

We Need the Power of the Spirit from Start to Finish

Gal. 3:1-6

This past Tuesday FB turned 10 years old and to commemorate, some of the funnier status' have been released (minus any identifying info) for all the world to enjoy. One exchange I found humorous was between Olivia and Evan.

Olivia writes: *I need a summer job, anyone know anyone who is hiring people to work?*

Evan: *What kinda job you lookin for?*

Olivia: *I dunno, something ez like a cd or movie store where [i] just sit round all day n watch movies lol!*

[at this point some guy named Tyson observes that Olivia sounds pretty lazy. Evan, however, goes on to offer Olivia some helpful advice]

Evan: *You should try Redbox. They are always hiring.*

Olivia: *4 real? I thought that was just a movie machine thing?*

Evan: *Nah, there is a guy inside the box that dispenses movies out to you. I hear it's a really simple job. My buddy works in one, he said there is a TV and a mini fridge inside. Go check it out, just go up to the red box and knock and get an application.*

Olivia: *cool I go right now!!*

I don't know how long Olivia stood knocking on her local Redbox, but we can't be too hard on her because the truth is, we all say and do dumb things sometimes. It's like it woven into the human fabric to do dumb things every now and again. You've done them. I've done them. The trick is not to let the dumb things we do end up on the internet!

Foolishness is also woven into the human fabric but foolishness isn't the same as dumbness. Foolishness doesn't have anything to do with intelligence – you can be very smart and very foolish. Foolishness, at least as the Bible frames it, has primarily to do with our relationship and posture towards God, not our intellect.

The fool says in his heart, "there is no God." PS. 14:1

This isn't describing a sincere seeker who hasn't yet been convinced that there is a God – it describes someone who has settled in their heart that there is no God because they want to live their lives unencumbered by having to give account to God in the end.

Foolishness also describes turning away from God. Jeremiah 5:21-23 says,

Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but see not, who have ears but hear not. Do you not fear me? declares the Lord. Do you not tremble before me?...But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone astray. Jer. 5:21-23

That's the kind of foolishness that the Galatian Christians are guilty of. Listening to a group of agitators called the Judaizers, they are turning aside from the gospel to a message of Christ plus obedience to the law equals salvation. The Judaizers have convinced them that God will accept them if they trust in Christ *and* keep His law. Trusting in Christ cleans the slate, keeping the law writes obedience on the slate and these two things together is acceptable to God.

The Judaizers made the case that if the gospel is all grace and doesn't include keeping the law, then Christians will live sloppy, unholy lives. And what the Galatians were seeing in the church seemed to confirm this – they trusted in Christ, had a powerful experience with God, but there was still all this crud in the church. Divisions, enmities, envies, gossip, backbiting, anger, lust and so on. So the Judaizers came along and said, "hey, how's that grace thing working out for you? Bet you still got a lot of sin going on – that's because Paul didn't give you the whole gospel. You need to seal the deal by obeying the law".

They were nailing it on the problems the Galatian churches were facing, and so to these new believers it was easy to think, if they're right about the problems we're dealing with, they're probably right about the answer, too.

Identifying the problem isn't the same thing as identifying the solution

I remember back in the 80's it became a big thing in some churches – including the one I was in – to get really deep into pain. I mean, really deep. Everything was pain. And there were a lot of books on the subject blaming every problem we had on stuff like co-dependency and dysfunctional families and our inner child not being happy. I read a couple of these books and I have to say they did do a good job of vividly describing a lot of the very real problems people face. Over time, as I began to question how helpful all this stuff (we called it psycho-babble) was, I began to suspect that identifying the problem accurately isn't the same thing as identifying the solution accurately.

The Judaizers are right about the problems the Galatian churches – and all churches – were facing. But they were dead wrong about what the solution was. Their answer was: trust Christ to start your salvation, trust yourself to finish it. This can still be a tempting departure point for Christians today. It's easy for us to get frustrated with our own lack of growth in Christ and battle with sin, and it's easy for us to get frustrated with other Christian's lack of growth in holiness and we can decide to take matters in our own hands. We can package it in ways that sound good – and appeal to our self-righteousness. "We need to stop compromising, stop making excuses, and get serious about obeying God." And those aren't wrong things to want. We should want to stop compromising, we should want to stop making excuses, and we should want to obey God. The question is, how do we get there from here? What do we rely on to get us there?

That's really the crux of what this book is about. How do we get there from here? How do we become acceptable to God? How do we fight and conquer sin? How do we change? By the law or by the gospel? By the Spirit or by the law? That's the contrast that Paul will be making from chapter 3 to the end of chapter 5. He begins this 3 chapter contrast by asking the Galatians a couple of rhetorical (and I think, sarcastic) questions.

1. Look back: how did you get saved?

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?

Paul says, remember the time when you were pagans living in complete darkness with no knowledge of God and no way to get to God, until one day Barnabas and I came to town and began to preach the gospel. And as we preached Christ crucified you began to feel your hearts burn within you – you saw Christ on the cross – not with your eyes but with your hearts and your minds – and you *believed*.

Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? When a person is saved it is always a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. It's being born again, regenerated, made alive to God. Think back, Galatians, did you encounter the regenerating power of the Spirit because you obeyed the law? Because you got circumcised? Or simply because you heard the gospel and believed?

Becoming a Christian is more than just hearing the gospel, or even thinking the gospel is true. We become a Christian when God the Spirit opens our ears and our hearts to the gospel and we believe it. Faith reaches out to appropriate it for our lives, the way a drowning man clings to a lifeline because he believes it's his only hope.

Let me pause here for a moment and talk especially to our young people. Maybe you've grown up in the church and you're pretty familiar with the gospel. That's good and it's awesome to see how God is

working in the lives of the young people in this church, but don't assume because your familiar with the gospel that you're a Christian. As you hear about Jesus and what he did, it needs to be combined with faith. Make it your own. Believe it – not just intellectually but clinging to it like a lifeline. Don't harden your heart – open your heart and believe in Jesus and he will take up His home in you through the Spirit and be with you and your best friend for the rest of your life. And that's only the beginning because he promises eternal life to those who believe in him.

2. Look ahead: do you really believe that you can perfect what the Spirit began with the flesh?

Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (vs. 3)

If the Christian walk began as a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, do you really believe that it's going to be perfected – the word means completed – by the flesh? Paul is astounded at their foolishness. Can they possibly believe that their flesh can finish what the Spirit began? Ronald Reagan once famously said, *Government isn't the solution, it's the problem.* Our flesh isn't the solution – it's the problem.

We can put on a good show in the flesh for a time, but the flesh has no power to change us to be more like Jesus. How could it? It's what destroyed the image of Jesus in us in the first place. We need the supernatural power of the Spirit every day to work in us to make us more like Jesus. That's what Paul means in chapter two when he says, *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.* (2:20)

He's talking about a supernatural life being lived through us – Christ living in us, the Spirit (who is the Spirit of Christ) working in us. We can't ever forget that the Christian life is meant to be something way beyond what we could ever live in our own power. We need the power of the Spirit. We need God working in us and through us if we're ever going to experience all that God has for us. Freedom from sin, freedom to be like Jesus, power to witness effectively to others and see them get saved – none of that can be manufactured by our flesh. The Christian life is meant to be a supernatural life.

But let's be honest, most of us don't feel very supernatural on any given day. That's why legalism can be appealing – let me take control of this thing and make some changes by sheer will power. I'll ask God to bless it, but if I don't do it, it won't get done. Paul is saying you might as well knock on a Redbox for a job application as knock on the flesh for holiness and a changed life. It ain't going to happen.

So let's get practical. What do we do with the anger, bitterness, envy, divisions, lust, backbiting, and other sins that we see in the church...and all too often in our own lives? These things can have a strong hold on us. How do we break the grip of bitterness, for instance? Bitterness is like a cage that imprisons our soul – it shrinks our soul, it shrinks our capacity to love, to live, to forgive, to be generous, and to be trusting. Bitterness is a cage, and like so many other sins, it's a cage we both hate...and love. We want to be free...and we want to remain in it. We are slaves to it...and we choose it.

What do we do with anger? The other day a conflict broke out in our home. Like so many conflicts, the issues weren't really that big – could have been resolved fairly easily and painlessly, but in my frustration I decided to just rant at everyone involved. And the more I ranted the angrier I got and the worse I made things. Finally the rant was over – I ran out of things to say – and I went back to my room to work on this message. And honestly I felt like a failure, what in the world am I doing preaching this message? What do I know about the work of the Spirit when the heat hits?

Here's the answer: What do I know about the work of the Spirit when the heat hits? Not much. Really I mean that, I'm not trying to sound humble. If that conflict did anything it helped me to see that I don't know much about the work of the Spirit when the heat hits. But it also convinced me that the answer isn't

found in our flesh. I saw what my flesh brings to the party and it's not Christlike. We can't "will" ourselves to be like Jesus. Every day, we need the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

When it comes to growing in our sanctification, we're not to be passive. Our part is to humble ourselves, embrace the Spirit by faith, and ask Him to do His work – and then walk forward, trusting that He will and He is doing that work. It's not that we apply no effort to our growing in Christ – we need to apply effort. It's just not "confidence in our flesh obeying the law" effort. It's coming to God and asking Him to empower us by His Spirit to live the way He wants us to. It's confessing our sin to God and asking Him to forgive us on the basis of Christ's finished work and to break the chains of sin and free us to serve Him in holiness.

It's foolish to abandon the gospel and embrace the flesh in order to grow. It's insanity. We will sin and sin flagrantly as long as we live in this flesh. The Spirit of God applies the gospel by crucifying us to our flesh so that we can live to God. Listen to Gal. 2:20 again: *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.*

There's a child-like faith that wakes up every day and believes in the supernatural work of the Spirit in our lives even when we're very aware of how "un-supernatural" we appear. Brothers and sisters, sometimes I think we lose sight of the importance of faith that believes in God. Not just to save us on that final day (though that's massive), but to meet us, empower us, use us, and yes, change us to be more like Jesus in the areas where we see our anger, or bitterness or whatever it is.

I don't want to give you three keys to being free from bitterness or anger or fear or lust or whatever the flesh is throwing at you. There are certainly good principles that can help, but we can't reach epi-teleo (completion) by our flesh. We need the Spirit to set us free. And He is able to set us free, if we ask, believe, engage, embrace, and walk it out in faith. What Paul calls *walking in the Spirit*.

We'll be looking at this contrast a lot more over the next several weeks – and it's good. But let me quickly close with this last point.

3. Look around: on what basis does God work in our lives – by our working the law or by our hearing with faith? (call Clint and James up)

The case that Paul will make is that the basis that God does everything in our lives is faith, not law. Spirit, not flesh. And next week we'll see that Paul is going to turn the tables on the Jewish Judaizers and out Jewish them. He's going to use the OT to make his case.

But I want to encourage your faith this morning: the same Christ who came into your life with power when you got saved is here to set you free from the chains that bind you. He's able to give you the power you need. The power I need. We need the power of the Spirit from start to finish. Sometimes I think when we get a little older in the faith, we can also get a little staler in the faith. Over time we lose some battles, we fail over and over, we get disillusioned by other believers, and we stop believing God for miracles. Stop believing God to change us. Stop believing God to use us to make an eternal difference in this world. And yet, Paul tells us that our part is hearing with faith. Faith. Believing God.

Let's take a minute to ask God the Spirit to give us a fresh faith, fill us with a fresh love and passion for Jesus, change us, use us. If Jesus isn't your Savior but you want to ask him to be your Savior, he's ready to come into your heart and forgive you and save you. Whatever your need this morning, let's take a few minutes in God's presence. If you want to come up front and make this an altar to the Lord, come on up.