

Sermon: Galatians 3 - What Truly Counts

Date: June 16, 2019

Galatians 3:

By Faith, or by Works of the Law?

¹ O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ 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— ⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ 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”— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

The Law and the Promise

¹⁵ To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offspring,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. ¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. 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. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Introduction

Recently one of our friends passed away. At his funeral, several of his family members and close friends had a chance to share their eulogies. His children talked about how he cared for them as a good father. His friends shared how they were drawn to him because he treated them like family. In the midst of heart wrenching loss and sadness, they found some comfort that he was a good man who lived a good life. I believe when our time comes to depart this world, we want to be remembered for having been a good person.

We aim to be good, be nice, be generous. Don't be mean, don't steal, don't be selfish. If we do enough good things, we will be remembered as a good person. If we do too many wrong things, or commit a major wrongdoing, our lives will count for much less. In other words, our standing in the community is a product of our own effort. This may be true in this world.

But many Christians who are citizens of Heaven have adopted the same believe. We believe our standing with God is a product of our own effort. If we do good, He will accept us. Yes, it's great that Jesus saved us but we must keep up our good works for the rest of our lives to maintain the good standing. In other words, Jesus is not enough. Our Christian walk requires Jesus + something else. While we are not spending our time and energy on Jewish customs, we are devoting our lives to things which are important such as being good husbands and wives, good parents, good sons and daughters, good students, good employees, good managers, good church members,

I'm not suggesting that any of the above are bad. No one should aim to be bad husbands and wives or bad parents, etc. But the motivation that drives us makes all the difference. We can either do so as slaves or as free people. If we do life not believing Jesus is enough, we end up chasing something else with great amount of stress and anxiety. We become believers of a false gospel which nullifies the saving grace of Christ.

This is the issue that Paul was trying to address vigorously with the Galatians.

In this chapter, Paul pushes back hard against the false gospel. He teaches that ...

“Christians are not only saved by the gospel, we also grow by the gospel.”

Our conversions began by hearing with faith. Our growth in Christian maturity is also by the same gospel. This is the subject of Chapters 3 & 4. This morning, we will follow Paul as he makes 3 arguments to defend his position.

We are counted righteous through

- 1. Hearing with faith**
- 2. Believing God**
- 3. Promises of God**

1. Counted Righteous through Hearing with Faith

Paul begins this chapter by once again expressing his shock of what has happened to the Galatians.

Galatians 3:1a

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”

He is rebuking them strongly.

He couldn't believe what has happened to his beloved – Like a father saying to his son in bewilderment - what happened to you? How could you be so foolish? Who has cast a spell on you? Have you lost your minds? Why did you start working for a rich inheritance which already belongs to you? Why do you believe that Jesus is not enough?

In v2, Paul draws attention to 2 incompatible choices –

Galatians 3:2

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

“works of the law” or “hearing with faith”.

This is the acid test that determines whether one is saved by the gospel or not. By “works of the law” – not saved. By “hearing with faith” – saved.

Galatians 3:3

Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

In v3 Paul makes a remarkable claim - Something that is often missed by Christians. The Galatians began their Christian walk by the Spirit but switched to the work of the flesh for their growth. They are now relying on their self-effort.

Like the Galatians, we are also susceptible to the same error. We are so ingrained with the idea that we get what we work for. It started since we were children. When we meet the mark, we are rewarded. It is the same when we enter the workplace. Everywhere we turn, we are being reminded we must work for what we want.

As a result, we find it difficult to accept that God is willing to give us a treasure so precious without any great effort on our part. Luther puts it in a interesting way.

Commentary of Galatians, Luther

Forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death, the gift of the Holy Ghost, everlasting life are grand things. If you want to obtain these priceless benefits, you must engage in correspondingly great efforts. And the devil says, "Amen."

To which Paul says, It's foolishness.

This is the central point that Paul is making. We are counted righteous by faith in Christ alone. God gives us grand things without our great efforts. If we could earn our salvation, then Christ died for nothing!

“The gospel that saves us is also the gospel that grows us.”

What does it mean to us?

It means we are set free from our addiction to self-effort. If we are counted righteous through hearing in faith, we do not earn our acceptance through what we do.

It means we are able to find peace of mind even when our plans appear to be headed towards failure.

You see, even if our plan fails badly, God still accepts us. People can be very upset with us. They can lose their confidence in us. Our bosses can demote or we even fire us. But none of these can change our relationship with God. Because, we are counted righteous and accepted through faith in Christ alone.

From this solid foundation, we don't run around in panic. We can face the heat like a fireman entering a burning building. His concern is not whether people like the color and design of his uniform. His concern is to save as many lives as possible.

From this solid foundation, we can live without a constant sense of inadequacy, fearing if someone is disappointed in us or judging us for not being good enough. We can rest in the full acceptance of God from the day we heard the gospel with faith.

This gospel truth is too good to be true. So Paul goes on to deal with some more objections.

2. Counted Righteous through Believing God

But didn't Abraham work for his righteousness? He uprooted his family in obedience to God. Wasn't he a man of obedience throughout his life?

The Judaizers believed they were real sons of Abraham. They were honoring father Abraham by insisting all sons of Abraham must be circumcised as commanded in the OT.

Paul takes them back to the Old Testament to show them Abraham was counted righteous by faith, not by works. He was known as the man of faith, not man of obedience. It was his faith that propelled his obedience.

Galatians 3:6

just as Abraham "believed God, and it was **counted** to him as righteousness"?

Paul was quoting from Genesis 15.

To understand this in its full context, we need to begin with the first encounter between God and Abram in Genesis 12. His name was not changed to Abraham yet. In v1, God begins with a command to "Go".

Genesis 12:1

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

Immediately after his command, God made his promises.

Genesis 12:2-3

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Notice God did not wait for Abram to leave his home and then reward him with the promises. God's promise first, Abram's obedience followed.

Fast forward to Genesis 15. Abram reminded God that He has not given him any children yet. God reaffirmed his earlier promise.

Genesis 15:5

And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

When these promises were made Abram still have no property. There was no sign of God's earlier promise of making him a great nation. Abram and his wife were both too old to have children.

Reason will tell us things are not adding up. Reason is unable to comprehend the picture painted by God. Reason will argue that's a tall tale God has told. No faith is required when God's promise aligns with reason. But, a man of faith believes God when reason tells him otherwise.

By faith, Abraham believed God.

Genesis 15:6

"And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

Galatians 3:6

just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

That faith was counted to him as righteousness.

The word for "counted" means to be "declared" or "accounted", "credited" with something he didn't have before. He was credited with God's righteousness which changed his legal status in the court of heaven from a condemned sinner to one who has received full pardon.

What activated this credit?

It was his faith – Abraham believed God. Paul drives his point again to the Judaizer that justification is by faith alone from OT thru NT. It's always been that way. No one has ever been counted righteous by works.

Without faith, no one can be sons of Abraham. God's people are not biological descendants of Abraham but those who believe God like Abraham.

Righteousness

We need a better understanding of the concept of righteousness. There are 2 entirely different types of righteousness – Righteousness of Human and of God.

Righteousness of Human – An ethical issue. It is socially achievable by avoiding gross sins and being morally upright, honorable & faultless.

Righteousness of God – is part of God's very nature. Just as God is love, God is also righteous. It is associated with His holiness which sets Him apart to be utterly unlike us. The righteousness of God is a gift what has the power to forgive sins.

Do you know the game Monopoly?

You use monopoly money to buy land and houses in the game. You collect rent when other players come to your properties. Suppose after 5 hours, you are the winner with more than \$1M.

What happens if you try to deposit it at a local bank? It won't work. Your monopoly fortune is completely worthless in Singapore's economy.

Likewise, human righteousness is like the monopoly currency. It is completely worthless in God's economy of righteousness. Zero. Zilch.

Paul says ... those who are of faith are blessed (v9). But those who rely on self-effort are under a curse! (v10)

We have to be mindful of this fatal error so we can enjoy the blessing and prevent it from being turned into a curse. This crucial error leads people to seek for salvation in the wrong way.

2 Examples:

Ex 1 - Look down on self

We come up with a set of self-imposed standards of righteousness. It is what gives you "face" or what gives you and your family "honor". We cannot be acceptable to people unless these standards are met.

For example, wearing certain name brands. Having certain kind of education. Knowledge in many topics or children's academics.

A word of caution to parents – It is especially damaging when your children are used to make you feel acceptable. It will drive them further and further away from you. In a Christian family, some of them might even leave the church.

The remedy is to look to the righteousness of God. It is blood bought. It is the righteousness of God that makes you acceptable to God. Not your "face" or "honor".

Ex 2 - Look down on others

We can be so impressed with our own righteousness we start to look down on others who are not as good as us.

So, we despise people based on such things as church attendance, generosity, politeness, etc. We think we are more righteous because we are better in all these areas.

This sense of pride can easily creep into all areas of life. For example, some of us can't stand messiness. When we see books arranged randomly, we will try to arrange them by size and by categories. When we see messy wires, we try to arrange them so they are neat or better yet, invisible. They can become a standard to determine who is acceptable and who is not. We are very pleased with our abilities to keep things nice and orderly. People like us are good. But messy people are out. They need to repent to God and become more like us.

One night, my wife and I came home a bit late and Sharon had fallen asleep in the car. So I carried her to her bed. I was supposed to change her into her pajamas. Before that I had to get something from the dining room. That was when I saw some messy wires sticking out of a wire box next to the dining table. I just could not stand the look of a wire explosion at a highly visible spot in the house. Even the cover was crooked. Like a zombie, I was hypnotized by it. I could only return to normal after the wires were fixed. All the while my girl was left on the bed.

My wife was quite annoyed that I took such a detour. I defended myself that she should be thankful I fixed her wires!

What happened?

Neatness became one of my standards of righteousness. I am better than anyone else in my home. I must do my job and keep things nice and orderly. While it is not wrong to straighten out messes, what is wrong is when it becomes a form of righteousness to look down on messy people and losing perspective of when it is not the right time to do it.

Paul would say that's foolish! Who bewitched you?

Though I have been given the superior righteousness of Christ. When I saw the mess, it didn't seem enough.

Next, we move to Paul's 3rd defense of the gospel.

3. Counted Righteous through Promises of God

What about the law of Moses? Surely that is proof that we must obey in order to be counted righteous?

For his 3rd defense, Paul explains that the law of God was enacted not to do away with the promise but to complement the promise. Beginning in v15:

Galatians 3:15

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified

If human covenants cannot be changed after they are ratified. How much more unchangeable is God's covenant. In other words, God did not save Abraham by faith and 430 years later gave Moses the law by which people can be justified. The promises made to Abraham to bless his offspring still stands.

Law & Promise

Let's clarify the difference between the law and the promise.

They operate on entirely different principles. The law is about what man must do. The promise is about what God will do. We can see the vocabulary used for the law of Moses. They begin with "Thou shall, thou shall, thou shall". But the promises from God to Abraham begins with "I will, I will, I will".

The law is about what we must do.

But the promise is about what God will do. It is about what He will do for Abraham and his offspring. It is a gift. The minute we try to earn it, it is no longer a gift but a wage

Again, Paul is addressing the issue of salvation. We are counted righteous based on our faith in Jesus. It is a promised gift delivered to the children of Abraham.

If the law cannot save us, what good is it?

Paul answers this question in v19

Galatians 3:19a

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions.

The law was added to expose our sins. Without the law, we might think we are good and holy people. Against the law, we discover we are hopelessly wicked. We worship all kinds of things but the Almighty God. Even when we worship God, we do so with our lips and not with our hearts. Our good works are often done to make ourselves look good. We murder one another with careless words happily as if there is no God to hold us accountable. We commit adultery in our lustful minds all too often. We take things that do not belong to us and justify we are not stealing. We give false testimony against our brothers and sisters out of the bitterness of our hearts. When someone else gets that promotion or the recognition we want, rather than rejoicing with them, we become jealous and envious.

That's not all. The law also provokes our sinful nature and increases our sin. The moment we know something is forbidden, we become attracted to it. When we eat something extremely unhealthy, don't we say with a smile – "It's sinfully delicious"? Instead of hating sin, we love it.

When I was a teenager in Malaysia where there was no drinking age, none of my school mates were interested in drinking alcohol. When I went to US to study where the drinking age was 21, most of my schoolmates were crazy about drinking.

The law is a mirror that shows who we really are. Oh, how depraved we are when we look into the mirror honestly. How heartbreaking to see God's image bearers show up as lovers of sin and haters of God's holiness. How horrifying to realize we are guilty of condemnation and worthy of everlasting punishment.

That's one of the functions of the law – to expose our sins and to show us we are utterly incapable of meeting its demand.

Commentary of Galatians, Martin Luther

God must therefore first take the sledge-hammer of the Law in His fists and smash the beast of self-righteousness and its brood of self-confidence, self-wisdom, self-righteousness, and self-help.

It is then we realize we are unable to save ourselves.

It is then we know how severe is our spiritual poverty.

It is in our despair, we are driven to the arms of our Lord Jesus ... hearing him saying these welcoming words from

Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Closing

Church,

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us

That's right.

We are no longer under the curse for Christ has become a curse for us.

We are no longer defined by the curse of crushing burden of what we do.

We are no longer held hostage by the curse of relentless to-do list.

We are no longer captives of the man's approval for we are accepted by faith alone.

What truly counts in the eyes of God is not our works but our faith. ...

What truly counts is hearing God's word with faith.

What truly counts is the righteousness of God which washes away our sins.

What truly counts is the promises of God which is given to everyone who believes.

To the extent that you believe this good news, you will experience a new-found freedom.

This sweet freedom is yours while you delight in obeying the law.

This sweet freedom is yours while you face the endless to do list for it has become your means of worship rather than slavery of acceptance.