

“Does the Promise Come by Faith or Works?”

Text: Galatians 3:1-14

Galatians is a letter of stark contrasts. There are struggling Christian believers throughout Galatia, and there are false teachers called Judaizers, who have secretly infiltrated these same churches wreaking havoc by their deceptive actions. Paul has spoken of a false gospel taught by these Judaizers, which is no gospel at all. He has also spoken of the true gospel, in which the saving merits of Christ are proclaimed and then received through faith alone and not by works. Paul has defended his own authority as apostle to the Gentiles, since his gospel and his calling to preach that gospel come from none other than our Lord himself. And now here in Galatians 3, Paul begins to flesh out a bit further the ramifications of this collision between the true gospel and the false gospel.

Galatians is one of the most powerful letters in the New Testament. Paul is writing to churches he helped to found through the preaching of the gospel. He has been gone from Galatia for short period of time, only to have a group of Jewish converts to Christianity deny the very gospel he had preached. These were men who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but who also believed that membership in the covenant was maintained through continuing obedience to the law of Moses, submission to ritual circumcision, the keeping of certain dietary laws, things which are known as the badges, or emblems of Israel.

When pagan Gentiles came to faith in Jesus Christ these Jewish Christians began to insist that Gentiles must adopt and maintain these badges or emblems of Judaism, or else forfeit their right standing before God. Unless Gentiles submit to circumcision, keep the dietary laws, and for all intents and purposes live as Jews, they cannot be justified.

Discovering what had happened in his absence, Paul went “postal” to use a contemporary term, took up his pen and fired off this Epistle. “*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you,*” Paul says, for this false gospel is taught by men “*who infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ. We did not give in to them for a moment.*” Things got so bad that Paul was forced to confront Peter to his face, since Peter was living as a Gentile, though he was telling Gentiles to live like a Jew. Peter was not acting in line with the truth, namely that “*a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*” Thus Paul’s gospel is grounded in the work of Jesus Christ, his sinless life and sacrificial death, hence justification is by faith, and not through obedience to the law or by works.

In Galatians 3, by way of response, Paul exhorts the Galatians to consider how it was that they came to faith in the first place (1-6).

1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. 2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? 4 Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? 5 Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? 6 Consider Abraham: “He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Exasperated, Paul reminds his audience of his indignation with the fact that they have tolerated the error of the Judaizers far too long. The phrase “foolish Galatians,” conveys the idea of an insufficient use of mental powers or a deficiency in understanding. A paraphrase like “you numbskulls,” is not inappropriate! Paul is angry, if not furious, with the Galatians and minces no words with them. Some commentators have called attention to the rather striking fact that Paul calls his readers “Galatians,” and not “Brethren,” or some other such term of endearment.

Paul now asks the Galatians the question, “Who has bewitched you?” Paul uses a term which means to cast a spell upon someone through the evil eye. The Galatians are acting like they are under the hypnotic spell of the false teachers, rendering them incapable of using sound judgement. Those who have been taken in by them risk being severed from Christ.

Paul appeals to the fact that he had been in the region preaching the gospel previously—“*before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.*” The language that Paul indicates that through his preaching in Galatia, Jesus Christ’s saving work had been set before the Galatians which such clarity, that Christ was openly displayed, literally “publicly placarded”—or set out as on a billboard—for all to see.¹ Paul describes his preaching as the setting forth of Christ’s saving work in such a way, that it is as if a picture of his saving work had been visible through his words. If the Galatians had fixed their eyes on the saving work of Jesus Christ by recalling Paul’s preaching, and had not instead focused on the deceptive evil eye of the Judaizers and their false gospel, the Galatians would not find themselves in their present predicament.

In verses 2 and 5 of chapter 3, Paul asks his readers several rhetorical questions, based upon the antithesis between his gospel, which is centered in the placarding of Christ, and the false gospel of the Judaizers, based upon the merit of human effort. In verse 2, the antithesis between the two is set out as follows— “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing what you have heard?” Similarly, Paul asks in verse 5, “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law or believe what you have heard?” In both cases the answer is clearly the latter. Paul asks these questions in order to force the Galatians to consider how it was that they entered into Christ in the first place, which Paul directly associates with “receiving the Spirit.”

This is a fairly common way for Paul to speak— in Romans 8:9 Paul says “*if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Christ*”; in Ephesians 1:13 he puts it this way—“*having believed, you were marked [in Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.*” For Paul, the Holy Spirit is received at the beginning of the Christian life by means of faith, through believing the gospel. The antithesis is that the Spirit is not received by obedience to law. This is a point which should be self-evident to Paul’s hearers.

It is equally wrong to assert that the Christian life begins with the reception of the Spirit through faith, but is continued through works and obedience, hence in verses 3-4, Paul sets up another antithesis. This time Paul contrasts “*beginning with the Spirit,*” with trying to attain the goal, through means of human effort (literally in the “flesh”). “Beginning with the Spirit (NIV) no doubt refers to the inception of the Galatians’ Christian life when the Spirit was imparted and received by their hearing with faith (v. 2) the

¹ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, p. 148.

message of Christ.”² As we enter into Christ through faith alone, Paul is perfectly clear that we receive the Spirit at that same time. Paul’s point here is that as we enter into Christ through faith alone and receive the Holy Spirit through faith alone, we continue on in Christ through faith alone, and cannot attain “perfection” in the flesh, that is, reach our goal [heaven] through obedience to the law of Moses, submission to ritual circumcision and the keeping of certain dietary laws.

Says Paul, if you follow the latter approach, as many of the Galatians were doing under the spell of the evil eye of the Judaizers, you risk suffering so much and still attaining nothing. To fall under the spell of the Judaizers is to transfer merit from Christ’s obedience to human endeavor, to take our eyes off the cross of Christ and place them on our own actions. It is to turn the gospel of Jesus Christ—a proclamation of his doing and dying—into a fable about human achievement and obedience. The teaching that we start by faith but reach the goal by works is, as Paul says a dangerous and deceptive spell, and to fall under its sway is to risk everything. We begin by faith in Christ and we reach the goal through faith in Christ.

Verse 6 is a critical verse in Paul’s overall argument, and is commonly misunderstood. The answers to the rhetorical questions Paul asks are virtually self-evident, so he now moves from the theological to the historical to buttress his argument. Paul cites Genesis 15:6 as a proof-text for his gospel because Abraham’s faith and the reckoning of Christ’s righteousness to him are connected. Far from being an invention of his own, Paul can appeal to the fact that Abraham is a concrete historical example that faith alone justifies.

There is some interesting background here that helps to give us some additional clarification. Many Jews of Paul’s day apparently considered faith as a meritorious work, therefore, God regarded Abraham’s faith itself as the righteousness that justifies. One scholar puts it this way:

According to Jewish interpretation at the time of Paul, Abraham's faith was a meritorious work; Abraham "put his faith in God," and therefore God counted that act of faith for what it was, as righteousness. Since Paul employs the quotation of Gen. 15:6 in confirmation of the implied answer to the question in vv. 2, 5 (by "hearing with faith" and not by "works of the law"), it is clear that he does not take the "counting" as an accounting of Abraham's merit, or even in the sense that Abraham's faith was regarded or estimated by God as if it were righteousness (the one quality being taken for the other). Rather, he takes it in the sense that Abraham was considered to stand in a right relationship (i.e., was given the status of being "right") with God, simply by virtue of his faith in God, and not by virtue of meritorious achievement before God. In this way Paul makes a radical break with Judaism, probably also giving a corrective to an interpretation of the same verse being taught to the Galatians by the Judaizers.³

Apparently, Jewish exegesis of the passage was that God credited Abraham's faith to him as righteousness, making faith a kind of meritorious work. Paul intentionally uses this passage to show that human merit is in no way involved in justification, and that Abraham’s right standing before God is given to him only because Abraham was given this right status through the means of faith, not because of faith. In Paul’s mind, Abraham’s reception of Christ’s righteousness through faith, is tantamount to the

² Fung, *Galatians*, p. 133.

³ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 135.

reception of the Spirit through the “hearing of faith.” Thus justification and the reception of the Spirit both come through the means of faith alone, and together stand at the center of Paul’s gospel. Christ justifies, and the Spirit is received by faith, not by works.

In verses 7-14, Paul discusses the means by which God’s promise to Abraham is fulfilled. As we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, and since we receive the Spirit by faith alone, can the promise God made to Abraham be fulfilled through means of obedience to the Law of Moses?

7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. 8 The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” 9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. 10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” 11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” 12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

Paul makes a very subtle, but important change in emphasis. He moves from discussing an individual—Abraham—to discussing a group of individuals—Abraham’s “children” or literally “men of faith.” Paul asked his hearers a series of personal questions in verses 1-6. “Did you receive the Spirit and a right standing from God through faith or by works?” Paul moves on to ask a much broader question, namely “Who are the true people of God, and on what basis does God accept them as such?” This is certainly a polemical argument, aimed squarely at the Judaizers and gets to the heart of the matter as far as the Gentiles are concerned.

As is his habit, Paul connects the theoretical to the historical, in this case, the person of Abraham. Not only is Abraham the best illustration of how it is that an individual is right before God (“*Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness*”), but Abraham is also said to be the father of a vast number of believers in Jesus Christ, the “children of Abraham,” the “men of faith.” This is important for Paul to clarify, since the Judaizers were probably appealing to the fact that it was submission to circumcision and the external sign that truly characterized the children of Abraham. “You were a child of Abraham because you are circumcised,” according to the Judaizers, because the merit of Christ is not enough to justify.

Paul refutes this notion by pointedly asserting, “*it is those who believe,*” not those who are circumcised “*who are children of Abraham.*” Thus being a child of Abraham does not depend upon ethnicity nor a ceremonial righteousness, but depends upon being united to Jesus Christ through faith alone. Through faith in Christ, Gentiles too, are children of Abraham and heirs to the promise.

In verse 8, Paul combines a number of verses together from Genesis 12, 22, 28 to demonstrate that the nations (the Gentiles) are heirs to the promises God made to Abraham. Paul does this to pull together a number of Old Testament promises, such as that of Isaiah 49:1-7, in which it is stated God would indeed bring salvation to all the nations. This means that the present missionary effort to reach the Gentiles with the gospel was God’s purpose from the beginning.

Thus the Judaizers were attempting to frustrate God's purposes rather than furthering them. They were not defending true Israel, they were tearing true Israel apart! Driving a wedge between Jewish and Gentile believers was, in effect, dividing what Christ died to join together into one body—a point that Paul will make in Ephesians 2:11-22. This is also why Paul can declare that the “gospel” was announced in advance to Abraham. There is only one gospel taught in the Scriptures, and though hidden in type and shadow, it is the same gospel in the Old Testament as in the New. God accepts sinners by providing a means of the forgiveness of sins, and by providing sinners with a righteousness which can justify. It is through Abraham that all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Thus, as Paul says in verse 9, those who believe as did Abraham—even Gentiles—are the recipients of all of the promises God made to Abraham. And the basis for this is not circumcision, or human works or obedience to the law of Moses, but faith. Thus as justification comes by faith, not by works, so also the promise comes through faith, not by circumcision.

Though obscured by the NIV, there is a marked transition from verse 9 to verse 10. Paul moves from the point that the children of Abraham are children by faith alone, to demonstrating that the law brings a curse, and that those who seek to be justified by their obedience to the law, will indeed find themselves under the curse of the law! Notice the contrast that Paul makes here between “the men of faith” (in verses 7-9) with “all who rely upon the law,” in verse 10. It is an “either/or” choice. Either you are justified by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, or else you are under the curse of the law.

Paul appeals to three Old Testament passages to make his point. First in verse 10, “*all who rely upon the law, are under a curse,*” is a citation of Deuteronomy 27:26. The meaning is clear, “all who try to be justified by their obedience to law, will be under the curse pronounced upon any and every infraction of law—namely, death and punishment.” If you want to be justified by works, it is simple: Obey the law, perfectly! James 2:10—“*he who breaks the law at but one point is guilty of breaking all of the law,*” comes to mind as a parallel passage.

Next, Paul appeals to Habakkuk 2:4, where we are told that “*the righteous will live by faith.*” If the righteous live by faith, or better, if it is only through faith that one receives righteousness and will live, then accordingly, no one can be justified by obedience to the law. Paul is very clear—“because Scripture says that he who is righteous (that is, justified) by faith will live, it follows that no one is justified by works of the law (irrespective of one's failure or success in keeping it).”⁴ Law brings a curse, not life.

In verse 12, Paul cites Leviticus 18:5, “*Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them.*” Here Paul argues that the law is not based upon faith but upon obedience, at least as far as justification is concerned. Again, to be justified by law—one must be perfectly obedient! Thus the utter contrast between the law and gospel, between faith and works, between the Spirit and the flesh! In short, the law cannot justify because no one can obey it perfectly. Break God's law but a single time in thought, word or deed, and you are under its curse, and therefore, subject to the wrath of God. To try, therefore, to be justified by obedience to law is contrary to faith. If you want to be saved by works and obedience, you must do so perfectly or else suffer the consequences. God will not grade the final exam for eternal life on a curve!

Paul has spoken of the blessing of Abraham and the curse of the law. Now he introduces the work of

⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 145.

Jesus Christ, as the one who delivers us from the curse and who brings to us that promised to Abraham. By dying, it is said, Christ himself has become a “curse.” There are some interesting points here, especially in Paul’s interpretation of the Old Testament.

In Deuteronomy 27:26, God, in effect, pronounces a curse upon everyone who fails to render perfect obedience to law. In Deuteronomy 21:22-23 Moses declares to be accursed everyone who hangs upon a tree. By bringing these two texts together and interpreting the latter [dying on a tree] in terms of the former [being accursed], Paul understands Jesus’ death upon the cross as a bearing of the curse of God! Thus Christ died under God’s curse “for us,” or “for our sake.” Thus Jesus Christ dies upon the cross for us, by becoming a curse, so that God could indeed punish him for our failure to perfectly obey the law. Christ was punished for law-breakers and sinners. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:8, Christ dies for the ungodly. Thus by submitting to God’s curse on behalf of Jew and Gentile alike, Christ redeemed us from that curse, paid for our sins and won for us freedom from the obedience to law as a means of justification.

Last, in verse 14, Paul elaborates on the reason why Christ redeemed us from the curse, which is so that we as Gentiles might receive the blessing promised to Abraham, namely promise of the Holy Spirit. It is only because of Christ’s becoming a curse for us, therefore removing the curse from us, that we can be justified by faith and become Abraham’s children. It is also because of Christ’s death for sinners that we receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith as well. Thus the . . .

gift of the Spirit (who is the substance of the promise) is to be received ‘through faith,’ literally ‘through the faith’—the faith spoken of in vv. 7-9, 11 f. In the original promise to Abraham there was no mention of the Spirit but only the blessing of justification by faith, and yet here Paul conceives of the fulfillment of that promise as constituted above all in the bestowal of the Spirit upon those who have faith. It is manifest that in Paul’s thinking the blessing of justification is almost synonymous (it is certainly contemporaneous) with the reception of the Spirit.⁵

Thus all of the blessings of the promise, the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness and the ‘right standing’ before God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to us only through the doing and dying of Jesus Christ and are received only by means of faith.

When considering justification, Paul argues *if* by faith, *then* not by works.

When considering the promise, Paul likewise argues that *if* the promise comes by faith, *then* it too cannot come by works.

Obviously, there is much in Galatians 3 that relates to the contemporary situation in the church today. When Paul speaks of his prior proclamation of Christ crucified throughout the region of Galatia, he speaks of “publicly placarding Christ,” as if our Lord’s saving work were set forth on a billboard for everyone to see.

Preaching Christ is not simply talking about Jesus, referring to him obliquely, or focusing solely upon his ethical teaching. Many of our contemporaries today have lost sight of this. I am convinced that this is why so much of evangelical and Reformed preaching, teaching and evangelism now centers in the felt

⁵ Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 151-152.

needs of the audience and why preaching produces so little lasting effect upon its hearers.

Much of this contemporary preaching is often current event or market-driven, with the preacher doing everything in his power to show how relevant Christianity is in every area of life. Christianity never becomes more irrelevant when we do this, and every pagan knows it—hence the reason why Christians are the butt of jokes for every sitcom and standup comedian. It is one thing if they hate the gospel, it is another when they lampoon us for our foibles.

Indeed this shift from Christ crucified to “Christ the manager,” “Christ the moral example,” “Christ the caring nurturer,” “Christ the motivator,” “Christ the healer,” in effect, turns Christ into a new Moses who simply gives easier laws and principles to keep which we now call “the gospel.” When this happens, the effects are devastating to Christ’s church, for both the law and the gospel are lost and this becomes the breeding ground for self-righteousness and moralism.

Not preaching Christ crucified destroys both the law—which was given, in part, to condemn us, show us our sin and our desperate need of Jesus Christ—as well as gospel, since the gospel becomes “doing what Jesus would do,” “living as Jesus would want me to live,” “Jesus helping me be a better person,” all which deny the very essence of the gospel, which is that the Son of God gave himself for me upon the cross, dying under God’s curse for all of those times when I didn’t do as Jesus would have me to do.

Preaching Christ is publicly placarded Christ, not using Jesus as an excuse to talk about ourselves. If our Christianity is reduced to “doing what Jesus would do,” instead of “believing what God would have us believe,” modern Judaizers have taken us in, we have come under the spell of the evil eye and we have reduced the law to trivialities, and turned the gospel into law. Christianity is only relevant to our true needs when it is centered in the public placarding of Christ.

Here also, Paul sets out the meaning of the cross, which is the content of his preaching. There are four things we need to consider here.

First, Paul contends that Christ has become a curse upon the cross. God thus regards Christ as a lawbreaker—the theological basis for those awesome and haunting words uttered by our Lord from the cross, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It is because Christ became accursed, that God could punish him for sins that he did not commit.

Second, it is clear that Christ has become a curse *for us*—that is for both Jew and Gentile. This makes sense of the universal language in the New Testament and still allows us emphasize the particular nature of so much of the New Testament’s atonement language, such as “Christ laid down his life for the sheep” (John 10:15) and “purchased the church of God with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Christ’s death is not intended by God to save each and every person who has ever lived in every age, or else the atonement does not accomplish what God intended that it would. Rather, this means that the atonement is for all (in the sense of all ethnic groups) Jew and Gentile—an important point in Paul’s defense against the Judaizers.

Third, by becoming a curse for us, Jesus Christ redeems us from the curse of the law. This means that Christ’s death is for the purpose of removing from his people the curse, that is, the penalty rightly due them for their infractions of God’s law. In other words, Christ died for our sins! If Christ has died for us this means that God will not hold our sins against us, since Christ has borne them for us on the cross.

Fourth, in his death Jesus Christ secures for Jew and Gentile alike all the blessings of the promises that God made to the children of Abraham, namely that we would be justified through faith alone and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus we have in Galatians 3 a fully developed notion of the penal-substitutionary death of Christ, in which Christ dies for sinners, sets us free from the curse of the law, and enables us to receive the promise of justification by faith apart from obedience to the law, as well as the basis for our reception of the Holy Spirit, also through faith alone.

Paul's rhetorical questions were meant to get to the heart of the matter about the gospel and the place of human obedience. Did the Galatians receive the Spirit through keeping the law, *or* through believing the gospel that Paul had preached to them? Did God work miracles in their midst through the means of faith, *or* because the Galatians were able to obey the Law? The answer is obvious. The same is true of the promise that God made to Abraham. Does the promise come by faith *or* works? Did Abraham receive the promise because he was circumcised and because God regarded his faith as a meritorious work? No, Abraham believed God and was therefore, given a right standing before God, because Christ's perfect law-keeping and righteousness was reckoned to him. Were Abraham's children his children because they were circumcised, obeyed the dietary laws and saw their own efforts to be obedient? No, they were Abraham's children because they were "men of faith," not "men of law." Clearly no one becomes a Christian on the basis of good works.

But what about those who thought they became Christians by faith, but who based their continuing status before God in the merit of human works? Paul has made it clear that the Galatians had begun their Christian lives in the Spirit, and now under the evil eye and the spell of the Judaizers, were trying to attain their goal by obedience to the law. This then is Paul's warning and promise to us today.

We become Christians by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, and we remain Christians by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. The good works which come from the Christian are the fruit of faith and justification, not the cause. And this is why God comes to us through Word and Sacrament in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we might continue to trust in the merits of Jesus Christ instead of our pitiful attempts at good works, that our faith in him might be strengthened as we contemplate the public placarding of his death for our sins, and so that we do not come under the spell of false teachers, who seek to divert our attention from Jesus Christ to our own efforts.

The promise comes by faith, not by works. We know this, because Christ crucified has been publicly placarded, he has become a curse for us, so that through faith in him alone, we are the adopted children of Abraham, justified from the guilt and power of sin, and indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit.

This is God's wonderful promise to all those who trust in Jesus Christ, through faith alone.