

Galatians

3. Don't go back! (Gal 3:1-10)

As we have looked at this book in previous weeks we have seen that Paul found himself in a battle with people that have been called Judaizers by some. These were people that didn't accept the message that Paul and as he points out, the other apostles were preaching, that acceptance before God is something that comes through faith. As David pointed out last week from that famous verse in Galatians 2:20 - *I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

- that his whole life as a Christian is because Jesus died for him. Verse 20 reflects the message of Romans 6. When we came to Christ and by faith accepted Him, we died with Him and now we live with Him. The life Paul was living was by faith and that's our faith too. We trust that we are acceptable to God, are able to serve Him, pray and enter into eternal life by faith - a simple act of trust that God's acceptance is due to what Christ has done and not by our own effort.

This is what the Judaizers were trying to draw the Galatians away from and give them a faith that depended on law - that depended on what THEY did. As we get into chapter 3 we see Paul laying it on pretty strong:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified

Who's put a spell on you? The Roman pagans believed in the "evil eye" that you could be turned to evil things by the gaze of someone into their witchcraft. As former pagans they knew they were released from that but he hurls the insult anyway and it gives us an idea of what he thinks of the Judaizers too. Back in chapter 1 he was more explicit in verse 7

Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

That's pretty strong stuff. These people were not pagans or even orthodox Jews. These were people claiming allegiance to Christ yet putting people under Jewish law. It wasn't on. And in 20 centuries it hasn't gone away. It has a long and "distinguished" history. Maybe the Jewish bit has gone but law hasn't. Why do I flog this one to death. Because Paul does and because the issue has not gone away. Law is damaging and divisive in churches. There are those who must have a child christened because they believe it becomes a Christian there and then. So salvation is based on the act of a person? I think not. How many think that people will be saved only if they believe and are immersed? Too many. How many think that church attendance pleases God irrespective of what they do for the rest of the week? All law and too many of those. How many people criticise and separate themselves from others because they are dressed wrong. Far too many. How many people think that they are going to be seen by God as an A1 super-Christian if they do more acts of devotion or more service. Too many. How many churches and Christians discriminate against others because they do not have the same devotion and practices even though they have the same faith? Plenty.

I heard a criticism of Alpha recently that it didn't really have the right balance of things in it, particularly in relation to repentance. I'm not sure that criticism is true as it is lifestyle based anyway. The implication was that: how could God bless this because it doesn't seem theologically correct? Well, the Lord doesn't seem to have the same problem. We had a discussion about the effectiveness of altar calls at evangelistic crusades. Yes, many people make false professions and many fall away. But I know many Christians who thank God that they came to Christ in a Billy Graham crusade. The Lord didn't have any hang-ups about working there? Why? Because any form of witness or service we do is going to be polluted by our fallen-ness but in the end, it isn't our effort that makes Christians anyway: it's the Holy Spirit who convicts and converts. You probably all know Spurgeon's testimony, where God challenged him through what was probably an awful piece of preaching.

God is a God who recycles. He picks up rubbish and turns it into something of value. God is able to use the most imperfect of believers to bring glory to Himself by His Spirit. And that's ALL of us and ALL believers without exception. He's a God who can take the minuses and turn them into pluses. It is God who can take people like us in all our weaknesses and faults and still use us. What a gracious God we have. Praise Him! That's the nature of grace. God doesn't wait until we are perfect before he uses us - in fact the weaker we accept we are the better because God blesses and uses those who are humble and contrite in heart.

But to come back to law; it's still alive and well and living in 21st century Britain! Just as it was living in the previous twenty in some guise or other. Galatians is still as fresh as the day it was written. And Paul just challenges them in some basics which should have stopped them dead in their tracks:

Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?

I'd ask that question to each one of us. How did you come by the Holy Spirit? Was it by works, by being religious - or was it by faith? A bit rhetorical. They received the Holy Spirit because they believed and trusted in Christ. He was a gift given to us graciously by the Father and the Son and received by faith.

The thing that most impresses me as I get older is that frankly, people don't get better. You may become older and wiser, but you don't become any more perfect. In fact, I just find it remarkable that God wants to use me. Yet I shouldn't because it was the Lord Jesus Christ who loved me and gave Himself for me. And it's only by the grace of God that I live my life and am any use to God.

3 Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? 4 Have you suffered so much for nothing--if it really was for nothing? 5 Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

And here were the Galatians. They had experienced the power of the Spirit yet were going back to law. He asks them the penetrating question in verse 5. They knew the answer. The works of the Spirit were done in the early days of the churches in Galatia and I suspect may well have ceased with the onset of law. They believed and saw the power of God manifest. Verse 4 is quite interesting. *Have you suffered so much for nothing?* It doesn't make much sense in the context of verses 3 and 5. It's the Greek word *pascho* which we have come across before. It's the word used for suffering but also for passion or some translators will even translate it in the sense of how they had experienced the Spirit in their lives. The NRSV translates it as : *Did you experience so much for nothing?* The point Paul is making in verse 4 is "you've been through all this and you think it was all for nothing?" He knows they couldn't have said that. They had forgotten the works of God and were drifting across to what was a lie.

Have you forgotten your past? This is something I find a common thread in "traditional" churches. You see, they're not very traditional at all. Most traditional Christians have had a very interesting and committed past, particularly evangelicals. I can remember my own youth when we thought we were very progressive to have coffee bars in our church. And people came with drums and electric guitars and did gospel things. We sang from Elim Choruses, CSSM and Youth Praise. We also enthusiastically did gospel events and witnessing. We explored the nature of our faith and what God was doing.

I've found that as someone passionate for my faith in Christ that it's easy to lose my credentials. It's easy to slip into a paranoia of defending things which are not worth defending and throwing away that which is most important. The same Christians that were progressive half a century ago now defend "traditionalism" against all comers and the traditionalism that they defend is something that the Victorians invented and they decried when they were young! There's nothing new under the sun. People have been doing this for centuries: abandoning a vibrant faith based on the power and presence of God for something that is law. Even worse, the people who are the strongest advocates of traditionalism seem to have no problem using scripture to justify law. I know better than most coming from a Brethren background.

The teaching from the OT may have been very alluring to the Galatians but their understanding of it had been unbalanced as Paul now shows us. From the example of Abraham. It's a familiar theme in Paul's writing and he deals with it more extensively in Romans 4. Paul shows us there is the "scarlet thread" that runs through scripture - we are acceptable to God by grace through faith.

Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. 8 The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." 9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

This is the simple notion. The nations were blessed through Abraham because of his simple act of faith in believing what God was saying to him. And we are the children of Abraham because we have come into the blessings of God in the same way. The Jews and the Arabs love calling themselves the children of Abraham because of their descent. We are children of Abraham because we have done the same thing: accepted God's promises by faith. Acceptability of God is just by one way by faith. What of the law?

10 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." 11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."

The key phrase here is *Clearly no one is justified before God by the law* because no one can be found righteous and acceptable before God through observance of law. In fact as he points out in verse 10, that those that fail in any part of the law are cursed. We are reminded in James 1:10 *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.* We are given that wonderful assurance in Galatians 3:13 *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.*

As we come around the table again this evening, let's remember that He became a curse for us. He died so that the blessings given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles, not by becoming Jews but by his legacy of simple faith. We remember again His broken body and shed blood this evening and praise God that He has shown His

love, grace and mercy to us. We have received Him by faith not by what we have done and we walk daily in that strength and knowledge. How do I know that? Because we have become people of promise like Abraham. Abraham's blessing has already. What about ours. It's the Holy Spirit. And He walks with us day so that we can be people as we heard this morning, that will be effective and productive disciples of Christ, living in a way that honours Him and brings glory to the Saviour who loved us and gave Himself for us.



*Preached by Mark Reid, Swaffham Baptist Church, 03/10/04.
Scripture Quotes NIV
© Mark Reid 2004*