, "who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20). How does knowing that the Son of God loved you personally and gave himself for you change the way you see yourself and the way you face your day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's theology becomes deeply personal: the Son of God "loved me and gave himself for me." He does not say loved us in the abstract but loved me. The cross was not only a cosmic transaction; it was a personal act of love aimed at Paul, the former persecutor, and aimed at each believer by name.

Invite students to receive this personally, which is harder than it sounds. Many believers affirm that Christ loves the world but quietly doubt that he delights in them. Paul models a faith that dares to insert its own name into the sentence: he loved me, he gave himself for me. That personal assurance is the engine of the whole Christian life.

Show how this love reorders a person. People who know they are deeply loved have nothing left to prove and nothing left to fear in the same way. They can serve without craving applause and fail without despairing, because their worth was settled at the cross. The love of Christ, truly believed, frees us from both pride and shame.

Bring it into the ordinary day. Encourage students to imagine facing a stressful morning, a strained relationship, a discouraging hour, as one who is loved by the Son of God who gave himself for them. That single remembered truth can change the temperature of an entire day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The personal love of Christ for each believer, demonstrated at the cross
- Assurance that dares to apply the gospel personally
- Freedom from pride and shame for those secure in Christ's love
- The love of Christ as the motive power of the Christian life (2 Corinthians 5:14)

Discussion Prompts

- Is it easy or hard for you to say, he loved me and gave himself for me?
- How does being personally loved by Christ free you from proving yourself?
- How would today look different lived as one beloved by the Son of God?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul insists, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (2:21), having said we are justified "through faith in Jesus Christ" (2:16). How do we hold firmly that we are justified by grace through faith and not by the works of the law, while still affirming that the faith which justifies is a living, obedient faith that believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into him, so that we fall into neither legalism nor a bare faith only?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it must be handled with both clarity and care. Paul has said plainly that we are justified "through faith in Jesus Christ" and "not by works of the law," and he closes by warning that if righteousness came through the law, "then Christ died for no purpose." The gospel stands or falls here. To make acceptance depend on law-keeping is to empty grace and to render the cross pointless.

First, settle what the works of the law are. Paul is excluding the works of the Mosaic law, the law-keeping a person performs to earn a standing before God and to boast in, including the badges of Jewish identity like circumcision over which this whole conflict arose. He is not excluding the obedience that faith itself renders to God. The target is merit and boasting, the attempt to put God in our debt, not the response of a trusting heart to its Lord.

Second, settle what saving faith is, because this is where the opposite error creeps in. Paul's phrase faith in Jesus Christ does not describe a bare mental agreement that leaves the life untouched. It describes a living trust that unites us to Christ, the very faith Paul has just illustrated by being crucified with Christ, indwelt by Christ, and living by faith in him. A faith joined to Christ in his death and resurrection is a faith that believes, repents of sin, confesses him as Lord, and is baptized into him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27). These are not works of the law added to the gospel; they are the shape of the faith that receives the gospel. This is why Scripture can say a person is justified by faith and also that faith without works is dead (James 2:17), without any contradiction.

Hold both truths together so students land in the right place. Against legalism, we insist that nothing we do earns or completes our acceptance; Christ did it all, and we receive it by grace. Against a faith only that obeys nothing, we insist that the faith which justifies is alive and obedient, taking God at his word and doing what he says. The beggar who opens his hand to receive bread has not earned it; yet he does open his hand. Believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized are the opening of the hand, not the earning of the gift.

End where Paul ends, refusing to nullify the grace of God. The point of guarding this truth is not to win a debate but to keep the cross from being emptied. If we could be made right by our own law-keeping, Christ would have died for nothing. Because we cannot, his death is everything, and the only fitting response is a living faith that clings to him with the whole self.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification by grace through faith in Christ, not by the works of the law (Galatians 2:16, 21)
- The works of the law as Mosaic law-keeping done to earn and to boast, not the obedience of faith
- Saving faith as a living trust that unites us to Christ, against a bare faith only
- Believing, repenting, confessing, and baptism as the shape of receiving faith, not works added to grace (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4)
- The harmony of justified by faith with faith without works is dead (James 2:17)
- The cross emptied of meaning if righteousness could come through law (Galatians 2:21)
- Receiving grace as opening the hand, not earning a wage

Discussion Prompts

- What does Paul mean, and not mean, by the works of the law?
- How is a living, obedient faith different from a bare faith only?
- How would you show that being baptized into Christ is not a work that earns salvation?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Paul's entire life had become a response to a Savior who loved him and gave himself for him. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to stop trying to justify yourself and instead live by faith in the Son of God who loves you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers the passage into a single, personal invitation. Paul's whole transformed life was a response to a Savior who loved him and gave himself for him. The aim of the lesson is not merely that students understand justification but that they begin, like Paul, to live by faith in the Son of God rather than by the exhausting labor of justifying themselves.

Help students name the shift concretely. For one person it may mean laying down a particular performance they have been offering to earn God's love. For another it may mean finally receiving, deep down, that they are loved and accepted in Christ. For another it may mean taking the obedient step of faith they have been avoiding, trusting the Lord who loves them. The capstone should produce one specific movement of the heart or the will.

Tie the two halves of the passage together. To live by faith in the Son of God is both to rest from self-justification and to follow him in obedient trust. These are not opposites; they are the two sides of a faith that has truly grasped grace. We stop earning, and precisely because we are loved, we gladly obey.

Close in worship. Send students home not with a heavier burden but with a deeper wonder, that the Son of God knew them, loved them, and gave himself for them, and that their whole life can now be a glad response of faith to such a love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Christian life as a response of faith to the love of Christ
- Resting from self-justification and obeying in trust as two sides of one faith
- Spiritual formation flowing from grace received, not pressure applied
- Worship as the fitting response to a Savior who gave himself for us

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way you can stop justifying yourself this week?
- What obedient step of faith is the Lord inviting you to take in trust?
- How does wonder at Christ's love change the way you obey him?