

Grace Above the Law

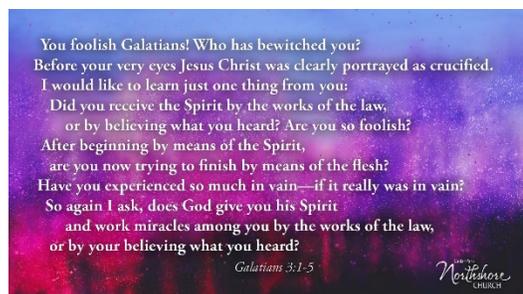
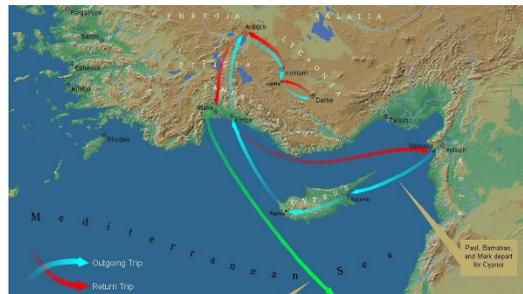
We are back in the New Testament Book of Galatians, and we are *picking up* where we left off a few weeks ago. If you were with us, or listened to the message online... great. But don't worry if you are *jumping in* with us today, because I'll quickly catch us up.

Galatia was a Roman province in the area that is now part of Turkey. The Apostle Paul, after his own dramatic experience with Jesus, determined to follow the calling of Jesus and spread the Gospel. Paul was a Jew (a scholarly, important, zealous Jew), nevertheless he determined to spread the Gospel among *non-Jews* (Gentiles). The churches in Galatia were among those first churches, comprised mostly of non-Jews, founded by Paul.

What we have in our New Testaments is a letter that Paul wrote back to those Galatians as he moved forward with his work. The letter had a generally encouraging purpose, but it was also written to solve a problem.

The problem was that after Paul had preached the Gospel, led people to faith in Christ, and established the Galatian churches, other religious people followed who were intent to have the Galatians follow Jewish laws and customs to attain and maintain their salvation. They were bringing a message of **grace +**. *Grace +* is not really grace at all.

So... last time we heard how Paul summarized the argument to the Galatians, asking:



After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?¹

When the Galatians heard the Gospel, they believed that they were saved through faith alone. Each of them experienced God's grace realizing that they could not earn any righteous standing before God by their own merit, but could only come trusting in the grace of God. This was how the church was founded in Galatia... and it is the way the church is founded in Kenmore too.

We begin "by means of the Spirit"... God's grace takes hold in our lives when we believe the Good News. We receive the grace of God through faith in Jesus, and all that Jesus accomplished on our behalf. It is God's greatest miracle.

But then we so easily walk away from that miracle as the Galatians were doing... starting "by means of the Spirit" but then trying to finish by our own means, "by means of the flesh."

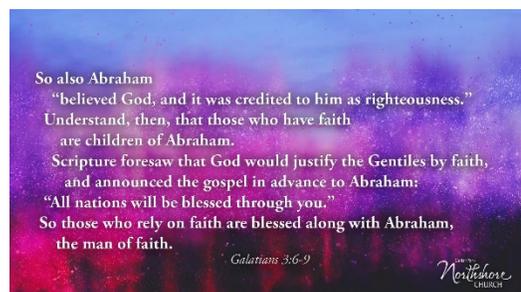
We add to God's grace by trying to justify ourselves by our *rule keeping* and such. *Rule keeping* and *religious observances* and *good work* and *charity* and such can all be wonderful when there are acts of worship in response to God's grace. But when all of that takes a subtle turn into **our** efforts to earn some sort of privilege or righteous standing before God... then it is a foolish work of the flesh that leads us astray from the Gospel.

Then Paul says in today's passage:

⁶So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ^{e 2}

Abraham is an interesting choice, since the Galatians were Gentiles. Abraham was the father of the Jews; he was the father Isaac who was the father of Jacob who God renamed Israel... the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. Appealing to Abraham made all kinds of sense for a Jewish audience... but a Gentile audience?

But that is precisely the point. Those that came after Paul were claiming authority as Jews, and were essentially insisting that the new believers in Galatia become Jews. We call them **Judaizers**.



¹ The New International Version. (2011). (Ga 3:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² The New International Version. (2011). (Ga 3:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It is almost certain that the Judaizers would have taught about Abraham, since Abraham was the patriarch of the Jews, the one who personally received God's promise that there would be a special people of God.

Paul plainly explains that Abraham was *before* the law, and so was Abraham's **faith**. It wasn't the law that made Abraham righteous; "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Here Paul was quoting Scripture (Genesis 15:6). Who knows if the Galatians recognized the Scripture, but the Judaizers would have.

Paul continued:

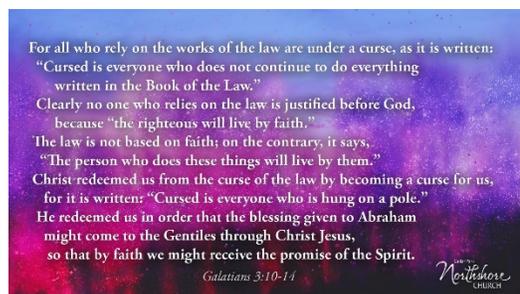
⁷ Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. ⁸ Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."^h ⁹ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. ³

It is **faith** that binds us together as children of Abraham, and children of God... not rule keeping or religious practice, faith. The blessing of all nations that would come through Abraham was not the law, but Abraham's faith and the One promised through Abraham: Jesus Christ. It was not God's plan that rule keeping and religious practice would come to the Gentiles through the children of Abraham, but rather the One who fulfilled the law (Jesus) would come via the children of Abraham. It is **faith** in God, and more specifically faith in the *One* promised through Abraham... this is what saves.

The Judaizers had it wrong; they believed that adherence to the Law was what made them holy and that all who didn't were *cursed*.

Paul explained how they had that completely upside down and backwards:

¹⁰ 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."^m ¹¹ Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith."⁴



³ The New International Version. (2011). (Ga 3:7–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ The New International Version. (2011). (Ga 3:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Keeping every law was impossible. Maybe someone could possibly maintain an outward appearance of keeping the rules, but God sees our hearts and intent... thus none can truly keep the Law. We are subject to the curse “as it is written” in Deuteronomy 27:26. Our only hope is God’s grace. The righteous can only live by faith, trusting God’s mercy and grace.

Paul even goes so far to say:

The law is not based on faith⁵

That may sound startling; it is merely a matter of logic. Faith is about believing; the law is about doing... and doing cannot earn righteous standing before God. Doing can be worship. Doing can be obedience. Doing can be the *result* of faith, for sure. But doing cannot replace faith.

Finally, Paul restates the Gospel, that which we believe... the Gospel in which we place our faith:

¹³ 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.” ^r ¹⁴ 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. ⁶

Christ redeemed us! We were slaves, bought by Jesus to be freed. The only perfect One who **did** live according the Law, took our place, becoming a curse for us. Moses wrote it in Deuteronomy 21:23, “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.” Christ became that curse for us, hanging on the pole (Cross) at Calvary.

With that purchase the promise given to Abraham was fulfilled, and through Jesus we all become a special people of God, bound together and filled with God in the person of the Holy Spirit.

This is the Gospel of grace!

⁵ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ga 3:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ga 3:13–14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

But before we go about our business today, allow me to ask a question that I like to ask from time to time: ***so what?*** What are we to take away from this ancient example of these ancient Galatians and the even more ancient Father Abraham?



The thing is... I think the problem the Galatians had isn't such an *ancient* problem.

Paul brought the Gospel to those cities and towns in Galatia and lives were changed. The Gospel started a bit of ***wildfire***... and the Judaizers came along to set things in order, to get that fire under control.



It is hard to blame them; what was happening as a result of the Gospel was unexpected and out of the ordinary... even a bit threatening and scary. The rule keeping and religious observances were all that the Judaizers knew... they were essentially Judaized themselves.

I am not at all concerned about Judaizers in our midst messing things up; I am concerned that we could be ***Christianizers***.



What we begin by means of the Spirit we so routinely try to finish in the flesh.

What begins by a miracle the Gospel can only accomplish in our hearts, we routinely try to institutionalize.

What starts as a fire we often reduce to a lukewarm lump of mush.

We speak in terms of Christian cultures and Christian organizations and even Christian families... but there really is *no such thing*. There are only ***Christians***.

I wonder how much energy and other resources we waste trying to *Christianize* our culture. Don't get me wrong; I'm in favor of our faith guiding the way we govern and behave and do business and such. But merely *Christianizing* our culture is not good enough.

Likewise, I think we often settle for merely *Christianizing* our families. If we are mostly concerned about appearances and behavior and such... we are missing the point. God forbid that we each experience the miracle that only the Gospel can produce in our hearts to then settle for merely *Christianizing* those that come after us, our families. God has children... but no grandchildren. We fail if we settle for merely *Christianizing* our families rather than doing all we can to make a way for each one to have a genuine encounter with Jesus.

We must not settle for merely *Christianizing* anyone.

This is a test I've been applying to my understanding of the work of our church. As a **church**, we must not settle for mere *Christianizing*.

I have no desire to merely *Christianize* folk here on Sunday mornings. If we succeed in getting a crowd to do the *trappings* of all of this well... singing the songs and saying the words, tithing and supporting missionaries, even mastering some of the data of our faith, but do not see lives changed by the Gospel... that would be merely *Christianizing* a crowd and it should be viewed as an utter failure. Our goal isn't to merely *Christianize* anyone, it is to do all we can to help people be Christians... to be **changed** by the Good News of the **Gospel**.

I don't expect Pastor Allison to merely *Christianize* our kids upstairs. She could keep them entertained I suppose and maybe even modify their behavior, but our goals are so much greater. We want our kids to love God, to encounter Jesus and believe the Gospel. We cannot settle for anything less.

The same goes for Chris and the youth he is reaching. He and I talk about this all the time. There are lots of youth groups that seem to merely try to *Christianize* kids... to get them to look and act in certain ways. We have no interest in such *puny* goals; we want our youth to experience the Gospel.

We must continually evaluate our work and motives. Our church is not merely an *outlet* where religious goods and services are obtained, we are not here to merely *Christianize*; we are here for the Gospel... to do all we can to help people believe in Jesus.

As we try new things, we apply this test. The *Kenmore Community Market* appears to be a success so far, but we are in it not merely to do something nice for the community and make a few bucks. And were not in it merely to *Christianize* anyone either. We do this sort of thing so that we can know our neighbors, we want to meet people and make friends. We aren't likely to show anyone the Gospel until we know them and they know us.

The same goes for the daycare and preschool we continue to work at (which, by the way is another step closer now that we have the occupancy permits we need in hand). We'll care for kids, and teach them... we'll serve our community and all... but *make no mistake about it*, we want kids to believe the Gospel. We are not going to settle for merely *Christianizing* kids.

I'm serious about this... and I hope you are too.

Merely *Christianizing* our culture, our kids, or even our churches, has no eternal impact. It isn't unusual that efforts to *Christianize* backfire, repelling people (if not repulsing them)... making it even more difficult for them to hear and believe the Gospel.

Here's where it starts. It starts with us.

The truth is, we often settle for merely *Christianizing* ourselves.

When we are mostly interested in what others see of us... we could be settling for being *Christianized*.

When we struggle with our sin by our own might and will, rather than looking to God for daily help and deliverance... we could be settling for being *Christianized*.

When we practice our spirituality in public far differently than in private... we could be settling for being *Christianized*.

When we won't wrestle with tough questions, preferring simple dogma... we could be settling for being *Christianized*.

When we see suffering and need and either can't or won't do anything about it... we could be settling for being *Christianized*.

When we are more concerned with the methods and precision and excellence of our religious practice than its authenticity... we could be settling for being *Christianized*.

I know I settle for being *Christianized* from time to time, as I suspect many of us do.

Today is a day to believe. It is also a day to confess our sin and shortcomings. And it is a day to allow God to do his work in our lives.

Allow the Spirit to guide us, convict, and correct. Let's not settle for being mere *Christianizers* when we are called to so much more.

And let's not settle for merely being *Christianized* ourselves, by anyone including ourselves. God's plan for us is to be radically changed, shaped, and guided by the Good News, the Gospel. Let's not allow that to be reduced to some measly set of Christian rules.



¹⁴ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. ⁷

⁷ The New International Version. (2011). (2 Co 13:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.