

“Spirit and Flesh”

Lesson Text: Galatians 3:1-14 **Background Scripture:** Galatians 3:1-18

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 1:3-14

Galatians 3:1-14 (NIV)

1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. 2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? 4 Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? 5 So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6 So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

7 Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. 8 Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” 9 So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” 11 Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” 12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will 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 hung on a pole.” 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To state why Paul referred to the Galatians as foolish.
- **Biblical Principle:** To contrast the nature and motives of the Spirit with those of the flesh.
- **Daily Application:** To make a plan to apply the lessons of the contrast to your service in Christ.

INTRODUCTION

Not Our Works

After taking my undergraduate course on God’s grace and our response, a student followed me to my office to express a concern. She told me that she believed that Jesus is God and that through Him, we can go to heaven. She explained that she had messed up a lot of her life and felt that Christ could not forgive her for all of it. She continued to tell me that before she surrendered herself in baptism, she wanted to get everything in her life right first. I did my best to explain that whether our works have been mostly decent or full of evil, we all come to Christ the same way—in need of a Savior.

The Galatians might have related to her story as well. Faith is well and good, they might have said, but what of the Law of Moses?

LESSON CONTEXT

Paul’s letter to the Galatians arose from a real-life crisis. He was confronting a menace to the churches he had planted in the province of Galatia. This danger was the false teaching that it was necessary to keep the Jewish law to be saved.

Paul’s argument against this heresy necessarily involved exposition of Scripture. The effect of Paul’s masterful and inspired use of Old Testament passages demonstrated that the gospel was not a radical departure from the Old Testament. Properly understood, the Old Testament also teaches a relationship to God based on faith rather than works.

We must keep in mind that the Jews in Paul's time had a very different understanding of the word law than we do. We tend to think of law as including civil rules and regulations—prescriptions that govern our conduct. While there was an element of that within Old Testament laws, that system was primarily meant to maintain a right relationship with God. To the Jews, these laws consisted of not only regulations concerning relationships but also ceremonial regulations covering such matters as worship and diet. Moral and ethical living was only a part of what the Jews thought of when they used the word law.

After the Law: Galatians 3:1-5

In Galatians 1:11, Paul addressed the members of these churches as "brothers and sisters," and in Galatians 4:19, "my dear children." But here, Paul addressed them very differently. The Greek word translated *foolish* does not mean uninformed or ignorant. Instead it implies that the *Galatians* knew the truth but were not acting on it (compare 1 Timothy 6:9; Titus 3:3). Paul loved these people and was gravely concerned about their error.

The Greek verb translated *bewitched* is found only in Galatians 3:1 in all the New Testament. Its root is the Greek word from which we get our word fascinate. This word has a deeper meaning than the sense of "enthralled" or "entertained," though. It meant to cast an evil spell on someone. But rather than magicians, sorcerers, or witches, the people were being mesmerized by false teachers. The false teachers had so fascinated them and confused their minds that they seemed to be groping around in a spiritual fog. They did not stop to think how senseless it is to mix law-keeping with faith in Christ, and they were swept along with this false doctrine (Ephesians 4:14).

Paul preached *Jesus Christ ...crucified* (1 Corinthians 2:2), as man's only and sufficient Savior. Paul presented the crucified Christ so vividly that it was as if the cross was displayed directly before his audience. The word translated *clearly portrayed* was normally used to refer to a placard that was set up in a public place. Jesus' crucifixion was clearly, unmistakably set before the Galatians through the preaching of the gospel. Other commentators believe that this verse simply describes how Jesus himself was put on public display when He was crucified. In either case, the Galatian error was not in misunderstanding the truth, but in abandoning it.

1. Why did Paul consider the Galatians to be "bewitched" (Galatians 3:1)?

What Do You Think?

Why is Jesus' crucifixion a good summary of the gospel?

Digging Deeper

What errors have you seen introduced to faith when Jesus' crucifixion is forgotten or disregarded?

Paul's second rhetorical question asks the Galatians to recall their personal experience with Christ when they were saved. One of the major distinctions between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God is the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is true that mention of the Holy Spirit can be found in the pages of the Old Testament, but while the Spirit of God is often present (see Genesis 1:2), there is no description of the Holy Spirit being given to the people of Israel individually in the "indwelling" sense of the New Testament.

Paul's point is that the Old Testament laws do not promise anything like the Spirit. It is not "keep the Sabbath and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The gift of the Holy Spirit, experienced by the Galatian believers, is a part of the new covenant. One does not receive the Holy Spirit through his or her own righteous efforts at obedience. Considering the conversion experience of the Galatians, this second question can only be truthfully answered one way. They received *the Spirit* because of their faith, not their works. The thought is similar to that found in Romans 10:17: "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."

So quite naturally, Paul follows up in verse 3 of today's lesson and asks, if you began in *the Spirit* (which is the only way to begin), are you trying to continue in the power of *the flesh*? How could growth be maintained by striving to live Christ's life in the flesh?

Our Christian life starts with, is maintained by, and comes into completion only through surrender to Jesus and dependence on the Holy Spirit. To revert to the old covenant is to disregard and endanger this precious gift. It is to buy the lie that we can be made perfect by our own efforts apart from faith.

2. What other question did Paul pose to the Galatians? (Galatians 3:2-3)

What Do You Think?

What makes living by the law seem easier or better than living by the Spirit?

Digging Deeper

What are some helpful habits you practice that remind you that the Spirit's work is not the result of your own effort?

The churches in Galatia had witnessed and experienced persecution (Acts 14:1–25; compare Galatians 6:12), as well as suffering common to all people. Rejection of the law as a means to salvation was not without consequences. But if there was a return to law-keeping by Jewish or Gentile Christians, this suffering would have been *in vain*, both for the Galatians and for Paul himself (see 4:11).

Verse 5 of today's lesson echoes the question of Galatians 3:2 (above). God both gives *his Spirit* and works *miracles* (Hebrews 2:4)—these things are taken as fact. But those miracles (examples: Acts 14:10, 19–20) did not come from those who were teaching that believers must follow *the law*. Whatever spiritual blessings the Galatians experienced came as a result of their faith in Christ rather than through legalistic observances.

3. What did Paul mean by suffering being "in vain" (Galatians 3:4-5)?

Before the Law: Galatians 3:6-9

Paul now moves into the scriptural argument (Gal. 3:6-14) to further prove his point. The substance of verse 6 is a quotation of Genesis 15:6 (see also Romans 4:3). If the Galatians required further evidence that faith pleases God, they needed to look no further than Abraham. Abraham lived centuries before Moses, who gave the law to Israel. Therefore no one could assert that Abraham was counted as righteous because he followed the Law of Moses (see Romans 4:9–11).

Abraham's example of faith in action remains an example for us all (see Genesis 22; Hebrews 11:17–19), not least the Galatian believers. Abraham's obedient works were not motivated by wanting to earn a reward but by his confidence in God. Thus, to hold up Abraham as the main example of a person blessed and justified by God necessarily excludes circumcision from the discussion—and this was the linchpin of the Judaizers' demands.

Abraham's *faith* was his defining trait (v. 7 of today's lesson). *Those who have faith* act as his *children* when they, too, are defined by their faith (compare John 8:37–47). This does not mean that salvation is only for those of a physical descent of Abraham; the promise made to Abraham is primarily spiritual (see commentary on Galatians 3:8, below in next Q&A). Allowing works of the law to interfere with this identity was like claiming their father had not taught them about the life of faith.

4. How did Paul use Abraham to further explain that faith is pleasing to God? (Galatians 3:6-7)

Verse eight points to divine inspiration (2 Timothy 3: 16). The word spoken to Abraham was recorded by Moses much later. Anticipating beforehand, seeing a long distance off. God foresaw that Abraham would become a channel of blessings to the Gentiles; God knows the end from the beginning (Acts 15:18). To *justify the Gentiles* reveals that God would justify through faith. Not the Jews only. God announced the good news to Abraham beforehand, before the blessing came to the Gentiles that: "All nations will be blessed through you."

Verse 9 of today's lesson, "So those," (consequently, adducing the result and conclusion of the argument just presented,) being of *faith* in association and fellowship with Abraham *are blessed along with* him. Abraham was a man of faith. The emphasis is on his faith, not his faithfulness.

This represents a summary of Paul's argument so far. Anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who is faithful to Christ is *blessed*. Far from being a departure from what the Scripture revealed, this puts the faithful in the same company with faithful Abraham.

5. What did God promise? (Galatians 3:8-9)

What Do You Think?

What benefit have you experienced because of study of faithful people in the Old Testament (examples: Hebrews 11)?

Digging Deeper

What blessings do you experience that they were still looking forward to?

Cursed Under the Law: Galatians 3:10-14

"As it is written" introduces a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 27:26, which is part of a list of accursed lawbreaking behavior (27:15-26). Everyone who broke *the law* on any count was *under a curse* (compare Romans 3:19-20). This is for all those who are resting upon their works and counting on justification by their obedience to the law. These are under the curse. The wrath of God is hanging over these who do not "do everything written in the Book of the Law." Salvation could never come by obedience to law because the law brings a curse, not a blessing. The law is not a "religious cafeteria" where people can pick and choose (see James 2:10-11).

Paul next quotes Habakkuk (v. 11 of today's lesson), "The just shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4). This statement is so important that the Holy Spirit inspired three New Testament books to explain it as mentioned before. Romans explains "the just" and tells how the sinner can be justified before God (see Rom. 1:17). Galatians explains how the just "shall live"; and Hebrews discusses "by faith" (see Heb. 10:38). Nobody could ever live "by Law" because the Law kills and shows the sinner he is guilty before God (Rom. 3:20; 7:7-11).

However, on the flip side (v. 12 of today's lesson), those who or not under God's grace are under His law and must "live by them." Failure to render absolute obedience is fatal.

6. Why did Paul consider those who rely on the law to be cursed? (Galatians 3:10-12)

"The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23); this is *the curse of the law*. We are made aware of our sins but unable to will ourselves into perfection. Therefore, we have all earned a death sentence.

But praise God! Our redemption came through Christ. Our sinless Savior was made a curse for us through His death *on a pole* (the cross). To be killed in this manner was reserved for the vilest of criminals. The law teaches that this manner of death is used to shame the one being executed (compare Deuteronomy 21:22-23; Acts 10:39). Jesus was born under the law and endured the curse that falls on lawbreakers. But Jesus was no criminal. And because He was sinless, He was able to do what no one else could do: He perfectly satisfied the justice of God by absorbing the curse (Romans 3:21-26) in accordance with God's purpose and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23).

Paul tied it all together in the final verse for this section. Through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the promised blessing of Abraham is realized. Even the Gentiles can receive this blessing, best seen in the gift of the Spirit. All of this is based on faith rather than law-keeping. The arguments and teachings of the Judaizers were put to rest, and Paul did this by using Scriptures from the law itself.

7. What role did Christ play in the law to redeem us? (Galatians 3:13, 14)

What Do You Think?

What Scriptures give you confidence that the Spirit is at work in your life?

Digging Deeper

In what seemingly irredeemable circumstances can remembering the Spirit's work nurture hope?

CONCLUSION

Christ is Enough

Who among us does not remember a parent, a teacher, or some other authority figure chiding us saying, "You know better"? Paul addressed the churches with the same lingering concern parents everywhere feel for their children. The Galatian churches were in danger of forgetting the truth of the gospel and embracing a works-oriented striving for salvation.

Sometimes our wrong thinking causes us to rely on law or works to please God. But this is not where salvation is found. We cannot gain salvation, forgiveness, or right standing before God by our works. These things are accomplished only through the work of Jesus and the grace of God (Romans 3:23–26). We receive the Spirit because of Jesus' gift following our faith response, not because we cleaned up our lives or obeyed all the right rules. As we reflect on this passage, we do well to ask whether our lives betray a continued striving for salvation rather than a joyful acceptance of it. Do we live and act based on the truth that Christ's work on our behalf is enough?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, forgive us for the times when we have fallen back to our old ways of trying to earn what You have freely given. Help us instead to live our faith in action as a loving response to Christ's work for us. In His name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Our faith is in Christ alone!