

# When the Beloved are Bewitched

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# When the Beloved are Bewitched

## Passage | Galatians 3:1-9 (ESV)

1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? 5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— 6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

7 Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." 9 So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

## Prayer for Illumination

Most merciful and kind, Heavenly Father: be with us this morning through the power of your Spirit. Open your Word to our hearts and minds, renewing our spirit to live in your strength. We ask this in the name that is above every name, the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Introduction

Tomorrow, we will celebrate Reformation Day. Over a span, many years ago, and seeing growing and rampant abuses within the Western church and a departure from the true gospel, many priests and religious leaders appealed to the church's leadership for reform. Most were squelched, even by pain of torture and death, or ignored. However, one such reformer was Martin Luther. He lived during a golden moment, enabling him to affect history. He nailed his 95 Theses (or 95 intellectual points of debate) to the Castle Church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. What followed was intense debate. Told to recant his beliefs, Luther responded to his religious and civil accusers in this way:

Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the Popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.online-literature.com/martin-luther/>

Luther, for all of his many faults, understood the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the apostles better than many of his contemporaries. Once excommunicated, Luther led the start of the evangelical churches - that is, *gospel* churches - the movement that we collectively refer to as *Protestantism*.

As we continue our study in Galatians, consider this gem from Martin Luther's Commentary on Galatians, the commentary in which he describes the biblical doctrine of justification:

If my salvation was so difficult to accomplish that it necessitated the death of Christ, then all my works, all the righteousness of the Law, are good for nothing. How can I buy for a penny what cost a million dollars? The Law is a penny's worth when you compare it with Christ. Should I be so stupid as to reject the righteousness of Christ which cost me nothing, and slave like a fool to achieve the righteousness of the Law which God disdains?

Man's own righteousness is in the last analysis a despising and rejecting of the grace of God. No combination of words can do justice to such an outrage. It is an insult to say that any man died in vain. But to say that Christ died in vain is a deadly insult. To say that Christ died in vain is to make His resurrection, His victory, His glory, His kingdom, heaven, earth, God Himself, of no purpose and benefit whatever.

That is enough to set any person against the righteousness of the Law and all the trimmings of men's own righteousness, the orders of monks and friars, and their superstitions.

Who would not detest his own vows, his cowls, his shaven crown, his bearded traditions, yes, the very Law of Moses, when he hears that for such things he rejected the grace of God and the death of Christ. It seems that such a horrible wickedness could not enter a man's heart, that he should reject the grace of God, and despise the death of Christ. And yet this atrocity is all too common. Let us be warned. Everyone who seeks righteousness without Christ, either by works, merits, satisfactions, actions, or by the Law, rejects the grace of God, and despises the death of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In so many words, Luther testified to what Paul has taught us so far - that works of obedience are the fruit of salvation, not the means to it. You cannot earn your salvation through your efforts. You cannot preserve your standing before God through your efforts.

## The Perplexity

As we noted last week, this creates a perplexity in our minds. On the one hand, as one of favorite theologians, Tim Keller, notes, the gospel of Jesus Christ is neither religion nor irreligion. "Religion makes law and moral obedience a means of salvation, while irreligion makes the individual a law to him- or herself. The gospel, however, is that Jesus takes the law of God so seriously that he paid the penalty of disobedience, so we can be saved by sheer grace."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, Martin Luther.

<sup>3</sup> This quote and the consequent discussion under the heading "perplexity" adapted from Keller, Tim. *Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything*. pp. 24-25.

So, on the one hand, God *declares* us as righteous in his sight through the grace of justification by his grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. However, on the other, we know that God is not content to merely declare us as righteous; he desires to make us *actually* righteous. In other words, what is the relationship of our justification to our sanctification (our growth in that grace toward actual, true righteousness)?

For instance, I know that Christ's sacrifice covers my sin of quickly judging my neighbor for dropping the "F-bomb" a few dozen times while in a verbal fight with some passers-by this past week. That sin of a hyper-critical attitude and arrogant spirit of judgment can't usher me toward condemnation or a loss of God's acceptance and love; it doesn't and can never compromise my justification. However, even so, the question remains: how can I now actually grow to consistently love my neighbor as myself, compassionately interceding for him before the throne of grace and reaching out to him in love? How do I actually become righteous?

## The Proposition

As we approach our celebration of Reformation Day, let's remind ourselves that there are lots of bad reasons for obedience to God. You can reject a bad behavior or word because it will make you look bad before others, subjecting you to scorn and isolation. You can reject a bad behavior because you simply and selfishly fear that you'll regret its consequences - low self-esteem, physical harm, etc. You can reject a bad thought process because you fear that God will read your thoughts and clobber you for them. *Every one of these reasons is a rotten reason to obey God because they are self-centered motives rooted in fear and pride, the very motives that tempt us to sin in the first place!*

Just as they are bad reasons to obey God, there are good reasons (duty, freedom from sin's consequences). However, not all otherwise good reasons to obey God are created equal. There is an ultimate reason to obey that eclipses them all: our loving response to the love of God (John 14:15; 1 Corinthians 13).

We must remember that our sanctification (growth in God's love and grace) flows from our justification (God's loving and gracious declaration of our forgiveness in Christ), not the other way around. ***In fact, only when we rest in Christ's righteousness for us will we truly produce and offer righteousness for him.***

## The Proof

Let's begin by reading verse 1:

**Reading:** *10 foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.*

In verse 1, Paul confronts the Galatians not with a malignant spirit of condemnation, but with a grieved spirit of disbelief. When he terms them "foolish" and "bewitched," he is not slamming them as stupid or under the diabolical influence of literal witchcraft. Rather, he means that they're foolish to abandon so quickly that on which they wisely placed their confidence, and wonders who "tricked" them into settling for something less than the greatness of God's grace.

If you've visited my office, you know that one of my favorite amusements continues and will probably always continue to be *Seinfeld*. My favorite character on that show is George. He's neurotic, impulsive, and paranoid. He's me at my worst,

and some of you at your worst, and so I and perhaps you should feel a certain allegiance to him. For you Seinfeld fans: apart from Christ, I am Costanza, Lord of the Idiots.

There's a great episode where he goes to buy a car. He's set on a Volvo - a wise, well-reasoned decision. However, when he gets to the lot, the salesman tells him that a Chrysler LeBaron is a better choice because it was formerly owned by John Voigt. Starstruck, George thinks he means the actor and - for no other reason - impulsively buys the car. Later, we discover that it's not Jon Voigt the actor who owned the car, but John Voigt, the periodontist. Needless to say George is bewitched, tricked through clever marketing into accepting something far less than what he should desire.

It's a funny story because it's a silly premise. Who would buy a Chrysler LeBaron on a whim over a reliable, well-researched just because Jon Voigt owned it? Nobody in their right mind! Likewise, Paul asks the Galatians, "Who would buy a false gospel after seeing Jesus Christ as good as in the flesh?" Nobody but a fool!

**Reading:** *2Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? 5Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— — 6just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?*

To restore them to sanity, Paul asks them a series of rhetorical questions - in so many words, *how did you come to into fellowship with God?* Did you receive the Spirit because you strenuously earned it through your efforts for God OR graciously received it by faith in Christ's efforts for you, to the glory of God the Father?

Stated another way, Paul asks the Galatian church if sanctification is the grounds for their justification OR if justification is the grounds for their sanctification. If that terminology is blowing your mind this morning, no worries. I'll say it yet another way. Do we obey God because we're forgiven OR are we forgiven because we obey?

As with all rhetorical questions, the answer is strongly implied. Paul implies the foolishness of trying to earn God's forgiveness. He shows that sanctification cannot precede justification because it's only in our justification that we receive the Spirit of adoption by which we're later sanctified. Until that point, we walk only in our fallen flesh, not by the Spirit - powerless to truly obey God in love.

Consider these words of Paul to the Roman church (7:5-6):

*5For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. 6But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.*

Released from the law in our justification, we are now free to serve in a whole new way - not out of slavish fear, but newfound freedom.

I know of a family that was in no small amount of debt. They toiled day in and day out to pick away at their debt, tormented by high interest rates that made paying off the debt next-to-impossible. Finally, someone - a relative - came

along and relieved them of the burden. They paid the debt for them. Of course, the family couldn't pay their benefactor back anymore than they could pay their original debtor, nor did they need to. The benefactor wouldn't hear of it.

So, what did they do with their newfound freedom? Of course, they kept paying off the debt that had been paid just as they had done before - writing check after check, slavishly working to pay off their already cancelled debt.

No, I'm just kidding. They didn't do that. That would be rather foolish. Who pays off a debt already justly cancelled?

They actually used their newfound freedom to bless others by canceling whatever was owed to them by or giving freely to others, not because they had to - but because they wanted to do so. Love for their benefactors compelled them to love others.

In like manner, Paul asks the Galatians - why, having your debt to the law cancelled, do you keep making payments according to the law? That's just foolish! Sure, they can and should keep the commandments of God, but for a new reason - one rooted in the freedom bought by Christ, not a foolish attempt to purchase what he already secured for them.

**Reading:** *7Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. 8And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." 9So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*

Paul then strikes those with confidence in the flesh even more.

As we've mentioned in previous messages, the Judaizers who tormented the church at Galatia took great pride in their racial identity and cultural heritage. They knew they were physical descendants of Abraham, Father of the Jews, and that the Gentiles had no such connections. This gave the Judaizers their sense of superiority.

However, here Paul takes his argument to the next level. If it is not by works of the flesh that any are made righteous, but only by God's grace, then true children of Abraham are not such by sharing the same flesh but by sharing the same faith. Underscoring this, Paul argues, is the fact that the believing Gentiles (those of the church at Galatia down to most of us here this morning) were always part of the gospel plan of salvation.

## The Priorities

Let's look at some implications:

- **Some forms of repentance are downright awful.**

Selfish "repentance" is when we choose the right course of our own benefit, without much if any reference to God. We know the consequences of sin; we don't want them; and so we turn away from true evil for our own selfish good.

Religious repentance is when we choose the right course for our own benefit, but with some misguided

reference to God. Deluded, we want to keep him happy. Keeping him happy, he answers our prayers and blesses us, or so the thinking goes. We therefore don't want to make God unhappy. Ticked off, there's no telling what God might do to us!

This is both exhausting and terrifying. It's exhausting because atoning for constant and deep-to-the-point-of-unsearchable sin is *hard work!* Actually, it's impossible. Also, it's terrifying because we tend to read correlations into our circumstances and God's opinion of us. When hardship comes, we wonder what we did wrong or feel betrayed by God who didn't accept our "goodness" as sufficient. We never find the security and peace that Christ freely promises us by grace, not works.

- **The gospel makes true repentance possible, for the right reasons.**

What drives your repentance? Is it a need to atone for your failings, to earn the forgiveness of God? If it is, stop. Christ atoned perfectly for you. You can't add to the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. Are you driven by a need for the approval of others or a fear of them? If so, stop. You have the approval of Christ and no longer need the approval of men and women around you as an ultimate source of identity and security. You don't need to be defined by insecurity producing a drive for power, prestige, control, or comfort. You are secure in Christ. You also have the "perfect love" that drives out fear.

As we mentioned before, there are reasons of lesser good for obedience - ex. a sense of duty, a desire to live free of sin's destructive consequences. Those are fine motivations, to some degree. However, the ultimate reason and power for obedience is a sense of awe and loving response to the love of God. We love because he first loved us, our love is shown in obedience born of it.

- **Don't let the inner-voice of legalism "bewitch" you, beloved.**

Most church historians consider Jonathan Edwards the greatest American theologian. Listen to what he says of our motivation to obey the Lord: "Whatever is done....if the heart is withheld there is nothing really given to God....What is given is given to that which the man makes his end in giving. If his end be only himself, then it is given only to himself, and not to God. If his aim be his own honor, then the gift is something offered to his honor; if it be his care or worldly profit, then the gift is to these...If the sincere aim of the heart is not to God, then there is nothing given to God."<sup>4</sup>

Don't let yourself be "bewitched!" Be on guard! Be very careful to examine your motivations for obedience. Are they to curry the favor and continued acceptance of God? Are they to produce a sense of security that we have and should seek in Christ alone? If so, don't worry, beloved. God still loves you, despite your silly ideas concerning him. However, you're not enjoying his love as much as he desires - and therefore not serving with the same peace, joy, and love as you would otherwise. He wants better for you. Don't settle for less.

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted in *Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything*, Tim Keller.