

Gospel Blessing

Galatians 3:1-9

God placed me in a family that loved Jesus and lived by faith in Jesus. As a family of faith, my mom and dad read the Bible to us, talked about the Gospel with us, prayed the Gospel into us, demonstrated Gospel living to us and engaged in Gospel worship and service with us.

If you are one of those who grew up in a home like mine, we are right to thank God for this added blessing. If you are married with children, you are right to seek the Lord to give this blessing to your children.

One of the ways that my family followed Jesus was in our devotion to the fellowship in Jesus' church. As a young boy, I sat with my parents almost every Sunday morning and evening in church. I sang hymns with my dad and mom. I listened to more sermons that I can recount. I arrived early to fill communion cups with my mom in the church kitchen. Following Jesus meant that the local church was central in our lives.

My first pastor was more of an evangelist than he was a Bible teacher . . . which had its advantages and disadvantages. In addition to the key sermon themes of heaven, hell, the cross of Jesus and the need to repent and believe in Jesus, the pastor would often speak about the danger of backsliding. That word "backsliding" is not used very often any more . . . at least not in my spiritual circles. When the pastor talked about "backsliders", I remember being confused about his meaning. I remember thinking that that whatever it was, it was something ugly . . . "backsliding".

At first, I thought that our pastor was talking about the people sitting up in the balcony at the back of the church. ☺ Eventually, I came to realize that the pastor was talking about Christians who at one time lived in obedience to the Lord's commands, but then somewhere along the line re-engaged with past sin.

So perhaps, in becoming a Christian, a drunkard stops drinking alcohol and then after some time begins going back to bars and getting drunk. Or perhaps, in becoming a Christian, a woman repents of sexual sin and lives a pure life, but then re-engages in sexual immorality.

To be sure this kind of "backsliding" was a problem for Christians back then in the 1960s. And it is a kind of "backsliding" that is still a problem today. Satan labors in every generation and culture to move God's people back in to various sins.

But there is another kind of “backsliding” that Paul talks about here in Galatians 3. This kind of backsliding is even more common and more corrupting than the moral kind.

Paul warns about sliding back away from grace and into legalism. Paul warns about sliding back away from the power of the Spirit and back into the power of self-effort.

This kind of backsliding is harder to see because the external manifestations are not so obvious, but it is a kind of backsliding that reaches deeper in our soul to move us away from the Gospel.

Main Idea: Having begun our life with God through faith in Jesus, let us live our new life by faith! The path to spiritual growth is not paved with the stones of our efforts to obey the Law, but with our walking by faith in the Spirit.

The Deception of Legalism

Galatians confronts directly the false teaching that Paul calls a “different” Gospel in 1:6. This altered Gospel sounds similar to the authentic Gospel, but it is distorted and twisted.

This false Gospel flows into the Galatian church through some professing believers who came from Jerusalem. Paul uses the strongest words to describe these men in this letter.

In 1:9, Paul says that these are “accursed”. In 2:4, Paul calls them “false brothers”. In 2:6, he calls them “influential”. And in 2:12, he calls them “the circumcision party”. In Philippians 3:2, Paul calls them “dogs” and “evildoers”. Paul does this openly in public letters!

Acts 15 gives a helpful short description of their teaching:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them,” (Acts 15:1-2 [ESV](#))

Today, the word many use to describe these teachers is “legalists”. The teaching that they espouse is called “legalism”.

In order to benefit from Galatians 3, we have to answer the question, “What is legalism exactly?”

Legalism is a misuse God's good and perfect Law. Legalism relies on the Law instead of Jesus to be accepted as righteous by God. Legalism relies on the Law instead of the Holy Spirit to become righteous in our daily lives. Legalism destroys both the truth about our justification and about our sanctification.

If we use God's Law correctly, the Law will teach us that we need Jesus the Messiah to resolve our problem with sin. The Law shows us our sin and convicts us of God's judgment.

*So then, the law was **our guardian** until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith." (Galatians 3:24-26 [ESV](#))*

The Law acts as a tutor to teach us that we do not have the capacity to justify or sanctify ourselves and that we need a Savior.

Truth: The Law cannot be mixed with the Gospel to accomplish the miracle we need.

The false teachers in Galatia were mixing Law with Gospel. With this problem of legalism in view, Paul responds . . .

"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (Galatians 3:1 [ESV](#))

The false teachers are not merely mistaken. They are people who are actively work to "bewitch" or to "cast a demonic spell" over the hearts of Jesus' followers. **These teachers have an agenda to confuse the minds of Jesus' disciples in order to lead them astray in their worship of God.**

In using the term "bewitched", Paul is emphasizing the demonic origin of those who are teaching them. This is a term that is connected with the occult. Paul has seen Satan's direct attacks on Jesus' church. Paul has witnessed the power of occultic practices over people's souls. Here Paul is launching a theological grenade into the heart of legalism. **He says that legalism is not merely wrong, it is demonic.**

Did you know that Satan is not afraid to enter in to Jesus' church to teach legalism to God's people?

The Galatian believers are responsible for listening to and submitting to the false teaching. Paul calls them "foolish" because they should have known better.

They already KNEW the true Gospel and they should have recognized the danger that the legalists posed.

Application: If we have heard and received the true Gospel, God holds us responsible for what we give their ears to hear and our hearts to believe. Receiving false teaching is not a sign of open mindedness, it is a symptom of rebellion against the Lord.

Paul is bewildered by their “backsliding” into legalism. He writes with astonishment . . .

“It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” (Galatians 3:1 [ESV](#))

“Before your eyes”! Every believer “sees” the crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah. Part of God unveiling His glory to us in the face of Jesus is a vision of Jesus’ death on the cross.

The Galatians had not physically seen the crucifixion of Jesus. They were not in Jerusalem on that first Good Friday. But “before their eyes” Jesus was publicly portrayed as crucified. Central to the Gospel message is the atoning death of Jesus. And the preaching of the Gospel is not a nice lesson in theology or history, but the preaching of the Gospel is a real presentation of the Person of Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection.

As such, the Gospel causes the person who hears and believes to personally experience a firsthand encounter with the crucifixion of Jesus. Part of the effect of faith is opening the eyes of our heart to see the crucified Lord.

One of my favorite hymns is one written by Isaac Watts in 1711:

Isaac grew up in a pastor’s home and Isaac loved the Lord and he loved his dad. But one thing young Isaac did not love was church music. Isaac believed that many of the old songs the church sang were dull and devoid of life.

So, he complained about it one day and his dad said, *“Isaac, why don’t you stop complaining and come up with something better.”* So Isaac did! That night Isaac wrote his first worship song.

While many in the church loved Isaac’s new music, many did not! Many loved the old favorites and did not care for the new stuff.

When he wrote “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”, many in the church complained about his use of the word “I”. They said his song was self-centered and not God-centered.

Watts echoes the truth that those who believe in Jesus experience a personal vision of the cross of Christ. The word “survey” reveals a deep, long look, not a glance or a quick scan . . . but a settled consideration and clear vision. This kind of look changes us. This kind of look is constant in the medicine it brings to our soul.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*3 See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*4 Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.*

The legalist says, “Look at the Law!” The Gospel calls, “Look at Christ and Him crucified!”

Question: Where do I find victory over my sin? Do I find victory over my sin by looking more at the Law. OR do I find victory over my sin by looking at Christ crucified?

Truth: If we live life by looking to the Law to help us live a righteous law, then sin will be our Master. Thank God we are not under law, but under grace!

“It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” (Galatians 3:1 [ESV](#))

Through the preaching of the Gospel, believers “SEE” Jesus on the cross dying for us. And when we see Jesus, dying for our sin, we believe and find life in Him. **When we survey the cross afresh, we are visited by God’s Spirit with a joy**

unspeakable and a conviction unshakeable. The cross is ever in view from the moment of our conversion to our dying breath.

The Reception of the Holy Spirit

“Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Galatians 3:2 [ESV](#))

This is Paul’s first of many references to the Holy Spirit in this letter to the Galatians.

After showing the conflict between justification by works of the Law and justification by faith in Christ. (See 2:16-17). Paul continues to hammer away at legalism as he talks about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

He asks, *“Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Galatians 3:2 [ESV](#))*

The gift of the Holy Spirit is one of the greatest blessings we receive when we place our faith in Jesus as our Lord. The Holy Spirit is given to us as God’s gift to help us . . . He is the Helper that Jesus promised to send to us after He ascended into heaven.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, . . . You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16-17 [ESV](#))

The gift of the Holy Spirit has been a central part of the Gospel message from the first preaching of the church. In Acts 2, after the church is established through the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter preaches in Jerusalem,

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”” (Acts 2:38 [ESV](#))

Then later, when Peter to Gentiles in Caesarea with Cornelius . . .

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. (Acts 10:44-48 [ESV](#))

Truth: The presence of the Holy Spirit in the soul is the believer’s most clear evidence of God’s salvation.

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,” (Romans 8:16 [ESV](#))

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” (1 John 4:13 [ESV](#))

The gift of God’s Spirit does not come to us some time AFTER we believe in Jesus, but at the exact moment of our faith in Jesus for salvation. **Friends, beware of any teaching that highlights special requirements in order to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. All such added efforts are forms of works righteousness that take our eyes off of faith in Jesus’ accomplishment and on to something that we DO in order to be fully blessed by God with His Spirit.**

Paul asks the Galatian believers, “Did any of you receive the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit as the result of obeying Moses’ Law?” The answer, “No. No one ever has earned the Holy Spirit.”

Then Paul asks, “Or did you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit by hearing the Gospel and responding with faith?” And the people say, “Yes. That is how we received the Holy Spirit in our lives.”

They knew by their own testimony that the Law did not . . . indeed could not bring the Holy Spirit into their lives.

Friends, have you received the gift of God’s Holy Spirit? We cannot do anything to merit His indwelling presence into our soul. If we are to have the Holy Spirit, we must receive Jesus as our Messiah by faith!

The Sanctification by the Holy Spirit

“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3 [ESV](#))

Friends, we need to keep ourselves in the Gospel and not the Law all throughout our walk with Jesus. We will stop growing in Christlikeness if we follow the advice of legalists. We rob ourselves of spiritual power when “backslide” away from Jesus and into Moses.

The word “perfected” means to mature in our life with Jesus. It is a reference to our sanctification. **Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life to separate us from sin and to grow us in true holiness of life.**

*“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will **bring it to completion** at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6 [ESV](#))*

Every believer is justified to the SAME degree; every believer is sanctified to a DIFFERENT degree. Each of us are wholly declared righteous by God through faith in Jesus. Each of us are partially grown in holiness by God through faith in Jesus. Every believer is responsible before God and active in God for our own growth in Christlikeness.

The problem with legalism is NOT that legalists make much of obedience to God. The Gospel does that! Christ gave Himself in love for His church so that He might purify us . . . sanctify us by washing us with the Word. **The problem with legalism is that the legalists place too little emphasis on the Holy Spirit and too great an emphasis on the self-efforts of our flesh. Our sanctification is the fruit of the Spirit’s work inside of our soul.**

Paraphrase: Are you so foolish to believe that you are justified by faith in Jesus, but then sanctified by works of the Law?

Satan designs to diffuse the power of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. If we get us to embrace legalism, he will cut us off from the only power we have to grow in Christlikeness.

Truth: We are foolish to believe that we are justified by the Spirit’s gracious work in us, and yet sanctified by our own effort to obey God’s Law. Our ability to grow in true holiness does not flow from our efforts, but from our active dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:16-24 [ESV](#))

The Gospel is not LESS concerned than legalism with practical holiness. The Gospel simply charts a different path than legalism for us to experience growth in godliness.

The Holy Spirit is at work in the Christian to give new desires and new motivations. The Spirit also convicts the Christian about operating daily on faith so as to produce good works which will honor and glorify God.

Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— (Galatians 3:4-5 [ESV](#))

The Galatian experienced miracles through the apostle Paul. In Acts 14, we learn of a man in Lystra who is healed after being crippled from birth. Miracles are not experienced because we earn them, but because we receive them as a gift by faith in the Gospel.

Question: How will you experience freedom from sin’s power? How will you experience the miracle of sanctification? How will you complete the race you began and become like Jesus? Answer: By Jesus’ ongoing work through the Holy Spirit.

Sanctification, like justification, is appropriated by faith and the Holy Spirit gives the power to do good works. The Galatians, however, were beginning to depend upon self-effort and legalism for their sanctification rather than the power of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith,” (Colossians 2:6-7 [ESV](#))

Illustration: Pilgrim’s Progress. Interpreter’s House.

Then he (Interpreter) took (Christian) by the hand, and led him into a very large parlor, that was full of dust, because never swept; the which after he had looked at it a little while, the Interpreter called for a man to sweep.

Now, when he began to sweep, the dust began so abundantly to fly about that Christian had almost therewith been choked. Then said the Interpreter to a girl that stood by, "Bring hither water, and sprinkle the room;" the which when she had done, it was swept and cleansed with ease.

Then said Christian, "What means this?"

The Interpreter answered, "This parlor is the heart of a man that was never made pure by the sweet grace of the Gospel. The dust is his sin, and inward evils that have defiled the whole man. He that began to sweep at first is the law; but she that brought water, and did sprinkle it, is the Gospel. Now, whereas thou sawest that, as soon as the first began to sweep, the dust did fly so about that the room could not by him be cleansed, but that thou wast almost choked therewith; this is to show thee, that the law, instead of cleansing the heart (by its working) from sin, doth revive, put strength into, and increase it in the soul, even as it doth discover and forbid it, for it doth not give power to overcome. Again, as thou sawest the girl sprinkle the room with water, upon which it was cleansed with ease; this is to show thee, that when the Gospel comes, in the sweet and gracious power thereof, to the heart, then, I say, even as thou sawest the maiden lay the dust by sprinkling the floor with water, so is sin vanquished and subdued, and the soul made clean through the faith of it, and, consequently, fit for the King of Glory to dwell in.

*"Run, John, run, the law commands,
But gives us neither feet nor hands;
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings."
—John Berridge (1716-1793)*

Much to say on the subject of sanctification! I want us to end today by looking at the little phrase that appears at the end of v. 2 and v. 5. "by hearing with faith"

The Gospel and its good influence on our lives is received "by hearing with faith". Not simply "by hearing". Many hear the Word of God . . . read it, memorize it, post it on the walls of their home . . . and yet experience no change from it. Our hearing of God's Word must be accompanied with faith. Without faith, we cannot please God. Without faith, we cannot experience the perfection that the Gospel promises to us.

What is biblical faith?

Faith is not doctrinal affirmation.

Faith is not hoping something good will happen in the future.

Faith is not a past decision.
 Faith is not reciting a prayer.
 Faith is not a striving for spiritual accomplishment.
 Faith is not fatalistically accepting hard trials.
 Faith is not embracing passivity and inactivity.

Faith is an active and personal reliance on God to do what He promises He will do.
 Faith is an active and personal grasping on to God in confidence.
 Faith is an active, personal entrusting of our life into Jesus' hands.
 Faith is an active, personal coming to Jesus to receive His love and sufficient provision.
 Faith is an active, personal turning from sin in repentance.
 Faith is an active, personal dependence upon the Holy Spirit to produce the fruit of true righteousness in us.

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."
 (Galatians 3:11-12 [ESV](#))

The Law operates without faith. The Law simply requires more effort from us. So the contrast between the Law and the Gospel is vast. If we lean in to the Law for our salvation, then we withdraw from the Gospel.

The Law says, "Do this and live." The Gospel says, "Jesus has done all for you."
 The Law says, "Try harder." The Gospel says, "The Holy Spirit will help you."
 The Law says, "Add more diligence." The Gospel says, "Draw near to Jesus."

Question: Does the Gospel remove any personal effort toward our justification?
 Yes! We are dead in our sins and we need God to act upon us. Our faith simply receives God's free gift.

Question: Does the Gospel remove any personal effort toward our growth in Christlikeness? No! The Gospel makes us alive so that our new life can move toward Jesus by faith. Our faith is not inactive. Our faith walks daily with the Lord and seeks His grace to overcome our battle with sin and to be changed by His Spirit.

Our salvation includes both our justification and our sanctification. These are two different parts of the same miracle that God performs in us who believe. A clear understanding of these two is vital to our spiritual worship and health.

The Illustration of Gospel Blessing

ABRAHAM!

Conclusion: I close with an excerpt from one of my favorite pastors and one of my favorite books. Holiness by J. C. Ryle

In what, then, are justification and sanctification alike?

- (a) Both proceed originally from the free grace of God. It is of His gift alone that believers are justified or sanctified at all.
- (b) Both are part of that great work of salvation which Christ, in the eternal covenant, has undertaken on behalf of His people. . . . The root of each is Christ.
- (c) Both are to be found in the same persons. Those who are justified are always sanctified, and those who are sanctified are always justified.
- (d) Both begin at the same time. The moment a person begins to be a justified person, he also begins to be a sanctified person.
- (e) Both are alike necessary to salvation. No one ever reached heaven without a renewed heart as well as forgiveness, without the Spirit's grace as well as the blood of Christ, without a meetness for eternal glory as well as a title.

Such are the points on which justification and sanctification agree. Let us now reverse the picture, and see wherein they differ.

- (a) Justification is the reckoning and counting a man to be righteous for the sake of . . . Jesus Christ the Lord. Sanctification is the actual making a man inwardly righteous, though it may be in a very feeble degree.
- (b) In justification our own works have no place at all, and simple faith in Christ is the one thing needful. In sanctification our own works are of vast importance and God bids us fight, and watch, and pray, and strive, and take pains, and labour.

- (c) Justification is a finished and complete work, and a man is perfectly justified the moment he believes. Sanctification is an imperfect work, comparatively, and will never be perfected until we reach heaven.
- (d) Justification admits of no growth or increase: a man is as much justified the hour he first comes to Christ by faith as he will be to all eternity. Sanctification is eminently a progressive work, and admits of continual growth . . . so long as a man lives.
- (e) Justification is the act of God *about* us, and is not easily discerned by others. Sanctification is the work of God *within* us, and cannot be hid in its outward manifestation from the eyes of men.

If you have not believed in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, the will of God for you is your justification.

If you have believed in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, the will of God for you is your sanctification.

Let us not backslide either in our practical daily life of obedience OR in our understanding that the righteous will LIVE BY FAITH! Let us walk forward with Jesus and become more and more like Him.