

It's All by Faith *Galatians 3:1-5*

A number of years ago I had the chance to discipline a college student named Ryan. If I remember right during the summer after his junior year in college, he did an internship in Kansas City. Ryan was genuinely a really good kid. He was also kind of a crazy kid. Well, one night during this summer internship he was out with some guys and they decided that they wanted to go swimming. And so they did. But they didn't just go swimming anywhere they went swimming at an apartment complex. The problem was none of them lived at the apartment complex and the pool was closed. And so what did they do? They jumped the fence. You can probably guess what happened next, right? The police came and Ryan and his friends got in trouble. But Ryan was the one who got into the most trouble because he was the oldest one in the group. Actually, the others with him were all high school kids . . . high school kids in a youth group. . . high school kids in a youth group of the church for which Ryan doing an internship as a youth pastor. Ryan made a foolish decision. The rest of the story is that about a year later that same church hired Ryan as a youth pastor, so it turned out all right for him.

I'm sure most of us would say we've done our own share of foolish things in our lifetime. I could have told you some of my stories, but decided I'd rather tell you about Ryan. They are a lot of ways we can be foolish, but in no area are the stakes higher than spiritual foolishness.

The Galatians were being spiritually foolish. They had begun jumping the fence into the pool of legalism. They were turning from the gospel of grace. And as we will see in today's passage, Paul will strongly confront their foolishness. Today we are looking at Galatians 3:1-5. In this passage, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions about the Galatians' experience to argue his point that all of the Christian life is all about living by faith, not the works of the law. Through his questions, he reminds us that our Christian life started by faith.

I. Our Christian Life Started by Faith (vv. 1-2)

Let's look at verse 1. Paul starts off with some strong words.

¹ You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

When Paul calls them *foolish* he is using a word that means lacking in spiritual discernment; it speaks of being illogical. The Galatians were being illogical because they were turning from the gospel of grace to the works of the law. The true gospel had been clearly preached to them. Before their eyes, *Jesus Christ was publically portrayed as crucified*. And the truth of Paul's gospel was that a crucified Christ completely rules out any other way of being righteous before God.

As Steve talked about last week, in Galatians 2:21, Paul said that if righteousness can come through the law then Christ died needlessly. And so if the Galatians want to depend upon their works before God, then they are saying that Christ did not need to die. This is foolish. It is so irrational that Paul wonders, *who has bewitched you?* Who has put a spell on you?

Paul presses on with another question. Verse 2:

² This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Paul says that there is one critical thing that he wants to find out from them. How did you receive the Spirit? He is asking them on what basis they received the Spirit. Was it *by the works of the Law?* Or was it *by hearing with faith?*

Paul is asking them to think back on their start in the Christian life. He is asking them to reflect on their experience of conversion. Paul was there. He knows their experience. And he knows that if they will recall their experience of coming to Christ that will settle the issue.

Now, we're not sure what their experiences with the Spirit were at conversion, but apparently something happened such that everyone knew they had received the Spirit. I want to read a passage out of Acts 10 that may be the kind of experience that the Galatians had. In Acts 10, Peter is preaching the gospel to a group of gentiles. Look at what happened to them. Peter says:

⁴³ "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. ⁴⁵ And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. ⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" ⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Acts 10:43-48

I think it is very likely that this is the kind of experience that Paul is referring to with the Galatians. How did these gentiles in Acts 10 receive the Spirit? Was it by the works of the law? Was it because they had committed to start following the Law of Moses? Or did they receive the Spirit by hearing with faith? They received the Spirit when they believed the message of the gospel. How did everyone know? Their experience. They spoke in tongues. There was a visible experience of the Holy Spirit. I think that is the kind of experience that Paul is referring to with the Galatians. Verse 5 talks about that God worked miracles among them.

And so, what's the obvious answer to Paul's question? Paul knows they would answer, "We received the Spirit by faith." This truth is a foundational one in Paul's argument.

Now before we move on, I want to make a couple of clarifying points. First, we need to understand why receiving the Spirit is so important for Paul. The reason this is so important for Paul is that to be indwelt by the Spirit is the mark of being a Christian. To be a Christian is to be indwelt by the Spirit. There is no such thing as a Christian without the Spirit.

Paul says this in Romans 8:9:

⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

Paul's consistent theology is that at the moment of conversion everyone who believes is permanently indwelt by the Spirit of God. This experience with the Spirit is not something that happens later; it happens at the moment of faith.

The second clarifying point is this: Paul is not saying that if you haven't had such experiences of speaking in tongues or some other kind of manifestation of the Spirit that you don't have the Spirit? That is not at all what he is saying. Without or without such experiences, Paul teaches that we receive the Spirit the moment we become Christians. But, because the Galatians did have such experiences, he uses that to his advantage in his argument.

It's possible that some of you have had similar kinds of experiences with the Holy Spirit when you became a Christian. If so, great; let that experience be a reminder that you started the Christian life not by following the law, but by believing with faith. But if you are like me and you haven't had such experiences with the Holy Spirit, you simply need to know that the Bible clearly teaches that at the moment of conversion every believer is given the gift of the Spirit. He does indwell you and he does so because you too have expressed faith.

We begin the Christian life by faith. The indwelling Spirit is the mark of being a Christian. And for the Galatians, there was an obvious experience of the Spirit that Paul points to to remind them that they started by faith.

Moving from that foundational point, Paul goes on to say that:

II. Our Christian Life Continues by Faith (vv. 3-5)

Paul presupposes that their answer to his rhetorical question is, "We received the Spirit by hearing with faith." This leads him to more questions:

³ *Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

If the very start of your Christian life *begun by the Spirit* why now, Galatians, do you think that your continuation in the Christian life is *by the flesh*? Why are you turning to the works of the law for your continued standing with God? *Are you so foolish?*

Where the NASB has the phrase, "*by the flesh*," the NIV says, "by human effort." I think the NIV can be a little misleading because it makes us think that Paul is contrasting effort with non-effort. It makes it sound like he is contrasting merit-seeking effort of following the law with the non-effort of faith, which would make us think that we should apply no effort to pursue spiritual growth. But Paul clearly teaches in other places that we are to apply effort to growth in Christ. In Philippians 2:12 he urges us to "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling." In Philippians 3, he talks about "pressing on" in the Christian life (3:12-14).

What Paul is contrasting here is not effort verses non-effort; but rather life lived in the Spirit verses the flesh. The term "flesh" refers to an approach to the Christian life that is not based completely on Christ's work and the power of the Holy Spirit. One who is living in the flesh is striving to live the spiritual life independent of the Spirit. Paul's point is that if we start by the Spirit, we must continue by the Spirit. The Christian life continues by faith.

And so, we do apply effort to grow, but we do so in the realm of the Spirit by faith. We do so knowing that God is the One at work to bring us to completion. Paul says in Philippians 1:6:

⁶ *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

We press on to grow. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, but we remember that our continued good standing with God and our growth in holiness is really up to God and the continuing work of His Spirit in our lives. We begin by the Spirit. Our Christian life is maintained by the Spirit and it will come to its completion by the activity of God's Spirit. We continue our Christian life by faith.

Paul continues his argument with yet another question. He asks about experiences they've had after their conversion. Paul asks:

⁴ *Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain?*

This verse is a difficult one to understand. The question revolves around the meaning of the word, *suffer*. The basic meaning of this word is simply "experience," which can have either a positive or a negative sense.

Contextually, the positive nuance of the term seems to make a lot sense, because Paul is talking in both verse 3 and 5 about the Galatians' positive experiences with the Holy Spirit. If we take it this way, Paul would be saying, "Did you experience so many things of the Spirit in vain?" And, if we add the fact that we have no knowledge that the Galatians experienced persecution, the positive nuance makes a lot of sense.

But in terms of usage, in every other case in the New Testament this term has the negative sense of experiencing suffering. This is how the NASB and the NIV translate it. I think that is how we should understand it, but it makes it more ambiguous for us to understand what Paul is talking about and how that applies to his argument. Maybe they did suffer some kind of persecution when they came to faith. Whatever the case, Paul is making yet another appeal to something they have experienced and it builds his case.

Finally, Paul comes back to the heart of his argument in verse 5 where he asks:

⁵ Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

This is really the same question that Paul posed in verse 2. The main difference here is that verse 2 was from the perspective of the Galatians while this verse is from the perspective of God. Paul asks how does God provide the Spirit to believers and how does He work miracles among you? Is it by the *works of the Law* or is it *by hearing with faith*. And once again, the answer is going to be that God does this in response to *hearing with faith*.

III. Application

We begin the Christian life by faith, and if that's true, Paul's argument is that we continue the Christian life by faith. Paul reminds the Galatians that they had started by faith. It was undeniable based on their experiences. And his argument to them is that if it is true that you started by faith, you also continue your Christian life by faith. That's the truth that Paul teaches to the Galatians and that is Paul's truth for us today.

I want us to think for a few moments about how we apply this truth to ourselves and how we apply it to others. First, let's think about applying it to ourselves.

1. Applying this truth to ourselves

I'm guessing that for most of us we don't doubt that our life with God started by faith. We know that we had nothing to offer. We know we were sinful and separated from God. We know that any effort to try and get into a relationship with God through our own self-effort would have been just as futile as trying to jump over the Grand Canyon. We couldn't attend enough church services; we couldn't give enough money away; we couldn't do enough good things; we couldn't do anything to bridge our separation from God. We get this; we started our life with God by faith.

But how well do we continue by faith? Do we really believe that our continued standing with God and our progress in our Christian walk is by faith? What do we believe? What do you believe?

What happens when you sin yet again in that area that you've struggled with for so long? You gossip again. You get angry again. You lust again. You lie again. You are greedy again. What happens? Do you ever feel that God must be really disappointed with you? Do you feel that you really cannot approach Him; you really can't pray to Him and ask Him to work in certain situations . . . at least for a while? And even though you might not actually think, "How can I get back to a right standing with God?" do you ever feel better about your standing with God after a few days of obedience in this area and some good time in the Word and prayer? In other words, do you feel better before God once you're reestablished a good track record of walking with Him? Does that make you feel more acceptable to God?

Let me ask you, "How did you enter into a relationship with God? Was it by the works of the law? Was it by meeting some standard righteousness first? Was it by getting your life all cleaned up first? Or, with all your sin and imperfection, did you simply enter into a relationship with God by faith?

And since you didn't earn your way into a relationship with God, but did so solely faith, why now do you sometimes think that your relationship with God is maintained by your continued obedience? Why do I think this way sometimes? Are we so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are we now being perfected by the flesh?

Our life with God started by faith and in the same way, it continues by faith. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't care about obedience. We should. God does want Him to obey us. But our standing with God is not determined by our works of obedience but by Christ. We started by faith and we continue by faith.

In the same way that we need to apply this truth to ourselves, we also need to apply this truth to how we see others.

2. Applying this truth to others

If it is true that our own standing with God is not determined by our obedience, but by our faith in what Christ did for us on the cross, then this is also true for every Christian we know. Their standing with God is not determined by their obedience or conformity to some set of standards that we wish they would follow. Their standing with God is determined by their faith in Christ.

Sometimes I think we can give a lot of grace to people who are not yet followers of Christ. We just love them in spite of the sin that we see in their lives. We give them grace. But when it comes to other Christians, I think we sometimes expect them to get it all right. We get impatient when we see sin in their lives. We want them to follow "the rules."

We might do this with our spouse or our kids. We might do this with friends. We might do this with the Christian leaders around us. We expect them to get it all right. We put them under a kind of law. And yet the reality is that while living in this world, none of us is ever going to get it all right. We will continue to sin (hopefully less and less over time). And we need to remember that if it is true that our standing with God is not determined by our obedience, so too for those around us. Let's be gracious with one another. We are all in process. Let's not put each other under the law.

In fact, I think what God longs for us to be for each other in the body of Christ is a representation of how He thinks of us. God loves us with an unconditional love. We don't earn it by being good enough. One of the ways that I believe God wants to teach us this truth is through the body of Christ. As we love one another unconditionally, it helps us internalize that that is how God deals with us. And so, may we lavish one another with grace. May we not put each other under the law. It's all by faith. That's true for us and it is true for those around us.

In a moment we are going to sing a song called, *Come Ye Sinners*. It expresses a lot of what we've been talking about today. The song is an invitation to come to God and to keep coming with all of our sin and brokenness. The last verse says this:

Come ye weary, heavy laden
Lost and ruined by the fall
If you tarry 'till you're better
You will never come at all

If we think we have to get our lives all cleaned up before we come to God, we will never come at all. The reality is that we didn't wait 'till we were better. We came by faith, right? The Christian life starts by faith in Christ's saving work for us. And if it started that way, that's how it continues.

Amen.