

Galatians

Bewitched!

Galatians 3:1-5

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Bewitched!

Scripture

Someone recently sent me the following story. . . .

After stopping for drinks at an illegal bar, a Zimbabwean bus driver found that the 20 mental patients he was supposed to be transporting from Harare to Bulawayo had escaped. Not wanting to admit his incompetence, the driver went to a nearby bus stop and offered everyone waiting there a free ride. He then delivered the passengers to the mental hospital, telling the staff that the patients were very excitable and prone to bizarre fantasies.

The deception wasn't discovered for three days!

Isn't it amazing that people can be so easily deceived? So easily led astray? So easily gullible? So easily bewitched?

I think that if the apostle Paul heard this story, he would have said, "I know some people who were once so easily bewitched. Let me tell you what I wrote to them." We read about what the apostle Paul wrote to them in Galatians 3:1-5:

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 observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴ Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? ⁵ Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:1-5)

Introduction

Shortly after I became a Christian I started attending the University of Cape Town. I lived in one of the dormitories on campus

and blossomed as a new believer in Jesus Christ. I grew in my relationship with Christ and shared my testimony of how I became a Christian with many of the non-believers who lived in the dormitory with me. I told them that by simply trusting in Jesus Christ (this is what the Bible calls *faith*) I received the gift of eternal life.

Then one day a new student showed up at the dormitory. He also professed to be a Christian, and he also was extremely zealous about sharing the good news of the gospel. However, this student was teaching that in order to receive the gift of eternal life a person had to trust in Jesus Christ *and* be baptized. He was so zealous that as soon as someone agreed with what he taught he would immediately take them to the swimming pool next door and baptize them himself!

Unfortunately this student caused a great deal of confusion and even managed to baptize some believers in our Christian fellowship.

Thankfully, he did not stay long, but by the time he left, a few students in our Christian fellowship believed that, in addition to faith, baptism was necessary for salvation.

The problem that we faced as students at UCT with the false teaching of the new student is a modern version of the problem the apostle Paul faced with the false teachers in Galatia. You see, the false teachers (known as the Judaizers) taught that a person was saved by trusting in Jesus Christ *and* by being circumcised (cf. Acts 15:1, 5), the Old Testament equivalent of New Testament baptism.

The false teaching propagated by the Judaizers keeps popping up wherever the true gospel of grace is taught. It popped up at UCT when I was a student, and it pops up whenever someone teaches a person can be saved by faith *plus* works. These works can include things such as circumcision, baptism, a list of dos, a list of don'ts, church membership, and so on.

The truth of the matter is that a person is saved by faith—and by faith *alone*. This is what the apostle Paul is so vigorously defending in his letter to the Galatians. A person is not saved by faith

plus anything; a person is saved by faith *plus nothing*. In fact, the entire Christian life is lived by faith alone, not faith *plus* works.

The doctrine (or teaching) that the apostle Paul is defending is known as the doctrine of *justification by faith*. Justification is the doctrine that teaches us how a guilty sinner comes into a right relationship with God.

In answer to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Question 33, “What is justification?” the answer given is: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”¹

Justification is a judicial act of God, in which he declares a condemned sinner “not guilty,” on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Faith—and faith alone—is the instrument by which we receive Christ and his righteousness.

This is what the apostle Paul is defending in his letter to the Galatians. In chapters 3-4 Paul gives a classic defense of the doctrine of justification by faith, a defense he had introduced in Galatians 2:16-21.

Lesson

In Galatians 3:1-5 the apostle Paul defends the doctrine of justification from the standpoint of personal experience.

I. Justification Is Defended from the Believer’s Experience with Christ (3:1)

First, justification is defended from the believer’s experience with Christ.

Paul says in verse 1: “**You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.**”

¹ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q/A 33.

Paul could hardly believe what the **Galatians** had done. They were turning away from the gospel, the gospel he had so faithfully and carefully taught. He blurts out in amazement, “**You foolish Galatians!**” Paul was so astonished at their mental and spiritual laziness that he wonders if some spiritual sorcerer **has bewitched** them. His question is partly rhetorical, because he knows only too well about the activities of the Judaizers.

The Greek word for **bewitched** means “to charm or fascinate in a misleading way, as by flattery, false promises, or occult power,” and clearly suggests the use of feeling over fact, emotions over clear understanding of truth. The **Galatians** were not victims of a magical spell or incantation, but were misled pupils of teachings they should have instantly recognized as false.

The Galatians’ experience of salvation should have prevented their falling for the false teaching. They had experienced first-hand the powerful, transforming, mind-changing truth of the gospel in the crucified Christ. They were people **before** whose **very eyes Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified**. They clearly saw the meaning of the cross. The gospel had come to them with the full clarity and power of Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf, and by faith they had believed and received it.

The Greek word for **crucified** (εσταυρομενος) is a perfect passive participle. This means that the crucifixion was a historical fact that had continuing results. John Stott eloquently states what this means: “Christ’s work was completed on the cross, and the benefits of his crucifixion are for ever fresh, valid and available. Sinners may be justified before God and by God, not because of any works of their own, but because of the atoning work of Christ; not because of anything that they have done or could do, but because of what Christ did once, when he died. The gospel is not good advice to men, but good news about Christ; not an invitation to us to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done; not a demand, but an offer.”²

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 70.

Years ago we went on vacation with three other families. One evening, one of the Dads and I were putting five pre-schoolers to bed (which was quite a job!). Tom read several Bible stories. I believe that someone requested that the story of the crucifixion of Jesus be read. After reading the story, Tom asked the children some questions to fix in their minds the essential truths of the crucifixion of Christ. He said something to the children—a quote from Luther—that at the time I thought was memorable. He said, “The Law says, ‘Do!’ The gospel says, ‘Done!’” What a powerful statement that is!

The law says that I must *do*, I must work, I must obey in order to earn God’s favor and forgiveness.

The gospel, on the other hand, says that Christ has *done* it all. He has perfectly obeyed God and all his laws, and all I need to do in order to receive God’s favor is trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

That is what Paul is saying to the Galatians. Just like Tom simply and clearly explained the meaning of the death of Christ, so had Paul. To turn from trusting in Christ to some form of works is the height of foolishness.

II. Justification Is Defended from the Believer’s Experience with the Holy Spirit (3:2-4)

Second, justification is defended from the believer’s experience with the Holy Spirit.

Paul says in verses 2-4: **“I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing?”**

In effect, Paul asks the **Galatians**, “Don’t you remember what **the Spirit** accomplished in your lives when you trusted Christ for salvation?”

He narrows his focus right to the issue when he pleads, **“I would like to learn just one thing from you: When you received Christ, did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Did you have to fulfill some further requirements, go through some special ceremony, or perform some additional rites? Or did you receive the Spirit by God’s grace at the same time you received Christ as Lord and Savior?”**

The question again was rhetorical and the answer obvious: They received the righteousness of Christ and his Holy Spirit at the same time.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the believer’s most unmistakable evidence of God’s favor, the greatest proof of salvation and the guarantee of eternal glory. Paul says to the Romans (in Romans 8:16), “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Conversely, in verse 9b, “And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (cf. also 1 John 4:13, 3:24).

Some Christians maintain that the full gift of the Holy Spirit comes through an additional work or experience. A person who does not have the fullness of the Holy Spirit does not need a second blessing, he needs salvation. The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is therefore inseparable from the new birth. As John MacArthur says, “At no time before salvation can a person *have* the indwelling Spirit, and at no time after salvation can he *not* have him”³ (emphasis his).

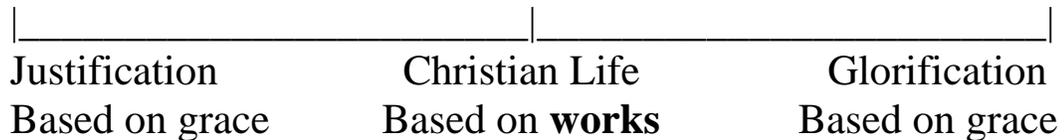
Every believer in Galatia had received **the Spirit** the moment he trusted Christ as Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit is not the *goal* of the Christian life but its *source*. He is not the product of faithful living but the power behind it. A higher level of living does not bring the Holy Spirit; rather submission to the Holy Spirit, who already indwells the believer, includes a higher level of living.

This is what Paul is getting at when he says, **“After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by**

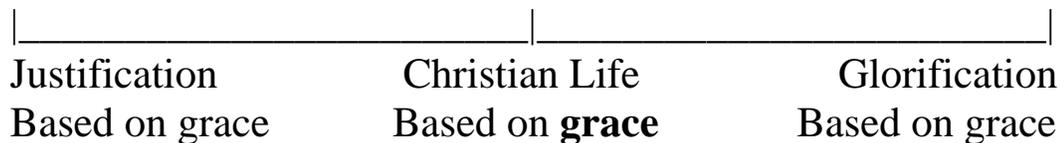
³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Galatians* (Chicago, IL, 1987), p. 66.

human effort? How could you think that your weak, imperfect, sinful **human effort** could improve on what the divine **Spirit** of God began in you when you first believed?” Drifting from grace into the efforts of law is **foolish**. Paul is now moving from the doctrine of *justification* (i.e., how we *come* into a right relationship with God) to that of *sanctification* (i.e., how we *live* in a right relationship with God).

Jerry Bridges, in his outstanding book which I commend to you, titled *Transforming Grace*, says that “at best, the Christian life is viewed as a mixture of personal performance and God’s grace. It is not that we have consciously sorted it all out in our minds and have concluded that our relationship with God, for example, is based on 50 percent performance and 50 percent grace. Rather it is a subconscious assumption arising from our own innate legalism—reinforced and fueled by the Christian culture we live in.”⁴ He says that our view of the Christian life is illustrated by the following time line⁵:



Our view of the Christian life is a grace-works-grace sequence. However, the teaching of Scripture, and specifically of the apostle Paul, is that the Christian life is from start to finish lived on the basis of God’s grace to us in Christ. So, the illustration should look like this:



⁴ Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1991), p. 19-20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

We will spend more time on this in the coming weeks and really examine how we not only *start* the Christian life by grace but also *live* the Christian life by grace. Let it just be noted that Paul is very clear that once we become Christians that we should not slip back into works.

Many Christians view God as a kind of Ebenezer Scrooge: He demands that last ounce of work out of his people and then pays them poorly. You may not think like that but I suspect that this is how many Christians view God. They believe that God has granted them eternal life on the basis of his all-sufficient grace. But then, after they have become Christians, they believe that God only reluctantly supplies their needs, let alone their requests. They do not realize that all of God's vast riches and resources are available to them, if they will but trust him.

They are like the old slave whose master died. Some time after the master's death, the slave was informed that his master had left him an inheritance of \$50,000, an enormous sum in those days. The money was deposited into an account in the slave's name in the local bank. After some months had gone by, and the slave had failed to draw any of the money, the banker called him in and again explained that he had \$50,000 available to him. The old slave—who had no comprehension of how much \$50,000 was—asked, “Sir, do you think I can have fifty cents to buy a sack of corn meal?”⁶

Many Christians think and live like the old slave. They do not comprehend the superabundance of God's grace and generosity, and so, if they even seek him at all, ask him for paltry blessings, the fifty-cent variety, when they could be drawing on the abundance of his riches.

Living the Christian life **by human effort** is **foolish**. A few years ago I received a letter from David Cross, a missionary our church supported, who was serving in England. He said that the letter had been written on the new computer they had received

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

from the United States. He said that it was a powerful machine and it had come with powerful software, which he was learning to use.

Now imagine if when he received the computer, he unpacked it and set it up. Then he sat down to type the letter but nothing happened. He opened the casing and looked inside the hardware but did not notice anything unusual. Still the machine would not work. He decided to read the manual. After reading the manual, the computer still did not work. With growing frustration, he started to bang on the computer to see if that would get it working.

Of course it didn't, and Barb, his wife, hearing the entire racket going on in the study, went into the room to see what was going on.

In exasperation, David said to her, "I can't get the computer to work."

"Oh!" said Barb, picking up the unplugged cord, "Would it help if you plugged the computer into the electrical outlet?"

Just as David's computer needs to be plugged into its source of power, so the Christian needs to be plugged into his source of power. But too often we try to live the Christian life **by human effort**.

Paul tells the Galatians—and us—that the Christian life must be lived in dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is powerful evidence that we are justified by faith. Only those who have been justified by God receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

III. Justification is Defended from the Believer's Experience with the Father (3:5)

And finally, justification is defended from the believer's experience with the Father.

Paul says in verse 5: **"Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"**

God not only gave **his Spirit** to the **Galatians**, he also worked **miracles** in their midst as a result of their justification. The Greek word for **miracles** (δυναμις) refers basically to inherent power or ability. Paul may have been referring to miraculous events **God** had worked **among** the Galatian believers, or he may have been referring to the spiritual power over Satan, sin, the world, the flesh, and human weakness that the Father bestows on his children through his **Spirit**.

Either option is an accurate interpretation of the word **miracles**.

Conclusion

Paul is saying that if a person has received eternal salvation through trust in the crucified Christ, received the fullness of the Holy Spirit the same moment he believed, and has the Father's Spirit-endowed power working within him, how could he hope to enhance himself before God out of his own insignificant resources by some meritorious effort? The answer, of course, is, he can't.

The student who came to UCT and taught that if a person wanted to be saved they had to trust Christ *and* be baptized was wrong. Paul is quite clear that salvation comes to all who trust in Christ *alone*. The work of each person in the Trinity points to the truth that the Christian life—from start to finish—is based on God's grace and never on man's effort. May God help each one of us not to be **bewitched**. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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