Dead to the law, alive to God: Galatians 2:17-21

For Jews in the first century AD, the law determined two things: it distinguished between what was sinful and what was right and it also defined who was sinful and who was righteous. Jews were righteous because they had the law and kept it; Gentiles were sinful because they did not have the law and did not keep it. But now Paul was preaching that Gentiles outside of the law were righteous because of their faith in Christ, and he was castigating Peter because his concern to keep the Jewish food laws stopped him eating with gentile believers (2:11-16). In effect he was telling Peter that he needed to break the law by sharing meals with Gentiles who did not keep the law. This was drastic. The law no longer defined what was right and what was wrong, who was in and who was out. No wonder some people charged Paul with making Christ the servant of sin – a charge he vehemently denies (2:17). But the implications of Paul’s position are disturbing. Let’s follow his thought to its logical conclusion: if the law no longer defines what is right and what is wrong, then what does? How do we know what is sinful?

There are maybe three ways to understand Paul’s cryptically brief comments in Galatians 2:18:

1. Paul may be referring to Peter’s behaviour: having ‘torn down’ the Jewish food laws in order to eat with Gentiles, Peter’s decision to withdraw from Gentile believers effectively reinstated the law, and this marked him out as a transgressor
2. Paul could be referring to his own decision to abandon the law in order to trust in Christ; if he were to revert to the law, he would show himself to be a transgressor.
3. Paul could be referring to his earlier persecution of the church, which he had undertaken out of zeal for the law. If he was now rebuilding the church which he had once torn down, then he was putting himself on the wrong side of the law by doing so.

It’s not easy to decide between these options, which is probably just as well, because it really doesn’t matter all that much, but which do you think is the most likely, and why?

Paul, as a Pharisee, would have been devoted to the law and would have sought to live his whole life in accordance with its precepts and ordinances. Encountering Jesus completely and utterly changed his life, and Paul uses vivid and radical imagery to describe this transformation (2:19-20). How do these verses make you want to worship?

To what extent do you find that the language Paul uses here is true of your own experience of becoming a Christian? What words or imagery would you use to describe your own conversion, in terms of the kind of person you were before you knew Christ, and the difference putting your faith in Christ made to you?

If the law no longer determines Paul’s conduct, what does? Again, how much of what he says here do you find to be true of your own experience? Do you think that the way Paul says he lived his life without the law can furnish us with the moral resources we need to lead a good life without the law to keep us in check?

What does Galatians 2:21 tell us about why Christ died? Was his death necessary? Are we ever tempted to suppose that we can get in God’s good books by how we live our lives? Jonathan Edwards put it well: ‘If there be ground for you to trust in your own righteousness, then all that Christ did to purchase salvation, and all that God did to prepare the way for it, is vain.’ Thank God that Jesus’ death on the cross for you is all you need to put you right with God.

‘Do we work nothing for the attaining of this righteousness? I answer: Nothing at all. For the nature of this righteousness is, to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing whatsoever of the law or of works, but to know and believe this only, that Christ is gone to the Father and is not now seen; that he is seated in heaven at the right hand of his Father, not as a judge, but made for us by God wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption.’ (Martin Luther)