

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

FAITH is the Victory

(Galatians 3:1-14)

Study #5

Introduction: How does your garden grow...?

I grew up with a farming grandfather and a gardening father. I have become a gardening father and am now a gardening grandfather.

Currently, Kathy and I are enjoying squash and green beans and tomatoes and peppers, having moved past the season of spinach and lettuce and broccoli.

Over the years, I've enjoyed Spring and Fall gardens and have honed my home gardening skills to a (sadly, only) dull point.

But, I've got a modified square foot garden approach. I compost (but not fervently). And, perhaps most notably, I don't use chemical fertilizers.

I've come to believe that building a healthy soil is the key to successful gardening, and that organic fertilizer (for garden and lawn) is the best way to build healthy soil - soil that is loose and airy, that is better able to hold moisture and nutrients, and that promotes healthier root development.

Now, of course, the alternative to organics is chemical fertilizers. They work more quickly than organics and can make a bad garden or lawn look great much quicker than most organics can.

However, with a chemical fertilizer, the nutrients are released very quickly. The kind of growth that is promoted by the chemicals is lots of activity above the soil line, but very little root development.

The result is progressively more and more depleted soil that yields weaker and weaker plants that need more and more fertilizer to produce less and less fruit.

With consistent use of chemicals, the soil is gradually depleted of healthy nutrients and microbial activity. Eventually, plants won't grow in the poor soil.

But with organic fertilizer, the soil itself is rejuvenated, there is long-term, sustainable growth, and plants grow and stay healthy over years.

What is true in the world of plants is also true for people, of course. A diet of donuts and Coke will (badly) sustain life. But a diet of fruits and vegetables and lean meat will, over the long haul, promote health.

And, as there is a choice between foods for people and plants, so I have come to believe that there is a similar choice for feeding our souls.

There are ways to feed a soul that result in a shallow root system and a lack of sustainability. Some ways of feeding a soul produce showy good looks for a while but wind up depleting the soul of needed nutrients. And in the end, there is no fruit.

Over the years I'm sorry to say that I've ingested plenty of junk food - of the physical and the spiritual variety.

They have both left me feeling the same way. An immediate jolt, a delicious first taste. And thirty minutes later, I'm feeling either hungry or sick to my stomach.

I have tasted a food, though, that produces deep, rich roots and that promotes long-term health and a rich harvest of spiritual growth and fruit for God. And Paul writes about that food, that soul fertilizer in the passage in front of us today.

As we have seen in our studies in Galatians thus far, Paul wrote this letter to protect brand new Christians from troublemakers. He's reminding them (and us) of the true Gospel of grace and its implications.

And today we come to a passage that is health food for the soul of any Christian who wants to grow in grace.

Paul starts off by posing a set of questions, rhetorical questions - the kind of question for which you do not expect an answer.

They are like questions the drill sergeant barks at you when he is really upset about something.¹

Questions, Questions, Questions (vv. 1-5)

Prelude to a Slap: Foolish and/or Bewitched (v. 1)

[1] You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

My bet is that Paul got the attention of his readers by calling them "fools." If you want to get my attention, call me "fool." If I call you "fool" I probably get your attention, too!

None of us enjoy being called "fool" - but we listen to what follows.

And before getting to the content of his accusing questions, Paul goes one step further. He calls his readers "fools" who have been "bewitched."

Leaving the "bewitcher" unnamed, Paul says that there are bad guys out there who have twisted the fundamental message of Christianity. And it is as if a spell has been cast over them.

We know that the stakes are high because of the last phrase of this first verse - *"before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified."*

¹ Maybe that says a lot about the depth of relationship he had with these folks. It certainly says something about his passion for the truth of the Gospel.

Living in Galatia, of course, these folks had not seen Jesus' crucifixion (in that, we are just like them).

But, when he had been with them, Paul had worked hard to preach *Christ crucified!*" He proclaimed the message so powerfully and so vividly that it was as if the Galatians actually "saw" Jesus crucified when they heard Paul proclaim it.

So, what have the Galatians done? They have abandoned the message of the cross of Jesus as the central theme of their faith.²

Having begun on such a cheery note - calling them fools; accusing them of coming under the influence of witchcraft; charging them with having forgotten the central theme of the faith - the cross! - we turn to even more pointed questions.

Receiving the Spirit: By Works or by Faith? (v. 2)

[2] This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

In various places in his letters, Paul makes it clear that all believers have received the Holy Spirit. In fact, possessing the Holy Spirit is THE defining trait of the Christian.

If you have the Spirit, you belong to Christ; if you don't have the Spirit, you don't belong to Christ.³ So, in referencing the reception of the Spirit, Paul is really asking nothing more than, *"How were you saved?"*

And to that question there are only two possible answers.

Either they were saved by something that THEY DID (their obedience to the Law, their diligence in rules-keeping, their conformity to a code), OR they were saved by hearing the Gospel message, and responding with faith.

² Here at Northwest, we don't want to be foolish and do want to avoid being bewitched! So, we work hard at keeping the cross of Jesus central. A cross has been placed at the front of our church, it is embedded in the church logo, we have cross walls near the front double doors and elsewhere in our building to remind us that the Son of God loved us and gave Himself up for us. (Galatians 2:21)

³ See Romans 8.

Everyone in the Galatian churches knew that they had not been saved by something they did, just as everybody here knows the same thing.

Anyone who is saved is saved by placing their faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

We don't DO anything to receive the Spirit. What WE do is not the point. The issue is what JESUS did!

Paul fires away again with another question. This time, the focus is more on how the Christian lives than on how someone becomes a Christian.

Begun by the Spirit, Perfected by the Flesh? (v. 3)

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

Paul has already established that they were foolish. The only remaining question is, "*How foolish are you?*"

Answer? They are SO foolish that they believe that having been saved by grace through faith, God will now perfect them through the flesh!

The issue in the Galatian churches was something called *legalism*.

Legalism is the tendency to define the Christian life in terms of conformity to an external code: what you wear, what you eat, with whom you associate, etc...

Now, adherence to an external code can have some value. It can promote social cohesion. It can teach submission. But, there is one thing that adherence to an external code cannot do. It cannot, in and of itself, promote spiritual maturity or produce a fruitful life.

For example, when I attended Dallas Theological Seminary, there was a dress code for men - coat and tie every school day. No beards.

I trust that no seminary professor would have dreamed of associating the wearing of a tie or the absence of a beard with spirituality.

But, the dress code was something that the Seminary's Board of Regents decided would help give the Seminary an appropriate presentation to a watching community.

That was a call they were well within their rights to make. And, we students voluntarily submitted to that code for the time that we were at the school.

Now, what was the effect of that extra-biblical standard?

Did God teach me submissiveness through those rules? Yes. Did He break some stubbornness? Yep. Did He teach me something about dealing with authority respectfully? Yes.

But, did the wearing of a tie make me more like Jesus? No.

Growth happened based on whether or not I brought an attitude of trust to the wearing of a tie and to having a clean-shaven face.

Here was the issue: Was I trusting that God knew what He was doing by having my appearance controlled by someone else, letting someone call the shots. If I brought faith to the table, then God would use that *faith* to prompt spiritual development.

The rhetorical question of verse 3 begs a negative answer, "*No, Christians are not perfected by the flesh.*" That is, maturity is not arrived at by following an external code, what he calls here a "fleshly" set of rules.

People whose lives with Christ started with the reception of the Spirit through faith should not suppose that their growth will be in any way other than the way it began. Growth comes, as salvation came, by **FAITH**.

We find the same kind of thought in the final two questions of this barrage of questions.

Power for Living: By Works or by Faith? (vv. 4-5)

[4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? [5] 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?

Suffering for naught?

We know that Paul suffered greatly to bring the Galatians the message of the Gospel. He was ridiculed. He was stoned.

They no doubt suffered, too. They were newly converted to monotheism in a polytheistic world, to morality in an immoral world, to Christianity in a world peopled by Jews and pagans.

His point in bringing up their suffering? If they endured all of those sufferings, and yet have now abandoned the faith they had embraced which had prompted the sufferings in the first place, then all of those earlier sufferings were for naught!

They suffered for a Gospel of grace that boasted of the work of Jesus - not for a message that boasted about all the wonderful works that they were doing!⁴

What is the source of the power you are experiencing?

And now Paul wants to know: *“On what basis, through what power, are you seeing evidence of the work of God in your life?”*

Are miracles happening, prayers being answered, lives being changed, because of your adherence to the Law? Or, is the power of God unleashed in your lives because of your confident trust in God?

Again, the question begs an obvious response. It is by their trusting reliance on God that the power of God was being unleashed in their lives.

Summary: In these five verses, Paul says that these Christians had “seen” the crucifixion through Paul’s powerful preaching; had received the Spirit; had received miracles from the Father.

Everything that welcomed them into life in Christ was the work of God. Their tragic error lay in thinking that now that they were Christians, now that they had become children of God, the rules had all changed.

⁴ And make no mistake about it. Wonderful things were happening. Paul mentions miraculous works of power.

They thought that God now required obedience to an external standard of rules if they wanted to stay right with Him, or to get righter with Him.

Now don’t get me wrong. I am not saying - and Paul is certainly not saying! - that lifestyle doesn’t matter, or that we shouldn’t lead holy lives as children of God. Of course we should!

The point is certainly NOT that since we move toward maturity on the basis of faith, our works don’t matter, and we can sin or not as we wish.

The issue is this: Is FAITH or are WORKS determinative for spiritual growth?

Paul says FAITH is the determinative dynamic for the growing Christian. Or, to put it in terms of the opening, FAITH is the fertilizer that reliably yields a crop of spiritual growth. RULES-KEEPING depletes the soul of nutrients, grows shallow souls and leads to non-sustainable growth.

To make the point about faith’s centrality, Paul now retreats two thousand years to the time of the father of the faith - Abraham. Look at what happened to Abraham, when he put His trust in God!

Exhibit A: Abraham (vv. 6-9)

Justified by Faith. Period. (vv. 6-7)

Abraham’s story..... (v. 6)

After years and years of obeying God, Abraham finally came to a crisis of faith. That crisis is described in Genesis 15.

[Genesis 15:1] After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying,

“Do not fear, Abram,

I am a shield to you;

Your reward shall be very great.”

[2] Abram said, “O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” [3] And

Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.”

[4] Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” [5] And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” [6] THEN HE BELIEVED IN THE LORD; AND HE RECKONED IT TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. (or, as Galatians 3:6 has it - [6] Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD; AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.)

Why did God declare Abraham righteous/justified/saved?

Well, it wasn't because of anything Abraham did. It was because of his faith that God would keep His promise to give him a son, and because he believed that, just as God promised, his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven.

It was Abraham's trusting reliance on the promise of God that saved him. Period. And Abraham makes a pretty interesting case study, especially as we note the chronology of his life.

- PRIOR to Genesis 15, he both committed sins and performed acts of righteousness. Neither of these added to or subtracted from his redeemability.
- AFTER Genesis 15, he also performed acts of righteousness AND committed sins. The righteousnesses didn't add to his justification and the sins didn't take it away.

(For example: It is true that he tried to pawn off Sarah as his sister prior Genesis 15. But he did the same thing after Genesis 15! And, he took Sarah's advice and impregnated her maid, Hagar, IMMEDIATELY after being justified (Genesis 16).

Bottom line? The father of the faithful didn't DO anything to be justified. He simply trusted in God's promise. That is Abraham's story. And that is our story, too as Paul goes on to say in Galatians 3:7.

Our story..... (v. 7)

[7] Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.

The troublemakers said, “If you want to become sons of Abraham, you must be circumcised, like Abraham was.”

Paul (grasping the true meaning of Abraham's example) said, “If you want to be a son of Abraham, then you must trust God's promise like Abraham did!”

And to make the tie-in with spiritual growth seamless, he continues and says that if you want to experience blessing from God, the path to follow is the path of faith.

Blessed by Faith. Period. (vv. 8-9)

[8] The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.” [9] So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Again, in the same way that we become sons of Abraham by believing like Abraham did, if we want to receive the blessing of spiritual growth and of leading fruitful lives as Abraham did, we must follow the road that Abraham continued to travel - not the road of legalistic rules-keeping - but the road of faith. Robust trust in God is where it's at!

Our passage wraps up with Paul hammering the point again that salvation (justification) is on the basis of faith, that it HAS to be based on what God has done, because none of us can self-deliver.

Our Dilemma - Christ's Deliverance (vv. 10-14)

Condemned by Works Alone! (vv. 10, 12)

[10] For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.”...[12] However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.”

Wow! That is a mouthful. Everyone who doesn't abide by ALL the requirements of the Law is under the curse of God.

Some Jewish interpreters from the first century an interesting “take” on those words. (Verse 10 is a quote of an Old Testament verse, Deuteronomy 27:26)

Ignoring the plain intent, the rabbinic school of Hillel said that if a person obeyed more than they disobeyed (51%), they were justified before God on the basis of their works.⁵

That is similar to the thinking of today that if someone’s good works outweigh their bad works, then they will go to Heaven.

But, Paul (see also the book of Romans) and Moses are in agreement. Any violation of the Law of God results in condemnation. What is required is absolute moral perfection if we are going to come to God on the basis of our works.

And, as experience - and Scripture - shows, it is impossible for any of us to perfectly obey all that the Law requires.

Let’s think about what that would have meant with respect to one small part of the Law, the Ten Commandments. It would be difficult enough for someone to obey the Ten Commandments’ “Do’s” and “Don’ts” in a woodenly literal way.

Oh sure, many have made it through life without committing overt adultery or actually stealing something. But, how many of us have always put the Lord God first in our lives? (“You shall have no other gods before Me.”)

And what do we do now that we have Jesus’ interpretation of the Ten Commandments, which is that one lustful look equals adultery and one violation of love equals murder?

If we will carefully consider even the basic code of the Ten Commandments we will see that we have fallen far short of what we need to do and be to be saved on the basis of obedience to Law (works).

⁵ Consistent with the verse, the School of Shammai said that 99% obedience wouldn’t cut it.

Law’s function has never been to justify. Law condemns. And, if in anyone’s case Law does not condemn, it is because that someone, realizing they were condemned, by faith ran to God for grace and mercy!

No doubt about it. It is FAITH - not works - that leads to eternal life.

Saved by Faith Alone (v. 11)

[11] Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”

These words, first penned by the prophet Habakkuk (one of the Minor Prophets who wrote hundreds of years before Christ), are repeated in the New Testament books of Hebrews, Romans, and here in Galatians.

It doesn’t matter how good you are. Righteousness comes through faith, not works. That’s the way it was under the Old Testament system and that’s the way it is now.

The difference between the Testaments is that before Christ, people trusted in the coming Messiah, anticipating the time when God would provide the ultimate sacrifice for sin.

Now, we put our faith in the perfect sacrifice, Jesus, who has already come!

Listen now to one of the most incredible statements in the Bible.

The Work of Christ for Us (vv. 13-14)

Jesus became a curse for us (v. 13)

[13] Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us⁶—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—

⁶ In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul says that Jesus, who knew no sin, was made to be sin for us, and that He became poor that we might become rich.

Jesus, the Son of God, became a curse for us (see Deuteronomy 21:23, where Moses said that anyone who was hanged on wood was under the curse of God).

He suffered the wrath of God so that we would never have to.

Having done absolutely nothing wrong and having everything exactly right, Jesus voluntarily took upon Himself the guilt for our sin when He died on the cross.

And in so doing, He fell under the curse of God, just as the lambs used in the Old Testament sacrifices did. He was an innocent substitute for guilty sinners.

And here's the punchline.

We receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (v. 14)

[14] 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.

There it is again. The blessing of Abraham comes only through faith.

Conclusion:

So, what does what Paul says to the Galatians say to people like us, today?

We want to know how to walk this Christian way. We want to make spiritual progress and have deep soils that produce a rich harvest for God.

Troublemakers in Galatia in the first century and troublemakers in 2009 are peddling a spiritual fertilizer that produces shallow roots, lots of quick, showy growth - and no staying power.

What is needed is the organic fertilizer of a robust faith in Jesus!

I've seen it time after time after time. A sincere, zealous Christian, all full of fire, gets sucked into a rules-based orientation for leading a God-honoring life.

He (or she) creates elaborate formulas and guidelines. He makes rulebooks and establishes metrics for measuring progress.

And the progress, for a while, is astounding. Bad habits fall away. There is improvement in speech patterns. Things are looking good.

But the focus on rules and works inevitably depletes the soul of energy. The sincere Christian gets tired of following the rules. The only way to combat the flagging zeal is to ADD MORE RULES.

Well, that works for a while. But like a steady diet of chemical fertilizer on a lawn or junk food in a body is eventually counterproductive, so the rule-following Christian eventually just gets tired and discouraged.

After a while he can be heard to say, *"I tried Christianity. It just didn't work for me."*

The problem, of course, is that what was tried was legalism, not Christianity.

Let the hungry-to-grow Christian feed his soul with a steady diet of trusting reliance on God and watch the roots grow deep.

Given time, the Christian who exercises his faith muscle, and:

- remembers that the Son of God loved him and delivered Himself up for him
- remembers the cross and the resurrection;
- remembers God's grace;
- remembers the goodness of God

will sent roots down deep, will grow, will produce an abundant harvest and will see the power of God unleashed in his life.