



Bewitched Believers!

Gal. 3:1-5, 5:1-6

Galatians 3:1-3

We're in Galatians. Did you read it this week? If you did you realized how deeply Paul the Apostle felt about the Galatians. But he was upset because there was a lie spreading among these new believers that had the potential to stop the Gospel of Grace from bearing more fruit. No longer would people put their full reliance on Jesus and his sacrificial death, it would be transferred to religious acts that we humans do trying to earn our salvation. We looked at this last week.

Now, this week we need to see something else - related - but different. There is another danger that I have encountered and so have you. It's a perennial struggle because there's something about our human nature that fights against internalizing this eternal truth. The apostle Paul is clearly concerned about this too.

What is it? Let me start with an analogy.

We all know that children sometimes say the darndest things. Sometimes it's because they lose something in the translation of words. They miss the point.

- A three-year-old went with his dad to see a litter of kittens. On returning home, he informed his mother there were 2 boy kittens & 2 girl kittens. "How did you know?" His mother asked. "Daddy picked them up and looked underneath," he replied, "I think it's printed on the bottom."
- On the first day of school, the kindergarten teacher said, "If anyone has to go to the bathroom, hold up two fingers." A little voice from the back of the room asked, "How will that help?"
- A father was reading Bible stories to his young son. He read, "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out

of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned to salt." His son asked, "What happened to the flea?"

The data was all there - they just didn't process it correctly.

When a person becomes a true Christian, he/she does so by relying solely on Jesus Christ, realizing that God saves them not because they deserve it, but because of God's Grace, His undeserved favor. He saves us in spite of ourselves, not because of what we have done or can do. It's, "*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.*", isn't it? And it's wonderful!

And we know that God has a perfect love. An everlasting love. That means He couldn't love us any more than he already does, because he loves us completely already. And He won't love us any less because His love is also a gift of His grace.

We know that, and we depend on that.

And yet, it is in this area that Paul brings out a second problem that was occurring among the Galatians, and often occurs in our lives as well.

It's the subtle but very dangerous situation that Christians encounter, that, after being saved by relying on God's gift of salvation through faith in his Son, we begin to measure the quality of our spiritual life and growth by our good works and conformity to God's laws and commandments. And suddenly Grace goes out the window.

Paul put it pretty clearly in **v.3**: *³Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Galatians 3:4-5 ⁴Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing?* (The way he asked this question shows Paul was not convinced that they had swallowed the lies of the false teachers, but he was very concerned that they might.) *⁵Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?* (NIV)

Brothers, sisters, we are saved and brought into the family of God by God's grace through faith in his son, AND we live the Christian life by God's grace-gift of his Spirit through faith. Period.

Confusing this creates TWO Problems:

1. We fall into Legalism - measuring the spirituality of ourselves and others by outward conformity to rules rather than inner transformation.
2. We start thinking that we are earning God's favor by our obedience and that "God owes us something better than what we're experiencing." (When you start thinking that "God owes you something" because of your faithfulness, you become a sitting duck for the devil to shipwreck your faith.)

I. LOVE NOT LEGALISM

Galatians 5:1 *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (NIV)*

Be careful. It is possible, no more than possible, for a believer to forfeit his/her freedom won for them by Christ, for a yoke of slavery. What does that mean?

That means that when God accepted you in Jesus Christ, he loved you enough to die for you, to forgive all of your sin and to begin a life-long relationship with you. He gave you the Holy Spirit so that you can have his presence day by day. He did everything you'll ever need for life and salvation, he has promised never to leave or forsake you, he has promised never to stop loving you, he has showered his love on you, so that you can, in return **SERVE HIM OUT OF A MOTIVATION OF LOVE**. (This is not about being obedient or not, it about **WHY** we are obedient.)

Love is the strongest motivation in the world. People die for other people because of love. God died in Jesus for us because of love.

Here's what happens though. We begin to reduce Christianity from a love relationship to a set of religious duties. It happens all the time, and it happens, in different ways.

- Some people reduce Christianity to religious rituals. Then it becomes all formalized and liturgical.
- Some people reduce Christianity to a moral code.
- Some people reduce Christianity to the set of religious requirements - come to church every Sunday, read your Bible, pray, don't sin. All good things to be sure. But suddenly it becomes possible to live the Christian life without much involvement with Christ. It becomes a "Christ-less Christianity".

"What must I forsake to grow?" a young man asked. Answer: "Colored clothes for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against him who created us, to attempt to improve on his work."

"Does this list sound absurd? And perhaps amusing. It is the answer given in one the most celebrated Christian schools of the second century! The list has constantly shifted over the 1,800 years since, but that's what legalism does.

There's something comfortable about reducing Christianity to a list of *do's and don'ts*: you always know where you stand, and this helps reduce anxiety.

But *Do's-and-don'ts-ism* misses the point of the Christian life. Christianity is a relationship with God to be enjoyed, not a set of rules to keep. At the heart of the Christian faith is a loving God who wants a relationship with us — a relationship based not on fear, but on love and trust.

That's why Paul says "be careful."

And here's what happens. We begin to lose touch with the gospel of grace and we start thinking that our standing with God somehow depends on how we perform the religious duties that we have prescribed for ourselves, or others have prescribed for us.

Then, instead of serving God out of a motivation of love, we serve out of a motivation of fear - fear that if we do not perform up to some level or standard, then God is not pleased.

This is what legalism does to us. And although those who are "super legalistic" tend think that they alone are walking close to God, in fact, they may be

farthest from God because they are now depending on their own self-righteousness rather than Christ's righteousness.

LICENSE - Opposite Problem

I want to be careful here, since we live in a society which often has the opposite problem of the one which are talking about today. In our culture, we have emphasized grace to the point where many people seem to feel that obedience to a moral code is not really necessary. To talk of moral failure is passé. Our culture does not have a problem with legalism as much as it does legalism's opposite, something I call "Gracism" (license)— that is, an overemphasis on grace to the point that we believe it is not important whether we obey God or not.

We carelessly live any way we please, believing that we live by grace and that God automatically forgives us for anything and everything. We almost rejoice in our brokenness and use it as an excuse.

So let me say, as clearly as I can, that rules are necessary, and the laws of God are good. In fact, the purpose of the laws of God are not to hinder us and make our lives difficult; they are the guidelines which show us how to get the most out of life and enjoy it to the fullest extent. If you want to be an unhappy person break any or all the laws of God. It is a formula for certain disaster. God's laws are the result of his love.

But we cannot mistake God's laws as being at the heart of our relationship with him.

Galatians 5:6 *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (NIV)*

Augustine used to say, "Love God and do as you please." By that he did not mean that you could love God and sin all you want. He meant that when you love God, your pleasure is to do what gives God pleasure. You don't need a list of rules to make you do that, it is an obedience that comes from the heart.

II. QUESTIONING GOD BASED ON MY PERFORMANCE

You may not be a legalistic-type Christian, but here is another trap that we often fall into.

Scenario. You are walking by faith, seeking to live the Christian life probably, depending on God's Spirit and developing a relationship out of love.

Suddenly you experience a crisis, a serious blow in your life. Maybe the doctors found cancer, movie or a child has a disease or an illness that won't go away. Maybe you lose a job you depended on, look little hope of finding another one of similar quality.

You are crushed. You are suffering. And you come to me or someone else and you say, "I don't understand it. It doesn't seem fair. Why would God let this to happen to ME? I am the one who always comes to church. I give 10% and more to God. I have taught Sunday school for 20 years, never taking a break. How could God allow this to happen to me (or my family)?"

Have you ever heard someone say something like that.? Heck, I have said something like that many times! Like I said before there's something in our human nature that just naturally thinks like this.

What I want to say to you is that this kind of thinking, though natural, is filled with error and is incompatible with the gospel of grace. We commit theological suicide when we do this and it gives the devil a superhighway opening to destroy our faith.

Let's go over it again:

God never treats us badly because he loves us totally and perfectly.

We can't earn better treatment from God because we perform better and we can't earn worse treatment from God because we perform worse. Because God doesn't relate to us according to our performance but according to Grace. Remember?

He ALWAYS acts according to love, since God is love. However, (and this is where I think the disconnect occurs) God's ultimate goal is not to increase our happiness, but rather to increase our faith. Remember it's all about faith (the righteous will live by faith, we are saved by faith, we are kept by faith, we live by faith)

Galatians 3:22 *But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. (NIV)*

Galatians 3:24 *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. (NIV)*

Galatians 3:26 *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, (NIV)*

Galatians 5:6 *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (NIV)*

In the 6 short chapters of Galatians, “faith” or “believe” are found 22 times!

Do you remember our study in Habakkuk? Here we saw that the reason we may see something that God allows as negative is because *God is acting according to a different standard* than we as humans naturally act on? He lovingly allows the things he allows because HIS goal is to bring our FAITH to a higher level. For him the bottom line is NOT my immediate human happiness but my faith.

This results is a mistaken evaluation of God in our lives. Why did God allow me to lose my job even though I have tried my best to serve him?

Are you going through a difficulty right now? Are you a Christian? Has God elected to love you with an everlasting love?

Listen, things might get worse, and it might get more painful, and you may even have more faith struggles. BUT, if you continue to stick with God no matter what he does around you, I can assure you that if you hold on to him, at some point **He’s going to move your faith at some point to a new and higher level of intimacy, trust and security that you never, ever dreamed possible** -- if you're willing to go through the season of difficulty and doubt.

In fact, everybody I know who is really, really intimate with God has been through these seasons.

James says it this way:

James 1:2-4 *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

So whenever you start thinking something like, “Why did God allow this to happen to me, considering how I have tried to love and serve Him?” Whenever you think like that realize that you are “Bewitched.” You have lost sight of grace.

CONCLUSION

GOD IS NOT FAIR. That’s true. But that’s a good thing. If God was fair to us, the only thing he could give us is a one-way ticket to hell.

God is absolutely just, but he’s not fair. That’s why it is called the Gospel (Good News). Truth is we all have a sin nature and we sin. And a just God will punish sin. If he was completely fair you would have to pay for your sin.

But because God is not fair to you, you don’t have to pay the penalty for your sins if you choose to put your faith in the one he sent for you - his son Jesus Christ.

God poured out his wrath on Jesus, and if you put your trust and faith in him - you will be spiritually born anew and your sin is forgiven and you will be entirely different. Heavenbound. His purpose on earth.

I just want to tell you it doesn’t necessarily mean you have a more cushy life, more money, good health and less difficulties. Because that’s not what it means to follow Jesus - *it means more than that. It means your life is going to count for the glory of God.*

God will allow things into your life to strengthen your faith. That is the bottom line. He loves you. And you *will* experience difficulties. But it doesn’t matter because your life counts and your following God.

INVITATION

I believe that God bought some of you here for this moment and you can sense it and you know it. He brought you here because it’s time to cross over the line and say “Jesus I believe you are the son of God. I surrender my life to you. Take me forgive me of my sins. I give it all to you. I give my life to you.”

BOW HEADS, CLOSE EYES. Would you lift your hands high right now if you know that’s you today...

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father save me from my sins, forgive me, make me new. I believe Jesus died for me. Help me live for you. Fill me with your spirit so I can follow you. For the rest of my life I am yours. Thank you for new life. And now you have mine. In Jesus name I pray. AMEN.