

## Scripture That Has Changed My Life: Galatians 2:20

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The job was almost done. After over an hour and a half of hard work, I had managed to rake the entire yard into a huge mountain of leaves. And right about then, it happened. Jana decided to send our two little girls, ages 3 and 1 at the time, out the door to “assist” me. Gee, thanks, Jana, I thought...as these two little toe-headed toddlers made their way to my beautiful leaf pile, and I quickly realized that the task before me had suddenly become infinitely more complex.

So there I was, about to stuff a VERY LARGE pile of leaves into the first of several large trash bags, when 3 yr-old Christina spoke up with this request: "Daddy, I wanna do it. Let me help!" Now...many of you know exactly what this "help" from a 3-year-old involves. You know that this gracious offer from your little assistant will, in reality, double or triple the amount of time it takes to accomplish the task. (Sometimes it will destroy any hope of accomplishing the task altogether.) But, you love their adorable enthusiasm, and so you somewhat reluctantly give in.

I was no different this particular morning. So I handed over the rake and I watched... as my adorable little 3-yr old proceeded to spread my nicely organized and rather large pile of leaves back across the entire front yard. Then, when the leaves were sufficiently scattered to the four corners of the earth, she suddenly decided that her turn was done, and exclaimed, "Here Daddy, you do it. It's too hard!"

Caitlyn couldn't really walk very well yet, so she just sat there, taking in the whole thing, with snot running down her face. I remember that part clearly. But Christina, after rearranging the leaves all over the yard, and looking quite pleased with herself, looked up at me, dropped the rake, and with an mischievous grin on her face, ran off around the corner of the house to go play in the sandbox.... leaving me to rake the entire front yard for the SECOND TIME THAT DAY.

Now... I am guessing that many of you have had similar experiences. So, this morning I want you to just hold onto those memories for a little while, and we'll come back to them later. But for now, let me read the scripture passage I've chosen for today. It may not make sense to you right away in terms of how it relates to this story, but I promise you, in the end... it will...

**Galatians 2:17-21** -- *"But what if we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then find out that we are still sinners? Has Christ led us into sin? Of course not! Rather, I make myself guilty if I rebuild the old system I already tore down. For when I tried to keep the law, I realized I could never earn God's approval. So, I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not one of those who treats the grace of God as meaningless. For if we could be saved by keeping the law, then there was no need for Christ to die."*

Well, there you have it. This is the passage that I've chosen for my contribution to this current sermon series called "Scripture That Has Changed My Life." I chose it for today partly because years ago, as a fairly young boy, I chose this passage, and vs. 20 in particular, to be one of my personal life-theme verses. But I have to tell you, right off the bat, that even though I grew up in a committed Christian family, that doesn't mean I fully understood what this verse passage meant at the time I chose it. Even with a solid Christian upbringing, my understanding of what this passage means for my life has changed dramatically over the years... and I am still unpacking its depth and significance for my life. So this morning, I want to share some of that journey with you...

To begin with, during my teen years, if I would have described my understanding of this verse, it would have probably sounded something like this: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I am very proud of it!" ... My interpretation of this verse would have sounded more like a cheer at a Christian pep rally than anything else, because, like most teen-agers, I needed a cause to identify with -- something to stand for, and I understood my "cause" to be Christianity. Now, don't get me wrong, my time was still consumed with school, and sports, and music & theater, and friendships, and girls... like any other teen-ager... but underlying it all was a basic understanding of myself as a child of God. I knew that the most important thing in life was my relationship with Jesus.

But even saying that, as I look back on it now, I'm almost embarrassed by the lack of awareness or concern I had at that age, regarding my own sin. My faith was strong and sincere, but it was young. You might say it was in its adolescent stage. To be honest, any notion of my sinful self-needing to "die with Christ" was probably not really developed. Now, many years later, as a pastor, I know that this is a normal stage in a Christian's faith development, and it was certainly appropriate for that teenage level. But as I entered college, my somewhat simple, idealistic and perhaps untested faith was about to be challenged...

Like most young adults, college was a time when I was faced with questions to my faith that I hadn't had to deal with in childhood. I attended religion courses taught by professors who seemed more interested in tearing down my faith than in building it up, and I began to examine my Christian beliefs in a more critical manner. I also found myself, for the first time, in what I thought at the time to be a blatantly "non-Christian" environment – and I couldn't just walk away from it, as I had in my childhood and teen years.

As part of this faith journey, I began to examine the ways that I was living out my Christian faith. Up to this point, in an attempt to live what I understood to be a "faithful Christian life" I had basically surrounded myself with Christian friends who believed the same things I did. If someone was too different than me, and especially if their words and actions were particularly un-Christ-like, according to MY definition, my solution was to remove myself from that circle of friends or that activity or relationship.

About halfway through college, though, I began to see more clearly, and on a more personal level, that Jesus' solution to the sinfulness of the world had not been to withdraw from it, as I had been doing. Whereas I tended to walk away from people who didn't talk or behave exactly like I did, Jesus had done exactly the opposite: He walked to them and engaged them in authentic friendship. This certainly wasn't a new concept for me, but I began to be convicted by the fact that when it came to my Christian witness in the world, I wasn't living it out very well. I was confused and unsure now, by what it meant to be "crucified with Christ." and to let "Christ live within me" in order to "shine his light to the world."

It was about this time that I met a certain young lady by the name of Jana Kryzaniak. (Yes, she's Polish. Her maiden name is spelled K-R-Y-Z-A-N-I-A-K. You try writing that on a Valentine's Day Card!) Anyway, as she mentioned in her message a couple of weeks ago, Jana was a fairly new Christian, having come to faith as a young, adult, shortly before we met. What was immediately apparent to me about Jana was her burning zeal to know and to name the "Truth" – the truth of any issue, and in any situation or relationship. She seemed determined to ask all the hard questions so that she would be living her life of Christian discipleship with as much integrity as possible.

Sometimes that drove me crazy, when I didn't want to be held accountable for my actions and thoughts... and inconsistent belief systems... but in the end, Jana helped me to better understand a non-Christian mindset, and how to relate to people who didn't believe the same things I did. And though I don't remember if we ever discussed this verse specifically, I know that as a result of my friendship with Jana, **Galatians 2:20** began to take on a new look in my life. She helped me to see that living as a Christian in a non-Christian world sometimes means "dying" to my self, and to my own comfort zone, in order to be the most effective witness possible. It didn't mean compromising my values or beliefs. But it DID mean that I was going to have to get more comfortable being around people who were different than me, if I was ever going to truly influence the world for Christ. That was a turning point in my faith.

But it wasn't until my young-adult years that I believe I think I came closer to really comprehending the meaning of **Galatians 2:20**. It was during this time that I became painfully aware of my own sinfulness and need to be forgiven. During the year after I graduated from college, I traveled on a Lutheran Youth Encounter team to East Africa. The ministry was exciting & fulfilling, but I was also very lonely, and often sick or exhausted. I was drained physically, emotionally, and spiritually and as a result I saw an uglier and more sinful side of myself than I had been aware of up to that point in my life. I would become short-tempered with my teammates, focused on my own needs, and rude to our African hosts. And in the quiet moments, when I was honest with myself, my thought process might have been something like this, with regards to **Galatians 2:20** -- "Christ lives in me?" Well, he must be sleeping, because I don't see the signs of him displayed very clearly in my life right now."

Ironically it was shortly after this, during a period of increased attempts at

faithfulness, that I became most aware of my unfaithfulness. During this time I began a practice of reciting the words of **Galatians 2:20** at the start of the day or during times of especially strong temptation. I would say the words over and over in my mind, almost like a type of Christian mantra, to get me focused for the day, and to remind myself of my foundation in life... *"I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me..." "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me..."*

The problem, though, was that the emphasis wasn't really on what Christ was doing "within" me, but what I was doing, as though I could somehow assist God in the process of putting my sinful side to death, so that the Christian side of me could emerge. I was attempting to "be better" -- to "be more Christ-like" -- wanting to correct persistent bad habits and spiritual faults -- but to my frustration they only got worse. If you've been in a similar state you know exactly what I'm talking about, and you know how frustrating it is! I began to wonder "what am I doing wrong here God?! Aren't these goals noble and good and right?" I remember how powerful these words from a Michael W. Smith song were to me at that time:

"Who do I hope to finally be? Is it not your life in me?  
Yet the how's too hard to see, too many times...  
Will I finally ever be the true intended me?  
Will the old in me be freed and left behind?  
Too many times, I'm back inside... Wanting desperately to hide,  
Yet I know, I know you say I have to die.  
Too many times, you hear my cries I'm at the end of all my tries...  
So I'm open, Lord, so teach me how to die. "

*"Teach me how to die..."* that was and is the key. I didn't really want to let my sinful self die! We humans don't do that very well, do we? We don't go down without a fight.

Perhaps some of you can relate to this struggle. You want to do the right thing, and be faithful as a Christian, but you just can't seem to pull it off, at least with any sense of consistency. Destructive patterns persist, old sins continue to get the best of you; you hurt the people you love the most... and somehow you continually fall short and disappoint yourself and you feel like you disappoint God. But do you know what I discovered? God isn't disappointed! He knows it's coming, and he's already taken our failure into account - through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Remember my opening story of Christina and the raking job? What were her words to me? "Daddy, I wanna do it. Let me help." When you think about it, that's exactly what we like to say to God. God has a plan for our lives and He gives us a unique set of spiritual gifts to help us carry out our God-given purpose. But then we decide that we want to (quote, unquote) "help" God. We want to make the call, we want to decide which sins need to be dealt with, and which ones to ignore, and so the sinful patterns of our lives continue, and the effects of those sins slowly tear down our lives. Like Christina and the leaves on that Saturday afternoon, we "want to help,"

but we end up disassembling and scattering the plans that God has for our lives.

But eventually (and thankfully) we have to give in. This is what happened to me... I eventually crashed halfway through my internship year of seminary, when I was forced to stop trying so hard to be what I thought God was asking me to be. Under a very good supervising internship pastor, I was getting invaluable, but sometimes difficult training and feedback in what it meant to be a "faithful pastor." The problem was, I was trying to be a "good pastor" and I suppose that also meant a "good Christian" -- all on my own effort. And it wasn't working very well.

After a particularly difficult night of Wednesday programming at the church, and after some particularly difficult feedback from our internship pastor, I found myself driving back to our apartment, defeated, angry and depressed. When I got to our parking lot, I turned off the car and just sat in the darkness, crying. After a few minutes, I finally just gave in, and I softly said a prayer to God, using the same words Christina would end up speaking to me a few years later... "It's too hard God. You do it." Those thoughts were the only prayer I could muster... the only thing I could think to say... but you know what? That's exactly what God was waiting to hear.

He didn't get mad at me for trying. He had watched and smiled and enjoyed, but you know what, he didn't really need me to do it on my own, just as I didn't need Christina to "help" me rake the yard that day. He had already seen far in advance, that I wouldn't be able to pull it off on my own. So he provided the help I needed, in advance. Namely, grace, and forgiveness, And the truth of God's forgiveness and grace -- the grace I so desperately needed to hear that night -- came to my mind in the form of a song. This really happened...:

I heard the words and the melody of one of the greatest songs ever written, being played in my mind. This was the song: *"Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but He is STRONG." Sing the chorus with me.... "Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."* And from that moment on, the healing began.

Now, I wish I could tell you that I have mastered this whole "dying to yourself and handing over the controls to God" stuff. But you know what? I almost always resist those moments when they come. It's no fun to hand over control to someone else is it? And it's not easy to admit that your sin IS sin and that it needs to stop. I still try to take the control of my life out of God's hand. I certainly have not conquered the patterns of sin in my life. ... But I KNOW WHO HAS.

And I've come to understand more fully the promise contained within **Galatians 2:20** -- That when we are finally and inevitably confronted with the reality of our inability to take away our sin, and when we utter, "It's too hard Daddy/GOD. You do it." -- THIS is when the spiritual healing begins. When we reach the bottom, and have no other choice but to hand the reigns back over to God, through confession and a plea for help, he does an amazing thing. ... He gives us our life back. ...

Instead of condemning us, or berating us, or shaming us, and yelling at us for messing up – for “spreading all the leaves back over the yard” ... instead -- God straightens up the piles of our messed up lives through the power of his forgiveness and He doesn't stop there. No, instead, God HANDS US BACK THE RAKE and says... why don't you try it again. But this time... let me HELP YOU. LET ME LIVE IN YOU. And then, in that moment, when we accept God's grace through Christ, we are set free to fully be OURSELVES – to fully love and to receive love, to forgive and to be forgiven as God intended when he brought us into the world. C.S. Lewis put it this way in a beautiful prayer. Listen to his words: “Overcome us Lord, so that, overcome, we may truly be ourselves.”

So, let me ask you this: Have you screwed up lately? Welcome to my world. Have you tried to take control of your life, and call the shots and ended up “spreading the leaves” all over the front yard and left one big mess that someone else has to clean up? Welcome to the club. So has every one of us here. But then, realize this: Today, in this moment, God says to each one of us, “I forgive you. And I have a way out. I am the solution. I've paid the price for that mistake already. It's dealt with. It's done. So, take back the rake, my child. Take back the rake. You are forgiven. ”

For you, my friends, are crucified with Christ, and yet you live. The life you now live, you live by faith in the Son of God who loves you and who gave himself up for you. Rejoice in your freedom my friends, for you have been crucified with Christ, and so you, now, LIVE. AMEN. Would you pray with me, please?

PRAYER: "God... Who do I hope to finally be? Is it not your life in me? Yet the how's too hard to see, too many times... Will I finally ever be the true intended me? Will the old in me be freed and left behind? Too many times, I'm back inside. Wanting desperately to hide, yet I know, I know you say I have to die. Too many times, you hear my cries I'm at the end of all my tries so I'm open Lord, so teach me how to die. " Teach us how to die, Lord, that we might come fully alive ~ in you. Overcome us, Lord, so that overcome, we may truly be ourselves. Through the grace of your son, Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen!