3-9-25

Galatians 3:1-6

Paul is writing to his beloved Galatian church because he has found out that they are listening to false teachers who are insisting that they must follow the Mosaic Law in addition to having faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour. We call them Judaizers because they were trying to turn the Gentiles into Jews. And Paul was shocked to find this out; as he said in chapter 1 verse 6: *I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel*. He is then quick to point out that this isn’t really even a Gospel; it is not part of the straight and narrow way to reach heaven.

And this needs to serve as a dire warning to us: there is no variation to the Gospel as presented in the Bible. If we add to it or take away from it, no matter how slightly, it is no longer the way to salvation. Now our tendency is to think that these types of things no longer apply to us; I don’t think any of us have had a Jew knocking on our door trying to convert us. Or even a Jew who believes in Christ but still thinks the law must be kept try to talk us into these things.

However the reality is that there are a growing number of those who would try to convince you that more than Christ is needed. We are all familiar with the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mormons who do come knocking on our doors. They are polite and intelligent and sincere; and they are very well trained to answer any questions or objections you might have. But along with having changed the Bible, having incorrect theology, and not believing in Jesus Christ as a Person of the Trinity; they have a works-based salvation. They offer a different gospel.

While we are all familiar with the proselytizing efforts of these groups, you may be surprised to learn that the Roman Catholic church is pulling out all the stops to gain converts; and their primary target is not so much the lost masses of people who need Christ; it is Protestants. Now you won’t have a priest come knocking on your door; but they are effectively and purposefully using the internet. When searching for answers regarding religious subjects or the Bible, it is very easy to come across a web-page, blog, podcast, or video that comes from a Roman standpoint.

There are a number of well-known Christian writers and speakers who have converted to Catholicism in recent decades. This really shouldn’t surprise us as there have also been many who have fallen from grace due to immorality. Apostasy increases in the last days. But we must be careful not to fall for the well-crafted and intelligent arguments used by these Catholic theologians. And we must watch for our Christian friends so they are not deceived. Catholic theology demands faith plus works; it is not the Gospel of Christ.

Make no mistake, the reformation is not over. It is still on the Catholic books that anyone who believes in salvation by faith alone is anathema; that means accursed. They can’t very well get by with burning us at the stake any more, so they are trying to convert us. Follow Jesus’ warning: Don’t be deceived.

One more group I’ll mention who are different but still dangerous are those who call themselves “deconstructionists” or “deconversionists”. These are influential people, usually on the internet, who professed Christian beliefs, but then changed their minds. They are not content to keep this to themselves, but use their platform to actively encourage others to give up on Jesus. They, too, are intelligent and well spoken; they are convincing. Unfortunately, they also have a huge platform from which they can reach millions of people.

I just mention these few, there are more, so that you will be aware that satan is very active in trying to distort the Gospel. His destructiveness is evident in all of the physical world we live in; but sometimes we miss the spiritual battle and we cannot afford to do that. Our defense is to steadfastly and unwaveringly keep our feet on the rock-solid foundation of the Gospel. Salvation is by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ.

God offers us salvation that we don’t deserve; we can’t earn salvation, it must come by belief; and that belief is solely in Jesus Christ. We fully accept that His work on the cross paid the debt we owe and it took the punishment that we deserve. Our salvation leads to good works but those works don’t save us. This is where we must stand, no matter how persuasive arguments to the contrary might be. Deep study of the Bible will always reveal the flaw in the contrary arguments.

The Judaizers had come with a two-pronged attack; they attacked Paul himself, and they attacked his Gospel. This forced him to defend himself which is primarily what he has been doing in the first two chapters of this letter; although important theology was there too. So now he turns to defending his presentation of the Gospel. He begins by asking a series of devastating questions. Any honest reflection by the Galatian Christians would convince them of the error of following the Judaizers.

He begins by getting their attention: *You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?* Yes, it is foolish to turn from the Gospel of Christ. Yet they have willingly wandered off in a different direction; they have been taken in by persuasive arguments and nice people who seemed to have their best interests in mind. But these false teachers have bewitched them.

We take the word “bewitched” to mean that they had the wool pulled over their eyes; that the Galatians were somehow enamored and taken by these Judaizers. While witchcraft and magic were no doubt practiced in the area, that doesn’t fit the context of what Paul is talking about here. These Galatians have put their minds in neutral and been lead along the wrong path.

And the reason for this astonishment and accusation is that “*Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified*” before their very eyes. Obviously, they did not literally see Jesus crucified; but Paul had made sure they knew about it. He did not hide the fact of the crucifixion of Jesus; and that is a very offensive part of the Gospel. People don’t like the idea of a mighty God dying on their behalf. But that is truly the most beautiful and alluring part of the Gospel. Our God was willing to do that for us; what tremendous love was displayed on that cross.

If we go back to the last verse of chapter 2, Paul has told the Galatians that if salvation came through the law, then Christ died needlessly. Well, the Christ, the Messiah, did die. And it would make no sense at all for God to send His Son to die unless that was the only way to save us. So Paul had made sure the Galatians knew that Jesus had been crucified and that is what had to be done. Christ did not die needlessly.

The second question would have to give them pause to think after the first had gotten their attention: *[D]id you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?* Those Galatians who had truly accepted Christ had received the Holy Spirit. He is the promised seal of salvation and He indwells those who turn to Jesus. The answer to this question was pretty obvious: Most of the Gentile Christians wouldn’t have even known what the law was. Even if the law was equated with righteous acts, none of them ever did any good thing and suddenly had the Holy Spirit come upon them. No, they heard the Gospel that Paul preached and believed it. Then they received the Holy Spirit.

And it is the same for each one here; it never mattered how good you were or how many righteous things you did, you received the Holy Spirit when you believed on Jesus Christ for salvation. The Holy Spirit came to you and you were sealed with Him to show that you belong to God. Now He indwells you; you have become a temple of the Holy Spirit; His dwelling place. Truly, all that takes place in the moment of salvation is miraculous.

Paul asks them if they are really so foolish. In order to turn to the ways of the false teachers, they have to be resisting the leading of the Holy Spirit. They have chosen to ignore His warnings and continue on a path that somehow appeals to them. That’s really not uncommon; we are constantly drawn to carnal appetites and we will resist the leading of the Holy Spirit if we are not absolutely focused on following Him. One of our carnal appetites is to have rules to follow so we can do things on our own. The Galatians had succumbed to the temptation to save themselves.

Which led to Paul’s next question: *Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?* We live in and experience the physical world constantly. It is part of our sanctification to learn to think in spiritual terms; in spiritual realities. But it doesn’t make any sense to have a spiritual transformation; a regeneration; a spiritual rebirth, and then try to improve on your spirituality by following fleshly rules. Performing good works that we are called by God to do have spiritual benefit in their obedience. At the same time we are spiritually strengthened and perfected by spiritual exercise: prayer, reading Scripture, Christian fellowship, private and corporate worship, and partaking of the ordinances. To try to follow a set of rules, which can’t be followed anyway, is absurd.

Verse 4 is another of the verses in Galatians that is difficult. The problem is with the Greek word translated “suffer”. First off, every other time the word is used in the Bible it means to suffer, in exactly the way we think of suffering. And it very well may mean that here. If so, the question becomes: what suffering is Paul talking about? No where in God’s word does it explain the suffering of the Galatian people. Possibly it means that the Galatian Christians were persecuted for their faith; that is often the case in the New Testament. It could also be some natural disaster or any number of other things during which they held fast to their faith.

There is, however, another nuance to the Greek word in which suffer indicates an experience; it is to experience joy. This actually fits the context better because Paul would be reminding them of all the spiritual joy they experienced when they became Christians and as they fellowshipped with each other. Have they forgotten that joy? Did they experience it in vain since they have turned away from its source? In fact, the thought of turning away from that experience brings to mind a particularly terrifying verse from the book of Hebrews: *[O]r in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance.* I don’t believe the Galatians had fallen away, but they were on that path.

Paul’s sixth and final question sort of ties these all together and gives the Galatians a final swat. *So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?* Firstly, notice that Jesus is the One who provided the Spirit and who works the miracles; not the Christians, not the Judaizers, not even Paul. Jesus is the One who brings these things about. But, how does He do so? Paul asks if works of the law are what causes Jesus to bring these things about; or is it faith in Him? Assuredly, not a person reading the letter could honestly claim that they had seen a miracle apart from faith. No amount of law keeping ever produced something miraculous.

Obviously, the Galatians had seen signs and wonders. When the Holy Spirit came upon them there were probably supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit. No doubt Paul performed miracles among them and once filled with the Spirit, probably many of the Galatians did too. Even after all that, they had been led astray into following law; into adding works to the wondrous gifts they had freely received from our gracious God.

Each of us here have received wondrous gifts from our gracious God. First among them would be the miracle of salvation. Salvation was impossible for us; but God made a way. Remember that the Holy Spirit indwells you; He lives within you. He is good and He is here to help and to comfort. Let Him do that. Too often we want to go our own way; solve our own problems. Or even worse, we cry out to God when we are in trouble; then, when things seem to be clearing up, we try to take back over again. How arrogant; how foolish.

Practice depending on God. Tell Him your plans before you go about them and ask His guidance before you even make them. This is hard; it is not our nature. But we are called to be obedient and dependent on our Lord. I think we all know in our heart, that things will be much better if we are.

Prayer

O Lord, we confess that it is our natural tendency to be foolish; we try to go about things on our own and by Your loving grace, things often work out for us. But then we take credit. We continue with ingratitude. Until we fall; until we are beyond help from anyone. Then we call to You.

Sometimes, unfortunately, we need to suffer this way. We need to be straightened out. But we are grateful that You will discipline those You love. You will not just let us fall so that we never rise again. You are good Father.

But Lord we also pray for the strong urging of Your Holy Spirit, so that we would remember to turn to You and then to give You the thanks and the praise You deserve. It is far better for us to be submissive to You, so that we do not have to endure discipline and so that You are glorified in us. Thank You for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, thank You for salvation in Jesus; we are forever in Your debt.

We pray in Jesus’ name

Amen