

Live by Faith and Not by Works
Galatians 3:1-5
Sunday, October 26th, 2025
By Ryan Perry

Scripture

Galatians 3:1–5

[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? [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—

Let's Pray

Introduction

Illustration

For my birthday this past July, I got super excited because my wife, bought me this giant Nordic Viking LEGO set. It was so big that it came with 2100 pieces, a 150-page instruction booklet, and it had to be put together in three different sections.

Now, I don't know if you have ever put together a LEGO set or not, but if you have, you know that many of the pieces are tiny, and if you aren't careful, it's very easy to either miss a step or put a piece in the wrong place.

And often when this happens, you can get away with it and still end up with a LEGO creation that looks like the one on the box. However, there are times when we make an error that is so bad that unless we take the whole thing apart, we will never get this LEGO creation together.

This same principle also applies to things like DIY bookshelves or desks.

So this fatal error happened to me while I was putting together the roof of the LEGO Viking guard tower. I looked at the instructions, built the whole roof, and sat there for the next 15 minutes wondering why I couldn't attach it the right way.

If you have ever experienced something like this, you know what kinds of thoughts run through your head. You blame the directions, you blame the pieces, and eventually, you even blame the manufacturer because, of course, they built it wrong.

But low and behold, after blaming everyone else, I finally saw it. I had made one crucial error that caused me to put the entire roof together backwards. And unless I took it apart and rebuilt it the right way, I would never be able to attach the roof or finish the Viking village.

In a similar way, the apostle Paul in Galatians 2:15-21 has been laying out the instruction manual for how someone is made right before God.

In 2:15-16, he makes it clear that a person is not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Christ Jesus, because no one can be made right with God by their works.

Then in 2:17-21, he says that through Christ he has died to the law, which means that he is no longer enslaved by it. So instead of trying to earn eternal life by doing works of the law **(which is impossible)**, he is now free from the law and has a new and forever life through faith in Christ.

He said this to show the Galatians that they, too, are dead to the law, and therefore must live by faith in Christ.

But now, in Galatians 3:1, after laying out these instructions, he directly addresses these gentile believers, like he did in 1:6-9, **to let them know that they have made a fatal error.**

Where they started well by putting their full hope in Christ alone to save and justify them, they have abandoned God's **instruction manual for faith** and instead are trying to complete their salvation by works of the law.

Or we could say it this way: They are building the LEGO set of eternal life with God in the wrong way, and if they don't correct their mistakes, they are going to create something that can't actually give them life at all.

Because instead of building in God's way, **through faith in Christ**, they will end up building their own **gospel of works that has no power and can't save them.**

If we are not careful, we can also start out well, building our life with God by faith, but then end up abandoning God's instructions on how we are actually saved and justified before him.

[FCF] Because even though we know that we are saved by faith in Christ alone, we can often treat faith like it's a door. It's what gets us into a right relationship with God, but then somehow, it's up to us to stay and grow in that relationship. When we do this, we end up turning faith into nothing more than an empty gospel of works.

So, realizing that this is what the Galatians are doing and that we are susceptible to the same thing, the apostle Paul is calling us out this morning so that we wouldn't be misled into believing a gospel that is devoid of any real power.

And the main thing that we are going to learn from Galatians 3:1-5 is this:

[Proposition] If we are going to protect ourselves from an empty gospel, then we must believe that our entire Christian life, from beginning to end, is received by faith in Christ and not by works.

The way that Paul is going to make this point both to the Galatians and to us is through a series of questions that are meant to show us that every part of our Christian life (from beginning to end) is a gift from God that is received by faith in Christ and not by works.

So the first thing that he wants us to see is this...

We are converted by faith in Christ and not by works

Galatians 3:1-2

[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?

Illustration

Have you ever had someone say to you, **“You’re being an idiot?”** Now, I realize that it doesn’t feel good when someone says that to us, and maybe they could be a little nicer about it, but we need to ask ourselves, **“Why did they say that?”**

Usually, when we look beneath the surface of an insult like that, we will begin to realize that this person was harsh with us because we were either doing or thinking something that was seriously wrong.

So, in order to get our attention and help us see the error of our ways, they spewed mean words at us so that we would stop and hopefully change our thoughts or behavior.

Text

This is what the apostle Paul is doing when he says, *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”* He is literally saying, **“You idiot Galatians, who has deceived you and led you into evil?”**

He’s doing this because he wants them to wake them up from their sin so that they can see that their desire to add works to their faith is evil and is not compatible with the gospel of Christ crucified.

This is why he says in the 2nd half of verse 1, **“it was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.”**

The Galatians heard the gospel, were taught the gospel, and believed the gospel of Christ crucified. So they know that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone, and really, there is no excuse for why they are beginning to trust in works of the law to save them.

But instead of just chastising them, he asks them a question that not only gets to the root of how they are saved, but it is going to set up the other questions that he asks in this section. He says in verse 2:

[2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Another way to ask this question is: How were you saved? How did you come to faith in Jesus? How were you converted to Christianity?

And one of the reasons that Paul uses the language of **receiving the Spirit** is because in the early New Testament church, one of the signs that confirmed that someone had come to faith was that they actually received a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. **That manifestation was usually speaking in tongues or prophecy.**

This happened in the Jerusalem church at Pentecost, but it also happened in many of the Gentile churches. In fact, we can see this in Acts 10:44-46 when Peter preached the true gospel to Cornelius and his household. As it says:

[44] While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. [45] And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. [46] For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Now, this doesn't mean that you have to speak in tongues to be saved. Rather, it was a visible sign that God gave for a time that proved the genuineness of someone's faith. That they had truly put their faith in Jesus and, as a result, received God's gift of His Holy Spirit in their life.

So then, Paul, in Galatians 3:2 is simply asking, how did you first come to know Jesus? Was it by your works, or by hearing with faith?

And the Galatians would have to answer, ***"We came to faith when we heard you and Barnabas preach the gospel, and as a result, the Holy Spirit came upon us."***

You see, Paul is bringing them back to the beginning of their faith, their conversion, to show them that their salvation was a gift from God. It came through the preaching of the gospel, **and was received when they heard about Christ crucified and believed in him.**

The point is: Their works have nothing to do with their coming to faith, and as we will see in the next point, that also means that it has nothing to do with completing their faith.

Application

I realize that I have said this a lot in this series, but I know that most of us believe that we came to know Jesus as our Savior by trusting in him and not by our works.

And it wouldn't surprise me if many of you have memorized Ephesians 2:8-9, which says:

[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.

But if we are going to say that we believe these verses, then we need to come to grips with two very important realities.

1. If your faith is a gift from God and not of your own doing, then you can't do anything to save yourself. (I think we all get that.)
2. **You also need to understand that you didn't choose God, but God chose you.**

As Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4: ***[4] even as he (God) chose us in him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.***

Left to yourself, you would always choose sin, death, and disobedience. **But the great truth that should bring immense joy to all Christians is that God, chose you, before time began, to be his child.**

You didn't deserve it, and you didn't earn it, but by the grace of God, through his Son Jesus Christ, he brought you to faith and gave you a new and everlasting life.

And this truth is of absolute importance when it comes to protecting us from believing an empty gospel of works. **Because if God chose us and saved us by a faith that he gave to us, then he is also the one who will complete that work of faith in us.**

We are completed by faith in Christ and not by works

Galatians 1:3-4

[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?

Illustration

When I think back to building the Viking LEGO set, I was jamming on this thing. I was getting through page after page of directions, I had fully put together two out of the three sections of the set, and I kind of thought I was a pretty amazing LEGO master.

But that all came crashing down when I misread the directions and built the roof wrong. And if I didn't correct the error in my building, I would have never been able to actually complete the LEGO set as it was designed.

Text

Paul is similarly looking at the Galatians and saying, "Man, you guys began so well. You received the gospel, you put your faith in Christ crucified, and you so clearly believed that Jesus and only Jesus alone could save you. **But now, you're acting foolish and have made a fatal error that needs to be corrected.**"

“You have disconnected the God who brings you to faith in Christ alone from the God who keeps you in that faith.”

“On the one hand, you know that God gave you faith, and saved you. And yet, on the other hand, you are now believing that you have to add works of the flesh to that faith in order to continue to be saved.”

Mini-Illustration

This would be like someone giving you a hundred dollars as a gift. So you go and put that hundred dollars in your bank account to keep it safe and to show that it now belongs to you. But right after you deposit the money, you get worried that this person might take it back, so you do all sorts of good things for them so that you can be sure that you will get to keep the 100 dollars.

You see how ridiculous that is, right? The money is already in your account! They can't take it away from you, because it belongs to you now.

Text

But these foolish Galatians have been deceived by the Judaizers and are unable to take their **conversion** to its logical conclusion.

Because if God brings us to faith in Christ through his Spirit, if he is the one who fully and wholly converts us and brings us to himself, then it only makes sense that he would be the one who fully completes his work of salvation in us.

We can see this exact train of thought in Philippians 1:6 when Paul says:

[6] And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

God is the one who completes his work in and through us. This is great news for us and for the Galatians, but it's also great news that they are about to miss.

Because if they are trying in any way to save themselves by works of the flesh, Paul tells us in the book of Romans that it will lead them to death. As he writes in Romans 8:13:

[13] For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Galatians 3:4

[4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

All that they have gone through in coming to faith in Christ is in danger of becoming meaningless. **Because they are trying to maintain their faith by an empty gospel of works that can't save them.**

Application

Look, I realize that for some of you, this walk through Galatians has been difficult, because it feels like what I am continually saying is that works don't matter.

I want to assure you that I am not saying that at all. In fact, I think that good works are an incredibly important part of our faith.

BUT we need to understand that good works are the **FRUIT** of a genuine faith in Christ, and are not the **ROOT**.

We can see this so clearly when we look back at Ephesians 2:8-9 and then add verse 10. Here's what it says:

[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. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are saved fully by God, through faith in Christ alone (**that's the root**), so that we would follow him and do the good works that he has prepared for us to do from the beginning of time (**that is the Fruit**).

So good works are incredibly important. And yet, even the good works we do don't originate with us. **They come from God and manifest themselves in the life of a believer as we live by faith.**

And the reason we need to keep harping on the centrality of being saved and justified by faith in Christ versus works is because we are prone to make the same fatal error as the Galatians.

We can say amen when talking about how Jesus saved us, and yet, we can make our works the measuring stick of whether or not we are a Christian.

Meaning, that we inadvertently make our works the basis for our right standing with God. **"I'm good with God because I do this or that, or I don't do this or that."**

And here is the real insidious truth about what happens when we make our works the measuring stick of faith. **We end up cheapening the grand call of the gospel.**

No longer do we take seriously Paul's words that "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21) or Jesus' call to "take up our cross and follow him daily" (Mt. 16:24).

Instead, we reduce our faith down to bite-sized commands that make us feel like we are good with God when really **all we have is a form of godliness that can't save us and is devoid of power (2 Tim. 3:5).**

But when we continually come back to the grandeur of King Jesus and his work on our behalf. When we, time and time again, are focused on putting our full faith and hope in Christ alone.

And when we continually come to grips with the fact that our entire life is held in his hands, then God will bring us to a place where we are willing to give everything, **including our very lives**, to make him known.

No longer will our Christianity be about simply doing bit-sized and lifeless commands, but it will be about doing everything we can to spread the greatness and goodness of our God and Savior to the ends of the earth.

But it begins by fighting the daily battle of faith. Where we look to Jesus, believe in Jesus, cry out to Jesus, and behold Jesus, so that we would be trusting him, not only to give us faith, but to fully complete his life-changing work in us and through us by the power of his Spirit in our lives.

And that brings us to our last point for this morning.

We are empowered by faith in Christ and not by works

Galatians 3:5

[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—

Text

In this final question from Paul, he is actually summing up the other questions that he already asked, but he is coming at it from God's perspective. **And his train of thought flows like this:**

“If you came to believe in Jesus by faith, and if your Christian life is completed and sustained by faith, then is God working in your life, doing miracles, and empowering you with his Spirit by faith in Christ or by works of the law?”

And of course, they already know the answer from the other questions: **It's by faith.**

Application

What is astounding to me about the Galatians and about many believers today (including me) is how easily we disconnect our Salvation and the hope of our eternity from the power of God at work in us.

We know we are saved by grace through faith, and we know that by that same faith we will spend forever with Jesus. And yet, in between those two realities, we either limp along with a lukewarm spiritual existence or (like I said in the previous point) we make our life with Christ a lifeless and joyless set of rules to follow until Jesus returns.

Who wants that? I don't want that, do you?

Yet, what we continually miss is the fact that we have been given and are empowered by the Spirit of the living God.

This means that God himself has taken up residence within you, **and he is at work in your life**. Look with me at the following verses:

Titus 3:5–6

[5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, [6] whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

God richly poured His Spirit upon us and by that same Spirit gave us new life.

2 Corinthians 3:18

[18] And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit,

By the Spirit of God, we are daily being transformed into the image of God.

Acts 1:8

[8] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

By the Spirit of God, we are empowered to be his witnesses. To “proclaim his excellencies” as Peter talks about in 1Peter 2:9, to the ends of the earth, until the day he returns. **This is true for every person who is a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.**

And yet, if we are not careful, we will easily miss out on the Spirit of God at work in us and through us, because we are more focused on making sure that we are doing the right things, versus putting our faith in the right person.

So my encouragement for all of us is to make the fight of faith our greatest pursuit. Make sure that you are daily trusting in Jesus to save you, to complete his work in you, and to empower you, by his Spirit, to do the good works that he has prepared for each of us from the beginning of time.

Because if we pursue a real, genuine, and Spirit-filled faith in Christ alone, it will not only keep us from believing an empty gospel, but God will use it in our lives to produce great and mighty kingdom-building works until he calls us home.

As Jesus said in John 14:12: ***[12] “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.***

Let’s Pray