

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(September 23, 2018)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Leaving the Chains Behind**

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

### **Justified by Faith, Growing by Faith**

(Galatians 3:1-14)

Study #4

#### **Introduction: Catalysts to growth...**

Last spring, I planted quite a few tomato and pepper plants in anticipation of a bountiful summer harvest.

Everything grew well for the first couple of weeks. Then we were hit with a terrible heat wave that required daily watering. Life got busy and I missed watering on two consecutive 100 degree plus days, and the plants all withered and died.

Well, I was determined to not lose my fall plantings. I got them planted in late July, again, when, as you'll recall, it was *very* hot. But I watered faithfully all throughout our brutal August and kept them alive. Barely.

Then, September hit. And now, my garden is doing great. It turns out that I'm a tremendous gardener when we get twenty inches of rain. I've got great looking tomato and pepper plants, squash and beans coming on, and the start of lettuce and spinach and Swiss chard.

My garden's current success has nothing to do with how long the seeds and seedlings had been in the soil. Time-in-the-soil doesn't guarantee a great garden. No, the plants started thriving and the seeds started sprouting when the right conditions - temps, water, nutrients - prevailed.

As it is in the soil, so it is in the soul. Time-in-the-faith doesn't guarantee character formation or impact for Jesus.

It is not a slam dunk that Christians will take next steps with Jesus as they age. Believers do not inevitably mature. We don't automatically grow based on how long we've been believers.

Gardens grow when the conditions are just right. Can we identify what makes the difference between us when the garden of your friend's spirit grows and yours doesn't?

You'd like to grow in Jesus. You've long yearned to walk with God, to be mighty in spirit. You want to be used by God for good and to be effective in service.

In a quiet moment, you reflect on how deeply you long to be transformed in character, to bear the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, and the rest - and to be a strong and faithful witness.

We know what gardens need. What are the conditions that brings about soul and character transformation?

That's the question I believe Paul is answering as we turn to Galatians this morning.

Of course, he doesn't give us a cut-and-dried mathematical formula. But, there is a way that doesn't work. And there is a crucial element that must be present if there is going to be growth.

How does your life-with-Jesus garden grow? Today, Paul addresses that question today and points the way to a life that brings a rich harvest for Jesus.

*Review...*

We'll start off by remembering that Paul wrote the letter to the new Christians living in the region of Galatia (Asia Minor, today's Turkey) because they were being exposed to the teaching of troublemakers.

Paul loved these Galatians, so he's written to remind them of the simple Gospel of grace.

What he has already said in the first two chapters is completely relevant to us, here.

He's given us his conversion story, told us of the early church's heart for the poor, told us of Peter's moment of hypocrisy, and of his own boldness to confront Peter. All of this has tremendous application for us. It is just what we, who long to take a next step with Jesus, have needed to hear.

Today is more of the same. But, I'll warn you that what comes first is unusual. It is a set of six questions. These are rhetorical questions. Questions that aren't really asking for an answer.

For instance, when I was a teenager, my father would often ask me rhetorical questions, like, "What were you thinking?" Dad wasn't asking me to tell him what my mental thought processes had been as I was burning out the clutch on his car. It is in that spirit that Paul poses these questions to the Galatians.

### **Some Questions that Provide Answers (vv. 1-5)**

***[1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? [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? [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] So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?***

### **These Questions Reveal PASSION**

Substitute a drill sergeant firing off a round of questions at a raw recruit or a coach yelling questions at a rookie on the first day of practice and you get the same sense of passion. Paul is intense here. Emotions are running high.

And if you substitute a mom or a dad asking a bunch of questions of a child after the child has done something disobedient and dangerous, you can hear the same confusion. Paul is baffled by the Galatians' recent actions.

Confusion and intensity are behind every one of the six questions.

And, just like my dad's rhetorical question - "What were you thinking?" - revealed something (it revealed that I wasn't thinking...), Paul's rhetorical questions to the Galatians reveal a few things, too, about how life in Christ works.

### **These Questions Reveal REALITY**

*Bewitched (v. 1)*

***[1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you,<sup>1</sup> before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?<sup>2</sup>***

His first question tells us that they had been beguiled. A bewitcher had succeeded in moving them away from the centrality of the cross.

Not that they were innocent.

We're guilty when we act foolishly. And the Galatians are guilty of acting like fools. They *allowed* this guy - or this group of guys - to shift their focus away from the simple message of the cross.

We'll have much more to say about the cross in a few minutes. But note that the first concern Paul mentions is the Galatians' neglect of the centrality of Jesus' death on the cross.

The gift of eternal life is ours when we put our trust in this Jesus who died for us on the cross. Everything flows from that crisis moment of faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> Behind the word "bewitched" is the idea of casting "the evil eye" on someone. There is satanic involvement here.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Paul did, actually, see Jesus' crucifixion. And all those in the Roman Empire (including Galatia) would have been all too familiar with it.

Paul's second question concerns the reception of the Holy Spirit.

*Receiving the Spirit (v. 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?**

In other places (for instance, Romans 8), Paul clearly teaches that if you have the Holy Spirit, you belong to Jesus. If you don't have the Spirit, you don't belong to Jesus. So, his question, "How did you receive the Spirit?" is the same as, "How were you saved?"

Clearly, it was all by faith. It didn't happen because they kept important rules. No. God saw faith, and that opened the door for the Spirit to move in.

Again, that's how things started.

But this letter - and this passage - has as much to do with how those who have trusted Jesus are to live *after* they trust Christ as it does with how to get saved in the first place. Hence, the third question.

*Growing in Jesus (v. 3)*

**[3] Are you so foolish?<sup>3</sup> Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?**

The problem in the Galatian churches was something we refer to as *legalism*.

Legalism defines progress in a walk with Jesus in terms of conformity to an external code of conduct. I'm not thinking of moral rights and wrongs, but things like what you wear, what you eat, with whom you associate.

These Galatians [foolishly] believed that having been justified before God by grace through faith, God will now grow them through rules and regulations, or what he calls here, "***the flesh.***"

In the case of the Galatian troublemakers, that code was the Jewish culture found in the Mosaic Law. But legalism can involve any external code of conduct.

Now, of course, it is true that cultural conformity to an external code may have some value, whether it's taken straight from the Bible or not.

When everybody in a group wears the same kind of clothes, has the same sorts of hair styles, listens to the same music and greets with the same handshake, there is some social cohesion.

But, following an external code doesn't promote Christlikeness and it doesn't bring about spiritual maturity.

Back when I attended Dallas Theological Seminary, there was a dress code for the men. We were required to wear a coat and tie every day and we were not allowed to wear beards. No seminary professor tied the wearing of a tie or the absence of a beard to spirituality.

But, back in the day, the "clothing and beard" standard was something that the Seminary's Board of Directors decided would give the school the presentation they desired to a watching community.

The Board was completely within its realm of authority to make those rules.

But, did the wearing of a tie make me more like Jesus? No. Did a clean-shaven face enhance my spirituality? Of course not.

Following an external code of conduct can't do that.<sup>4</sup> Growing in Jesus is something the Spirit of God takes care of as we trust, and it has nothing to do with conformity to a cultural code.

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul established in verse 1 that they were foolish. The only remaining question now is, "How foolish...?"

---

<sup>4</sup> Might a student have worn a tie or shaved his beard and resented it bitterly? Yep. Would the rule about the tie be the cause of that student's bad attitude? NO! Could the rule have taught the student something truly powerful about submission? Sure.

In the next question, Paul wonders out loud if the Galatians went through all they suffered for Jesus for nothing.

*Suffering in vain (v. 4)*

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

We know that Paul suffered greatly while bringing the message of the Gospel to the Galatians. He was ridiculed, rejected, and stoned. I'm sure that after Paul left, the Galatians suffered, too.

They suffered for the very counter-cultural message of *"faith alone in Christ alone for eternal life."*

Now, after enduring all those early sufferings, they are abandoning the faith that had prompted the persecution in the first place. Those sufferings were for naught.

And, finally, a question about the source and the means of God's power in their lives.

*Miracles (v. 5)*

**[5] So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you,<sup>5</sup> do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?**

Paul wants to know - on what basis are you seeing evidence of the power of God in your life?

Is God at work because you're obeying a code of conduct? Is He active in you because you are wearing the right clothes, singing the right tunes, eating the right food? No.

The power of God is unleashed to heal and to save, to restore and to transform, to answer prayer and to meet needs because of your confident trust in God.

### **Summary:**

In these first five verses, Paul reminded the Galatians by way of questions that accuse that what welcomed them into life in Christ was the work of God, activated by their faith.

Their fatal mistake was in thinking that now that they are God's children, the rules have all changed.

They think that God now requires obedience to an external set of cultural norms (like the Law) if they want to stay right with Him, or to get righter with Him, to make spiritual progress, or to unleash His power in their lives.

But God works His miracles of grace through faithful hearts, not through rules-oriented, legalistic hearts. God is looking to use and to bless those who trust Him. Leading a life of faith is the way to make progress in Christ.

It's not about works, it's about faith. In Scripture, faith is the non-work. And, to demonstrate just how crucial faith is, Paul looks backwards two thousand years to the father of the faithful: Abraham.

### **A Story that Provides Insight (vv. 6-9)**

#### **Abraham's Story (Genesis 15:1-6)**

When we come to Genesis 15, Abraham had reached a crisis. After years and years of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son, they still had no son.

So, one starlit night, God led Abraham outside of his tent and told him to look up and count the stars.

Abraham did as he was told and then listened as God told him, **[Genesis 15:5] "So shall your descendants be."**

Abraham's response to this amazing promise?

**[6] Then he believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.**

---

<sup>5</sup> Note the miraculous healing in Galatia on the First Missionary Journey. (Acts 13:8-10)

Abraham was declared righteous - justified - because he believed that, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, God would keep His promise to give him a son.

Chronology is often key to understanding theology, and you'll notice that Abraham was justified before God centuries before the giving of the Law of Moses (Exodus 20). So, his right standing before God couldn't have had anything to do with Law-keeping.

As well, notice the part that Abraham's works - good and bad - played in his salvation.

The sins he committed didn't disqualify him from being declared righteous and his many fine acts of obedience had nothing to do with his being declared righteous, either.

Abraham, the father of the faithful didn't DO anything to be justified. He simply trusted in God's promise. That is Abraham's story.

And that is our story, too. Listen as Paul quotes September's memory verses.

### **Our Story (vv. 6-9)**

***[6] Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. [7] Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham...[9] So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.***

The Galatian troublemakers said, *"If you want to become sons of Abraham, you must be Law-keepers, like Moses was."*

Paul remembered his chronology and knew that was all wrong. His message was, *"If you want to be sons of Abraham, then you must trust God's promise like Abraham did!"*

Again. The primacy of faith. Trusting reliance on God. Depending on Him. That's the thing. Now, we're almost done.

But in the time that remains, we're going to listen as Paul explores our salvation. He goes deep into the heart of the Gospel.

Here, he highlights the enormity of what Jesus did for us when He died on the cross.

### **A Savior's Sacrifice that Provides Justification (vv. 10-14)**

#### **Condemned by Works Alone! (v. 10)**

***[10] For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM."***

OK. Everyone who doesn't abide by ALL the requirements of the Law is under God's curse. That's sobering.

Galatians 3:10 is actually a quote from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 27:26), and I found it interesting that some first-century Jewish interpreters had varying ways to look at the verse.

One school of thought<sup>6</sup> said that if a person obeyed more than they disobeyed (51%), they were justified before God on the basis of their works.<sup>7</sup> That's very much like someone today who believes that if their good works outweigh their bad works, then they will be saved.

But, that totally ignores what the verse is really saying.

Paul is agreeing with Moses in saying that any violation of God's Law results in condemnation. What is required is moral perfection if we are going to come to God to be justified, armed only with our works.

And, as experience - and Scripture - shows, it is impossible for us to perfectly obey all that the Law requires.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The rabbinic School of Hillel.

<sup>7</sup> Consistent with the verse, the School of Shammai said that 99% obedience wouldn't cut it. 100% required.

<sup>8</sup> Lots of people make it through life without murdering or committing adultery. But, then Jesus raised the bar and declared us guilty if we are angry or have a lustful thought. In addition, how many of us would claim that we have *always* put God first in our lives?

If we're willing to be at all reflective, we will admit that we've fallen far short of what we need to do and to be to attain righteousness through our works, our obedience to God's Law.

In fact, the Mosaic Law - or any other kind of law - can never justify. The whole purpose of law is to condemn.

And, if in anyone's case Law does not condemn, that is not because they found justification through the Law. It is because, realizing they were condemned, they ran to God for grace and mercy.

The result for anyone who is seeking justification before God by works is condemnation. It is a hopeless quest. It is faith - not works - that leads to eternal life.

### **Saved by Faith Alone (vv. 11-12)**

**[11a] Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident...**

In what way is it evident? It's evident from the life of Abraham. It's also evident from the rest of the Old Testament, too.

Paul goes on to quote from the Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk 2:4<sup>9</sup> who says, **[11b]...for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."**

And the sense of that quote is this: *"It is the one who is righteous (justified) by faith, who will live before God, not the one who seeks righteousness through works of the Law."*<sup>10</sup>

God has never justified anyone by works. Not in the days of the Old Testament, and not now. There is no hope for anyone who approaches God on the basis of works.

But there is another way to approach God that gives us great hope and confidence.

---

<sup>9</sup> Habakkuk is also quoted in the New Testament at Romans 1:17 and at Hebrews 10:38.

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, Commentary, p. 161.

Listen, now, as Paul gives us one of the most amazing statements found anywhere in the New Testament.

### **The Work of Christ for Us (vv. 13-14)**

*Jesus placed Himself under the curse of God (v. 13)*

**[13] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us<sup>11</sup> - for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"**

Jesus, the Son of God, became a curse for us.<sup>12</sup> He suffered the wrath of God in our place.

This is what is meant by the word "atonement."<sup>13</sup>

Having done absolutely nothing wrong and having everything exactly right, Jesus voluntarily took upon Himself the guilt for our sin when He died on the cross.

By doing this, He fell under God's curse. He gave Himself as an innocent substitute for guilty sinners.

And now, Jesus having suffered to pay the penalty for our sin, Paul delivers the punchline.

*We receive, by faith, the promised Spirit (v. 14)*

**[14] in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.**

---

<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that Jesus, who knew no sin, was made to be sin for us, and that He became poor that we might become rich.

<sup>12</sup> See Deuteronomy 21:23, where Moses said that anyone who was hanged on wood was under the curse of God.

<sup>13</sup> There are some who teach today that this idea that the Father sent the Son to die for our sin is "cosmic child abuse." They consider it a primitive and barbaric idea that God would require His Son's death for our salvation. But these teachers miss the holiness of God and His demand for justice, and the enormity of our sin and our helpless estate. The truth is that only the perfect sacrifice of an innocent would satisfy God's justice and rescue us from the condemnation our sin demands.

And there it is again. The blessing of Abraham - life, eternal life, the gift of the Spirit - comes only through faith in Jesus. There is no suggestion that what we do is the key. It is what Jesus did that is the key.

So, back to the question raised at the beginning. How does the garden of our soul grow? How do we make progress in our life with God?

Is it by conformity to an external, culturally acceptable code? No. We apply the fertilizer of faith to our souls, while God sends the nourishing rains of the Spirit - and that's what moves us to maturity in Jesus and impact for Jesus.

### **Conclusion:**

Now, how does all of this speak to the situation that the Galatian churches were facing, or to us, today, who encounter legalism?

There were voices then and there are voices now telling us that it's conformity to a cultural code that is the make or break when it comes to making a difference for God.

Some today will tell us that once someone has entered into a relationship with God, they must now "fit in" if they are going to grow, stay saved, or get in better with God.

Maybe it'll help if we think of it like this...

A man is pursuing the woman he loves. They are in a dating relationship and he's shown her nothing but attention and affection. He's treated her with the utmost respect.

She has enjoyed the attention and is drawn to him. But, having common sense, she's wary. She's seen this movie before. She wants to be sure he's for real before she gives her heart away.

Finally, after a long time of seeing his consistent love and kindness, she is swayed and agrees to his request that she marry him.

The big day arrives. She walks down the aisle to meet him. The minister says, "*Do you?*" and "*Will you?*" They both affirm that they do and will, kiss, and then walk out to build their new life together.

On the way to the getaway car, his whole demeanor changed toward her, and from the wedding reception's end forward - for the next fifty years - the loving, caring, strongly supportive, encouraging man she thought she was marrying disappeared.

What took his place was a man who demanded that she behave in certain ways toward him, a man who was never quite satisfied with anything she did.

She wondered, "*Where was that guy who seemed so content to love me, to cherish me, to accept me?*"

He left her at the altar - and she never saw him again.

God woos us. He pursues us with all the passion of a lover. He courts us by the Good News that Jesus, His Son, died for us. But, we are wary. Others have fed us "a line" before.

Eventually, though, the beauty of the cross convinces us that God's love and grace is for real. He is FOR us. We come to Him - maybe tentatively - by way of faith.

Do we really believe that God, having dealt with us in grace all through the courtship, changes the nature of the relationship on the day of salvation from grace to works? Do we believe that, all of a sudden, God becomes a harsh taskmaster who is more concerned with our measuring up than with our trusting reliance on Him?

God began to deal with us in grace, requiring nothing from us beyond a confident trust in His promise - faith along in Christ alone. He continues to deal with us in grace, requiring nothing - other than a growing confidence that He is good and that He is for us.

The reality is that it is this grace and faith orientation that moves us to lives of love and service. Nothing works like faith.

Trust God. That is how your garden grows.