

Never Leave It Behind
Galatians 3:1-9

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Galatians

Anyone here have a tendency to forget a few of the things you brought when it's time to leave? We've all done it. It can be a costly mistake, too—wallet or purse, designer sunglasses, maybe even a kid or two.

Back in Nov 2014, a team of archeologists was combing through the hills and valleys of Great Basin National Park, prepping the area for a fuel reduction project, when one of them made an amazing discovery—an old weathered rifle propped up against a juniper. The metal had turned brown with rust, the wood was grey and cracked, and the stock was partially buried in debris—all obvious indications the rifle had been in this location for decades, perhaps even longer. A little examination revealed it was a Winchester Model 1873—the so-called “Gun That Won the West. The serial number indicated this particular rifle had been manufactured and shipped in 1882.

It's a fascinating discovery for many reasons, not least of which is the mystery of how it came to be left behind by its owner. Why would you ever leave your rifle and not come back for it—especially in the days of the Old West, when a rifle was the most important piece of equipment a man could carry?! Was he hurt or killed? Did he forget where he left it? Was somebody trying to hide it? Was he taken prisoner? No answer has been forthcoming. One thing's for certain—if the owner survived, he would have realized fairly quickly he left something precious behind.

Sadly, the same is not true for many Christians. They've left a most precious article behind, too, but they don't even notice. Their life lacks joy and they wonder why. Their experience of God is flat. Sin always seems to be getting the upper hand. Outwardly, they might be a mess; but maybe not. They could be working very hard and appearing very put together. But there's no real life, no power there, and they know it.

What happened? Somewhere along the line, they lost and left behind... the gospel! They have no idea what Jesus death and resurrection has to do with their everyday life, so they've abandoned it, at least as a functioning reality. They've assumed or been taught that Christians are saved by grace through faith, but they grow by discipline and work. Their strategy for life as a believer is summed up in Nike's trademark

slogan: “Just Do It.” Learn what God wants and then... just do it. It's honorable, but it's no different from a responsible non-Christian.

It's the concern to which Paul turns his attention in our text for today. Verse 3 is the key verse:

3:3 *Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

The Christian life is meant to involve supernatural power. It certainly started that way: “having begun by the Spirit.” The Spirit of Life (Rom 8:2). The Spirit of Truth (Jn 15:26). The Spirit of Grace (Hb 10:29). The Spirit of Holiness (Rom 1:4). The Spirit of Glory (1 Pt 4:14). The Spirit of the Living God (2 Cor 3:3). The Christian life is a supernatural life—it is, as we saw last week, nothing less than Jesus Christ living out His life through you.

So Paul asks, “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected—i.e., made complete, finished—by the flesh?” Everybody knows their life has voids in it. Deficiencies. Things you want to be or experience or do just better before the end. Everybody's on a journey. Christianity makes very specific claims about why we're on this journey, where we're headed, how to travel well and arrive safe. So Paul asks Christians, “Having begun [that journey] by the Spirit, are you now being perfected, made complete, brought to your destination, by your own strength?” And if you're not a Christian, he'd ask you basically the same thing: “Where is your life headed? And how's that working out for you?”

The Holy Spirit gives us two strategies in this passage to “be perfected.” (NOTE: Paul is actually giving arguments here, not strategies—reasons reasons the Galatians must not abandon the gospel. Your situation is different—though the temptation is the same—so I've rephrased his arguments as practical strategies.)

1. Return to your conversion. (vv1-5)
2. Reread your Bible. (vv6-9)

Return to Your Conversion

What happened at your conversion?

1. You were presented with the gospel.

2. You believed.

This, Paul argues, is not only how you begin the Christian life; it's how you live every day of the Christian life. You rehearse the gospel and you believe. Notice how he stresses these two elements in vv1-5:

vv1-5 *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-*

Paul is coming to the theological heart of the letter. He's finished reminding his readers of his own story, defending the source of his gospel. He's moving now to the real reason for writing. And this is how he opens: "You morons!" J. B. Phillips renders it: "O you dear idiots of Galatia." He's actually not calling them names; he's pointing out in clear terms the nature of their behavior. Some actions are just stupid, aren't they? No excuse. We should know better. This is basic.

NOTE: Last Sunday was the 11th anniversary of my first Sunday here at Parker Hills. From the beginning, I've told you: "I have one string on my guitar, and I'll play it every Sunday—the gospel. It's what I'm all about because it's what God is all about and the Bible is all about and there's nothing better to be about!" And some of you still think this is just a personal preference of mine. You accept it, might even like it, but you've not embraced it. To you, this is just my thing. You think: "Every pastor has his shtick; I guess this is Josh's."

Paul takes a much different view! This is basic Christianity! He's stunned anyone could forget this. In his view, the only possible explanation is voodoo: "Who has bewitched you?" What's happened to them must have been caused by a supernatural evil influence.

So what does he suggest? He drives them back to their first experience as a Christian—i.e., their conversion. And what happened there? They heard the gospel and believed:

vv1-2 *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?*

This whole journey began for them when Paul preached the gospel, and they not only heard and understood it; somehow they actually saw and

experienced it. This was no mere intellectual exercise for them. They didn't have a discussion or watch a lecture. "Before their eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified." They experienced a vivid and dramatic presentation of the cross.

NLT: *For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross.*

NOTE: This is the same goal we have for you on Sunday morning—that you would receive a **fresh impression of the glory of Christ**. Our goal is not information but impression. A mark on your soul. A feeling of awe and wonder. It requires mental engagement, but it's not limited to mental engagement. If you learn something new, good; if you see, feel, experience God's glory in a freshly moving way, even better.

Notice again what was publicly portrayed: "Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified" (v1). This is the essential point about Jesus you have to grasp: His death. The death of Christ for our sin clearly shows how hopeless we are on our own and how we can't make any contribution to our salvation:

Stott: "The gospel is not good advice to men, but good news about Christ; not an invitation to us to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done; not a demand, but an offer." (*Message of Galatians*, 70)

And what should we do when "before our eyes Jesus Christ is publicly portrayed as crucified"? Believe! It's exactly what the Galatians did at first, and everything changed for them:

v2 *Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*

A little (unconscious) Pauline irony in v2: "Let me ask you only this." And then he proceeds to ask them 5 rhetorical questions:

v2 *Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?*

v3a *Are you so foolish?*

v3b *Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

v4 *Did you suffer so many things in vain- if indeed it was in vain?*

v5 *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*

He's driving them back to their conversion, back to the beginning of their Christian experience.

- v5 It's when miracles were first done among them as confirmation that the message was true (cf. Acts 14:8ff).
- v4 It's when their faith was proven with suffering (cf. 14:22).

- vv2,3,5 It's when they received the Spirit, the mark of a Christian—God Himself, living with us, literally residing within us. It's what Paul described earlier in 2:20:

2:20 *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.*

What makes that claim a reality in the spiritual realm? The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, living within. What makes is a reality in our practical experience? Faith: "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."

To the Galatians, Paul puts it: "works of the law or hearing with faith." That's the main point in these 5 questions—you have only 2 alternatives for how to live: **works or faith**. Self or Christ. Do or done. Demands to be obeyed, or promises to be believed.

The common assumption is that we are saved by the gospel and then we grow by applying biblical principles to various areas of our lives. But Paul argues here that we are saved by the gospel and we grow by applying the gospel to various areas of our lives. ***In other words, your failure to grow is not primarily a failure of willpower; it's a failure to believe the gospel as it applies to this particular area of your life.***

Your problem is not sometimes faith and sometimes obedience. NO. It's always lack of faith. If you're not obeying, it's because you're not trusting. Here's how this works...

- Forgiveness
Ephesians 4:32 *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*
- Love
Ephesians 5:2 *walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*
- Anger. Not living in line with the gospel, something has become your functional Savior (need to have it) or Lord (need to serve it), often yourself. For example, your anger might be a result of a desire to have control. Instead of just hoping God will remove your anger and working hard to control it, ask: "What is it I think I need so much? What is being withheld that I need to feel complete, safe, worthy?" The answer(s) is your functional

savior. Only a fresh depiction of the gospel – in a way that grips your heart – will convince you to surrender all to Christ.

The way to progress as a Christian is to repent and change the same way we originally became a Christian—by the vivid portrayal of Christ as crucified.

Reread Your Bible.

- As a book of promise, not demand.
- As a story about Jesus, not you.

Paul has been arguing from their experience, but now in vv6-9 he turns to the Bible itself to make the same point. Consider Abraham...

vv5-9 *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- ⁶ just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"? ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*

Bringing up Abraham here is a brilliant move in Paul's argument against these false teachers. They are trying to convince these Gentile believers to become practicing Jews, so who does Paul call as a witness in his case but the father of the Jewish nation, Abraham himself. Abraham simply "believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness" (v6). So now, anyone can be a child of Abraham and an heir of the blessing God promised him if they will simply follow his example as "the man of faith" (v9). In other words, Paul is saying, "Sure, go ahead. Get connected to Abraham. But make sure you do it the right way—by faith, not works!"

Let me remind you of Abraham's story... He first appears in Genesis 12.

Genesis 12:1-3 *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

At this point in the story, the world is a disaster. Humanity is dying. Sin has ruined God's good paradise, and the whole cosmos is under a curse. Since chapter 3, where God first pronounced judgment against sin, the word "curse" has reverberated through the story. Five times it appears:

- To the serpent: "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field..." (3:14)
- To Adam: "cursed is the ground because of you" (3:17)
- To Cain: "now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (4:11)
- Lamech: "...called his name Noah, saying, 'Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.'" (5:29)
- Noah: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers" (9:25)

But everything changes in ch12. notice here, in God's call to Abraham, the reverberating echo of the word "bless":

- "I will bless you" v 2a
- "you will be a blessing" v 2b
- "I will bless those who bless you" v 3a
- "all families of the earth shall be blessed" v 3b

This five-fold parallel of "bless" with "curse" indicates that, through Abraham, God intends to restore the whole world. He is going to reverse the effects – the curse – of sin in the world, and it's going to happen through Abraham. Why? Because that's the kind of God He is. He made Abraham an unconditional promise just because He will not allow curse to get the final word on His world.

This is awesome! This is the kind of life we want, the future we were hoping for! How can we get it?

Keep reading Abraham's story. Years later, nothing much seems to have changed:

Genesis 15:1-6 *After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."*

⁵ *And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*

Notice that word "counted." The righteousness in view here was "thrown at" Abraham, accredited to him. He was deemed, appraised, viewed as righteous. This was something God did, not something Abraham did. Abraham believed God's word. God surprised everybody by saying, "I'll see that faith and raise you my perfect righteousness. I know you are still a faltering, fumbling sinner; but in my eyes, you are justified."

This is the distinguishing feature of the Christian faith. Every other religious says you are either a good person who qualifies for God's favor or a bad person who does not qualify. But Christianity says, "You can be accepted by God while you are still sinful and imperfect. It's called grace, and it's yours if you'll simply believe the offer." It's not simply that Jesus died for us while we were still sinners, but also that God justifies, qualifies, "righteousness-es" us while we were still sinners.

Romans 4:5 *And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,*

This is the central message of the Bible!

v8 *The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."*

Promise, not demand. About Christ, not you! Even faith is about Jesus! Faith justifies, not because faith has any inherent power or virtue, but because Christ has inherent power and virtue, and it is faith that unites us to Christ:

3:14 *...so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*

Here's how we want to live: remembering the gospel every day of our lives. Like John Newton: the month he died (age 82) he shared with a friend: "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior."