

When A Christian Plays The Fool

Galatians 3:1-5

This Week's Prayer Requests:

Memory Verse: Galatians 3:24: "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

Text: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain - if indeed it was in vain? Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?"

Lesson

Have you ever experienced the loss of a gift you take for granted? What happened?

In August of 2003, the United States experienced the largest blackout in its history. It began about 3 p.m. on a Thursday when most of New York State and parts of New England lost power. The blackout then spread west to Ohio and Michigan and north into Canada and then to various other places. It was estimated that by Friday some 80 million Americans were without power, which was almost a third of the nation's entire population. This caused all manner of problems. There was a transportation crisis, a crisis from the heat, a crisis in hospitals, a crisis from a lack of water because the stations that pump millions of gallons a day to homes and businesses were not working. There was a crisis in industry, of course, because work came to a standstill. In other words, it was an absolute mess.

There was a picture that I clipped out of a newspaper at the time and stuck in my file cabinet of commuters sleeping on the steps of a post office building in New York. They were stranded in the city due to the failure of the subway system and commuter train lines. They had no way to get home, so they slept on the steps of a public building in their work clothes, using briefcases and purses as pillows. Everybody was pretty much miserable and wanted the electricity to come back on as soon as possible.

But now let's hypothesize for a moment, that after all of that mess was fixed, that some people began to look back on the experience with a sentimental eye and said, "You know what that was kind of fun. It

reminded me of the good old days when there were almost no conveniences: the days of outhouses, working the land with your hands, salting meat and burying it in the ground to keep it from spoiling, children dying from minor infections, you know, the good old days.” And suppose this group got all wistful and teary eyed, and they began saying “Let’s go back to darkness.” In fact they start to campaign across the country and develop a slogan: “Back to darkness.”

Now most of us would look at this group and say, “What a bunch of crazies!” Don’t they know how bad it was? Can’t they see how wonderful it is to have light and electrical power. And yet, Beloved, this is exactly the kind of thinking that Paul is confronted with in the churches of Galatia. Unlike physical darkness though, men are much more inclined to embrace spiritual darkness due their sinful self-absorbed nature. These people had come to understand the good news of God’s grace, forgiveness of their sin, justification before Him, salvation if they had faith in Jesus Christ, and now they were in danger of leaving that behind and going back to the law and a life of trying to be justified before God on the basis of their own works rather than simple faith in Christ. If that isn’t back to darkness, I don’t what is.

How would you summarize what we have learned in Galatians to this point?

Paul has just explained in verses 15-21, which we saw last week that seeking to be justified before God by works is not only impossible, it is also sinful. Further it is a self-glorifying rejection of the Christian goal of denying and dying to oneself; and if that wasn’t bad enough, he has told us that a person who holds this belief is openly declaring that the death of Christ on the cross was vain, useless, unnecessary, and that it lacked any true value for men. It is this thought that launches Paul into the words of chapter three verse 1: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” Why would you ever want to disobey the truth? It’s like going back to darkness.

Now, we have learned at least four things from chapters one and two that we need to keep in mind as we begin the next portion of the letter. 1) There are false teachers in the Galatian churches preaching what Paul calls a different gospel (1:6), which is no gospel at all. 2) The opponents of Paul are attempting to discredit his message by denying Paul's authority as an apostle. 3) Paul has powerfully established by historical reports that his gospel and authority are not from any man, but came by revelation of Jesus Christ; and not only that, there is a deep unity of theology and faith between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles in spite of their independence. 4) The way Paul has defended his authority and his gospel reveals the kind of false teaching that is threatening the churches

What problems can you see with the false doctrine that you must supplement the work of Christ on the cross?

of Galatia. A Jewish group of professing but false Christians are teaching that it is not enough to trust Christ for righteousness. Faith must be supplemented with "works of the law." Trusting in what Christ did for you has to be supplemented by what you can do for Christ. "God's work plus your work equals justification" is their false Gospel. So the Judaizers required circumcision (2:3), dietary restrictions (2:12,13), and the keeping of feasts and holy days (4:10), as a means of contributing to personal justification before God.

As far as Paul is concerned, Christ supplemented is Christ supplanted. If you buy into this mingling of faith and works you nullify the grace of God (2:21), you are out of step with the truth of the gospel (2:14) and you remove the stumbling block of the cross (5:11). As close as it may sound to the truth, as close as it may seem to be tied to the apostles, it is another gospel, which is no gospel and is not good news at all (1:7). Those who follow this false teaching will be accursed and cut off from Christ (1:8,9).

According to Paul, sinners may be justified before God and by God, not because of any works of their own, but because of the atoning work of Christ; not because of anything they have done or could do, but because of what Christ did once on the cross when He died. The gospel is not good advice to men, but good news about Christ, not an invitation to us to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done for us; it is not a demand but an offer of grace to be received by faith.

Do we begin the Christian life by faith and continue it by works? Or is our sanctification (growth in Christ-likeness) also accomplished by faith? Why or why not?

And now Beloved, the importance and relevance of this issue for us only increases as we turn to Galatians 3:1-5. For here it becomes crystal clear that the heresy of the Judaizers is related not only to how you begin the Christian life, but also to how you live it and try to bring it to completion. Anyone who says, "Well, I know that I began the Christian life by faith alone and so the warnings of Galatians don't apply to me," -- that person has not understood the book, especially chapter 3:1-5, because as the Scripture tells us it's not just about how you begin, it's also about how you arrive!

In 3:1-5 Paul does the same thing to the Galatians that he did to Peter in 2:11,14ff -- he confronts them head on with their folly and the inconsistency of their behavior. To begin, Galatians 3:1-5 is a series of rhetorical questions that don't come right out and state Paul's point but lead us there inexorably. And in these verses Paul shows us that it is possible for a Christian to fall into inconsistent and utterly foolish living

What does Paul mean, when he calls the Galatians “foolish”?

before God. It is possible for a Christian to play the fool.

Twice Paul calls the Galatians foolish. Verse 1: “O foolish Galatians”; and verse 3: “Are you so foolish?” The next phrase in verse 1 explains what he means by foolish: “Who has bewitched you?” He means that they are acting as if someone cast a spell on them. It's as if they have been hypnotized. They are irrational, out of touch with reality, mentally drunk.

Let me draw out two minor implications of these words. First, don't ever forget that it is the people who don't take Christ into account who are in a dreamworld. The real fairy tale is not the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, but the fantasy of fulfillment by godlessness whether it takes the form of the Judaizer's legalism or drugs and alcohol. The most seriously bewitched people are those who don't believe the Scriptures. The most deluding stupor in the world is caused not by faith, but by the sedative of secularism. If Christ is real, and He is, it is not his followers who are fools but those who deny the greatest reality in the universe.

How should we respond to those who are bewitched?

Second, even though the Galatians are, as it were, bewitched, irrational, and out of touch with reality, Paul still writes a very reasonable and tightly argued letter to break the spell. Some people will say, “If people are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1) and blinded by the God of this age (2 Cor. 4:4), there is no point in reasoning with them. Only the Holy Spirit can open their eyes.” But Paul reasons for six chapters with people so deluded he calls them bewitched. The reason is that the Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum. God has determined that he will use His appointed means. And He uses the word to break the spell of confusion and unbelief. Don't let the unreasonableness of your acquaintances stop you from sharing the truth of the God's word. God may yet grant them the gift of repentance that they may come to know the truth and escape from the snare of the devil (2 Tim. 2:25,26).

Now this word fool is not the word that the Lord uses in the Sermon on the Mount. That's the word μωρός (moros). This is the word ἀνόητος (anoetos). It means literally persons without understanding, unwise, foolish, senseless. How is it that the Galatians and other Christians can play the fool? How is it that they can think in such a senseless manner as these churches were thinking? The main thing Paul does in 3:1-5 is help the Galatians see why their actions are so foolish. And as he does so, Paul shows us four mistakes in their thinking that caused them to play the fool. The first mistake is this:

What is “the majesty of the cross”?

1. A Christian plays the fool when he forgets the majesty of the cross (v. 1).

Verse 1 says, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?”

It was simply incredible to Paul that anyone who had seen Christ crucified in the gospel could still get caught up in legalism. The death of Christ for our sin shows how hopelessly lost we are and how we cannot make any contribution to our salvation. The stumbling block of the cross, the thing that makes it so offensive, is that it means we in ourselves are helpless (Rom. 5:6) and cannot do anything to enhance our position. Paul said in Galatians 5:11 “If I preach circumcision ... the stumbling block of the cross has been removed.” If we believe that by being circumcised or by doing any other work of law (tithing, going to church, teaching Sunday School), we can add to the work of Christ then we are bewitched and do not understand the gospel.

What does the cross say about us? What does it say about Christ?

Not only does the death of Christ for our sin show how hopelessly lost we are. It shows how utterly sufficient the atonement is which God made in Christ for our sin. The death of Christ is the death knell to our pride but also the dawn of our hope. That it should take the death of the Son of God to atone for my sin should shut my mouth forever and bring my life to an end. But that it was no less than the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (2:20) awakens a new life of hope and faith. The cross kills the independent, self-reliant, insubordinate me, and the cross quickens a new me who lives only by faith in the all-sufficiency of Christ and never looks to itself with any expectancy of power or virtue.

The majesty of the cross is simply amazing. Therefore, when we or the Galatians follow the Judaizers and erect the law as a ladder to heaven on which to demonstrate our contribution of will or effort, we nullify the grace of God (2:21), we remove the stumbling block of the cross (5:11) and we show that we are bewitched and foolish (3:1,3). Why? Because we have lost the wonder and majesty of what God has done. That, then, is the *first* reason Paul gives for why the thinking of the Galatians is so foolish: it forgets the all sufficient glory of the work of Christ on the cross, which Paul had so clearly portrayed to them when he first shared the Gospel to the Galatians.

There is a beautiful truth contained in the word “crucified” that I don’t want to pass over. This word translates a perfect passive participle in

the Greek language, and what that means is that the crucifixion was a past historical fact that has ongoing or continuing results. In other words, no ritual, ceremony, regulation, or any other thing devised by man can pick up where the cross leaves off. Why? Because the cross never leaves off. The cross is the continuing and eternal payment for all sin; and, every sinner who puts his trust in the cross is forever and continually being forgiven. A believer can no more stay saved by works that he could have been saved by works in the first place. It is the cross that continues to move powerfully and relentlessly through history; and, it will stand forever as living proof of the marvelous grace of God in redeeming lost and helpless sinners.

The second mistake in the Galatians thinking that is turning them into fools is this:

How did you personally, begin the Christian life?

2. A Christian plays the fool when in pride he forgets his beginnings (v. 2).

The Galatian's thinking contradicts the very work of the Spirit in their lives. Paul begins to show them this by reminding them how they received the Spirit at the beginning of this new life. Verse 2: "This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith."

Now this verse raises three questions: 1) What is the relationship between becoming a Christian and receiving the Spirit? 2) What is the evidence that the Spirit is present in your life? 3) How do you receive the Spirit?

When does a person receive the Holy Spirit? What Scriptures support your answer?

1) The answer to the first question is that becoming a Christian *means* receiving the Spirit of Christ. Paul assumes in this verse that all Christians have received the Spirit. It's not something that happens later. Romans 8:9 makes this crystal clear, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." This is why it is impossible to think of Christianity merely in terms of a change of status before God. Becoming a Christian always involves the coming of Christ's Spirit to dwell and work in the believer, being united with Him. As Galatians 2:20 said, the old self dies and in its place the risen Christ comes to live. As a Christian you are no longer your own, you have been bought by Christ and possessed by His Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

2) What is the evidence of the Spirit's presence in your life? The New Testament mentions different kinds of evidence of true salvation and the

What evidence do you have personally that the Holy Spirit is dwelling within you and is at work in your life?

presence of the Spirit. For instance in Galatians 5:22-23 we will discuss the fruit of the Spirit, which gives evidence of His presence in your life. One evidence is mentioned in verse 5 of our text, "Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you...." The Galatians could point to miracles that God was doing by the Spirit in their midst. In other words, mighty works like healing and deliverance from the evil one and evil influences, salvation, and the significant altering of circumstances through prayer -- these gave evidence to the Galatian believers that the Spirit had been poured and was at work in their church body. What other kinds of evidence might a person be able to point to?

3) Now the third question verse two raises (and answers) is how we receive the Spirit. "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" Answer: by hearing with faith.

What ultimately causes a person to hear the word of God "with faith"?

Paul asks them in effect, "Remember back to the time I was preaching there in the synagogues and in the streets? I was reasoning from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ; I was arguing that all people are sinners, that this Jesus died for sin and rose again, that any who trust him can have forgiveness and hope. And as you were hearing my message, ... faith happened."

"You didn't plan it, you didn't force it. It came upon you like dawn comes upon a darkened city, and with it -- whether in front or behind you could not tell -- came the Spirit. You felt yourself crying out in your heart, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6), and, "Jesus is Lord!" (1 Cor. 12:3). You did no works. You were worked upon. The Word of God, 'sharper than any two-edged sword' (Heb. 4:12), cut away all your defenses and laid bare your need and God's provision. 'The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' drove out the darkness of unbelief. You found yourself as helpless as a little child, yet utterly secure in the love of Jesus. The Spirit had come to you, breathed new life into your dead soul and produced faith; the old self of rebellion died; and the Spirit of Christ took up residence in your heart. Galatians, you did not get the Spirit, you did not become Christians, by working for God. You received the Spirit when God worked for you. As James 1:18 says, 'Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth.'"

“You did absolutely nothing in your own strength that this marvelous working of God should happen to you. It was all of the Spirit. It was all of His power. Are you going to turn from that glorious sufficiency that changed your entire world and rely now on what you can do, your own power? Consider where you began.”

In what ways do Christians often rely on their own strength rather than the power of the Spirit?

The third mistake in the Galatians thinking was this:

3. A Christian plays the fool when he relies on his own strength rather than the power of the Spirit (vv. 3-4).

Lord preserve us from such foolishness. “Not by might [חַיִל (*chayil*) - Your own wealth, resources or sufficiency] nor by power [כֹּחַ (*koach*) - strength, force, exertion], but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6)

In Verse two Paul reminded them how they *began* the Christian life. Now in verse 3, Paul tells them that they have to *keep going* the same way they began. “Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” The clear implication is, it can't be done. If you try it, you will make a shipwreck of your Christian life (Rom. 8:13). So we need to be very clear about what the Galatians were about to do here that we might avoid it like the plague.

How often does this happen?

Notice the change in terminology between verse 2 and verse 3. In verse two the contrast is between *works* of law and hearing of *faith*. In verse 3 the contrast is between beginning by the *Spirit* and trying to be completed by the *flesh*. We've talked about the Spirit. But now, what is this “flesh”?

What is the evidence of it?

It is not physical. It's the old “me” which cherishes independence and self-assertion. Romans 8:7 says, “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed, it cannot.” Flesh is the autonomous self, so in love with its personal power of self-determination that it does not and cannot submit to God's absolute authority. But don't think the flesh always looks wicked. In its *irreligious* form the flesh always flaunts its insubordination to God in immorality, idolatry, envy, drunkenness, and the like, as Paul says in Galatians 5:19 where he describes the works of the flesh. But in its *religious* form the subtlety of rebellion and self-determination can manifest itself in a philosophy of Christian growth which encourages people who begin with faith to grow by works.

To whom is verse 3 written?

Consider verse 3 very carefully. This verse is not directed to those who are yet to start the Christian life. But It is written for those who presumably began some time ago and are now in grave danger of trying to live the Christian life in a way that is fruitless. The point of the verse is that you must go on in the Christian life the same way you started it. Since we began by the work of the Spirit, we must go on relying on the Spirit. You do not begin the Christian life by faith and then you grow in the Christian life by works, that is, by drawing on powers in yourself to make your contribution to your sanctification and final salvation. But you begin by faith and you continue by faith. Flesh, on the other hand, is the rebellious, self-determining ego which in religious people responds to God's word not with reliance on the Spirit but with reliance on self. It can by it's own strength produce a very rigorous morality, but it nullifies grace and removes the stumbling block of the cross and gives birth to a wretched pride in the soul.

I hope you can see, then Beloved, that a critical mark of a healthy Christian is not how far he or she has progressed in sanctification, but on what he is relying to get there. Are you striving for sanctification by works? Or are you striving for sanctification by faith? (Note well the issue in verse 3 is how to be completed, i.e., sanctification.) Are you advancing in the life of love by the power of the Spirit? Or are you trying to love in the power of the flesh, that is, by your own works?

You might say, "Pastor, how do I progress in the Christian life by faith? What does that mean practically. Let me give you an example from John Piper that describes very practically how I try to live the Christian life so that I can say it is "not I but Christ"; it is not by the flesh but by the Spirit. John Piper uses the acronym APTAT to help him in this process. He begins his day with it and follows it when he must exert some effort to do what is right. The goal is for this way of thinking and feeling to become so much a part of you that you approach all of life this way. He says:

"A - I *acknowledge* that apart from Christ I can do nothing of eternal value (John 15:5). I *acknowledge* with Paul in Romans 7:18, "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing." I *acknowledge* that the old "I" which loved to deny this fact was crucified with Christ.

"P - I *pray*. I *pray* with Paul in 1 Thess. 3:12 that Christ would make me abound in love. I *pray* that grace might reign in my life through righteousness (Rom. 5:21), the righteousness of Christ given as a gift. I *pray* that God would produce in me the

obedience he desires (Heb. 13:21; 2 Thess. 1:11).

“T - I *trust*. This is the key because Gal. 3:5 says, “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” In other words, the ongoing work of the Spirit to enable us to love as we ought happens only as we trust the promises of God (Gal. 5:6). I *trust* that as I act it will not be I but the power of Christ in me and me only clinging to him in faith.

“A - I *act* in obedience to God's word. But, O, what a world of difference now between such an act and what Paul calls works of law. The acknowledgment that I am helpless, the prayer for divine enablement, the trust that Christ himself is my help and strength--these transform the act so that it is a fruit of the Spirit not a work of the flesh.

“T - Finally, when the deed is done and the day is over I *thank* God for whatever good may have come of my life (Col. 1:3-5). I thank him for conquering at least in some measure my selfishness and pride. I give him the glory (1 Pet. 4:11).”

APTAT: A - *Acknowledge* your inability to do good on your own. P - *Pray* for divine enablement. T - *Trust* the promises of God for help and strength and guidance. A - *Act* in obedience to God's word. T - *Thank* God for whatever good comes.

Now, if you feel, “Hey this makes too little of me and too much of God, then check your testimony against that of Paul who said in 1 Cor. 15:10, ‘I worked harder than any of them, though it was *not I* but the *grace of God* which was with me.’” And in Romans 15:18, “I will not venture to speak of anything except what *Christ* has wrought through me.”

A fourth and final mistake in the Galatians thinking that led them to play the fool is this:

4. A Christian plays the fool when he attributes the works of God to himself (v. 5).

Verse 5 states simply, “Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?”

In what ways might Christians in general attribute the works of God to themselves?

I went to an evangelism conference on one occasion, in which a fellow pastor got up to introduce the main speaker for the evening. He started off in glowing terms about a particular vocational evangelism, the character and length of his ministry. And he went on to describe how in the course of this man's ministry, "he" – meaning the man – had saved so many thousands of souls and been responsible for so many revivals and how so many would spend eternity in heaven because of this man's faithful efforts. By this time, warning lights were going off in my brain and I was starting to feel a little sick to my stomach. Where was the Lord in all of this outpouring of praise? Who were we here to glorify?

Now sometimes, a person who is truly a man of God will get such an introduction and be wriggling in tremendous discomfort through the entire thing. He will then stand up and immediately give glory to the One to Whom it properly belongs and admit his own weakness and sinfulness. I've seen that happen on multiple occasions. So this introduction, in spite of its sickening nature, did not immediately turn me off. Unfortunately, what happened over the course of the next hour, not only turn me off completely, but it filled me with tremendous indignation. Because not only did the man not deny the praise that had been heaped upon himself, but he immediately stood up and began to give a fifteen to twenty minute commercial about all the wonderful things he could do for our churches, should we have the good sense to invite him, including all the people that would be saved as a result of his personal efforts.

Afterwards, he proceeded to give a completely man-centered message that concluded with the worst "arm-twisting invitation" I have ever experienced in my entire life. In which, he actually made the statement, "If you have ever had even a scintilla of doubt as to your salvation, then you must not be truly saved and you need to come forward and pray right now." And such a statement, Beloved, is both unscriptural and patently ridiculous. Though it did have the effect the man wanted it to have that evening.

The great evil of that night in my mind, was that if God had indeed in His amazing mercy and grace ever actually done any work through this man's weak presentation of the Gospel – which only God knows – then this man had blatantly attributed those works of God to himself. And that evening has stuck with me for years as a warning in my heart against pride.

Now it is unlikely that any of you, who have actually read this far in this

lesson, would ever do anything so blatantly perverse as what happened that night. But we must remember that the desire for the praise of men is a very insidious and subtle evil. It can creep into our hearts and color our conduct in a number of ways. Hence the warnings of Matthew 6:1,5 & 16.

For example, how often have I been tempted to pat myself on the back when someone commends the behavior of my children in church, as if it was by my hand that they had learned respect and propriety rather than by the grace of God poured out on their lives. And I have to quickly repent and give thanks to Him. In what ways have you been tempted to take glory to yourself for the gracious working of God? How must we guard against this?

Let us then be very careful in conversations and in taking our own thoughts captive to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we have seen this week that a Christians plays the fool when he or she forgets the majesty of the cross, forgets his beginnings, relies on his own strength rather than the Spirit's, and attributes the works of God to himself.