

THE FOOLISHNESS OF LEGALISM
PART 4

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:1-5

December 27, 2009

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

To keep the Galatians from living gospeless lives, Paul reminds them of three distinct experiences they had undergone that uphold the truth of justification by faith alone.

He recounts their first experience in v. 1.

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

LESSON:

II. THE GALATIANS EXPERIENCED THE REGENERATING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.
vv. 2-4

Last week, we saw how Paul asks his converts six pointed, penetrating questions in order to expose their foolishness and to demonstrate the truth of justification by faith apart from works of the law. The answer to his question in v. 2 was obvious: When the Galatians heard the gospel, not the law, preached by Paul (v. 1) they received the Holy Spirit. The blessings of justification and the Holy Spirit are given solely by hearing the message of the gospel with faith and not by works of the law.

The Spirit's chief work is to effectually persuade us to receive and rest upon Christ alone for salvation as He is freely offered in the gospel not only at the beginning but throughout the entire course our Christian lives.

In v. 3, Paul further exposes the Galatians foolishness (i.e., the foolishness of legalism). Note the contrasts he makes in vv. 2-3 and what each results in:

- v. 2- works of the law vs. hearing with faith
- v. 3- Spirit vs. flesh
- A bit further in Galatians 3, we see:
- Works of the law (v. 2) = flesh (v. 3) = curse (v. 10)
- Hearing with faith (v. 2) = Spirit (v. 3, 14) = justified/blessing (v. 8)

The word “flesh” (σάρξ) refers not only to “works of the law” (e.g., circumcision, dietary laws, feast days, etc...) but also to human nature in its unregenerate weakness (Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 149). Again, we see from Paul’s statement the default tendency of man’s fallen nature is legalism. The flesh seeks to be justified through the Law rather than faith in Christ. The word “perfect” means “to bring to an end, finish,” (BDAG, ἐπιτελέω, cf. Phil. 1:6). Through unregenerate weakness, man’s fallen nature seeks to bring about that which only the power of God is able to achieve, namely justification.

As we have repeatedly pointed out, the underlying problem of legalism is the questioning of the sufficiency and glory of Christ. To rely upon fleshly methods for one’s justification calls into question the perfection of Christ. Legal methods such as circumcision, dietary laws, observance of feast days, etc... are fleshly methods devoid of the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we learned last week, the Holy Spirit only works through the gospel by the sole instrument of faith to bring about justification. Here are a few more examples:

- “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ,” (Rom. 10:17).
- “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...” (Eph. 1:13).

The reception of the Holy Spirit confirms the reception of Christ’s redemptive work. He is the unmistakable evidence and greatest proof of the believer’s justification.

- “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe,” (1 Thess. 2:13).

The Holy Spirit is the Life and Power of the gospel as well as our Christian lives. He is given to us to empower us by true faith to share in Christ and all His benefits (cf. Gal. 3:14, see Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 53).

A. A GOSPEL-AWAKENING

Until several years ago, I had no knowledge of this gospel-centered perspective of the Christian life. Like so many, I understood Christ’s death as applying to what is commonly thought of as getting “saved.” Many believers think that the gospel is for unbelievers (i.e., what we preach to get people “saved.”). The gospel is thought of as that which applies only to evangelism. Even after nine years of theological education, I was NEVER taught that the death of Christ was also a death for Christian failure (i.e., the power for sanctification). In short, the centrality of the gospel was not central in my thinking or daily experience.

Because I failed to understand that the gospel was the interpretive key to the unlocking the meaning of the Bible as well as the driving force for the Christian life, I viewed the Bible as largely a rulebook to follow in regards to my sanctification. Moreover, my understanding of the Christian life consisted of viewing the gospel as what got me in but relying upon performance as what moves me forward and keeps me in favor (i.e., justified) with God. In theory I was an Evangelical, but in practice I was a Judaizer (i.e., Gal. 3:3).

Regrettably, this truncated view of the gospel is prevalent within Evangelicalism. To borrow a phrase from Paul in Galatians 3:1, this view is evidence of the spiritual bewitchment of the evangelical church.

B. THE BEWITCHING OF EVANGELICALISM

In the quest for “relevance,” relevance has become the Evangelical golden calf. Sermons, Bible lessons and books abound with exhortations telling people what to do.

The flawed assumption is that if people simply are made aware of their felt needs and can then be shown how Scripture speaks to those needs, all that is required is to tell them what to do and exhort them to go do it.

Listen for example to the following answer given by a pastor who is considered to be one of the most innovative, effective communicators and leaders in Evangelicalism today.

When asked, “What is your philosophy of communication/preaching?,” he answered:

“Preaching on Sunday mornings is such a simple thing and by complicating it, I think we all do ourselves and the audience a disservice. It is very simple. Here is the model: Make people feel like they need an answer to a question. Then take them to God's Word to answer the question. And tell them why it is important to do what we just talked about. And then you close by saying, "Wouldn't it be great if everybody did that?" And that's it. It is a journey. You take people from somewhere to somewhere...

communication is: Here we all are. We all have a common need or desire. We all have something in common, and I am going to stay here until I make you feel the need to have it resolved. And then I am going to open God's Word and resolve it. And I am going to take that and tell you what you need to do specifically. And then I am going to take a minute and talk about what the world would be like, how much better off we would all be, if we would all do what the Scriptures say. It is really that simple,” (<http://blogs.lifeway.com/blog/edstetzer/2009/03/andy-stanley-on-communication.html>).

He concludes by stating that the ability of the preacher to engage an audience is the key to making the Bible relevant for people.

He states, that once an audience is disengaged, they, "...begin to process the information as: this is irrelevant; church is irrelevant; God is irrelevant; the Bible is irrelevant. And all of a sudden I am learning the opposite lesson. I am drawing conclusions that are opposite of what the communicator is trying to make me draw because I am disengaged. So, the issue is: how do you engage the audience," (Ibid)?

Certainly, no preacher wants to be disengaging and to be sure preaching must be relevant. Without argument, nothing is more engaging than the gospel and the Bible's testimony to Christ! Redemptive history is the most engaging, all-consuming story ever known! To those who suggest that Christ-centered, expositional preaching is somehow irrelevant may have a point due to a bad experience from a pastor or church that has a truncated, narrow, view of the gospel. Those who talk in pious tones, offer sweeping generalizations of the gospel and possess very little understanding of the unsearchable riches of Christ (cf. Eph. 3:8) are most certainly disengaging and irrelevant. But, for any Evangelical pastor or church to suggest that faithful, Christ-centered, exposition is irrelevant and unhelpful is simply appalling.

Moreover, this pastor's answer misses the point. In fact, this kind of philosophy of preaching and understanding of the Bible is not even Christian. Graeme Goldsworthy makes this observation, "Any sermon...that aims to apply the biblical text to the congregation and does so without making it crystal clear that it is in Christ alone and through Christ alone that the application is realized, is not a Christian sermon. It is at best an exercise in wishful and pietistic thinking. It is at worst demonic in its Christ-denying legalism," (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p. 124).

How, then, are we to understand the issue of relevance? The key is the gospel. "The Bible," writes Graeme Goldsworthy, "is the word of God by virtue of its relationship to Christ and not by virtue of its spiritual application to our lives," (*Preaching the Whole Bible*, p. 113).

Goldsworthy's comments on the relationship of relevance and the gospel are worth noting in full:

"Preaching must be relevant, I'm sure we would all agree. But what does 'relevant' mean? Who determines what is relevant and on what basis? How often do we hear the statement that a proposition or particular message is not relevant to certain people? Yet the Christian preacher or convention speaker is bound from time to time to receive comments about his or her talk as to how 'helpful' or 'relevant' people found it..."

Relevance is relative. It is relative to how we perceive a situation. Often it is based on as simple a thing as enjoyment. A sermon was deemed relevant because the preacher stimulated and even entertained us. Maybe it seemed relevant because it confirmed our already formed ideas or prejudices. The preacher needs to beware. A lot of congratulations and noise about relevance and how the Lord

blessed us through the sermon or talk can be very seductive. Relevance can easily be assessed on purely pragmatic grounds....

There is an important gospel-based principle that applies here. Since it is the gospel that, by revelation, shows us the real nature of our human problem as well as God's answer to it, relevance has to be assessed by the gospel. There is a practical problem in this. We know that, depending on the audience, we have to use various means to arrest the hearers' attention. A congregation of maturer Christians, sitting expectantly with Bibles open on their laps, will be easier to motivate than a group of uncommitted people who live in a culture of instant gratification. The further away from a gospel-oriented mind-set people are, the harder it will be to motivate them to listen to the exposition of God's word. Thus, we frequently begin by 'scratching where it itches.' We start with a commonly felt need or problem, which may be anything from low self-esteem to animal rights or global warming. There is nothing wrong with such an approach, and, indeed, it may be necessary in some situations. But unless the felt problem is then redefined by the gospel, we are in danger of reducing the Christian message to a pragmatic one of helping us feel better or make the world a better place to live in," (*Ibid*, pp. 61-62).

Clearly, the issue of relevance is not simply to help a person identify a need, point them to a proof text, tell them what they need to do and talk about how great their life and the world would be if, as the Nike commercial says, they would "Just do it!" Exhortations without the gospel are legalistic, irrespective of how "relevant" they may be deemed by the congregation.

It is a grave mistake to separate matters of ethics/godly living from their roots in the gospel. Without the gospel always being the focal point, all the exhortations of the Bible become legalistic. Rules, practical steps are law and law only points out one's duty and condemns. Law, in any form, has no power to change!

It is critical to understand is that the Bible is more than a set of "practical" moral principles, which you need to be told to do. If the Bible is nothing more than a code of moral principles for practical, relevant Christian living, it is no different than the Koran!

When ethical imperatives are divorced from the gospel or not made crystal clear to be implications of the gospel, "The alternative" writes Goldsworthy, "is to preach law and to leave the impression that the essence of Christianity is what we do rather than what God has done. Legalism easily creeps in even when we think we have avoided it. The preacher may well understand the relationship of law and grace, but the structure of the sermon program may undermine it in the thinking of many in the congregation," (*Preaching the Whole Bible*, p. 59).

Again, Goldsworthy points out,

“The preacher can aid and abet this legalistic tendency that is at the heart of the sin within us all. All we have to do is emphasize our humanity: our obedience, our faithfulness, our surrender to God, and so on. The trouble is that these things are all valid biblical truths, but if we get them out of perspective and ignore their relationship to the gospel of grace, they replace grace with law. If we constantly tell people what they should do in order to get their lives in order, we place a terrible legalistic burden on them. Of course we should obey God; of course we should love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. The Bible tells us so. But if we ever give the impression that it is possible to do this on our own, not only do we make the gospel irrelevant, but we suggest that the law is in fact a lot weaker in its demands than it really is. Legalism demeans the law by reducing its standards to the level of our competence...

In practical terms, if we are preachers lay down the marks of the spiritual Christian, or the mature church, or the godly parent, or the obedient child, or the caring pastor, or the responsible elder, or the wise church leader, and if we do this in a way that implies that conformity is simply a matter of understanding and being obedient, then we are being legalists and we risk undoing the very thing we want to build up. We may achieve the outward semblance of conformity to the biblical pattern, but we do it at the expense of the gospel of grace that alone can produce the reality of these desirable goals. To say what we should be or do and not link it with a clear exposition of what God has done about our failure to be or do perfectly as he wills is to reject the grace of God and to lead people to lust after self-help and self-improvement in a way that, to call a spade a spade, is godless,” (*Ibid*, p. 119).

So, it really is not as simple as taking a minute to talk about what the world would be like and how much better off we would all be, if we would all do what the Scriptures say. This actually complicates matters greatly. Why? Exhortations without the gospel are legalistic and legalism complicates the Christian life!

This raises a very important question: *What is the Bible?*

This question is so basic and the answer so simple, it is regrettable that it even needs to be raised. Yet, the answer is so frequently missed.

In brief, the Bible is a book about Christ. It is first and foremost about God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. Article 3 of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics says, “We affirm that the Person and work of Jesus Christ are the central focus of the entire Bible.” Jesus, Himself, said the Scriptures were about Him (cf. Lk. 24:27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46).

Everything in Scripture before the cross points to God’s redemptive work and everything after the cross--including our sanctification--flows from that work. All Biblical texts ultimately point to one essential theme: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (see *Preaching the Whole Bible*, pp. 21, 113).

In light of the gospel/Christ-centered nature of the Bible, Graeme Goldsworthy, makes the following challenge, “To the evangelical preacher, then, I would address one simple but pointed question, a question every one of us should ask ourselves as we prepare to preach (and certainly the answer should be crystal clear in our minds before we get up to preach): How does this passage of Scripture, and consequently my sermon, testify to Christ?...Given the considerations of the nature of the Bible, I can think of no more challenging question for the preacher’s self-evaluation than to ask whether the sermon was a faithful exposition of the way the text testifies to Christ, (Ibid, p. 21)”

Again, “...The first question we all need to ask is not, ‘Was it relevant?’; ‘Did I find it helpful?’; or ‘Were we blessed?’; but ‘How did the study (the sermon) testify to Christ and His gospel as the power of God for salvation?’”, (p. 62).

Finally, in his chapter entitled, “Can I preach a Christian Sermon without Mentioning Jesus?,” Goldsworthy concludes,

“We return to our original question: ‘Can I preach this sermon, lead this study, discuss this meaning of the daily Bible reading, without mentioning Jesus?’ The simple answer...is a resounding ‘NO!’ No Bible passage yields its true significance without reference to Jesus Christ in His gospel...If we are not going to proclaim some aspect of the riches of Christ in every sermon, we shouldn’t be in the pulpit,” (pp. 122, 126).

The flawed assumption of many today, as noted earlier in the pastor’s philosophy of preaching, is to unconsciously assume that the only thing believers need is to be exhorted with relevant steps and practical insights so they can live by the commands and exhortations of the Bible.

There is just one major problem with this approach: Paul says here in Galatians 3 that all legal methods are devoid of the Spirit. No law, divine or man-made, is able to drive out the idolatrous, legalistic affections in a man’s heart.

Robert Bruce, in 1589, wrote, “It is very easy to speak of it, to bid a man renounce his own idol, which I call his affection, but it is not done so soon. Assuredly, the stronger must come in to cast out these affections; yes, one stronger than the devil must come in to drive out the devil, who makes his residence in the affections,” (*The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*, p. 52).

Legalism in all its subtle forms is simply an attempt to use the flesh (human nature in its unregenerate weakness) to bring about a divine result (i.e., justification). Legalism is attempting to do in the flesh only what God can do by His Spirit. The flesh is substituted for the Holy Spirit. This, Paul argues, is utter foolishness. Martin Luther says it is “... a monstrous illusion of the devil,” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 200). It is foolish to turn away from the only source of one’s life and power and begin trusting in lifeless, powerless means to bring about a divine result!

Evangelical believers today desperately need to hear that the gospel is as much for believers as unbelievers. Many understand they are saved by grace through faith in Christ apart from works. But, so few have been told that the gospel is also for Christians and their failures.

Consequently, the gospel gets put on the shelf and the Christian life just becomes a matter of working hard. When the gospel is not central in our thinking and informing our daily experience, believers become enslaved and discouraged due to ongoing struggles and failures in their Christian walk.

In light of Paul's argument here in Galatians 3:3, we must not think that the forgiveness that was conferred upon us for past sin, which we received in the Gospel, has no application for us in the present or future. Justification is to be a present reality that we are to live by each and every moment of our lives (cf. Gal. 2:20). The gospel, as Tim Keller has said, is not the ABC's of the Christian faith but rather the A-Z.

When the gospel is not central in our daily life, we will seek out some new remedy of forgiveness for each newly committed sin into which we fall! Paul addresses this wrong view of the gospel and the Christian life here in Galatians 3:3, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

Paul is asking the Galatians (and us), "Having been saved by grace through faith, are you now trying to be perfected by your own sinful efforts (i.e., performance)?"

The Christian life begins through hearing the gospel with faith. Both justification and the Holy Spirit are granted and received through hearing the gospel with faith (v. 1). In v. 3, Paul says that the Christian life progresses and finishes exactly the way it starts. In other words, the way *INTO* the Christian life is also the way *ON* in the Christian life.

Listen to how Philip Ryken, commenting on Galatians 3:3, puts it,

"From start to finish, the whole Christian life is by grace through faith. A new life in Christ commences with faith, continues by faith, and will be completed through faith. To put this another way, the Gospel is for Christians just as much as it is for non-Christians. We never advance beyond the good news of the cross and the empty tomb...Therefore, the Christian always looks back to the Gospel and never to the law (i.e., performance) as the basis for his righteousness before God...There is no such thing as performance-based Christianity...Justification is a doctrine for the whole Christian life from start to finish. It is not simply a doctrine for coming to Christ in the first place...Justification is a doctrine to live by each and every moment," (Galatians, pp. 90-92).

CONCLUSION:

As I read the following excerpt from Jerry Bridges, I want you to ask yourself this question, "What group am I in?"

“As I see it, the Christian community is largely a performance-based culture today. And the more deeply committed we are to following Jesus, the more deeply ingrained the performance mindset is. We think we earn God's blessing or forfeit it by how well we live the Christian life.

Most Christians have a baseline of acceptable performance by which they gauge their acceptance by God. For many, this baseline is no more than regular church attendance and the avoidance of major sins. Such Christians are often characterized by some degree of self-righteousness. After all, they don't indulge in the major sins we see happening around us. Such Christians would not think they need the gospel anymore. They would say the gospel is only for sinners.

For *committed Christians*, the baseline is much higher. It includes regular practice of spiritual disciplines, obedience to God's Word, and involvement in some form of ministry. Here again, if we focus on outward behavior, many score fairly well. But these Christians are even more vulnerable to self-righteousness, for they can look down their spiritual noses not only at the sinful society around them but even at other believers who are not as committed as they are. These Christians don't need the gospel either. For them, Christian growth means more discipline and more commitment.

Then there is a *third group*. The baseline of this group includes more than the outward performance of disciplines, obedience, and ministry. These Christians also recognize the need to deal with sins of the heart like a critical spirit, pride, selfishness, envy, resentment, and anxiety. They see their inconsistency in having their quiet times, their failure to witness at every opportunity, and their frequent failures in dealing with sins of the heart. This group of Christians is far more likely to be plagued by a sense of guilt because group members have not met their own expectations. And because they think God's acceptance of them is based on their performance, they have little joy in their Christian lives. For them, life is like a treadmill on which they keep slipping farther and farther behind. This group needs the gospel, but they don't realize it is for them. I know, because I was in this group,” (“Gospel-Driven Sanctification” © 2003, Modern Reformation Magazine (May/June Issue, Vol. 12.3).

Regardless of which group you may find your self in this morning, here is the truth Paul sought to get across to the Galatians (and us!):

Having begun the Christian life by faith in the gospel, we are to continue with faith in the gospel.

Any other course, Paul says is foolish and is to live in vain (v. 4).

We must not foolishly think that we will complete by works of the law, what the Holy Spirit began by faith in the gospel. Here is a question that we all need to ponder: If the

Holy Spirit were to remove Himself, I wonder how many believers (and churches) would even know He is gone?

At Christmas time, many of the traditional values coalition groups are quick to pounce on atheists for their attempts to secularize Christmas. Yet, so many of us are guilty of practical atheism. We begin the Christian life by faith but then proceed to live in a total disregard of God in our daily lives.

We live as though our acceptance with God is dependant upon our personal obedience and holiness. We unconsciously think, “The Gospel is what gets me in but my duty is what moves me on and keeps me walking in God’s favor.”

In Psalm 14:1, David, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” We are so quick to apply this to unbelievers. Yet, there is an equally valid application for believers. Every time we turn from Christ to our performance as the basis for our ongoing acceptance before God we are acting foolishly like the Galatians and practically saying, “There is no God.” Legalism is then in this sense practical atheism.

Christians today desperately need to hear and understand that they need the gospel not only to get started but also to continue in the Christian life. Having begun the Christian life by faith in the gospel, we are to continue with faith in the gospel.

We must continue with faith in Christ, because the work of salvation from beginning to end is a work that only God is able to complete/perfect, “He who began (ἐνάρχομαι) a good work in you will bring it to completion (ἐπιτελέω) at the day of Jesus Christ,” (Phil. 1:6).

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