

Faith versus Performance

From Galatians

By Dennis Prutow

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Bible Text: Galatians 3:9-14

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Westminster Evangelistic Ministries

Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

7418 Penn Avenue

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15208

Website: www.wordfortheweek.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/rptsprof

Please turn in your Bibles to the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians, I would like to read from Galatians 3:1 through verse 14. Hear God's Word.

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? 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? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? 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?

Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 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."

So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. 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." Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"—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.¹

¹ Galatians 3:1-14.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for your Word. We pray that you will be pleased to give us grace as we have opportunity to look into it. We ask that you will deal kindly and tenderly with us and show your mercy through your Word by the power of your Spirit. We pray these things in the good and gracious name of Jesus Christ who is the only Lord and Savior. Amen.

I direct your attention this evening to Galatians three verses nine through 14. This is my text, Galatians 3:9-14.

After I had the privilege of graduating from the Military Academy at West Point my first regular army assignment was in Korea. I was assigned to the 13th Signal Battalion of the First Cavalry Division stationed at a base camp north of Seoul. It was the division headquarters and I had an opportunity to get acquainted with the division chaplain. I was not a Christian at the time.

One morning I went to the chaplain's office after I had given a class for my company. I sat down in the chaplain's office. He looked at me and he said, "Lieutenant, why are you here?" I said, "I don't have the vaguest notion." The very next words out of his mouth were, "Have you ever accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Figuring it was not a good thing to lie to the chaplain I said, "No, I have not."

He proceeded to get out a New Testament and relate to me the fact that I was a sinner. He went to verses like Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."² Well, he didn't need to tell me I was a sinner. I knew that already. In fact, it was abundantly evident to me that this was the case. He then proceeded to go to other texts to explain the gospel, "Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust."³ That Christ, "bore our sins in His body on the cross,"⁴ that "he might bring us to God."⁵

For the first time in my life I actually *heard* the gospel. Yes, I had heard it before, if you understand me, but for the first time in my life I actually understood the gospel. I did believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. I learned on that day that the blessing of God comes by faith in Jesus Christ, not on the basis of performance. I had always been taught a good work ethic and that performance was important. But I learned on that day: Faith in Jesus Christ, not performance, is what gives you blessing before God. This is what Paul is leading us to in our text.

This is a text that he speaks to Churches, the Churches in Galatia. As a result, this text is applicable to you and to me. And Paul is making this very same point. Faith in Jesus Christ, not performance, is your path to blessing before God.

² Romans 3:23.

³ 1 Peter 3:18.

⁴ 1 Peter 2:24.

⁵ 1 Peter 3:18.

As we get into this text, look, first of all, at Galatians chapter three and verse 11. Paul makes our point, at least in part, abundantly clear. Verse 11. “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’”⁶ Paul is very clear, it seems to me, that the law is not a way of justification. By justification Paul means that God is no longer offended with you and you are no longer offended with God.

My wife and I watched part of a debate last evening between Christopher Hitchens who is a well known British Atheist and Denish D’Souza who is a Christian from India. During the course of the debate Christopher Hitchens scoffed at the notion of faith in Jesus Christ. He scoffed openly and publicly at the notion of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And he berated the idea of the gospel. He did so openly and publicly and he was applauded for doing so.

But the text which is before us makes abundantly clear that the way of the law is not a way of justification. God comes to people like you and me through faith. By faith in Jesus Christ we receive a righteousness from God and the forgiveness of our sins. God is no longer offended with us and we no longer take the position of Christopher Hitchens and are offended at God. This is a very good thing. And so Paul presents this very clearly. “THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”⁷ And in opposition to this he says, “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident.”⁸

And Paul says the very same thing in Galatians 2:21. Look at that text. “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”⁹ You see, righteousness, justification, does not come through the law. Paul also says this in Galatians 3:21. “Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.”¹⁰ But, friends, this is not the case. Paul is pressing this very issue.

Now as you go to the very next verse, verse 12 in Galatians three, you see that the apostle Paul quotes from the law. He has just quoted from one of the prophets, from Habakkuk. But now he quotes from the law, from Leviticus chapter 18. It is verse five that he has in mind. Keep your finger there in Galatians and turn with me, if you would, to the Old Testament, to Leviticus chapter 18, and to this section from which the apostle quotes.

Leviticus chapter 18, let’s read the first five verses. Leviticus chapter 18.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘I am the LORD your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the

⁶ Galatians 3:11.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Galatians 2:21.

¹⁰ Galatians 3:21.

land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes. You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.”¹¹

Verse five presents a little bit of a problem to many folks. When they get to verse five there is a little wrinkle in their brow. Perhaps there is a little wrinkle in your brow at this point. The thing I want you to see is this. What Paul says in Leviticus 18:5 is that Moses is presenting a way of life to the people of God. If they actually do live by the law, they perform the precepts of the law. This is what Moses is saying. He is doubling up, I think, in his language.

Now, I am following here, just to give myself a little bit of back up—preachers like to do this, you know. Just to give myself a little bit of backup I am following Professor John Murray on this. His exposition of Leviticus 18 is in his appendix to his commentary on Romans. I also checked with my colleague at the seminary who teaches Old Testament to make sure I was on the right track here. And so I commend to you the idea from Leviticus, you see, that what Moses is giving to the people of God is principally a way of life.

You will notice this at the beginning of Leviticus 18. “I am the LORD your God.”¹² Of what do these words remind the people? The preface to the 10 Commandments. The catechism asks the question: What is the preface to the 10 Commandments? The preface to the 10 Commandments is in these words “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”¹³ What does the preface to the 10 Commandments teach us? Listen to this. The preface to the 10 Commandments teaches us that because the Lord is God and our God and our Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all of his commandments. The law is given to a redeemed people. You need to remember this and I need to remember this. It is given to a redeemed people as a way of life. It is not given to the people as a way to perform for God so that God will pat them on the back and somehow add merit to their lives. This is not the purpose of the 10 Commandments. And I think Leviticus 18 shows us that this is the case.

Now, I want you to go back to Galatians chapter three and you are going to have to work with me a little bit. I know you are able to do this. So please do work with me a little bit. Galatians chapter three and verse 12. The New American Standard Version reads this way. “However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, **HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.**”¹⁴ “The law is not of faith,”¹⁵ Paul says. “The law is not of faith.”¹⁶ Some of the versions translate it this way. “The law is not based [upon] faith.”¹⁷

¹¹ Leviticus 18:1-5.

¹² Leviticus 18:2.

¹³ Exodus 20:2.

¹⁴ Galatians 3:12.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid (NIV)

But I submit to you, dear friends, in Jesus Christ that in many ways the law is based upon faith. Now I am not trying to oppose the apostle Paul, nor am I trying to oppose Moses. In fact, I am trying to line up with both of them. In many ways, I submit to you the law is, in fact, based upon faith. Why? The only way that you are capable of keeping any of the commandments in any way whatsoever is if God himself has given you a new heart, has placed a vital faith in your heart, and has given you a love for him. As a result, you desire with all of your heart to follow those commandments. What does Jesus say? “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”¹⁸ And if there is a vital love in your heart and if there is a faith in your heart, you have a desire to follow the commandments of God *as a way of life*. We also know that James in his epistle takes faith and obedience together. He tells us that obedience to the written Word of God is an evidence of the fact that you do have a vital faith in Jesus Christ. So there is a sense, I submit to you, that the law is based upon faith.

If this is the case, if this is the case, what is Paul saying here? Well, I want to make a suggestion to you as to what Paul is saying here. Notice verse 11 again. “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’”¹⁹ What is this faith? This faith is the *way of justification*. There is no other way for right standing before God except faith in Jesus Christ. And these words, “by faith” or “of faith,” represent for you and me the “alone means” of justification as the Confession puts it. Faith *is* the way of justification.

But it happens that Paul uses the very same words in Galatians 3:12. “The Law is not of faith,”²⁰ or “by faith.” These are exactly the same words as in verse 11. I therefore suggest to you what Paul is saying in verse 12 is this: “The law is not *of faith*.” That is, it is not a *way of justification*. The law is not a *way of justification*. This is true, is it not?

Now I want you to look at this verse again because in some of the versions it begins with “But” or “However.” In the New American Standard it begins with “However.” The King James Version, I think, renders it in a better fashion. It begins with “And... And... And the law is not of faith.”²¹ That is, the law is not a way of justification.

Then Paul quotes from Leviticus 18:5. This is the way of life as just discussed. Paul affirms that the law is not a way of justification by quoting from Leviticus 18:5 and by displaying the fact that the law actually is a way of life for you and me. I think this is actually Paul’s argument.

Now I will confess to you that I am in the minority here. I want you to know this. I tell my students that I willingly say this when I find myself in a minority position. And I want you to know this. But I challenge you to study this text because I think Paul is being faithful to the Old Testament here as he presents us this argument.

¹⁸ John 14:15.

¹⁹ Galatians 3:11.

²⁰ Galatians 3:12.

²¹ Ibid (KJV)

The problem is, you see, that if you understand the law as a way of justification, you are in danger of placing yourself *under the law* as a way of justification. If you take this step—and Christians are often going in this direction. This is why the apostle Paul is so adamant here. He is speaking to the churches at Galatia. He is speaking to those who have made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. He is telling the Galatian Christians that it is abundantly inappropriate for us to place ourselves under the law as a covenant of works. If we do so, we think we can do things which are meritorious before God. But the law is not of faith. It is not a way of justification.

However, if you do this, if you place yourself under the law as a way of justification, as Paul says in verse 10, you put yourself under the curse. Look at verse 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.’”²² Paul quotes Moses again. He quotes from Deuteronomy chapter 27.

When you read Deuteronomy chapter 27, it is a rehearsal of several curses and this quotation here in Galatians three happens to be the final one. In other words, this is the sum of all the curses that are brought against those who think arrogantly that they can put themselves under the law and in some way be meritorious before God. I say Christians can slip into this mode.

I had a student in class who asked me this question. He raised his hand one day in class and said, “Dr. Prutow, if I complete all my assignments will you give me extra credit?” Yes, you do laugh, don’t you? But, you see how we can slip into the mode of thinking that if we do something that is good we will get a pat on the back from God. I reminded this student of what Jesus said with regard to a servant. Jesus said the servant would do all of the things that his master required although he had been working in the field all day. He would come in and serve his master at the table. And Jesus said of the servant that when he accomplishes all of these things and has accomplished his duty, the servant should say, “I am an unworthy servant.” Why? “Because all I have accomplish is my duty.” It is not any great thing to accomplish your duty. And this is the point, you see.

Do you think that you or I should think that we are able to do anything thing before God that is above and beyond the call to duty? I think not. In fact, you see, Paul says the opposite in Galatians 3:10. “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse.”²³ God’s curse rests upon you if you slip into the mode of thinking that somehow what you do is in any respect whatsoever meritorious before God. It is by faith, not performance, that blessing comes before God.

You see, this is the point of the text. And the wonderful thing you see, my friends, is this. The wonderful thing is that Jesus Christ comes and redeems people like you and me who

²² Galatians 3:10.

²³ Galatians 3:10.

think wrongly that somehow we can do right before God on the basis of performance. Jesus Christ comes and redeems us from the curse of the law.

Look at verse 13. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE’”²⁴ The apostle Paul is, again, quoting from the Old Testament. Please keep your finger in Galatians again and turn to Deuteronomy chapter 21. Paul is quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 22 and 23. Through Moses we have these words:

If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.²⁵

Here is this idea of hanging a corpse on a tree. Israel did this, for example, with the king of Ai. They went in to Ai and surrounded Ai and slaughtered the people after they had had an unfortunate occurrence beforehand with Achan. Yes, they slaughtered all of the people. Then they took the king of Ai and they hanged him on a tree. This was to portray to all the watching world that the city of Ai was cursed by God. This was the idea, you see. This hanging of the corpse of the king symbolized the fact that that nation was cursed by God and they were to be destroyed by Israel.

And so it was that Jesus Christ came along and God sent him into the world born of a woman, born under the law so that he could keep every stipulation of that law perfectly for the likes of you and me. And not only so, he took the curse, the curse of the law and was publicly humiliated on that cross. Darkness fell upon him and he cried out, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”²⁶ He experienced in his own flesh and body the curse about which the Old Testament speaks. He took that curse for you and he took that curse for me. This is what Paul is telling us as you go back to Galatians chapter three and verse 13. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE’”²⁷

Four years ago in Iraq a security company by the name of Blackwater had some men killed in Falujah. Some of you may remember this incident. Their charred bodies were hanged on a bridge by the insurgents. It was an ugly scene. From the perspective of those Iraqis, they were sending a message to the United States of America. I don’t think too many people got the message. They were sending a message to the people of America. They were saying, “You see those bodies hanging on that bridge? Allah has cursed you, America.” This was a symbolism behind what they were doing. And we see a similar

²⁴ Galatians 3:13.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

²⁶ Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.

²⁷ Galatians 3:13.

thing here in the Bible. Praise be unto God. Jesus Christ took the curse for you and for you and for me. He redeemed you and me from that curse of death.

So the lesson is simple. Faith in Jesus Christ, not performance, is your way of blessing before God. Look at verse nine now in our text. “So then...” Here are the blessed words. “So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.”²⁸ And verse 14. “In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.”²⁹ That’s you and me. That’s us. “In order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.”³⁰ And what is the blessing of Abraham? There are coordinate clauses in verse 14. The first part of the verse is parallel to the second part of the verse. “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.”³¹

What is the blessing of Abraham? It is the receipt of the Spirit. And how do you receive the Spirit? Through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the blessing. If God in his grace has caused you to be born again and put on your lips that confession that Jesus is Lord, you are a recipient of the grace of God. You are a recipient of the Spirit of God. He has blessed you.

And what do you do, friends? You say to God, “Abba, Father.” He is no longer offended with you. You are right with him. You are no longer offended by him. You are right with God. This is the blessing. Faith, not performance, is the way of blessing before God.

When I came home from Korea I was a little concerned. For over a year I had been at odds with my father at home. When I flew from Korea to the States and to Philadelphia, I called my mother in South Jersey from Philadelphia. “Mom,” I said, “would you come and pick me up?” She knew the routine. I knew the routine. So I got on a bus from the airport.

When I got to the destination and got off the bus it was evening. We were in a large parking lot. I got off the bus and there were just a few cars in the parking lot. I looked around and fellow got out of a car. He also looked. And when he saw it was me, he ran. It was my dad. He ran and he threw himself on my neck and gave me the biggest hug. I was so grateful because things were right with my dad. I didn’t do anything to deserve this. He loved me, plain and simple.

How much more, friends, with your heavenly Father? What have you done to deserve the great salvation that God has been pleased to give to you? Nothing. But God has been pleased in his grace to love you and this is the lesson in Galatians. Faith in Jesus Christ, not performance, is the way of blessing before God.

²⁸ Galatians 3:9.

²⁹ Galatians 3:14.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Let's pray together.

Father in heaven, how grateful we are for your grace. We are supremely undeserving. Yet you have been pleased to come to us through Jesus Christ. And not only so, you give us the gift of faith by your Spirit. And so we have nothing to present to you and you have everything to give to us in Christ. Thank you. Thank you that it is faith in Christ and not our performance that is the way of blessing before you. Help us to understand this more and more and more we pray in the good and gracious name of Jesus Christ who is the Lord. Amen.