

Perfecting Your Faith?

Galatians 3:1-5

With Study Questions

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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? 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? – ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ⁴ Have you suffered so many things in vain – if indeed *it was* in vain? ⁵ 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?

A Professor's Inquiry

A college professor was known for asking his Christian students (when they first became Christians) if they knew what they were getting themselves into. Contained in his questions was his understanding of how Christianity is often billed as very gracious but can rapidly become very burdensome and constraining.

His not-so-friendly cross examination surely possessed elements of truth found in two major errors prevalent in the church throughout the ages – and very prevalent today. First, is the presentation of the gospel without the charge or challenge to repent – the counting of the cost (Luke 14:28). Second (more appropriate to the text before us), is the tendency to introduce the new convert to certain behaviors that must be present – not as the necessary fruit of salvation – but that which legitimizes their salvation. The light burden and the easy yoke all of a sudden become cultish slavery (Matthew 11:30).

Bewitching the Saints

The bewitching of the saints at Galatia resulted in their thinking they could be perfected by the flesh rather than the Spirit. So let us begin by asking some questions: What was the nature of this bewitchment; how did it come about? Was it hypnosis or the casting of a spell? Second, what was the perfection of which Paul writes? Was it merely a matter of becoming more mature in the faith? Finally, what does Paul mean when he pits the flesh against the Spirit? Does this mean we should not make every human effort to live a life pleasing to God?

Let us give a brief answer to these questions prior to examining the passage. The nature of this bewitchment was not hypnosis or the casting of a spell but the proposal of a lie. As we have learned earlier, false teachers were capturing the thoughts of the members of these churches. The most steadfast and well taught Christian is not immune to believing errors about their faith.

The perfection of which Paul writes is not a matter of merely becoming more mature in the faith; we all need that. It was a matter of supplementing that which Christ left unfinished on the cross. This is the heresy Paul is dealing with. It surrounds us to this day and is a great enemy to our souls. William Hendriksen aptly states,

...that a Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted!

Finally, when Paul pits the flesh against the Spirit, he is not saying that we shouldn't seek to love God and our neighbors with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – a teaching clearly taught by Christ Himself. He is, though, telling us that all the human effort we can muster up will not draw us one step closer to heaven or justification (declaration of acquittal before God). Here the clarity of my own conscience can be my worst enemy. If I view my having obtained a level of morality to be contributory to God's accepting me, I have opened the door to my own destruction.

Let us now examine the passage.

Foolish

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 (Galatians 3:1)?

Paul seems to be a bit derogatory here! This is not so much an indictment against their intellect as much as it is against their good sense. Even the most intellectual person can be wooed into folly. Generally, it is a result of sin. How sinful is it for mere men to be so full of themselves as to think they can somehow successfully parade their works before a holy God? The foolishness lies in a great many things, not the least of which is an overestimation of their own righteousness.

Bewitched

As I stated before, the bewitching is not a twinkling of the nose but a presenting of a lie. Paul asks who, rhetorically. He knows well who is promoting this heresy in the church. He will speak aggressively toward them. Pastors ought not to be unnecessarily polemical or argumentative. But let them heed that they, over and above media Christianity (radio, books, television), are accountable to God for the souls in their pews. Therefore they, like Paul, must address the errors and those who promote them. These people seek to lead churches away from the obedience to the truth.

¹ William Hendriksen, Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians, (Baker Book House, 1968), p. 112.

Portrayed as Crucified

Paul is not saying that these people were actual eye-witnesses of the crucifixion. He is saying that his preaching (and writing) presented Christ and Christ crucified. Herein lays the challenge for pastors. Let us not depend upon icons which violate the second commandment. Pictures of Jesus on a crucifix do very little to accomplish what Paul had accomplished in portraying Christ crucified; it in fact accomplishes just the opposite since He is always misrepresented. Paul didn't draw them a picture of Jesus.

The challenge for the preacher in portraying Christ crucified is the challenge of presenting what the crucifixion accomplished. The heinous nature of the Galatian error was how quickly they were turning away from those glorious truths of the effective, atoning work of Christ on the cross. To understand the cross correctly would be to understand the cross needs no assistance in the saving of a soul. One can look at a crucifix and not get this at all. But when the cross is preached correctly, its power stands alone as man's hope.

Receiving the Spirit – Work or Faith?

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 (Galatians 3:2)?

Paul may have in mind here the unique and miraculous works of the Spirit in the birthing of the New Testament church. Surely God didn't pour out His Spirit because this particular portion of humanity were such good law-keepers. But he more likely (or in addition) has in mind the work of regeneration. God doesn't regenerate us because we are so good at keeping the law. Often times the gospel is presented this way. It is presented as if man takes the first step toward a God who will then respond. This is backward. No man seeks after God (Romans 3:11), all are dead in sin (Ephesians 2:4), God is the originator of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), and grants repentance that we may know the truth (2 Timothy 2:25). God doesn't send His Spirit in response but His Spirit creates a response in us.

Paul is addressing their short memory. Since we are utterly dependant upon God to save us in the first place, it doesn't make much sense that we would not be utterly dependant upon Him to sustain us in that salvation. Have you been taught or made to feel that God is unwilling to accept you until your quiet times are sufficient or that your behavior is adequately distinct from the ways of the world? A quiet time may be a good discipline and we certainly shouldn't be imitators of the world but of Christ. But these do not precede our peace with God but rather flow from our peace with God.

The peace you had with God the hour you first believed rested (hopefully) upon the accomplished work of Christ. That has never changed, nor will it ever change. Paul comments on the utter folly of thinking otherwise.

Continual Need for the Cross

Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh (Galatians 2:3)?

Here is another chastisement. How foolish to think we can somehow perfect (or bring to completion) that which Christ left incomplete. A man may grow in maturity, wisdom and stature; but he can never grow to that rank where he needs Christ any less than the first hour his eyes were opened to his own wretched condition. Genuine maturity actually yields a greater recognition of that wretched condition. May God grant us illumination to our own abysmal natures and desperate need for the cross of Christ. Maturity which yields morality apart from increased dependence upon the cross is not maturity at all, but rather a demented form of pietism.

Tending to Forget

Have you suffered so many things in vain – if indeed it was in vain (Galatians 3:4)?

The word “suffered” here could also be translated “experienced” and doesn’t necessarily mean persecution, although there may have been some persecution for these Christians. Paul’s frustration with these churches is how quickly they had departed from the truth of the gospel – how quickly they had forgotten what he had taught them. Churches are to repeat the important things. They are to have regular communion, regular declaration of the pardon of sins, regular instruction on justification by faith – this because we tend to forget. We are to regularly place before our eyes those things which are central to the faith.

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 (Galatians 3:5)?

Paul now sums up what we will sum up as well. No matter where we are in our faith, fledgling or elder, we are to remember that we can never posture ourselves into God’s favor. While we were sinners, and in utter rebellion against God, He loved us and therefore saved us. We can never make Him love us more or save us more. We can add nothing to our own justification or right standing with God. It is because of this that we elevate the cross and offer Him only our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the inquiry of the professor. What errors lead to these kinds of questions (page 1)?
2. How were the Galatians bewitched (pages 1, 2)?
3. What was the “perfection” that Paul wrote of (pages 1, 2)?
4. In what way does Paul pit the Spirit against flesh (pages 1, 2)?
5. What was the nature of the foolishness of the Galatians (page 2)?
6. Why must pastors address errors and those who promote error (page 2)?
7. How did Paul portray Christ as crucified (page 3)?
8. How does one receive the Spirit (page 3)?
9. What did Paul mean by being made perfect by the flesh and why is this a foolish notion (page 4)?
10. Since people tend to forget, what should churches do (page 4)?
11. Why did God save us (page 4)?
12. What can we offer God (page 4)?