

Text: Galatians 3:1-9 Faith from First to Last

Exegetical Big Idea: God's salvation and his Spirit are given by faith (Abraham is example of this), not by works of the law or our striving. It is not in line with the gospel to depend on human effort for the Christian life, but rather to live out our Christians lives by faith.

Homiletical Big Idea: **The whole of the Christian life is one lived out in faith.**

Fallen Condition Focus: We are foolish people! We often get "bewitched" by our own pride or legalism and wander from the grace that saves us, though it is this same grace that sustains us.

Background:

Paul continues his argument against his opponents, who are legalistic Jews that have come from Jerusalem. They are tricky opponents, because while they don't deny that Jesus is the Saviour, and that he died on the cross for the sins of the world, they are preaching that this is not the entirety of the gospel. They maintain that salvation, while found in Jesus, is completed and only fully received through obedience to Mosaic laws. They would say for example that since Abraham was circumcised, so should all gentile Christians.

Paul rightly argues that this is slavery. If any part of our salvation depends on us, namely, depends on obedience to God's law, then we are required to keep the entire thing! And that, as we know, is absolutely impossible.

No, Paul writes that the only way to be made right with God is by receiving the free gift of Jesus. His death was a gift to us that we call grace. He pays for our sins fully, and we receive this grace by faith.

Not only are we saved by this grace received through faith, but we also, as Christians live in that faith.

Intro:

In Matthew 14 Jesus tells his disciples to get into a boat and head on over to the other side of the lake. Jesus will meet up with them, but first he's going to go up on a mountainside to pray. The disciples obey Jesus and start to make their way across the lake. Well it's a long journey and they have to sail through the night. In the middle of the night, a storm comes up on them and the wind and the waves start to rock the boat around. Well the disciples look out, and they see a figure of a person walking on the water! At first they think it's a ghost, but he's no ghost. It's Jesus!

As Jesus comes closer, the disciples are freaking out, but Jesus calls to them and says "take courage, it is I". Now it is amazing enough that Jesus is able to walk on water. But what happens next is astonishing if you think about it. Peter, (who always seems to act out on impulse which often gets him into hot water, but not this time) gets the bright idea to call out to Jesus "if it's really you, tell me to come out there and I'll come to you". Amazingly, Jesus does not tell him "no Peter, this is a little beyond you." Jesus tells him to come! So Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk on the water, like Jesus, towards Jesus.

Now that, is amazing faith. There is absolutely no way Peter thinks that he can somehow accomplish that on his own! He literally steps out in faith towards Jesus!

I wish I could tell you that Peter walked over to Jesus and gave him a high five...but that's not what happens. Peter looks around at the wind and the waves and he gets scared! As soon as he takes his gaze off of Jesus, he starts to sink. Jesus then says to Peter "you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

If you've been a Christian for any length of time I think you can sympathize with Peter. Many people come to receive the saving grace of Jesus in exciting moments of faith. We just talked last week about how salvation, being justified before God, is an act of faith and not works.

But then the Christian journey begins, and how easy is it to take our gaze off of the goodness of Jesus and look around us at the world. Just like Peter, that doesn't help us any. In fact, it causes us to start to flounder around. The Galatian church was floundering. They had started off so well! But not these dangerous teachers had come to them and the gaze of the Galatians were turning from Jesus and they were looking at these legalistic teachers.

In one sense these verses are not all that different from the ones that have come before.

After making his argument that the Christian is saved by faith alone in Jesus, Paul now shows us that it's not only faith in Christ that saves us, but that it's this faith in the goodness of Jesus that sustains us through our whole Christian life.

The whole of the Christian life is one lived out in faith.

Vv. 1-3: Through faith, God starts and finishes his work.

3:1 says starts with "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

Paul is clearly worked up as he begins this section! It kind of feels like he's a bit harsh with the Galatian church. But this comes out of a heart of concern for them. He cares for them! He loves them. We know that the Galatians are in some serious danger of going off the rails as a church. Remember back in the opening chapter that Paul tells them that he is astonished that they are so quickly deserting Christ and his gospel! The implication here is that they have not done so altogether as a church, but if they're not careful to stay on the path of the gospel, they're going to destroy what they have.

Paul's plan is to focus them back on the cross of Christ. He has just told them in the verses that we looked at last week that if righteousness (that is being made right with God) could be obtained through obedience to the law, then Christ died for nothing. But of course since righteousness cannot be obtained through obedience, then Christ's death was indeed not for nothing!

In fact the cross itself was an amazing spectacle. Unlike the birth of Jesus, which was very inconspicuous, the death of Jesus was plain for so many people to see! Paul starts off with this thought in verse 1.

He writes that "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified." I know we can be thrown off here by the word "portrayed", as if the death of Jesus was some kind of slight of hand or trick. That's not what Paul is getting at here. The word here means a public spectacle. Paul is simply saying that the death of Jesus was an event that many many people witnessed. If there was T.V. and internet back then, it would have been covered by all the news outlets.

The point is that this happened by God's design! The cross of Christ, and we certainly can add in the resurrection of Christ to this, but the death and resurrection of Jesus is the centre of God's plan for

redemption! The whole of the Old Testament point us to the cross, and the whole of the New Testament points us back to the cross.

It's at the cross that the sinless saviour died. He is fully God and fully human. Fully God because the sacrifice is of infinite worth and value, and completely holy. Fully human because he had to be made like his brothers and sisters to stand under the wrath of God for us and absorb it.

It's at the cross that the full measure of God's wrath on the sins of his people is poured out as Jesus calls "it is finished". And it is at the tomb after the cross that sin and death are defeated once and for all.

This is what Paul means when he says that Jesus was clearly displayed as a public spectacle as he hung on the cross. So then, says Paul, let me ask you this one thing (verse 2). If they answer this one question, they will have the answer to all the problems being created by the legalistic Jews.

"Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?"

Paul is now connecting the cross of Jesus, with receiving his Spirit. And if we think about it that makes perfect sense. We know that when a person come to believe in the saving work of Jesus they receive God the Spirit in them. We read about that last week. When a person comes to Jesus by faith, they are justified before God. They spiritually die and are spiritually raised to life again. And this new life is now lived in Christ, while at the same time Christ lives in them by the person of the Holy Spirit.

So Paul's thinking is this: You came to Christ by faith alone, and are justified by faith alone. And if you receive God's Spirit when you come to Christ, how then did you come to receive the Spirit of God? The answer of course is also by faith! This makes perfect sense.

Here's another way to think about it. God is holy right? Of course he is. We however are unholy. The holy cannot dwell with the holy. But if the unholy person were to die, and be resurrected in holiness, now God *can* dwell with that person! So the very fact that a holy God dwells in his people must mean that his people have been justified (made right with God) and are holy.

So, Paul says, did you receive God's Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? The answer is obvious. By faith. Now that this is made clear, Paul wants us to follow this pattern going into verse 3. Paul then writes "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" The contrast here is that "the Spirit" means faith in God's work, and "in the flesh" means faith in or own work.

When Paul says "begun with the Spirit" he is meaning exactly what we just talked about, namely, being saved. So if God does all the work in our initial salvation, who do you think is going to carry this work on to completion? We are not immediately beamed up to heaven when we come to faith in Jesus. We still live here on this earth. We are being transformed more and more into the likeness of Jesus. That's what this word "perfected" means.

The question is of course, how is this perfection accomplished? Are we left on our own to do it after we get an initial "boost" from God? Does he pull what's called a "bait and switch" on us?

[Suppose you enter a contest and your name is pulled as the winner. Your prize is your very own private Island in Hawaii! It has everything; indoor swimming pools with water slides, tennis courts, go kart track, a roller coaster, and even a petting zoo with and elephant! Isn't that amazing? You'd be ecstatic about

wouldn't you? I certainly would. But then the hype of the contest is over, and you start to read the fine-print. Technically you get this island, but the property taxes are a million dollars a year, not to mention the insurance on everything. You have to pay the upkeep on the house, as well as make sure the roller coaster is safety certified and inspected often. You obviously have to do all the little things like dust and vacuum your massive house and cut the grass (or pay someone to come in and do it). And please don't forget about feeding your elephant. What's the point of winning that if there is no way to keep up with it?]

Is that God's game with us? Did he display Christ on the cross as a public spectacle, centering all of history around him, gloriously saving us from our sin, just to leave us to keep it up and "perfect" ourselves in the flesh? Does God lavishly pour out his grace on us just to say "ok I've done my work in saving you, now you'd better buckle down and finish the job"? Absolutely not!

Paul's question in verse 3 is what we call "rhetorical", meaning Paul and his readers already know the answer. It is through faith in Christ that God starts the work of salvation in his people, and it is through this same faith in Christ that God is going to finish it. How will turning to my own strength help me in this? It won't help one bit.

And yet...I can relate to the Galatians. This is not just a Galatian problem, this is a human problem. That's why thousands of years later it stings us when we sing "*Prone to wonder, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love*".

Thank the Lord the next line we sing is "*Here's my heart Lord, take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above*". That's not just a good rhyme, that's biblical truth. Paul writes to the Philippian church "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on *completion* until the day of Christ Jesus".

Praise God for that!

The whole of the Christian life is one lived out in faith.

Vv. 4-6: God glorifies himself as his people live by faith.

Living by faith is by no means an easy thing for us. And yet, as we trust God *in* our weakness and frailty, we bring God glory. The bigger the contrast between our weakness, and God's power, the more glorious God shows himself to be.

At first when Paul starts talking about suffering, it seems like he's changing subjects. He writes in verse 4 "Did you suffer so many things in vain – if indeed it was in vain?"

What kind of suffering is Paul referring to? Was it an illness that swept through the church? Was this a poverty issue? While we don't know exactly what the suffering was, the context here gives very good reason to see this suffering as one of suffering for the gospel. Paul has been talking about the gospel since the opening of the letter, and he's going to continue talking about the gospel for a few chapters now, so it makes sense that the suffering he is referring to is a persecution type of suffering for the sake of the gospel of Christ. Likely, this would have been at the hands of the Jewish leaders, but possibly by these false teachers. Remember that the first persecution that the Church experienced was not at the hands of the Romans, but at the hands of the Pharisees. Paul himself traveled to churches to round up Christians and imprison them.

So Paul asks them if their suffering was in vain. Clearly what had happened was that the church was formed on the foundation of the true gospel, and when persecution came, they stood their ground and suffered for Christ! So it wasn't in vain! Paul writes to Timothy that the fact is that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. And standing for the gospel is not in vain...if you don't throw the cross away.

Paul's making an argument from the Christian experience here. He's saying "listen, you stood your ground on the gospel of Christ, to the point of being persecuted. Are you going to throw that persecution all out and listen to these legalistic Jewish teachers?"

The natural question is "why did you stand and be persecuted in the first place"? And the answer is the same answer that Paul has been giving this whole time. You stood by the Spirit. What gives a person the strength to stand for the gospel? Not human strength! That kind of strength comes from the Spirit. God's power is displayed in our weakness. That's God's hand. That's evidence of faith in God's holding power.

Paul makes another example from the experience of the Galatians. He asks them in verse 5 he writes "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, of by hearing with faith"?

What exactly are these miracles that Paul is talking about? Again, we're not told directly but there are a few possibilities. We do know that the giving of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts often was accompanied with miracles like speaking in tongues. It's very possible that the Galatians experienced that! We also know that the apostles themselves did many miracles in establishing the early church. It's possible that the Galatians saw and experienced those miracles themselves. But this could also be simply a reference to the amazing acceptance of the gospel by the Galatians and the great number of conversions to Christ. We know that Paul wrote to the Corinthians that his visit there was not with crafty words but by demonstration of the Spirit's power, likely meaning conversions.

But whatever the miracles are, they are actually not the point. The point is that God did powerful work among the Galatians, and the question again is, was that brought on by your own good works of the law, or by your hearing and believing the gospel of Christ? Of course the answer is by faith!

[My two oldest daughters are getting into Lego. They are really good at opening the packages of Lego and getting the instructions and putting the sets together themselves. Sometimes they need a little help but most of the time they can pretty much do it on their own. Well my son, seeing his older sisters playing with Lego, has gotten into it as well. Well he got a Lego set of his own one day. It is a Mario Kart Lego set if you know what that is. Well we bring the set home from the store and he sits down and opens the box. He's now faced with 2 options. He can chew open the bags and fling the pieces everywhere and just do his best to build it, or he can ask dad for help. Don't get me wrong, I want my kids to become independent and try things for themselves so please don't misunderstand me. However, He can't read the instructions, he doesn't have the dexterity to put the pieces together, and he certainly lacks the patience to sit down and figure that out. In this situation, he needs dad. So he can either come to his father in faith that I have the ability, and desire, to help him, or he can try and accomplish this task on his own.]

It's the same thing for us. When is God's power displayed among his people? Is it when we impress God so much by our obedience that he feels obligated to work among us, or is when we come to him believing in his goodness and trusting in his grace?

God works among his people when they trust in him, because trust and humility go hand in hand. If God worked based on our performance, what do you think our reaction would be? I know what my reaction would be, I'd be so proud of myself for being so good that it caused God to move. That's pride! That's trying to steal some of God's glory.

It's impossible to trust God, and rely on your own strength, at the same time. This is because faith, by its definition, is admitting our weakness. That's why Abraham is such a good example of this. Paul gives Abraham as an example of this in verse 6.

When God called Abraham he was already an old man, and Sarah his wife was old as well. Not only was she not able to have any children when she was young, but at that point she was likely well into menopause, which made children a double impossibility. And yet God called Abraham and said I am going to make you the father of many nations!

Abraham had no means of having kids. He had no means of working towards pleasing God because he did not even have God's law. All he had was a promise from God. It was in his weakness, that he trusted God. He had no idea how it would all play out, but he trusted nonetheless. What God was promising was in fact impossible, but he trusted nonetheless.

And look what God says about Abraham: Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness". You know what happened, God's power was displayed in Abraham and Sarah. They had a son, and Abraham became the father of many nations.

So, does God display his power among his people by our works of his law, or by faith in him? God power is displayed in his people of faith.

Are you weak? Are you discouraged? Do you doubt? Are you in need of God to work powerfully in your life? You're in a better situation than you might realize. Rest at the cross of Christ. Just stay there. Maybe not having the strength to "do anything" is exactly where you need to be.

Have you ever considered that your weakness can be used to glorify God? When we come to the end of ourselves, and the only thing we can do is trust God in our weakness, that's when God is most glorified. Because that's when it is most obvious we need him.

The whole of the Christian life is one lived out in faith.

Vv. 7-9: It's always been that God's blessing is received by faith, and it always will be.

If it is true, that even Abraham was justified by faith, then that has huge implications! It has huge implications because the whole argument of the legalistic Jews revolves around Abraham. Here is the legalistic argument in a nutshell: They would argue that Abraham is the father of the Jewish people, a people who were specially marked by God as being "his people". It was to Abraham that circumcision was given as a command, as almost a prototype of the law. And though the law came through Moses later, he is nonetheless the ancestor of Moses and the law is closely connected to Abraham.

So, if you're going to belong to God, you also have to belong to Abraham since he is the father of God's people.

Here's the problem with that argument...it's actually true! If you are a son or daughter of God, you're also a son or daughter of Abraham. The real question is, what makes a person a son or daughter of Abraham?

Paul is going to show the Galatians that Abraham himself was not justified by works of the law, but by faith. And if Paul can show that, then the whole legalistic argument of the false teachers is demolished.

Look back at verse 6 for a moment. Paul is quoting from Genesis 15. This is when God comes to Abraham and says "count the stars, I will make your descendants as numerous as that." But of course at this point Abraham has no son! And yet, when God tells Abraham that he will have all these descendants, He believed God! This is where that quote comes from. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Here's the important thing to note. This happened before Abraham received the practice of circumcision. All this happened before the law was given. This happened while the promises of God were still impossible (from a human perspective).

Which means, that Abraham was made righteous (justified, made right with God) how? It could not have been through circumcision or obedience to the law! Abraham himself was justified by grace, through faith.

Now look at verse 8. Paul writes that the Scriptures always pointed to the reality that the gentiles would be saved, and that they would be saved not by becoming Jewish first, but just as Abraham was saved, by grace through faith.

I love how Paul puts it. He describes it as the gospel was also preached to Abraham! How is that possible? Because the promise that all nations would be blessed through Abraham is a direct promise of Jesus. Abraham saw the promises of God from a distance. He saw those promises, and he believed God and was declared righteous. We see the bigger picture. We know that all the promises of God are yes and "amen" in Christ Jesus. We see the promises of God in Christ and believe God. Abraham is just a pattern of the church today! In fact he's a pattern of all those who are made right with God. Look at what Paul says in verse 9: "So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith".

So then, who is a son or daughter of Abraham? The person who, like Abraham, believes God. Because the person who believes God is the one to whom righteousness is credited, not the person who tries and accomplish it on their own strength! Who are those who are blessed along with Abraham with all the blessings of God? It is not the person who tries to earn it from God, but the person who believes.

All of God's blessings are received by grace through faith. Trying to squeeze out God's blessing by our performance is foolish.

[Everyone here has probably heard of the Mona Lisa. It's a painting by Leonardo Da Vinci, probably the most well-known painting in the world. To most people it is a flawless masterpiece. For good reason it's kept safe behind glass in France at a museum called Le Louvre. But supposed I think to myself one day that she is missing something. So I pack my Crayons and head on over to Le Louvre. When I get there I go through security and behind the glass and walk right up to the painting and decide that she needs

some sunglasses. So I draw a pair of sunglasses on her. Or maybe she looks hungry and I decided to colour in an ice cream cone in her hand. Have I made the painting better? Of course not! What have I done? I've ruined it. So if it is the case that I cannot improve on the Mona Lisa, how should I approach it? I need to leave my crayons at home, and simply go admire and enjoy it.

God will not love us any more, or any less, based on our day to day obedience and performance. If you think you can gain more of God's blessing by impressing him with your performance, you are dead wrong. Here's a better way. Leave your crayons at home, and admire and enjoy the glory of God.

You already have all you need in Christ Jesus, if you come to him in faith. So stop trying to improve on it and enjoy it!

This give me great hope, because you know what Abraham did after he received the promises of God? He went off and sinned. Did his sin nullify God's promises? Absolutely not. And what about Peter? We didn't really finish the story with Peter walking on the water. He started to sink when he took his eyes off of Jesus, and Jesus says to him "you of little faith, why did you doubt?" But Jesus doesn't just stand there and let Peter sink. Matthew writes that "Jesus reached out his hand, and caught him". Peter's survival did not depend on his own strength, or even the strength of his faith for that matter, but Jesus alone.

Even our faith, is given to us as a gift from God.

If my standing with God, and my walk with God depends on my works and strength, I'm done for. But if indeed all of God's blessing is in Christ Jesus obtained by faith in his grace, there is life and hope for me and all of us.

The whole of the Christian life is one lived out in faith.