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Gal. 3:1-6

Q&A on Faith vs Works

If someone were to ask you what you must need in order to grow spiritually as a Christian, what would you say? What do you think you most need to hear and learn about? Perhaps we might think that what we need most is to better people: a better employee, citizen, child, parent, or spouse. In fact, we might be tempted, as we're going through Galatians, to say, "Good grief, that's awfully repetitive! I mean, every single sermon is about the gospel, and how we're justified by faith in Christ alone and not by works! We get it, enough already! We already believe the gospel. Can't we move on to something else? I already believe the gospel - what I really need now is help being a better Christian. Can't you just move on to addressing how to live a better life and do more good works?" But that's very dangerous thinking.

We must not get tired of holding up the truth of the gospel, week after week. And this is because our greatest need is not to focus on good works. Our greatest need is to *believe the gospel more*. In fact, as we do so, *that is actually what will lead to every other good work!* The way we grow as Christians is by *believing the gospel more deeply - by understanding it more fully in our heads and more deeply experiencing and believing it in our hearts, in the midst of every circumstance of life!*

There is a pervasive temptation today, to think that we become Christians through faith in the gospel, and then need to move on towards focusing on our own works for Christian growth - but this temptation is by no means new; it's the same temptation that was facing the Galatian believers, back in Paul's day. It's this temptation that we see Paul turning to address in our passage this morning, *Galatians 3:1-6*. And he addresses it *very sharply and pointedly*. Our passage begins with jarring words of rebuke: "O foolish Galatians!" Now, those aren't exactly the kind of words we would write in a Hallmark letter that we send to friends that live far away, are they? Why does Paul turn to the Galatians now with such a startling, even offensive, word of rebuke? It's not because he's mean or insensitive; it's because the Galatians are being tempted to move on from the gospel toward legalism and works-based righteousness. And because Paul cares about them so deeply, he's not just gonna sit by idly while that happens. So Paul gives a sharp word of rebuke, out love, and the way he does it is by *reminding them of the truth of the*

gospel and exhorting them to believe it more deeply. He does this by asking a series of rhetorical questions - in which he assumes the answers are obvious - and then draws a conclusion, which he then argues from scripture. And each question reminds us of basic truths of the gospel, helping us to truly believe in the gospel of faith in Christ alone, not our own works.

So my five points this morning will just follow the five rhetorical questions that Paul asks in this passage. And his first question reminds us...

I. We Must Never Forget the Gospel of Christ (3:1)

Verse 1 opens with a stinging, perhaps shocking, rebuke: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” Why does Paul begin by launching into this jarring, provocative rebuke? Why does he use such offensive, provocative language, calling them “foolish” and “bewitched,” as if they’re under the trance of a spell? It would probably be helpful, at this point, to remind ourselves why Paul was writing this letter: false teachers had come up to the churches in Galatia; the churches were filled with mainly non-Jewish Christians (Gentiles), and these false teachers were Jews that claimed to be Christians. But when they came, they preached that faith in Jesus Christ wasn’t enough to truly be justified before God and be saved - they also needed to obey the Law of Moses, be circumcised, live like Jews, only eat certain foods, and so on and so forth. Only that’s not the gospel! THAT’s not the way that we are saved! Over the last two chapters, we have seen very clearly that the only true gospel - the only true good news of salvation - is that we can be saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone, not by our own works and efforts! As we saw last week, this is the doctrine of justification by faith, which is at the heart of the gospel: our good works could never be enough for us to be considered righteous before GOD, so our only hope is to trust that Jesus is good enough for us, in our place.

The Galatians knew the gospel. Paul himself had preached it to them; this is what he means when he says, “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” But the problem was: the Galatian Christians were being tempted to buy into these false teachings and stop believing that the cross of Christ really is sufficient for us to be forgiven and declared righteous before God. This is why Paul calls them so “foolish,” repeating this rebuke twice in the passage: there is nothing more foolish than to abandon the gospel of Christ, because it is our only hope! THERE is no other way to be saved from our sin and Hell; believing

in Jesus *plus basing our righteousness off our own works* is a false gospel; if we contribute towards our righteousness at all, then we *are not righteous at all*. So Paul uses strong language to show how serious and foolish it is; he says it's like their being "bewitched" by a spell, possibly alluding to spiritual warfare, and the Satanic influence at work here, trying to lead them away from trusting in Christ alone as sufficient.

But the problem wasn't just back then; the problem for us today is: *you and I are still tempted to live and think as if our standing before God is based on our own works, efforts, and performance, rather than being received as a free gift through faith in Christ alone!* Even for those of us who believe the gospel is true, we are still tempted to be "bewitched" into thinking that Christ isn't sufficient for your standing before God, so that you start relying on your own works. When this happens, we are being tempted to forget the gospel. And so, there's only one answer; only one way to cure our bewitchment: *we have to relearn the gospel everyday*. We have to continue to look to Jesus, remember the gospel, and believe that it is true, more and more deeply, not only in our heads, but in our hearts. We need to hear the gospel preached from God's Word week after week. But that's not enough. We need to preach the gospel to each other, in our conversations and prayers throughout the week. But that's not enough either. YOU and I need to preach the gospel to ourselves every single day, multiple times a day, reminding ourselves, from God's Word, that the gospel is true - that you and I, though sinners who can never be good enough, truly are forgiven, righteous before God, and perfectly loved and accepted by God *purely because of what Christ has done, regardless of our own sin or obedience, success or failure!* ON our best day and on our worst, our only hope is Christ - and it is more than enough!

We must cling to Christ through faith. We must remember, relearn, and re-believe the gospel every single day. And this is why Paul continues asking these rhetorical questions, where the answers should be obvious, reminding the Galatians, and us, that the Christian life begins, continues, and ends *through faith*, not works. So let's turn to Paul's second question:

II. We Become Christians through Faith, Not by Works (3:2)

Paul's second rhetorical question here, where he assumes we all know the answer, reminds us that the Christian life began by faith, not by works. Verse 2 says: "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?"

In this question, Paul is assuming three things: 1. To believe the gospel of Christ is to become a Christian and be justified; 2. To believe and become a CHristian is to receive the Holy

Spirit; 3. Therefore, His hearers have the Spirit, because they are Christians, having received the Spirit the moment they first believed in the gospel.

So in other words, he's asking: "How did you become Christians? How did you begin the Christian life? How did you receive the Holy Spirit of God? Was it through the works of the law? Did you become a Christian, did you become justified before God and receive His Holy Spirit, through your own obedience to God and by your own works? Or was it by hearing with faith - by hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ and believing that Christ's life, death, and resurrection really are sufficient for your salvation?"

Paul is assuming here that we know the obvious answer: we became Christians through faith, not by works! We receive the Holy Spirit as a free gift, simply through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ! We didn't earn the Spirit! We were forgiven and justified through faith, not by our own works! The Christian life doesn't begin by our own works - it begins by hearing and believing the gospel, trusting in Christ alone. As we saw clearly from the previous text last week (Gal. 2:15-21), there's nothing you and I could ever do to be considered good enough before God. We can only be justified - declared righteous before God and be saved from our sin - through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. That's how we became a Christian: by believing that Jesus lived a perfect life that we couldn't live in order for his righteousness to count as our own; that He died on the cross in our place, bearing God's wrath against our sins, paying the penalty we deserve, so that we don't have to; and that He was raised from the grave, being justified by God, so that we can trust that God accepted His sacrifice on our behalf, so that one day we will be raised from death, will be declared righteous before His throne, not because we've been good enough, but because Christ's righteousness is our own, and we will enter into eternal life with Him! That's the good news of the gospel! You become a Christian simply by believing that glorious message!

When you're tempted towards legalism, and you're tempted to think that God doesn't love you or accept you because of how much you've sinned recently, or because you're not doing enough good works, then remember this: your Christian life didn't begin by works, but through faith in Christ! You didn't become a Christian by being good enough - in fact, you became a Christian by realizing that you could never be good enough for God, but that God loves you anyways! You became a Christian through faith in Christ alone! And if this was true when you became a Christian, then it is just as true for you today and everyday.

The Christian life begins not by works but through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. But not only does it begin through faith - the Christian life also *continues* through faith alone. And this leads us to Paul's third rhetorical question, where we see that:

III. We are Sanctified through Faith, Not Through our own Works (3:3)

Paul asks the third question in verse 3: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" In other words, he's saying, "You became a Christian through faith in the gospel. Are you now trying to grow as a Christian through the works of the flesh?" Or, to say it differently, "You were justified by faith. Are you now trying to be sanctified by works?"

As we just saw in our last point, we became Christians through faith in Christ alone, not by our own works and merits. We didn't earn the Spirit; the Spirit was God's free gift to us. We didn't earn our righteousness; we realized that we are not righteous, and could never be righteous through our own obedience or performance, and so we turn to Christ, trusting that we are justified - that we are *declared righteous before GOD* - purely because of what Christ has done for us. We turned away from trusting in ourselves, our own works, or any false gods or gospel - and we turned to Jesus Christ, trusting in Him alone for salvation! When we became believers, we *received the Spirit*. By the power and grace of God's Holy Spirit, we repented and believed the gospel. And by the same Spirit and through faith we turned to Christ with new hearts, with a desire to follow and obey Christ out of love. The Spirit gives us new hearts when we become Christians, producing a desire to trust, love, worship, and obey God more and more. We didn't earn this through our works. We didn't do anything to change our own hearts. It was all GOD's free gift of grace, that we simply received through faith! In fact, even our faith was a gift, produced by the power of the Holy Spirit within us!

This is how our Christian life began - by the Spirit, not our flesh. And so, this is how the Christian life continues, this is how we grow as Christians - by the Spirit, not the flesh. Just as we are justified through faith in Christ alone, and not by our own works, so we are also sanctified through faith in Christ alone, not by our own works. "Sanctification" simply means the process by which we become more and more holy; it's our spiritual growth as Christians, where our lives begin to look less and less like the sinful ways of the world and more and more like the perfectly righteous life of Jesus Christ. This is what Paul means in verse three when he speaks of "being perfected." We don't become perfect when we become believers. We still live in the flesh. We

still have indwelling sin that we have to confront, confess, and repent from; this will be true for the rest of our lives here on Earth. And yet, *we are not the same as we were before we became Christians!* When we became believers, we were filled with the Holy Spirit; we were “born again,” as Jesus says in John 3; we were given new hearts. And the same Spirit that changed our hearts and gave us faith then continues to do so now. We are not saved or justified by our works, but through faith; yet true, saving faith, which comes by the Spirit, produces the fruit of the Spirit. This means the Christian life is one of change and growth, of ongoing faith, repentance from sin, and a growing desire for obedience and holiness. We call this spiritual growth and maturity *sanctification*. And such growth comes not by works of the flesh, but through faith by the Spirit.

And yet, just like the Galatians, we are so easily tempted to fall into the lie of thinking that our sanctification - our spiritual growth and maturity - comes by our own works of the flesh rather than through deeper faith in the gospel. When I was in High School and College, I began to have greater conviction of my sin and deeper desires for holiness, obedience, and Christian growth. I so desperately wanted to know God more, to sin less, and to live a holy life! But there was a point in that journey where I thought that this meant I needed something *beyond* the same gospel I grew up hearing. Now, I believed the gospel was true, and I believed that I was saved by it! But even though I wouldn't have said it this way, I was subconsciously thinking that, even though I began by faith, I could only grow through my own works and efforts of the flesh. I thought that if I could just start reading the Bible, praying, giving, and evangelizing more, than God would really love me, really finally be pleased and happy with me. I believed God loved me in a general sense and had forgiven me, but everytime I sinned, I felt like I had to prove how sorry I was, and pray, confess, and obey enough before I could come back into God's good graces. I felt like I was on the outskirts, that God was holding me at arm's length, and if I could just sin less and obey more, then God would really be pleased with me and accept me. But this isn't faith in the gospel - it's legalism! And this isn't where spiritual growth and maturity come from. Early on at college, I began learning about spiritual disciplines, and again I fell into a similar trap: I thought that if I could start fasting more, depriving myself of food and instead praying more, and doing other kinds of disciplines and practices, then these practices would automatically make me holier; or, at the very least, that in exchange for my obedience, GOD would answer my prayers and make me holier. Now, again, I wouldn't have articulated it that

way, this wasn't a conscience thought I had - but it's what was driving the way I was living for a season. And again, that's not gospel - it's legalism, it's works-based righteousness! I started obeying more and sinning less, for a time - but it didn't make me spiritually more mature; it actually puffed me up and led to greater pride in my heart.

Why? Because legalism is deceptive; legalism can feel like holiness. When we convince ourselves that the Christian life and our relationship with God is a check list - do this, don't do that - then when we check off all the right boxes, we feel really good about ourselves, don't we? We feel very holy - maybe even better than those people that *don't* check as many boxes as we do. This is legalism, works-based righteousness - in such a moment, we've stopped believing the gospel, and we think that we really do contribute to our standing before God, at least in some small part, with our own works. Now, the flip side of this, is that when we *don't* check off all the boxes, or when we compare ourselves to others who check off *more* boxes than we do, then we feel crushed and deflated. We feel like failures, like God doesn't want anything to do with us, and that we need to just do better and go get our acts together; we tell ourselves that if we just check off the right boxes again, then *this time* it will be different, and we will be back in God's good graces, back to feeling holy again! But again, *this isn't the gospel*. In fact, in those moments, we aren't believing the gospel - in those moments, we're saying that *the cross of Christ isn't sufficient to deal with our sin, guilt in shame; in those moments, we're saying that Christ's life, death, and resurrection aren't sufficient for us to be righteous before God!*

This is *anti-gospel thinking*. It might make us feel like we're growing in holiness, but it actually just *hardens our hearts in unbelief!* Such thinking is disastrous. Paul shows us that in his fourth question, our fourth point:

IV. We Must Not Fall Away from Faith in the Gospel or We Will Not be Saved (Gal. 3:4)

In fact, if we continue down that road of legalism, then it doesn't lead to righteousness - it leads to abandoning the gospel! This is exactly what Paul tells us in verse 4, with the fourth question: "Did you suffer so many things in vain - if indeed it was in vain?" Now, the word suffer here could also be translated "experienced." So, he could be saying, "Did you experience conversion, faith in the gospel, justification, and receive the Spirit, all in vain?" Or, he could be saying, "Did you endure and persevere through suffering and persecution, on account of your faith, all in vain?" Whether it is "suffering" or "experiencing," the main point is the same: even though they began by faith in the gospel, if they stop living through faith in the gospel and start

living by works of the law, relying on the flesh instead of the Spirit, then *everything in their Christian life up until then will have been vain*. Why? Because if we abandon the gospel for a fake gospel of legalism, then we will not be justified before God, and we will not be saved from our sins and the Hell we deserve. People who fall away from faith in Christ prove themselves to never have been true believers in the first place. Even though someone might have professed faith in the past, maybe even being baptized, turning from sin, and obeying and doing good works, all of that is vain and meaningless if, later in life, they walk away from faith in the gospel of Christ. Our only hope is to *continue to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ!*

Therefore, we only remain Christians and grow in Christ by continuing to believe in the gospel and live by faith, every day. This leads us to Paul's last question and our final point:

V. We Experience the Work of the Spirit in our Lives by Faith, Not by Works (Gal. 3:5-6)

Paul asks his last question, in *verse 5*: "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...?" We could rephrase this question by asking, "how do we experience the work of the Spirit in our lives?" Once again, the assumed, obvious answer is, "by hearing with faith." We don't earn the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives or in our church through our works of obedience or our own efforts. We can't earn God's blessings. God continues to supply His Spirit to us the same way we first received it: by grace through faith in Christ alone! And it's not like we have to drum up enough faith, so that God will give us more of His Spirit in exchange for more faith or something like that. No, it simply means that we experience the power working in our lives more as we continue to believe and trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ more. We look to Christ; we believe that His gospel is sufficient for our salvation - in the beginning, to first be forgiven, and in the end, when we will be justified on judgement day and raised to eternal life, but also even now, in the middle of the Christian life! This is why Paul concludes his last question with his driving point, in *verse 6*: "just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" Now, we're going to return to this verse more next week, but for now, we can simply see that this is saying exactly what we've been seeing all along: *we are declared righteous by God purely through faith in the gospel, not by our own works*, just like Abraham.

And so, once again, we see that we grow in Christ the same way we came to Christ: *through faith in His gospel!* And it is the Spirit who brings conviction for our sin, true

repentance, true faith in the gospel, desires for obedience, greater love for God and others, the fruits and gifts of the Spirit, and every other good or spiritual thing in our lives. Therefore, we grow in Christ and live by the Spirit, not the flesh, by trusting more and more in the reality that what Christ has done for us really is sufficient, and that the Christian life really is all by God's grace, from beginning to end! We began by the Spirit; we received the Spirit through faith! And so we continue on in "being perfected" not by works, but through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ! And so, we continue on through faith. Brothers and Sisters, let us grow in Christ by continually fixing our eyes on Jesus and relearning the truth of His gospel day after day, understanding it more in our heads and believing it more in our hearts, by the grace of GOD and by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives! As we're convicted of our sin and guilt, let us look to Jesus and believe that His cross is sufficient; our debt is paid, and we really are forgiven by His sufficient, glorious grace! As we repent and confess our sins, and believe the gospel, let us pray for the Spirit to change our hearts, give us greater desires for holiness, and press on in obedience, not by our own strength, but by relying on the Spirit, through faith. Let us preach this gospel to ourselves and each other, every day: we are saved, from beginning to end, through faith in Christ! Christ's life, death, and resurrection is sufficient for you to be forgiven, to be justified and declared righteous, for you to be sanctified and grow spiritually, and for you to persevere and finally be raised to eternal life. If you believe this gospel this morning, and are a baptized member of a gospel preaching church, then we invite you to come to the table with us in just a few moments, as we corporately and visibly proclaim our continued faith in this gospel by taking the Lord's Supper. After a moment of silence, I will motion for everyone to come down, from the outside in, to grab a stack of cups, and then we will all partake together.

If you're not a Christian this morning, the main way for you to respond is the same: simply believe that Christ's life, death, and resurrection are sufficient to save you from your sins and make you right with God! Then, instead of taking the Lord's Supper, you can let us know that you believe, and make your faith public by being baptized. If you have any questions about this, or about baptism or joining the church, I would love to speak with you. Let us have a moment of silence.