

“By Works of the Law, or by Hearing with Faith?”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 3:1-14; Genesis 15:1-18

Galatians is a letter of sharp contrasts. Paul is writing to Gentile Christians throughout Galatia, who have been told (erroneously) they must now live as Jews. Their confusion arises from the efforts of false teachers (Judaizers), who secretly infiltrated the churches in Galatia to spy out the freedom enjoyed by these new Christians. In response, Paul exposes the false gospel taught by these men for what it really is, no gospel. He reminds them that the gospel which he preaches (the public placarding of Christ) was revealed to him by Jesus, whose saving merits are received through faith alone, and cannot be earned by works. In Galatians 3:1-14 (our text), Paul contrasts the true gospel which he has preached (requiring the “hearing of faith”), and the false gospel (“works of law”) proclaimed by Judaizers.

Paul is writing to churches which he helped to found not long before through the preaching of that gospel which had been revealed to him by Jesus. Paul was gone from Galatia for a brief period of time, but already a group of Jewish converts to Christianity (Judaizers) were denying the gospel which he just preached to them. Telling Gentile believers, “yes, Jesus was Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God,” the Judaizers added the condition that membership in the church was maintained through continuing obedience to the law of Moses, submission to ritual circumcision, the keeping of certain dietary laws, all of which functioned as badges, or emblems of membership in the people of God (true Israel). When pagan Gentiles came to faith in Jesus Christ, Judaizers insisted that Gentiles adopt these ethnic badges of Judaism, or else forfeit their right standing before God. Gentiles must believe in Jesus, but live as Jews.

Discovering what had happened in his absence, Paul composed this letter. In the opening chapter, Paul expresses his concern. *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel”* (Gal. 1:7). Paul contends this false gospel was taught by deceitful men *“who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery”* (2:4). Things got so bad that Paul was forced to confront Peter to his face, since Peter was living as a Gentile, but hypocritically telling Gentiles to live as Jews. Peter was not acting in line with the truth of the gospel which is grounded in the work of Jesus Christ, his sinless life, sacrificial death, and resurrection from the dead. Justification (our right standing before God) comes through faith, and not through one’s obedience to dietary laws, submitting to circumcision, or through obedience to any other elements of the Mosaic law. In Galatians 2:16, Paul has made this point clear. *“A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”*

In Galatians 3:1-6, Paul exhorts the Galatians to consider how it was that they came to faith in the first place. Exasperated by the state of things in Galatia, Paul warns his readers/hearers not to tolerate the error of the Judaizers. The harsh label he ascribes to them “foolish Galatians” comes from a term which conveys the idea of an insufficient use of mental powers or a deficiency in understanding. But a paraphrase like “you numskulls,” is not inappropriate! Paul is angry, if not furious, with the Galatians. He minces no words with them. Many readers of this epistle notice the rather striking fact that Paul calls his readers “Galatians,” and not “Brethren,” nor does he use any terms of endearment to people he knows well and from whom he has recently departed.

When Paul asks the Galatians the question, “*who has bewitched you?*” he uses a term which means to cast a spell upon someone using the “evil eye.” The Galatians are acting like they are under a hypnotic spell cast upon them by the Judaizers, rendering them incapable of sound judgment. Paul will warn them in Galatians 5:4, that those who have been taken in by the evil eye (spell) risk being severed from Christ.

The Judaizing spell contrasts sharply with the gospel which he previously to them. “*It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified*” (3:1). Through his preaching, Jesus Christ’s saving work was set before the Galatians with such clarity that Christ was openly displayed, literally “publically placarded,” as though 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 were as though a picture of his saving work had been visible through his words—what Chick Hearn called a “word’s eye view.” If the Galatians had fixed their eyes on the saving work of Jesus Christ of Paul’s gospel, they would not be in their present predicament, under the spell of the evil eye of the false gospel of the Judaizers.

In verses 2 and 5 of chapter 3, Paul asks his readers two rhetorical questions, clarifying the contrast between his gospel which is centered in the placarding of Christ, and the false gospel of the Judaizers, which is based upon the merit of human effort. In verse 2, the antithesis between the two is set out as follows: “*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?*” Similarly, Paul asks in verse 5, “*did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*” In both cases the answer to the rhetorical question is clearly the latter, “*the hearing of faith.*” Paul is forcing the Galatians to recall how it was that they entered into Christ in the first place, when they “*received the Holy Spirit.*”

Paul says much the same thing elsewhere. In Romans 8:9 we read, “*you, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*” In Ephesians 1:13 he puts it this way, “*in him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.*” Paul is clear that Holy Spirit is received at the beginning of the Christian life through means of faith in response to the preached gospel. To be in Christ is to be in the Holy Spirit, and vice-versa. The Holy Spirit is not received through obedience to law. This is a point which should be self-evident to Paul’s hearers who, presumably, have all experienced receiving the Holy Spirit when they came to faith.

But it is equally wrong to assert that the Christian life begins with the reception of the Holy Spirit through faith, but is then maintained through the merit of good works and obedience. In verses 3-4, Paul sets up another contrast, this time between a life “*begun with the Spirit,*” and that of attempting to attain the goal (perfection) through means of human effort (literally in the “*flesh*”). “*Beginning with the Spirit* 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 message of Christ.”² When we enter into Christ through faith alone (union with Christ), we receive the Holy Spirit. As we enter into Christ through faith alone and receive the Holy Spirit through faith alone, we continue on in Christ through faith alone. We cannot attain “perfection” in the flesh. We cannot reach our goal [heaven] through obedience to the law of Moses, submission to ritual circumcision, or by keeping dietary laws.

¹ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 148.

² Fung, Galatians, 133.

Paul warns that should anyone follow the latter approach, as many of the Galatians were doing under the spell of the evil eye of the Judaizers, they risk suffering so much but yet attaining nothing. To fall under the spell of the Judaizers is to transfer merit from Christ's obedience to human endeavor. It is to take our eyes off the cross of Christ and place them on our own good works. It is to turn the gospel of Jesus Christ (the 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. 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—*“just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”* Since the answers to the rhetorical questions just asked are self-evident, Paul moves from the theological to the historical to buttress his argument. In verse 6, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 (part of our Old Testament lesson) as a proof-text for his gospel because Abraham's faith, and the reckoning of 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 (biblical) example that faith alone justifies. Genesis 15:6 makes this perfectly clear. *“And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”*

There is some important background here which offers clarification to help us understand what, exactly, Paul is arguing. Apparently, many Jews of Paul's day considered faith as a meritorious work—something God rewards. Many Jews thought God regarded Abraham's faith to be that righteous act which makes us right before YHWH, so that Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6 is understood as meritorious.³ It is likely the Judaizers followed this line of thinking—God rewarded Abraham because he believed, or God regarded the act of believing as “righteousness.”

So, when Paul asks his two rhetorical questions in verse 2 and 5 contrasting “hearing of faith,” with “works of Law,” he is refuting the argument that Abraham's faith (the act of believing) is itself meritorious, or that God sees the presence of faith in the heart and regards it as though faith was righteousness and the ground of our right standing. But for Paul, it is not the act of faith which justifies, but the object of faith—the future righteousness of Christ yet to be accomplished in his doing and dying. Abraham's reception of Christ's righteousness through faith is tied to the reception of the Holy Spirit, both of which come through the “hearing of faith.” Christ justifies through the hearing of faith, so too, the Holy Spirit is received by the hearing of faith (trust), not by the merit of faith (works).

In verses 7-14, Paul takes up the questions surrounding the way in 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 in any sense be fulfilled through means of obedience to the Law of Moses? No. Faith is the act of trusting God's promise (it receives the merits of another). It is not something we do (the act of believing) which God rewards.

Paul makes a very subtle, but important change in emphasis. He moves on 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 now asks a much broader question, namely “who are the true people of God, and on what basis does God accept them as such?” This is an argument, aimed squarely at the Judaizers and how they viewed the Gentiles and their salvation.

³ Fung, *Galatians*, 135.

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 (“*And he believed the LORD, and he counted it 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.” Paul must clarify this, since the Judaizers were probably appealing to the fact that it was submission to circumcision as the external sign that supposedly characterized the children of Abraham. Yet, they were also insisting that the merits of Christ are not enough to justify. Paul refutes this error by asserting, “*it is those of faith,*” not those who are circumcised “*who are the sons of Abraham.*” Being a child of Abraham does not depend upon ethnicity (Jewish), nor a ceremonial righteousness (keeping holy days), nor to a kosher diet, or a surgical procedure (circumcision). All those united to Jesus Christ through faith alone are children of Abraham and heirs to the promise—even Gentiles.

Beginning in verse 8, Paul combines a number of verses together from Genesis 12, 22, 28 to make the point that the Gentiles (the nations) are genuine heirs to the promises God made to Abraham (the father of Israel). Paul pulls together a number of Old Testament promises, including Isaiah 49:1-7, in which it is stated God would indeed bring salvation to all the nations. This means that Paul’s missionary efforts to reach the Gentiles with the gospel was God’s purpose from the beginning.

Claiming to defend the true faith of Israel, the Judaizers actually were driving a wedge between Jewish and Gentile believers, dividing what Christ died to join together into one body—a point that Paul will make in Ephesians 2:11-22. This explains why Paul declares 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. The promise made in verse 9, “*so then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith,*” indicates that all who believe as did Abraham (even Gentiles) are the recipients of all of the promises God made to Abraham. The basis for this promise is not circumcision, human works, obedience to the law of Moses, but faith. Since justification comes by faith, not by works, the promise comes through faith, not by circumcision.

There is another transition in verse 9 to verse 10. Paul moves from his point that the children of Abraham are children by faith alone, to demonstrate that the law brings a curse. All those who seek to be justified through their obedience to the law, will find themselves back under the curse of the law! Notice the contrast that Paul makes here between “*those who are of faith*” (in verses 7-9) with “*who rely on works of 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. When he writes in verse 10, “*all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them,’*” he is quoting 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—death and punishment.” If you want to be justified by works, it is quite simple: Obey the law, perfectly! James 2:10 comes to mind as a parallel passage. “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.*”

Next, Paul appeals to Habakkuk 2:4, where we are told that “*the righteous shall 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 no one can be justified by obedience to the law. Paul is very clear about this, “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 which reads, “*You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord.*” Paul contends that the law is not based upon faith but upon obedience, at least as far as justification is concerned. To be justified by law, one must be perfectly obedient! The sharp contrast between the law and gospel, between faith and works, between the Spirit and the flesh, is inescapable. The law cannot justify because no one can obey it perfectly. Break it but a single time in thought, word, or deed, and you are under its curse, and subject to the wrath of God. To attempt to be justified by obedience to law is act contrary to faith. If you strive to be justified by works and obedience, you must be perfectly obedient or suffer the consequences. God will not grade the final exam for eternal life on a curve!

Up to this point, Paul has spoken of the blessing of Abraham and the curse of the law. He now introduces the saving work of Jesus Christ, the one who delivers us from the curse and who brings his people to those blessings promised to Abraham. In verse 13, Paul writes, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”* In dying for us, it is said, Christ himself has become a “curse.” In Deuteronomy 27:26, God, pronounces a curse upon everyone who fails to render perfect obedience to law. In Deuteronomy 21:22-23 Moses declares that anyone who hangs upon a tree as accursed.

Paul’s interpretation of these Old Testament texts (which seem to have no connection to each other) arises directly from his encounter with the Risen Jesus on the Damascus Road. Paul now reads the Old Testament with Christ-centered glasses, seeing the whole of the Old Testament in light of Christ’s person and work. In bringing these two texts together and interpreting the latter [dying on a tree] in terms of the former [being accursed], Paul sees that Jesus’ death upon the cross is Jesus’ suffering under of the curse as though he were a law-breaker! He says Christ died under God’s curse “for us,” or “for our sake.” God punished Jesus for our sins (we are law-breakers and sinners) who fail to obey God’s commandments, even for a moment. By submitting to God’s curse on behalf of Jew and Gentile alike, Christ redeemed us from the curse (Adam’s Fall), paid for our sins (our actual sins) and won for us freedom from the obedience to law as a means of justification. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:8, Christ dies for the ungodly.

In verse 14, Paul elaborates on the reason *why* Christ redeemed us from the curse. “*So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*” It is only because of Christ’s becoming a curse for us, thereby removing the curse from us, that we can be justified by faith and become Abraham’s children. It is because of Christ’s death for sinners that we receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith, not through works. Although the gift of the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in Genesis 15:6, in light of Christ’s appearance to him, Paul now understands that to be forgiven of our sins, is to be given the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁵

When considering justification in Galatians 2:16, Paul argues *if* by faith, *then* not by works. When considering the promise in Galatians 3:14, Paul likewise argues that *if* the promise comes by faith, *then* it cannot come by works. The conclusion is inescapable. All of the blessings of God’s promise to

⁴ Fung, Galatians, 145.

⁵ Fung, Galatians, 151-152.

Abraham, including the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness (the 'right standing' before God), along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to us only through the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, and received only by means of faith. Not by works of law, but by hearing with faith.

There is much in Galatians 3 that relates to the contemporary situation in the church today. First and foremost, when Paul speaks of his proclamation of Christ crucified throughout the region of Galatia, he speaks of “publically 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, mentioning his name, or focusing on his ethical teaching. Many of our contemporaries have lost sight of this simple point, and this likely the reason why so much of evangelical and Reformed preaching, teaching, and evangelism produces so little lasting effect upon its hearers. Much of contemporary preaching is often current event centered, fad-centered, or is application overload, with the preacher doing everything in his power to show how relevant Christianity is in every area of life—even those areas of life not addressed directly by Scripture. The reality is that Christianity is never more irrelevant when the gospel is replaced by practical suggestions to help us improve our lives.

The shift from Christ crucified to “Christ the manager,” “Christ our example,” “Christ the caring nurturer,” “Christ the motivator,” “Christ the healer,” turns Jesus into a new Moses who gives us easier laws and principles to keep which we now call “the gospel.” When this happens, the effects are devastating to Christ’s church. The failure to preach 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, which now 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 publically 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 their evil eye and we risk reducing the law to trivialities and turning the gospel into law. Christianity is only relevant to our true needs (dealing with our sin and the curse) when it is centered in the public placarding of Christ. This leads to four important considerations.

First, Paul contends that Christ has become a curse upon the cross. God regards his own beloved and eternal son 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 (mine) which he did not commit.

Second, 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 yet still allows us emphasize the particular nature of so much of the New Testament’s atonement language: “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 was 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. Rather, Christ’s death 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. Christ’s death has for its purpose the removal from his people the curse, that is, the penalty rightly due us because of our

infractions of God's law. 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. In Galatians 3:1-14, we find a fully developed doctrine of the penal, substitutionary death of Christ, in which Christ dies for sinners (i.e., in our place), 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, which is the basis for our reception of the promised Holy Spirit.

Paul's rhetorical questions—works of law? Or the hearing of faith?—are meant to get to the heart of the matter of 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 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?

The answers are self-evident to people who have already embraced the gospel. Abraham believed God and was given a right standing before God, because Christ's perfect law-keeping and righteousness was reckoned to him. Are Abraham's spiritual children (Jew and Gentile) his because they were circumcised, obeyed the dietary laws, and saw their own efforts to be obedient as the ground of justification? No, they are Abraham's children because they were "people of faith," not "people of law." No one becomes a Christian on the basis of good works, only through the "hearing of faith."

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? "In by faith, stay in by works," as the saying goes. Paul has made it clear that the Galatians began their Christian lives in the Spirit, but came under the evil eye of the spell of the Judaizers, and sadly were trying to attain their goal by obedience to the law. Here, we find Paul's warning and promise to us today. We become Christians by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. We remain Christians by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone. The good works which Christian produce are the fruit of faith and justification, not the basis for our "right standing" before God. The promise comes by faith, not by works. We know this, because Christ crucified has been publically 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.

God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through word and sacrament, so that we might continue to trust in the merits of Jesus Christ instead of our pitiful attempts at good works. He reminds us that we reach our goal through faith in the promise, not through the efforts of our flesh. The Lord comes to us to strengthen our faith and fill our hearts with gratitude as we contemplate the public placarding of his death for our sins. His word warns us not to come under the spell of false teachers, who seek to divert our attention from Jesus Christ to our own efforts. This, beloved, is God's wonderful promise to all those who trust in Jesus Christ, through faith alone. Christ crucified took God's curse upon himself to save us from ours. But then Paul's questions still must be answered. Does Jesus death save us by works of law (our good deeds), or by hearing with faith (trust)?