

Living By Faith

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on May 19, 2019

This morning we are continuing with our short sermon series on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Written around 49 A.D., about one year before the historic Jerusalem Council, this letter addressed the most pressing controversy in the early church, which was the status of the Law of Moses in the emerging Christian community.

And now turning to God's Word, we will be reading from Galatians, chapter three, verses one through fourteen.

Galatians 3:1-14

3 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so much for nothing? - if it really was for nothing. 5 Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? 6 Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," 7 so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. 10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith." 12 But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" - 14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

In 1859, the famous tight-rope walker Charles Blondin traveled to Niagara Falls. He stretched a thick wire over the gorge. There, suspended on this wire, 49 meters above the water, he walked 340 meters from one side to the other. He did this a number of times: blindfolded, in a sack, pushing a wheelbarrow, on stilts, sitting down midway while he cooked and ate an omelet and standing on a chair with only one chair leg on the rope. But that's not all. He also carried a man on his back over that tightrope. That man happened to be his manager.

Now, imagine if halfway across the manager had said to Blondin, "Look, I appreciate that you've taken me this far, but I really don't trust you anymore. I think I'll do the rest myself.

Let me down, and I'll take it from here." Can you imagine? He'd be a dead manager from that point on. Having been carried that far, why in the world would he think that he could get the rest of the way across by himself?

In our Scripture reading this morning, Paul asks the Galatians a similar question. In verses one through three he rhetorically asks how they became Christians and how they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The answer that they would have given was, "We became Christians and received the Spirit because we heard and believed the gospel message by faith." Or, to use the tightrope analogy, they became Christians not by thinking they could cross over that chasm by themselves, but by placing their trust in Christ to do for them what they couldn't do for themselves.

In other words, the Galatians did not receive the Holy Spirit because they were circumcised, or because they kept the works of the Law of Moses. They did not become Christians by doing anything to earn God's acceptance. No, the Holy Spirit entered their lives and they became Christians when they heard the gospel preached and when they placed their faith in Christ.

Given this, Paul then asks, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" The answer of course is, "no." But, again, Paul is not looking for an answer to his questions. Rather, he is making a statement. Through these questions Paul is reminding the Galatians how they became Christians, so that it may inform them of how they should mature in their faith.

Stated another way, the questions Paul raises in the first few verses of Galatians, chapter three, is really words of exhortation that could be phrased in the following way. Continue in the Christian life the same way you started: by grace through faith, not performance. Anything else would be ridiculous. (Just as it would be foolish for Blondin's manager to start his journey across Niagara Falls on Blondin's back and then dismount halfway so he could finish the walk on his own.)

This, in essence, is the message Paul was communicating to the Galatians in today's Scripture reading. In response to the false teachers who were encouraging the Galatians to assume responsibility for their salvation and growth by following the Law of Moses, Paul reminded them that they were saved by the Spirit through faith, and that they would become mature Christians in exactly the same way. By grace through faith.

That being said, Paul was not saying that they should passively sit and do nothing while they waited for God to make them mature in their faith. After all, the call of the Christian is to take up our cross and follow Jesus. But, the way we do that is not by trusting in our own strength and good works to do the job. This is why Paul reminded the Galatians that the path forward in our Christian journey is no different than on our first day. For each day we

follow Jesus we do so by grace through faith.

This is the way it is. And as Paul tells the Galatians in today's reading, this is the way that it has always been; going all the way back to Abraham. As Paul writes in verse six, "just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'." Over the next few verses, Paul emphasized this point to make sure that it sank in that the reason Abraham, the great ancestor of the Christians and the Jews was saved was because of his faith.

This is important to note, because many will think of Abraham as being a hero on account of his good works. For example, he picked up and moved when God told him to. He was ready to give up his son Isaac when God asked him to. And yet Paul tells the Galatians that none of these things justified Abraham before God. Instead, he was saved by grace through faith.

The final message that Paul communicated to the Galatians in our Scripture reading from this morning is that there is no other way to live the Christian life than by grace through faith. For if we try to live the Christian life by our own strength, we'll only end up condemned. We'll never measure up. For there is no way we can live on our own strength and succeed.

To make his point, in verses ten through fourteen, Paul contrasts the two ways people try to get God's approval. One way is to try to keep the Law. The problem with this approach, Paul tells us, is that our efforts to keep God's law always fall short. And God pronounces a curse on all who fail to keep all that the Law requires.

But, there is another way. As Paul reminds the Galatians, what the Law required of them, Christ accomplished on their behalf on the cross. Jesus became cursed in their place. He received their curse so that they could receive his blessing. Thus, they had all the blessings of being Abraham's spiritual dependents through Christ. Nothing else was necessary.

Translating this into today's world, we don't progress in the Christian life by pulling ourselves up by our own effort. Rather, we continue the same way we began; through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is how we grow in the Christian life; not under our own steam, but through the Spirit-enabled working out of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

This is the good news, that Paul reinforced among the churches in the region of Galatia nearly two thousand years ago. And it made all the difference in the world. As we noted in the first sermon in this series from two weeks ago, when Paul wrote this letter, the fledgling Christian church was at a key moment in its history.

Having started out twenty years earlier from the city of Jerusalem as an exclusively Jewish religion, Christianity, was quickly spreading throughout the Roman Empire and it was starting to make inroads into the non-Jewish, or Gentile communities. This was a world

changing development.

However, would the inroads continue? Would the dominant Jewish culture within the early church impose itself on the Gentile converts, or would it give them the space they needed to flourish. How the church responded to this issue would determine the future of Christianity and the future of the world. The importance of this time in church history cannot be overstated.

Coinciding with this war of cultures was the struggle to ensure that the core message of the Christian faith be preserved. This is a battle that the church has faced throughout the ages, as numerous counter-narratives have emerged throughout the centuries.

In the days when Paul wrote to the Galatians, the most popular counter-narrative to the gospel was a blend of Jesus and the Law of Moses. And make no mistake about it, this divergent gospel made waves. To such a degree that a special council was called that drew leaders to Jerusalem from around the Roman world. This was a very big deal.

In the end, the gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians was upheld as the central message of the Christian faith, and this teaching has been preserved by the church down through the ages.

And the message that was preserved, the message that we preach is this. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" - in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

In everyday language this means that the pathway to God, the pathway to life is by grace, through faith, not by our good works. This is the way it has always been. And this is the way it will always be. If we try to win the favour of God based on our own strength and our own good works, it will lead to failure, it will lead to condemnation.

Therefore, as Christians, in light of the message that lies at the heart of our faith, let us live each day of our lives the same way we started our journey with Jesus, through continual trust and dependance in the Holy Spirit and a continual focus on the cross as we live to please Christ. Having trusted him to bear our sins, let us trust him day by day to lead us safely across the straight and narrow path to our eternal home.