

Salvation is By Faith Alone, Not a Mixture of Faith and “Works”

Galatians 3:1-9

Galatians 3:1-9: *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ² This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ⁴ Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? — ⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” ⁷ Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” ⁹ So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”*

Background Notes

The apostle Paul wrote this epistle to straighten out a very serious problem that had arisen in the churches of Galatia. False teachers known as “Judaizers” had penetrated the Galatian churches, and they were teaching a different gospel than the pure unadulterated gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul was preaching and teaching.

The Judaizers taught that a person must add the “works” and rituals of the Old Testament Law to faith in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. They also taught that, following salvation, believers must adhere to the regulations of the Law to be sanctified, or to become more holy. The apostle Paul said, “No!” Adding **anything** to the sacrificial work of Christ at Calvary was (and is) heresy!

Salvation is by **faith alone** - not by “works” (human effort), and not by a mixture of faith and works. Sanctification, or growing in Christ, is by faith alone as well. Good works are the **result** of salvation and sanctification. They are **not** the **means** of salvation and sanctification.

Diluting the grace of God by adding the requirements of the Old Testament Law for salvation and sanctification was such a crucial problem that Paul used some pretty strong language in the letter to the churches in Galatia. Look at Galatians 1:8-9: *“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”*

In chapter 3 the apostle Paul continued with this strong language: *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth”* (v1). Who has bewitched you? Who has cast you under an evil spell, by an evil influence of the devil, to cause you to abandon the truth? Paul confronted this watering-down of the gospel head on, because it was so critical. Paul’s teaching on the means of salvation was critical then - and today!

Knowing and understanding God’s way of salvation is essential, because ***what we believe determines our eternal destiny!*** Knowing and understanding God’s way of sanctification, or becoming more holy, is essential because ***it affects our whole way of living as believers.***

Doctrinal Points

1. Receiving the Holy Spirit is by faith, and not by “works.”

In verses 1-5 Paul set forth his argument by reminding the Galatian believers of their own experience. They could not deny that when they first believed the gospel that Paul preached to them, they had experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives: *“Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”*(v2 NASB).

Furthermore, the Galatian believers had seen (and were seeing) the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst, including the early “sign miracles” that accompanied Paul’s preaching: *“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?”* (v5 NASB). Read Acts 14 to learn about some of the miracles that were done in the region of Galatia.

The Galatians could not deny these facts, and they could not deny that all this activity of the Holy Spirit had nothing whatsoever to do with the works of the Old Testament Law! So then Paul put forward the obvious question: *“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”*(v3). If keeping the Law did not save you, do you think God’s plan for your sanctification is by trying to keep the Law?

O foolish Galatians - don’t be taken in by the false teaching of the Judaizers! You couldn’t keep the Law perfectly before you were saved, and you can’t keep it after you’re saved. Trying to “earn” salvation or “work” for sanctification not only ends in failure, but it is actually a work of the flesh - the sinful nature (v3)!

Any kind of human effort (“work of the flesh”) takes away from the grace of God – both then and today. I trust that all of you understand that good works cannot save us! If we could be saved by our own human effort, or by doing good works, then salvation would not be by God’s grace. Grace, by definition, is God’s ***unmerited*** favor. Grace does not allow human works to be added to faith, because if you add works it is no longer God’s ***unmerited*** favor. ***Good works follow salvation; they are not the means of salvation.***

The same is true of sanctification, or the process of becoming more holy. We don’t become more holy or more spiritual by adding any kind of human effort to the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives.

Some Christians manufacture a list of rules for becoming more spiritual – rules such as, you **must** read a certain translation of the Bible, or if you **must** raise your hands when you pray, or you **must** have your devotions in the early morning, etc... On and on we could go with this manufactured list of spiritual do's and don'ts. Some Christians actually judge the spirituality of other Christians by whether or not they adhere to a man-made list of certain “rules for holiness”!

Folks, these things are matters of personal choice! Don't get the idea that you become sanctified, or more spiritual, through human effort or “works of the flesh.” No! Making a list of “rules for holiness” is just as bad as the legalism of the Judaizers! Sanctification comes about by yielding our bodies and minds to the Lord. Christians become more like Christ-like when they allow the Holy Spirit to empower the new life that they have in Christ. **That** is what it means to “walk in the Spirit.” **That** is walking by **faith**!

Notice what is taught by implication in these verses: **the Holy Spirit dwells in every true believer**. Even though the foolish Galatian Christians were not spiritual at this point, they did have the Holy Spirit. They were saved, and therefore they had the Holy Spirit. And if you're a true believer, so do you. Receiving the Holy Spirit is by faith - not by works!

2. Righteousness from God is by faith, and not by works.

In verses 6-9 the apostle moved on to use Abraham as an illustration of his teaching. The Judaizers would certainly have used Abraham as one of their prime examples. Their argument would likely have gone like this: “Abraham was circumcised, and because God declared that circumcision was the sign of His covenant, all Gentile converts should be circumcised.” If Gentiles were to be saved and sanctified, said the Judaizers, circumcision was a ritual “work” of the Law that was necessary for them to follow.

So the apostle Paul specifically chose to use the example of Abraham to defeat the legalistic teachings of the Judaizers. He drew on Abraham precisely because the Judaizers would have used Abraham as their example - and he defeated them at their own game! This example from Abraham's life proved Paul's case: “*Just as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness*” (v6).

Verse 6 is a quote from Genesis 15:6. God declared that Abraham was righteous by his **faith** – not by circumcision – because that declaration was made years **before** Abraham was circumcised! Abraham was already saved by faith **before** circumcision was given as the sign of God's covenant in Genesis 17.

By the way, Paul also used this same argument in Romans 4. Abraham was **saved by faith - not by works**. And so is everyone else! Just as Abraham was declared righteous when he believed what God said, so we are declared righteous when we believe what God has said. And God has said that salvation is by **faith in Jesus Christ alone** - not by any added human effort, or any mixture of faith and human effort (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation by faith alone was not just “Paul’s spin” on Old Testament events. No! The “way of faith” was anticipated in the Old Testament when God first spoke to Abraham: *“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer”* (v8-9).

The way of salvation has ***always been by God’s grace through faith***. There was no such thing as a different way of salvation in the Old Testament. The way of salvation has always been by God’s grace through faith. Righteousness from God is by faith, not by works!

Practical Application

Don’t use Galatians 3:7 to “spiritualize” Israel!

“Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (v7). The obvious point of this verse is that all who believe in God by faith are the ***spiritual*** “sons of Abraham.” ***Like Abraham***, we have ***saving faith***.

However, some Christians take verse 7 out of its Galatians 3 context and say it means that since all believers for all time are “sons of Abraham,” the promises God made to Israel in Old Testament times no longer apply to the Jewish people. For them, verse 7 is a proof text that God’s promises to Israel should now be applied in a spiritual way to the Church - that the Church is the “New Israel.” Thus they say that all the promises that God made to the Jewish people in the Old Testament are now to be “spiritualized,” and applied in a “spiritual” way to the Christian Church.

No! The statement that *“those who are of faith are sons of Abraham”* means ***like Abraham***, we have ***saving faith!*** It does ***not*** imply that the Church is the “new Israel.” Israel is Israel, and the Church is the Church – it is ***not*** the “new Israel.”

And the teaching of verse 7, that *“those who are of faith are sons of Abraham,”* does ***not*** mean that God has done away with the promises He made to the nation of Israel. God has ***not*** changed His plans and promises for the Jewish people, who are the natural, biological descendants of Abraham. The promises God made to Israel and the Jewish people will be fulfilled in the future. Read Romans 11 in this connection.

The statement, *“only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham”* means that believers today are like Abraham in having ***saving faith!*** So - don’t use Galatians 3:7 to “spiritualize” Israel - or God’s promises to Israel!