

Galatians 2:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles,

Analysis

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles. The phrase *hēmeis physei Ioudaioi* (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι, "we by nature Jews") acknowledges ethnic identity—*physis* (φύσις, "nature") means by birth and heritage, not conversion. The contrasting phrase *kai ouk ex ethnōn hamartōloi* (καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔθνων ἀμαρτωλοί, "and not sinners from Gentiles") reflects typical Jewish categorization. *Hamartōloi* (ἀμαρτωλοί, "sinners") was how Jews labeled Gentiles—those outside covenant relationship with God, living in moral and spiritual darkness.

Paul uses irony here, adopting the Jewish perspective he once held as a Pharisee. Jews viewed themselves as privileged covenant people with law, temple, and promises, while Gentiles were hopeless pagans. Yet this verse sets up the devastating reversal coming in v. 16—even this privileged status doesn't provide righteousness before God. Birth as a Jew, access to the law, cultural and religious heritage—none of this produces justification.

This statement prepares for Paul's argument that Jews and Gentiles stand on equal ground before God: both desperately need Christ's righteousness, neither can achieve justification through works. The categories of "Jew by nature" and "Gentile sinner" both dissolve at the foot of the cross, where all are revealed as sinners requiring grace.

Historical Context

First-century Judaism maintained strict boundaries between Jews and Gentiles. Jews possessed the law, circumcision, temple access, and covenant promises—advantages Paul later lists in Romans 9:4-5. This created a sense of inherent superiority: Jews were God's people, Gentiles were outsiders. Paul's dramatic conversion showed him that these advantages, while real, couldn't provide the righteousness needed for justification—only faith in Christ could accomplish that.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What forms of spiritual or religious privilege might tempt you to trust in heritage rather than Christ alone?
2. How does recognizing our common need for grace eliminate both pride and despair regarding spiritual status?
3. In what ways do Christians today create categories that mirror the Jew-Gentile distinction Paul is demolishing?

Interlinear Text

Ἐμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἔξ εἰς οὐνῶν
We by nature who are Jews and not of the Gentiles

G2249

G5449

G2453

G2532

G3756

G1537

G1484

ἀμαρτωλοί·

sinners

G268

Additional Cross-References

Ephesians 2:3 (Parallel theme): Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

Titus 3:3 (Parallel theme): For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.

Romans 3:9 (Sin): What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;

Romans 4:16 (Parallel theme): Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

Philippians 3:4 (Parallel theme): Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: