

Fallen From Grace

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“You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4). Interestingly, the sin for which these folks were condemned was not some licentious, rebellious, or covetous pursuit. While such things can lead to our spiritual doom according to other passages (2 Peter 2:20-22, Hebrews 6:4-6), the trouble in Galatia had to do with their belief in self-justification, or salvation by meritorious conduct. Whether their issue was the Law of Moses or simply “law” itself (good deeds, as outlined in a moral code) the result was the same. They were operating under the assumption that their own righteousness justified their salvation.

Paul had no qualms when it came to calling them on this troubling issue. He even told Peter face-to-face, *“Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified”* (Galatians 2:16). Even those who were most qualified to boast about their law-keeping prowess had no grounds for self-justification. The apostles themselves believed in Christ, and taught that it was not by works of the Law that they were saved. Paul would make a similar statement to the Romans in Romans 3:28. In the same context, he describes a stark difference between justification by works of the Law and faith (Romans 3:21ff). We need to remember, however, that his primary purpose in writing this to the Romans is not to discount obedience, but to keep it in perspective. The Jewish converts were foisting upon their Gentile counterparts various provisions of the Law that were not required under Christ. In doing so, they were essentially invalidating the power of the gospel through faith. Even in the midst of such an “anti-Law” letter, the necessity of obedience to God is never downplayed by Paul (Romans 10:9-10, 2:4-5, 2:16, 6:16-17, 12:3ff, 15:18, 16:19). It is very tempting to overstate his denunciation of “the Law” (the Law of Moses, given at Sinai) – justification by the Law is clearly an inappropriate pursuit (Galatians 2:21) – but Paul’s argument must be kept in its context. Paul might be (in accommodative terms) anti-Law, but he is never anti-obedience.

One cannot avoid the conclusion that grace is conditional. Peter *“stood condemned”* (Galatians 2:11) for his hypocrisy – and not just condemned in Paul’s opinion or judgment, since he left it entirely up to Jesus Christ to judge and condemn others (Romans 8:33-34). At the moment that his hypocrisy overtook him and he began showing favoritism, Peter was not a saved man. Otherwise, how can one stand condemned and be saved at the same time?

The Christian And Sin

Will our sins be held against us, even if we are in a relationship with Christ? The “once saved always saved” argument becomes dizzying because of its circular reasoning. One may say that a person was never saved at all if by his actions he proves uncommitted to Christ. Consider the apostle’s analogy in Romans 11:17ff:

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ Quite right,

they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again..."

Of course, this text is speaking of the circumstances surrounding Gentiles and Jews and their relationship to God. But the lesson has a modern application. The Jews were severed from God because of a failure to obey. Their lack of faith and trust blinded them to the gospel, while many Gentiles – who had previously been excluded – were now welcomed into the gracious arms of their creator through the gospel. Even with the particular concerns of this text, we are nevertheless faced with the same conclusion: God's grace is conditional. Those who are disobedient, whether Jew or Gentile, are removed from the tree and cast away. Those who are repentant are able to be grafted in over and over again. It is not beyond God's power (or his prerogative) to take people in and out of salvation.