

## THE FOOLISHNESS OF LEGALISM

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:1-5

December 6, 2009

### REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

Thus far in our study of Galatians, we have seen:

#### I. THE GOSPEL OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM DECLARED (1:1-5)

A Gospel Declaration!

#### II. THE GOSPEL OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM DEMANDED (1:6-10)

No Other Gospel!

#### III. THE GOSPEL OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM DEFENDED (1:11-2:21)

Not Man's Gospel!

In this section, we saw how Paul defended the divine origin of his apostleship and gospel. Both his mission and message originated from God and were totally independent of man. Thus, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is not man's gospel but rather a divinely revealed message from God to man.

Now we come to chapter 3 where Paul continues his defense of the doctrine of justification by faith alone against the objections of the Judaizers by carefully and systematically defining what it is.

#### IV. THE GOSPEL OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM DEFINED (3:1-4:31)

God's Gospel!

In this new section of his letter, Paul will drive home the central thesis he introduced in Galatians 2:15-16. Paul begins chapter 3 in a manner similar as to how he began chapter 1 (cf. 1:6, 8-9).

His language is forceful and pointed. His tone is marked by surprise, frustration and indignation toward the Galatians. When it comes to legalism Paul doesn't pull any punches.

In 1:6, Paul characterizes legalism as spiritual treason. In 1:8-9, Paul reveals legalism as an accursed doctrine. In 2:13, he characterizes it as hypocrisy. In 2:18, he characterizes it as law breaking. In 2:21, he states that it nullifies grace and renders pointless the death of

Christ. Now, in chapter 3, he will characterize it as foolishness (3:1, 3) and spiritual bewitchery (3:1).

As we will come to see, Paul's impassioned outburst against the Galatians is quite understandable. His astonishment and indignation is due to the foolishness of the Galatians, who were calling into question the sufficiency of Christ (cf. 2:21) and contradicting the gospel he had preached to them.

Therefore, in order to expose their foolishness and to "break the spell" of legalism that had over taken them, Paul reminds the Galatians of three distinct experiences they had undergone that upholds the truth of justification by faith alone. Each experience makes it clear that justification by grace and justification by law are mutually exclusive.

It is instructive to note that each experience Paul alludes to involves a member of the Trinity:

- v. 1- God the son
- vv. 2-4- God the Holy Spirit
- v. 5- God the Father

In each experience, Paul reminds the Galatians how the triune God had graciously worked among them by means of faith rather than by works of the law.

#### **LESSON:**

##### **I. THE GALATIANS EXPERIENCED THE PREACHING OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED. v. 1**

First, Paul exposes the foolishness of his converts and upholds the doctrine of justification by faith alone by reminding them of their experience of his preaching of the gospel of Christ crucified.

In 2:21, Paul argues that turning to works based righteousness nullifies grace and makes the death of Christ pointless. Such action is utter foolishness and unthinkable.

Thus, John Calvin notes, "...the very serious nature of the errors which he has brought forward unquestionably roused him to a burst of passion. When we hear that the Son of God, with all His benefits, is rejected that his death is esteemed as nothing, what pious mind would not break out into indignation," (*Calvin's Commentaries, vol. XXI, p. 78*).

This is why Paul begins in v. 1, "O foolish Galatians!; v. 3, "Are you so foolish?"

##### **A. "FOOLISH"**

ἄνότητος (foolish) does not imply the mental state of being an idiot or imbecile, (i.e., lacking intelligence, cf. *Louw & Nida, Accordance Bible Software*).

Rather, as Hendriksen notes, "...the original indicates an attitude of *heart* as well as a quality of *mind*. It refers not to bluntness but to a sinful neglect to use one's mental power to the best advantage. The Galatians, in lending a listening ear to the arguments of the legalists, must be considered not necessarily dull but thoughtless, not ignorant but senseless, not stupid but foolish," (*Galatians*, p. 111).

Luke uses the same word in Luke 24:25 when he recounts Jesus' rebuke of the two disciples on The Emmaus Road. It wasn't that the two disciples were lacking intelligence. Rather, Jesus rebukes them for their thoughtless, foolish response. They should have known that the Messiah was to first suffer before entering into his glory because the entire OT taught this (cf. Lk. 24:26)!

In the case of the Galatians, their problem wasn't a lack of knowledge because they had experienced Paul's preaching of the gospel. Thus, they should have resisted the Judaizer's false gospel. They knew from Paul's preaching that the gospel teaches justification by grace through faith alone. Yet, when faced with the false gospel of the Judaizers, they acted foolishly and gave them a listening ear.

Time after time, the Bible depicts how prone man is to think and act in a foolish manner. In Romans 1:14, "foolish" is the opposite of wisdom. In Titus 3:3, Paul writes, "For we ourselves were once *foolish*, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another," (emphasis mine).

In 1 Timothy 6:9, Paul speaking of greedy people whose main goal in life is to obtain wealth writes, "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many *foolish* and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction," (emphasis mine).

As we learned last week, all of our actions, thoughts and desires are tainted by our sin and foolishness. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the only remedy for our foolishness. "Jesus," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "became to us *wisdom* from God as well as our righteousness...(emphasis mine)."

What can be more foolish than to turn away from Christ and begin trusting in one's performance as the basis for one's standing before God? Hendriksen notes, "...is not everyone foolish who barter the truth of God for the lie of satan, peace for unrest, assurance for doubt, joy for fear, and freedom for bondage," (*Galatians*, p. 111)?

A lot of us grew up in families and churches where the major sins of our culture (i.e., the "big" sins) were avoided and/or condemned (gross immorality, drunkenness, drug abuse, homosexuality and the ordination of homosexual ministers, MTV, abortion, murder,

etc...). But we never stopped to consider that our “respectable” sins (i.e., “holier than thou” attitudes) are just as insidious as the “big” sins.

If the world seeks justification in immoral vices, many of us grew up seeking it in our morality and traditional family values.

Bill Bennet’s books such as, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* and *The Children’s Book of Virtues* represent the all too prevalent focus within our conservative, evangelical circles.

For example, one prominent Evangelical church that is considered to be one of the leading, cutting edge churches in America, offers the following Children’s “Bible” curriculum:

#### “Superheroes Curriculum

Superheroes is a 10-week curriculum created for elementary-aged children to teach the superpowers of confidence, forgiveness, courage, self-control, and compassion using biblical stories about Jesus, Elijah, Daniel, and more.”

A more fitting title, as we learned last week, would be “Superzeroes Curriculum,” with the exception of Jesus! This is nothing more than foolish, moralistic legalizing of children! Any Bible study materials and curriculum that are moralistic and not self-consciously gospel-centered should be avoided!

One can only imagine what the Apostle Paul would say, “O, you foolish Evangelical moralists! Why are you leading children astray with your moralistic lessons?”

This raises a critically important gospel-based principle that we need to understand. Contrary to many, the Bible is not primarily a book of moral virtues. In fact, the Bible is not about us! It is not about our problems, our felt needs or our way to a better life now.

The Bible is first and foremost about God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ and His saving acts.

To teach moral virtues without a gospel-centered/driven approach is to radically distort a person’s (child’s) understanding of Scripture. It is to leave the impression that the essence of Christianity is what we do or become rather than what God has done and is.

Using the Bible to teach superpowers of confidence, forgiveness, courage, self-control, etc... teaches our children (and ourselves!) to read the Bible like Aesop’s Fables. The bible becomes a book of virtues, a treasury of great moral stories.

Moral education of the young rather than gospel conversion and trust becomes the focus. Aesop, then, replaces Christ as the driving motive and goal for Christian living.

Graeme Goldsworthy's words are fitting and worth quoting at length,

"I have often reflected on the possible reasons why, in the heyday of Sunday School attendances, so many children graduated from programs and were never seen again. There were no doubt a host of reasons, including the lack of parental encouragement or of active ministry in the home. There is another contributing factor that I think bears consideration. While I certainly do not want to appear to be carping and critical of the multitude of faithful volunteers who prepare curricula and teach them in Sunday Schools, I get the impression that both tasks are carried on with little or no understanding of the big picture of biblical revelation. Consequently, children are often taught a whole range of isolated Bible stories, each with its neat little application deemed appropriate to the respective age levels. So much of the application is thus moralizing legalism because it is severed from its links to the gospel of grace. By the time many of these children reach their teenage years they have had a belly full of morality, enough, they would think, to last them for the rest of their lives. They thus beat a retreat to live reasonably decent but gospelless lives," (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p. 151).

Because of the craftiness of satan and our endless propensity to foolishness, legalism easily creeps in when we think we have avoided it. And so, like Paul, churches, Christian educators, preachers, etc... must always seek to be self-consciously gospel-centered and scrupulous in making clear the truth of the gospel.

Graeme Goldsworthy writes, "The life and ministry of the local church needs to be self-consciously gospel-centered if it is to maintain any kind of effectiveness for the Kingdom of God," (*Preaching The Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p. 129).

Whether our idols are money, sex, power or *The Book of Virtues* or *Superheroes Curriculum*, all these things are foolish because they divert one's trust from Christ to self, which subtly but surely undermines the doctrine of justification. Our idolatry leads us to live reasonably decent but gospelless lives! This is why Paul, in Galatians 1:8-9, condemns false gospels so severely. False gospels nullify the grace of God and render pointless the death of Christ.

"What," Martin Luther wrote, "... can be more wicked or a more horrible sin than to nullify the grace of God and to refuse to be justified by faith in Christ?" The answer is nothing!

Attempting to establish a right standing with God by works of the law of any kind is utter foolishness.

This leads us to ask an important question: How could the Galatians (we) be so guilty of such foolishness? The answer: The Galatians' loose grasp on the truth of the gospel set them up to be led astray.

## B. “BEWITCHED”

Paul asks, “Who has bewitched you?” The word, *bewitched*, occurs only here in the NT. It literally means, “to give someone the evil eye, to cast a spell over, to fascinate in the original sense of holding someone spellbound by an irresistible power,” (George, *Galatians*, p. 207). F.F. Bruce translates it, “Who has hypnotized you,” (*Galatians*, p. 148).

Paul is not literally speaking of witchcraft or hypnotism. Rather, he characterizes the Judaizers as wizards who had cast an enchanting spell upon the Galatians. The Galatians’ embracing of the Judaizer’s false gospel was like coming under the power of a magical spell. Though Paul is not literally speaking of witchcraft, we must not think of his metaphor as totally exaggerated (cf. G. Delling, *TDNT*, vol. 1, p. 595).

The Judaizers were the front men. But, working behind the scenes was the devil, who being the father of lies (Jn. 8:44), continually seeks to distort the gospel and blind the minds of unbelievers (and believers), “to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God,” (2 Cor. 4:4).

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, “I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ,” (2 Cor. 11:3).

By yielding to the “wizards” (i.e., Judaizers), the Galatians unknowingly surrendered themselves to evil powers of falsehood and deception.

Therefore, in the context, the word “bewitched” carries the meaning of “pervert” or “to confuse the mind,” (Burton, *Galatians*, p. 144). Paul is really asking the Galatians, “Who is leading you astray by confusing your minds?”

It is important to note that legalism (works righteousness) exerts a spellbinding, flesh-pleasing power over men. It feeds pride and is appealing to the flesh. The fallen heart of man loves this kind of teaching. Man finds great fulfillment in being able to say that he has fulfilled all sorts of conditions so that God would truly bless him. And as we have seen, if we are not seeking to be self-consciously gospel-centered, we can aid and abet this legalistic tendency in the hearts of men (i.e., “Superheroes Curriculum”).

Whenever we loose our grip on the truth of the gospel, we open ourselves up to all manner of foolish and destructive doctrines. The Apostle Paul says warns against being “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes,” (Eph. 4:14).

By cunning and craftiness, the Judaizers infiltrated the Galatian churches and spread confusion and doubt with their false gospel of “Christ plus,” rather than “Christ alone” (cf. Gal. 1:7). The real issue at stake in this letter (and our lives) is the sufficiency of Christ (cf. 2:21).

The Judaizers sought to supplement the saving work of Christ by the merit of their own obedience to the law. Paul, however, argues that this is impossible. For as William Hendriksen notes, “a Christ supplanted is a Christ supplanted,” (*Galatians*, p. 112).

Finally, we want to ask, “How does Paul seek to break the spell of legalism, which has been cast over the Galatians?”

### C. JESUS CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Following his rebuke, Paul reminds the Galatians of their experience with the gospel! He writes, “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” The antidote to legalism is to be brought into a clear and vivid reminder of the gospel!

We noted that the word “bewitched” meant “to give someone the evil eye.” Interestingly, Paul says “it was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified,” (emphasis mine). Now that the Galatians’ eyes were spellbound by the enchanting power of a false gospel, Paul says they needed to get their eyes back onto the soul-liberating power of the true gospel.

What does Paul mean when he says that before their eyes, Jesus was publicly portrayed as crucified? He is not saying that the Galatians were actually present at Christ’s crucifixion.

The phrase, “publicly portrayed” is one word in the original. It was used to refer to the posting of a public notice or proclamation on a board for citizens to read (Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 148; Burton, *Galatians*, p. 145).

Through his preaching, Paul made the crucifixion of Christ so clear and plain it was as though he posted a great placard before their eyes so that everyone could clearly read, “Jesus Christ crucified,” (cf. Machen, *Notes on Galatians*, p. 165).

Thus, there was no mistaking Paul’s message and therefore the Galatians’ foolishness was without excuse. As soon as Paul arrived on his first missionary journey to Galatia, he preached justification by grace through faith, “by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses,” (Acts 13:39). Paul preached, “Christ died for your sins so you can stop trying to earn God’s favor and begin trusting in Him!”

Once again, we see Paul placing the cross at the heart of justification. The Cross of Christ rested at the heart of Paul’s preaching. Paul made clear to the Galatians the relationship of Christ’s death on the cross and justification.

The word, “crucified,” in v. 1 is in the perfect tense, which indicates a past event with the results continuing in the present. Thus, Paul is saying to the Galatians (and to us!) that Christ’s past work on the cross was complete and the benefits of His death continue in the

present. Christ's death was fully sufficient to justify the Galatians initially and forever. His atoning work needed no supplementation.

Because of Christ's perfect, completed work, the gospel promises to every believer the free forgiveness of sin and the privilege of immediate and permanent acceptance with God!

This is why Paul was resolved "to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," (1 Cor. 2:2).

### **CONCLUSION:**

The task of every faithful preacher and church is to placard before people the life-giving message of the gospel! The crucifixion was an historical event intended by God to be proclaimed.

Paul faithfully proclaimed that Jesus died as our substitute on the cross for our sins. He paid the full price and bore the entire penalty for our sins by satisfying God's strict requirements of justice in His Law. And as Paul has shown from Galatians 1:1, Jesus not only died for our sins but in order to demonstrate that His death was accepted, God the Father raised him from the dead.

Thus, the proclamation of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection go together. Christ not only died for our justification (Rom. 3:24) but He was also raised for our justification (Romans 4:25). Because of both, He is able and willing to justify all who put their trust in Him alone!

John Stott writes,

"This, then, is the gospel. It is not a general instruction about the Jesus of history, but a specific proclamation of Jesus Christ as crucified...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 us to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done; not a demand, but an offer," (*Galatians*, p. 70).

Christ's atonement completely rules out all law-keeping as a means of justification. Paul is reminding the Galatians (as well as us), trust in the all-sufficient, crucified and risen Savior alone!

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