



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Hearing with Faith

Galatians 3:1-14

Sermon by: Robert Austell

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Last week we looked at two encounters in Galatians 2 where Paul's teaching on grace was put to the test. First he met with the group of Apostles who led the new Christian movement in Jerusalem to confirm that they all shared the same MESSAGE of grace and MISSION to Jews *and* Gentiles. They did.

Then he ran into Peter in Antioch. At first Peter was eating among the Gentile Christians, but when a certain group pushing the requirement of circumcision came into town, he started acting contrary to his own beliefs and the agreed-upon message and mission and separated from the Gentile believers. Paul challenged this behavior, pointing to God's grace alone as the measure of salvation and belonging.

Paul recounted these two encounters to the Galatians because apparently they are dealing with similar issues. So now in Galatians 3 he turns his focus to them directly, asking who has fooled them into accepting a counterfeit message. He fires off a series of six questions before turning to Abraham himself as an example of God's grace over works. We'll look at that and then look at some application for us.

SIX QUESTIONS

Here are the six questions. They are all rhetorical, not seeking information as an answer, but reflection upon the implied answer.

1. *What happened to my thoughtful friends? (v.1)* - Having just finished ch. 2 with “if righteousness is through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” Paul is incredulous. Don’t they know of the crucifixion and its necessity? (Paul has told them, if nothing else!) This is not “foolish” like he’s calling them stupid; rather it is so out of character (they have a reputation for being smart!). He goes on to ask if they’ve been ‘bewitched’.
2. *Did you receive the Spirit by works or faith? (v.2)* - Paul appeals to their own experience: they did not begin with works and Law, but by responding to the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. They did not ‘earn’ the Spirit, but experienced it as God’s gift to them.
3. *Again, where did my friends go!?* (v.3a) - Paul, still incredulous.
4. *If by faith, why would that change now?* (v.3b) - If it all began by receiving a gift through hearing with faith, why would it change now to works of Law. Aren’t they already saved? Haven’t they already received the Holy Spirit? There is not “another level” of perfection to attain. (Maturity is a better way to understand Christian growth, and one he will introduce in chapter 4, where he will actually equate legalism with immaturity.)
5. *Did you suffer in vain? (v.4)* - This word could be ‘suffer’ or ‘experience’. It is not clear to what it refers, but either persecution over their initial conversion or perhaps experience of the Spirit and miracles in v.5. In either case the sense is “isn’t all that you’ve come through by grace to this point validating to you?” In other words, God would not bait and switch, bringing you in with a gift and then holding you with a requirement.
6. *Again, is God’s Spirit and miracles a gift or a reward? (v.5)* - One last run through the same argument... are you with me, yet? God provides and you hear and believe; it is not a reward for your good behavior. Right? Let me remind you of how God works....

THE BLESSING OF ABRAHAM

Paul exits the rhetorical questions and turns to a direct and positive example of how God has worked. And it's no random example, but Abraham, the father of the faith and the original receiver of God's covenant. Paul introduces this approach in verse 6, then goes on to 'unpack' God's gift and Abraham's faith: "Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Paul is quoting Hebrew scripture, from Genesis 15:6. It is in that chapter, which we heard in our Call to Worship, that God promises Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars. Abraham did not have to perform righteous deeds to earn this blessing, it was God's gift, promised by covenant to Abraham. That covenant is first presented in Genesis 12, which we also heard in the Call to Worship. There God not only promises blessing to Abraham, but says, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." God's promise is for *all* the nations of the world *through* Abraham and his children.

And all this predates the Law. The Law came with Moses, hundreds of years after Abraham. The Law was given to protect and care for God's people, like rules about not playing in the street or looking both ways before crossing. But the gift had already been given.

One way I've always illustrated this is by sharing rules we had for our children growing up. They were not allowed to play in the street without one of us present. Now, sometimes they *did* go in the street and there were consequences for that. But those consequences were not kicking them out of the family. They did not lose the family name. That rule was not there to determine whether they could be Austells. It was there to protect them because we love them! So it was (and is) with God's Law and God's Word. It does describe "rules of the family" which are for our protection, health, and well-being. But our belonging to God's family is through God's gracious initiative, first in creating humanity, then through the promises to Abraham, and then through Christ. In each case God was making a way for us which we can believe because God is trustworthy.

Paul follows through the implications of God's grace toward Abraham to declare 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." (v.14) A key phrase that Paul repeats several times in our text today is "hearing with faith." As Christy explained, faith is believing someone because we trust them. Hearing with faith is listening to God and the promises of God and believing them because we trust God. Let's consider what that might mean for us.

HEARING WITH FAITH

Twice in this passage Paul asks the Galatians if they received the Holy Spirit through works of Law or by hearing with faith. Paul's clear answer - and he seems to hope it's clear for them as well - is that we are saved and receive the promised Holy Spirit by hearing with faith, by believing the message of and about Christ because we trust God.

I want to ask two questions of my own to try to apply today's text.

How do we "hear with faith?"

We hear with faith by hearing and by trusting. To hear we must listen or read the message of and about Jesus Christ. That message isn't going to just pop into our head. We must read and learn and pray to take it in. That doesn't just happen in a worship service through a sermon, but through Bible reading and study, through prayer, and through commitment to learn the teachings of scripture. And trust... it's hard to trust someone you don't know well. Think about all that goes into building human trust. We spend time with people; we share experiences where their character is demonstrated. We live life and trust grows incrementally as our experience grows. Trusting God is like that as well. Children come to trust God by seeing their parents do it. We come to trust God through prayer and seeing God's answers to prayer, though sometimes those aren't what we envisioned. We come to trust God as we see the character of God, described in scripture, proven in our lives and the lives around us. God is faithful; God is patient; God is full of compassion and mercy. Trust isn't quick or easy; it takes time and

proximity and relationship. And so to hear by faith we must take time to know God and come to trust him. As trust grows, so faith and experience grows!

Why does it matter whether we are saved and experience God through works or by hearing with faith?

It matters because there seems to be some kind of internal wiring that makes us want to earn God's attention. Maybe this starts in childhood when we call out to friend and family, "Watch me!" Or maybe we learn this system from grades, performance reviews, and a hundred other things. The thing is that working our way to God is not the way, nor is it just a less effective way. It's no way at all. And if we don't know or realize that it can be so frustrating. We come up with whatever it is we think will impress God and then don't experience God any differently. We have perfect attendance or give a certain amount of money away or pray in a certain way or a certain number of times. And some of those things *are* good things. But they won't save us. And at the end of the day, when we are exhausted by being good, we realize that we have not closed the gap. God must come to us!

The Good News is that God HAS come to us... all the way! And God has told us what we need to know to experience His presence and salvation. We must simply receive it, trust God at His Word, hear with faith. THEN we will start experiencing God. God stops becoming the rule-book and we recognize Him as the patient and compassionate Abba Father. God stops becoming referee and becomes the One who welcomes us home.

There are more than a few church-going people who have followed the rules all their life, but do not have a personal relationship with or experience of God. Faith comes through hearing, through trusting. It is a gift of God by which we are brought close into the heart of God.

Paul has dialed way back from the nitty gritty of food and circumcision laws to the heart of it all. Do you trust God at His Word? If you have not or do not, would you now? That's the starting place for sorting out the rest of life.

I am reminded of the song “Step by Step” or rather the fuller version entitled, “Sometimes by Step.” In it, songwriter Rich Mullins sings this verse:

*Sometimes I think of Abraham
How one star he saw had been lit for me*

And that verse feeds into the familiar chorus, which is a song of trust, a song of faith:

*O God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you
O God, you are my God, and I will ever praise you
I will seek You in the morning
And I will learn to walk in your ways
And step by step you'll lead me
And I will follow you all of my days*

That's faith and trust - praising God, seeking God each day, learning to walk in God's ways, following God's leading. Amen.