

## 7. O foolish Christians!

January 3, 2013

Can you imagine Michael Phelps who is the most decorated American Olympic swimmer with a total of 22 medals deciding that he didn't want to swim anymore but wanted to play in wrestling in 2012 Summer Olympic right before his most favored "200 meter Butterfly"? You couldn't. Your response to Michael Phelps' sudden urge for wrestling would be, "Are you a nut? You've come so far. How could you throw it all away? You don't know anything about wrestling. How foolish, Michael Phelps!"

Foolish indeed! But not nearly as foolish as turning your back on the grace of God that saved a person and instead embracing a legalistic way of living which only brings condemnation. This is what the Galatian Christians did and that is why apostle Paul called them "foolish."

The sixty verses that make up Galatians 3 and 4 are some of the strongest writing that Paul ever penned. But, after all, he was in a battle. He was out to prove that salvation is by grace alone, and not by the works of the Law.

Paul uses six different arguments in chapter 3 and 4 to prove that God saves sinners through faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law.

**1) The personal argument** (Galatians 3:1-5): He asks the Galatians to recall their personal experience with Christ when they were saved.

**2) The scriptural argument** (Galatians 3:6-14): Paul quotes six OT passages to prove his point.

**3) The logical argument** (Galatians 3:15-29): The apostle reasons with his readers on the basis of what a covenant is and how a covenant works.

**4) The historical argument** (Galatians 4:1-11): He explains the place of Law in the history of Israel.

**5) The sentimental argument** (Galatians 4:12-18): The apostle appeals to them to remember his love and their happy relationship in days past.

**6) The allegorical argument** (Galatians 4:19-31): His argument is based on the life of Abraham and his relationships with Sarah and Hagar.

Practical application of his doctrinal argument follows in the last two chapters.

### A. THE PERSONAL ARGUMENT

*Galatians 3:1-5 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? 2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? 4 Have you suffered so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? 5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?*

The Greek word for 'foolish' is "anoetos" which means "mindless behavior, acting without thinking." The J.B. Phillips translation is far more blunt:

*Galatians 3:1 O you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Jesus Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? JBP*

As if someone hypnotized the Galatian Christians, they went along with the Judaizers' heresies without any resistance. I really like the word 'bewitched' in NKJV which led

astray by sorcery. The Judaizers had, in a sense, mesmerized them into thinking that they could earn God's favor by keeping the Law which fanned their pride.

This powerful charm of legalism pulled the Galatians away from Christ, whose crucifixion Paul had preached in Galatia with such effectiveness that the people could almost see Jesus crucified for them on the cross.

I like what theologian Charles C. Ryrie said about legalism: "Legalism may be defined as "a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self." That is exactly what legalism is – Pride.

After his stern rebuke, Paul now asks them a series of four rhetorical questions in v2-5 that were designed to reveal the foolishness of trying to live under the Law:

**1) The question of receiving the Holy Spirit – v2**

*Galatians 3:2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?*

The Galatians knew that they had received the Holy Spirit upon believing Paul's Gospel and putting their trust in Jesus Christ. The Spirit didn't come to indwell them as some kind of reward for living up to the OT Law's rules and regulations. The Holy Spirit was given to them as God's gift and guarantee for their salvation.

**2) The question of living by the Spirit – v3**

*Galatians 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?*

When the Galatians received the Holy Spirit into their hearts as they got saved, it had nothing to do with their own effort. Now they were trying to convince themselves that the salvation and sanctification have something to do with the way they live with the OT Jewish Laws.

This doesn't apply to the first Century Galatian Christians only, but also many legalists and the gullible followers in the 21st Century. The apostle is talking to Christians – people who are already saved. So legalism's distortion of the Gospel doesn't just keep people from being saved, it keeps saved people from growing in their faith. Legalism hinders both justification – God's declaration of the sinner righteous through faith in Christ – and sanctification – the process of growing in Christ.

*Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

To embrace Christ by faith and then resort to living by works is inconsistent and incomprehensible.

**3) The question of suffering – v4**

*Galatians 3:4 Have you suffered so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain?*

Another logical question the apostle had to ask these legalist-wannabes was about their suffering for Christ. Living the Christian life was no piece of cake in Galatia region during that time. Both Paul and the Galatian Christians had endured ostracism and persecution for their faith for the sake of the Gospel previously. They endured all that because they believed Paul's message of grace. If they put themselves back under the Law, that suffering would mean nothing because they would be no different than the Gentiles who tried to earn their favors from their idols by following the rituals they had.

#### 4) The question of miracles – v5

*Galatians 3:5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?*

There are several thoughts among the Bible scholars regarding the miracles Paul mentioned here. Some say that the miracles were the spiritual gifts the Galatian believers received from the Holy Spirit and exercised; the others would say that the miracles were the ones that were done through apostle Paul by the Holy Spirit; and the rest would insist that they were not only the outward displays of supernatural power but also include the inward miracle of salvation. I would go for the third option.

One thing for sure, these miracles had nothing to do with their works, but they were the results of their faith in the Lord.

Systematically, like a prosecuting attorney, Paul exposes the futility of legalism. Guess what? He was not done yet. He was just getting warmed up.

### **B. THE SCRIPTURAL ARGUMENT**

*Galatians 3:6-9 just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” 7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.*

To the Judaizers and even today’s Jewish people, there are three prominent OT Jewish biblical characters they had placed above anyone else – almost to the point of deity. Who are they? Abraham, Moses, and king David.

Since the Judaizers wanted to take the Galatian believers back into the Law, Paul quoted the Law; since they magnified the place of Abraham in their religion, Paul used Abraham as one of his witnesses. Paul showed them that the very father of the Jewish nation was saved by faith and not by keeping the Law by quoting Genesis 15:

*Genesis 15:6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.*

At this point of Abraham’s life, he was old, more likely ancient, and childless. God promised him that he would be the father of the Jewish nation and he would have an heir and countless descendants. Abraham simply believed that God would do what He promised to do.

He was justified by faith, not by keeping the Law. This was done ten years before circumcision was instituted by God in Genesis 17; and it was 400 years before the Mosaic Law ever came into the picture.

The Jewish people were very proud of their relationship with Abraham. The trouble was, they thought that this relationship guaranteed them eternal salvation. John the Baptist warned them that their physical descent did not guarantee spiritual life.

*Matthew 3:9 and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘ We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*

Jesus made a clear distinction between “Abraham’s seed” physically and “Abraham’s children” spiritually in John 8:33-47.

Some people today still imagine that salvation is inherited. Because mother and father were godly people, the children are automatically saved. But this is not true. As I've said many time before, no one can ride on someone else's spiritual coat tails.

### **C. WARNINGS**

- 1) Legalism hinders the spiritual maturity of Christians.
- 2) Legalism suffocates freedom in Christ.
- 3) Legalism obscures the grace of God.
- 4) Legalism pumps up our pride and is very contagious.