

## Paul's Defense of Justification

Galatians 3: 1-5

As I think back over my Christian walk, and the twenty years I have served in pastoral ministry, many have come and gone within the church. While some moved on to faithfully serve in other churches, others abandoned the church altogether. Several of those who have abandoned the church appeared to be genuine in their faith, but over time that apparently was proven untrue.

I have also encountered those who appear to be genuinely saved, but they got caught up in the dictates of men. They were saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, and yet, they now believe certain rituals or nuances of the faith are necessary to be in a right relationship with the Lord. Quite often, these are involved in questionable doctrine or legalistic practices. Such is the case with the text before us. Some within the Galatian church were no longer depending solely on justification by faith to secure their standing with Christ.

As we discuss the [questions](#) Paul raised in the text, let's consider: [Paul's Defense of Justification](#).

**I. The Admonition regarding Christ (1)** – Paul knew those who rejected justification by faith in Christ alone held a view of Christ and His finished work that was not consistent with the gospel, nor of Christ and His work of redemption. Consider:

**A. The Rebuke (1a)** – [O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?](#) As is his nature, Paul immediately gets to the point and does not hold back in his rebuke. Their distorted view of the work of Christ was foolish, failing to uphold the truths of the gospel. Such a departure from the truth was dangerous spiritually and needed to be confronted. Paul declared they had been *bewitched*, literally *led astray* according to their tendency of “*the use of feeling over fact, emotion over clear understanding of truth.*”<sup>i</sup> (We too must be willing to confront false doctrine and those who are led astray by its teachings. Left alone, such false doctrine has potential to spread and damage the entire body.)

**B. The Reminder (1b)** – [before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you?](#) Those who were born again in Christ, being transformed by genuine faith in the truth of the gospel, should know better than to deny the work of Christ being sufficient to secure salvation. These believers were not denying the sacrifice Christ made as our substitutionary atonement on the cross, but they had embraced a doctrine that claimed His sacrifice alone was not sufficient for

salvation. These had been led to believe works of the flesh were also necessary to secure one's salvation. Such doctrine denies the heart of the gospel and the atonement of Christ. [Acts 13:38-39](#) – Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: <sup>39</sup> And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. If Christ's atoning work on the cross and glorious resurrection from the dead are not sufficient to save, no amount of effort on the part of man can secure salvation.

**II. The Question regarding the Spirit (2-4)** – Paul then challenged the Galatians regarding the reception of the Spirit and His work among the church. Paul spoke of:

**A. Their Reception (2)** – [This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?](#) How had they received the Spirit? Did He come to abide within them based on their keeping the commandments of the law or was He received as they were saved by faith? Clearly, Paul was confident the Spirit was received immediately following salvation by faith. The Lord did not reserve the presence of the Spirit for those who accomplished certain tasks or met specific expectations. If the Spirit was received by faith, at the moment of conversion, such false doctrine of works being necessary to secure salvation would fall apart. *The gift of the Holy Spirit is the believer's most unmistakable evidence of God's favor, his greatest proof of salvation and the guarantee of eternal glory. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16).* <sup>ii</sup>

**B. Their Sanctification (3)** – [Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?](#) Paul then challenged their sanctification through the Holy Spirit, their growth in the Lord and continued conformity to Him. If they had in fact received the Spirit at salvation, apart from works of the flesh, and the Spirit had begun to mature them in the faith, were they now being matured due to personal works of the flesh, apart from the Spirit?

➤ Such is the danger with false doctrine today – this includes any teaching that denies justification by faith in Christ alone. Apart from genuine faith in Christ, every other form of religious teaching relies upon works of the flesh. Are we so foolish to think that the Spirit depends upon our abilities to assist Him in leading us in the ways of righteousness and producing Christian maturity in our lives?

**C. Their Dedication (4)** – [Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if it be yet in vain.](#) The word suffered is translated from the Greek word *paschō*. Paul often used this word to imply *suffering or hardship*. It can also be used to imply an *experience*. Within the context of the passage, some

scholars seem to think Paul was referring to their experience in the Lord. That seems to make perfect sense in light of what we've discussed thus far. Paul questions if their Christian experience (their salvation by faith in Christ and the work of the Spirit within their lives) were in vain. This is a valid question one would do well to answer regarding doctrine that is contrary to the gospel. If, in fact such doctrine was true, then all of the experiences one has during and following salvation would be in vain. Does this new "insight" nullify all past experience in one's relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit?

➤ It is apparent that Paul is holding out hope that these particular experiences would not have been in vain, (4b). It seems as if Paul desired to challenge them to consider all they have received in Christ and the formational experience of walking with Him through the Spirit, and contrast those experiences with the teaching that had received. Does the doctrine they have embraced align with the truth? If not, abandon the false doctrine and abide in the truth.

**III. The Reflection regarding the Father** (5) – Finally, Paul questioned the Galatians in regard to God's work in their lives. He reminded them of:

**A. His Provision** (5a) – *He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit...* Paul reminded the Galatians that they had received the Spirit by the gracious provision of the Father. It was He that supplied and furnished the Spirit unto them abundantly. *Acts 1:4-5 – And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. <sup>5</sup> For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.* The Spirit was promised and provided by God for every believer.

**B. His Power** (5a) – *He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you...* Paul also reminded them of the power of God at work in their lives. It was He who performed great miracles among them and others within the church. Whether Paul spoke of physical miracles or the supernatural power of God at work in transformation through salvation, it was evident that God had done great and mighty things among them.

➤ We may not experience physical miracles on the scale of those within the early church, but we cannot deny the miraculous power of God at work in our midst. You may disagree, but I would argue that transforming a dead sinner unto abundant life in Christ is the greatest miracle ever performed. All the saved have experienced this miracle of God!

**C. The Process (5b)** – He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? This question should put to rest any reliance upon works of the flesh and adherence to the law for acceptance to God. Regardless of the type of miracle Paul implied (physical or spiritual), were those miracles performed and received based on works of the flesh or by the hearing of faith? If one argues that God’s miracles are dependent upon works of the law, then one is arguing for a works-based salvation.

➤ I can personally testify that was not the case for me. I wasn’t even looking for the Lord the day I was saved. He came to me in His time, according to His grace and good pleasure, and provided salvation as I believed in faith. My salvation, the greatest of all miracles, was provided of the Lord apart from any work on my behalf. To argue God’s works are dependent upon ours robs God of His glory and deity; not to mention, such arguments are contrary to Scripture. We are saved by grace through faith, not of our works. We have nothing to boast in regarding the works of the flesh.

**Conclusion:** Paul offered a compelling and convincing argument regarding the contrasts between works of the law and faith. It is evident our salvation and the many benefits received regarding salvation are obtained by faith rather than works. The Lord works in our lives according to His good pleasure in regard to our faith, not our works. If you are depending on works, you are not going to receive the gifts of God. We must come to Him by faith, walking with Him in faith.

---

<sup>i</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., [Galatians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 64.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 66.