

SONS OF ABRAHAM
PART 3

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:6-14

February 14, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

Turning from the subjective experience of the Galatians (3:1-5), Paul will now appeal to the objective evidence from the Scriptures to prove his thesis in 2:16.

Paul's opponents took great pride in their relationship to Abraham. They appealed to Abraham in defense of their different gospel (cf. 1:6). Therefore, Paul takes up their argument and appeals to Abraham as well.

In 3:6-14, Paul uses Abraham as a "test case" and quotes six Old Testament passages to prove that the Scriptures teach justification by grace alone and not by the works of the law. In vv. 6-9, he expresses faith alone positively and demonstrates how it is the pathway to blessing (i.e., justification). In these four verses, Paul sets forth 3 arguments to prove that the blessing of justification comes through faith alone apart from works of the law.

The first argument Paul offers is in v. 6.

I. ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED AS AN UNCIRCUMCISED GENTILE. V. 6

In and of himself, Abraham was ungodly (cf. Rom. 4:5). Through no work or merit of his own, God justified Abraham and counted him as righteous through faith alone.

Just as Abraham, when we by faith trust in Christ alone, God reckons to our account the very righteousness of Christ, which consists of the obedience of His life and the suffering of His death.

A word of clarification is necessary concerning the distinguishing of Christ's active and passive obedience. We must not distinguish Christ's active obedience from His passive obedience. During every moment of His Incarnate life, Christ was engaged in active and passive obedience.

For example, His whole life was characterized by suffering, as Isaiah writes in Isaiah 53:3, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

In addition, His death on the cross was the apex of His active obedience, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:8, “And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Thus, every event of His life was characterized by active and passive obedience. All of this is to say that Christ took our place with respect to the law of God. He paid the law’s penalty for us in His death and He obeyed the law’s commands for us in His life. Jesus not only saved us from eternal condemnation and judgment but He also earned for us our entrance into heaven! And so from Galatians 3:6, Paul sets forth the heart of the gospel, namely imputation.

Graeme Goldsworthy writes,

“The gospel is saying that, what man cannot do in order to be accepted with God, this God Himself has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ. To be acceptable to God we must present to God a life of perfect and unceasing obedience to his will. The gospel declares that Jesus has done this for us. For God to be righteous he must deal with our sin. This also he has done for us in Jesus. The holy law of God was lived out perfectly for us by Christ, and its penalty was paid perfectly for us by Christ. The living and dying of Christ for us, and this alone is the basis of our acceptance with God,” (Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, p. 86).

And so it is through faith alone that God reckons to our account the very righteousness of Christ, which He earned for us by His perfect obedience (passive and active) throughout the course of His entire life. Christ’s imputed righteousness is the sole ground of our justification before God.

The almost-too-good-to-be-true-truth about the imputation of Christ’s active and passive obedience (i.e., His righteousness) is that both are counted to us as if we have done them ourselves. You may ask, how can this be? The answer is through faith alone we come into union with Christ. Those who are “in Christ” are considered to have fulfilled the whole righteous requirements of the law both as to obedience as well as to its punishments and penalties!

This is what it means to be blessed!

Just like Abraham, apart from anything you have done, by faith alone God imputes to you the righteousness of Christ so that God now looks upon you for Christ’s sake not only just-as-if-you’d-never-sinned, but also just-as-if-you’d-always-obeyed.

This leads us to Paul’s second argument in vv. 7, 9.

LESSON:

II. SONSHIP IS NOT PHYSICAL BUT SPIRITUAL. VV. 7, 9

Having set forth Abraham as a test case for justification by faith alone, Paul now expands his argument to Abraham's descendants. His argument revolves around the matter of sonship to Abraham and the questions he raises are critical.

Who are the sons of Abraham? Who are the recipients of the blessings promised to Abraham? By answering who are the Sons of Abraham, he is really asking who does God accept and on what basis (cf. Fung, *Galatians*, p. 137)? Again, he appeals to the biblical argument of Abraham to prove his case.

Beginning in v. 7, Paul calls upon the Galatians to recognize the obvious, logical answer to what he just stated in v. 6 (note the imperative mode "Know then...", "Understand," "Be sure that..."). As an Apostle, Paul is speaking authoritatively to the Galatians and calling upon them to recognize the obvious facts. Since Abraham was justified as an uncircumcised Gentile (v. 6), it logically follows that the true sons of Abraham are also those of faith rather than those of circumcision.

Over against the "circumcision party," Paul insists that it is the "faith party" who are the true Sons of Abraham (Fung, *Galatians*, p. 138). In brief, faith not circumcision and subsequent obedience to the law makes a man a son of Abraham.

Paul's declaration would have been greatly offensive to the Judaizers. It served as a stinging rebuke and ran counter to everything they stood for and believed. The Jews took great pride in and boasted of their physical descent from Abraham. They gloried in their reception of circumcision and observance of the Law (cf. Gal. 6:12-13). These things served as their supreme confidence, boast and ground of justification.

Based on a misreading of Genesis 17, the Judaizers insisted that if the Galatians wanted to become Christians, they had to be circumcised because the true sons of Abraham (i.e., the recipients of God's blessings) were physical descendants of Abraham who had received circumcision. Circumcision was set forth as the indispensable mark of God's people (cf. Gen. 17:11). Those who were not physical descendants but nevertheless had received circumcision were also included. Anyone who refused circumcision could have no part in the blessing of God because it was said he had broken God's covenant (cf. Gen. 17:14).

Clearly this was wrong.

JOHN THE BAPTIST- MATTHEW 3:9

In Matthew 3:9, John the Baptist warned the Jewish people against relying on their physical descent from Abraham for their eternal security. He clearly understood that physical descent from Abraham did not equal being a true son of Abraham.

JESUS- JOHN 8

In John 8:31-44, Jesus clearly distinguished between Abraham's physical and spiritual seed. His confrontation with the Scribes and Pharisees illustrates and reveals the deep-seated pride of the Judaizers (see vv. 31-33, 37, 39-40).

PAUL- GALATIANS 3:7, 9

Just as John the Baptist and Jesus, Paul, in contrast to the Judaizer's legal view of the OT Scriptures, also sets forth a gospel/grace-centered view of justification. Paul's gospel-centered view of the OT Scriptures brings up an important and often overlooked point.

It is important to note that no part of the Scriptures can be understood correctly without reference to Christ. This gospel/grace/Christ-centered interpretation of Scripture is the "hermeneutical key" that unlocks the entire meaning of the Bible (cf. Lk. 24:25-27, 44). Graeme Goldsworthy writes,

"By referring to the gospel as the hermeneutical key I mean that proper interpretation of the Bible requires us to relate it to the person and work of Jesus... Once we recognize that a part of the business of being saved is coming to a right understanding of what God says to us in His word, we are driven to the conclusion that the gospel is the power of God for hermeneutical salvation. Salvation must include being saved from sinful interpretations of the Bible, but like every other dimension of our sanctification we have to work at it," (Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture, p. 84).

Thus, Paul contends vigorously against the Judaizer's legalistic view of the OT Scriptures and their false gospel and deprives them of their supreme confidence (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 236). He argued in v. 6 that Abraham was justified by faith alone as an uncircumcised Gentile, just like the Galatians! In 3:2-5, 14, he argues that the Holy Spirit rather than circumcision serves as the genuine identifying mark of Abraham's sons (i.e., God's people, see 3:2-3, 5, 14).

Abraham wasn't justified because of his virtuous character or righteous works but only because he believed God. So, like John the Baptist and Jesus, Paul, argues that the Judaizers who so deeply boasted of being the true people of God by virtue of their physical descent were in fact not! And, those they considered to be outside the covenant blessings promised to Abraham (i.e., Galatians/Gentiles) were actually the true recipients of God's blessings because of their faith.

Returning back to the chief question Paul is raising, "Who does God accept and on what basis?," Paul concludes in v. 9 by stating that the ones God accepts are those who believe rather than work for God.

Paul's whole emphasis lies on the word, "faith" (2xs in v. 9; 5xs in vv. 6-9), which is of paramount importance, both for Abraham and his spiritual descendants. Paul doesn't describe Abraham as "the man of works" but rather as "the man of faith."

All who believe the gospel share in the blessing God promised to Abraham, namely justification (i.e., the imputation of Christ's righteousness). God accepts men through faith rather than physical descent or works of law (i.e., circumcision). In contrast to the Judaizers, Paul maintains that sonship to Abraham depends on the "genealogy of faith" rather than a "genealogy of physical descent," (Fung, *Galatians*, p. 138). All, like Abraham, who believe receive the promised blessing of imputed righteousness.

Martin Luther writes,

“Thus Paul battles against the confidence of the Jews, who proudly boasted: ‘We are the offspring of Abraham.’ ‘Fine.’ ‘Abraham was circumcised and observed the Law. We do the same thing.’ ‘I concede this. Then what? You do not intend to be righteous and to be saved on this account, do you? No! Let us go to the patriarch Abraham himself, and let us see by what means he was justified and saved. Certainly not on account of his outstanding virtues and holy works- not because he forsook his fatherland, his family, and his father’s house; not because he accepted circumcision and observed the Law; not because he was ready, at the command of God, to sacrifice his son Isaac, in whom he had the promise of descendants- but because he believed God. Therefore he was not justified by anything else except faith. If you want to be justified by the Law, your father Abraham could neither be justified nor receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit except by faith. Since this is true according to the testimony of Scripture, why do you contend so for the Law and for circumcision, and maintain that you have righteousness and salvation through the Law, when Abraham himself, who was your father, your source, and your head, and in whom you boast, was justified and saved without the Law, by faith alone?’ What reply can be made to this argument,” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 237)?

There is no reply. Neither physical descent nor good works of any kind serve as the basis for one’s relationship to God. The OT Scriptures are clear. The real sons of Abraham are those who believe God’s promises not those who keep the law.

CONCLUSION:

As we consider Paul’s exhortation to the Galatians to “know,” who it is that God accepts and on what basis, (v. 7) I want to leave you with several implications to consider.

1. SALVATION IS NOT INHERITED.

Like the Jews of Paul’s day, many today believe that salvation is inherited. A Gallup poll released this past Christmas, revealed that 78% of Americans identify with some form of the Christian faith (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/124793/this-christmas-78-americans-identify-christian.aspx>). Even though this number has been steadily declining in recent decades, 78% is still a significant number.

Like the Jews who relied on their physical descent from Abraham, many today live with a false security because of the fact that they were born into a Christian home or grew up attending church or perhaps graduated from a Christian college or university.

Many people wrongly trust in their baptism as automatically guaranteeing their salvation, while others look to their confirmation as that which makes them a Christian. It is common to find professing Christians in more conservative circles trusting in the fact that they “made a decision” “prayed the sinner’s prayer,” or equate “coming to faith” with “coming down the aisle” in which they responded to an invitation during the “altar call.” Incidentally, the imagery of “altar” is not even a NT category. There is no Scriptural warrant for using OT images in view of Christ’s death and resurrection. There are no more altars! Christians would do well to avoid using the term “altar.” The avoidance of such language and imagery emphasizes the end of the OT sacrificial system (cf. Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). In addition, it promotes the understanding of the “priesthood of all believers” in the New Testament church (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10).

One would think that the statement, “salvation is not inherited,” is self-evident, yet it is not. The saying is true, “God doesn’t have any grandchildren.”

The covenant God made with Abraham certainly incorporates Abraham’s descendants but not on the basis of works or moral virtue but rather faith. Simply being a physical descendent of Abraham was not enough. Paul repeatedly warned of this.

In Romans 28-29, he wrote, “²⁸ No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

In Romans 9:6-8, Paul writes, “⁶ ...not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”

God only accepts us on the same terms that he accepted Abraham, faith alone. We can say it like this:

Descent by blood alone equals condemnation.
Descent by faith alone equals justification.

Martin Luther writes,

“Descent by blood or physical procreation does not create sons of Abraham in the sight of God...he himself was a father of faith, and he began to be justified and to be pleasing to God, not because he was able to procreate or because he had circumcision and the Law, but because he believed God. Therefore anyone who wants to be a son of Abraham the believer must himself believe. Otherwise he is a son, not of the Abraham who was elected, accepted, and justified, but only of the

Abraham who procreated, who is nothing else than a man like another man-conceived, born, and confirmed in sin, without the Holy Spirit, and therefore damned. Such also are the sons who are physically descended from him. They trace nothing back to their father but flesh and blood, sin and death. Therefore they, too, are damned. And so this boast, ‘We are the offspring of Abraham,’ is vain and futile,” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 237).

2. WE ARE A BLESSED PEOPLE.

We commonly use the phrase, “be blessed,” but we rarely stop to think what it really means to be blessed. For many, it means nothing more than to wish someone well or to speak of word of encouragement. Though this is good, this is not what Paul means in Galatians 3:9 when he says those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham.

To be blessed, in this context, is to be counted righteous in the sight of God through faith alone. The imputation of Christ’s righteousness comes through hearing and believing the gospel. The nations are blessed as they hear and believe the gospel. They are, as we learned last week, justified (i.e., counted by God just-as-if-they’d never sinned and just-as-if-they’d-always-obeyed).

What a blessing!

3. WE ARE BLESSED TO BE A GOSPEL BLESSING.

God has blessed us so that we might in turn bless others. How do we bless others? Listen to Martin Luther,

“To bless...is to preach and teach the Word of the Gospel, to confess Christ, and to propagate the knowledge of Him among others...For we hear that our sins are forgiven and that we have been accepted by God; that God is our Father and that we are His children, with whom He does not want to be wrathful, but whom He wants to liberate from sin, death and all evil, and to whom He wants to grant righteousness, life, and His Kingdom,” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, pp. 245-246).

If God’s promise to Abraham was to extend to all the nations, Paul’s mission to the Gentiles was necessary just as is our mission today! The Lord has blessed us so that we might in turn be a gospel blessing to others.

This raises the question, what is evangelism? Evangelism is simply doing what Paul does here in Galatians, namely faithfully and clearly explaining the gospel.

Too often evangelism is thought of in terms of “response” (e.g., calling people to come to Jesus, telling people they must be born again, challenging them to commit their lives to Christ, etc...).

To be sure, the Scripture is clear is that we are under a divine command to call “all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). We should invite people to believe the gospel, trust Christ, repent of their sins and follow Christ. However, as good and necessary as these things are, they are at best only telling people what they ought to do or what happens to them when they have received the gospel (e.g., being born again).

Evangelism, however, is sharing with someone a clear explanation of the gospel. Missions and evangelism are the natural consequences of the gospel being the gospel in our lives.

When you are blessed, you can't help but to want to share your blessing with others so they too can come to share in your blessing. If you are not seeking to invite others into the blessing of the gospel, it is because the blessing of the gospel has not gripped your heart and life. But, when the blessing of Christ's imputed righteousness overwhelms your soul, you naturally want to bring God's blessing to others.

No wonder David, in Psalm 32:1-2 (cf. Rom. 4:7-8), breaks forth into thanksgiving and declares, “¹ Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

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