

How to be a 'Good Christian' and other religious nonsense

You are so dumb, you are really dumb... fo' real

Galatians 3:1-14

Read Galatians 3:1-4 (NLT)

We must remind ourselves of the issue at hand here which can be done with a quick glimpse at the last part of the last verse of chapter 2

- "... if keeping the law could **make us right with God**, then there was no need for Christ to die."
- If we could be **justified** before God by the things that we do (positive) and refrain from doing (negative) then Jesus never would have died on the Cross!
- The way to be accepted before God would have been to **try harder, do better** and **be better**
- But, the truth is that **(1) we cannot be good enough (exceedingly wicked)**, and **(2) we suffer under the demand of trying to do so (slaves to sin)**
- So, God (in love) made another way for us to be accepted before Him—the Cross

At one time, the Galatians had understood this very clearly (see v. 1^b)

- "... the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to as if you had seen **a picture** of his death on the cross."
- Through Paul's preaching

The folly of the Galatians is that though they knew God had first accepted them according to **grace through faith** in the **finished work** of Christ on the Cross—for them

- They were now **trying to stay right with God** by **trying harder, doing better, being good enough**
 - **They were not resting and rejoicing in His finished work for them**
- We seem to have the same problem—indicated by the fact that we sometimes feel like either '**Good Christians**' or '**Bad Christians**' (and we also identify others as such)
 - **And we imagine that God deals with us accordingly—blessings or curses (as you sit here today)**

And so Paul says to them (and us) here: **You foolish Galatians!** (v. 1) ... **How foolish can you be?** (v. 3) **I.e. You are so dumb, you are really dumb... fo' real**

- As one respected translator¹ put it: "**O you dear idiots of Galatia... surely you can't be so idiotic?**"
- And likens their new approach to relating to God as **an evil spell... a bewitching** (NASB)!
- As actually being **evil** (very wrong) in light of the cross and grace
 - And the fact that God deals with us according to those and not our performance (good/bad)

And so Paul begins to reason with them and challenge them to think (v. 2^a)

- **Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses?**
- Paul is using the phrase here "**receive the Holy Spirit**" as indicative of salvation
 - At the moment of salvation the Holy Spirit is given to us—He is 'in' us² (necessary)
- So, what Paul is asking here is this:
 - **What role did you play in the work of salvation?**
 - "When you were saved/born again/regenerated/forgiven/made new/recv'd the HS (etc), did that event take place **because of** how well you had been behaving/obeying?"
 - Was there a point in time where God said, "Okay! You reached a level of obedience that has earned you these things! You are now good enough to receive the Holy Spirit."

The obvious answer is **no** (v. 2 cont'd)

- Paul says, "**Of course not!**"
- He continues, "**You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ.**"

¹ J.B. Phillips

² There are some nuances here, such as the baptism of the Holy Spirit and being filled with the Holy Spirit as seen in the book of Acts, that are very important but beyond the scope of this sermon. I have taught on these things many times and if you go to the messages page on our website and search for Holy Spirit you will see those teachings. Or find books on the subject at our book table.

- **Which is:** You have not, nor ever can, reach a level of obedience that earns you justification, but Christ has done it for you!
- And if Christ and **His** performance has gained you acceptance and favor before God (even though you have performed very badly—wickedly) what makes you think that now you need to perform well to keep that acceptance and favor?
 - Where did you get that idea?

Paul says it this way (v. 3)

- “How foolish can you be?”
- “After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, **why are you** now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?”
 - **Become perfect** = to complete or finish; become mature
 - You were made new by **the Spirit**—why are you trying to be better than new by **human effort**?

To begin to think that way is (as Paul said in 1:6) to **desert God** (NASB), to **turn away from God** (NLT)

- To commit **spiritual treason** (i.e. It is an offense to and an abandoning of the truth of the Cross!)

He says in verse 4

- “Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain was it?”

Then in verse 5 Paul reiterates and presses the issue and question further

“I ask you again, does God **give you** the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you **because** you obey the law? **Of course not!** It is **because** you believed the message you heard about Christ.”

- The last question (v. 2) was from the perspective of the **people receiving**. This one is from the perspective of **God giving**: ... **does God give you** the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you **because you obey the law?**
- **NO!**

It is through believing (faith) that you are saved... **and** that God works among you afterward!

- It is exclusive from how well you behave or how poorly you behave!
 - So the **law-truster** cannot say, “I earned this.”
 - And the **law-breaker** cannot say, “I can't have this.”
- **...and work(s) miracles among you...**
 - Take this component for example—Imagine if God only worked miracles for those who obeyed the law perfectly
 - How could we have any hope in life's difficulties?
 - **Ex. Ian and Amber O'Neill and their newborn son Andrew**
 - How could they approach God in that moment?
 - What if their acceptance before Him was dependent on their performance that day and the days leading up to it? (Had they been 'good enough')
 - **That is not how God deals with us once we have believed the message about Christ**
 - **Hebrews 5:16** (NASB)
Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Sometimes we think that the bad things that happen to us is God punishing us

- The idea would be that if God is harming me in some way because of my failures
- What would that mean?
 - It would mean that you owe **some debt** for your sins. **That Jesus does not pay them in full.**

- I must confess that in my weakest moments this would creep into my mind with my daughter's cancer... "Have I been bad in some way (**I have been a bad Christian**) and this is punishment. God is mad at me. Otherwise he would just heal Daisy."
 - If that is the case, then what is the end? After she has suffered (we have suffered) then will I be accepted again?
 - That would mean I am not accepted, do not have access before God until that **debt** is paid.
 - No heavenly help or resource or compassion
- But that is not the case, because Christ has once and for all taken the wrath of God for us, paid the debt in full, and we are accepted before God and have access to God
- **Hebrews 5:16** (NASB)
 - Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.
- **The Lord does discipline us**
 - That is never to be **confused with punishment** or the **need to atone** for something
 - It is for those whom He loves, and for our good (it may feel like punishment)
 - **Hebrews 12:10^b-11** (NASB)
 - He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

You see the folly

- If Ian and Amber could only approach God in their good behavior, they would have no hope today
- If my daughter's cancer or her not being healed of it miraculously are God's punishment, then my sins were never really dealt with at the Cross

Paul then furthers his argument by appealing to the example of Abraham (v. 6-7)

- This is a brilliant strategy in that those who misleading the Galatians looked to Moses as their teacher and point of reference for the necessity to obey the Law
- So Paul goes centuries further back to Abraham Himself
- In the same way, "Abraham believed God, and God **counted him as righteous** because of his faith."
- Abraham was considered righteous why? Because of how he obeyed? No. In fact he did not! (Ex. The Ishmael Debacle)
 - **Because of his faith** in God
 - Genesis 15 story...
 - Genesis 15:6
 - And Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith
 - In fact, Abraham was not circumcised until chapter 17
 - 24 years later! 24 years after he had been declared righteous by God because of his faith
 - That kinda makes Paul's opponent's assertion that you have to be circumcised as obedience to the Law to be righteous null and void!
- **Verse 7**

The real children of Abraham, then, are those **who put their faith in God.**

Paul then tells us that this was always the plan; that there has never been another way

Verse 8

What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would declare the Gentiles to be righteous **because of their faith**. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, "All nations will be blessed through you."

- A reference to Jesus way back in **Genesis 12**
 - It is not that in the OT people were righteous because of how well they followed the rules
 - **The point of the OT is that they did not and could not**
 - So, they (and we) need a Savior!!!
 - Who was promised to Abraham and his children (by **faith—v. 7**) way back in **Genesis 12**

Verse 9

So all who **put their faith** in Christ share the **same blessing** Abraham received because of his **faith**.

- The blessing of being made right with God (**justified**) through faith

Now he presents the opposite side of things

- He explains what the implications are for those who are **counting on dealing with God** on the basis of their performance
- Cf. This is many people in our culture (**God as negotiator**)
- Cf. Many Christians daily

Verse 10

But those who **depend on the law** to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, "**Cursed** is everyone who does not observe and obey **all the commands** that are written in God's Book of the Law."

- Paul uses Deuteronomy 27:26 to prove his point
- God's **standard** is **perfect obedience—all the commands**
 - Humanity hates this because this is never our standard
 - We want God to be a **Santa Claus** figure...
- **There is no hope of trying to be right with God on the basis of you doing good or refraining from doing bad**
 - Because you are guilty (and cursed) if you do not obey **all the commands** of the law
 - It is not a sliding scale, we are not graded on a curve, it isn't a matter of good outweighing bad

James 2:10-11

¹⁰ For the person who keeps all the laws **except one** is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws.

¹¹ For the same God who said, "You must not commit adultery," also said, "You must not murder." So if you murder someone but do not commit adultery, you have still broken the law.

Verse 11

So **it is clear** that **no one can be made right** with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."

- Quoting Habakkuk 2:4

Verse 12

This way of faith is **very different from** the way of law, which says, "It is through obeying the law that a person has life."

- This is how we all function at one time or another: If I just do the right things and don't do certain other things, then I will please God and have life
 - And then even as Christians: **If I am a good Christian...**
 - **How is it that we've come to imagine that Christianity consists primarily in what we do for God? How has this come to be the good news of Jesus?**
- **The way of faith is very different from** that: If I believe and trust in what has been done for me and that God sees me in Christ and so **is pleased** with me... **a different approach to life**

- The law says 'Do this' and the gospel says 'Christ has done it all'. The Law requires works of human achievement; the gospel requires faith in Christ's achievement. The law makes demands and bids us to obey; the gospel brings promises and bids us to believe.³

Verse 13

But Christ has **rescued us** from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he **took upon himself the curse** for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

- Quoting Deuteronomy 21:23 "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."
 - Every criminal sentenced under the Mosaic Law and executed (usually by stoning) was then fixed to a stake or 'hung on a tree' as **a symbol of his divine rejection**⁴
- (NASB) = **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us**
- It was all laid upon Christ—the curse that was ours for our wickedness
 - So much so that the biblical language is: **He became a curse... He became sin**
- Hence the agony and cry on the Cross of **"My God, My God why have you forsaken Me?"**

I Corinthians 5:21

God made Christ who knew no sin **to be sin** on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

- By nailing Christ to the Cross

Colossians 2:13-14 (NLT)

¹³ You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. ¹⁴ He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

- There can be no negotiations... the record has been canceled (destroyed—nailed)

"It is finished!" (John 19:30)

- There is nothing to be added! There is nothing to do but believe (have faith in Christ and His work)
- The gospel is not good advice to men, but good news about Christ; not an invitation to us to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done; not a demand, but an offer.⁵

Verse 14

Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, **so that we who are believers** might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.

- So that we who are **believers**—Not we who are doers!

All of this the Galatians should have know. They should never have been so foolish.

- And yet we fall prey to this sort of thinking all the time
- What would have kept the Galatians from succumbing to such foolish thinking?
 - If they had kept the Cross before themselves... just **as clear as a picture** (v. 1)
 - This is why we continually teach on the Cross, preach the Cross, sing about the Cross, read books about the Cross, meditate on the Cross and talk about the Cross
 - In my own life I preach the Cross and the gospel to myself!
 - Because the more clearly we have it set before us the more we realize—"there is nothing I can do to add to what Jesus has done!"
 - **In that then we finally discover rest and joy**
 - **And we approach life a different way and with a different identity (loved and accepted)**

"Doing the right things for God" become instinctive and spontaneous **when** our hearts are deeply gripped by what's been done for us!

³ John Stott, 71.

⁴ John Stott, 81.

⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 70.

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