

“BY HEARING WITH FAITH”

In this passage Paul continues to show the Galatians the distinction between the biblical gospel of justification by faith alone and the law-oriented message of the Judaizers. As Paul said in chapter 1, there is only one true gospel, and the so-called gospel that was being preached by the Judaizers was not it. And as Paul gives his biblical and theological argument for the gospel of justification by faith alone in these verses, he has two main things to say. First, he wants the Galatians to consider this matter in light of their own experience of salvation. Which gospel is more consistent with how they were saved? Is it the gospel that Paul preached to them, or is it the so-called gospel that they were hearing from the Judaizers? Second, Paul wants the Galatians to consider this matter in light of what the Old Testament has to say about salvation. How was Abraham saved? Was it by works of the law, or was it by hearing with faith?

Paul begins this section by expressing his astonishment over what the Galatians were doing. He even calls them “foolish,” and not just once but twice! He says that what they were doing was so unthinkable that it seems as though someone placed them under a spell. How else could Paul explain the fact that they were exchanging the precious gospel of Christ for a cheap substitute? Now in some ways Paul’s words here may sound a bit harsh, but remember what he just said at the end of chapter 2: “if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” By turning aside to the law, the Galatians were effectively saying that Christ’s death was in vain. This helps us to see why Paul got so worked up over what was happening in the churches of Galatia. As

Calvin notes in his commentary, “For when we hear that the Son of God, with all His blessings, is rejected and that His death is esteemed as nothing, what godly mind will not break out into indignation?” We should take offense when the gospel is distorted and corrupted. It is an affront to our Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us.

Paul’s words in these verses are fatal to the Roman Catholic teaching that justification is by faith plus works. This was exactly what the Judaizers were saying. They were not saying that works alone are enough to save a person. They believed that we need Christ. But they did not believe that Christ alone is sufficient. We need faith plus works in order to be justified. This is what Paul is so vehemently refuting in Galatians. For him, such teaching is nothing less than a rejection of the true gospel. It is saying that Jesus died in vain. While works are a necessary fruit of genuine faith, they have absolutely no part in a person’s justification.

Paul expresses his dismay over the Galatians’ apostasy by asking a string of rhetorical questions. And in this list of questions we can see three problems with the Galatians’ conduct. They were being foolish, they were being forgetful and they were being inconsistent. Their conduct was foolish because, as we just saw, they were essentially saying that Christ died in vain. By listening to the Judaizers’ message, a message that said that the way to find acceptance with God was through works of law, they were saying that Christ was insufficient for their salvation. And if Christ is insufficient, then his death was all for naught. This is what we are saying whenever we begin to think that we need to do something in order to find acceptance with God. If works play a role in

justification, then Jesus is not a sufficient Savior. It is utter foolishness to reject the only true way of salvation in favor of another way of salvation that is sure to fail.

The Galatians' conduct was also forgetful, because it showed that they had lost sight of the message that was so clearly preached to them. Paul says that Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified before their eyes. This is an interesting way of speaking about the preaching of the gospel. It does not mean that Paul made use of visual aids in his preaching. He did not perform skits. He did not show the Galatians *The Jesus Film* or *The Passion of the Christ*. Yet he says that Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified before their eyes. This shows us that people do not need visual aids to see Christ crucified. When the gospel is faithfully proclaimed and responded to with faith, Christ is seen with the eyes of faith. As our brother Greg Reynolds, the pastor of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church in Manchester, says in the title of a book he has written: *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures*. The Galatians had seen Christ with the eyes of faith, but now they were beginning to turn away from him to embrace this other message. They were not just foolish, they were also extremely forgetful.

Their conduct was also inconsistent with what they had experienced when they first came to faith in Christ. They were not converted by performing works of the law. They were converted by hearing the gospel and receiving it in faith. Paul's gospel had not changed since he first preached it to them. It was still the message of justification by faith alone. So why were they now intent on seeking some other way of justification, justification through the law? They were being inconsistent.

There are several important things to point out as we look at the string of questions that Paul asks in verses 1-6. First, take note of how he describes conversion in verse 2. He refers to it as receiving the Spirit. This is what conversion is. It is receiving the Holy Spirit. This is made clear in our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, where he uses the phrases "born again" and "born of the Spirit" interchangeably. To be born again is to be made spiritually alive by the working of the Holy Spirit within you. Every Christian is a "Spirit-filled" Christian, just as every Christian is a born again Christian. Those names are redundant. You cannot be a true Christian and not be born again by the power of the Spirit of God.

Paul also says that the Galatians received the Spirit by hearing with faith. Conversion is brought about by hearing the gospel and responding to it with faith. This is why we place so much of an emphasis upon the preaching of God's Word. The Spirit of God brings about his saving work in the lives of God's people through the Word of God. We can see this when we examine two parallel passages in Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. There are a lot of similarities between these two letters, and it is generally agreed that the reason for those similarities is due to the fact that Paul probably wrote these two letters simultaneously. Here is one example of the close similarity between Ephesians and Colossians. Ephesians 5:18-20 says this:

"be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving

thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”

And Colossians 3:16 says this:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

These passages are nearly identical, with only one significant difference. In Ephesians Paul instructs us to be filled with the Spirit, while in Colossians he instructs us to be filled with the Word of Christ. The Spirit and the Word are used interchangeably by Paul because the two go hand in hand. And both have the same effect. Do you want to be more “Spirit-filled” in your Christian walk? Then fill yourself up with the Word of God on a regular basis.

This passage also shows us that we are sanctified by the same means that we are justified. Paul asks, “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” We are not perfected, or sanctified, by works any more than we are converted by works. Sanctification, which is the theological term for the perfecting of our faith, is brought about by the same method that conversion is brought about: by hearing with faith. The Spirit of God uses the gospel to perfect us in our faith.

Another thing to note in these verses is the contrast that Paul makes between the Spirit and the flesh. This is an important contrast in Paul's letters. "Flesh" does not refer to our physicality in and of itself. God made man a physical being at creation, and he pronounced him good. Rather, "flesh" refers to fallen human nature, which includes both our body and our soul. To be in the flesh is to be in the fallen, corrupt state; to be in the Spirit is to be in the new, regenerate state. The Dutch theologian Herman Ridderbos explains it this way:

“‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ represent two modes of existence, on the one hand that of the old aeon which is characterized and determined by the flesh, on the other hand that of the new creation which is of the Spirit of God.” [*Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 66]

Or, as Alexander Whyte puts it,

“Flesh...is human nature poisoned at its very source by sin... It is human nature become the seat of sin and the stronghold of Satan.” [*The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 127-8]

What Paul is saying when he speaks of beginning with the Spirit and trying to be perfected by the flesh is that it is impossible to be saved by grace and by our own efforts.

It is either one or the other. Any work that we do in hopes of earning anything from God is a work that is done in the power of the flesh, in the power of our fallen human nature. You cannot get started with the help of the Spirit and then take it on your own from there.

After distinguishing between the gospel of justification by faith alone and the message of the Judaizers by looking at the Galatians' experience of conversion, Paul turns to the Old Testament for insight. Since the Judaizers were so concerned about making sure that the gospel was consistent with what was said about salvation in the Old Testament, Paul asks what we can learn about this by looking at the experience of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. This was a brilliant move on Paul's part, because it left the Judaizers without a place to stand. Abraham was the man in whom the people of Israel had their beginning, and he was not saved by works of the law, but by hearing with faith. And Paul says that the Galatians' experience of salvation was the same as that of Abraham, who "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Abraham received God's blessing through faith. And we should not think that it was Abraham's faith itself that was counted as righteousness. Faith was only the instrument through which God's righteousness was credited to Abraham.

The Judaizers probably argued for circumcision on the grounds that this was the way to be made a part of the family of Abraham, the way to be made a participant in all of the blessings that God had promised to Abraham. But what does Paul say here? He says that the way to be a son of Abraham is to have the same faith that Abraham had. Abraham had many physical descendants, descendants who were marked by the sign of

circumcision, and many of those descendants did not share his faith. Paul makes this point in Romans 9 when he says that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” [Rom. 9:6]

Note also that Paul says that the gospel that he preached to the Galatians was the same gospel through which Abraham was saved. Paul writes, “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.’” The promise that God spoke to Abraham was the Christian gospel. And the Galatians themselves were part of the fulfillment of those words to Abraham. They were Gentiles who had been blessed through Christ, the offspring of Abraham.

The temptation that the Galatians were facing is a temptation that Christians perennially face. We have a natural proclivity towards works-oriented religion. We are prone to look for something that we can do to make ourselves acceptable to God. But we must not succumb to the trap that the Galatians were beginning to succumb to. We must remember that we are saved by the same gospel from beginning to end. The gospel of justification by faith alone is the same gospel by which we receive the grace that we need to keep on walking with the Lord each day. And this is why we should always say, with Paul: “far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” [Gal. 6:14]