

## The Useless Cross

It is unthinkable that a Christian would set aside the grace of God or denounce the death of Christ as useless. Yet this sin is as common today among religious people as it used to be among the Jews and some professing Christians in the apostolic era.

These people do not reject grace by living in gross immorality, but paradoxically, by their misguided zeal for the Law of God. To be sure, grace is despised by someone claiming to believe in Christ, who turns Christian freedom into libertinism. But it is equally damning to attempt to become right with God by personal efforts and works.

‘I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing’ (Gal 2:21 NAB), or, in another translation, ‘I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain’ (NKJV).

### The Law

Why does the apostle speak like that about the law? Surely the gospel does not nullify God’s Law, and every Christian is under moral obligation to obey his Lord.

But here the apostle Paul has one and only one aspect of the law in mind, namely its abuse by religious people. They presume that righteousness can be obtained by the works of the law – that is, by their efforts to fulfill its demands. However, the law was never intended for justification; it has never justified anyone and it never will. On the contrary, the law exposes our utter failure and shameful guilt.

But someone may argue, was not Paul referring to the Law of Moses? Yes, he was, Paul was referring to the Law of Moses with all its ceremonies and moral precepts. The Jews were attempting to become righteous in God’s sight by their obedience to the Law of Moses, rather than by placing their faith in the Son of God.

Yet the same principle applies to us today, for if they could not be justified by the works of the perfect Law of God, why should we think that we can be justified by any other law, or the precepts of any church? Why, if justification could somehow be achieved by our efforts, it cannot be of grace: ‘if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace’ (Romans 11:6).

### The Son of God

Moreover if it were possible that we could become righteous by our works, or in any other way apart from faith in Christ, then the cross was a fiasco. Calvary would have been unnecessary; Christ would have died without a true reason or a just cause.

Dare we say, Christ died in vain? We may not say it with our mouth, but we may well imply it unwittingly by our attempts to attain justification by our works. ‘But I do give great value to the death of Christ,’ someone may protest, ‘Apart from his cross, nothing that I do has any value before God. My good works are meritorious because they are united with the merits of Christ.’

Still, in addition to Christ, you’re seeking righteousness by your works. The apostle Paul, however, *contrasts* the law and Christ as two opposing ways to righteousness. He does not say ‘by law and Christ’. Righteousness cannot be obtained by the law, but by Christ alone for ‘if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.’

We have only two alternatives. We can either renounce the merits of our works, and believe in Christ for justification; or else, we can work hard to obtain righteousness by our labours -- and deny the grace of the Son of God. We can either clutch to the cross for righteousness and be cleansed by Christ’s blood, or else, attempt justification by the works of the law -- and be crushed by its curse and condemnation.