

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part eight - Teaching #2143

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DO WE *LIVE* IN GOD'S GRACE THE SAME WAY WE *STARTED* IN GOD'S GRACE - OR IS IT DIFFERENT?

Galatians 3:1-5 - "You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? [2] I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard? [3] Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh? [4] Did you experience so much for nothing — if in fact it was for nothing? [5] So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law? Or is it by believing what you heard...."

This passage marks a bit of a transition in the sense that it is the first time Paul has spoken directly to the Galatians themselves since **1:13**. Up to that point what we have recorded are the words of Paul to Peter after the incident at Antioch.

The importance of this present passage for us lies in the fact that Paul turns his attention away from the subject of ***beginning*** the Christian life by faith alone to ***continuing and finishing*** the Christian life on the same basis. In other words, none of us can sit back and say, ***"Well, I am a Christian by faith in Jesus Christ, so this text has nothing to do with me. I've not made the same mistake these new Christians were in danger of making. I know that a person is saved through faith in Jesus Christ, plus nothing else."***

That's good, but Paul's point in this text goes much deeper. Not only is one **saved** by faith in Jesus Christ and His death on the Cross, but one also **continues and finishes** his Christian life in the very same way he started. This is going to be the thrust of Paul's message in this text.

Paul is going to show the Galatians that their error is utterly **"foolish"** (1). And he's going to show it is foolish on **two levels at the same time**:

- 1) **PAUL TELLS THEM IF THEY REGRESS INTO JUDAISM THEY ABANDON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JESUS CHRIST, HIS INCARNATION AND HIS CRUCIFIXION**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 3:1 - "You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?"

To turn back to Judaism (or any other religion of human works/ righteousness) is an act of **spiritual treason** when the gospel has been clearly pronounced and demonstrated.

Notice the wonderful expression of Paul's teaching among them - **"....before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?"** This was the focal point of Paul's teaching among them. Notice please, he didn't just preach about Jesus Christ. He didn't just tell them about Jesus' life and beauty and moral instruction.

Rather, Paul placed Jesus Christ (that is, the Jewish Messiah) before them in His **crucifixion**. This, to Paul, was the death knell for the Jewish law as an instrument of justification. Paul, in his teaching, put Jesus on the Cross before these people. The text uses the word “**portrayed**” - “**....portrayed as crucified....**” (1). Paul means he made the people **see** the link between Jesus’ death and their salvation. He labored to make them **participants** in the Cross of Christ. This is always what the gospel is all about.

So, first of all, these Galatian Christians are utterly foolish because their regression into Judaism is a denial of the whole meaning of Jesus Christ and the purpose and end of His incarnation here on earth. They were denying the message of the Cross whenever they turned to other religious efforts to be made right with God.

How were their actions denying the Cross?

The Cross shows how utterly hopeless our spiritual condition is on our own. The death of Christ **on our behalf** shows the lengths to which God must go, not to **educate** us, but to **redeem** us.

I can still remember years ago seeing John MacArthur, a Rabbi, and a Muslim cleric in “Larry King Live.” Much of the conversation revolved around the great similarities between these three faiths - the great monotheistic faiths of the world. But you could feel the tension mount when Jesus Christ was discussed.

I don't mean the **teaching** of Jesus (they all loved His teaching - except His teaching about Himself), but the **Incarnation** and the **crucifixion** of Jesus. Both the cleric and the Rabbi were visibly angered at the very idea of God the Son dying on the Cross for our sins.

This is why the Cross is a stumbling block to so many religious and moral people. The first thing the Cross reveals about me is my utter helplessness to save myself. If Jesus were a prophet, well then, I can simply obey His teaching. My pride is intact. But if He's my Redeemer, then I need **rescuing**.

Nothing reveals both the **depths of my sin** and my **helplessness before God** like the Cross of Jesus Christ. And this has been Paul's case before these Galatians all along. If dietary laws or circumcision or any other regulation, or all of them put together, could make me right with God then Christ died for nothing - **Galatians 2:21 - “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” - IPAD TEXT**

By putting their faith in their own ability to keep the law these Galatians were in danger, unless they repented, of “ ***the grace of God.***”

But there’s a ***second*** way these Galatian believers were in danger of aborting a valid and living Christian faith:

- 2) **THE GALATIANS ARE FOOLISH BECAUSE TO REGRESS BACK INTO JUDAISM IS TO DENY THE REALITY OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE OF GOD’S SPIRIT IN THEIR LIVES**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 3:2 - “I only want to learn this from you: *Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?*”

So, to abandon salvation by grace through faith not only denies God’s work in Jesus Christ in ***history***. It also denies the work of God’s Spirit in their own ***experience***. On both accounts any religion that turns away from faith in Jesus Christ to confidence in human merit drastically misses the target.

The question Paul asks here is highly significant. He doesn't ask them, "***What did you hear or learn from me?***" Or, "***What did you believe?***" Or, "***Who baptized you, and with what words or formula?***" None of those is the center of Paul's attention here. The question involves their ***experience*** - "***What did you experience of the Holy Spirit?***" ***How did you receive the Spirit?***"

Notice how his question focuses on ***their experience of the reception of the Holy Spirit***. He assumes there was something ***recognizable***, something that was beyond merely an ***intellectual deduction***, or ***declaration by ritual or baptism***. He's asking about their ***experience*** of the Holy Spirit when they believed.

Very few commentaries reach the level of scholarly acceptance and recognition as James Dunn's acclaimed work on Galatians. Listen to the way he (a non-pentecostal writer) expounds Paul's words on Galatians 3:2, on Paul's question, "***Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?***":

“This cannot be understood in any other than experiential terms, as though ‘receiving the Spirit’ was a matter of purely rational conviction, or simply a deduction to be drawn from the fact of them having been baptized. The appeal is clearly to an event which Paul could clearly expect them vividly to remember....The coming of the Spirit in these early days of Christian mission was evidently something which made an impact on the lives of those who received it, an impact at an emotional as well as a rational level.”

Paul intends to remind these Galatian believers there is simply no denying the work of God’s Spirit in the transformation of those committed to Christ Jesus. That’s the important point in verse 2. People must ***experience*** the power of God’s Spirit in their lives. The power of the Spirit isn’t merely an ***intellectual*** event. The Christian life isn’t merely something ***thought about***, or even ***agreed with***. It’s a recognizable ***experience*** of God’s Spirit in the depths of the soul.

Now, here’s why all of this is so important in Paul’s argument. Most of those who had been converted under Paul’s ministry were ***Gentiles***, not ***Jews***. They had never even tried to keep the laws of ethnic Judaism. Many of these Gentiles wouldn’t have been able to even ***recognize*** the teachings of the Jewish law. ***Yet they had this powerful experience of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ Jesus.***

“Now,” says Paul, “how are you going to ***explain*** this life changing experience of the Holy Spirit in terms of the law?” Or in Paul’s words: **“I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?”**

Clearly, both Paul and these Galatian listeners ***knew*** the answer to that question. There were only ***two options***. There was the **“works of the law”** and there was the **“hearing with faith.”** And they all knew they hadn’t heard Paul preaching about the “works of the law.” The Jewish law had been totally bypassed. They had received the Spirit through faith in Christ alone. They had nothing else to stand on. That was the only message Paul preached to them, and their lives had been gloriously invaded by the Spirit of God Himself.

Now Paul moves on in his argument:

3) **THE ABIDING ROLE OF FAITH AND THE ONGOING DYNAMIC OF THE SPIRIT IN THOSE WHO BELIEVE**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 3:3-5 - “Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh? [4] Did you experience so much for nothing — if in fact it was for nothing? [5] So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law? Or is it by believing what you heard....”

Notice how each of these verses takes us a bit further into the present walk with Jesus by the Spirit. Notice how Paul moves beyond arguments about **seeing Christ crucified (1)**, and **experiencing new life in a dynamic encounter with the Spirit of God (2)**, to how one is going to go on being **“perfected”** in the Christian life (3).

Paul has a great heart of compassion for these Galatian Christians. His concern for them isn't something cold and theological. It is a loving and practical concern he has for them. He wants them (and us) to understand that their's is not merely some kind of **mistake** that doesn't really make much difference anyway. He wants them to see they are coming very close to an **approach to Christian living that won't and can't work.**

Think about verse 3 very carefully. It's not written to people **yet to start** the Christian life. It's written to people who began some time ago, and are now in danger of veering badly off course. Paul's point is plain - **what was begun in the power of the Holy Spirit cannot be completed in the power of the flesh (3).**

What does Paul mean by the flesh? Well, we know from Galatians 5:19-21 what some of the manifestations of the flesh are - **“Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, [20] idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, [21] envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things — as I warned you before — that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” - IPAD TEXT**

But those are the *irreligious* manifestations of the flesh. That's the life of the flesh when it's not ***dressed up and behaved***. And what's important for us to remember in our present study is this is not the ***only*** way the life of the flesh is manifested.

Let me give you another, very different picture of the life of the flesh from the Scriptures:

IPAD TEXT - Philippians 3:4-7 - “...although I have reasons for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised the eighth day; of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; regarding the law, a Pharisee; [6] regarding zeal, persecuting the church; regarding the righteousness that is in the law, blameless. [7] But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ.”

Now, the important point for us to see here is that Paul is talking about the very **same flesh** in both of these passages. In Galatians 5 he’s talking about the way the flesh manifests itself **secularly**. In Philippians 3 he’s talking about the way the flesh manifests itself **religiously**. But it’s the **same flesh operating in both cases**.

“How can it be the same, Pastor Don? I don’t see any similarity at all!”

Here’s what’s the same - **exactly** the same. In each case the flesh **sets its own agenda**. In each case the flesh is **insubordinate** to God’s will and way. The **first** picture (Galatians 5) is the flesh trying to **find fulfillment** on its own terms. The **second** picture (Philippians 3) is the flesh trying to **please God** on its own terms.

But it's the same flesh in both cases. And just as surely as we would *all* agree that you can't ***find fulfillment*** on your own terms, Paul is also saying we can't ***make our approach to God*** on our own terms.

“Did you experience so much for nothing?”(4a). Think about everything God has done in your life. Think back to any miracle of his life and grace, any divine provision, any time God took care of something you thought would never work out. Here's Paul's question: ***“Did you earn that? Or was it grace?”***

And we ***need*** to know the right answer to that question!

So, as Paul said to the church at Ephesus, ***“Keep on being filled with the Spirit!”*** Don't settle into dead formalism. Don't live the Christian life on your own momentum. Don't equate living faith with any act of service you are involved in. Don't just settle for “church as usual on Sunday morning.” Remember, having begun in the Spirit, you can't possibly continue in any other way.