

March 18, 2007

“A Life of Grace” Galatians 3:1-5

FCF: Losing our way

PROPOSITION: (anchor) We must rest in Christ alone
(magnet) Borne out in the experience of the Christian

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Sometimes “the rest of the story” isn’t so encouraging. One of my favorite hymns is Robert Robinson’s “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” But I learned something this week. Not long after he wrote that song, Robinson walked away from the faith. I’m not sure of the circumstances. But some years later, he was out for the evening with a lady friend and, as they were walking by a church, he heard that song being sung. And he began to weep. His companion asked him what was wrong. He replied (**READ quote**), “*Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then.*”

Robinson had lost his way. And the folks Paul was writing in this letter to the Galatians were in danger of doing the same. And he couldn’t bear to see that happen.

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 3:1-5

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Simple marriage advice – the way you go on is the way you got in. The way you go on is the way you got in. Things have lost their luster, the relationship is missing something, even on the rocks. Ask yourself, “*Who is this person? What was it that drew me?*” Wonder anew at the vows you exchanged. Go back to the beginning and let those things recalibrate the way you see them and your life together. It can make a difference.

Sometimes the way on is the way in. At other times – such as in our text – the way got in is the way you go on. Paul’s concern has to do with confusion over the most fundamental thing – how can we be made right with God? In the first two chapters of this letter, he has focused mostly on his autobiography – not because he was impressed with himself but rather because he was impelled to make sure his readers understood the nature of his calling as an apostle and that they would pay heed then to his message.

Having made his case, Paul then presses forward. And he does so with great feeling (**READ Galatians 3:1**). “*O foolish ones! Let me knock some sense into you. O bewitched ones! Let me break the spell.*” And so he reminds them of Jesus Christ crucified. The verb tense here is critical. It is a form of the past tense conveying something with ongoing results. “Jesus Christ crucified” is an event in time and space that has done something. And the lives of His followers should reflect something of that.

It is a life of grace from start to finish. But sometimes His followers are foolish, seemingly bewitched. Sometimes we lose sight of who we are and how we got here. So Paul sets up an intervention – four friends gathered to testify to someone they care for, are concerned for, and their need for a change. And the witnesses called to speak are voices from our own experience as believers – voices that make clear that we are made right, we are justified, with God by faith alone. It’s a life of grace from start to finish.

I. RECEIVING THE SPIRIT

Well, let’s listen to these friends as they speak (**READ Galatians 3:2**). Obviously, Paul is assuming his readers had received the Spirit. And, of course, if they were believers, they surely had. There is no biblical warrant to separating salvation in Christ and the receiving of the Spirit. So the question is not “if” they had the Spirit; it is “how.”

A) Not by Works of the Law

1. The attempt

Was it “by works of the law”? Did they heed its commands – doing justly, loving mercy, walking humbly with God – so consistently and thoroughly such as to warrant this?

2. The failed attempt

No. Surely not. They knew what it was to strive and to struggle. And to fail.

Illustration:

We know something of this. Would you be willing to “give a testimony”? Not that one. The other one. The one that reveals how you’re shocked and ashamed by some of the thoughts you entertain, the temptations you struggle with. The things you’re sure that if people knew they would shun you, reject you, and want nothing to do with you.

Well, that’s what’s going on here. So how was it they had received the Spirit?

B) But by Hearing with Faith

It was not “by works of the law” but “by hearing with faith.”

1. Hearing

Hearing. Not striving but receiving.

2. Hearing with faith

Hearing with faith. Not doing but believing.

This is what Paul is appealing to here. He knew they had received the Spirit. His readers knew they had received the Spirit. He had entered their lives, helped them to see, was enabling them to serve. He was renewing their hearts, pulling them together, and drawing others into their midst. And Paul is pressing the issue. “*How had it happened?*”

Application:

Not by works of the law but by hearing with faith. Could not the same be said of us? How have these things happened? We have received the Spirit. And how have we received the Spirit? By faith. That is what God has done for us. We have received the Spirit by faith alone and we are justified by faith alone. They are wedded together.

II. GROWTH IN MATURITY

Such is the voice of the first friend – an appeal to the receiving of the Spirit. Then comes the second friend (**READ Galatians 3:3**). Here again, Paul is able to make an assumption – that they were being perfected, completed, this work of renewal continuing. Again, the question is not “if” this was going on; the question is “how” was it happening.

A) Not by the Flesh

1. Not speaking of our body

Was it by the flesh? Now by that, Paul does not mean our physical bodies.

2. But of our strength

He is referring here to our unregenerate weakness, our self-dependent strength.

B) But by the Spirit

And Paul’s point is that, no, it was not by our flesh but by God’s Spirit.

1. This is His work

This growth in maturity, this transformation, is the work of the third person of the Trinity. The One who was present and active at creation is present and active in our re-creation.

2. His work in us

This is His work in us. And Paul knew that not only was this work going on in his readers but that they knew why and who was doing it. And that’s what he’s appealing to.

Illustration:

This taps into the roles we play in what is referred to as our “sanctification” – our becoming more and more like Christ. Yes, we are living out this life. But who is renewing us, enabling us all the while? It’s something akin to a toddler learning to walk. Yes, they are walking. Their legs are moving. But could they walk, could they move, without the hands of the parent holding tightly to theirs? No, of course not. We, as parents, hold them. And that’s Paul’s point. We don’t live this life on our own. And we did not begin this life on our own. Our new standing with God comes from God.

Application:

Pulling these two things together. Have you ever struggled with a “besetting sin”? Something you could not overcome that just seemed to dog you at every step? And then been freed from that? Has there been any growth in your life as a Christian? Have you begun to be free from the fear of others’ opinions or a streak of perfectionism?

Paul’s point is that the Holy Spirit is the One who’s freed you in those areas. Well, the way we go on in this new life is the way we came in. It’s a life of grace. And that’s good news, good news we are prone to forget and need to remember.

III. SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

Which brings us now to the voice of the third friend (**READ Galatians 3:4**). Remember how you’ve received the Spirit and grown in your faith. And along the way in this growth (and as a vital part of that growth) you have suffered for this faith.

A) The Reality of Suffering

1. Not clear as to what form

Paul is acknowledging the reality that they had suffered. We’re not told how.

2. But clear as to its presence

It could have been as a consequence of their sin. It could have been due to some dire calamity. Likely, in this case, it was some form of oppression or persecution from others.

B) The Implication of Suffering

In any case, their suffering was real. And it had certain implications.

1. Whose they were

Implications in a very real spiritual battle. Jesus said, “If they hated me, they will hate you as well.” Such is the degree to which His followers are identified with His message.

2. What they had committed themselves to

And Paul’s readers had committed themselves to this. And they had suffered for it.

Which then is Paul’s point. *“If the cross is unnecessary, why bother to suffer for it? If works can do it, why put yourself out? Think back to what you endured. Why did you go through that? You know why – the cross of Christ. Don’t lose sight of that.”*

Illustration:

It brings images of family vacations to mind – especially from my childhood. Great intentions and great expenditures made that go sadly unappreciated. Tension fills the air – restlessness and not rest – making it hard to remember what it was all about.

Application:

Some of us know of suffering for the gospel, the message of Christ crucified. Perhaps not something that could really be described as persecution or oppression. But certainly sacrifice. And the apostle is calling us here not to forget why. Because at some point, we knew that our only hope was in Jesus Christ crucified. And that was enough.

IV. THE THINGS OBSERVED

Finally, we come to the fourth of these friends brought in (**READ Galatians 3:5**). Again, some grammar. The words “supplies” and “works” are present participles – meaning these were not one time events but things continually observed and experienced.

A) His Supply of the Spirit

1. The action described

First, His supply of the Spirit. Christ’s supplying, providing, giving. His initiative.

2. The provision described

The promised Spirit – the One to whom the prophets pointed, the “Paraclete,” Counselor, of whom Jesus spoke, the One who invaded at Pentecost. The Galatians knew Him.

B) The Workings of Miracles

1. Their function

And they knew the workings of the miracles as well. As often happens as the gospel first penetrates a culture, these works came authenticating the message and its messengers.

2. Their presence

And during that first missionary journey, we read of just that – demons cast out, the sick healed, lives changed – mighty works of power seen which apparently had continued.

Now, questions beg to be asked here, questions Paul is forcing. Had those things taken place only in the lives of those who deserved them? Read Acts 13 and 14. There’s no indication of that. And what would constitute a deserving? Would it have been based on Paul’s righteousness? On the people’s righteousness? No one’s! It was all of God.

Application:

Which, again, is Paul’s point. This is all of God’s initiative. Think back to what He has done in your life and in the lives of others. Think back to what He has done and ask the question as to why He has done it. Was it because of our deserving from Him and His indebtedness to us? Or was it all of His mercy and grace? His mercy and grace. That’s what characterizes all His dealings with us – from the start all the way through. That’s what characterizes all His dealings with us but we are so prone to forget this.

CONCLUSION:

Now, my fellow Galatians, couldn’t this be said of us? *“O foolish Richard. Who has bewitched you? Listen. You need this intervention. Let your experiences testify to the truth of this. Your relationship with Me is not secured by what you do but by what I have done on the cross.”* Our problem is we don’t believe it could be that good. *“This can’t be true.”* It’s said that legalism – this insistence that there must be something we need to do to be right with God – is *“dancing while looking at your feet.”* Look, that’s not dancing. It’s marching. Jesus says, *“You’re free. Dance.”* But we answer, *“Great. But am I doing it right?”* We keep looking at our feet, making sure of our steps. We can’t believe it’s really that good. That Jesus could really be more interested in our learning to dance to the music of the gospel than the drumbeat of performance.

It’s something akin to driving impaired, intoxicated. Last night saw no few doing the St. Patrick’s Day “Pub Crawl.” And in the last few days, we heard no few public service announcements pertaining to driving under the influence. Of course, you can be influenced by exhaustion too – fatigued, needing rest or at least cold water in the face.

And Paul is addressing the way we go about living impaired. Living the great oxymoron of resting in our works. There’s no rest at all there. None at all. But in Christ – by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – there is rest that is rest indeed.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) We must rest in Christ alone

(magnet) Borne out in the experience of the Christian