



LAPSING INTO LEGALISM

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Galatians 3:1-14

Fifth Message

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Many people believe that if and when they stand before God, their good works and bad works will balance out. They think that because God is “nice,” he will say that while they may have missed the mark on occasion, in general they did fine. But that is to misunderstand the holiness of God. God is utterly holy and untainted by sin. He will have nothing to do with sin. Furthermore, people don’t know the depth of their own depravity, how sinful they are and how far short of the mark they fall. Suppose we were given the task of swimming from California to Hawaii. A good swimmer would make it a few miles offshore, but nobody would make it to Hawaii, no matter how hard they tried. In the same way, doing your best to live a good life just won’t cut it. God’s standard for holiness is perfection, and nobody can achieve that. The only way people can make it to heaven is to be “in Christ,” the only perfect person who ever lived. And the only way to get in Christ is by faith. It can’t be done with good works.

Many Christians know that justification comes by faith. Sanctification, the process of growing in Christ, is where they get confused. They end up mixing law and grace. That was the Galatians’ problem. They would admit that they had found Christ by faith, but they thought sanctification came about by performing good works. That error is just as prevalent in churches today. People think they gain God’s approval by reading the Bible, praying, memorizing Scripture, giving more and serving more.

In Galatians 1 and 2, Paul defended both his apostleship and the divine origin of his message. In chapter 3, he speaks directly to the Galatians.

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? (Gal 3:1 NASB)

J.B. Philips translates this verse: “O you dear idiots of Galatia.” *The Message* puts it this way: “You crazy Galatians!” “Foolish” means without knowledge or reason. Their behavior was illogical. It didn’t make sense. They were not thinking properly. Someone had bewitched them: in a tongue-in-cheek reference to the magicians of his day, the apostle says that someone had cast a spell on them.

Interestingly, the pronoun here is singular. One would expect it to be plural, referring to the Judaizers. Perhaps Paul has in mind the enemy behind the false teachers, the consummate liar, Satan. Jesus called him a

liar and murderer. His goal is destruction and his method is deception. He is the great deceiver. Much of our illogical behavior is the result of his deception.

Paul warned Timothy about people who have a form of godliness but deny its power. They look good, they know all the rituals, but the heart of it is missing. Satan doesn’t always need to drive you away from God. He can preoccupy you with religious activity to the point where all the joy is wrung out of your life. He can be the epitome of a legalist. If becoming a drunk isn’t a temptation, he can make you a monk. He is behind all the legalism that has entered Christianity: all the musts, the shoulds, the oughts, the have to’s that paralyze us and suffocate our spiritual life.

But there is a cure; and it is found in the cross. Notice how Paul puts it, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” We will come back to this verse when we celebrate communion later. The apostle is asking the Galatians how could they have been fooled after learning about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Having embraced the truth at the beginning, that people are justified by grace, in Christ, through faith, they had now adopted the view that circumcision and works of the law are also necessary for salvation. Their new position negates the gospel.

John Stott comments:

Sinners may be justified before God and by God, not because of any works of their own, but because of the atoning work of Christ; not because of anything that they have done or could do, but because of what Christ did once, when he died. The gospel is not good advice to men, but good news about Christ; not an invitation to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done; not a demand, but an offer.¹

The word that Paul uses for “publicly portrayed” is the term that was used by heralds for a proclamation or a decree. They would nail the proclamation on a wall and announce what the king had to say. When Paul was in Galatia, he proclaimed like a herald the message from the King: that their sins were forgiven. That was Paul’s message. And that is why he told the sophisticated Corinthians, “I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). We don’t have to work for our salvation. It is finished.

In the following verses, Paul reveals the Galatians’ foolishness by showing that both their own experience and the plain truth of Scripture teach that justification is

by faith alone. First, the apostle argues from their own experience, in verses 2-5:

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the 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 then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (3:2-5)

The apostle puts four questions to the Galatians. First, “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” Did you work for it through strenuous self-effort? No. They believed the message, and as a result, God gave them his Spirit.

Secondly, Paul asks, “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Having begun supernaturally, were they now going to reach the goal by human effort? He is referring to sanctification, the process by which God cleans up your life, removing the things that irritate you and are of concern to him. How does that happen? By self-effort? By deciding once and for all that you are going to get it done? How did you deal with some of the habits that were afflicting you early on and some of the ungodly responses to those around you? Was it by faith or self-effort?

Paul’s third question is, “Did you suffer so many things in vain?” “Suffer” can also be translated “experience.” In fact, the verb basically means experiencing something which stems from outside of ourselves but which affects us. Oftentimes in the New Testament it refers to unpleasant experiences, hence the translation “suffer.” But here Paul is using the term in a general sense. Have you had all these wonderful spiritual experiences for no purpose? He is referring to the experiences that have caused growth in our spiritual lives, things that we can look back on and say, “By God’s grace I have been able to deal with some of the issues that are a concern to me.” How did that happen? Was it by self-effort or by faith?

As our three boys have grown up, we have recorded their height on the door that leads to the garage. I am always amazed to look back and see the growth spurts. I think that’s what Paul is saying. We can look back at our lives and see that there has been growth in different areas. I see growth in areas of my own life that were of concern to me ten or fifteen years ago. How did that happen? Was it through my own discipline? No. God has been at work completing the good work that he began.

Finally, Paul asks: “Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?” Here he is talking about ministry and service in the body of Christ. The Galatians had been given, as we have been

given, the gifts of the Spirit, those divinely bestowed gifts by which we serve one another in the body of Christ: gifts of teaching, counseling, helping and giving. God has poured out his Spirit and given gifts to fill us and flood us with his presence so that we can minister to others. And they were given to us not because we were good, not because we had obeyed the law, but simply because we believed the gospel.

Notice that three times in these verses Paul refers to the Holy Spirit. When you became a Christian you received the Holy Spirit. That is what identifies you as a Christian. The Christian life is a supernatural life. It takes God to be godly.

*To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands;
But better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.*

So these are good questions to ask ourselves: How did we come to Christ? By faith. How have we grown? By faith. How is God dealing with sin in our life? By faith.

So Paul argues, first, from the Galatians’ experience. His second argument is from Scripture.

Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations shall be blessed in you.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (3:6-9)

The apostle is inviting these deceived Galatian believers, who thought that they must be circumcised in order to be saved, to go back and examine the Scriptures before making that claim. Paul reminds them that Abraham was a pagan when God told him that he wanted him to go to a land that he would show him. He said, “Trust me, and I will get you to the right place. I will bless you and make you a blessing. Through you the whole world will be blessed.” So Abraham went to the land of Palestine and lived there for a number of years.

Paul quotes from Genesis 15, where God told Abraham that Sarah would have a child. Abraham was at least 75 years old at that time. Sarah was barren, and had gone through menopause, so it was impossible for her to become pregnant. Abraham thought this meant that he would adopt Eliezer, his servant’s son. But God told him, “No, you are going to have a son through Sarah.” One night God told Abraham to look up at the sky and count the stars. He told him, “So shall your descendants be.” In response to that promise, Abraham said, “I believe,” or, as Paul puts it in Romans, “in hope against hope he believed.” Abraham believed and God declared him not guilty (or to use the New Testament phrase, he declared him justified, righteous).

Now it was true that many years later, God told Abraham that he was going to seal this relationship, and the sign of the seal of the covenant would be circumcision. Abraham was circumcised as a sign of God's ownership. The Judaizers were telling the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised because all of Abraham's children were circumcised. To be a true Jew, they said, they had to be circumcised. And they told the Gentile believers that they needed to be circumcised because that is how they become a son of Abraham. Paul says that's not true. Abraham wasn't circumcised in order to be justified. Circumcision was merely the outward sign of God's ownership. Abraham's justification took place years earlier. It was not circumcision that saved him, it was his faith! Abraham was justified years before he was circumcised, and years before the law was even given. Abraham wasn't even a Jew when he was justified! He was a pagan gentile who had come to believe that God was dependable. He had put his faith in the faithfulness of God and God declared him not guilty.

Paul's conclusion is in verse 9: "So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." The blessing that was promised to Abraham is given to us when we are justified. Verse 8: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.'" The blessing is justification, and it comes to us just as it came to Abraham, by faith. We come to Christ by faith and nothing else.

Having demonstrated positively that the O.T. teaches justification by faith through the life of Abraham, Paul now looks at the negative counterpart to that truth: the impossibility of ever being justified or sanctified by law. Interestingly, he rests his case on statements from the law itself.

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, to perform them." Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "The righteous man shall live by faith." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "he who practices them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (3:10-14)

Here the apostle quotes four more times from the O.T., showing that in each case, any attempt to live by law, rather than producing a blessing, actually brings a curse, because the law demands perfection. Paul is contrasting the curse with the blessing. Now, if the blessing

is justification, then the curse is to be pronounced guilty. Remember, justification is a legal term that means not guilty. Conversely, to be "cursed" is to be pronounced guilty.

Paul quotes a verse that deals with the promise of being justified by works. In theory, it's possible to be justified by works. Verse 12: "he who practices them [what the law requires] shall live by them." But no one has ever practiced them; therefore, no one will live by them. The problem we face is that we have to keep the whole law. The law is not a collection of random and miscellaneous parts, some of which can be disregarded. The law is like a pane of glass: if one part of it is broken the whole thing is broken. We would have to keep all of the law. So if we are going to try to be justified, or sanctified by law, we have to be perfect in everything. It isn't a matter of merely wanting to do it; we have to keep the entire law.

Furthermore, this law is applicable to everyone, without exception. We can try as hard as we can to keep the law, and do good in the community, but we all fall under this condemnation: "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, to perform them." If we live on the basis of works, then the standard is perfection. On that final day, the Judge will only have one question: "Did you do everything that is written in the law? You may have had good intentions, but did you obey?" There will be only one answer to that question: No. And there will be condemnation and the penalty of death. So we cry out, "Who will free us from such a fate?" Paul's reply is, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (3:13-14).

Jesus himself took that curse. He accepted the guilt of our sin. He paid the price, so we are no longer cursed. We receive justification, the same blessing granted to Abraham.

The cross is the answer to all the guilt and legalism that we so easily lapse into. At the cross we give up all of our foolish thoughts of trying to please God by our own efforts, and rest in his finished work.

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 70.

I am indebted to David Roper for his insights into this text in his message, *The Height of Folly*, preached at Cole Community Church, Boise, Idaho, on February 3, 1991.

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