



Galatians 3:1-14
 Finding Freedom: Galatians
 Living By Faith

Rev. Brian North
 February 7th, 2021

Have you ever felt duped by someone or by some organization? You know...where you fell for something or believed something that you probably shouldn't have? Maybe an internet scam, a relationship, a job you took; or maybe 6 months ago you picked the Seahawks to go to the Super Bowl?

And: **Maybe you've asked yourself: "How could I fall for this?"** We've all been there in some way, shape, or form at some point in our lives. That is exactly the question that Paul is asking the Galatians at the start of this passage, and it flows right out of everything else we've been looking at in this series. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul has been building the case for the reliability and sufficiency of Jesus, and he's mostly been building the case through the lens of Paul's own experience of Jesus. His own faith journey has been the primary lens through which he's tried to make his point about the sufficiency of Jesus.

Chapter 3 begins a new section where Paul conveys the same theological truths about Jesus but now through a couple different lenses: Their experience of the Holy Spirit, and the Old Testament. There's a lot of repetition in this letter (challenge for preaching!), because the Galatians needed to hear this multiple times in order for it to sink in. And we probably do as well. Experts in marketing oftentimes will talk about the rule of seven. The "rule of 7" says that it takes a person 7 engagements with a marketing message before that person will make a purchase of whatever it is that's being sold.

That's why you hear the same ads on the radio all the time – especially if you listen at about the same time each day. That's why companies will run the same ad every week in a television show, or run the same ad 3 or 4 times in a football game – unless it's the Super Bowl where the ads are so unbelievably expensive: \$5.5 million for a 30 second ad this year. But repetition is needed. What did I just say? "Repetition is needed." One more time? "Repetition is needed." 😊 We need to be reminded about the truths of Jesus Christ just as

much as the Galatian churches did, or else even we might find ourselves asking why we've foolishly fallen for something else. So, Paul continues the themes of chapters one and two, but now shifts lenses.

And he gets into these new lenses with this question that if you hadn't read the first two chapters might seem a little over the top. **He writes, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you!?" (Galatians 3:1).** Who has pulled the wool over your eyes? How could you fall for that? It's strong language. Sometimes we need a cold splash of water in the face to wake us up and snap us out of a funk we're in, and that's exactly what this is. He reminds them that they heard all about Jesus and the message of Christ crucified, and that they believed that message about righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.

And apparently when they believed that message, the Holy Spirit came upon them and did some serious working in their lives because that's where Paul goes first: to their experience. There are several questions he asks about this. Questions are always a good way to get someone to think about something, and wrestle with something. Statements often cause people to dig their heels in, but questions invite people to reflect and consider things. In his commentary on Galatians, Walter Hansen says that questions "break the grip of illusions" (IVP NT Commentary Series: Galatians, p. 78). They help us to see things clearly.

So, Paul asks some questions, and there are three that stand out. First, verse 2, **"Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?" (Galatians 3:2).** He takes them back to when they first heard the gospel message and responded to it, to remember how it impacted them and how the Spirit moved powerfully in their lives. This is so important for us to do as well, whenever we start to fall for foolish thinking like the Galatians did and doubt the sufficiency of Jesus. Go back to those times when God's Spirit moved powerfully in your life – might be when you first became a Christian, or perhaps later. I mentioned in a sermon this fall about being prayed for by some people because of some bad lower back pain I had, and how I felt things literally shift in my back and I was healed 50% or so. That was some 15 years ago, and I think about that time regularly.

I also think about how 10 months into my friendship with Gwen, we had a “defining the relationship” talk, when she told me, and these are her exact words, “I’ll never date you.” About two months later she started dating me; about 6 months after our first date I proposed to her, and about six months after that, she said, “I do.” In about a year she went from “I’ll never date you” to “I do.” Talk about a miracle! On a weekly and almost daily basis, I think about how God’s Spirit moved to change her heart. My prayer now is, “Lord, don’t let her heart change back to where it once was.”

And in both of those instances, I didn’t do a thing. I just trusted God. I believed that he would heal me, and believed that he had a plan for me and my future spouse – whether that was Gwen or not. And then the Holy Spirit moved. So, Paul asks them this question about how they received the Spirit, which reminds them that it’s not by anything they’ve done, but by believing, and it takes them back to when they first believed and how God moved powerfully.

The second question is about their progress in the Spirit: **“After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3).** This is getting at their spiritual growth – or lack-there-of, in this case. They started well, but then they slid into a works-based religion, a religion of laws and religious legalities, influenced by Jewish Christians who insisted that in order to follow Jesus they had to “Become Jewish” through these other things. So they started well, but they’ve slipped, and now their spiritual growth trajectory is not going in the right direction. Paul asks this question to get them thinking about that.

And then the third question is: **“Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?” (Galatians 3:5).** What we see here is that the Spirit has moved in the lives of people in these churches, whether Jewish or not. Whether they followed Jewish customs and rituals or not, God’s Spirit has moved in miraculous ways. And he’s getting them to think about that so they’d realize that they don’t need to do these legalistic things that outsiders are saying they need to do. God has clearly blessed them on the basis of their faith. With

these questions, he's getting them to think about their experience of God moving in their life. And at the heart of it all is: Did you do some religious thing to make that happen, or did you simply believe? The answer is: All they did was believe in the Gospel message of Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. Jesus did everything for them, and their part is to believe.

Then beginning in verse 6, he changes lenses to Old Testament references to continue making this point. He points to Abram. Many of you are perhaps familiar with Abram – who later has a name change to Abraham. We looked at him a bit a couple months ago in our sermon series on the Names of God, when one Sunday we talked about God our Provider – Jehovah Jireh.

So a little after the passage we looked at then, Abram laments that he doesn't have any children. And God leads him outside and says to him, "Look up at the starts of the sky. Can you count them all?" Of course, he can't. Then God says, "So shall your offspring be." And then the next verse in Genesis is one that Paul quotes here in Galatians 3:8 **"Abram believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Galatians 3:8 and Genesis 15:6).** What did he do to be right with God, to have righteousness in God's eyes? He believed God. That's it. No works or laws about it.

And so Paul is telling the Galatians, and now us, that those who believe in Jesus are one of those children. We are spiritual descendants of Abraham's. Maybe some of you learned this song when you were a kid: "Father Abraham, had many kids, many kids had father Abraham, and I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord!" And then it repeats and adds arm motions and leg motions each through, and then the last time through you spin around and "sit down!" – which is a relief because you're pretty pooped out by then. But it's a fun little kids' song to remind us that we are one of those children, through faith. **And the connection to Abraham is nice, but ultimately, it's all pointing to our heavenly Father and we are his children.** That's the ultimate connection Paul is making for us here. Our faith is in God, not Abraham; but like him, it's our faith that makes us right with God. We are God's children.

This is an important thing to grasp. This is our identity: as members of the family of God. And we're not the in-laws or the out-laws or the one that the family hesitates to acknowledge is part of the family. We are God's children, and he loves us dearly. That's our identity. This is crucial for the Galatians because they were struggling with this identity piece. A lot of them would have likely been previously involved in Greek Pagan religions, and they've left that behind to follow Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. And then they've got these Jewish Christians who came over from Jerusalem who are telling them, "Well, if you're gonna follow the Jewish Messiah, you've got to become Jewish." And that sounds logical, so now their identity is starting to swing in that direction.

But Paul is saying: Wait! You're in a great family of faith and all it takes is believing in Jesus. It's a family of *faith*. Not a family of *laws*. It's not an identity based on nationality or race or achievements or legalisms. It's based on Jesus. *That's* your identity. *That's* your heritage. *That's* your people. *That's* what matters...so *stay centered* on Jesus. That's his message.

I wonder if our churches and if we Christians individually communicate that message well today. **Do we communicate that it's "faith in Jesus alone" that matters, or do we – perhaps unintentionally – add in something more...that there's another identity that goes with following Jesus.** This is a crucial thing for us to think about, because more and more people from around the world are moving here, and their initial identity is found in something else – their nationality or their family or some other community – that they've now left behind.

I found out this week – and speaking of the Holy Spirit moving, this wasn't sermon research...I can't even remember why I ended up discovering this, but I realized a couple days later this information fits profoundly into today's passage: **22.8% of Kirkland's population was not born in the United States.** Not just that roughly 1 in 4 people have some ethnicity from another nation even if they were born here in the U.S. and their parents or grandparents moved here decades ago...but 22.8% of Kirkland residents weren't even born in Kirkland.¹ That was news to me. I would bet that the statistics are similar for other surrounding cities here on the Eastside.

So, people move here from another country, their identity is kind of in flux like the Galatian Christians, then maybe come to a church like ours because someone from our church family invites them, or they see the service online...and this is an opportunity to help them find their identity as a child of God...to find their identity in Jesus. Or people could be in flux about their identity for other reasons: loss of a job, a divorce, death of a loved one, loss of health, and so forth. And I wonder if we meet people in that place well, or if we sometimes mix in other messages – much like the Jewish Christians brought a message to the Galatians of “Jesus plus something more” is what they needed.

We want to combat that. The Lausanne Covenant is a theological statement that was created in the 1970’s by and for Evangelical Christians, and it helps to counteract this “Jesus plus something more” mentality. The Lausanne Covenant is named after the city in Switzerland where theologians and church leaders gathered to develop this statement, and it helps us in particular to think of our faith in light of missions and evangelism. One statement reads, **“Missions have, all too frequently, exported with the gospel an alien culture, and churches [in these foreign lands] have sometimes been in bondage to culture rather than to Scripture” (Lausanne Covenant, Article 10).**

I wonder if we are exporting a gospel into our own community, that is causing people to be in bondage to cultural stuff rather than to Scripture? Are we mingling the two, even if unintentionally? Are we ourselves caught up in a false Gospel that is telling us to find our identity in something other than, or along with, Jesus? If we are, there’s a good chance that it’s carrying over into how we live out our faith and will be an obstacle to helping others find their identity as children of God through faith in Jesus. We need to assess our own discipleship trajectory, perhaps by asking questions like Paul did, to make sure we’re not co-mingling things with Jesus. And we want to do this for our own sake, and for the sake of our witness to Jesus in the world.

Briefly, in the last few verses, Paul continues in the Old Testament with quotes from Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Habakkuk to continue hammering

the point home. And again, in a nutshell, he's imploring them to let go of this works righteousness...they don't need to become Jewish to follow Jesus...Jesus is enough.

And then in verse 14 he brings it back to the Spirit that we started with in verse 1. He goes full circle...though the theme of the Spirit continues in the rest of the letter. The Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus to be with us, is a blessing and a sign that God is with us and for us and we have righteousness in his eyes...that we have a right relationship with him. And it all comes through faith in Jesus.

We started with Paul's questions in the first few verses. They help the Galatian churches to break the grip of illusion about their walk with Jesus. And so I'll end with a couple questions here that I've already asked. **Is your faith – is our faith together as a church – co-mingled with something other than the gospel? Is our identity found in Jesus alone?** Hopefully, our answers are “no” to the first, and “yes” to the second. We don't want to be foolishly bewitched into making our faith and our identity centered on anything other than Jesus. Even when our faith is tiny, like the size of a mustard seed as Jesus puts it...even that is enough, because it's not about us. It's about Jesus. He is sufficient. This frees us up to simply live out our faith, shining the light of Christ, being His hands and feet in the world as the Spirit moves and leads, and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves so that others might hear the Good news of Jesus as well. May that be the kind of faith that we have, and that we wouldn't foolishly fall for anything else. Let's Pray...Amen.

¹ <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/kirkland-wa/>