

Bewitched!

Galatians 3:1-5

Intro: I grew up in a family where theology was a regular and sometimes heated topic of debate - particularly between my Dad and his brothers. My Dad got along famously with his brothers. They were very close. However, since we were Christian Reformed, and my Uncle Herm was Protestant Reformed, and my Uncle John was Netherlands Reformed, - there was plenty of material for energetic disagreement. Tempers could flare. And while sometimes lines were crossed, I grew up with the realization that nothing is more important than Biblical truth.

Paul's letter to the Galatians stands for the proposition that passion, frustration and even godly anger is warranted when gospel truth is on the line. The opening line of chapter 3 reveals a righteously indignant apostle.

"O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?"

Or as Bible translator, J.B. Philips puts it:

"Oh you dear idiots of Galatia ... surely you cannot be so idiotic?"

It's strong language. But it is absolutely accurate! They were being idiotic. They weren't thinking clearly. And Paul rebukes them strongly because, when it comes to the gospel, folly is deadly. When it comes to the core issue of how a man can be made right with God - idiocy is suicide. This is a matter of life and death.

A few years ago John MacArthur spoke at the funeral of R.C. Sproul, the great theologian. MacArthur told a story of a meeting of 6 men: himself, R.C., James Kennedy, Bill Bright, Charles Colson and J.I. Packer. These men all knew each other well. Most of them were good friends. But an issue had divided them: the document "Together for the Gospel" was an attempt to bring Evangelicals and Catholics to together on the doctrine of justification - the very issue that spawned the Reformation. R.C. was convinced that it sought to do so by undermining the Biblical truth and he was deeply disappointed that his good friends, Packer and Colson, were spearheading this thing. MacArthur recounted that one point RC got up on the table, and pointed a finger at them, saying, "I don't think you get it. This is about whether you're saved or not." MacArthur said, "RC stood for the gospel and defended the faith - even when he was looking in the eyes of a cherished friend."

That's exactly what's going on in the letter to the Galatians. Paul looked straight in the eyes of the Apostle Peter and rebuked him for undermining the gospel. And now he does it via letter with these brothers and sisters whom he dearly loved. The gospel was on the line – along with their salvation – and it was a time for strong words.

The next two and a half chapters are devoted to making a case for the truth of the gospel against the false teaching of the Judiazers. As you remember, the Judiazers were teaching that salvation was by grace and by law; by faith and by works; by Jesus and by Moses. In our text this morning we will notice the nature of the folly and Paul's first argument in his case for the truth.

I. The Nature of the Folly

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?”

We don't want to pass by this outburst. It is a Spirit inspired and spiritually insightful outburst. It is meant to awaken the church to severity of their error and the spiritual forces behind it.

First, it exposes the source of their error. When Paul says, “Who has bewitched you?” he's revealing something. The Galatian believers didn't just stumble into this error. They were seduced into it, just as Eve was in the Garden of Eden. Now, on the one hand we could say we know who has bewitched them. It was the Judiazers. But Paul raises the question because, from his perspective, there is an evil someone at work behind the Judiazers. Someone has bewitched them, cast a spell over them.

Surely, you've had this experience in your own life. Have you ever been tempted to commit some great sin or fallen into it – only later to ask yourself, “What in the world was I thinking? How could I have been so stupid? It's like I was in a spell, in a spiritual stupor.” Or maybe you have a loved one who has left the faith. And you can't figure out why. It's like they are in a spiritual coma. They aren't thinking clearly. Their actions and decisions make no sense. Rational arguments don't reach them. It's as if someone has bewitched them.

The Devil leads us into sin – be it moral failure or theological error by bewitching – blinding our mind to the truth of God and Christ!

Secondly, Paul's outburst shows not only the **source** of their error but the of it **severity** of it.

There are issues in the Christian life over which well-meaning and committed followers of Christ can disagree.

- We see an example of that in Romans 14 where the believers are disagreeing over the observance of Sabbaths and eating meat sacrificed to idols. "Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind."
- Contemporary examples would be the baptism of children or church polity or views on the end times. Those are issues we can cordially debate and respectfully differ.

This is not that sort of an issue! When it comes to the nature of justification and the way sinners are made right with God – well, that's the core of the gospel. Two people can't truly disagree on this and both be Christian.

Why not? Because it goes directly to the purpose of the cross! That's why Paul responds the way he does.

"It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."

The word "portrayed" can also be translated as "placarded". It means to post a public notice – like a billboard. And it provides a concise summary of Paul's ministry. If you asked Paul "What do you do?" He would say, I publicly placard the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In every town I visit, I raise a giant billboard proclaiming the Son God nailed to a Roman cross for the salvation of sinners.

This is the core of Paul's message.

"We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, the power and wisdom of God." (1 Cor 1:23)

This was the Jesus Paul had preached in the towns of Galatia. And, in his preaching, Christ Jesus Himself was publicly portrayed before their eyes. Through the preaching it was as if they were transported to Calvary and saw, with their own eyes, Jesus the Son of God, hanging naked and cursed on the tree – bearing their sin, pardoning their guilt, robbing them in His own righteousness and reconciling them to God.

They had seen it! They had believed it! And now they are abandoning it! The Judiazers are not just adding something to the gospel – they are subtracting something, something essential – the nature of Christ's work on the cross. Paul has already argued this in chapter 2. To say that a sinner can be made right with God on the basis of their own obedience to the law in the slightest degree – is to say that Jesus died in vain.

Galatians 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, *then Christ died for no purpose.*

If the law of Moses can, in any way and to the slightest degree, make us righteous before God – then what in the world was Jesus doing on the cross?? Why didn't he just keep preaching the Sermon on the Mount? And the answer is because the Sermon on the Mount has no power to reconcile sinners to God. The Sermon on the Mount can't wash away the sinner's stain, it can't atone for the sinner's guilt, it can't deliver us from this present evil age or the judgement that is to come. It can't robe a sinner in righteousness or redeem a soul from death. A moral teaching cannot do these things – only an atoning sacrifice can. And that is why Jesus came and that is why He died.

"The Son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many."

That was Paul's message. He uses the perfect tense of the word "crucified" to show that Christ's death is not something that simply happened in the past – but it is something that happened on the past with dynamic relevance and power for the present. The fact of Christ's crucifixion stands as a mountain of mercy towering over the eons of time – testifying to the finished, efficient, redemptive work of Jesus as he died for our sins. It stands today proclaiming that sinners can be saved – that whoever looks to the cross of Christ in faith will be fully forgiven, justified, sanctified and glorified.

The single requirement for this glorious salvation is faith. The single key to experiencing the power of the cross for your own soul is to believe it. I love how John Stott puts it,

"This, then, is the gospel. It's is not general instruction about the Jesus of history, but a specific proclamation of Jesus Christ as crucified...(It proclaims that) sinners maybe justified before God and by God, not because of any works of their own, but because of the atoning work of Christ; not because of anything that they have done or could do, but because of what Christ did once, when he died. The gospel is not good advice to men, but good news about Christ; not an invitation to us to do anything, but a declaration to us of what God has done."

This is the gospel, in all of its beauty and glory, in all its hope and joy and peace – and the Galatian believers where abandoning it. How incredibly foolish.

II. The Case for the Truth - The Argument from Experience

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 argues from their own experience of conversion. They had heard Paul's message – had come to believe in Christ and experienced the reality of the Holy Spirit in their life. They were experiencing the essential blessing of salvation – God Himself indwelling them.

Paul's question is: How did that happen? Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law? Did it happen after you worked really hard and managed to attain a certain level of righteousness? Is that what happened? No, that's not even close to what had happened. They received it like the weeping prostitute at Jesus feet and the trembling pagan jailer in Philippi. They received the Holy Spirit when they came to Jesus, weak and wounded, sick and sore – and believed in his love and grace manifested in his saving death! That's when the Spirit was poured out on them! They experienced the Spirit as a gift, not a wage, by receiving – not by earning, by hearing – not by doing,

Luther points out that the saving instrument of a Christian is not their hands but their ears. They heard the gospel and believed. That's how they received the Spirit.

That being the case – Paul presses it home.

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

You can only sense the incredible foolishness by grasping the polar opposites of the two terms: Spirit and flesh.

- The Spirit is the 3rd Person of the Holy Trinity – God Himself in all His Sovereign Omnipotent power.
- The flesh is human nature – in its fallen state, with all the consequent corruption, weakness and inability.

One of the basic tenets of the Christian faith is that the Christian life is a life begun by, driven by, empowered by the Holy Spirit – not the flesh. As Jesus says in John 6:63

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”

Not only is the flesh incapable of producing a Christian life – it is opposed to it!

Galatians 5:17 “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

And again,

Galatians 6:8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

You can see why Paul uses the word “foolish”. Are you so foolish?? Having begun by the Spirit – by the Sovereign Omnipotent life-transforming power of God – are you now going to try to do this in the flesh? By your own feeble, God-opposing, death-reaping efforts? Why in the world would you do that?

There a humorous Geico television ad that says “If you’re in a horror movie, you make poor decisions. It’s just what you do.” And it shows a group of terrified young adults standing in the night and in the rain, in front of a haunted looking house– frantically looking for a place to hide. One of girls says, “Why don’t we hide in the attic?” And the other says, “no, in the basement”. And another says, “Why don’t we just get in the running car? And there’s a beautiful red getaway car, engine running, light on, doors open. A clear way of escape. But a young man says “Are you crazy, let’s hide in the garage behind the chain saws”. Another says “Good idea”. And the shot cuts to the mass murderer standing behind the chain saws shaking his head in weary disbelief.

Well, trying to live the Christian life by the flesh is just as silly as running to the chainsaws for protection – with the very same predictable results. The Galatian believers were running to the law – believing that the law was the necessary ingredient for full salvation. But in running to the law, they were just running to the flesh – what the flesh could accomplish, what the flesh could do. To run to the law for holiness is just as foolish as running to the chainsaws in the garage to escape the murderer. You’re running right into his arms.

Christians, facing the threat of besetting sin often make bad decisions. In our attempt to grow in holiness we tend to follow our own foolish instincts, lean on our own incapable resources, and trust in our own paltry efforts. We’ll often run to the law looking for help. Just tell me what to do. Read my Bible more? Got it. Pray more? Done. Try harder? I promise. In fact, I promise never to sin like that again. I swear it. And we hope that our renewed vows and earnest efforts will be able to move us into Christ-likeness. But it can’t work. Running to the law for holiness is like running to the chainsaws for protection.

How does God work in the believers life??

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—

God does his saving, sanctifying work in our life – not by works of the law, but by hearing the gospel and receiving it with faith!

Only the Spirit of Christ is able to make us like Christ. That's what the Spirit was sent to do – to show you Christ, to unite you to Christ and the lead you to abide in Christ. And all of this happens as we hear and receive the gospel by faith - believing all that Christ has done for us; laying hold, by faith, of all that He is for us, all that He has promised to us, all that we are in Him.

“The law makes demands and bids us obey; the gospel makes promises and bids us believe.” For salvation and for life. Remember what Paul said, “The life I live in the flesh, I live by faith. Faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

How do you live your life in the flesh? Is your Christian life defined by trying, trying, trying? Or by trusting, trusting, trusting. The Lord invites you today to lift your eyes to all that He has accomplished for you and all He has promised to you – and live by faith.