

THE FOOLISHNESS OF LEGALISM PART 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 3:1-5

December 13, 2009

REVIEW/INTRODUCTION:

There are two realities that we need to be constantly aware of in the Christian life:

1. The craftiness of satan
2. Our constant propensity toward legalism/foolishness

In 1589, Robert Bruce, one of Scotland's most influential and powerful gospel preachers wrote, "...it is most necessary that every man should take heed to himself for the devil is so crafty in regard to this that he is always erecting some idol or other in our souls, and sometimes under the guise of virtue, which is the most dangerous of them all," (*The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, p. 52).

Just as we learned last week, the idols of virtue and morality (e.g., Superheroes Curriculum) lead us to live reasonably decent but gospeless lives! Regrettably, Evangelicals have in many respects become practical moralists and unwittingly replaced Christ with Aesop!

Legalism in all its subtle forms is idolatry. The Galatians' idols consisted of circumcision, dietary laws and Jewish feast days. The idols of our culture are, for example, money, power, sex (e.g., the Tiger Woods scandal; Internet pornography), narcissism (i.e., self-love; an over occupation with self), workaholism, traditional family values (i.e., The Book of Virtues or Superheroes Curriculum) and independence (i.e., noncommittal and the desire for self-autonomy).

Whatever our idol is, Paul says they are foolish because they divert our trust from Christ to self and thereby subtly but surely undermine the doctrine of justification.

Thus, to keep the Galatians from living reasonably decent but gospeless lives, Paul reminds them of three distinct experiences they had undergone that upholds the truth of justification by faith alone.

He asks several penetrating questions, which exposes the Galatians' foolishness and demonstrates the truth of justification by faith apart from works of the law. As he has done throughout this letter, Paul makes it clear that justification by grace and justification by law are mutually exclusive.

The first experience Paul reminds the Galatians of was his preaching of Christ crucified.

I. THE GALATIANS EXPERIENCED THE PREACHING OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED. v. 1

There was no mistaking Paul's message. The Galatians knew from their own experience that justification is by grace through faith in Christ alone. Paul reminds them that, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."

This is the task of every faithful church and preacher, namely to faithfully and consistently placard before people the life-giving message of the gospel! Why? We need this because we suffer from gospel amnesia.

We face double-the-work when it comes to learning to live by the doctrine of justification. As we have noted, we face:

1. The craftiness of satan and
2. The legal, foolish propensity of our flesh

Thus, we have to unlearn many old, deeply rooted ideas of what it means to be a Christian and how to live out our Christian lives. And, we have to learn new gospel ways and methods, which do not come naturally or easily to us.

So, we must pray like the Biblical writers. For example,

"⁴ You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. ⁵ Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!... ³³ Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. ³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart," (Psalm 119:4-5, 33, 34; see also Mk. 9:24; Lk. 17:5; Eph. 1:15-22; 3:14-21; 2 Thess. 3:5).

Just like the Biblical writers, it is not that we don't know what we are to do or what is required of us. The issue is that we don't know how. We lack the necessary power and means to obey God and live the Christian life.

Listen carefully again to Robert Bruce as he writes about the challenge we face in overcoming our legalistic, idolatrous hearts,

"It is very easy to speak of it, to bid a man renounce his own idol, which I call his affection, but it is not done so soon. Assuredly, the stronger must come in to cast out these affections; yes, one stronger than the devil must come in to drive out the devil, who makes his residence in the affections," (*The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, p. 52).

This is why Paul preached Christ crucified. This is why the Cross of Christ rested at the heart of gospel and preaching. Only the atoning work of Christ possesses the necessary and sufficient power to come in and cast out the legalistic, enslaving affections in our hearts (i.e., idols). As we will come to see in vv. 2-4, this is precisely what the Holy Spirit does.

Paul understood the enslaving nature of legalism (i.e., idolatry). He therefore sought to bring the Galatians (and us) into a clear and vivid reminder of the gospel!

He placarded the gospel openly and clearly to the Galatians. Paul taught that Christ had done everything necessary for their justification on the cross.

The Galatians' experience of Paul's preaching clearly testified to the truth of the gospel, namely that justification is by grace through faith in Christ alone. Therefore, they were foolish to lend a listening ear to the Judaizer's false gospel.

This brings us to the second experience Paul cites to expose the Galatians' foolishness and to uphold the truth of the gospel (i.e., that a man is justified through faith alone apart from works of the law).

LESSON:

II. THE GALATIANS EXPERIENCED THE REGENERATING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. vv. 2-4

Since we only have limited time this week, I will make some introductory comments concerning vv. 2-4 and we will return next week to look at it in detail.

Paul begins v. 2 by asking the Galatians a pointed question concerning their receiving of the Holy Spirit, which is a reference to the grace of regeneration, which marked the beginning of their Christian lives and is common to all believers (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. XXI, p. 81).

He wants them to answer only one thing, "This only I want to learn, 'Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?'" The answer implied by his question is sufficient to expose their folly, to uphold the truth of justification by faith, and to refute the Judaizer's false gospel.

F.F. Bruce writes, "If they conceded this point- and in the light of their experience they could do no other- they had conceded Paul's case: the ground was taken away from the Judaizing argument," (*Galatians*, pp. 148-149).

The Galatians knew they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit by faith alone ("Paul, we received the Holy Spirit by hearing with faith."). They knew that Paul had not imposed upon them additional requirements to meet (e.g., circumcision) in order to be justified.

Yet, this is exactly what the Judaizers were doing. They were telling the Galatians that if they wanted to be right with God and enjoy His full favor, there were certain requirements/conditions they first had to meet. Otherwise, the Galatians were sub-par Christians.

The devil approves of this message and magnifies it in our hearts. Tragically, many Christians believe they are sub-par Christians. They think they have not attained to some, higher spiritual level of Christian existence. As a result, they fall into tremendous guilt and despair because they do not think the grace of God and His promise of forgiveness applies personally to them. Why? They think that they need to wait to believe until they are better prepared. They believe they need to meet some set of special conditions or requirements.

However, if you wait to trust in Jesus for justification until you are better, you will never trust Him, as the well-known hymn, “Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy,” says,

Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.

The gospel says to sinners (both justified and unjustified!), “No preparation required!” Paul reminds the Galatians that the moment they trusted in the gospel he preached to them (v. 1) they immediately received Christ’s righteousness and the Holy Spirit (vv. 2-4)!

F.F. Bruce notes, “The gift of the Spirit and justification are two sides of the one coin,” (*Galatians*, p. 149). The moment you believe the gospel, you are justified and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. At this precise moment, through faith, you receive all of the Holy Spirit not just a part just as much as all of Christ’s righteousness is reckoned to you and not just a part.

Consider then the foolishness of legalism (i.e., the idolatrous affections of our heart). All legal methods (e.g., circumcision or moralistic “Bible” lessons) are utterly powerless to begin, continue or complete our Christian lives because they are void of the Holy Spirit. All legal means are fleshly means and therefore powerless to liberate our hearts from the enslaving nature of legalism.

Paul says to the Galatians (and to us), “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. This then only I want to know: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”

This only I want to know. Consider Paul’s question carefully. The answer is obvious yet so elusive! You receive the Holy Spirit just like you receive justifying righteousness, by the empty hand of faith alone. How will you answer Paul’s question? Christ is fully sufficient for your justification. Trust in Him today to do for you what no fleshly method could ever produce!

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