

April 27, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *The Blessing of Abraham - In Christ*

**Galatians 3:13 – 18**

To understand what Paul says in this section, we need to see it in relation to the first part of this chapter. In verses 1-5, Paul makes it crystal clear that ***we continue to walk in the Christian life the same way we began – by the Spirit of God.*** We were born of the Spirit when we received by faith the revelation of Christ our Redeemer – not by the works of the Law. That is not by keeping the commandments of God. This was the problem in the Galatian churches – having begun by the Spirit, they were trying to finish it out by their own hard work – and that Paul says, nullifies grace and dishonors God. We are justified (made right with God) by faith – and we are sanctified (made holy before God) also by faith.

Paul then gives us by way of example in verses 6-9, the faith of Abraham and shows that the only way to be a son of Abraham is to have the same kind of faith – not the same kind of genes. The blessing of Abraham comes to those who trust the promises of God as he did – not those who try to earn it by being good. And then Paul goes on in verses 10-14 to say that anyone trying to get right with God or earn merit by being good is under the curse. If you live by the law you will die by the law. You cannot take what was meant to be an inward condition of faith and make it an outward exercise of your will. That is legalism. ***It is making the law of God that was never intended to save us into the means of salvation.*** The law is good, the law is right, the law is the expression of the majesty and character of God. But when we make keeping the law a means to God – we fall into mere legalism.

The essence of legalism is ***trusting in the religious activity rather than trusting in God.*** It is putting our confidence in a practice rather than in a Person. And without fail this will lead us to love the practice more than the Person. Chuck Swindoll tells the story about a youth worker many years ago who attended a very conservative church. Being a rather forward-looking and creative young man, he decided he would show the youth group a missionary film. We're talking simple, safe, black-and-white religious-oriented movie. That film projector hadn't been off an hour before a group of the leaders in the church called him in and asked him about what he had done. They asked, "Did you show the young people a film?" In all honesty he responded, "Well, yeah, I did." "We don't like that," they replied. Without trying to be argumentative, the youth worker reasoned, "Well, I remember that at the last missionary conference, our church showed slides—" One of the church officers put his hand up signaling him to cease talking. Then, in these words, he emphatically explained the conflict: ***"If it's still, it's fine. If it moves, it's sin!"*** The moral of the story being - you can show slides, but ***when they start movin', you start sinnin'.***

When we try to keep the law to curry favor with God and gain His blessing, we actually break the law: ***For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor.*** Galatians 2:18 and we are brought under the curse of the law: ***For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse;*** Galatians 3:10 Paul was aiming his big guns at this thought that evidently plagued the Galatian churches. And this is a problem in our churches today also. It is a problem I believe, because there is this artificial tension between compassion and truth.

On the one hand you have liberal Christianity that says 'Do what you want – believe what you will – we will still love you and God understands. On the other you have the conservative side that says "Do what we say – believe it our way – or burn in hell.' ***One is love without truth and the other is truth without love.*** And this happens I believe because we make our faith either one of feelings or mere external obedience. And Paul is saying, 'Salvation is by grace through faith alone – not by ***keeping*** the law, nor by ***not keeping*** the law. It is placing all our hope, all our confidence, all our exertions in Christ, who has redeemed us from the curse of the law.' ***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE "--*** Galatians 3:13

This is the great mercy and mystery of God. Christ became a curse for us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, [God] *made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* The thought is staggering. Jesus Christ – perfect man, was made sin on our behalf. All our sin was charged to His account and He suffered the punishment for us. I don't know if eternity will suffice for us to fully appreciate what Christ did for us. We only begin to touch the surface of such sacrifice if we ourselves have been guilty of such heinous crimes that the judge and jury call for the death sentence, and as we are heading to the gas chamber someone steps up and takes our place – and he dies and we live. Charles Wesley attempted to give voice to this in his great hymn, 'And Can It Be?' *'And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me who caused His pain, for me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God didst die for me?'*

And Christ died, Paul says, *'...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.* Galatians 3:13 Here we need to notice two things, mainly. 1 – the blessing of Abraham comes to us **in Christ Jesus**. And 2 – the blessing of Abraham is something Paul calls the **promise of the Spirit**. But before we look at these two things, let us look at verses 15-18. Speaking of this promise, this blessing,

Paul says, *15 Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. 16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ. 17 What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.* Galatians 3:15-18

Paul's point here seems to be in answer to the unstated objection of those who married faith and works as the means of salvation – and their objection seems to be that Abraham may have started by faith, but God thought it necessary 430 years after Abraham to add the law with its 600+ commandments – and that means that salvation is through faith and works. **Why else would God have added the law to the promise of Abraham unless it meant that we must earn our right to the promise?**

And Paul's response was that God's promise to Abraham was in no way revised when the Law came 430 years later. He uses the analogy of an unchangeable will or covenant to make his point. Now while it may not be clear to us that this was a good point to make – after all, wills today can be changed, or added to or annulled at any time – but in Paul's day there were certain Jewish and Roman laws under which this statement would have made perfect sense. And this is why Paul uses this analogy. There were, and are, covenants, testaments, wills or oaths that cannot be changed or canceled or altered by addition. *What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.* Galatians 3:17

The promise to Abraham, salvation by grace through faith, had been ratified by God and He did not change his mind 430 years later, and say 'Whoops – I forgot, you need to keep these laws too!' And Paul's argument is that if by the introduction of the law, God were telling us that we need to earn our way to blessing by works, then the covenant of grace would be nullified. So what are we to think about the law? Next week we will develop this more fully – but for now we need to understand that **the law was fundamentally a restatement of the promise to Abraham – applied to that point in redemptive history.** It does not nullify salvation by grace through faith because in both covenants the only way to get the blessing is through faith – and both in covenants, the final blessing depends on a life of faith – not just one single, solitary act. In both covenants, the faith that saves comes from God and the result is obedience to the law – **not legalistic works – but Spirit-empowered obedience by faith.** Paul finishes out his thought in verse 18: *18 For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.* Galatians 3:18

What does this mean for us? I think the first implication for us is that the revelation of the work of God in redemption should cause us to bow our heads in worship and awe-struck humility. **Salvation is all about what God has done – not what we can do.** Too often I think we make the mistake of pinning our hopes on a one-time confession and a life-time of trying, or not trying, instead of understanding that faith is not a product of our energy – but God's – and that **faith, genuine, salvation-bearing faith brings with it the power to obey whatever it is that God has said.**

Secondly, I believe **this is a powerful statement of the trustworthiness and kindness of God**. All our issues in life are colored by our relationship or lack of relationship with God. We were created to have fellowship with the God who made us, and if our efforts at fellowship with God are distorted by a view of God that says He is primarily a demanding God, a grim, no-nonsense lawgiver and judge – how will we ever come to know the sweet joy and peace of a God who is for us, not against us – a God who says He will bless us – based not on our own merits – but on His sovereign grace? And Paul's argument is that God is absolutely trustworthy and kind. He will save you – and you cannot work to earn it. And he was speaking against those who held a view of God that prohibited them from understanding that God deals with us in grace – in response not to their works but to their faith.

And the centerpiece, I believe, of Paul's word here is that **the promise of salvation is centered in Christ**. *'...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles,* Galatians 3:13a There is no promise, no salvation outside of Christ. **In Christ Jesus** – three little words – three powerful words. To live by faith is to be in Christ. To receive the blessing of Abraham we need to be in Christ. And in Christ is where the promise of the Spirit is. **So the blessing of Abraham is not a thing – the blessing of Abraham is a person – Christ Jesus Himself.**

This goes all the way back to the promise God made to Abraham – the blessing He gave on account of faith. Turn with me to Genesis 15:1. The blessing of Abraham includes a lot of stuff – but the essence of the blessing is found here in this verse: *'After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your [exceeding great] reward.'* What could be a better reward, a better blessing than God Himself? This is the blessing of Abraham – **God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit in us to be our life and life supply – to make us sons of Abraham, sons of God, bearing His nature and likeness for His great glory and name.**

So if the promise is fulfilled in Christ Jesus, naturally we ask, 'What does it mean to be in Christ Jesus?' Paul says in verse 16: *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.* The Jews argued that the true offspring of Abraham was in Israel, and that God's demand for righteousness could only be fulfilled by strict adherence to God's Law. But Paul says that Christ is the true seed of Abraham – not the entire nation of Israel – not those who were circumcised only in the flesh and tried to keep the law – but Christ Jesus – **in Him the promise was fulfilled and now through the Spirit God was extending that promise.** Paul tells the Corinthians the same thing: *For as many as are the promises of God, in Him [Christ Jesus] they are yes; therefore also through Him [Christ Jesus] is our Amen to the glory of God through us.* 2 Corinthians 1:20 **The promise was fulfilled in Christ – and we inherit that promise by virtue of union with Christ.**

So implicit in this is that to get the blessing we need to be in Christ. In 3:27 Paul tells us: *For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* Galatians 3:27 **To be in Christ is to be clothed with Christ.** Or to put it another way – get wrapped up in Jesus. Be wrapped up in His goodness – His righteousness – His salvation. When we come to Christ He wraps us in the garment of salvation which encompasses all His heavenly virtues and character. The biggest temptation as Christians though, is to try and put back on those filthy rags we came to Christ in over the white robes of righteousness He gave us by faith. Paul reminds the believers in Romans: *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.* Romans 13:14

We desperately need to see this – we need a revelation from heaven to understand what it means to be in Christ. Christ is the sum and center of everything – all reality is focused in Him. The whole Old Testament anticipates His coming and the whole New Testament celebrates His triumph. Our eternity depends on how this is applied to our lives. This metaphor – in Christ, be clothed with Christ – put on Christ – so permeates the Scriptures – in the types and shadows of the Old Testament and in the clear doctrinal statements of the New – that we could spend the next decade teaching on what it means to be in Christ.

But we don't know if we have the next decade – we only know that we have this morning. So to sum this up – **to be in Christ Jesus is to put Him at the center and as the circumference of our lives.** Everything must relate to Him. There are no parts left for just me. My life is not divided into sacred and secular realms – **to be in Christ is to be immersed in Him.** This is a work of grace – not self-effort. It is Christ my joy, Christ my hope, Christ my patience, Christ my living and Christ my strength. To be in Christ implies that I am strengthened to do what He commands – and in Him, through me, the law of God is fulfilled. I do not look at God's law that says 'Thou shalt not lie, or steal or commit adultery' and struggle to conform to it – there is within me a deep and abiding repulsion to do those things and a deeper joyful embrace of His commands that comes from Christ Himself. We continue this life of faith just as we began – in Christ.

*Our gracious Father and Great Redeemer,*

*Roll the clouds away this morning, lift the veil of darkness that blinds us to Your goodness, open the eyes of our hearts to truly see the majesty and mystery of the blessing of Abraham. Grant us Father the gift of faith to trust You completely, believe You unshakeably, obey You perfectly. You have loved us everlastingly and unchangeably – may our hearts return that love – You have given Yourself for us – may we give ourselves to You – You have died for us – now may we live for You, in every moment of our time, in every movement of our minds, in every beat of our hearts. Forbid that we should value religious practice over a living relationship with You, or pursue the fleeting pleasures of sin instead of the eternal joys of heaven. May we not flirt with the temptations of this passing world but walk daily by Your side, listen to Your voice, be clothed with Your grace and adorned with Your righteousness.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto You.  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***