

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 7: A Defense of Justification by Faith Alone from Experience (3:1-5)

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ might be many things, but complicated isn't one of them. I've never heard of anyone not accepting the gospel because they just couldn't get the facts straight in their mind. The Gospel truly is quite simple to comprehend, so much so that a small child can understand it well enough to place their faith in Jesus Christ. Despite its simplicity, this gospel has had so much opposition. Mankind simply will not tolerate a message that declares them to be spiritually dead and in desperate need of Jesus Christ saving them. People want a saving God, they want a merciful God, they want a gracious God, but they also want to feel like they're good people. They want to feel like they're moral, and ethical, and pleasing to God. People want to feel like God is naturally proud of them, even more than most other people. People want to believe that if God had a refrigerator, that their good works would be on be in the door to display for all else to see.

Part of the reason for the rejection of a gospel where people are justified by faith alone and not by works, is that it will make for a lazy people. The argument goes something like this: If you're chasing the dream of Heaven, you'll do everything you can to get there. If God has already locked up your future home, you'll coast through life carelessly. When Duke George of Saxony heard about the doctrine of justification by grace alone, he complained that it was “a great doctrine to die by, but a lousy one to live with!” In other words, when I die, I want to hold onto this guaranteed Heaven language. I want this binding contract when I'm about to face the judge of Heaven. But Duke George thought that this doctrine gave him nothing of value for the present day. He wanted motivation for the here and now to get up and live for God, and this doctrine seemed to take the wood out of his fire.

Our text in this chapter is Paul's way of handling an argument like the one Duke George had. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is definitely a great doctrine to die with, but it's also a great doctrine to live with too! It is not only the doctrine that greets us into the faith, and guarantees our home upon death, but it is also the lifeblood of our entire walk with Christ in the meantime.

Up until this point in the letter, Paul has been setting the table (so the speak), and now we're about to eat! He has spent the first two chapters proving his apostolic authority, and defining the gospel once again. Over the course of the next few chapters, Paul is going to explain the theology of the gospel, beginning with another sharp rebuke to the Galatians. As I've stated many times already, Paul is upset while writing this letter. His language has been sharp, and forceful. He has just finished reviewing with Peter how they had both come to Christ the same way, by God's grace alone through no work of their own. And he has essentially called any who pervert the free grace of God with some addition of works-righteousness to be those who nullify the grace of God. The Judaizers had definitely nullified God's grace, and the Galatians were in serious danger of doing so as well. Paul is beyond shaking his head at these Galatians. He blurts out, **“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”** Paul really was at a loss to know how people could so quickly fall away from the gospel and believe such nonsense. He

literally asked them if a sorcerer had cast an evil spell on them, or if a magician had put them under hypnosis. It just didn't make sense to Paul that they would think the way they did. Paul clearly didn't think that they had been put under a spell, but the wording of the sentence does suggest that he saw the demonic influence behind the teaching of the Judaizers. Make no mistake, any teaching that distorts (or worse denies) the scripture is not from God no matter how kind, or moral, or spiritual the source may be. I believe that the favorite strategy of the Satan is to package the perfect lie in a suit and tie, and send it from any pulpit he can. Satan doesn't need you to hate Jesus, propagating a damning anti-gospel and taking as many souls down with you as you can is good enough for him.

These Galatians had been duped. They had become the victims of errant teaching. They had felt the pressure of the society around them, and they had felt the heavy influence of the false teachers before them, and they crumbled. A good point to remember here is that Paul is aware of the false teachers, and yet he hasn't let the Galatians off the hook! He calls them foolish! The Galatians were still responsible for the dumb choices that they made with the gospel truths that they already possessed.

So Paul reminds them of their foolishness, brings to light how their present state reflects someone who has literally been cast under a spell and carried into serious error. And now he continues his rebuke with a reminder of the cross of Christ, **"It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."** There is a little play on words here that the lay reader of the text would never notice. Paul uses the term "before your eyes". There's a reason that he brings up the eye. Earlier in the verse, when Paul used the word "bewitched" (Gr. *ebaskanen*), the meaning of that word had to do with giving someone "the evil eye", not the kind that your mother gave you, but in a dark-magic sort of way. In other words, it's as if Paul were saying, *"Your eyes have been exposed to Satanic influence, put your eyes back on the cross!"*

The next word that requires our attention at this time is the word "portrayed". Paul didn't say that Jesus *was* crucified before their eyes, he says that Christ was publicly *portrayed* as crucified. When we think of 'portrayal', we might think of an actor who is playing a role in a movie. Michael Keaton isn't actually Batman, he just portrayed Batman on camera. Therefore, was Paul meaning that actors *portrayed* the characters in the crucifixion story on a stage in their presence? Not exactly. In that day, the Greeks would *portray* (for one example) by posting a public notice of a piece of property that was for sale. The word *portrayed* then is best under in the world of advertising. It gives the idea of taking information and spreading it so that all become informed.

Once again, this doesn't mean that Paul posted the gospel on billboards off of the Galatian highways. But he *is* referring to the broad proclamation of the gospel that made in their region. Time and time again, whether it be on the street corner, or in the open market, or at someone's house, Paul preached with great detail the gospel message, he lived out the gospel too. They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. Paul may not have been an artist, but he was a preacher, and with a thousand words he painted a picture that left more detail in the minds of his listeners than any painting could ever do! That is the art of preaching and living for Jesus Christ and Him crucified! It's the method instituted by God Himself, that people might hear the truths of His Word and believe, even though they may not have present, it's just like they were!

Paul's gospel was the gospel of the crucified Christ. He uses the perfect tense in the word *crucified*. That may or may not mean anything to you at first, but it has a significant meaning. A word that is in the perfect tense, means that it happened in the past, but it still has an effect today. If ever there was an event in world history that could be described in the perfect tense, it was the crucifixion of Christ. An

event that happened one time, and yet the result of it has eternal ramification for people who are coming to Christ today! Paul is upset with the Galatians for forgetting all of this! They had seen Christ with great clarity through the ministry of Paul. They had seen what God can do with Paul, to save a soul who sought to destroy the gospel, and make him one who promoted it. Paul portrayed Christ with the precision of Michelangelo. What the Judaizers did was the modern version of spray-painting graffiti over the masterpiece of the gospel that Paul painted before them. They sought to change the message, to alter its appearance. The Judaizers weren't interested in hearing a message of salvation by faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, they wanted to custom-tailor the portrayal so that it looked like the god they worshipped.

What Paul does in 3:1 is re-orient their eyes to the cross, where they would see once again the old, old story of Jesus and His love. That Jesus paid it all! What follows next in our text is four rhetorical questions raised by Paul designed to show them the folly of returning to works of the law for salvation *after* they had seen, and understood, and placed their faith in Christ alone. The four questions are:

Initiation (how they came to Christ – 3:2) **“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”**

Completion (how a life in Christ ends – 3:3) **“Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”**

Persecution (the cost of following Christ – 3:4) **“Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?”**

Miracles (their meaning in the Christian life – 3:5) **“Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”**

If you boil all of the questions down into one point, the essence of it would be, *“Does the Christian obtain the Holy Spirit by working the law or by hearing with faith?”* The Galatians knew the answers to all of these questions. They were, after all, believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they were Spirit-indwelt people. These questions raised by Paul weren't meant to spark debate, or cause them to choose one or the other. The questions were rhetorical. It was a reminder by Paul to them that they were all saved by God's grace, justified by the sacrifice of Christ alone for them on the cross of Calvary, by no work of their own. It was a reminder by Paul to them that the Spirit of God had begun (and would finish – see Philippians 1:6) His saving work in their heart. It was the Spirit who had breathed new life into their bodies. It was the Spirit who gave them their strengths and talents and abilities to serve God. It was the Spirit who caused good fruit to be abundant in their lives.

A side note on the word “miracles”. Paul mentions in verse 5 that the Spirit works miracles among the Galatians. Are we then to conclude that those first century Christians performed miracles? What does that mean as far as us? Can we perform miracles too? The English word can be a little misleading. The Greek word is *dunamis*, from which we get the English word ‘dynamite’. When we think of dynamite, we think of explosive power that alters everything it touches. I think that definition gives us a better picture of how the Spirit was working through the Galatians, and how He still works through believers today. Wherever the life of a Christian is lived out, an impact will be made upon all who surround them. Sometimes positively, and God may use that influence to draw them to Himself. And sometimes negatively, where persecution comes and God's name is slandered. Nevertheless, God is always impacting this world precisely the way He wants too, through those whom He has appointed. And when God chooses to save a hopeless sinner, one who stands as His enemy, what other word can use to

describe such a change in a person than a miracle? A miracle is by definition, something that occurs out of the ordinary through the influence of God, who suspends the natural laws that He created.

How did the Galatians receive the Spirit?

There are only two possibilities as to how they did: Either by keeping the law, or by hearing the gospel and placing their faith in Christ alone. When we read the term ‘works of the law’, we need to remember that what is meant is more than the keeping of the ceremonial Jewish law, but a strict adherence to the entire law in general. So Paul is taking these two options (law and faith) and pitting them against each other, so that one reveals the other as error. *If the Galatians received the Holy Spirit through law-keeping, then the concluding teaching for all of us who are reading is that we all must do something in order to earn the Spirit within us too! If we also make the effort to keep the Mosaic law and wear the proper clothing, eat proper foods, keep a clean mouth, watch wholesome movies, listen to wholesome music, than we too can hope to be filled with the Holy Spirit. If that were the option, God would be granting the Holy Spirit to every committed Christian as a reward for obedience.*

This is precisely the way that Christ is presented in many churches, across many Christian denominations today. This is precisely the message that every sinful heart wants to hear. *“I know I’m a sinner. I’m sorry about my sin. I don’t want to offend God with my sin anymore. Tell me exactly what God wants me to do and I’ll do it for Him. Tell me exactly what God wants me to stay clear of and I will. I vow to make God be proud of the person I will become. When I die, God will see that I’ve lived for Him with great dedication, and He’ll more than happily let me into Heaven because He loves me. God is a loving gracious God who will accept my efforts and overlook my shortcomings in my efforts.”*

But there is another option that Paul gives that runs against the idea that God is granting the Holy Spirit as a reward for obedience. It’s the view that is proclaimed through the Bible, that God is granting the Holy Spirit to His elect *in order that* they might grow in obedience to Him! In this option Paul gives, the Holy Spirit is alive and active in a person, *preceding* their faith. The Holy Spirit is the one who has given life to a spiritual corpse and caused them to see their need of Christ in the first place!

When Paul asks them the question, **“Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”** The Galatians knew the answer, it was through faith! Long before the Judaizers showed up with the distortion of the gospel, the Galatians (being Holy Spirit indwelt) had already recognized their need for Christ, and trusted in His redemptive work on Calvary alone! Hearing is all that was necessary for them, as for us. Hearing the articulated gospel and believing it is all that is necessary for saving faith. Far from being a reward for obedience, God gives the Holy Spirit as a gift, by His grace, to those who are His enemies, in order that they will believe in Christ and be saved. Paul’s last rhetorical question (in verse 5) again echoes the point that God has given the Spirit to those who heard and believed with faith.

There is a movement within the Protestant Church that is growing at the moment. It’s called the Holiness movement. The Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination is a member of this movement, and are present in Windsor today in four churches, one being a mega-church. This movement teaches that the Holy Spirit is given to believers, but at a later stage. They call it the “second blessing”. The Holiness movement has created two tiers of Christians, those with the Spirit, and those without Him. Christians who are new believers don’t have the full measure of the Spirit, but have received the ‘first work of grace’ and been forgiven of their sins. The ones who have the Spirit are the ones who have received the ‘second work of grace’. God has now made them holy, and they will

gradually be cleansed from the tendency to commit sin, an experience that they call 'entire sanctification' which leads to Christian perfection.....wow.

Once the Galatians saw Paul's questioning and realized that his point, that the Holy Spirit was theirs by God's grace at the moment of receiving Christ, the argument was over. The truth is that the Spirit is given by God to Christians by faith alone. What that means by application has profound implications. Paul essentially says in verse 2, *"Let me ask you just one (rhetorical) question..."* and then he asks them four variations of the same question. Verse 3 Paul asks, **"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"** Keep in mind the issue of circumcision at hand, which the Judaizers were promoting as a necessary step of obedience to be right with God. "Flesh" deals in regards to the totality of our being, in all of its weakness and sin, apart from the power of God dwelling within us. Therefore, flesh would include even our best works which Isaiah called **"a polluted garment"**. (Isa. 64:6) Any attempt at self-righteousness is done in the flesh, including circumcision as promoted by the Judaizers. Paul's rhetorical question could have been, *"You know that God gave you the Spirit at the moment of your conversion. You know that you were justified by the blood of Christ at the moment of your conversion, are you now trying to get right with God by mutilating your body in circumcision?"*

John Stott summarized the theology of the Judaizers, *"They did not deny that you must believe in Jesus for salvation, but they stressed that you must be circumcised and keep the law as well. In other words, you must let Moses finish what Christ has begun. Or rather, you yourself must finish, by your obedience to the law, what Christ has begun. You must add your works to the work of Christ. You must finish Christ's unfinished work."*¹

As I mentioned in passing a few pages ago, God always finishes what He starts in us. This is what Paul meant when he wrote in Philippians 1:6, **"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."** It is nothing short of folly, and maybe blasphemy, to think that we can perfect God's work in us a little better than He did. We would call it a criminal activity for an amateur artist to visit the Louvre in Paris and take out a paint brush to improve the look of the Mona Lisa. We know a masterpiece when we see one. We recognize the priceless value of something that is accomplished by a famous person. What is infinitely more criminal is to think that any effort of ours could improve our appearance and make us more beautiful in the sight of God.

Paul's next rhetorical question adds to his case for their reception of the Spirit at conversion through faith alone, verse 4, **"Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?"** The Greek word for suffer *could* mean physical suffering for Christ, although it's not limited to physical suffering, and could be referring to emotional persecution for following Christ. The Galatians had witnessed Paul suffering for his faith and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They too had (in some way, or in many ways) been the recipient of persecution for their faith in the gospel of Christ. Paul question therefore could have been, *"If God only started a work in us that we have to finish with our obedience to the law, than the cross of Christ saves no one. If Christ's work on the cross isn't the good news of our free salvation, then why are we suffering!!! We're putting ourselves through pain for nothing!"*

But there is another option for what "suffer" means, and I think it is more fitting within the context of the letter. The Greek word *pascho* is a word that carries the basic idea of experience that comes from pain or hardship. But since there is nothing in the letter that has referenced physical persecution at all,

¹ Stott, John, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, IVP, 1968, p.22

it seems strange that Paul would bring it up now. What seems to make more sense is that Paul is referring more to their 'experience' is following Christ in the Spirit. With this interpretation, we could reword Paul question this way, *"Did you experience so many things in vain? Haven't you learned anything from all of your Christian experiences? Why can't you see the truth of the gospel clear enough to realize you're being duped by the Judaizers! Has everything you've learned been for nothing?"* Then he adds, **"if indeed it was in vain."** This really is a softening of the blow by Paul. Here Paul leaves room for hope that not all was lost with the Galatians, but that perhaps now after reading Paul's words they would have been stirred up to remember the cross and reform their theology.

Verse 5, **"Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?"**

The Greek word for 'supplies' (*epichoregeo*) means to supply abundantly and with great generosity. It was the word used of a husband's unfailing love for his wife. Obviously, this last rhetorical question is answered, *"By hearing with faith."* God, in his unfailing, gracious, generous love, has provided us with the Holy Spirit, the One who *"will guide us into all the truth, who will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to us the things that are to come. He will glorify God, for He will take what is His and declare it to us. All that the Father has is His; therefore Jesus said that He will take what is Jesus' and declare it to us."* (John 16:13-15, sort of)

This is the Spirit who works powerfully (*dunamis* – remember dynamite, translated miracles in this verse) in us. He is one who speaks through our feeble words and carries through them the power of God. This is what meant when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, **"And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."** The Lord responded to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."**

The power of the Holy Spirit is God's gift to His children. It is not earned, it is not a reward. If a person has realized that they are a needy sinner, and placed their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, they are saved. At that moment the Holy Spirit indwells them, as a further gift from God, so that they might walk in His strength. How could anyone hope to improve on the work that the indwelling Holy Spirit is already doing in their heart?