**Galatians: Paul’s Letter of Freedom**

**Sunday September 23, 2018**

**“Living by Faith” (Galatians 3:1-18)**

**1. Introduction: *Arguments Around the Dinner Table***

By nature, I’m a bit of a peacemaker. So, my tendency is to avoid conflict and confrontation, whenever possible. My family will tell you that when an argument erupts in our house, I tend to say, “Calm down, everyone,” which only makes things worse. But, from time to time, I find myself drawn into some rather heated arguments. Unfortunately, it usually happens at family gatherings, like Thanksgiving, and it usually involves politics. Now, over time I’ve learned the lesson that arguing about politics, especially at family gatherings, tends to achieve very little, except for making things very awkward. So, I’ve been trying to steer clear and keep quiet whenever a provocative statement on politics is uttered. This is very difficult because some members of my extended family have some very strong opinions and I can’t help but jump into the fray. So, in a few weeks time, ask me how my Thanksgiving went!

The problem I encounter with arguments is that I tend to get emotional. And sometimes those emotions lead to anger, raised voices, and even personal attacks launched at others. Sometimes, when the topic isn’t so important, I can keep my cool and calmly discuss the subject at hand. But when I’m passionate about the matter being discussed or I take it personally, it’s a struggle to keep my emotions at bay. In many ways it’s impossible be emotionally detached from a discussion if the issue really matters to you; if something important is at stake. So, perhaps my tendency to avoid conflict isn’t the best response. If I can’t avoid arguments, perhaps I can learn to argue fairly in a healthy way. No personal put-downs, no yelling, no sulking; I can be impassioned about an issue and argue about it without using these manipulative tactics to gain the upper hand. So, the next time an argument erupts around the family dinner table, I’ll have practice what I preach.

The apostle Paul was involved in a very heated debate around his family’s dinner table. Now his family was comprised of those Gentile Christians in the churches of Galatia and the issue at stake was the truth of the gospel. And the gospel “*is the good news that we sinners, guilty and under the judgment of God, may be pardoned and accepted by His sheer grace, His free and unmerited favour, on the ground of His Son’s death and not for any works or merits of our own* (Stott, *The Message of Galatians,* p. 54). Paul can’t help but be emotional about this subject because it was so crucial to what God was doing in the world. To give in on this, to allow the Judaizers to convince these Gentile Christians that they needed to follow the Mosaic law to be accepted by God was an absolute denial of the sufficiency of Christ’s death. Or in the words of Paul, “if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21).

This morning’s reading from Galatians 3 contains Paul’s argument in support of his thesis statement in 2:16, “we know that a person is justifiednot by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” Here in Galatians 3, we find Paul’s defense of this proclamation, challenging the counter-proposal of his rivals in Galatia. Now, some of you might be saying, “Ok, Jim, we get it. We can’t get God’s approval by performing religious or moral acts. So, why don’t you move on and preach about something other than Galatians.” I suppose my response would be a question - “Do we really get this message? Do we really accept and understand the implications of the gospel for the Christian life?” *Justification by faith* is not just a theological idea to ponder; it’s also wonderful truth that should influence our lives and impact our relationships, our attitudes and our actions.

**2. Paul’s Three Arguments for Faith**

In arguing his case before the Galatian believers, Paul takes three slightly different approaches to drive the same point home. He begins with an argument from *experience* (3:1-5), moves on to an argument from *Scripture* (3:6-14) and concludes with an analogy from *everyday* *life* (3:15-18). Taken together, all three communicate Paul’s main idea that the basis for the Christian life is *faith* and not *works of the law*.

Bursting out of the starting gates, Paul holds nothing back, confronting both the Galatia believers and the rival missionaries with his opening words – “You crazy Galatians! Did someone put a hex on you? Have you taken leave of your senses?” (3:1,*The Message*). Paul’s words are direct and harsh, but they convey his deep concern for Galatians’ faith and his exasperation and bewilderment at their profound lack of spiritual insight. After all, the message of *Christ crucified* was clearly communicated to them, but they seem to have forgotten this as they caved in to the Judaizers’ alternative path to righteousness. Paul declares, “it’s obvious that you no longer have the crucified Jesus in clear focus in your lives. His sacrifice on the cross was certainly set before you clearly enough” (2:1). The verb *crucified* is in the *perfect tense* and stresses that Christ’s work of salvation “was completed on the cross, and that the benefits of his crucifixion are forever fresh, valid and available. Sinners may be justified before God and by God, not because of any works of their own, but because of the atoning work of Christ” (Stott, *The Message of Galatians,* p. 70).

Paul argued that the rival missionaries had tricked the Galatian believers, figuratively casting a spell of confusion upon them so that they could no longer focus on the centrality of the cross of Christ for their lives. If the Galatians had fully grasped the truth of Christ crucified, that on the cross Christ did everything necessary for their salvation, they would have realized that the only thing required of them was to receive this good news by faith. Then, the Judaizers’ appeal to add the works of the law to the finished work of Christ would have been soundly rejected. But the foolish Galatians were fooled into accepting this pseudo-gospel and Paul had to wake them from their spiritual stupor.

Paul, then, appealed to the Galatians’ *experience* of receiving the *Holy Spirit* in order to get the message through to them. Bidding them to recall the very start of their new life in Christ, he asked them *how* they received the Holy Spirit. Was it by doing the *works of the law,* piling up good deeds to please God? *Or* was by *believing the gospel message,* responding to its proclamation and putting their trust in Christ*?* Obviously, the Galatians would have remembered their conversion experience and God’s generous gift of his Spirit when they first believed. Paul then exposed the absurdity of their acceptance of the Judaizer’s message. He writes, “Have you lost your senses? After starting your Christian *lives in the Spirit*, why are you now trying to become *perfect* *by your own human effort*” (3:3). It was quite likely that part of the appeal of the Judaizers’ message was their promise of perfection in the Christian life by doing the works of the law. They likely told the Galatians that believing in Jesus was only the first step but to complete the process they needed to follow the law of Moses. In response, Paul points to God, the one who freely and abundantly gives the Spirit to those who *believe* the message of the gospel (3:5). Paul’s words to the Christians at Philippi would have been very appropriate here – “And I am certain that God, who *began* the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally *finished* on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6).

It is quite likely that these rival missionaries referred to the Hebrew Scriptures in their preaching to the Gentile believers in Galatia. They likely emphasized passages on the importance of the law for the people of God. It is also likely that they told the story of Abraham and focused on Genesis 17:9-14 where God commands Abraham to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant. Perhaps the Judaizers said something like this – “Faith in Jesus is important, but if you really want to be a child of Abraham and belong to the covenant people, you must be circumcised.” So, Paul jumped into the fray and took up the story of Abraham as well. Citing Genesis 15:6 Paul offers Abraham as a prime example of a person who was declared righteous through faith, “In the same way, “*Abraham* *believed* *God, so God declared him righteous because of his faith*” (3:6). So, right from the very start, from the beginning of the covenant, living by faith was essential for God’s people. God justified Abraham, that is, he declared him righteous, not because of his good deeds or circumcision, but because he had *faith*.

Eugene Peterson writes these reflections on the *faith* of Abraham. “Abraham is the towering figure of faith in our tradition. We know so little about the man, yet he means so much to us. We know only a few bare details. Somewhere in the shadows of the nineteenth century B.C. in Ur of the Chaldees, in a corner of the Persian Gulf, he heard God’s call, left home and began a long trek westward. He left his religion, his home, his culture and his security. God was more important to Abraham than anything else – country, comfort, culture. Abraham listened to God. Abraham obeyed God. Abraham believed God” (*Travelling Light,* p. 101).

By stressing that the story of Abraham was about *faith* and not circumcision, Paul successfully turned the tables on his opponents in Galatia. Since Abraham was declared righteous because of his faith, the logical conclusion was that “*The real children of Abraham, then, are all those who put their faith in God*” (3:7). The Gentile Christians in Galatia, then, were already the children of Abraham because of their faith, making the extra step of being circumcised totally unnecessary. Taking his argument further, Paul declared that *justification by faith* is deeply embedded in God’s plan for humanity. The gospel, then, was not a new idea, but it was *good news* *proclaimed beforehand* to Abraham. To back up this idea, he cited God’s great promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, “*All the Gentiles (nations) shall be blessed in you*” as proof that the Hebrew Scriptures anticipated that God would justify the Gentiles by faith (3:8). So God *blesses* all who live by faith along with Abraham, the man of faith (3:9).

In stark contrast to the life of *faith* is the life focused on the *law*. While relying on *faith* brings *blessing*, living by the *law* brings a *curse* since, “*Cursed* is everyone who does not observe and obey *all* the things written in the book of the law” (Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:10). “The obvious impossibility of carrying out such a moral program should make it plain that no one can sustain a relationship with God that way” (3:11, *The Message*). Flying in the face of the Judaizers’ argument that *faith* and the *law* were necessary for acceptance by God, Paul, citing the Hebrew Scriptures, declared them as polar opposites. No human can make him or herself right with God by doing the law, because that would entail doing *everything* written in the law. Living this way would only evolve into more and more rules and more and more failure at keeping the rules. Like Sisyphus from Greek mythology, we would be doomed to an existence of rolling an immense boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down just as we reach the top. Is that the kind of life we want to be living? *Or* do we want to live by faith because “the one who is righteous by faith shall live (Habakkuk 2:4; Galatians 3:11). Do we want to live a life of faith in Jesus, who has freed us from the *cursed* and *futile* life of keeping the law? He became the *curse* and dissolved the *curse* when he died on the cross (Galatians 3:13). As a result, the blessing of Abraham is available to the Gentiles who are in Christ and the promise of the Spirit is given on the basis of faith (3:14).

Reflecting on this passage, John Stott writes the following, “The challenge of this passage is straightforward. We must renounce the proud folly of supposing that we can establish our own righteousness or make ourselves acceptable to God. Instead we must come humbly to the cross, where Christ bore our curse, and cast ourselves entirely upon His mercy. And then, by God’s sheer grace, because we are in Christ Jesus by faith, we shall receive justification, eternal life and the indwelling Spirit. The ‘blessing of Abraham’ will be ours (*The Message of Galatians,* p. 83).

Rounding off his argument, Paul gave an analogy from everyday life, which actually involved a clever play on words in the Greek language. The Greek word διαθήκη can refer to a *will,* as in the last will and testament, and a *covenant.* Referring to everyday life, Paul pointed out that a legally ratified *will* (διαθήκη) cannot be annulled or added to (Galatians 3:15). In the same way, the *covenant* (διαθήκη) previously ratified by God was not annulled by the *Mosaic law* so the promises to Abraham remained unchanged (Galatians 3:17). Furthermore, Paul argued that the covenant promises that God made to Abraham were not to his *seeds,* that is, his *physical* *descendants*, but to his *seed,* that is Christ (Galatians 3:16, 18). So, the heir of the covenant promises is Christ and all who trust in him become co-heirs of the promises. The law is taken out of the equation completely.

So, Paul’s intense argument comes to a close and we are left sitting at the dinner table, wondering what to make of it all. As I was navigating my way through this passage a snippet of a Keith Green song kept coming to mind.

“My son, My son, why are you striving  
You can't add one thing to what's been done for you  
I did it all while I was dying  
Rest in your faith, my peace will come to you” (*When I Hear the Praise Start)*

I have two related responses to this passage. First, *go easy on yourself.* So often we put self-imposed burdens upon ourselves because we think we’re unworthy of God’s forgiveness. We weigh ourselves down with guilt-induced rules, thinking that we’ve got to earn God’s love. That’s not how God wants us to live. He wants each one of us to experience his grace. And *no* *one* is deserving of God’s grace because it’s his free and unmerited favour extended to sinners like you and me. “My child, my child why are you striving, you can’t add one thing to what Christ had done for you. He did it all while he was dying. Rest in your faith and his peace will come to you.”

Second, *go easy on others.* Just as we can place burdens upon ourselves, our inclination toward rule making can lead us to put burdens upon others. God doesn’t want us to pile up unreasonable expectations on people, weighing them down so much stuff that they aren’t free to respond to him. Sometimes we give the impression that Christianity is all about keeping the rules, doing your duty and conforming to the group and most people don’t want to sign up for that sort of thing. But the message of the gospel is light-years away from that. It’s a life-giving message for the broken who trying to fix themselves; for the lost who keep around going in circles; for the sinful who struggle to find forgiveness; for the seekers who are looking for the divine. To all these and more, Jesus says, “Stop striving; I’ve done in all on the cross. I offer you forgiveness, acceptance, grace, relationship, peace, and wholeness. You don’t need to earn it or work for it; all you need to do is to trust in me.” That’s very good news indeed!