

THE FOOLISHNESS OF LEGALISM
PART 5

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:1-5

January 3, 2010

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

In our study of Galatians 3:1-5, we have seen how Paul is seeking to keep the Galatians from living foolish, gospeless, performance-based Christian lives. To counter their foolishness, Paul reminds them of three distinct experiences they had undergone that uphold the truth of justification by faith alone. Thus far we have seen:

- I. THE GALATIANS EXPERIENCED THE PREACHING OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED. v. 1
- II. THE GALATIANS EXPERIENCED THE REGENERATING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. vv. 2-4

Last week we ended our study of vv. 2-4 with an excerpt from Jerry Bridges where he gave a description of three different types of believers. All three groups represent what is largely a performance-based culture within Evangelicalism today. However, a performance-based culture is not endemic to American Evangelicalism. Because the human heart in all cultures and all times is as Luther wrote, “turned in upon itself,” a performance-based culture will always pose a threat to the gospel of grace.

Paul addressed this performance-based culture in Galatians. In 3:3 Paul writes, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Here, Paul is asking, “Having been saved by grace through faith, are you now trying to be perfected by your own sinful efforts (i.e., performance/flesh)?”

Paul argues that the Christian life progresses and finishes exactly the way it starts. The way one *begins* the Christian life is also the way *progresses* in the Christian life. Philip Ryken, commenting on Galatians 3:3, writes,

“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).

The solution Paul sets forth for a performance-based culture is to become a gospel-driven believer. But someone may ask, “Isn’t the gospel for unbelievers? I thought the gospel is what we used in evangelism? Is the gospel really for believers? If so, what does a gospel-driven believer look like? What does it look like to make the gospel paramount in your daily life?”

So you can see that it is not strange to preach the Gospel to believers, I want to show you several passages of Scripture this morning (in addition to Galatians 3:3), which demonstrate that the Gospel is for Christians just as much as it is for non-Christians. These passages will also help shed light on what it looks like to make the gospel paramount in your daily life.

To begin, turn with me to Romans 1:15

LESSON:

I. PAUL WAS COMMITTED TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO BELIEVERS (ROMANS 1:15-17).

We don't usually think about preaching the gospel to believers. But, Paul says that he was eager to preach the gospel to believers in Rome. Why?

Look back at Romans 1:5 (cf. 16:26). Paul’s aim in preaching the Gospel was to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations. God’s plan is to produce believers who by faith live in obedience to God so that Jesus Christ’s Name will be glorified worldwide.

How then does He do this? How does authentic saving faith come about? How is one’s faith strengthened and sustained? The answer: the gospel.

A. THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

In his work, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus writes,

“What are the proper effects of the Gospel?

1. Faith. because “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God,” (Rom. 10:17); “The Gospel is the ministration of the Spirit,” (2 Cor. 3:8); “The power of God unto salvation,” (Rom. 1:16),” (p. 105).

Your faith begins with the gospel and your faith is sustained by this same good news of grace over and over again (HC, Q. 65!).

Paul’s aim was not only to produce faith but also the fruits of faith, i.e., obedience.

How does obedience come about?

B. THE OBEDIENCE of faith

Obedience comes about through faith in the free grace of God through Christ, the Gospel! This is why it is called the "OBEDIENCE of faith."

Again, Ursinus in his commentary, writes,

“What are the proper effects of the Gospel?

1. Faith.

2. Through faith, our entire conversion to God, justification, sanctification (this is where obedience fits-J.F.) and salvation, for through faith we receive Christ, with all his benefits,” (p. 105).

The Gospel is the root of all true obedience to God (cf., Rom. 1:5; 16:26). It is the means the Holy Spirit uses to produce and sustain faith in our hearts (1 Pet. 1:23-25; see HC, Q. 65). Paul understood this and thus it is the reason why he was eager to preach the Gospel to the believers in Rome! This is why the Gospel must always be the central focus of the believer’s daily life. Believers desperately need to be told and understand that Christ died for their sins. Rod Rosenblatt writes,

What should the Christian do if he is reading the law and says, “This is not yet true of me: I don’t love God with all my heart, and I certainly don’t love my neighbor as I love myself. In fact, just today I failed to help a poor man on the side of the road who was having car trouble. I must not yet be a Christian.” The answer of the Higher Life movement to the struggling Christian is, “Surrender more!” or, “What are you holding back from the Lord?” The Reformation answer is different: “You hurry back to the second use of the law and flee to Christ where sanctification is truly, completely, and perfectly located.” After this experience, the believer will feel a greater sense of freedom to obey (thus fulfilling the third use of the law), and this is the only way that one will ever feel free to obey. “The death of Christ was also a death even for Christian failure. Christ’s death saves even Christians from sin. There is always room at the cross for unbelievers, it seems. But we ought also to be telling people that there is room at the cross for Christians, too,” (“Christ Died for the Sins of Christians,” p. 4).

One of the greatest problems that distort a believer’s understanding of discipleship and spiritual growth is to view the gospel only as how to start the Christian life and to view the law as the way to continue. However, if you want to grow in your Christian life, you must learn to preach the Gospel to yourself every day. The consistent teaching set forth in the Scriptures is that we need the gospel to grow. To understand this more fully, turn back to Galatians.

II. PAUL WAS COMMITTED TO LIVE BY THE GOSPEL AS A BELIEVER (GALATIANS 2:16-21; 3:3).

In v. 20, Paul is speaking in the present tense, “and the life which I now live...” The context of vv. 16-21, as we have learned, is justification. For Paul, justification (being declared righteous by God on the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone) was not only a past-tense experience (i.e., what one commonly thinks of as being saved) but also a present-day reality. Our status as justified believers doesn’t change.

This is why Paul lived every day by faith in the shed blood and righteousness of Christ. Every day he looked to Christ alone for his acceptance with the Father. No one except Jesus has ever been as committed a disciple both in life and ministry as Paul. Yet, in Galatians 2, Paul says that he did not look to his own performance but to Christ’s “performance” (i.e., his perfect life, death and resurrection) as the sole basis of not only his initial but also ongoing acceptance with God. Consequently, it was from this perspective that Paul was driven to live the Christian life, as he writes in Philippians 3:12, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but *I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own,*” (emphasis mine). The gospel is always prior to and the basis of our duty to live godly, Christian lives.

This truth has huge implications for our lives especially in regards to dealing with self-righteousness, guilt and a troubled conscience. Without a continual reminder of the Gospel, we easily fall into one of two errors.

The first is to become a

A. PHARISAIC BELIEVER

The tendency for believers in this group is to “think” that one has kept God’s law and is thus acceptable to God because of their “good performance.” Here, the believer focuses on his external performance and becomes proud like the Pharisees and they think they DESERVE God’s favor. There is a second error.

B. DESPAIRING BELIEVER

This error is the exact opposite of the first. This believer struggles with relentless feelings of guilt and a troubled conscience.

Guilt-laden believers are exposed to the demands of God’s law, the disciplines of the Christian life, obedience and service, etc... But in their hearts they know that they have not kept those requirements. They begin to look at others’ lives and assume they have not been as “successful” as others around them appear to be. And, still more, they find themselves dealing with sins of the heart such as anger, resentment, jealousy, pride, covetousness, bitterness, lust, materialism, judgmental attitudes, impatience, critical spirit, gossip, lack of faith/trust/delight in God, etc...

Because they have put the Gospel on the shelf, doubt enters their minds and despair takes over. Despairing believers struggle with a sense of failure and guilt and their conscience consistently accuses them. As a result, they begin to believe God is displeased with them

and that they certainly cannot expect His blessing on their lives because they think they don't DESERVE His favor.

However, this is the problem with both errors: Neither is focused on the Gospel! Rather, both errors are focused on self and one's performance instead of Christ and His performance. Both errors forget the meaning of grace: God's unmerited, undeserved favor to those who only DESERVE His wrath!

Pharisee-type believers think they have earned God's blessing through their "good" behavior. Guilt-laden believers are convinced they have forfeited God's blessing through their "bad" behavior or lack of "good behavior." Yet both have slipped into a performance relationship with God and have forgotten that there is no such thing as performance-based Christianity (unless one is thinking only of Christ!).

Most of us, as Jerry Bridges has pointed out in his book, *The Disciplines of Grace*, entertain either of these attitudes on different days. For instance, on a "good day", as we perceive it, we tend toward self-righteous Pharisaism. On a "bad day" (which may be weeks or months!) we wallow around in a sense of failure and guilt and beat ourselves up with self-imposed acts of contrition until we feel right with God again.

Both errors are an insult to Christ. On the one hand, Pharisaic believers insult Christ because they act as though His performance is not sufficient or totally necessary for justification. On the other hand, despairing, guilt-laden believers insult the fullness of Christ's grace and merit by thinking they need to "clean themselves up" before they can trust in Jesus for justification.

Regardless of the kind of day we may experience, we must remember this important insight from Jerry Bridges:

"Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the REACH of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the NEED of God's grace," (*Disciplines of Grace*, p. 18).

So, whether you struggle with being a Pharisee-type of believer or a guilt-laden believer, the answer is the same: You must become a Gospel-Driven type of believer!

What does this look like?

C. A GOSPEL-DRIVEN BELIEVER

Turn to Romans 7:14-8:1 In brief, Paul is saying, "Stop looking at yourself and your imperfect, sin-stained performance and look to Christ wherein lies your acceptance before God!" Gospel-driven believers have a greater sense of their unworthiness and sin ("Wretched man that I am!"). However, they also have a greater sense and awareness of the greatness of God's grace in Christ ("Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!").

The gospel-driven believer understands that his performance will never be good enough to be acceptable to God. The Heidelberg Catechism asks:

“62. Q. But why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before God’s judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God, whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.”

Don’t miss this! Even the very best we do in this life is imperfect and stained with sin. Therefore, the gospel-driven believer understands that the only way any he can relate to God is through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ (cf., Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The gospel-driven believer understands that only Christ’s satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make him right with God and keeps him right with God.

Gospel-driven believers turn their attention away from their own performance, whether it seems good or bad, and look to Christ in the Gospel alone! The gospel-driven believer acknowledges that Christ as freely offered in the gospel is his only provision for sin, the basis for his acceptance with God, and the motivation for his daily walk.

For gospel-driven believers, the Gospel not only applies to them on the day they trusted Christ for justification but also every day of their Christian lives! So, like Paul we must learn to make the gospel paramount in our lives (Gal. 2:20; 3:1). The gospel continually reminds us that our day-to-day acceptance with the Father is not based on what we do or don’t do but upon what Christ has done for us in his sinless life and sin-bearing death!

The Gospel declares that God no longer charges our guilt against us because it has already been borne by Christ our substitute. And, the gospel assures us that God is our loving Father and that we possess the full rights of sons (Gal. 4:5-7; cf. Lk. 15:22-24). Since this is the case:

- If He loved you while you were unlovable
- If while you were an enemy He reconciled you
- If while you resisted him, He bled and drew you
- If while you disobeyed, He obeyed

That means that right now, in spite of how you feel, what you think, what doubts you have, no matter how you assess your situation (i.e., whether you are having a good day or a bad day), and regardless if the circumstances of your life seem to show God’s displeasure towards you, none of these things measures or determines your relationship with God.

The gospel reveals to us that that the sentence has been served. The penalty has been paid. The victory has been won! This is why Paul wrote, “Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin” (Rom. 4:8).

The gospel frees us from thinking and feeling like we have to perform to be accepted by God. It frees us from fearing His rejection when we blow it! The gospel frees us to love and obey God and to love and serve others because we are already accepted in Christ (Read Rom. 8:1). When the gospel is paramount in your heart, your driving motivation to obey and live a godly, Christian life is no longer guilt or slavish duty but rather gratitude and love for God because of your apprehension of His love for you as revealed in the Gospel.

CONCLUSION:

Walter Marshall, in his book, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, provides the following gospel-driven perspective,

“Have faith first, and your apprehension of God’s love for your soul will sweetly draw and compel you to love God and His service. ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ (1 John 4:19). You cannot love God before you understand His love for you. You must perceive His love if you are going to love Him. If you look upon God as someone who is against you, who hates you, and who condemns you, your own innate self-love will breed hatred and rebellion against Him...The first, right and holy thoughts you can have of God are thoughts of His grace and mercy to your soul in Christ...Get these thoughts first by believing in Christ, and they will produce in you love to God. You will think all kinds of good thoughts about Him!...You will see God as just and merciful, and you will extend His grace to others,” (p. 108).

Do you feed your faith daily with the promises of the Gospel? Do you believe that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, which alone commends you before God? Or, do you function as if your performance/living the Christian life is what commends you before God?

The Gospel alone is the power that gives us victory over despair, pride, greed, jealousy, lust and a million other vices. The gospel alone brings you joy unspeakable and full of glory! Therefore, stand in it, hold it fast, believe on it, feed on it, savor it, preach it to yourself every day! Christ, who is freely offered in the gospel, will perfect you!

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