

On this day, 504 years ago, a young 34-year-old Roman Catholic monk did something that changed the world. Martin Luther was a bright and humble student of the Scriptures. While serving at the Wittenberg Castle Church in central Germany, he saw some things in his Roman Catholic Church that bothered him. He saw doctrines and practices that didn't align with what he saw in the scriptures.

His main criticism was something called selling indulgences. This was a teaching that said when a person committed sins, they could make a monetary payment to the church. This payment would supposedly absolve a person from the penalty of their sins that would have been paid after their death in purgatory. In other words, a person could pay the church a set amount of money and would then receive forgiveness or absolution from punishment. Luther searched the scripture to see why his church held that belief, and he couldn't find any scripture to support it.

And when Luther read the Bible, especially Galatians, it became clearer to him that salvation could only be granted through faith and by divine grace, not by works. He was so convinced that he listed a defense of his positions to be known as the 95 Theses. On October 31, 1517, Luther posted these 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. Most historians believe that Luther didn't want to leave his church, and the idea of a protestant reformation was not on his mind. He wanted honest debate and internal reform. As he pinned the 95 Theses on the door, he was probably thinking, "Hey guys, let's go down to the pub and debate this." But Luther's protest spread quickly throughout Germany. The Catholic church soon ruled Luther's 95 Theses to be heresy and demanded that Luther recant. Eventually, word of this reached Rome.

A council of who's who in church theology gathered three years later in the city of Worms, Germany, to demand that Luther recant. The city was named Worms. The council was called the Diet. Diet and worms are two words you wouldn't think go together in the same sentence.

So in the year 1521, Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms in Germany. He refused to recant. And at the risk of death, he ended his testimony with the defiant statement: "Here I stand. God help me. I can do no other." And the church was changed forever. Luther looked back on what his life was like before he understood God's amazing grace. He wrote:

I was a good monk and kept my order so strictly that I could claim that if ever a monk were able to reach heaven by monkish discipline, I should have found my way there. All my fellows in the house, who know me, would bear me out on this. For if it had continued much longer, I would, with vigils,

prayers, readings, and other such works, have done myself to death. Martin Luther

Paul described himself as a pharisee among Pharisees. Luther saw himself as more monkish than any monk. Martin Luther said that Galatians was his favorite book of the Bible. His commentary is still read today. He wrote that his life was transformed. It's as if he was set free from his monkish discipline by grace.

I do not seek [my own] active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it, but I declare that even if I did have it and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I... embrace only... the righteousness of Christ.... Which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ. Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians

Kevin showed us last week the words of Paul in Galatians 2:16, "*know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*" And then, in verse 2:21, Paul says that if we add any good works on our part to the work of Christ, it would mean that Christ died for no purpose.

So how can we explain this idea that we are not justified by works? Or that justification comes through faith in Christ? Here is the clearest way I know how to explain it. As a sinner, I can stand before God's throne with all my sins pardoned. Instead of having to defend my life, I will be defended by the life of the crucified Christ. This is such wonderful news that Paul has given us.

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, plus nothing. As Paul says in Romans 4:5, "*However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness*" An opponent of Luther said, "Justification by faith is a great doctrine to die by on judgment day, but a lousy one to live within the present!" The guy actually raises a good point.

If we are ultimately saved by God's grace rather than by our own works, how should looking back at the cross empowers us to live for God today? And really, if my works don't save me, why should I do any good works for God at all?

For most of us, we know in our hearts that it's by grace through faith that we become Christians. But for most of us, if we are honest, we are not satisfied with our own personal spiritual growth and impact. Here is our problem, and Paul reveals that it was the same problem the Galatians had. We get that we are saved by grace through faith, but then we think that it is up to us to live a godly life. Our lives project something

like this: "Thank you, Jesus, for saving me, but I'm most comfortable taking it from here."

Justification by faith in Christ is a great doctrine to die with, but it's also a wonderful doctrine to live by. It is for the whole Christian life, from beginning to end. So in case you are prone to wander and have been frustrated at your growth and impact, and you are inclined to say, "Thank you, Jesus, for saving me, but I'll take it from here," then Galatians 3 is a passage to encourage you this morning.

We're going to see three things in this passage.

- The Whole Christian life is based on faith, not performance
- That this is the way it's always been
- There could be no other way

The Christian Life is Based on Faith, Not Performance

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (v. 1). Paul is at a loss here. He is emotional, angry, and frustrated at their lack of discernment. In other words, "You have heard this. You know it. You saw with your own eyes the truth that I preached to you that Jesus was crucified."

The phrase "clearly portrayed as crucified" is in the perfect tense. Paul is saying that a past event, the death of Jesus, saved you. But the effects on your life don't stop there. His death on a cross continues to be significant and impact you in the present.

J.B. Phillips, in his translation, puts it, "O you dear idiots of Galatia... surely you can't be so idiotic?" Paul asked, "Who has bewitched you?" To Paul, it was as if some sorcerer had cast an evil spell on them. "How could you believe that you need anything added to the gospel to be justified?"

Paul is saying that when you are prone to wander and go your own way, get your eyes back on the cross of Christ. This is key for any place we find ourselves, whether we feel far from God, discouraged over circumstances in our life, or fearful about our lives right now, fix your eyes back on the cross of Christ. What saved you back then will sustain you today. What saved you back then will deliver you today. What gave you hope back then will give you hope today.

"I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?" (v. 2). What Paul identifies here is one of the most profound issues we face. He is asking them, "Hey Galatians, when you first heard the gospel and became believers, wasn't the power of the Holy Spirit clearly at work in your lives?"

The Bible clearly teaches that when we invite Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior and accept this on faith, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts. And true Christians have the Spirit living within them as a guarantee that what he began in us he will see through to completion.

So here's his question. Did they receive the Holy Spirit because they believed? Or did they receive the Holy Spirit because they kept the works of the law? The Holy Spirit doesn't take up residence in our lives because we've cleaned ourselves up and made ourselves good enough. No, the

Holy Spirit entered our lives in our brokenness; in spite of our dirtiest sins, He enters when we hear and receive the gospel message by faith. We are not saved by doing; we're saved by hearing with faith.

"Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" (v. 3). Paul then asks, "If you first came to faith by the Spirit, why are you now trying to continue in the faith by the flesh." Paul says, "That's foolishness."

My take on this is that Paul is telling them and us to check our hearts. Is it my motive to trust God or trust my flesh to get it right? Is my motive to follow my plan or surrender to God's plan? And Paul is asking us, "So how is trying to finish by means of the flesh really working out for you?"

What Paul is saying is, "Continue in the Christian life the same way you started: by grace, not performance. Anything else would be ridiculous. And very discouraging." I like how John Piper puts it:

Faith is the only response to God's Word that makes room for the Spirit to work in us and through us. Flesh, on the other hand, is the insubordinate, self-determining ego that in religious people responds to God's Word not with reliance on the Spirit but with reliance on self. It can produce a very rigorous morality, but it nullifies grace and removes the stumbling block of the cross.

I hope we can see that the essential mark of a Christian is not how far we have progressed in our spiritual formation but on who we are relying on to get there. Paul is not saying that we should passively sit and do nothing while we wait for God to change us. Our spiritual formation is not passive at all. It takes effort, but it's a grace-driven effort to grasp the gospel. It is a grace-driven effort to go back to the cross, again and again, the effort to surrender, and the effort to trust God's Spirit to work in us and through us. As someone said to me this week, "For me, spiritual formation is more about abiding and less about striving." I love that! Paul asks another question:

"Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain?" (v. 4). The word Paul uses for experienced in the original language means is in the context of suffering. Paul wants them to be encouraged because God's Spirit works powerfully in the context of suffering. That was certainly the case in Paul's life, the Galatians' lives, and I think many of us have experienced this as well.

Our experience around suffering is never in vain. Whatever distressing thing this broken world throws at us, whatever causes us hardship, grief, and trauma, we can go back to the cross and hold onto the promise that God works in powerful ways in the middle of it. If God had the power to raise Jesus from the dead, He would certainly sustain you in your present hardships. Our suffering is not in vain. God's Spirit showed up for them and shows up for us in our suffering.

"So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or your believing what you heard?" (v. 5). God's Spirit showed up through miracles too! These miracles were proof that the Holy Spirit was present with them and working. Paul is asking them, "Do you remember the miracles you saw? Did these miracles come because

you did stuff, or did the miracles come because God gave you His Spirit because you believed the gospel you heard?

The truth was they had received the Spirit long before the false teachers came into their community. A new life in Christ begins with faith, grows by faith, and is completed through faith. So we must always look back to the gospel and never to our works when it comes to our own spiritual formation and our impact on the world. Only God can complete what He has begun.

This is the Way It has Always Been

These false teachers had told the Galatians that in order to be good Christians, they needed to observe all the laws given to Moses 1600 years before Christ was crucified. But Paul says, "You use Moses as an example; I'll go back even further. Abraham lived 1000 years before Moses Abraham is the one who introduced us to grace and faith and how one is justified before God."

"So also Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'" (v. 6). When we look at Abraham's life, what should we learn from him? We could focus on Abraham as an example of good works. He picked up and moved when God told him to. He was ready to give up his son when God asked him to.

Was it Abraham's obedience that we should care about most? Was it Abraham's good works that matter most? Abraham wasn't saved because of his good works? Paul says. Abraham was saved exactly the same way that we are saved. He was saved by grace through faith. And because Abraham believed in God, it was credited to him as righteousness.

God has always operated this way. There have always been two ways to get to God. One way is by keeping the law, and every one has failed at that. The other way is through believing in faith. Paul is saying that if you want to be part of Abraham's family, you need faith.

"Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham" (v. 7). No matter our race, class, gender, ethnicity, no matter our personal history, credit scores, or screw-ups in the past, we can each become the beneficiary of Abraham's blessing through faith. So Paul asks, "Who can receive Abraham's blessing?"

Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. vv. 8-9

So it was always God's plan that he would justify the Gentiles by faith, and he would bless all nations through Abraham.

Last summer, we did a preaching series on the life of Abraham. He was no perfect example of faith. If you look back at Abraham, it's actually comforting to learn that his faith wasn't a perfect faith. His faith was a persevering faith. When his faith got wobbly, when he wandered away from God's plan, and he made a mess of things, what did he do? He got back on his feet, dusted himself off with repentance, refocused his life back on faith, and set out again in the power of God.

The Bible is not a book full of heroes we should emulate. God is the hero. Abraham and every other person we get to know in the Bible is actually a recipient of God's grace. This completely changes the way we look at their lives. Instead of seeing them as people who were good enough, we can begin to see them as real and broken people who trusted God. And we can see how this worked out in their lives from start to finish.

There Could Be No Other Way

In our final verses of this message, Paul compares the two ways we try to be accepted by God.

"For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law'" (v. 10). The story of Israel is a story of grace and redemption, yes, but it's also a story of rebellion and sin, eventually leading to Israel receiving the curse of the law for failing to keep the law.

"And Moses himself had the Levite priests announce to the people, 'Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out'" (Deut. 27:26). One way to be accepted by God is to try to keep the law, and we see how that works out.

"Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because 'the righteous will live by faith.' The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, 'The person who does these things will live by them'" (vv. 11-12). Paul is telling the Galatians that God's blessing can't be found in the law because no one but Jesus kept the law. If Israel kept the law, then Abraham's blessing would come to them through the law. But Israel didn't keep the law. And anyone who goes down this path of the law will find that God has posted a giant "Dead End" sign over the path.

This isn't good news. In fact, the whole nation of Israel was scattered among the nations of the world. The only thing they could do was wait for God to show up and do something about their desperate situation. They cried out as in the words of the hymn, "O Come O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appears."

And after hundreds of years, Immanuel did come. In Galatians 4, Paul says, *"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law" (Gal. 4:4-5a).* Paul triumphantly proclaims, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole'" (Gal. 3:13).*

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* It's an amazing twist. It's like a heart surgeon who realizes the only way his patient will survive is with a heart transplant, so the surgeon voluntarily gives his own heart, his very own life, to save his dying patient.

What is the curse that Christ redeemed us from? It's a curse that is on us because of our sin. And he redeemed us from it by becoming a curse for us. *"He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (v. 14).*

There are two roads—the road of the curse and the road of the blessing. The road of the curse is the road of the law, and through disobedience, those on this road are “under a curse.” It’s a dead-end! The road of the blessing is paved with faith. Those on this road inherit a blessing. The cursed road trust in their own works, the blessed road trust in the work of Christ.

As Christians, we need to relearn the gospel every day. We are prone to wander, and we may act as if a spell has been cast over us. The Christian life is a battle to rely on the gospel. We are inclined to look to ourselves and trust in our own achievements rather than relying solely on the cross of Christ.

In our *Ekklesia* community here at CPC, we are called to invite one another over and over again back to the cross of Christ. And to call one another over and over to look away from ourselves and focus on Christ. We may slowly drift from the gospel, just as the Galatians did. And just like the Galatians, we cannot live the Christian life on autopilot. We need to accept that we have a daily struggle, and it takes effort to continually surrender our lives to the one who redeemed us and who blesses us.

God has redeemed us from the curse of the law through Jesus Christ so we can receive the blessing of Abraham through faith in Christ.

Last Monday I officiated at a wedding. It was actually a renewal of vows in person with friends and family. A year ago, I performed their wedding standing behind my kitchen counter on zoom. The couple I saw on my screen was seated on the couch at the groom’s parents’ home in Foster City. Up in the corner of my screen was the San Mateo County Clerk’s face witnessing the nuptials. I remember it was hot in my condo that day, so I had a suit jacket, tie, and dress shirt on top and shorts on the bottom out of sight. A year later, when they told me that their first year was tough, I got it. I understood it. Our first year was also the toughest.

Whenever I do premarital counseling, I always tell these young couples that the best tool they have for a great marriage is the grace of God. I think of our own marriage and what it would have been like without the cross and the work of Christ to justify us.

1. We wouldn’t know how to love and forgive or accept each other as Christ loves, forgives, and accepts us.
2. We wouldn’t have known where to turn when things were desperate in that first year. We turned to the cross that saved us years before. The cross was our safety net that caught us when we were falling.
3. We wouldn’t have the capacity to give up our own plans and surrender so we could get the help from a wise counselor that we needed. We had to believe in God.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

By believing in God, we received the blessings promised through Abraham. I don’t think Julie and I would have honored our marriage covenant for 35 years without our understanding of God’s eternal covenant he made with us. As the last line in the song, *In Christ Alone* says, “Here in the death of Christ we live.” For Julie and I and for all of us it is, “Here in the death of Christ we live.”

This passage leads us back to the cross. It leads us to reflect on the scope of what God did for us to justify us before our holy God. Reflecting on the cross should lead us to a humble place—a place of surrender. Surrender is hard. Surrender takes effort. Surrender means we have to do something that our flesh doesn’t want to do.

Maybe you are far away from God this morning. Turn to the cross and trust in God’s righteousness. Stop trying to trust in your own righteousness. Christ’s righteousness is where hope is found.

Maybe you have doubts about God this morning. Maybe you have wandered in your faith. Turn back to the cross. Surrender those circumstances that have caused you to doubt his love and power. As you reflect on what Christ did for you, trust him to walk you through whatever is happening in your life.

Maybe you are discouraged this morning. You have been trying so hard, and you are exhausted. Surrender your plan. Trust that God has a better plan than yours and his way is the way of blessing.

Heavenly Father, You know the circumstances that each of us is in this morning. And we know that hope is found at the cross. Turn us to the cross today. May we fix our eyes on your son Jesus, the author, and perfecter of our faith. Lord, show us how to surrender our past, our present, and our future to you. And Lord, teach us to surrender that secret that we are holding onto, that one thing the Holy Spirit is prompting us about right now. Keep our eyes on Jesus, who was crucified for our sins. May we see him as our Savior who not only died but also rose again and lives for us. May we then regain the vision of what it means to live for him by faith.

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