

Galatians 2:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.

Analysis

I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. The emphatic *ouk athetō* (οὐκ ἀθετῶ, "I do not nullify/set aside") opens Paul's conclusion—*atheteō* (ἀθετέω) means to reject, set aside, declare invalid. The object: *tēn charin tou theou* (τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ, "the grace of God"). By maintaining justification by faith alone, Paul honors grace; the Judaizers, by adding law-works, frustrate (nullify, make void) God's grace. If works contribute anything to justification, grace is no longer grace (Romans 11:6).

The devastating alternative: *ei gar dia nomou dikaiosynē* (εἰ γὰρ διὰ νόμου δικαιοσύνη, "if through law righteousness comes"), then *ara Christos dōrean apethanen* (ἄρα Χριστὸς δωρεὰν ἀπέθανεν, "then Christ died for nothing/in vain"). The adverb *dōrean* (δωρεάν) means without cause, needlessly, to no purpose—if law-keeping could produce the righteousness (*dikaosynē*, δικαιοσύνη) God requires, Christ's death was unnecessary, a cosmic waste, divine foolishness.

This verse presents the starkest either-or in Scripture: either righteousness comes through law (making Christ's death pointless), or it comes through Christ's death (making law-works irrelevant for justification). There's no synthesis, no middle position. Adding any human work to Christ's finished work doesn't supplement grace—it nullifies it. Paul's entire argument comes to this: honor grace by resting in Christ alone, or frustrate grace by trusting in yourself—but you cannot do both.

Historical Context

The early church faced intense pressure to compromise the gospel by adding circumcision to faith. Jewish believers risked family rejection and persecution for abandoning law-keeping. It would have been easy to find a middle way—"faith plus small obediences." But Paul saw that any addition to Christ's work implicitly declares it insufficient, making His death futile. This uncompromising stance preserved the gospel of grace for all future generations.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What religious performances or moral achievements are you adding to Christ's finished work, thereby frustrating grace?
2. How does the reality that Christ's death was either necessary or pointless (no middle ground) clarify your understanding of salvation?
3. In what ways does your life demonstrate whether you're resting in Christ's sufficient work or striving to supplement it with your own efforts?

Interlinear Text

οὐκ	ἀθετῶ	τὴν	χάριν	τοῦ	θεοῦ·	εἰ	γὰρ	διὰ	νόμου
not	I do	G3588	the grace	G3588	of God	if	for	come by	the law
G3756	G114		G5485		G2316	G1487	G1063	G1223	G3551
δικαιοσύνη	ἄρα	Χριστὸς	δωρεὰν	ἀπέθανεν					
righteousness	then	Christ	in vain	is dead					
G1343	G686	G5547	G1432	G599					

Additional Cross-References

Romans 11:6 (Grace): And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.

Galatians 3:21 (Righteousness): Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law.

Hebrews 7:11 (Word): If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron?

1 Corinthians 15:14 (References Christ): And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.

Galatians 2:16 (Righteousness): Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

Isaiah 49:4 (References God): Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.

Romans 10:3 (Righteousness): For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

1 Corinthians 15:2 (Parallel theme): By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.