

"By Grace Alone"

Galatians 3:1-14

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If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and he asked you "Why should I let you into heaven?"—what would you say? Your answer tells a lot about how you understand God.

One response is the non-response, simply putting God out of mind. The question can make people uncomfortable. They might say, "That's personal."

If you pressed them, some people may resort to comparison: "Well, I may not be perfect, but compared to a criminal or a murderer, I haven't done too badly."

Others might say, "Because I try to measure up," or, "I've done a lot of good things. I've worked hard."

Still others say, "Well, I'm sincere, so that should count for something."

What can we do to satisfy the Lord of the universe? What is enough? What exactly do we owe God?

Can you give money? You can, and probably should, but it's already his. Everything we have is only on loan, entrusted for his service. That won't earn you any points.

Can you offer the work of your hands? You can, and probably should, but he created everything that exists, including your hands. Our bodies, our very lives, already belong to him. We can't bargain our way into heaven.

God is so grand, so colossal, we have only one response: to give up all our efforts to impress him.

What God has done for us is beyond price. God spared nothing to bring us from darkness to light, from death to life. Not even his own Son. That means his commitment to us is total. And because it's total, ours can't be token. Nothing short of full commitment will do.

This is where faith comes in. Why faith? Because you can't impress God, and you can't demand a recount, and you can't appeal to a higher court. Faith is renouncing our own attempts to appease God. It's responding with our whole self to God's demonstration of love. Christ loved us and gave himself for us. By faith we love him back and give ourselves to him.

The Christians in Galatia needed to hear this. They were close to missing the whole point of the gospel. Paul shows them this with a series of sharp questions. How did the Galatians respond to these questions? We don't know. But I hope that their dialogue with Paul would have gone something like this:

Question: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by believing what you heard?

I hope they answered, "Well, Paul, your point's well taken. We weren't practicing the law when we first heard the good news about Jesus. God gave his Spirit as a gift in response to believing the good news. The Christian life is all by grace."

Question: Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?

I hope they answered, "You're right, Paul. How can what we do compare with what God's already done? Our own striving and schemes and works don't amount to much in the end, except to obscure the gospel message. Trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to make people new-- that's the basis for the Christian life."

Question: Did you experience so many things in vain?

I hope they answered, "Heaven forbid! Don't let it all be for nothing! Our own experience proves that justification, and righteousness, is by faith, not works. Paul, we've forgotten a critical truth."

Question: Does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you because of your doing works of the law, or because of your believing what you heard?

I hope they answered, "Paul, thank you for removing the blinders from our eyes. The sequence really is always hearing and believing the gospel; receiving the Spirit; and then experiencing the power of God."

Not works but faith had saved the Galatians. This manner of God's working was nothing new. Many centuries before, God had worked with Abraham in the same way.

What about Abraham pleased God?

Was it his personal integrity? No—the Bible is honest about Abraham's faults.

Was it his perfect obedience? No—more than once Abraham took matters into his own hands.

Was it his circumcision? No—that was only the badge of something deeper—his loyalty and his commitment to God.

God counted Abraham a righteous man not because he began to practice circumcision, but because he trusted God. In spite of his sin and shortcoming, he is a model of faith for us. Those who respond to God's grace by believing him are the true children of Abraham, heirs to the blessings God promised him.

Faith brings blessing. And to make it clear why we need faith, Paul adds a shocking contrast: If faith brings blessing, then law causes curse. He quotes, "Cursed is everyone who hangs from a tree." (Gal. 3:10, from Deut. 27:26)

What is the law? Paul uses the term in different ways at different times. Sometimes was referring to the Ten Commandments. At other times, he meant the Pentateuch, or the first five Books of the Bible, what Jews call the Torah, the Law. And at yet other times, he was talking about scripture in general, like in the phrase "the Law and the Prophets." The point is that the law is expansive. It expresses God's righteous demands.

Paul means that the law has to be seen as a whole. You can't pick and choose which part you'll obey. You can't honor some commandments and throw away the ones you don't like. To live by the law means to live by the whole law—or else! Obey it perfectly, or else you better not count on the law to make you right with God.

Think of it: one spot of raspberry jam ruins an otherwise perfectly good white shirt. One nail flattens a tire. And one broken law brings the whole law down upon us in judgment.

Faith sees that Christ took the punishment of God's law for us.

This comes out in the story of "The Last of the Mohicans". It's a story about the struggle for control of North America in the 18th century right before the American Revolution. English, Scotch-Irish, Dutch, and French Huguenot farmers live along the border with vast Mohawk and Huron lands before the Revolution. Life becomes dangerous for them when the French start using the Indians to attack settlements along the frontier.

Heyward is a young British officer who loves a young woman named Cora, the daughter of the British commander Munro. The Huron have captured Cora and her little sister. The Huron chief decided to burn Cora at the stake, and to give away the younger daughter in marriage.

The Indians start to drag Cora to the fire, when young officer Heyward desperately pleads with the chief. The old chief's eyes go to Cora, and he says something to his warriors. They stop dragging her toward the fire pit. They throw her aside, and instead grab Heyward. The officer gave himself in her place. Heyward will die in the fire, buying freedom for the two girls.

That's a picture of what Jesus Christ has done for us. He paid the price. He suffered for our sins. He took the curse. He fulfilled the law. "He was reckoned with the transgressors." (Luke 22:37) He gave his life so we could be free.

So by having faith, the Christian is no longer under the law, but is freed from the law.

That means the law has no more power over us. Now it has a purpose that is holy and good. Now the "law of Christ", that is, the Lord's commandment to love one another, can be fulfilled in the Spirit. So instead of something that crushes us, now the law shows us God's good purpose for us. It's something we *want* to do, not in a desperate attempt to win God's favor, but in order to say "Thank you Lord. I want to live for you."

Jesus gave his life in our place to pay the penalty of the law. The mighty God of the universe has poured out his love—what can we do but respond in adoring wonder?

I think Ken Gire expresses it well in his book, *Windows of the Soul*. He tells about the example of the faith of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, the one who sits at Jesus feet and anoints him with costly perfume. He writes,

"The most fulfilling thing I remember as a father is coming home when [my children] were younger and hearing the first one who saw me, holler to the other, "Dad's home!" And then to see them all come running, throwing their arms around me, showering me with hugs and kisses."

That was a long time ago. They're teenagers now. Their thoughts are other places when Dad comes home. Homework. Television. Household chores. Telephone. I was no different when I was their age.

We all group up and grow out of our childlike enthusiasms. But maybe something of the little girl in Mary never did. And maybe one of the reasons she meant so much to the Savior was that she had a "Jesus is home!" type of excitement whenever she saw Him, and that sitting at His feet or anointing Him with perfume came as naturally as children throwing their arms around their daddy's legs and showering Him with hugs and kisses."

Our response to the love of God in Jesus Christ should be the same. We should simply trust, receive him in faith, and rush into his arms to return his love.

Do you have faith in Jesus? Do you trust in him? Then you are a child of God, part of the true vine, a friend of Christ. You are chosen and appointed by him, and are no longer under condemnation. You are accepted and sanctified and reconciled to him. You are blessed, secure and sealed by the Holy Spirit. You are God's workmanship, a fellow citizen with the household of God, an expression of the life of Christ, chosen by God before the foundation of the world, a son or daughter of the light and not of darkness. You are alive, born of God, and the evil one cannot touch you.

So do not submit again to a yoke of slavery, Paul will tell us in chapter five. You receive the promised Spirit by faith alone. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Simply believe, and receive the gift of eternal life. Do it today and you will know that if you die tonight, you have a home in heaven with Jesus.