

You've Gotta be Kidding Me! Or A Grace-filled Interrogation for Killing Your Legalism

<sup>1</sup>O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup>Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? <sup>3</sup>Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? <sup>4</sup>Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? <sup>5</sup>Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—<sup>6</sup>just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?”

<sup>7</sup>Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. <sup>8</sup>And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” <sup>9</sup>So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

<sup>10</sup>For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” <sup>11</sup>Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” <sup>12</sup>But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” <sup>13</sup>Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—<sup>14</sup>so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

—Galatians 3:1-14 (ESV)

## INTRODUCTION

- Up until this point Paul’s argument for the singularity of the gospel has been primarily autobiographical. However, beginning in chapter three he shifts and begins to argue theologically. Because of this transition I think it is important to retrace his thoughts.
- Turning back to 1:1-5 we see Paul arguing from **the divine origin of his apostleship**. Verse 1: “Paul, an apostle— not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father”
- He then argues from **the divine origins of his gospel** in 1:6-24. First, with the negative example of the man pleasing false gospel with which the Galatians have been deceived. Secondly, with the positive example of the true gospel he proclaimed among them and received through divine revelation.
- Moving then to the second chapter he argues from **the apostolic acceptance of his gospel** in 2:1-10. Here we see that the other apostles accepted Paul, the gospel he proclaimed, and even viewed his ministry as parallel to that of Peter.
- In 2:11-21 Paul’s confrontation of Peter allows him the opportunity to expound **the Christ-centered content of his gospel** and serves as a transition between the biographical and the theological content of his letter.

- Before we dive in I want to go ahead and lay out the text for you so you can see how Paul begins to craft his theological argument. Just as in the biographical material from chapters one and two Paul is still addressing **the unity of the gospel** and he demonstrates this unity four ways. First, in verses 1-5 **demonstrated by the Galatians' experience**. Second, in 6-9 it is positively **demonstrated by the example of Abraham**. Third, it is negatively **demonstrated by the curse of the law** in verses 10-12. Finally, **demonstrated by redemption in Christ** in verses 13-14.
- If you know Zac then you know that he listens to a lot of Bible during his long road trips. And you will likely also know that he is not quite satisfied with any of the readers' attempts to capture the emotive nature of this epistle. In particular he keeps telling me that we need a dramatic reading of Galatians; one that really captures the intensity of Paul's public confrontation of Peter. What we spent the past two weeks looking at in chapter two and this is one intense moment and with its retelling comes some intense writing.
- Have you ever began thinking or talking about something and then at some point you realize that you have become so worked up that you began yelling, either in your mind or out loud? Something so ridiculous, so frustrating, that you cannot help but be worked up about it?
- That is where Paul is at. He is getting seriously worked up as he writes of the absurdity of Peter's hypocrisy and now in chapter three as he begins to directly address the church in Galatia, he does so with an emotive force used nowhere else in any of his letters, exclaiming, "O foolish Galatians!" Or, in what is now my favorite translation of any New Testament passage, *The New Testament in Modern English* reads, "O you dear idiots of Galatia." With that Paul abruptly ends his biographical defense and unleashes upon the Galatian church his interrogation meant to root out and kill their legalism.

### I. The Unity of the Gospel as Demonstrated by the Galatians' Experience

vv. 1-5: <sup>1</sup>O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup>Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? <sup>3</sup>Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? <sup>4</sup>Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? <sup>5</sup>Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—

A. I am getting riled up with Paul here I can feel his frustration. It is like he is shouting, "You've gotta be kidding me! This is absurd! Your entire experience argues against this false gospel. How were you so easily swayed?" But I mean let's be honest right? This is a struggle. This is the primary false gospel that we are fighting with on a day to day basis.

B. And not to dismiss the prosperity gospel or whatever else is out there because I struggle with that. I get a flat tire and think, "I don't deserve this." But it is easy to turn on TBN and throw down on the guy selling crystal trinkets and tap water while promising to answer your prayers. It is a lot harder to answer Paul's

questions here. It is a lot harder to look inside ourselves and dissect not just what we do but the attitudes and motivations which drive those actions. That is hard and humbling work.

C. I think the danger of legalism is that it is so subtle; it looks so good! For all of our worry about rampant sin, about antinomianism or lawlessness, we really miss the point of Galatians 5:19, “Now the works of the flesh are evident.” You don’t have to spend a lot of time evaluating sorcery, or fits of anger, or drunkenness, or orgies to decide whether or not it is God-honoring. I think it is humorous all the sermons, all the talk, I hear directed towards something so obvious all the while spending so little time addressing something so covert and deadly.

D. The classic example of legalism is the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14.

He [meaning Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The self-righteous Pharisee trusting in his works for salvation stood condemned while this tax collector, broken over his wretchedness before God, was justified by God’s grace. That is the issue which Paul is addressing here.

E. Paul begins really by insulting them and then demonstrates the absurdity of their situation in a series of rapid fire questions.

F. First, he questions how they were deceived when Paul made such a clear and public presentation of the gospel. The language here speaks to the public posting of official notices. Paul’s proclamation of the gospel was obvious. It was as if he posted it on a billboard for all to see. Later on I would encourage you to read through Acts 13:13-14:23 and listen to some of the sermons Paul preached in Galatia. The clarity of those gospel presentations will better help you to grasp Paul’s frustration here.

G. In verse two he inquires to the means by which they received the spirit and he phrases the question in such a way that its answer is decisive. There is really no need for continued debate at this point. Justification and the reception of the Spirit come by faith. Final answer.

H. But Paul doesn’t end there. Now that he has tackled justification he plans to take on sanctification next. “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Galatian church, Providence Community Church, do you realize how idiotic your legalism is? How absurd it is to think “by grace we have been saved through faith, not our own doing; but by the gift of

God, not a result of works, so that we may not boast” and to then conclude that we are sanctified by our works? That is the mindset Paul is confronting here.

I. Don’t miss Paul’s sarcasm here either. He could have easily contrasted the Spirit with the works of law as he does later in his argument but he doesn’t. He contrasts it with the flesh. He is poking fun at the Judiazers and their insistence upon circumcision. “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh, by removing some skin?” Keep in mind this is the same Paul who later will declare his desire that the circumcision party go all out and remove the genitals entirely. He is sarcastically demonstrating the absurdity of this argument.

J. Continuing on. With verse 4 in mind if we look back to Paul’s first missionary journey we see that while traveling through Galatia the Jews were “filled with Jealousy” and reviled him (13:45), they attempted to stone Paul and his companions (14:5), and these same Jews then followed him to Lystra, stoned him, and left him outside the city thinking he was dead (14:19). That gives Paul’s question here real weight. There is no indication in the text as to the nature of the Galatian church’s’ suffering; however, if the attitude of the Judiazers towards Paul is any indication then it is likely that they suffered similar persecutions. Paul’s ending, “if indeed it was in vain,” points towards his hope, or rather his confidence in the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that their faith prove true; that they will not be persuaded by the false teachers.

K. Paul then turns to their experience of the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit and asks if God’s abundant outpouring of His Spirit was by works or by faith. Again looking back to Paul’s missionary journey through Galatia beginning in Acts 14:8 we read:

Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had **faith** to be made well, said in a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he sprang up and began walking. And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

This is ridiculous right? You experienced God display His power among you, working these kinds of miracles, through His Spirit in response to faith and yet you have been so easily persuaded that this same God wants you to finish the race, which you began by faith, on the merit of your own works.

L. As we continue on to the example of Abraham in verses 6-9 Paul begins, “just as Abraham ‘believed God’” and with that he immediately establishes that the Galatians’ experience, of God’s grace through hearing with faith, is parallel to that of Abraham.

## II. The Unity of the Gospel as Demonstrated by the Example of Abraham

vv. 6-9: <sup>6</sup>just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness?” <sup>7</sup>Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. <sup>8</sup>And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” <sup>9</sup>So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

A. Paul is still arguing here; he is still countering the false gospel of the Judiazers. If they are going to reference Moses then he is going to go back even further and reference Abraham. Here in verse 6 he is quoting from Genesis 15 where God enters into an unconditional covenant with Abraham. We see that Abraham’s faith was counted, or credited, to him as righteousness. This is imputed righteousness. Abraham did not earn or fashion a self-made righteousness but rather a foreign righteousness was credited to him by God. This is the same thing the Galatians experienced, this is the same thing we have experienced, and this is the exact opposite of legalism. This is justification by faith. Keep in mind that Abraham was uncircumcised when this occurred and he would not be circumcised until at least fourteen years later (cf. Genesis 16:16; 17:1). So contrary to the gospel of the legalists we see that circumcision has nothing to do with justification.

B. Because of this Paul concludes, in verse 7, that Abraham’s sons are marked by faith! As John Stott writes, “the true children of Abraham . . . are not his posterity by *physical* descent, the Jews, but his *spiritual* progeny, men and women who share his faith!”<sup>1</sup>

C. Further driving home his point Paul then links this concept not just to Abraham, but to the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. Paul, either countering an argument of the Judiazers or in anticipation of their counter argument, destroys the idea that participation in the Abrahamic Covenant, and subsequently its blessing, is dependent upon circumcision. He does this by inseparably linking the blessing of the covenant to the faith of Abraham. Because of this Paul can proclaim that God preached the gospel to Abraham. What is this gospel? The good news that God imputes His righteousness to both Jew and Gentile based not upon their works but because of their faith, their confidence that he alone can redeem. Or as verse 9 summarizes “those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” Paul then immediately shifts his argument from addressing the blessing to addressing the curse.

### III. The Unity of the Gospel as Demonstrated by the Curse of the Law

vv. 10-12: <sup>10</sup>For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” <sup>11</sup>Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” <sup>12</sup>But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

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<sup>1</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 73.

A. Anyone used to reading the Torah would be used to the “juxtaposition of blessing and curse”<sup>2</sup> and so what seems like an abrupt transition between the blessing through faith in 6-9 and the curse of the law in 10-12 is an intentional literary device that the church, especially the Judiazers would be familiar with. And so Paul uses this to grab their attention and deal a devastating blow to the argument of the Judiazers.

B. From this blessing that comes through faith Paul makes the inference in verse 9 “[so then] all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.” Why is this? Because those who do not perfectly fulfill the law are under the curse. That is fairly straightforward. I say that it is straightforward because it is; however, if we were to read Deuteronomy 27, that Paul is quoting here, it seems to say the exact opposite of what Paul is saying. It basically says “If you do not do what the law says you will be cursed” whereas Paul is saying “if you do what the law says you will be cursed.” So which is it? Do we do the law or do we not do the law? The answer is fairly simple. Looking forward to verse 21:

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

What is the purpose of the law? It demonstrates our condemnation and our desperate need for redemption in Christ. So Paul’s point in verse 10 is that no one perfectly keeps the law and so anyone relying upon it is condemned.

C. This is the point of the next verse. He is quoting from Habakkuk where the prophet is contrasting the arrogant attitude of the proud with the humility of the faithful. Think back to the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and you will understand the contrast here. “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

D. Again in verse 12 Paul reminds them of this juxtaposition between blessing and curse by quoting from Leviticus 18. Echoing the Judiazers’ arguments back to them he reminds them that they are under the curse because they cannot keep the law. By writing that the law promises life he is instead reminding them that they stand as condemned law-breakers.

E. Paul has destroyed the argument of the legalists and taken from the Galatian church any hope that they might place in the works of the law in general and circumcision in particular. Now he reminds them of the true gospel, the gospel they already know to be true.

#### **IV. The Unity of the Gospel as Demonstrated by Redemption in Christ**

vv. 13-14: <sup>13</sup>Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—<sup>14</sup>so that in Christ Jesus

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<sup>2</sup>Timothy George, *Galatians*, The New American Commentary 30 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 229.

the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

A. Again turning back to Acts 13 where we find Paul teaching in the synagogue in verses 38-39 we read,

“Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man [speaking of Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

They already knew this. Which is why Paul reacts the way he does when he learns that they have been persuaded by the Judiazers. They knew that the Law was inadequate. They knew that Christ had set them free and yet they chose to submit themselves to the yoke of slavery. So Paul proclaims the gospel to them.

B. Verse three paints a vivid picture of propitiation. In verses 10-12 we saw that we stood condemned under the curse of the law. Paul explains, in verse 13, that Christ then became a curse for, meaning on behalf of or above, us to redeem us from under the curse. So here we are under the curse, Christ comes under that curse above us, and bears God’s wrath for us.<sup>3</sup> Jesus stands in our place and takes the wrath of God upon himself to redeem us. Paul argues using Old Testament imagery that this is evident because Jesus was hung upon a tree. This was a practice where they would tie the bodies of those who had been executed to a stake as a visual representation of their rejection by God.

C. And so Christ became a curse for us “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” Or as Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:21 “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

## CONCLUSION

- Paul has brought his argument full circle beginning with the Galatians’ reception of the Spirit by hearing the gospel with faith and concluding with the cross of Christ where He became a curse for us so that we might receive the blessing of Abraham, the Holy Spirit, through faith.
- Parallel this with the five solas.
- I will use Paul as an example. If you have known me for any length of time you know that I like crazy hairstyles, I have several piercings, and I once had a mustache the size of Texas. I don’t have any tattoos yet but if someone wants to go I have like six drawn and ready. Anyways, sometime early in our relationship Paul came to me and said something along the lines of, “If someone had told me that I would be doing ministry alongside someone with earrings and a mohawk I would have told them they were crazy.” That is legalism and I am glad Paul has

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<sup>3</sup>Kenneth S. Wuest, *Galatians: In the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944), 97.

moved beyond that but we all struggle with similar gospel-denying attitudes, over what are really insignificant things, that must be put to death.

- When we were preaching through Jonah Paul read the following quote from Tim Keller's book *The Prodigal God*: "If a group believes God favors them because of their particularly true doctrine, ways of worship, and ethical behavior, their attitude toward those without these things can be hostile. Their self-righteousness hides under the claim that they are only opposing the enemies of God. When you look at the world through those lenses, it becomes easy to justify hate and oppression, all in the name of truth"<sup>4</sup>
- Last week we sang "Complete in Thee" and I love that song. But I could not get it out of my mind when reading through this passage and thinking how hideous our legalistic self worship is. So I rewrote it to capture our attitude in the false gospel of legalism. I call it *Complete in Me!*

Complete in me! no work of Thine  
 May take, dear Lord, the place of mine;  
 My works hath pardon bought for me,  
 And I am now complete in me.

When you just come out and say it like that it is so ridiculous that it is somewhat comical. But that is ugly isn't it? And that kind of self worship is the attitude at the heart of legalism.

- That is really what legalism is all about. The idea that God favors us because of something we do or something we don't do rather than God favoring us because of what Christ has done. I don't know what that something is for you. The Galatians were duped in to thinking that removing their foreskin would earn them favor with God and Paul is right that is idiotic.
- Let us not forget the truth of Ephesians 2:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, . . . But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . . by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Our works are result of our redemption not the other way around.

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<sup>4</sup>Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 54.