

Growing in Grace: Avoiding the Trap of Legalism

Paul's letter to the Galatians contains a powerful warning that remains relevant for Christians today. After defending his apostolic authority and correcting false teachers, Paul turns his attention to the church itself, addressing believers who had allowed themselves to be led astray from the freedom found in grace.

What Does It Mean to Be "Foolish" in Faith?

Paul begins Galatians 3:1 with striking words: "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" The word "foolish" here doesn't mean lacking intelligence. Rather, it describes someone who can think but chooses not to use their power of perception - someone who knows better but has become fascinated by false teaching.

This fascination can bewitch believers to the point where they lose their spiritual wits. Remarkably, some people find a strange comfort in bondage because grace feels too uncertain. Grace can be scary because it provides no measuring stick, like a yard without a fence. Some believers feel they need rules and regulations to know exactly where they stand with God.

How Do We Receive the Holy Spirit?

Paul asks four crucial questions that help believers examine their faith foundation. The first question addresses how we receive the Spirit: "Did you receive the Spirit by works of law, hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:2).

The answer is clear - we receive the Holy Spirit through faith, not performance. You cannot work your way to receiving God's Spirit, nor can you purchase it. Simon the sorcerer learned this lesson when he tried to buy the Holy Spirit's power with money. Our righteousness apart from Christ is like filthy rags, which is why grace becomes essential.

How Are We Sanctified and Set Apart?

The second question deals with sanctification: "Are you so foolish, having begun by the Spirit, are now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). Sanctification means being set apart for God's purposes. As Christians, we're no longer part of the world system but belong to God's family.

This sanctification doesn't come through works but through faith and grace. While we'll never achieve sinless perfection in this life, God calls us to spiritual maturity. He wants us to grow up in our faith, moving beyond spiritual infancy to become mature believers who can handle life's challenges.

What About Suffering and Trials?

Paul's third question addresses suffering: "Did you suffer so many things in vain?" (Galatians 3:4). Christians will face attacks and difficulties. The question is: when trials come, do we throw in the towel and fall back into works-based righteousness?

The Bible teaches that our works will be tested by fire at the judgment seat of Christ (the bema seat). This isn't about heaven or hell - that's already settled for believers. Instead, it's about the quality of our works, not the quantity. What matters is whether our actions were done with the right motive for God's glory, not for personal recognition.

On What Basis Does God Perform Miracles?

The final question concerns miracles: "So then does he who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you do it by works of law or hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:5). We cannot earn miracles or make deals with God. God isn't a deal-maker; He's a faith-maker. Miracles come through faith, not through our attempts to bargain with the Almighty.

Understanding Two Different Covenants

The Old Testament contains two primary covenants that Christians must understand: the Mosaic covenant (the law) and the Abrahamic covenant. These represent two different approaches to relating to God, and we must choose which one influences our Christian walk.

Abraham's Covenant of Faith

Abraham lived 430 years before the law was given. When God found Abraham, there was something about him that enabled him to simply believe God. "Abraham believed God and was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Galatians 3:6). Abraham wasn't a Jew under the law - he was the forefather of faith whose belief opened the door for Gentile believers to come to God.

God promised Abraham that "all the nations will be blessed in you" (Galatians 3:8). This blessing comes through faith, not through keeping the law. Abraham's faith established a covenant where God essentially said, "If you mess with Abraham, you mess with me."

The Law's Purpose and Limitations

The law came later and served a specific purpose: to show how much we need grace. "For as many are the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law to perform them" (Galatians 3:10).

Under the law, you could do 100 things right, but one mistake brought the curse. The law was a tutor designed to demonstrate that we cannot be perfect on our own. This is why we need Christ - the law reveals our need for a Savior.

What Does It Mean to Be Redeemed?

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). Redemption means being purchased back from doom, condemnation, and a self-defeating life. Before Christ, even successful lives are ultimately doomed because they lack eternal purpose.

Christ's redemption accomplished two things: it purchased us back from the curse, and it gave us the promise of the Spirit. God's goal was never just external compliance but internal transformation through the Holy Spirit living within us.

Why the Holy Spirit Must Live Inside Us

God learned that having the Spirit work from the outside doesn't work effectively. The pull of the world is too strong. When we yield our lives to Jesus Christ and invite Him to live inside us, the Holy Spirit can work from within, enabling us to walk in freedom from past bondages, temptations, and failures.

We can choose between two options: being blessed based on our performance under the law, or being blessed based on the Holy Spirit working through us. Sadly, some Christians choose the performance route, constantly trying to put themselves into the equation when God designed salvation to take us out of the equation entirely.

The Promise Versus the Law

The blessing comes through one seed - Jesus Christ - not through the Jewish nation or keeping the law. "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. And it does not say and to seeds, referring to many, but rather one. And to your seed, that is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

Moses' law was conditional, but Abraham's promise was unconditional. Which would you prefer - conditional love that depends on your performance, or unconditional love based on grace? The Abrahamic covenant offers unconditional love, while the Mosaic covenant demands perfect performance.

Our Identity as God's Children

"For all who baptized into Christ Jesus, have clothed yourself with Christ" (Galatians 3:27). When we put on Christ, it changes us like putting on special clothing changes how we feel and act. We're clothed with His righteousness, not our own efforts.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). God doesn't play favorites. The person with the poorest self-image is loved just as much as someone who thinks they're perfect. We're all equal in God's eyes and heirs to His promises.

Life Application

This week, examine your relationship with God honestly. Are you trying to earn His love through performance, or are you resting in the grace He's already provided? Choose to live by faith like Abraham rather than trying to measure up through rules and regulations.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Am I trying to earn God's approval through my actions, or am I trusting in what Christ has already done?
- When I face difficulties, do I fall back into works-based thinking, or do I stand firm in grace?
- Do I see other believers as equals in God's family, regardless of their background or current spiritual maturity?
- Am I allowing the Holy Spirit to work from within me, or am I trying to manage my Christian life through external effort?

The goal isn't rule-keeping but receiving more of God's Spirit in your life. As John the Baptist said, "He must increase, I must decrease." Let God's life increase in you while your old self-centered life decreases, walking in the freedom that Christ purchased for you.