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SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)

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TITLE: What's Your Excuse?

What's the best excuse you've ever come up with? What's that reason you've given to excuse bad behavior in your life? As a parent, I think I've probably heard virtually every excuse in the book for such a wide variety of both sin and simple accidents. I don't know if you pay much attention to the news, but a recent politician was caught on camera breaking a mandate that she had declared imperative, and those who wouldn't follow it should be punished. But when caught, immediately, there was an excuse and deflection.

Now, here's the problem with excuses: Excuses do not deal with or remedy the problem. We can give great reasons as to why the car is now around a tree. We can give great excuses as to why there was paraphernalia found in the car. We can provide years' worth of evidence of good behavior, but that doesn't excuse the momentary lapse of judgment. Again, the problem is, an excuse does not remedy the problem. In order to fix the problem, we need a fixer. And there is no greater problem that we face than our sin. Can we save ourselves? Can we excuse our bad behavior? Can we erase the lapse of judgment with a history of obedience? Or do we need a Savior? That's what we want to talk about today in the book of Galatians, beginning in Chapter 2 at verse 14:

¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" ¹

Paul calls out Peter in front of everyone. Some people may say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, that's completely inappropriate. Doesn't the Bible - in fact, Jesus - tell us to correct people in private?" Yes, Jesus does. However, this was a public act. Peter's compromise was influenced by others, but more importantly, it influenced others to sin as well. When we sin publicly and hurt people, it is perfectly appropriate to call out and address the sin publicly. This is not to shame; this is not to ruin a reputation. What we are doing, is showing that in Christ, we care about each other. We are trying to make the wrong right. So that's exactly what Paul does with Peter. And then he says he saw that their conduct was *not in step with the truth of the gospel*. This literally means to walk upright. But I think we can just think of it as walking in a way consistent with the truth or reality.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ga 2:11–14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Paul says you are free - live as free. Do not go back to slavery of any kind, whether it's to the law, or addiction or anything. He says, "Peter, you are free. These people are free. Don't tell them in your actions to live like a slave."

Paul continues in verse 15: *We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;*

Paul says "we" four times in the next 3 verses. When he says "we", he is talking about himself, Peter, and any Jewish Christians. These are the people who are born Jewish. That's pretty straightforward. But then he says, "and not Gentile sinners." That probably sounds a little odd, if not a little bit offensive. What Paul is not saying is that Jews were sinless. And he wasn't necessarily saying that Gentiles were in a special class of sinners. What he was referring to is that the Gentiles were people born without the law. You see, according to Jews, Gentiles were sinners by nature, because they had no law to guide them in proper living and in pleasing God. So again, this had nothing to do with one people group being sinless and another people group being sinful. It's true that the Jews were God's Chosen People. They were children of the Abrahamic covenant, but they were still sinners. The difference between Gentiles and Jews, as Paul is referring to here, is the physical law that guided them.

I think we need to be really careful to never forget that we are all sinners in need of a Savior. The religious elite would point back to their heritage. Remember, that's what Paul did in Philippians. He said, "Hey, I'm a Jew of the Jews. I was born in the right family. I have the right degrees. Look at my background; look at what I've accomplished." But then he flips the script on its head, and says, "All that stuff I used to bank on is garbage. It means nothing, because ultimately, nothing we do, and nothing from our past or our ancestry can save us. It's ultimately the blood of Jesus Christ." That was true for Paul, and it's true for you and me today.

So Paul has just reminded Peter and us today that our background doesn't matter. We are all sinners. It doesn't matter if we were born with the Bible, the Jewish Torah, or no religious literature at all – the reality is, according to Romans, we all have a moral law written on our hearts. It is our sin that condemns us. It has nothing to do with our background. It has nothing to do with our performance. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. Paul hits home with this message in verse 16:

¹⁶yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul has just said in three different ways, we are not saved because of what we can do, but rather we are justified by what Jesus Christ has done. No amount of rule-following can make a person righteous before God. "Justified" is a legal term that means to be declared righteous or without blame. It's like a judge hitting his gavel and saying, "I find no fault in this man or this woman. They may go."

So Paul says *a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ*. That first statement is general. No one can be saved by their own good works. Why? Because the Bible declares it, and history confirms it. *There is none righteous, no not even one! No one seeks after God*. We are all sinners. We are *dead in our trespasses and sins*, according to Paul in Ephesians 2.

But couldn't we do just a little bit of work to get ourselves out of the sin trap? Well, let's think about it like this: Imagine with me, that you are driving down the street and you see the light changing from green, to yellow, to red. So what do you do? You gun it! You just *blow* through the red light. Next thing you know, you hear the sirens, you look up, you see the lights, and sure enough, a cop is in your rear view mirror. So, what do you do? You know you're late for a doctor's appointment. So you can justify your sin, right? Let's find out:

The cop comes up, gets your information, and says, "Do you realize you were speeding?" You say, "Yes I do, but I'm late for my doctor's appointment. I didn't think this was a big deal." The police officer says, "Well, in fact, it *is* a big deal. It's illegal for you to go through a red light, and now you mentioned you're speeding to get there, so that's a double whammy!" But then you figure it out. You say, "OK, you're right, I did speed, and I did blow through a red light. However, do you realize I live over 3 miles away from here? And up to this point, I did not speed, and I did not go through any red lights. I've done a really good job up until just now. So, why not let me go?" The police officer, who is serious about the law, and a good cop, replies, "I'm sorry; that's great you obeyed the law up until this point. However you broke the law, and now I must write you a ticket."

You see, we cannot excuse our bad behavior with the good behavior we've done. That will not save us from our sin, and it won't get us out of a ticket from the cop; just like your good behavior will not get you off for your bad behavior with the law, or any Justice Department. This is why Paul says in verse 16: *We know that a person is not justified or declared righteous by works of the law*. It doesn't matter how many green lights you went through, if you ended up going through that red light at the end. It doesn't matter if you drove 35 mph for the last three miles, but in the last 10 feet, you barreled it at 75. We are not justified by works of the law, but through Jesus Christ.

Because Paul knows how we operate as humans, he says it again in a different way. "*So we also believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.*" See, this is deeply personal. It's not about them out there; it's about you. It's about me. Paul is saying "we" as Jewish Christians had the law, and we knew it, yet we still sinned. Our good behavior in the past, no matter how many trips to the synagogue or temple, no matter how many sacrifices we offered, no matter how many tithes and offerings we gave, we still stood condemned. We could not buy our Salvation. We could not win our Salvation. The only way to experience it was through Jesus Christ.

Paul is shouting at us today, "Quit playing the game of religion. Quit trying to save yourself. Quit trying to play God." You cannot give enough money to your church, to a social justice

movement, or to your favorite nonprofit. That won't save you. Paul is saying to quit thinking by going to church that you're saving yourself. Paul is saying, quit thinking that because you work 7 1/2 hours a day, that last 30 minutes that you played Candy Crush is going to be dismissed. Paul is saying, quit thinking that because you teach a Bible study, or a youth group, that your viewing of pornography once a week is dismissed.

Friend, there is nothing we can do to ignore our sin. There's nothing we can do on a cosmic spiritual scale that tips the scale in our favor. No matter of religion, no amount of performance, no amount of track record can save us from our sin. In case you missed it, Paul will say it one more time:

Because by works of the law, no one will be justified.

Whenever something is repeated in the Bible, it means *listen up*. Take it seriously. Quit dismissing it or ignoring it. Listen up. Paul is telling us this isn't a guessing game. This isn't a lottery. This isn't a pay per play. No, if you want to be declared righteous - in other words, free from sin before a holy God- you cannot achieve it by your works. **Your good behavior will not excuse your sin. The only way is through the blood of Jesus Christ. His blood covers our sins. And because He was buried and rose again, we have true life.** Three times Paul has said we are not saved by our works. The question for you and me is will we believe it enough to live it?

N: So let me go to Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney now. Cara, what happens when you start to think that you *earn* your way to salvation?

C: Read my Bible, Nat. You know, there's a few people in the Bible that I never want to be. And Job's buddies come to mind. I always think about Job's buddies. I don't want to be them. Don't overtalk. And then the other is the Prodigal Son's older brother. So I don't want to be standing outside criticizing everybody else, while they're in there enjoying the freedom they get out of their Salvation. So I read the Bible. It's a good reminder: I am free. My Salvation is secure.

N: But I'm just curious. You know, it seems like people are so bent towards religion. I've talked about this for a couple of weeks now. People just keep going back to religion, and it's that way of legalism. Why do you think people are so attracted to it? Even Christians?

C: Because I think we question the - I mean, I'm not saying being a Christian is easy. I'm not saying that at all. I think it's extremely difficult, but our Salvation is easy to achieve, because the One that did all the work, *did* all the work. It was Jesus Christ. And so we just have to accept that gift. That's it. I think we're always looking for a catch, right? Because in the world, there is always a catch. But, in this case...

N: I agree. Well, and speaking of grace, Arnie, grace puts everyone on the same level. That is the fix for that religion. That's the fix for the legalism. So why is grace so important?

A: Oftentimes, I think legalism prevails when people want to feel better than someone else, and pride gets in the way. I see it a lot in the Christian culture, if you will - holier than thou - or better. And Jesus Christ came and was the great leveler. I mean, we've all sinned and fallen short. And so nobody's better than anybody else. And when people start going down that path, they're actually condemning other people, or not wanting them to have Jesus in their hearts. It's such a tremendous harm to people, when you don't accept grace - that we've all sinned - and it places all of us on the same level. We're not better than other people. It's critical.

N: I think that's interesting. And I think you've actually said something really important there. We do that in that comparison game - that performance game - we are trying to make ourselves look better than others. And what's crazy is, Paul said, that's not true. Ephesians Two - "For by grace you've been saved through faith and not of works, so that no man may boast." It's not about you. Stop it. And that's exactly what you're saying. And I'm going to have to give that a lot of thought, and even reevaluate my own life now. That's really thought provoking. As I think some more about it though, when we talk about works, we talk about living a life pleasing to God. It almost seems to be in contrast with what we're saying about Salvation by grace, through faith. But yet we know, James said, faith without works is dead. So how does that work with this grace-based Salvation?

A: I think it's talking about life transformation. So if you have accepted Jesus into your heart, your life is going to transform; your behavior is going to transform. And yes, sometimes that appears as works, but it's critical that you have life transformation, because without it, you're not transformed. Or, you know, it's chicken versus the egg - which came first? I get that, and you can go in circles. But basically for me, in working with people, until I see some life transformation, some change in behavior that's not works based - it's just - there has to be some kind of change taking place, for me to feel comfortable that you're actually saved. And you know, we want people to grow. And part of growing is - a key part of growing - is life transformation. And when your life transforms, you change.

N: Cara, what do you think about that?

C: Well, I would say then that's verbal faith - so faith that consists of words without actions - it's insufficient, right? Faith alone can't save, serve or survive. So you think about how everyone profits, when the love of God abides in the believer, and then is expressed through those good works. So, you know, James also asked that question, "Can faith save him?" A faith that does not demonstrate itself in works is not genuine.

N: Right. It's a dead faith. And you know, I quote Ephesians Two a lot, and it's probably, I guess at this point, my life passage, and if I ever got a tattoo of a verse or verses, it would probably be Ephesians Two, because it just makes it so clear. Like Ephesians Two, one through ten, really to me, settles so many debates about faith and works. But Ephesians Two says, *for by grace through faith, you've been saved, not of yourselves*. And then in 2:10, it says, *you are God's masterpiece, saved for good works, which Christ prepared beforehand for you to walk in them*. That's it - saved by grace. You are being transformed, to live in a way that is pleasing to

God. That's how you're saved. And there's the evidence - case solved; problem dismissed.

C: Let me say this. Is it wrong? You know, I would say, sometimes, I question my Salvation, and I know that's stupid to do, because I know I'm saved. My Salvation is secure, but I think this is just normal. Sometimes we do that. But I do look back, and I think, "No", - this sounds bad - but I go, "You know what? I was pulled to do this, and to want to tell this person about Jesus." Or I was telling you a story off the air, Nat, about how I felt this pull to want to be around other believers. And so I met my friend Ashley through that, and I think that's evidence of being saved. [Right. Right.] And I find so much comfort in that.

N: This is a hard topic, but it's really quite simple. I've really come to terms with that. You know, we've tried to create a formula for Salvation: if you do this, then this follows. You know, Arnie and I, and you - we've talked about, you know, the Sinner's Prayer - saying a prayer, asking Jesus into your heart - these concepts that you don't find in the Bible as salvific methods, but they're reflective of a process we go through. And, you know, people have asked me, you know, "When were you saved?" I honestly don't know the answer to that question. I remember at 4, wrestling with sin. And I remember not wanting to be separated from my mom in Hell. And so guess what? I asked Jesus into my heart, and I was on a trajectory. But then - from about 20, 21, until about 23, 24 - man, if I looked like - if I was a Christian - I was in by the skin of my teeth, right? I mean, there was no evidence. I would go to church on Sunday, but I'd go in red-eyed, you know, from the night before. And I basically turned my life into Hell, almost jeopardizing my marriage in the process.

But there came this point - I remember the night - where I'm sitting in my living room by myself with - what do they call it - a pack and a pound - a six pack of tacos and a pound of Frito-Lays - whatever they call them. And I remember just going, "Well, I screwed it up. I messed it up. I believed a lie". And something began to change in me. And my wife, she said, "Nat, you're not who God has called you to be. I don't know if you're - I don't know what the deal is. I don't know where you are with Christ, but you're not living like a believer. You're not living like you should be. You've got a choice to make and you need to decide." And it was in that moment, and in that wrestling, that I realized, "Holy smokes, I'm really a sinner in need of a Savior", and something flipped. Now was I saved at age four? I don't know. I don't know. Was I saved at 23, 24 - wrestling with the sin? Maybe - maybe not. But at some point in this process, I began to really understand my depravity, my total need for a Savior, because I couldn't save myself. I began to have true repentance and remorse over my sin. I knew that the Holy Spirit was living inside of me. And though I still sinned then, and I still sin now, it is clear to me that Christ is driving my life. It is clear that the Holy Spirit is in me, convicting me, and shaping me, and molding me.

But to become so, "Hey, we've got to look for this defining moment", I think can be almost problematic, but rather it's a process. And though Salvation isn't a moment, justification does happen. We don't see this necessarily - Jesus saying, "Hey, you know, ask Me into your heart." But they followed Him. They observed Him. They watched Him. They walked with Him. And then at some point - we don't know when - it became real for Peter. You know, it became for some of the other Apostles - for James. And I think a lot of people's walks are like that. We don't

necessarily know when to point back to, but at some point it becomes very real. And we find that evidence, and the outflow of that Salvation - the outflow of loving God - is obediently following Him, no matter where He calls us.

A: So really Nat - You're saying that your accountability partner - your wife - saved your butt.

N: Saved my butt and possibly even saved my soul.

A: Wow.