

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE SECRET

Galatians 2:15-21

Do you know “The Secret?” That is the title of a phenomenally popular book and DVD by an Australian TV producer named Rhonda Byrne. There are more than 5 million copies of the book in print in the U. S. alone. It was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for months. And, perhaps most significantly, it was given the Oprah Winfrey seal of approval on her television show.

What is “The Secret?” Quite simply, it is what Byrne calls the “law of attraction.” This law, she says, is as powerful and immutable as the law of gravity. It is based on the principle that “like attracts like.” The law of attraction promises that if you think positive thoughts about what you want in life, you will get it. According to this law, anything you want is both possible and easy to get. If you think positively, your thoughts become a magnet that pulls everything you desire towards you.

According to Byrne, it is the most powerful law in the universe, and there is never a time when the law of attraction is not working. She says that we attract into our lives the things we want, and this is based on what we are actually thinking and feeling. Since we create our own circumstances in life by the choices we make, and the choices we make are fueled by our thoughts, it means that our thoughts are the most powerful force there is on earth.

Distilled to its essence, “the secret” is this: Simply ask. Believe. And receive. That is all there is to it. It is a sort of 21st century New Age version of “the power of positive thinking.”

If you follow the logic of “the secret” to its conclusion, there is a dark side to it: If bad things happen to you, it’s all your fault. If your thoughts can bring health and wealth and love, then they are equally the source of any illness or pain or poverty or loss or misery you experience. If you are poor, it is because you are blocking money or prosperity from coming to you with your thoughts.

According to the law of attraction, people who have experienced tragedies or disasters in life brought it on themselves. How? By their thoughts. It was their own fault. They did not want strongly enough not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Try telling that to victims of the Holocaust. Try telling it to people whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Try telling it to those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center or the Pentagon or on United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. Try telling it to those who have been wounded or killed in action in our nation’s armed forces. Or try telling it to anyone who has ever had cancer or lost a loved one to cancer.

Ultimately, “the secret” purports that you are the master of your own destiny. That you and I can control what happens in our lives by our thoughts. That God is not sovereign. You and I are. In reality, as Prison Fellowship Ministry President Mark Earley has said, it is simply a repetition of the oldest lie there is, the lie foisted on Eve by Satan in Genesis 3 when he said: “You will be like God” (3:5). That is the secret, not of success in life or the blessing of God’s peace, not of happiness or fulfillment in life, but of misery. Do not be deceived by it.

I want to talk with you today about another “secret.” It is not really a secret, because it is revealed and stated plainly by the apostle Paul in our reading today from Galatians 2. What Paul says in Galatians 2:20 is the key, if you will, to understanding and living life as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen again to what he says there: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Before we zero in on this verse, I want you to understand the context in which Paul makes this statement. In verse 11 we read that Peter, Paul’s fellow apostle, came to Antioch. Antioch was the most important city in Syria at the time. It was a major trade center. It was the place where the Christian mission to the Gentile world began. It was Paul’s base of operations. And it was, as we are told in Acts 11:26, the place where the followers of Christ were first called “Christians.”

The Bible doesn’t tell us why Peter came to Antioch, only that he came. Perhaps he came as a representative of the church in Jerusalem to observe and assess the ministry of the church in Antioch. Perhaps he came simply to offer encouragement to the church. Whatever the case, Peter’s visit became the occasion for a major conflict between Peter and Paul.

When he came to Antioch, Peter regularly ate meals and enjoyed fellowship with Gentile believers in Christ. Though he was Jewish, after his experience at the home of a man named Simon in Joppa, Peter had begun associating with Gentiles and eating with them. In a vision recounted in Acts 10, God spoke to Peter and showed him that in Christ, he was not bound by the Jewish dietary laws and restrictions (Acts 10:15), and that he should not call anyone impure or unclean (10:28). He came to understand that God’s plan for the church included both Jews and Gentiles, and that both Jews and Gentiles were made right with God through faith in Christ and His saving work on the cross, not by their adherence to the rules and regulations of the Jewish law.

Trouble came when a group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch teaching that circumcision according to the law of Moses was necessary in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). Apparently these Judaizers, as they were known, went even further and taught that it was wrong for Jewish believers to have fellowship meals with uncircumcised Gentile believers, even though these Gentiles believed in Jesus and had been baptized. Under pressure from these Judaizers, Peter backed away from the Gentile believers and stopped eating with them.

When Paul saw what Peter was doing, he confronted him face-to-face and in public. The reason Paul challenged Peter in public, rather than in private, was because Peter's actions were public and his example was profoundly influential. For the sake of the purity and well-being of the church, sin committed in public must sometimes be confronted publicly.

Paul charged Peter with hypocrisy, for what Peter was doing in practice contradicted what Peter knew and believed to be true. It was the fear of men – specifically, the fear of “those who belonged to the circumcision group” who had come from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:12) – that prompted Peter's change in action. It is strange, for on at least two other occasions, in Acts 4 and again in Acts 5, Peter boldly said that he and the other apostles must obey God rather than men (5:29; cf. 4:19-20). But here, Peter succumbed to the fear of men. He was driven by the fear of what James and other Jewish Christians might think or say about him. Proverbs 29:25 says: “Fear of man will prove to be a snare.” It proved to be just that for Peter.

Paul did not accuse Peter of denying the gospel in his teaching. But there was a disconnect, a contradiction, between the gospel Peter proclaimed and his practice. In his pulling away from fellowship with Gentile believers, Peter's behavior was a contradiction of the truth of the gospel. His conduct simply did not square with it. So Paul, seeking to defend the truth of the gospel of grace, confronted Peter and exposed the inconsistency between his actions and his theological convictions.

Our congregation, as you know, is part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The motto of our denomination, as most of you know, is: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” There is a myriad of issues which could divide us or create conflict between us, if we allowed them to do so. John Stott has said: “When the issue between us is trivial [or, we might say, ‘non-essential,’ recognizing that not everything that is non-essential is necessarily trivial], we must be as pliable as possible. But when the truth of the gospel is at stake, we must stand our ground. We thank God for Paul who withstood Peter to his face, for Athanasius who stood against the whole world when Christendom had embraced the Arian heresy, and for Luther who dared to challenge even the papacy.” In matters which are non-essential and not central to the faith, we can and must allow one another to exercise Christian liberty. But in the essential matters of the faith which are non-negotiable, we must stand firm and strong. As Paul did in Antioch for the sake of the gospel.

In verse 16, Paul restates for Peter, for the benefit of the Galatians, and for our benefit as well, the foundational truth of the gospel, which is that we are justified in God's sight not by observing the rules and regulations of the Jewish law and not by any meritorious works on our part, but by faith in Jesus Christ and His saving work for us on the cross. He says: “(We) know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Jesus Christ that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law (i.e., undergoing circumcision or following the dietary rules and restrictions of the law) no one will be justified” (2:16).

Justification, as the Reformers said, is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It is a gift from God, to which we can add nothing. Nor do we need to.

What does it mean to be justified by faith in Christ? Justification, as many of you know, is a term borrowed from the courts of law. As a legal term, it is the opposite of condemnation. To condemn is to declare a person guilty. To justify is to declare that person not guilty. It is to declare a person innocent or righteous. In the Bible, as John Stott says, justification refers to God's act of unmerited favor – His grace – by which He puts sinners right with Himself, not only pardoning and acquitting us, but accepting us and treating us as righteous, on the basis of Christ's righteousness and His atoning sacrifice for us on the cross.

At the heart of the gospel, there is a double switch. Paul describes it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made Him who had no sin (Christ) to be a sin offering for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." What a deal! Jesus took our sin – yours and mine and the sin of the whole world – upon Himself when He gave His life for us on the cross. What do we get in return? Through faith in Him we are declared righteous in God's sight. We are justified through faith in Christ. We are given the cloak of Christ's perfect righteousness to wear, so that when God looks at us, He sees not the ugliness and filth of our sin but the righteousness of our Savior. When we trust in Christ and His saving work, He takes our sin and declares us not guilty but righteous in His sight.

That is the gospel of grace Paul proclaimed and the gospel he defended against the perversions of the legalists who demanded strict adherence to the Jewish law, and against the misguided conduct of Peter in his withdrawal from fellowship with the Gentile believers in Antioch.

This is the essence of the gospel: We are justified in God's sight not by our acts of righteousness or obedience to God's law, but through faith alone in the sufficiency of the saving work of Christ on the cross. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast." That Christ died for you and me is the heart of the gospel.

There is nothing you and I can do to earn or achieve our salvation. And there is nothing we can add to the saving work of Christ on our behalf.

But there is more to the gospel than this core, essential truth. There is more good news that God has for us to grasp. The "more" is found in verse 20, in this statement by Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

Here, if you will, is "the secret." Not only did Christ die for you, to save you from your sins. Not only are your sins forgiven through Christ. The key to living life as a fully-devoted follower of Christ and finding in Him your all in all, is understanding and

embracing the gospel truth that if you are in Christ, Christ lives in you. He lives His life, His resurrection life, in you and me. It is not a matter of you and me trying our hardest to live for God, thinking it all depends on us and our resolve. That road leads inevitably to frustration and futility. And there are a lot of frustrated, discouraged, defeated Christians who are tired of trying and trying and trying, and continually failing to live the kind of life we believe God wants us to live. We are doomed to defeat and discouragement as long as we think it depends on us and our efforts to live a life that pleases God.

What does Paul mean when he says: “I have been crucified with Christ”? He means – and this applies not just to Paul but to every one of us:

- I died with Christ to the power and reign of sin in my life. Romans 6:6-7 says: “We know that our old self was crucified with (Christ) so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” Having been united with Christ in His death on the cross through faith in Him, we have died to our old sinful self and to the power and reign of sin in our lives. We have been set free from its enslaving rule over us.
- I died with Christ to the power of the law. Which is to say, we are no longer under obligation to try to earn God’s favor by our futile efforts to keep God’s law in its totality. It cannot be done, as Paul has already said in Galatians 2:16: “By observing the law no one will be justified.” Because no one can perfectly keep the law. No one except Jesus, that is.
- I died to myself as the primary point of reference in my life. You and I are not the center of the universe. We are not the center of our own personal universe. As Rick Warren would say, it’s not about us. It’s not about you or me. It is about Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead. It is about Christ living in us. Living His life in and through us. If through faith in Christ, you have been crucified with Christ, you died to yourself as the center of your universe and the monarch of your life. And that is a good thing, because until Jesus is the center of your universe and the monarch of your life, until you understand that He is in you to live His life through you, you will find the Christian life to be an impossible dream filled with disappointment and frustration.

“The secret” of living the Christian life is not that we must try hard to live for Christ. It is not that Jesus is with us to help us live the Christian life. It is more than that. You and I are simply incapable of living the kind of life God wants us to live. We cannot do it. Only God Himself can do it by living His life in us.

If the Christian life is based on our performance, then it is hopeless, just as salvation is hopeless if it is based on our performance. But if it depends on Christ living in us and living His life through us, then it is not impossible or hopeless at all.

One translation of verse 20 says: “I have been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live. Yet not I, but Christ lives in me.” We do live, yes. You and I, having been crucified with Christ, have also been raised to new life in Him, as Paul says in Romans 6. But the

power for living God's way comes from Christ living in us. Christ reigning in us. Christ living His life and fulfilling His purposes through us.

Dan Stone, in his book *The Rest of the Gospel* (which a friend of mine passed on to me), says that only God can do it. Only God can live the life. Only God can do His work in us, making us willing instruments and servants of Him. But this doesn't mean that we have no role. Our role is availability. And willing surrender. What Mary said to the angel Gabriel is the proper posture of every believer: "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). Mary, you see, was available. And willing. God was the One who did it.

Our availability, says Stone, releases God's ability. And while living the Christian life is impossible for us when we are relying on our own strength, as Gabriel said to Mary: "Nothing is impossible with God." What is impossible for us is Him-possible with God.

What is the secret of living the Christian life? Just this: Not only did Christ die for you on the cross. Not only are your sins forgiven. Not only are you justified in God's sight through faith in Jesus Christ. In addition to all that, Christ lives in you. He lives His life through you. His power is at work in you. So it is not up to you or me to do it in our strength. It is up to Him, as we allow Him to live His life in us and to reign in our lives as Lord and King and Commander.

As I bring this message to a close, I want you to do something to make the truth of this verse – Galatians 2:20 – very personal. Paul made it personal in his life. I think God wants each of us who has come to Him in faith to make it personal in our lives. So here is what I want you to do. I want you to read Galatians 2:20 and put your name in it. You can read it from your Bible or one of the pew Bibles or you can look at the heading of today's order of worship in your bulletin, where it is printed.

Here is how it works. When I read it, I insert my name so that it says: "Neil has been crucified with Christ and Neil no longer lives; but Christ lives in Neil. The life Neil lives in the body, Neil lives by faith in the Son of God, who loved Neil and gave Himself for Neil."

What is true for Neil is just as true for all of you. Will you insert your name in this verse, and let's say it out loud together, each of us applying our own name to make it personal? Let's do it:

"Neil has been crucified with Christ and Neil no longer lives; but Christ lives in Neil. The life Neil lives in the body, Neil lives by faith in the Son of God, who loved Neil and gave Himself for Neil."

Christ lives in you. That is the truth of the gospel, and it is the secret to living the kind of life that pleases God. May we stop trying to do it in our own strength, and allow the Lord Jesus to live His life in and through us. To the glory and praise of God. Amen.