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Free Indeed: A Study in the Epistle of Galatians

The Foolishness of Legalism

Galatians 3:1-14

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Let's imagine that Mark is starting a business and he comes to me for some business advice—because I “know” so much about business. He lays out his business plan and I say, “Mark, that cannot work. That is doomed to fail. You have got to make radical changes.” But He will not listen to me—he is determined to do it his way. So he goes to the bank, gets a loan and starts his business. The business struggles, and pretty soon it is going down into the tanker. He is working hard to try to keep his business afloat, but it is going down.

He comes back to me and says, “Bryan, I've got big problems here.” I say, “Mark, I told you it won't work. You have got to completely abandon that whole plan you have and you have got to do *this*.” He listens to me, but he is kind of hardheaded. He decides he is really not going to make a change; he just decides to tweak this and tweak that. He says, “I will take a little bit of what Bryan says, but I think I can make it work.” So that is what he does. He only makes a few minor changes and tweaks this and that. And the business just keeps doing down, down, down.

Finally he reaches a point of desperation where he is in a lot of trouble and he comes to me. This time he is a broken man. He says, “This is what I did. I tried *this* and now I am really in trouble.” I look at the financial sheets and I say, “You are really in trouble. This is just what I told you before. You have got to completely abandon your business plan. There is no way that can possibly work. You are going to have to completely change your thinking. You are going to have to do it *this* way.” He is broken enough this time that he listens. He completely abandons his way and tries my way. And what do you know? Things begin working and the business starts creeping up out of the hole. Soon it is going pretty well.

But then the strangest thing happens. Mark starts to think, *I know my way didn't work back then; but now the business is up and it's going. I think I'm going to try my way again.* And so he does... and down into the tanker it goes. Mark comes back to me and he says, “This is what I did.” I look him in the eye and I say, “You are an idiot. I think you may have mental problems.”

You are probably thinking that would be pretty harsh. And it would be. But it is exactly what Paul said to the Galatians—because they had done, spiritually, the same thing Mark had done in his business. The question is: If Paul were here with us today, would he say that to you? Let's find out in Galatians 3.

In Galatians 1, Paul calls the believers in Galatia “brethren and fellow Christians.” Now in Galatians 3:1, he uses a little different language, calling them “foolish Galatians.” That word “foolish” is not the typical word for foolish that you would find, for example, in the Gospels. This is a word that means to know the truth and to just simply act unreasonably or irrationally—basically to be an idiot. As a matter of fact, if you look at the Phillips translation of the New Testament (which is a very good paraphrase), Galatians 3:1 reads like this: “Oh, you dear idiots of Galatia.” That is a very accurate translation. That is pretty much the tone of the word Paul uses.

He writes, "...who has bewitched you?" There is a little sarcasm in that, but what he is saying is, "What you are doing is so idiotic, it makes me think some sorcerer has cast a spell on you. That is the only thing that could explain the irrational behavior." We would say, today, "I think you have a mental problem. What else could possibly explain how irrationally you are thinking?"

Paul asks, "...before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" That phrase "publicly portrayed" is an interesting Greek word. In the ancient world, they did not have all of the multimedia that we have in order to communicate. When they communicated, they posted whatever it was. If the emperor had a new decree, or if there was something the people needed to know, they posted it somewhere in the public square. That is what this word means. It means to take it and post it in the public square.

What is he posting? He is posting *Christ crucified*. As a matter of fact, the word "crucified" is in the emphatic in the sentence, which simply means: the most important thing. It could be bold type or it could be in red ink. It is a way of saying, "This is really the point. I publicly portrayed to you (I posted, I put on the billboard) Christ crucified." What he means by that is, "It was Christ crucified for our sins (Galatians 1:4). I told you that is the basis upon which you are saved—salvation by grace through faith." That has been the theme so far in the book of Galatians, and Paul says, "You knew that. You saw that. I posted it very clearly in your presence."

When we talk about "crucified" there are all kinds of implications to that. From the book of Galatians, it is the understanding that it is the only way of salvation. He has clearly said in Galatians that if you add any work of the Law to the crucifixion of Christ, you have nullified the cross. You have made it unnecessary. Therefore, when we look at the cross, the cross is a symbol that it was the *cross alone*, and that was sufficient for our salvation—nothing more. It is a symbol of grace. It is interesting how many churches hang a cross on their buildings and in their auditoriums, but turn right back around and demand certain works of the Law in order to be saved. You cannot have it both ways. The cross is symbolic that it was by grace through faith. If that is the case, then add nothing to it. That has been the message of Galatians all the way through. That is what Paul means when he says, "I publicly posted that message before you."

Verse 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?"

It is interesting when you go through the New Testament to notice all the different language used to describe salvation. When Paul talks here about receiving the Spirit, what he is talking about is being saved. It is a synonym for salvation. It is very consistent with Galatians 2:20 which says that I have been crucified with Christ, but the life I live now is not my own. It is the very life of Christ living within me. In other words, I have received the Spirit. It is the very life of Jesus within me that now lives. So to describe salvation in this case, he is simply saying, "when you receive that new life, when you receive the very Spirit of Jesus within you."

It is evident that the Galatian believers knew this had happened. He is assuming that. You know that you have been saved. You know that the Spirit has come into you and things have radically changed. The question is: How did that happen? Did it happen by works of the Law or did it happen by faith?

We need to ask ourselves the same question. Do you believe that you have been radically saved? Do you believe that you have received the very Spirit of God? If so, how did that happen? Did that happen because you were good enough? Did that happen because you went to church enough? Did that happen because you did certain religious rituals? Or did it happen by grace through faith?

The message of Galatians has been very clear. It can only happen by grace through faith. We are only justified by faith—Paul has said it over and over again. If that is true, then look at verse 3: “Are you so foolish?” This is where the irrational thought comes into play. “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

The false teachers, the Judaizers, were saying, “Okay, even though you have been saved (now that you have been saved in order to perfect that) in order to bring it to completion, you have to do this, this, this and this.” Paul says that is idiotic. He says you have a mental problem if that is what you think. How could the Law, which was unable to accomplish salvation, now bring about the completion of salvation? If it didn’t work then, it is not going to work now. If it couldn’t make us righteous then, it does not make us righteous now. What began by faith must be completed by faith.

As a matter of fact, the word “perfected” is the Greek word from which we get our mission statement in Colossians 1:28: “to be complete.” That’s what it means. Paul is saying that in order for us to accomplish our mission of presenting people complete in Christ, if we think it starts by faith and is finished by works of the Law, we are idiots. We are foolish. This is the foolishness of legalism—thinking that the Law can do in our Christian life what it could not do to save us.

It has been interesting dialoguing with quite a number of people about different things we have been talking about in our Galatians study. There have been some very good questions. People are asking questions about legalism and about people using grace as a license for sin. They are asking, “What about this and what about that?” With almost every question that I have been asked, I can answer, “We are going to get to that; Paul addressed that in Galatians.” We tend to want to skip ahead too fast and we say, “We know all of this stuff. Let’s move on.”

But maybe we *don’t* know all of this stuff. What Paul wants us to conclude at the end of verse 3 is: Do you understand? Do you really understand that you have been saved by faith? And if that is true, do you understand that you can only be perfected (completed) in your salvation by faith? This is a huge problem in the church and it is something we all struggle with.

He goes on in verse 4: “Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?” The word “suffer” could also be translated “to experience.” He is saying, “You have experienced this new life and it was evidence of salvation by grace through faith. But is it all now in vain? Is it all meaningless that you have reverted back to the way of the Law?”

Verse 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?” Notice that verse 2 was in the past tense. That is how we began. Now verse 5 is in the present tense, talking about experiencing the life of the Spirit. Experiencing the miracles means bringing about changes in our life.

The word “provides” (provides the Spirit and provides the power for the miracles) is an interesting word. In the ancient Greek world they loved the theatre. They loved plays; but almost all of their plays were pulled off without music because music was very expensive. Once in a while you would have a benefactor who would step up and offer to pay the bill in order to provide music for that particular play. When he would do that, it would literally bring that play to life. That was the best they had to offer, and it only happened when there was someone with enough money to provide that. That is exactly the word that Paul uses here. It is saying that our lives were dull and drab until God provided the music. God was the benefactor that provided the music which brought our lives to life.

Most of us would say, “I have experienced that.” The question is: On the basis of what? God provides you that music on a daily basis—life in the Spirit. There are miracles that He is doing in your life—because of what? Our tendency is to think, *I know I was saved by grace through faith*. Oftentimes we leave that there at the cross. We become convinced that we really have to merit the completion of our salvation. We think that if God blesses us today it’s because we are good; and if don’t perform so well, God is going to get us.

We struggle with this a lot, don’t we? There is a tendency to believe that we don’t think that way, but we really do. Every time the words “that’s not fair” come out of our mouth, it is a reminder that we do think that way. When we say that, what we’re really saying is, “I’ve been playing by the rules. I have been good. That’s why this isn’t fair.” We are thinking that is how it works now. We think that because of our performance God blesses us; and if we don’t perform so well, we pay for it. We have reverted back to Law. But the fact is, if I experience God’s blessings today it is purely *grace*.

Paul has talked about the experience of the Galatians and our own experience. We are thinking, *How did we experience salvation and God’s working in our lives?* Because we struggle with this reverting back to works of the Law, he says, “I am going to digress. I am going to go back again and remind you it is salvation by grace through faith.” We seem to forget that.

He uses the Old Testament Scriptures and starts with Abraham. It is interesting how many times Abraham comes up in the book of Galatians. As a matter of fact, the reason we are going through Galatians now is because we went through the life of Abraham last spring. You really need to fully understand one to understand the other, so we are doing them back-to-back. The Judaizers were saying to these Galatians, “We will accept the fact that you are saved. But in order to complete that salvation, in order to be really spiritual, you need to be circumcised. That goes all the way back to Abraham where that started.” Paul says to them, “Okay, you want to talk about Abraham... let’s talk about Abraham.”

Verse 6: “Even so Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Paul goes back and says, “Let’s talk about Abraham. Genesis 15:6 says Abraham believed and it was credited to his account as righteousness. Abraham was justified by faith.”

Sometimes I hear people say that in the Old Testament people were saved by the Law and in the New Testament they were saved by grace. But that is not true. It has been *grace* from the very beginning. Every person who has ever been saved throughout all of recorded history has been saved by grace through faith. That has never changed. The Law has never been able to be a means to salvation—*never*. Abraham preceded the Law by hundreds of

years. He even preceded the circumcision here by 14 years. Paul is saying that Abraham believed 14 years before he was circumcised. It was faith!

Verse 7: “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.” That is quite a statement. The Jews were saying, “We are Jews and that gives us a certain advantage. And then we are circumcised, so we are the top of the heap. We are sons of Abraham.” Paul says, “No, that is not true. Those who are sons of Abraham are those who have believed by faith; therefore those Gentiles who believed by faith were more sons of Abraham than those Jews who had been circumcised.”

By the way, when he talks about “sons” of Abraham, I know in this gender sensitive culture, everybody wants to make the language gender neutral. You need to understand, that would totally mess up the theology here. “Sons of Abraham” is not a reference to your gender or to my gender. It is a reference to the fact that a son was a legal heir to the inheritance. So as soon as you become a daughter of Abraham, you have no legal right to his inheritance. It is not a reference to whether you are male or female. It is a reference to the fact that we are legal heirs to the blessing of Abraham. So we leave it the way God wrote it. We are sons, legal heirs, of the blessing of Abraham.

Verse 8: “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.’ ”

Right from the beginning it was promised to Abraham that all of the nations, including the Gentiles, would be blessed. What would that blessing be? It would be: to be justified—to be reckoned as righteous just as Abraham was. How does that happen? By faith—just as it happened to Abraham.

Verse 9: “So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.” Paul says, “If you want to talk about Abraham, let’s talk about Abraham. Abraham was saved by grace through faith. Every Gentile, every Jew, anybody who believes by faith, then becomes part of the promise of Abraham.” He has talked about salvation by grace through faith. He says, “Let’s go back and talk about the Law.”

Verse 10: “For as many as are of the works of the Law {*meaning those who think that it is on the basis of Law, or legalism, that you merit righteousness*} 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.’ ” It is a quote out of Deuteronomy. Paul says, “You need to understand that if you believe you merit righteousness on the basis of the Law, you are under a curse.” He just tells them up front, because the only way that the Law can make you righteous is if you keep *all* things in the Law.

You see, the legalist has a tendency to pick and choose those things that are on the list. That is what the Pharisees did. That is what the Judaizers did. They were just picking and choosing, saying that you have to do this, this, this and this. Paul says, “No, it does not work that way. If the Law is your means of justification, you have got to keep the whole thing.”

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that there are those who teach that all it takes to be a Christian is to love—that we just need to love one another. The New Testament calls that the royal law. In order to keep the royal law, you have to keep the whole law. If at any time on any given day you fail to love someone perfectly, you are cursed. You are condemned.

James 2:10 says that if you offend the law in one point, you are guilty of the whole thing. The legalist makes up his own list. The legalist picks and chooses those things that define righteousness, and then everything else is just swept away as a non-issue. Paul said it does not work that way. I have noticed over the years that the legalist tends to make a list out of those things he or she does not struggle with, and is very quick to dismiss those things he does struggle with.

It might look like this on a Sunday morning. The legalist gets up and comes to church. He comes to church because he has to—that is on the “list.” He may have a heart full of self-righteousness. He may have a very critical judgmental heart. He may have a heart filled with pride. But he has figured out a way to justify those things. They are non-issues and they are not dealt with. After the service, he walks out to the parking lot and he sees a growing Christian light up a cigarette; and he immediately believes, *You are less spiritual than I am*. He has cast his judgment because that is on the list. He is walking through the foyer and up comes a high school student with a ring in his nose. Immediately he believes, *You are less spiritual than I am because that is on my list*.

Paul says, “That is idiotic. That is legalism.” It is just simply setting up our own standard to think, *This is the list of rules that make us righteous. There are a whole bunch of sin issues in my life I am just going to dismiss as non-issues*.

That is exactly what the Judaizers were doing. Paul said it does not work that way. If you believe that in order to be saved you have to keep the Sabbath, or take communion, or go through baptism, or attend a certain church—that you have to do this or you have to do that—you need to understand you are then saying that salvation is merited by Law. Therefore, you have to keep the whole thing. It is all or nothing. The conclusion is that nobody can do that. And that is exactly right.

Verse 11: “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith.’ However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices them shall live by them.’ ” It is a very interesting statement Paul makes when he says, “The Law is not of faith.” I know a lot of legalists who would say they are people of faith. They are not. Paul says clearly that the legalist is not of faith. Legalism is the walk of sight. Grace is the walk of faith.

The legalist frankly just does not believe Galatians 2:20 is true. If you believe that grace is a license for sin, then you do not believe Galatians 2:20. Because the radical change that is now the very life of Christ will do far more to conform somebody to the image of Christ than the Law ever could pretend to do. The legalist does not believe that.

Verse 12: “However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices them shall live by them.’ Christ redeemed us {*purchased us, bought us out of slavery*) from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’ ”

Christ redeemed us. He set us free from the curse of the Law. How did He do that? He became a curse for us. The quote is from Deuteronomy. It is a reminder that for the Hebrew people, when someone was really bad, they would be stoned to death. After they were stoned to death, they would be nailed to a post (a tree), so everyone who saw them would know that they were rejected by God. Generation after generation understood that imagery. Those who were nailed to that tree were the worst of the worst. It would be similar

to how we would process the death penalty, since the death penalty is for the worst. That is why they could not come to grips with the reality that their Messiah was nailed to a tree, because that was reserved for the worst of the worst. What they had to come to grips with was the reason He hung on a tree was because *they* deserved to hang on the tree. That is a sobering thought—to believe that the tree was reserved for the worst of the worst, and then to imagine that it is *me* who should be hanging on that tree. I was cursed; that is what I deserved. At one time in my life I was condemned to hell forever. Do you know why? Because I deserved that—because I had so offended God, that is what I had coming. We tend to think the worst of the worst should be hanging on that tree... but that is *us*. He became the curse for us because that is what we had coming.

The worship team did a beautiful job of taking us there in the song “Marvelous Grace.” We only understand how marvelous grace is once we understand the depravity of our sin. When the worship team moved to the verse that talked about the ugliness of our sin, they moved into a minor key. It had a different feel. The lights began to darken, and it was symbolic of our bondage in sin. Once the verse of the song had made its point, the instruments played to give us time to just think about that—to come to grips with our own depravity. Then the beautiful, sweet violin started to take us back to grace and we ended again with a celebration of grace. It was beautifully done to help us think about the fact that it was *our* curse He took upon Himself on the tree.

Why did He do that? Verse 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.” Why did He hang on the tree? So that we might enter into the blessing of Abraham. What is that blessing? To be declared righteous, that we as Gentiles might experience the new life of the Spirit within. How did that happen? By faith. How did this spiritual journey, this relationship with Jesus Christ, start? It started by faith. How is it going to be completed? By faith—grace.

In Galatians 3:2 Paul says, “I just want to bring it to this one point.” That is where I want to bring it—the point I think Paul wants us to be at before we move on in the letter. Do you believe this is true? Do you believe that you have the Spirit of God because you have been radically saved, and that it has taken place by grace through faith? You did not earn it and you don’t deserve it. It is just the gift of God’s grace. If you believe that, then it is only reasonable to believe that you will be completed or perfected by faith. To believe that the works of the Law could do now what they could not do before is foolishness. It is irrational.

If that is true, then here is what I would like to ask you to do. Would you, before God, commit yourself to the following: In the next several weeks as we go on in Galatians, if God reveals even one area of legalism in your life, would you acknowledge to Him that you will deal with it? Would you clean it out of your life? Because the law is not of faith; and to believe that somehow I can be perfected by the Law is foolishness. That is where we need to be in order to get ready for what lies ahead in the book of Galatians. If God reveals to you even one slightest area of legalism, will you deal with it? Will you get rid of it? Will you clean it out of your life? I would invite you to bow your head right now before God as you deal with that question. Are you willing to confess before God that you will deal with any legalism He reveals to you and ask Him to help you get it out of your life?