

By Faith and Not by Works
Gal 1:1-5
Sunday, September 7th, 2025
By Ryan Perry

Scripture

Galatians 1:1–5

[1] Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—[2] and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

[3] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, [4] who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, [5] to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Let's Pray

Introduction

I'm not sure how all of you operate, but I know for myself that I am, in general, a really good starter and not a great finisher.

What I mean by that is I am great at starting projects, initiatives, or life-changes, but I am not always great at staying the course and seeing them to completion. This can happen for a variety of reasons: **boredom, life circumstances, fear of failure, loss of focus, or even the possibility of a better or easier option, to name a few.**

One of the ways that I have seen this play out in my life is through the various productivity systems I have tried to utilize throughout my career and life in ministry. If you didn't know this about me, I love to be productive, and I love a good system to help me do that.

So I have, at various times, devoured self-help books that primarily focus on habits to increase performance and my ability to accomplish more in my life. Books like:

- High-performance habits
- Atomic habits
- The 4-hour work week
- Do More Better
- Free to Focus
- What's Best Next

All of which have their own system for getting things done, and come with a promise that if you do these things, you will become a Jedi master of using your time well and production.

Now, I'm not going to tell you that this premise is either true or false for any of these books, because the truth is that I, in one way or another, started to utilize each of these systems, only to abandon them for something else a few months later.

So I started well, but I didn't end well because I quickly began to believe that I needed a different system to reach my full potential when it came to getting stuff done.

I'm telling you this story, as silly or as mundane as it might seem, because it highlights a very real problem that we will encounter throughout the book of Galatians.

Problem: As Christians, we know that Christ is the only one who saves us and makes us right with God, and yet, we can be tempted to put our hope in our works instead of in Him.

Or to put it another way: We can begin to believe that we need another system besides Christ or that we need to add something on to Christ.

This problem, as we will see, gets to the heart of a single question that runs through the entire book of Galatians:

Question: How are we justified or made right with God?

Paul's whole argument throughout this book brings us to this answer.

Answer: Because Christ is the promised fulfillment of the law, we are made right with God (justified) by faith in Christ alone and not by our works.

This will be the bulk of what you hear from this pulpit over the next 4-6 months.

Why Galatians?

So, then the question is, why do we need this message in the current season of our church?

I believe there are three answers to this question.

The first is more general and gets at the heart of what I said above. We are all prone, on some level, to subtly make our works the basis of our justification before God. We can begin to believe that God's love for us and his acceptance of us are somehow based on what we do versus what he has done for us.

Paul knew this, which is why he wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9:

[8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

And it's why he wrote in Galatians 3:11:

[11] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."

Being made right with God is always a matter of faith in Christ and his finished work, and has nothing to do with our works.

The second reason is more about me, but it has a profound effect on you. A few years back, after preaching one Sunday, I asked someone what they thought about the sermon, and they said something to the effect of: **“Your preaching has shifted a bit, and you seem to be more duty-driven than Christ-driven in your teaching.”**

Meaning that it seemed to them like I was emphasizing our human works over the work of Christ on our behalf.

I thought about this for quite a while, talked with a few others about it, and finally concluded that yes, in my desire to see a robust and lived faith within myself and God’s people, **the pendulum had swung to a place where, at times, I was making works seem more important than Christ.**

So I need the message of Galatians, that being made right with God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, **so that I don’t believe and then preach a false gospel that can’t save and is devoid of any real power.**

Finally, we are in the process of finishing up and then rolling out a new mission, vision, values, and strategy for the church. We are very excited about it and believe it will be for the health and benefit of LEFC as it helps us to further the cause of the gospel in the Coulee Region.

However, with our excitement to see it become a reality, we want to be careful that we don’t make it the main thing in the life of the church. **Because our mission, vision, and values can’t transform lives or make people right with God, only Christ can.**

So then, with all of that said, we are going to take the rest of our time this morning to talk through a few things that will help us to better understand this book and its overarching message.

We will talk about Paul’s first missionary journey in Acts 13-14, so that we have a picture of the churches to whom Paul is writing. We will unpack the situation that made it necessary for Paul to write this letter. Finally, we will look through the letter to identify Paul’s goals in writing to the Galatians.

The Churches in Galatia (Paul’s first Missionary Journey)

If you would turn your Bibles to Acts 13 and look with me at verses 2-3. It says this:

[2] While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” [3] Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

At this point in time, roughly around 47-48 A.D., Paul and Barnabas are at Antioch, Syria, which is over on the east side of the Mediterranean. However, while the church in Antioch and its leaders were praying, God called them to set apart Barnabas and Saul (Paul), because he was going to send them on a missionary journey.

So the Church prays for them and the leaders lay hands on them, as a way to commission them for the work they are about to do, and they send them off.

From there, they eventually sail west to the Island of Cyprus, where they first share Christ with the Jews in the synagogue, and from there throughout the rest of the island. After that, they set sail from Paphos on the western edge of the island and made their way to a city called Perga, which is on the southern coast of our modern-day Turkey.

Then they decide to travel north and finally come to another city called Antioch in Pisidia. **This city is important for two reasons.**

One, this finally puts them in the region of **Southern Galatia**.

Two, if you read Acts 13:14-43 you will see Paul and Barnabas going to the synagogue on the Sabbath, Paul giving a huge apologetic argument about Jesus fulfilling the law and providing the forgiveness of sins through his death and resurrection, and many Jews and devout converts coming to faith.

Then, in verse 44, on the next Sabbath day (so a week later), it says that the whole city gathered to hear them. But instead of accepting their message like they did before, the Jews became jealous of Paul and Barnabas, contradicted their teaching, and ultimately rejected the message of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins.

This leads to a huge change in Paul and Barnabas' ministry when they say in verse 46:

Acts 13:46

[46] ...“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.”

So now, after this, Paul's ministry in this area is mostly **(though not exclusively)** to the Gentiles. Which means that most of the churches that are planted after this are made up of non-Jews **(This will become very important as we unpack the problem in this letter).**

These churches include those planted in Iconium (Acts 14:1-4), Derbe and Lystra (Acts 14:6-20), and many other cities in the surrounding region of Lycaonia in Southern Galatia (Acts 14:6).

And once all these churches are planted, Acts 14:21-23 tells us that Paul and Barnabas even went back through to encourage and establish these churches further. Here's the way Luke writes it:

[21] When they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, [22] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. [23] And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Paul and Barnabas strengthened the disciples, encouraged them to continue in the faith and to endure trials, they appointed elders in the churches, and they prayed for them.

All of this culminates then with their return to Antioch, Syria, in Acts 14:26, and in verse 27 as they praise God and tell their sending church all that God had done to open a door of faith to the Gentiles in Southern Galatia.

This seems like the perfect missionary story that has an amazing and happy ending.

But something happens at the beginning of Acts 15 that lets us know that all isn't well in these churches. **This brings us to the reason why Paul wrote this letter.**

Why did Paul write this letter?

Look with me at the following verses from Acts 15:1 and Galatians 6:12-13.

Acts 15:1

[1] But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Galatians 6:12

[12] It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

There are certain Jews, going through these newly formed churches of southern Galatia, who are trying to convince these Gentile believers that they need to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be truly right with God.

Now, it would be one thing if these were non-believing Jews trying to convert the Gentiles to Judaism. Paul faced these kinds of people all the time. But it's clear from Galatians 6:12 that these are Jewish Christians **(The same Judaizers and false teachers that we mentioned in Philippians)**, who are trying to convince these Gentiles that they need Christ, plus circumcision, and obedience to the law of Moses, to be saved.

And the reason they are doing this, according to Paul, is to escape the persecution that might come from non-believing Jews. The thought process being, **"if we show the Jews that the Gentiles are circumcised and following the law of Moses, then they won't care that we believe in Christ and will leave us alone."**

So that's the external threat that has prompted Paul to write this letter. But when we read the book of Galatians, it becomes clear that there's something else happening here as well.

Look with me at the following verses.

Galatians 1:6-7

[6] I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— [7] not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Galatians 3:1–4

[1] O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. [2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

Galatians 4:8–11

[8] Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. [9] But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? [10] You observe days and months and seasons and years! [11] I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Galatians 5:2

[2] Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

If Paul were just warning the Galatians about the Judaizers (false teachers) like he did in Philippians, he wouldn't have written the letter in this way, nor would he have used such strong language.

But the problem is that these Gentile Christians are starting to believe these Judaizers and are actually trying to follow the Mosaic law as a way to make sure that they are in a right relationship with God.

They are abandoning the reality of Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and instead are now trusting in their own works in order to be justified in God's sight.

So Paul, realizing that genuine faith and eternity are at stake in these churches, gets pretty heated in this letter, and he doesn't mince words.

Right out of the gate, he tells them that they are abandoning the gospel of Christ and turning to a different gospel. He calls them foolish multiple times in chapter 3, which means they are being **senseless and stupid**, as they walk away from God.

He makes it clear in chapter 4 that following the Jewish law will bring the same results as their life as an unbeliever, it will make them slaves to something that can't save them.

Finally, in chapter 5, he says that if they accept the Jewish law and circumcision as a way to be made right with God, Christ will be of no advantage to them. **It will become clear that they don't have a genuine faith in Christ, and they will not be saved.**

So this is the threat and temptation that these churches are facing as the Galatians are beginning to believe that they need something else besides Christ alone to save them and to make them right before God.

They are beginning to believe they need a new system.

So this not only prompts Paul to write this letter to them in A.D. 48ish, but it also gives us a clear understanding of why he wrote this letter and uses such direct and harsh language throughout.

Side Note

Now one quick side note before we move on the Paul's goals in this letter. I read to you Acts 15:1, where it talks about these Judaizers coming and teaching the necessity of circumcision. And if you read the rest of Acts 15:2 and beyond, you will notice that Paul and Barnabas are sent to the Jerusalem church to get a ruling on what these men are teaching.

But the interesting thing is that Paul never references this council or their verdict in the book of Galatians, even though it would have been a very easy way to defeat the arguments of these false teachers. **This has led the vast majority of conservative scholars to place the writing of this letter between Acts 15:1 and 15:2.**

I wanted to point that out, so you have a good understanding of how this letter fits into the Acts narrative.

Finally, let's look at Paul's goals in this letter.

What is Paul's goal in this letter?

Paul's ultimate goal in this letter is to answer the question that we asked at the beginning of this sermon.

Question: How are we justified or made right with God?

Again, his resounding answer throughout this book is:

Answer: Because Christ is the promised fulfillment of the law, we are made right with God (justified) by faith in Christ alone and not by our works.

To build his argument, he ties together quite a **few themes** that really build on each other and make the truth of his answer: **“By faith in Christ alone and not by works,”** so clear.

Salvation History

That Christ can only be rightly understood as the climax and fulfilment of this unfolding story (Salvation History) that began all the way back in the Garden and was promised to Abraham.

Look with me at the following verses:

Galatians 1:3–4

[3] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, [4] who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,

Jesus is the one who came to deliver us (bring salvation) from sin and this evil age.

Galatians 3:15-16

[15] To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. [16] Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant that God made with Abraham back in Genesis 15, where he told Abraham that he would make his descendants like the stars of the sky and would give his singular offspring (Christ), the promise land (**which at that time was viewed as a physical land, but was ultimately pointing to an eternal and forever home with God**).

Galatians 4:4-5

[4] But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, [5] to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Jesus is the fullness and climax of time (Salvation history), God sent him through a woman who was under the law of Moses, so that he could redeem those who were under or held captive by the law. Why? **Because law-keeping or works can't save people, only Christ can.**

Gospel and Cross/Crucifixion

This might seem a little similar to the last theme, but these two ideas are all over this book and are used to point to a contrast between Paul and these false teachers, and to highlight the error of the false teacher.

Look with me at the following verses:

Galatians 1:11–12

[11] For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. [12] For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

This is a confirmation of the divine nature of the gospel Paul preached, and he is indirectly contrasting it with the human origin of this false gospel of works that these Jewish Christians are teaching.

Galatians 2:19–20

[19] For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. [20] I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul wants the Galatians to fully understand that the law was pointing to and was fulfilled in Christ (which means that the law itself can't save anybody).

And because Christ was crucified on the cross, Paul and all believers are no longer under the requirements of the law. Instead, through Christ we have died to those requirements **(which we couldn't keep)**, and we are now spiritually alive in Christ.

Which then brings us to two final themes that are of paramount importance in this book.

Faith/Law Contrast

Look with me at Galatians 2:15-16, which really stands as the main thesis statement for this whole book:

Galatians 2:15–16

[15] We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; [16] yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

On the one side, Paul has put the works of the law (this is trying to keep and obey the law of Moses with all of its rules and regulations), and on the other, he has put faith in Christ.

His point in doing that is to make it clear that there is not a single thing we can do (including trying to keep the rules God gave to Moses) to save ourselves, and if we do, we cannot claim to be made right with God.

However, if we stop trying to do things to make ourselves right with God and instead put our faith in Christ and his finished work on the cross, then we will be made right in God's sight. **We will be saved.**

Which I hope you will always hear as good news. Because this means you can rest in Christ's work on your behalf instead of worrying about whether or not you've done enough to be right with God.

Justification

Now, I'm not going to read any passages here because in Galatians 2:16 (which I just read), you saw the word **Justify/Justified** three times.

In fact, in this letter alone, Paul uses a form of this word 8 times, and a word that goes with it, **"righteousness,"** 4 times.

Which means that it is an important word and concept. **So what I want to do is to give you a definition for what Paul means when he uses the word justified and talks about the Christian doctrine of justification. We are going to define it like this:**

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness (his perfections) as belonging to us, and declares us to be righteous in his sight.

This means that when we put our faith in Christ's finished work on the cross, 3 things happen.

1. God forgives us of our sins (because Christ paid the penalty for them).
2. He gives us Christ's perfect record of obedience.
3. He declares us to be right in his sight. (We are now in a right relationship with God).

Now, does this mean that we will ever live perfectly in this life? No. But it does mean that when God looks at us, all he sees is the perfect record of Christ, which is why we have the privilege of being called sons and daughters of the living God.

This is something that we will be coming back to time and time again in our study of Galatians.

Conclusion

So as we close this sermon, you may be asking yourself, are we really only going to talk about how we are made right with God for the next 4-6 months?

And my answer to you is a resounding, yes!

Not only is it a yes, because Paul wrote a whole letter about it, but it is a resounding yes, because our human hearts are in a moment-by-moment battle for our faith in Christ.

You and I are being tempted, every moment of the day, to trust in something else besides Christ to save us and make us right with God.

So it is my hope and my prayer that God will take this deep dive into the book of Galatians and how we are made right with God, and will expose for all of us, the things that we are trusting in to justify ourselves besides Christ.

And that by the end of this series, our only hope, our only boast, will be in Christ and Christ alone.

So that we can become a people who live lives of freedom and joy as we love one another, serve each other, and joyfully point others to the great message of the whole Bible:

You are saved and made right with God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and not by your works. Amen.

Let's pray