

## Galatians 3: A Beginning of Division, an Ending of Unity

Grace and Peace be to you in the name of your righteous Substitute, Jesus Christ.

Many people are discouraged and concerned at the division that currently exists in our nation. The news outlets have been flooded this past week with stories of racial divide stemming from protests and violence in Charlottesville, VA. We often wonder why such evil continues to exist in our country. We marvel that ignorant beliefs which were conquered years ago in war keep on being perpetuated publicly. And perhaps most alarming of all, we fear for the future of our families, our nation, and our world.

Even with racial tension aside, we still have plenty of vexing dangers. Terrorism, digital crime, and nuclear war all loom on our minds. Fear is still very much alive in our 21<sup>st</sup> century. And fear thrives on division. How fitting then that we encounter chapter 3 of Galatians this morning in our Lord's Word. For this chapter is all about division, and yet the lasting thought is one of unity. Is this not what all people today desperately long for? Can we not then give them strength as we ourselves are also strengthened by the Holy Spirit? We ask Him to lead us today in that portion of His Word which we read as our second Scripture reading.

And we pray: guide, uplift, and sustain us through Your Word, O Lord; for it is truth.

To begin, let us list the many divisions we see in this chapter (printed in bulletin).

- Law and Gospel
- Spirit and Flesh
- Works and Hearing
- Beginning and Ending
- Curse and Promise
- Mediator and Guide
- Jew and Gentile
- Slave and Free
- Male and Female, and certainly more could be driven out of the text.

By God's grace, the chapter ends with this promise: **"You are all one in Christ Jesus."** This is ultimately the lasting theme. As dreary as the divisions sound, their severity only serves to highlight the insurmountable love of your Savior. At the end of the day, they are all surpassed by Christ. For the believer, divisions are no longer sources of contention and stress. They are mere evidences of all that Christ has overcome. This is all that needs to be said, but to learn a bit more let us dig a bit deeper.

As painful as it is, division is a reality of life. The simple, straightforward truth is that life will never be close to perfect in a sinful world. And God is very upfront about that truth. That's why so much of this chapter is spent on describing the negatives. That's why so many examples are listed. And Paul gets right to the point in talking about their effect upon the Christian. He calls the Galatians "foolish." He says that they were "bewitched," literally led away by sorcery. What made this all the more painful was that they knew very clearly what they were straying from. Paul says that the message of Christ crucified was laid bare before them. Like a gigantic billboard on the highway, there was no missing the Gospel. The Galatians plight, as we have seen over the course of our series, was not born out of

ignorance, but rather out of indifference. They knew the great treasure that they had and they let it slip away.

How sad this must have been for Paul, who helped found this congregation. But, he also knew that the situation was not beyond repair. And so we see the first round of our divisions. Paul asks, **Galatians 3:2-3 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?**

Here we see a clear distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The Law is always paired with works. The Gospel is always paired with hearing. Hearing may seem like a work on the surface but it is an entirely passive activity. The person who is hearing a message is not contributing anything to the substance of the message. Likewise, when a believer hears the Gospel and believes, it is entirely the Holy Spirit's doing, based entirely on the work of Jesus Christ. For the Galatians, there was no doubt that this was the way they came to faith. In fact, it's the same way all Christians come to faith, regardless of church denomination; regardless of generation. It always happens by hearing the Word of God.

But, as they continued in their faith, the Galatians were trying to move forward with their works. Paul's stern reminder is that both the production and the progress of faith come from hearing. Take this bit of wisdom to heart. If you think you're a Christian and claim to be a Christian, yet are distant from God's Word, your faith is not progressing and it may very well be dead. Usually, when such a warning is given the first response is, "But, look at everything I'm doing." I am loving to others. I don't break the law. I feel very connected to God on my own. And the reasons go on and on but you'll notice that they all deal with works and not with hearing. For the non-hearer, faith becomes their own creation. They produce it and they progress it to their liking and according to their definition. As we saw last weekend, in the case of the young rich man, this is simple idolatry.

For the Galatians, this foolishness of works began when they allowed false teachers to convince them that they needed to retain the old ceremonial restrictions of Israel – things like circumcision, Sabbath-day laws, tithing, etc. The Galatians were told that if they did not do these things, they could not be saved. To drive his point home, Paul gave them an example. If the Galatians wanted to be like Jews, Paul would go back to the father of the Jews – Abraham. [Here we see the next divisions of our text.](#)

God gave Abraham a promise. That promise was the coming of a Savior, who would enlarge the family of Abraham. This was not a physical promise. Abraham is known today as the father of the Jewish nation, but more importantly he is the father of all believers. God's promise was more important than a long line of earthly descendants – because the Seed of Abraham was Jesus. Just as Jesus' kingdom was not of the earth, so also Abraham's family was not of the earth – at least in connection with this great promise.

In order for that promise to be kept, something had to be done with the curse. First, the curse of sin brought into the world. But, also the curse of the Law which binds all people under God's strict commandments. Against these two curses we are helpless. But, Christ stepped in our place, became our Substitute, and redeemed us from the curse. Notice the complete exchange. We deserved to be cursed, righteously, yet Christ *became* the curse for us. He completely took our place, and He fully paid for our sins. If this redemption is truly complete, then it is eternally true that no work is needed on our part. Not only was this the point of God's promise to Abraham, it was the very way that Abraham himself was saved, as Paul writes, **just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as**

**righteousness."** If the Galatians really wanted to be more like Abraham, they were doing a pretty poor job at it.

For the Galatians, the struggle was about OT works. For us, it is different but the point is the same. Many of us have begun our faith in the same simplicity, by connecting to the Holy Spirit through the simple waters of Baptism. There was no struggle there. There was no effort on your part in the slightest. Yet somehow, later in life things get more complicated. We begin to think that we must do something and that somehow God couldn't operate without our help.

That's the kind of thinking that leads the Christian, who began in the Spirit to tell others they must choose their Savior or invite Him into their hearts or they must be make a confession of faith before they can be assured of heaven.

That's the kind of thinking that leads a person, who began in the Spirit, to believe that they don't need church because they can be close to God on their own.

That's the kind of thinking that tells a person, who began in the Spirit, that they can find more spirituality in nature than they can from the pulpit.

Each of those thoughts leads further away from hearing, and closer to works. As Paul would say, What foolishness! Don't be led astray. If you began in the Spirit, why are you being perfected in the flesh?

But, at times, the truth hits even closer to home, especially in the current divisions of our nation. How often people think that human kindness and generosity will end world conflicts. If we could just be more loving, more wise, more educated, the world would be a better place. A utopian peace of this world is the perpetual lie of Satan, sown explicitly so people will no longer hunger and thirst for a heavenly country. Every person who trusts, promotes, or believes this lie has no more reason to keep on hearing by the Word of God for growth in faith by the Holy Spirit. The ideas of world peace, tolerance, love of others are all noble pursuits, to be sure. They emanate from God, the Creator of all good. But they are not more important than God. And they are never attainable in a completely holy manner outside of God's Word.

The Galatians had their problems, we have ours. Our nation's current conflict with racial tension will never be mended by tearing down statues, or ostracizing the opposition. Verbal wars on social media only serve to widen the division. Protests and marches often serve to heighten the conflict, rather than deter it. In any human endeavor, there may be minor improvement, but the sinful hatred that gives birth to racism, and every other evil, will always exist in a sinful world. No amount of human works or effort will ever eradicate it. And most important for our own hearts, no amount of human works will make us any better than anyone else. If you can grasp that truth, you have taken a huge step past the deluge of Satanic lies that are thrown your way in this world. You will show yourself to be a student of God's law, to understand a part of His righteousness. The Law can certainly tell us a lot about ourselves but even the Law falls short of salvation. Paul writes, **if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. (Gal 3:21 ESV) the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, (Gal 3:24 ESV)**

The path to salvation is through the Gospel. It is the Gospel that can indeed change a person's heart. The Galatians were going through their own racial tensions but Paul didn't prescribe any of the

world's solutions to their problems. He told them: **so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (v.14).** This thought was completely unheard of at that time. No one, outside of God's followers, were teaching that Abraham was connected to Gentiles in any way. It was the Pharisees who appealed to Abraham as their father as a reason why they didn't need a Savior (John 8). It was through Abraham that God instituted the Old Testament ceremonial laws which they Galatians had become so entangled with. Paul could preach something so revolutionary because salvation had nothing to do with Abraham's works or anyone else. It was not a matter of earthly ethnicity. It was completely about faith in Jesus Christ – the one who did everything. And that faith came through the hearing of the Word of God and the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

The divisions of sin continue to hit our culture hard. We want to offer some kind of hope and we can. Let us strive for something greater and more powerful than mere human works. We can offer eternal unity to all people. Unity through the blood of Jesus. But, this gift does not come being silent or by hammering the opposing side harder. **“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.”** Having begun in the Spirit, let us be made perfect in the Spirit. No matter the division, we are all one in Christ Jesus. That is not of this world. That is not defined by the world. That does not come by works. If we are trying to attain that gift in any of those ways, we have strayed from the truth just as the Galatians did.

Only in Jesus Christ do the many superficial divisions of life become superseded by true unity. For this unity we now wait for by faith, and we eagerly expect in eternity in heaven. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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